

Doing the Twist: Modern American poetry and vitalism

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In American English a *twist* can refer to a “turn of events,” the introduction of a plot element that changes the course of a story, or the tightening or stressing of a weave. A *twister* refers to a tornado. To twist someone’s words is to perform an act of sophistry or to misrepresent the truth. To refer to someone as *twisted* paints them with evil intentions. One of America’s most cherished rock n’ roll variations is called “The Twist,” and Chubby Checker’s version of the song topped the Billboard charts not only in 1960 and again in 1962, but also in the 1980s with accompaniment from the Fat Boys. In the dance, the twist, popularized after Checker’s version of the song, the body releases nervous tension through a series of pivoting and twisting motions throughout the body.

When one looks at Modern American poetry, twisting is ubiquitous as a metaphor for composition. One finds it in Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*, where the poet relates the growth of his long poem, and thus his democratic alter ego, Maximus, thru the flower nasturtium, whose name derives from the Greek for “twisting”. The etymological origins of the flower lie not only in the flower’s twisted appearance, but also in its strong, pungent scent, infamous for turning the nose away. In Greek mythology, the nasturtium is also a “trophy” flower symbolizing victory over an oppressing force. In Olson’s insistent reference to the flower in *The Maximus Poems*, he pays homage not only to the convoluted thought-paths poetry often makes through its line-breaks and syntactical patterns, but also the poem’s victory within the realm of the symbolic and imaginary, if not also over real forces that the poet would like to combat and defeat.

The ascription of such a power to poetry can also be found in William Carlos Williams’ *Kora in Hell*, where he writes “There is nothing that with a twist of the imagination cannot be something else,” acknowledging poetry’s power to potentialize imagination and intellect. Yet the twist is perhaps most famously taken up by Williams’ and Olson’s contemporary, Louis Zukofsky, who in his text “Mantis, an interpretation” imagines contemporary composition as a remedy to what he recognizes as overly formal and determined methods of composing. By such methods one does not discover or invent forms adequate for the task at hand, so much as apply forms that are already given and so staid by prior use. While Zukofsky arrives at an approximation of a classical form through the composition of his poem “Mantis,” which he identifies as an “irregular” sestina, he claims to have done so only by responding to the necessities of his subject—a praying mantis which has “alighted” on his coat in a New York subway, and sparked his imagination about the abject conditions of the working-class and poor during his moment, Depression era America. Through the winding lines of his irregular sestina, Zukofsky attempts to weave related images, sounds, and ideas, achieving their maximum effect through recurrence and syntactical compaction.

The twist, it would seem to me, should embody poetry’s power to over-turn. And indeed this is also one of the definitions of the “twist”: a “turning” or “over-turning”. How the poem twists exactly remains alchemical, intuitive, and often over-determined whenever

one tries to describe it as a function of verse. Yet, the twist is arguably the thing which most applies to poetry as a function of intelligence, and contributes to social life as it is lived through the intensities of language. Two other modern poets who take up this function are Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens. Though the poets are often pitted against each other by canon formations, their formulations about verse in relation to vitality mirror one another uncannily when one looks at them together.

Stevens is famous for discussing poetry in terms of its vitality, claiming in his book of essays and lectures *The Necessary Angel* poetry as life's "great stimulant". Yet throughout his work Stevens repeats one word that I have always taken as a simile of the twist. This is the word "flick". For Stevens, flicking represents an expression of life. That which Stevens most considers living, he often describes as having a flick—whether a flick of the wrist, or a kind of photographic or cinematic flicker. One of the images of flicking that recurs throughout Stevens' work is that of the French stage-actress Sarah Bernhardt playing Ophelia in a performance of Hamlet. Through a simple movement of Bernhardt's hand Stevens believed the actress to convey precisely the emotional complexity of one of Shakespeare's most tragic characters. So it is as if all of life's meaning can be contained through similar gestures, and words do also evince such gestural qualities—qualities which contribute in subtle ways to a poem's atmosphere, and the feeling that the poem is acting upon us in certain ways when we read it.

In Stein's work, the twist does not operate so much paratactically, though Stein would also lineate much of her work, as through grammatical and syntactical elements. In place of the twisting achieved by lineation, Stein would use what she called a technique of "insistence," which is the quality of repeating words and phrases without those words and phrases losing their qualities of expressiveness. So in her "portraits" Stein attempted to enact a lively description of a particular object or person not by producing realistic visual descriptions with words, but by improvising writing that might associate the object or person synaesthetically, kinetically, and through the internal logic of a single portrait's textual elements. In this way, Stein avoided describing her subjects in order to express their essences through prosody.

A discourse that Stein, Olson, Stevens, and Zukofsky share that much modern and contemporary poetry also share is that of *vitalism*—the study and belief in "life essence"/*élan vital* which grew up in the 19th century through post-Darwinist biology. While I don't believe the legacy of vitalism has left us, and it may in fact be with us more than ever before, I do believe that there are better uses to which vitalism can be put, as well as the twisting which may be poetry's greatest vital sign. Which is to say, while one may continue to test poetry by claiming whether it is vital or not—an assumption of language's force (and a counter-force of that force) or a failure to express language as a living thing—the ways that vitalisms are reflected by critical-reaction to poetry seem crucial to how we take poetry in its appropriate cultural context, and as a product, ultimately, of forces that can not be divorced from a *socius*.

Two great lacuna of modern poetry's twisting lie in Ezra Pound and Emily Dickinson. As Susan Howe, Beverly Dahlen, Susan Cameron and others show, Dickinson's own vital

lyric—a lyric often cited for its aphoristic tautness, and nervous condensery—was put towards undermining the force of Puritan-American personalization as it lines up with social forces that would undermine women and other marginalized people, and that would produce the United States as both an unrivalled imperial power, and as a power that could expend so many lives in so extravagant a manner through civil war. On the other hand, Pound, not unlike the Italian Futurists, ultimately championed poetry's intensities (poetry, for Pound, consisted of what he called “an aristocracy of emotions”) in order to serve both a fascist theme, as well as an authoritarian historicist-citational practice. Though it is difficult to argue against the vitality of much of Pound's work, and especially his work as a translator, it *is* possible to show the abuses and contradictions of the way he expressed this vitality. (And here I would beg to differ with the editors of *N+1* magazine who in a panel about the “Practical Avant Garde” at MoMA's P.S.1 museum in the spring of 2006 claimed vitalism to be a “good unto itself” for avant garde practice.)

Yet another modern who thought through the question of vitality after Darwin and modern physics is of course Frederic Nietzsche. And it is from Nietzsche that Michel Foucault derives a question that still has not been adequately answered by poetry: “Who is speaking?” If there is any question that poetry should continue to pursue in our day, I believe it is still this question of what it means for a particular subject to be speaking. For the question *who is speaking* situates poetry's vital energies—its power, if you will—where it perhaps most matters. Two of the places where I think poetry can most matter is both in the sphere of cultural production and critique. By asking *who is speaking* one wonders how language positions both its author and reader in terms of forms that are not so much invented (even if they seem to appear out of nowhere) as they are coproduced and performed. By attending this performance we may better wield what poetry can do. The problem of *who is speaking* (or *discourse*) is one that goes back to Baruch Spinoza insofar as Spinoza is the first modern, to my knowledge, to ask the question of what a body can do, that is, how can one determine the body's potentialities, rather than treat bodies as foregone entities.

What if we treated poetry like a body in terms of poetry's social effect? How can we maintain as wide a definition of “social effect” as possible before foreclosing or codifying poetry's meaning to the detriment of what it may be capable of doing—effecting and performing? These are sincere questions that I believe Filip Marinovich and Dorothea Lasky both investigate through their own practices as poets: poetry as biopolitical theater; poetry as a baring of the subject and subject formations in contemporary life; poetry as a filter for information, and means of expressing cultural valuables; poetry as a (counter-) disciplinary machine; poetry as a source of health, regimen, “technologies of the self” (Foucault). *We are approaching certain discoveries*, but what do these discoveries mean? Poetry, as one of culture's most experimental modalities for meaning, must continually investigate the stakes of vitalism as both an ideology, and as a metaphor for embodied subjectivity.

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