

Potential Form and Hank Lazer's *Portions*

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It would seem that Hank Lazer has been busy for some time now trying to exhaust form. Or more accurately, forms. As he himself notes, “For the past twenty or so years, I have been (serially) inventing a form and living with that form either for a specified number of poems...or for a specified duration of time....[I]nhabiting a form to discover what might be learned through and from it” (103). Each form Lazer works with, then—for the duration of the writing of a book—is a potentiality—thus rather than *exhausting* his forms (he spectacularly, and I think happily, fails to do this), Lazer proves their *inexhaustibility*.

The form in *Portions*, while discovered more or less by chance in the writing of Lazer's previous book, *The New Spirit*, is a rigorously maintained poem of 18 three-word lines (always divided into six three-line stanzas). At 54 words a poem, Lazer found the rationale for the form in the Torah, where readings on the Sabbath are divided into 54 “portions” in the course of a year. Each portion or *parashah* is named after its first or characteristic word (a practice Lazer also follows in his *Portions*).

When I mentioned potentiality above I had in mind Giorgio Agamben's writings on potentiality. Potentiality, Agamben argues, only makes sense if it also contains its opposite—impotentiality, powerlessness, the potential to not be or not occur. Something is potential only when it is not actualized, when there remains the chance that it will not come to pass. Here is Agamben:

To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. The *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-being. (182)

Lazer seems to comment on such (im)potentiality when he writes “just now being / here it of / course slips away” (37), or again: “the twin engines // being & nothingness / motor across the / still lake” (97). But more than this mere thematizing of the co-implication of doing/undoing, what I want to argue is that Lazer works, formally, *with* (im)potentiality, with the whole project working simultaneously towards exhaustion while proving that the simple form it works is in fact inexhaustible.

Returning to Agamben, we find that the philosopher is less interested in abstract, unrealized potentiality than in its continued existence in things that have in some way been actualized:

[I]f a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes

fully into it as such. This does not mean that it disappears in actuality; on the contrary, it *preserves itself* as such in actuality. (183)

How does something remain potential in the actual? I have in mind here works of art—actualized cultural object (books of poems, for instance). What “preserves” potentiality (which includes the potential to not-be) in their actualized forms? One answer, when considering the linguistic objects, resides in the very slipperiness of the sign, the fact that words are unstable, multiple, refractory, shifty. Lazer comments on just this fact when he “cuts” right to the heart of the contradictoriness of signification:

When to cleave
means to cling
to or cut

Through (17)

That which means both at once “to cling to” and “to cut through” is a potentiality—because it includes its impotentiality (its erasure in its opposite). Poetry, we might note, exploits the (im)potentiality of language—the possibility for meaning to slide in multiple and often contradictory directions—more or less as its *raison d’etre*. Lazer is, in this sense, a very canny and conscious manipulator of some of poetry’s “core values.” More though, he works this (im)potentiality not just at the level of the individual sign, but also at the level of the line and stanza.

In the Hebrew Bible, Lazer notes, no periods or commas or punctuation of any kind “interrupts the flow of words” (Ouaknin qtd. in *Portions* 105). This leads him to explore “the multiple possibilities of line breaks—the way the line break offers both a discontinuity and a space through which one reads to connect” (103). In the following poem I have used slash marks to note where I think the syntax hinges, simultaneously marking a break and connection:

Discipline amounts to
staying here / access
strictly in daily

circumstances / same options
as electron or
subparticle / acrobatics / when

syllable / life / music
of light &
wind / in sobered

palms / shadowed diamond
head back lit
gives way to

complete light / coffee /
meditation / reading / writing /
altar at dawn /

familiar birth canal /
how quickly birth
& morning disappear (25)

Note that (as I read the poem) the ligatures in the first four stanzas all occur mid-line, propelling the work onward, causing us to slip quickly across the enjambed line breaks. In the final two stanzas, however, the poem slows, and the pauses begin to occur at the ends of lines, bringing us up sharp. One thing to note is that form and content are working in lock-step in these meditative poems of awareness (this poem is in many ways characteristic of much of the work in *Portions*). I would also suggest that the poem plays, syntactically, with the (im)potentialities of meaning, stretching them across line breaks or bringing them up short (“diamond [?]/ head”—ah, we are in Hawaii!).

The meditative poetry in *Portions* is an example of what Lazer has called “Thinking/singing”: “that ‘meaning’ and ‘musicality’ are inseparable, coincidental, and simultaneous”—“The poem is the thinking, is an embodiment, a highly specific incarnation and manifestation of an interval of consciousness” (*Lyric & Spirit* 188).

The writing hand
will not tell
at all until

eyes move slowly
along the chosen
word a rising

symphony of the
busy eyes turning
to this world (26)

Here physical awareness of the body (“hand”), perception (“eyes”), and cognition (“word”) all emerge simultaneously in “a rising / symphony.” The shortness, and insistence, of the lines and line breaks stretch this thought out, drawing taught against the poem’s form, accentuating its sound structure (the **will tell all until** of the first stanza, **move slowly chosen word** of the second, and the **symphony busy turning world** of the next).

Portions contains more than poems of daily meditation though, and this brings us back to the inexhaustibility of the form the book employs so rigorously—a form in which Lazer exclusively wrote for over five years. There are poems here on daily life, on Judaism, autobiographical reflections on the poet’s father, poems on love and death, poems on contemporary politics (the very entertaining “W,” on the Bush presidency) and poems dedicated, and clearly written in conscious response to, poets who have shaped Lazer’s own practice (including Robert Creeley—those short sharp lines!—Louis Zukofsky—an inveterate word counter—and perhaps most importantly, Robert Duncan).

Duncan makes a number of appearances—in the poem entitled “Robert Duncan,” obviously—but perhaps also in the poem “Passage,” in which the refrain “i am after / passage” (19) perhaps suggests an homage (“after”) Duncan’s *Passages* poems (a key example of a “potential” poetry).

The refrain is an important technique in *Portions*, another point at which the flexibility, and inexhaustibility, of a simple procedure is tested. The refrains are often an aspect of the poems’ meditative insistence on the present, but they can also take on the characteristics of the lament, become politicized, as in “Pharaoh”:

tell old pharaoh
but the people
don’t know they

are in his
clutches tell old
pharaoh but this

one doesn’t go
by that name
tell old pharaoh

to let but
there is no
sensible place no

podium from which
to petition him
must find a

way to tell
old pharaoh let
our people go (47)

We learn who this one who “doesn’t go / by that name” is a few pages later in the poem “W,” in which then president Bush’s war on Iraq becomes an almost Biblical struggle to “loot” “ancient tablets” (55), although it is in fact about “coveting” “pipelines” (the monetary bottom line lurking beneath the ritualized surface). What do we learn? That for the righteousness “the true bible / is always ours” (55). Such thinking allows “W” to think

maybe in
a year or
two try it
again in iran (54)

I want to close with a brief meditation on constraint. The sort of constraint Lazer employs in *Portions* may have more to do with traditional forms, such as the sonnet, which provided a linguistically material resistance to the poet's thought and expressivity, than it does with many contemporary examples of constraint, which have evolved out of a modern push away from (as Olson put it) "the lyrical interference of the individual as ego." So, from Eliot's "impersonality" to Williams' "machine of words" to Spicer's "dictation"—all the way up to Gregory Betts' "plunderverse" and Kenny Goldsmith's "uncreative writing," we have an attempt to get outside of, and receive information from other sources than, the limited personal ego or individual subject. Personally (contradiction intentional), I have been thoroughly invested in such practices, collaging found material and blurring the lines between reading and writing, the text "I make," and the text "I find," in almost everything I've written. Nevertheless, the task of completely eliminating the "self" and subjectivity from the process of writing (as Goldsmith seems to suggest he does) is, I think, fruitless, and more to the point, only capable of reflecting current conditions (the instrumentalization of life, complete alienation under late capitalism)—but entirely powerless to suggest alternatives, or even embody the struggle against such forces. I realize I am calling such poetics "impotent," and that a sharp reader might sniff out possible "preserved" potentiality in that impotentiality. Maybe this is so, and who is to say what openness may yet lie in a re-typed *New York Times*. What I find disturbing is the claims made as to the avant-garde credentials of such practices. Now, there is no denying that what a Goldsmith is doing draws upon practices that have long existed in the avant-garde; the problem I have is the more or less complete evacuation of the political from such practices as articulated by many of their contemporary practitioners. Thus a Christian Bök can repeatedly claim to be an "avant-garde" poet, but just as consistently leave any politics out of this claim, reducing the definition of "avant-garde" to, it would seem, "outrageous," or "shocking" or simply "new." The irony here, I think, is that where once the avant-garde was positioned as a critique of consumerism and commodification, Bök appears to reposition its goal as consumption and as a commodity (I'm thinking of his repeated self-celebration of *Eunoia*'s remarkable "market" success, as, for instance, in his recent "cage match" with Carmine Starnino).

Bök is, however, an interesting example to raise here. His constraints—in a work such as *Eunoia*, at least—are in fact closer to Lazer's, and traditional notions of form, than they are to Goldsmith's ambitions. The constraint provides a material limit the poet (yes, as an at least partially autonomous agent) must work with and against. While this opens the door for the poet to celebrate his "mastery" of the form, it also reminds us that the material conditions we everywhere find ourselves in (which include language and its ideological saturation) are a "constraint" we must navigate, negotiate, resist, critique, etc. I suppose, if I were to make the

comparison, the difference between Bök and Lazer is that the former details the struggle to negotiate his constraint *outside the poem*, while Lazer shows us the struggle *inside* the poem, where it remains an (im)potentiality.

Works Cited

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