

The Democracy Service

Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary

Edited by Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr

Reviewed by Roger Farr

I teach among some passionate advocates of something called “Liberal Education,” in an area that reserves for itself the task of “initiating” young people into their “future roles” as “educated citizens.” These young people, the story goes, after having completed the 60 or 120 “credit hours” we have put aside for our difficult but rewarding task, will have acquired certain intellectual “capacities” which will “empower” them to “participate” in “the democracy.” But before they can assume their positions in “the democracy,” they first must come to college, where, if they haven’t already, they can be interpellated as incapable, inarticulate, low-level outsiders. “Anything you say in class these days is ‘news’ to students,” a colleague opines. Our students are “sweet bumbler,” generalizes another.

It’s a good way to protect one’s career: once we’ve established that our students are empty vessels who don’t know anything, we can set about filling them up with what we think we know. Curiously, while we are preparing our students for “the democracy” – predicated as it is upon the designation of the inferior by the superior – these inferiorized subjects can be tried in court and sent to prison; yet, under the educational apparatus, they are not regarded as fully “capable” citizens. *They are not our equals*. And in an amazing reversal of the social and political aspirations of the contemporary avant-garde, “difficult” poetry is regularly invoked as evidence of this pedagogical axiom, the site of the failure of the inferior mind – “it’s not suitable for *their level*.”

But if there is one thing such writing teaches, it should be that it has no native speakers. None. Prior to its appropriation as a tool used to buttress the hierarchies embedded within our educational institutions, and the society they reproduce, avant-garde writing is defended by those who produce it as an *equalizer* of relations between language users.

So what if one was to teach from this perspective, from the assumption of what Jacques Rancière calls *equality*, in which “there are not two levels of intelligence...[for] all human works of art are the practice of *the same intellectual potential*”? And further, as a rejoinder to the deferred emancipation promised by humanist pedagogy (in both its Liberal and Marxist incarnations), what if our teaching was predicated upon the idea that before one can “emancipate someone else, one must be emancipated oneself...one must know oneself to be a voyager [a non-native speaker] of the mind, *similar to all other voyagers*: an intellectual subject participating in the common power of intellectual beings”? Tellingly, a “pedagogue” is, literally, a *slave* who supervises children.

It is with such questions in mind that I read *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary*, a collection of twenty-two essays originally delivered at a symposium held at the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking in 1999. Taken together, the works collected here make a convincing argument for the importance of “contemporary” (i.e., “avant-garde, experimental,

innovative, language-centred, marginalized, oppositional, minoritarian,” etc.) poetry in an academy that is mostly indifferent, and occasionally hostile, towards it. In making its case for the necessity and relevance of a pedagogy informed by the collaborative, experimental, and “cross-cultural infusions” that constitute avant-garde poetic practices, the collection will be very useful to anyone in need of good arguments and evidence to support their work in an institutional setting (I’m already citing passages in various course and program proposals). That said, the collection’s necessarily defensive rhetorical frame (what avant-garde poet working in Corporate U isn’t a little defensive?), a strategy that no doubt stems from an assessment of the precarious conditions in which we work, leads to a generally celebratory tone, which in turn results in some unanswered questions about the political agency of contemporary poetry and the pedagogy it might inform.

Poetry and Pedagogy is divided into two sections. The first (“What’s the Use of Contemporary Poetry”) “is composed of critical essays on specific poetries and their pedagogical implications”; the second (“A New How To”) provides “practical, text-centered strategies for teaching poetry in today’s classroom.” Six essays are allocated to the first section, and sixteen to the second, which gives some indication of the book’s overall gist. As it isn’t possible in this short review to do justice to all the essays included here (reviewing an anthology compounds exponentially the omissions required in editing one!), I will focus on pieces that I read as representative, or which struck a chord for me, given my own commitments.

Tackling directly the precarious position of the avant-garde in the academy, the opening essay by Alan Golding, “‘Isn’t the Avant-Garde Always Pedagogical’: Experimental Poetics and/as Pedagogy,” examines the ways in which American poets have negotiated their “oblique” relationship with “the pedagogical situation,” and more specifically with an institution they have historically repudiated, but which has become an important site for the distribution of their work (this latter fact, I would add, leads many commentators to describe avant-garde poetry as “academic,” thereby mistaking the parasite for its host). Golding cites Olson’s “Letter for Melville 1951” as exemplary of a previous era when the poet could maintain an “unproblematized outsider” stance to the academy. The contemporary avant-garde poet (here Golding focuses mainly on the work of Bob Perelman and Ron Silliman), on the other hand, appropriates the discourse of the classroom, and rearticulates it as material *within* the poem, in order to directly “engage, rather than turn [his] back on, these conditions.”

Augmenting Golding’s argument, Lynn Keller’s essay “FFFFFalling with Poetry: The Centrifugal Classroom” employs Bakhtin’s distinction between centrifugal and centripetal discourse to describe “these conditions” as unstable and contested. For her, the pedagogical situation is not fully decided until a text is introduced: “more open and polysemous texts generate more centrifugal classrooms.” By “centrifugal classroom,” Keller means a site that moves its attention “outward into the world,” is “collective rather than privatized” (the latter condition is produced by confessional, lyrical texts and reading strategies), is “less hierarchical” because of the shared responsibility for making meaning from a difficult poem (which, again, has no “native speakers”), and is “liberating.” Keller concludes with a reading of Joan Retallack’s “Icarus FFFFFalling” to show how the piece performs the “centrifugal dynamics” that shift attention away from absorption (“falling in love with the poem”) and towards contemplation of the ways language shapes social conditions.

Morris Young's "Beyond Rainbows: What Hawai'i's 'Local' Poetry Has Taught Me About Pedagogy" is one of several places in the collection where what Spahr and Retallack call "community located poetics" come to the foreground. The editors stress that this category does not designate "regionalism...[or] a sort of updated identity politics" so much as "investigative or critical modes that take environmental, ecological, social, and/or political awareness into their framework." Here, pedagogy-as-poetics begins to counter the liberal project of "initiation," as Young describes how "local" pidgin writing (his example is "Coloring a Rainbow" by Hawai'i poet Wing Tek Lum) can be used to move "beyond initiating students into a dominant American discourse and toward a more productive engagement with their community." Young teaches from a presupposition of equality in his classroom, through his use of student writing to *critique* the classroom, and in his belief that "students are participants in constructing their education if not the producers of their education." This essay also opens a number of possible horizontal linkages between avant-garde poetics and sub-altern / minoritarian speech communities, an oppositional affinity to what Arjuna Parakrama elsewhere calls the "ways in which the standardized languages steadily fucked over the users of other forms."

In the second section of the book, the essays are more detailed in their accounts of specific classroom procedures and strategies. Charles Bernstein's "Creative Wreading: A Primer" includes a pragmatic "Poem Profiler" – a heuristic device for analyzing the rhetorical features in a poem – that made it into my writing class within hours of my receiving this book. Lyn Hejinian's "Stages of Encounter with a Difficult Text," a kind of phenomenological meta-narrative about reading Oppen's "Discrete Series," is also very useful, especially in a writing class, for it anticipates and responds to many of the problems (and pleasures) students encounter when they are presented with avant-garde writing: "Faced with a difficult text," she writes, "how can one trust that it will be worth the work required to 'get it'"?

The desire to "get it" is taken quite literally in Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels' "Deformance and Interpretation," which proposes an ambitious new mode of critical reading called "deformance." Here, readers are prompted to "break beyond conceptual analysis into the kinds of knowledge involved in performative operations." Deformance, or deformative interpretive procedures, much like Rob Pope's practice of "textual intervention," involves disassembling, reading backwards, erasure, reordering, etc. While these procedures are probably not going to surprise anyone familiar with avant-garde poetics, the way McGann and Samuels historicize and theorize this practice as pedagogy might. The deformative approach, they explain, assumes that "the poem's intelligibility is not a function of the interpretation, but that all interpretation is a function of the poem's systemic intelligibility. Interpreting a poem after it has been deformed clarifies the secondary status of the interpretation." They conclude with a number of examples of deformative readings of Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" and Coleridge's "Limbo."

The last article I will mention here is Maria Damon's "Post-Literary Poetry, Counterperformance and Micropoetics." Of all the works collected in *Poetry and Pedagogy*, Damon's essay addressed most directly my own concerns and commitments. She writes:

The inarticulable poetic experience I want to facilitate in students is directly related to empowering citizenry, though what this citizenry does with its power

remains open. By ‘citizenry’ I do not mean that a people imbued with high culture through a formal education constitute the entirety of those fit to govern themselves. On the contrary, the poetry that inspires this putatively charged citizenry certainly does not have to be academic or even the product of educated literacy and, in fact, the citizenry I have in mind overlaps considerably with what Rachel Buff has called the ‘denizenry,’ a looser term that implies the ambiguously embodied/illicit/disempowered socius that may not reach the radar screen that acknowledges the ‘citizen.’ The academy can be an environment in which these expressions can be understood and reflected on as poetry. That is, the ‘ill’-literate, extra-literary, alter-literary, or post-literary need to train the conventionally literate in new ways of hearing, reading, seeing, experiencing, making the transparent opaque and the opaque transparent.

From here, Damon attempts to radically alter – even reverse – our understanding of both “poetry” and “pedagogy” (“a discourse founded on condescension”). In making this case, she argues for increased attention to “post-literary poetry,” where “there is writing without words [and] sidewalks burn with language.” This configuration of the field of “poetry” Damon draws from the Situationists, whose understanding of poetry was decidedly non- or even anti-literary:

poetry must be understood as direct communication within reality and as real alteration of this reality. It is liberated language, language recovering its richness, language breaking its rigid significations and simultaneously embracing words and music, cries and gestures, painting and mathematics, facts and acts. Poetry thus depends on the richest possibilities for *living* and changing life at a given stage of socioeconomic structure. (“All the King’s Men”)

Damon includes, problematically I think, in the category of the “post-literary” the “new oralities: slams, zines, and open-mike readings with their uh-oh-so commodifiable underground cachet and unpredictable energy.” I say problematically because if these forms are recuperable as “commodities” they are recuperable as “literary”; and with their prizes and stars and rituals, they have already strayed quite a long way from the burning sidewalks where they may have once been considered “underground.” Nevertheless, Damon’s challenge that these works have the potential to put “academic discourse about poetry, not to mention academic poetry, into crisis” is certainly worth testing in the classroom.

Which brings me back to an earlier point. If *Poetry and Pedagogy* has a limitation, it is that few of the essays comment directly on potentially conflicting aims and practices *within* the slippery aesthetics of “the contemporary.” This becomes especially apparent when the editors (along with some of the contributors) invoke terms like “global interconnectedness” and “cultural awareness” as part of what often appears to be an emancipatory model of culture and education under global capitalism.

For example, they write in the introduction that “educating for this world [international, intercultural, etc.] is the most pressing challenge we face.” There’s quite a lot riding on that preposition “for,” given the operations of culture in what Jeff Derksen has called “the ideological software of neoliberalism.” Like the deferral of equality and “citizenship” that underlies liberal

pedagogy, when read on a global scale, the promise of democracy – and its cultural poetics of interconnectedness, communication, exchange, etc. – is what “we” in the North offer, and “they” in the South need (whether or not “they” want “our” “democracy” is another question). We can deliver the democracy-service, but only after they recognize and admit to their *inequality*, their lack, and only after they achieve sufficient credits for carrying out the various assignments and reforms outlined in our program (the SAPs). This is the ruthless and manipulative “pedagogy” of global economics (which is no stranger to the lash, either, when it needs it).

While Retallack and Spahr identify the tensions between “an overly optimistic concept of the global village [and] increasing concerns about the politics of globalization,” tensions that can create conflicting imperatives in the classroom, and while they make a much-needed and “unabashedly utopian” case that “education must be in touch with the historical-contemporary intersection that forms the world in which we live,” there is more to be said, I think, about how – or which – radical poetry and pedagogy might meaningfully contest the ongoing globalization of social and economic disequilibrium, and about how we might, for instance, develop our affinities with the social movements already involved in this struggle.

Without this account, I fear that those of us labouring in educational institutions will be stuck with the task of fixing the problems of citizenship and cross-cultural communication that capital needs fixed.

Works Cited

“All the King’s Men.” *Situationist International Anthology*. Trans. Ken Knabb. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981.

Parakrama, Arjuna. *De-Hegemonizing Language Standards: Learning from (Post)colonial Englishes about "English."* London: Palgrave, 1995.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Trans. Kristin Ross. Stanford, CA: UP, 1991.

Roger Farr is the author of the long-poem *Surplus* (Linebooks, 2006), and the editor of *Parser: New Poetry and Poetics*. His writing on radical social movements and the avant-garde appears or is forthcoming in *Anarchist Studies*, *The Encyclopedia of Protest and Revolution from 1600 to the Present* (Blackwell, 2009), *Fifth Estate*, *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, *The Rain Review*, *West Coast Line*, and *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*. He is Convener of the Creative Writing Program at Capilano University.