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**NARRATIVE AND TEMPORALITY:  
THE CRUX OF THE LYRIC AND THE EPICAL IN CONTEMPORARY  
US POETRY**

**Keywords:** American poetry; contemporary; lyric; epical; expansive poetry

**Abstract:** The paper tackles the issues of temporality and narratives in lyric and epical poetry, in a context in which a strong revival of genres like the novel in verse questions the ability of lyric poetry to include genuine narratives and to cover areas of experience and culture which are typical of narrative poetry solely. Back in the 80's and onwards, poets like Frederick Turner, Fred Feirstein, and Dick Allen started to work towards a poetry that was meant to return to "real meaning", while also promoting a subsidiary return to the traditions of meter and/or rhyme. "Real meaning" referred to categories and modes of signification that were closer to common knowledge, perception, and rendition, rather than the abstruseness, non-conformity, and apparent nonsensicalness of much of modernist and contemporary lyrical poetry. Through analyses of narrative and cinematic elements in major lyric poetries, like the ones of Frank O'Hara and Charles Simic, and symmetrically, the lyricism of David Mason's novel in verse *Ludlow* and John Tranter's verse narratives in *The Floor of Heaven*, the paper weighs and diagnoses the contemporary differences and intersections of the lyric and the epical, in terms of expressing temporality – a concept which also receives a theoretical treatment and brief overview in contemporary US poetry.

In a 2007 article in *Contemporary Poetry Review*, James Matthew Wilson pleaded with historical and contemporary arguments for the development and affirmation of a certain literary category called "expansive poetry." Back in the 80's and onwards, poets like Frederick Turner, Fred Feirstein, and Dick Allen started to work towards a poetry that was meant to return to "real meaning", while also promoting a subsidiary return to the traditions of meter and/or rhyme. "Real meaning" referred to categories and modes of signification that were closer to common knowledge, perception, and rendition, rather than the abstruseness, non-conformity, and apparent nonsensicalness of much of modernist and contemporary lyrical poetry. In fact, their argument involved even the concept of the lyric itself – poetry should not restrain itself to just that, but also recover areas that were traditionally so much in its own realm too. Thus, "expansive" poets sought to "expand" the audience for poetry by reviving once flourishing but meanwhile generally disused kinds of poetry: satire and epigram, for instance, but more importantly, narrative poetry, whether in the guise of the modern narrative epic or the relatively new form of the verse novel.

The modern tradition of the verse novel goes back, Wilson argues (*ibidem* unpag.) to Alexander Pushkin's early-nineteenth-century *Eugene Onegin*, while a poet like David Mason, in an impressive *ars poetica* he draws upon Jorge Luis Borges, professes a return, on modern terms, to the Homeric and Vergilian paradisiacal concurrence of song, verse, and epic.

And if along with the pleasure of being told a story we get the additional pleasure of the dignity of verse, then something great will have happened. [...] I think the epic will come back to us. I believe that the poet shall once again be a maker. I mean, he will tell a story and he will also sing it. And we will not think of those two things as different, even as we do not think they are different in Homer and Virgil. Mason (230)

The tendency to absorb wider and wider experiences and language versions runs like a red thread through the history of modern poetry. In this respect, Pound significantly “expanded” the material that could work its way into poetry, indeed, and in contemporary poets like the celebratedly prolific and ample Albert Goldbarth, one can find a poetry always willing to absorb, to include, to accumulate experiences and materials coming from fields as diverse and distant as popular culture, politics, literary history and (auto-) biographies, etc. Although Goldbarth, for instance, is (also) a subtle practitioner of blank verse and camouflaged traditional and/or hybridized forms (double sonnets, blank verse sonnets, etc.) and a reservoir of narratives, he is not among the ones Wilson enumerates. And here is why: “modern poetry has shown itself significantly less equipped to absorb, or rather, to give form to, a wide range of experiences, precisely because *it tends to melt them all down to that fool’s golden nugget, the narrative lyric*” (Wilson, unpag., emph. mine). We see here how the stress laid on form also entails discrimination in species. Dana Gioia (cf. idem), outstanding figure of the poetry and criticism of the 90s and of today has argued that poetry is far from being “just” a genre of the lyric, but is rather a genus of which there are many species. In his ground breaking essay *Can Poetry Matter*, he has already expressed concern regarding the audience poetry can get nowadays and what would be the cultural fields it should approach in order to acquire wider relevance and stronger appeal. Besides its possible conjunction with arts like music especially in contexts of performance and with multi-media and media culture – radio broadcasting, for instance – poetry should revive the species which have traditionally spoken in the most convincing and coagulating manners to the community. Thus, not only that lyric poetry is not the only species of this genus, but it traditionally ranks below the two other major ones, narrative and dramatic verse. Moreover, as some of the expansive poets would argue in theory and illustrate in their practice, narrative poetry and poetry in general is closer to some of the most successful arts in popular culture, such as movies – poetry typically and consistently uses cinematic techniques in a manner that is much more at the heart of this genre than, for instance, that of novels in prose (Cf Mason 228).

Cinematic techniques abound also in John Tranter’s *Floor of Heaven*, a fragmentary novel in verse whose each episode focuses on and convey the perspective of a different character involved in a jigsaw puzzle plot. But cinematic and other media strategies are not solely typical of narrative poetry or novels in verse – as a matter of fact, Mason’s argument quoted above resort to high modernist examples of lyric, as he says he advises his students when dealing with difficult poems like those of T.S. Eliot’s to try to project them as a movie on the screen of their own imagination (Mason, ibidem). John Tranter himself is an illustration of that reality in his lyrical poetry as well – his 2001 collection, *Ultra*, for instance, was rightfully reviewed by Barry Hill with *The Weekend Australian* as containing poems that “do not fall into cliché, sociology or archness. They are highly visual, cinematic poems that Tranter directs like Polanski.” (Hill, unpag.) And it seems that the real pungency of such texts stems from their very movie-like anatomy and development, with a strong cinematic effect on the reader: “They can make us feel like we are in a film; then, just at the right time, we are back on the street, where the poet stands with his merciless phrasebook...” (idem)

The link between poetry and movies has been diligently tackled by Sarah Riggs in a whole chapter of her book *Word Sightings: Visual Apparatus and Verbal Reality in Stevens, Bishop and O’Hara* where she significantly discerns strategies in Frank O’Hara’s poetry that endow his verse with cinematic qualities arising from interplays of verb tenses and a three-dimensionality that creates a privileged space within the poem, similar to the one experienced in a movie theater or in relation with the art of painting (sometimes also intertwined with the history of poetry, I would add, as is the case with his restaging, in *An Image of Leda*, in a movie theater, of the myth of Leda and its treatment by Yeats in one of his classical sonnets). O’Hara is actually far from being alone among contemporary poets in his typical attempts to accommodate cinematic and visual art techniques in his lyrical narratives. This is also a point in Riggs’s argument, which she bases on a “classic” like Stevens and then develops by the examples of

Bishop and O'Hara. But of course in poets closer to nowadays this inclination has grown even stronger, while its tilt moved from painting and traditional graphic art to popular culture, especially cinema, television and comic books. The poetry–cinema relationship was closely analyzed by Laurence Goldstein in his 1995 *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History*, where he parses poetries starting from Lindsay and Hart Crane through Jorie Graham – actually the only living poet in his study except for Adrienne Rich. But the phenomenon is naturally much wider, and it is sure to receive further extensive attention in the future research on the subject. Until then, I shall just quote another couple of poems and try to sketch the main force lines of the field and its evolutions. Here is an excellent, short and epitomizing poem by Charles Simic from his *Charon's Cosmology* (1977) also included in his 1985 *Selected*, “Position without a Magnitude:”

As when someone  
 You haven't noticed before  
 Gets up in an empty theater  
 And projects his shadow  
 Among the fabulous horsemen  
 On the screen

And you shudder  
 As you realize it's only you  
 On your way  
 To the blinding sunlight  
 Of the street. (Simic 1985, 115)

This poem can be read if not as a 25-year-after reply to O'Hara's often quoted and analyzed *An Image of Leda*, at least as one sharing quite a significant (and signifying) deal with the postmodern classic. Both poems allude to famous classical myths – Leda and the Swan in O'Hara and Plato's myth of the cave in Simic – and both entertain a victimized image of the moviegoer, as Leda being forcefully impregnated by Jupiter in the guise of a swan in the former, and as schizoid self experiencing the nightmarish split of one's identity in the movie theater, in the latter. Moreover, the poems share motifs that play key-roles in the construction of meaning – the interplay of light and shadow is crucial in both texts, as it helps build up the paradox of free-willing victim-spectator in O'Hara (cf. Goldstein 156) and it provides the dramatic effect in Simic. Since the light-shadow motif is essential in the Platonic myth, and in “An Image of Leda” it is something brought into the respective myth by the poet (it does not come via literary tradition either, since it does not occur in Yeats's sonnet), one may sense that the Serbian-American's poem is a re-reading and rewriting of the New York School poet's one indeed. Even given that hypothetical palimpsestic feature in the former, they both relate the modern with the traditional in a context of alienation and disintegrating selfhood, which proves how modernistic postmodernism can actually be. But of greater importance to our issue is not what unites the two poems, but what differentiates them. O'Hara's is cinematic and to a certain extent kinetic? But is its kinesis narrational? Not really, since everything that seems actual action in the poem is just recounting and reinterpreting the myth as relevant for a certain *state* of mind, a certain condition. In that respect, the word “image” in the title is more than relevant, the poem constructs indeed an image, a portrait of the young poet as moviegoer. In Simic's poem, on the other hand, the myth does turn into a modernized narrative whose poetic relevance relies on a metaphor unearthed from the traditional Platonic scenario and made to operate in cinematic algorithms.

The above mentioned evolution of such subjects towards “more contemporary” versions of popular culture is present in a later poem of Simic's, “Cameo Appearance” in his 1996 collection,

*Walking the Black Cat.* The speaker watches a movie with his children on their VCR, in which he has played a small walk-on part. The movie captures some war scenes with a panicking stampeding crowd while a dictator gives his mad speech from a balcony, “crowing like a rooster.” The speaker keeps rewinding the tapes “[a] hundred times” but his “kiddies” just cannot (or would not?) catch sight of him in the “huge gray crowd.” Obviously irritated, he finally gives up trying and sends them to bed.

Trot off to bed, I said finally,  
I know I was there. One take  
Is all they had time for.  
We ran, and the planes grazed our hair.  
And then they were no more  
As we stood dazed in the burning city,  
But, of course, they didn't film that. (Simic 1996, 6)

The poem constructs an ingenious junction of horrific history (recuperated as dimmed intimate memories), cinema and media culture, contemporary family life, and effaced identity in modern mass culture, a cocktail so typical of the former US Poet Laureate. The speaker's actual existence itself even as a “cameo appearance” is questioned and doubted by even his dearest ones, and finally by himself, in a world always on a rush to just get a glimpse of everything and perception of virtually nothing – “I know I was there. One take/ is all they had time for...” and a culture that misses exactly the respites and oases where identities may bloom – “but, of course, they didn't film that.”

Such crafty impressive poems prove Wilson's harsh diagnosis on narratives in lyric poetry to the contrary, in that they manage to assemble a credible and vivid depiction of contemporary community life and individual drama by typically lyrical means and along the lines of an art whose author, in the case of Simic for instance, explicitly deems our times to be incompatible with any possible epic. And even if significant younger poets may disagree with that tenet, as is the case with Ilya Kaminsky, himself of similar Eastern European extraction, they will still try to develop their epics on their own lyric terms.

Therefore, the issues at stake in differentiating between epic poetry and verse novel – in one term, expansive poetry – on the one hand, and lyric poetry on the other, are the above quoted “real meaning” in Wilson's article and the treatment of time as embedded in narratives. If real meaning refers, like I have already said here, to common knowledge, plainness, communal interests and language, even common place, than the will to real meaning could be a short phrase for the history of modern and contemporary poetry (a poetry which has been prevalingly lyric, but it has produced major lyrical epics). Starting with the modernist “fathers”, Eliot and Pound, and then Williams, who strove to introduce free verse into the language and infuse poetry with common speech and colloquial cadences, modern poetry continuously made its way by consecutive waves of deeper and deeper “secularization”, with the “raw” and the “cooked” of the 50s and 60s – the profane Ginsberg and the grim-acrimonious Lowell and their peers – with the “I do this I do that” seemingly loose poetry of the above mentioned O'Hara, with the further relaxation of the discursive and even “more reader-friendly” poetry of Robert Pinsky and the comically didactic Billy Collins of the 80s and the 90s, the craftily political and rock music poetic chronicler David Wojahn and the introverted landscapist and plainly-speaking erudite David Baker through, say, the late 90s and nowadays subtly slangy prose poems and punning blues pieces of the brilliant Harryette Mullen, the cruel cursing negative-Dante songs of the harsh-mannered Frederick Seidel, and the merciless and masochistic gay-Dante patches coming off the culturally erotic D.A. Powell. To mention just a few of the so many significant ones, both of the past and present-day. But if real meaning means to say things communal and even loci, fictional or not, in epic poetry or verse novels, which lyric poetry of course cannot do, than this simply means accusing the latter of not being capable of real meaning because it is

not what it never could and never should be. And then, subsequently, if lyric poetry can involve narratives (be they the “fool’s gold nugget,” as James Matthew Wilson puts it), can or should expansive poetry involve at times elements typical of the lyric? I shall come back to this after settling the other issue considered at stake at the beginning of this paragraph.

If one is to tackle the matter of time, even if she considers that lyrical narratives are not “actual” or effective, that does not mean that lyric poetry cannot capture the sense of time or that the typical state of mind of the poet, or reader, for that matter, is atemporality. Cole Swensen, for instance, in a recent essay on Peter Gizzi’s poetry, finds in this important poet of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> that atemporality is a major trait of poetries like his, his predecessor’s – Jack Spicer – or other major poets’ of the last century, like Garcia Lorca. Swensen argues that “materially, atemporality is inherent to poetry” (Rankine 118), and although rhythm may be a timekeeper of the language, syntax is the one that qualifies the flow of time, maintaining it within certain bounds and unidirectional. More importantly, continues Swensen’s argument, atemporality is closely connected to tradition, as the rewriting of poems over time assures direct bounds to the masters of the past in a manner that also guarantees the survival of difference.

First of all, it is not accurate that syntax is not part of keeping time in poetry, and testimony to that stands John Longenbach’s beautiful book *The Art of the Poetic Line*, in which the poet and essayist so minutely and comprehensively discerns between various ways of ending a line (in relation with syntax) and all rhythmical and therefore meaning-creating consequences of such possible options. Moreover, binding with the tradition shows a deeply imprinted aspiration for atemporality indeed, only that the sense of difference that such enterprise insures in poetry is actually and essentially a form of the sense of time in the art. I am not original in saying that, as an essay of 2007, “To Think of Time” by David Baker has proved the matter in a more focused and detailed manner. Baker argues that poetry involves both an aspiration for the atemporal as well as an inherent temporal nature. Eruditely and perceptively, with examples ranging from Sappho to the English tradition of writing replies to earlier poems – Donne and Sir Walter Raleigh after Marlowe, and the metrically crafty (hence deft in measuring time) Pope and Hopkins – and onwards to Pound’s imagism, David Baker makes his point quite decisively on the matter:

Poetry wishes. It may wish to stop or eliminate time by its eternal promises or by replacing chronology with epiphany. But [...] time is an inevitable, central element in lyric poetry, even poetry that intends or proposes to be outside time’s frame. That is, *time provides the subject, the story, and the style of lyric poetry*. (Baker 239, emph. mine)

Baker makes a crucial point here, and it is not only that it is typical of him to say both in his poetry and his criticism things that sound surprising and accurate at the same time, unexpected and yet fundamental, but it is a great benefit for our discussion and for any other future one on this subject to find this simple radical truth stated on grounds of genuinely solid argument. And starting from here, what Wilson thinks is a shortcoming in lyric poetry, in Baker becomes an advantage and an affirmation of the supremacy of the lyric as such over any other criteria that may cloud aesthetic judgment. To Baker there is no problem that narratives are not actually narratives in lyric poetry, quite on the contrary, this proves the complexity and autonomy of the lyric itself. Consequently, Baker dismisses even the concept of narrative poetry by saying that what is usually termed as such is actually lyric poetry with elements of story-telling disseminated in it (cf. idem 294).

But if lyric poetry can accommodate narratives on its own terms, can or should epic poetry involve elements or episodes of lyricism? I shall briefly discuss from this perspective two major issues in what we agreed to term expansive poetry of the past few years – *Ludlow* by David Mason and *The Floor of Heaven* by John Tranter, who is Australian and lives in Brisbane (yet he also spent some time in Florida and Los Angeles years ago), but whose acclaimed e-zine *Jacket* focuses almost prevalingly on

US poetry and whose own verse is regularly reviewed or mentioned in American criticism along with the domestic literature.

The former also has a subtitle – *A Verse-Novel* – which explicitly places the book, from the author's perspective, in the epic genre. The "novel" tells the story of the first miner movements, unions, and unrest in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the massacre at Ludlow as climax of the plot. At the center of it is the character Louis Tikas, leader of the Greek immigrant miners (himself a Cretan émigré) and later on one of the heads of the union movement, a real life personage who got killed at Ludlow and whose biography the author has studied assiduously (and, as we found out from the after-word, it took Mason no less than 40 years of bearing the story "in his marrow" (Mason 223) until he decided it is "ripe" and ready for being written). But the book attempts to evoke a whole world and it proceeds to that by coming up with an impressive number of characters, fictional or not, of which a Hispanic girl Luisa Mole "la huerfana", the orphan, is one Mason made up and followed pretty closely in her early years to portray the life of the mine sappers, the mining area shopkeepers (the pluck-me-stores), small towns and first union movements, public speeches, and demonstrations, etc. The point of interest for our discussion is the islands of lyricism, if any, in the book. The work is no doubt profoundly poetic – the way in which the novel in certain episodes proves to be structured around certain metaphors, images, symbols, like for instance the allusive link between shot-firers (sappers) and coyotes (36-38), the way in which working on a certain family of words (e.g. scrap, scraps (as meal leftovers), scrapping (in the sense of idle conflicts of attrition and/or minor clashes pp 28-32, or to stitch, needle, "needled ground", "stitching rags of hearsay" pp 77-9) as a way of connecting the landscape with the life of the community and its social economic realities, etc – and not always so convincingly novelistic. Thus, at times, the fluency of impeccable blank verse (structured in octaves that in certain chapters end with a trimeter instead of pentameter, rhyming once in a while where emphasis is needed, apt to integrate remarkably diverse versions of the language) does not provide the time and the space for genuine psychological insight that a "normal" novel would secure – e.g., the swift shift of mood and attitude in Too Tall MacIntosh making his mind up all of a sudden to join the union with no actual psychological justification (125-126) is more suitable for a ballad than a novel. The subsequent 30-year-later episode, then, in which this character remembers the past and is confronted with an inhospitable present of old age and solitude, could be very well excerpted as an excellent lyrical poem (with scraps of story-telling, as David Baker would put it).

Which brings us right to the core of the subject of lyricism in Mason's book, with its two hypostases – like above, the lyrical episodes involving a character, and, more significantly, the fragments where the auctorial "I" confides in us his experience of writing (this book or generally), his ties to the story, the relationship between his own deepest concerns and intimate interests on the one hand and the characters on the other (his sojourn in Greece, his translations from Greek poetry also being there in the background) and between his biography and family history. His (as speaker-character in his turn) are pages of remarkable beauty and splendid poetical (namely, lyrical) meditation, and such testimonies actually prove the deep need of the poet to crown the "novel" with lyricism and give the epic amplitude a grave personal meaning.

Tranter's book is a sequence of narratives that do not proceed linearly like in Mason, but with advances and withdrawals and circumventions that will challenge the reader to get a greater picture of the plot by putting together the jigsaw puzzle pieces presented to us very much like in a Quentin Tarantino movie. The title is taken from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and appears in an epigraph where Jessica, Shylock's daughter, is taught by her lover how to read the cosmos and how to fill in the patriarchal Christian order, an epigraph ironically contrasting the paternal dedication to the author's son. The narrator changes from one narrative to the next and, moreover, so radically unlike in Mason, in the last episode the identity remains undisclosed until the very last lines which come with a *coup de théâtre*

whereby it turns out to be a *she* (Sandra, a character quite present and in focus throughout the book) that seals the whole story with a lesbian kiss.

Tranter's "epic" thus becomes one of subversion and feminine liberation from paternal forms of culture and expression including story-telling (let alone epic) itself – ironically enough, one female character, Karen complains about her boyfriend significantly called Blake who would not sleep with her unless he got her to listen first to a new story of his, etc. The therapist leading the therapy group around which the plot gravitates, a man called (again, more than relevantly) Masterson, seems at times inclined to act like a mentor and even, in certain unaccounted for lines, a creative writing teacher advising his class. The gradual liberation of femininity works its winding way through the book by undermining linearity and diagesis, by despising writing cultures, by contorting and even aborting narratives – and injecting lyricism – and by finally even suspending speaking itself. The lyricism prevailing here is intimately erotic and furtively anarchist, while the community, far from being as in Mason the place where the personal connects with tradition and history, is the harsh world "out there" of male dominance, falsity, absurd, atrocity, and misfortune.

Expansive poetry and lyric poetry therefore seem not to be as incompatible as they appeared in the first place, and the way in which lyricism crowns and/or subverts the epical in major recent accomplishments of expansive poetry is a good counterpoint to the accused failure of narratives in lyrical poetry. The future may thus present us with further less dogmatic fusions of the two, to the benefit of language, art, and culture.

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