

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:  
THE NEW IN THE NEWS:  
POETRY, AUTHENTICITY, AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

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*The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out: Poems*

Karen Solie

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015

128 pages; hardcover, \$25.00

*Emblems of the Passing World: Poems after Photographs by August Sander*

Adam Kirsch

The Other Press, 2015

144 pages; hardcover, \$24.95

*It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time, simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it—backwards.*

—Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals*<sup>1</sup>

The news is not new. After all, it has already happened. The world as we know it must be a thing of the past. Knowledge is historical, rendered, as all history is, in imaginative form and thereby changed. And since the act of reading too exerts a revisionary power, the news, as mediated, must always be new. The more vigorous the imaginative transformations of writing and reading, the more internalized their chosen world, infused with value, thought, emotional range, rendered as something other than mere object. That said, the very emotional

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959): 89.

stakes that would bind us also potentially become their own locus of attention. The will to “make it new,” as Pound says, and reencounter the world threatens in its extremes to eclipse it, to render its shared history more uncertain. But what is the “it” in Pound’s adage if not the past or, more specifically for Pound, the tradition? We find in his words a distilled version of the paradox that plagues the poetic imagination, particularly as it identifies with the “modern.” Poems thrive on the new in the old, the old in the new, how each lies embedded in the other in dissonant dialogue. Poems are conflicted in this regard as all language is, but with particular intensity of focus as if to test what is at stake in the conflict, what values might reshape us when that conflict is alive.

That said, we no longer quite live in the Pound era. Our sensitivity to the instability of language and its forms of knowing is far more heightened now, not simply because of the contributions of postmodern theory and epistemology, but also because of the rise of mass-mediated forms of distortion driven at unprecedented speed with unprecedented breadth and political consequence. The news has never seemed more new, more in flux, changing the world we struggle to read with historical accuracy. At the same time, the instability of discourse gets tested at moments of cultural and personal crisis. Facts exert their weight. In a so-called information age, with its plethora of misinformation, the net becomes increasingly an untrustworthy friend, but a friend nonetheless, in matters historical, cultural, and political. We might, in our longing to connect, wonder not only about the authenticity of the news but also, as a related matter, about the deliverer of the news, whether writers write in good or bad faith, how honest they are, yes, but also how realized, how self-aware.

Whatever cynicism we share about authenticity in forms of media, it has yielded two vastly different responses: that is, a distrust of authenticity as a viable category altogether or a renewed effort to carve out a space for the authentic, less as an absolute than as a relative value worth working toward. In a world where the anointed winner of a presidential debate could also be the one who did not get the facts right, we might ask, how did this odd disease that makes democracy dysfunctional enter our culture, and what is our response in pushing back against a populist form of constructivism where authenticity becomes subordinate to rhetoric in the realm of responsible choice?

A poet might equally ask, what, if anything, does poetry bring to the conversation? Is there a relationship between the authenticity of the news and that of poetic expression as it mediates and shapes our inner life? How might poetry heighten a sense of “the real” or “the authentic” that mere journalism does not?

Williams’s famous passage from “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” articulates a persistent unease with poetry’s vocation to connect us factually and yet valorize poetry’s character as a force of renovation:

My heart rouses  
                                                          thinking to bring you news  
                                                          of something  
that concerns you  
                                                          and concerns many men. Look at  
                                                                                                          what passes for the new.  
You will not find it there but in  
                                                          despised poems.  
                                                          It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
                                                          yet men die miserably every day  
                                                                                                          for lack  
of what is found there.<sup>2</sup>

It is common to quote the last sentence here out of context and thus highlight the life-affirming power of the poetic imagination in spite and in light of its opposition to the literal. While the passage suggests poetry engenders the felt values that make “the news” matter, there remains the destabilizing paradox in the poem: despised poems are indeed the genuine source of “the new” as something other than the news. One might see the conflict here as not only between the imaginative and the journalistic, but also between something individual and something multiple, made of many facts, many stories. Granted this association is fraught with paradox, since the new as some imaginative principle of individual consciousness, some inwardness and vital creative hunger, might indeed be the connective force that shapes a community in profoundly meaningful ways. The “you” here resonates

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2. *William Carlos Williams, Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1969): 150–51.

in context of the poem as intimate, specifically Williams's wife, and yet clearly the sweep of this claim feels more broadly universal, the discourse more public, the sense of "you" more inclusive.

Men die miserably, it appears, because they suffer some larger cultural impoverishment, some lassitude of imaginative life. They live lives of quiet desperation because the authenticating and catalyzing power of imaginative freedom remains subordinate to the recalcitrant world of facts, norms, and low expectations that would render consciousness passive. The originary power of the poem, as Williams conceives it in "Asphodel," brings to mind his attack in "Spring and All" on Shakespeare's metaphor of art as mirror. The role of the poem is not mimetic, Williams's says, but generative; not passive, but revolutionary. Art is indeed a *source of new* being and not merely an imitative substitute. A poem does not reflect nature in Williams's argument. It is a force of nature. It participates in a spontaneous unfolding of the real. As such, it invites us to participate in a vital and progressive visionary process.

As polemic, Williams's writing tends toward the reductive, in order to voice a necessary rebellion, but meanwhile his poems depend upon some measure of historical and mimetic witness, the partial failure of which remains a precondition for a poem's distinctive reason for being. Williams' revolutionary rhetoric embodies the familiar Romantic sense of imaginative life as engendering a deeper sense of "the real"—one that includes and thereby honors individual subjectivity—and yet the possible excesses of a Romantic inward and individual focus remain in dialogue with the transpersonal in the form of community and "nature" as the variously conceived. One becomes an individual by way of participation in what lies within and beyond any one individual. In this way participation implies a degree of submission to a natural order. Such participation figures as political in ways that go to the psychology of power as manifest in political discourse and action, where imaginative life might deepen and authenticate a feeling of inclusion. Ironically, it is the passive acceptance of the normative and traditional that exacerbates the problem of alienation, the feeling that one is standing outside some larger exchange of forms whose authority lies, in part, in their repetitive insistence.

Contemporary American culture in advertising and entertainment has become saturated with images of rebellion and novelty,

mere facades that hide within them the simultaneous opposite appeal—that is, the lure of escaping our alienation and becoming one of many rebels whose images of creative will can be purchased and thus precede our involvement with them. Such forms are, to borrow from Williams, “what passes for the new.” The “Rebel” camera by Canon, for instance, becomes an object of desire because its image is conflated with that of a famous tennis star and the millions of others in the stands who cheer him, that wave of popular acceptance already well established in a community that will remain forever at a distance because it is an illusion. The image of youth and the new here is essential to an economy driven by obsolescence, and yet the nourishment at the level of meaning—the new as Williams conceives it—is nonexistent. Thus the appeal here is to a passive and lonely sensibility encouraged to identify with a figure of adventure and self-determination while remaining relatively unexposed to the unsettling anxieties of adventure, the conditions that call upon our negative capability to transform them. Obviously such inauthentic imaginative forms as commonly seen in advertising contain neither the new nor the news, so they become the antithesis of poetry that would make of the historical imagination a vital problem. To say it is “difficult” to get the news from poems is to suggest one has tried—Williams’s book-length poem *Paterson* is, after all, littered with excerpts from newspaper articles. Doubtless it is difficult enough to get the news (the facts) from the news (the media), let alone from poems whose transformative mediations are critical to their inclusively inward and outward model of the real. Thus, while a poem’s success in rendering the news remains ambiguous in “Asphodel,” as does the precise nature of “what is found there,” the simultaneous irresolution and protest in Williams’s rhetoric voices the peculiar position of the poet who feels the pressure of worldly necessity in something defiantly undetermined. He articulates both an historical and revisionary hunger, a desire to honor a fiercely factual world, a “given” that must be in conflict and dialogue with spontaneous will to do the life-affirming work of poetic meaning. He identifies spiritual survival with a feeling of belonging, a kind of marriage, a rootedness in the quotidian, whose felt significance relies upon continuous imaginative renewal.

The necessary friction between historical and revisionary desires continues to haunt contemporary poems and our ways of talking about

them. The theme finds fresh wind in its sails in an era caught between competing breeds of postmodern discourse—one that emphasizes the news and the other that emphasizes the new. The accent on the news finds expression in an intensified interest in political-historical contingencies and responsibilities and predicates its critique on a certain stability of information and sociological interpretation. On the other hand, we find the accent on the new in the style of critique sensitive to language as a process inextricable from the continual revisionary process of the reading individual. Once again, the news points to our necessary collectivity; the new to our equally necessary freedom from the herd. Contemporary poets often foreground the inescapable and irrevocable nature of history as their point of departure wherein they might explore the nature of individual freedom and identity as inextricable from culture and its stories and yet never fully determined by them. To be an individual is to be capable of the new.

A contemporary poetry movement such as conceptualism puts extreme pressure on categories such as “self,” as if to suggest its fundamentally regressive and illusory nature, but such rhetoric fails to break such diction down into its many competing connotations. The self conceived as a complex or drive (as in the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut) seems absent from a discourse that identifies self merely with persona (a self-construct), which indeed is a radically different and in many cases oppositional phenomenon. A self-drive, for instance, is no more of an illusion than a sex drive, though both may create the illusions of identity constructs conceived as stable and reliable. Questions thus remain. What do we mean when we use the word “self”? A process, a construct, creative will, mythic convenience? Or a little of each? If there is no self, then is authenticity also an illusion? Or do we risk being too reductive on the issue of authenticity if we identify its discourse with absolutist and essentialist absurdities that exaggerate a self’s autonomy? The contemporary poet might feel particularly challenged to probe more deeply the psyche caught in such questions, registering their experience with both irony and something beyond the ironic, and in so doing, they would reinvestigate the authentic as complex and problematic but no less central to the problem of meaning.

In Karen Solie’s second book, *The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out: Poems*, we find such a space. We see the poet’s conflict between histori-

cal and revisionary desire taken up in conversation with problems of epistemology. In a style decidedly contemporary, we see a world full of odd, yet daily, details—funny, unnerving, unexpected, at times horrific—the modes of imagistic and discursive rhetoric as mercurial as the swiftly changing world it would negotiate. Whatever the tone of wonder and bewilderment, her poetry typically gives way to a more meditative impulse working toward greater insight, greater stability in its perspective, mindful of the very limits of language and abstraction and the illusions of stability they would provide. Her metaphors are decidedly fresh, tensive, hurled with tremendous associative speed as if to register some of the anxious and exuberant energy of rebellion that seeks out “Beauty and terror / In equal measure” (9).

In such a world, the irrevocable nature of time appears both tragic and fortuitous. The very road beneath us mirrors us, changing as we change, such that we become grounded in the groundless, driven across a thing in motion. To affirm the indeterminate nature of experience is to participate in some measure of chaos, stylistically and argumentatively. It is to appropriate the very forces of loss and illogic that might otherwise paralyze us. And yet the poems of greatest meditative generosity tend to embody and resist the skittery expansiveness of local imaginative wit. Take Solie’s poem “A Western” that opens with an unabashed discursiveness that must be light, swift, and nimble to sustain the feeling of the spontaneous so critical to the spirit of the book. If we must work a bit to make sense here, the imagination we bring becomes germane to process both embodied and explored—that of orienting oneself in the wilderness, in the chaos of the West:

Its origins are to this hour undetermined.  
The free-floating found  
its transformative agent. A third term  
arose. It was a thing, it existed.

Not a friend, though in all other things  
it did kindle a renewed existence.  
Storefronts said, *defend yourself*.  
Under pavements, the timbers,  
arms around one another, said  
*embrace your condition*, said, *we are lost*. (10)

As in the swiftly evocative, meditative work of Stevens and Ashbery, the poem deploys the more flexible form of metaphor in metonymy to shed light without breaking the spell of darkness, the wonder so fundamental to the poem's radiance, but such flexibility is not absolute. Clearly, the origins discussed belong in part to "a western" of the title, but the interpretive freedom here opens up the scope of reference. What we find are conditions that involve origins in general, all of which are eclipsed, and so the birth of the "transforming agent," the myth born of bewilderment and desire. We negotiate some third term between the imagined and the real that in turn constitutes its own sense of imagined life as the new real. The perspective here is fundamentally Romantic in origin—that is, the imagined does more than merely mediate the real; it participates in the creation of the real. The myth "exists." The affirmation of the indeterminate finds its form, its storefront, its repertoire of images that figure as both defense against and registration of the fundamental rootlessness and metaphysical desire that haunts us.

It is a tribute to the maturity of the poet's vision that she begins with indeterminacy and the paradox of the mythic, only to go deeper in her meditation in ways that speak to the book's overarching concern with time. She is careful at each stage to register the defiant otherness of what must be killed or left out to make imaginative design possible:

The situation prevails with its timeline.

A third term arose between us, it existed.  
But a violence has been done  
to its element it could not withstand.  
It is not dead, unseen, or elsewhere.  
Nothing real any longer corresponds to it. (11)

The paradox here is that the "element" (as connotative of both atmosphere and fundamentals) suffers a kind of violence, as if to suggest change and thus loss, but whatever metaphysics required to conclude this is likewise denied. Thus the curious loss or violation is tied to the loss in our ability to forge correspondences to what is lost, but the latter loss makes inconclusive our sense of the former. The poem self-reflexively turns to the very theme of illogic in its mythic function designed to negotiate the chaos:



Above the harbour a gull creates flight  
as flight has created him. He arises  
and results from his work.  
He is the circle that violates logic.  
That's where his soul is. (11)

Thus the "timeline" with its linear logic and historicity yields to the image of the circle. The claim for eternal recurrence with its refreshingly unironic evocation of a "soul" avoids the tidy or sentimental due to its complexity and position in dialogue with the poem's skepticism. In context, the circle does not imply that linear time is conquered or that some singular origin is recovered. Nor do we have here some reductively essentialist notion of the soul. Rather in suggesting the creator as created by the creative act, the circular image of stability articulates something fundamentally unstable about identity and our ability to talk about its boundaries and beginnings. The bold vision here is that of individual soul ("his soul") as contingent upon otherness, change, revision, loss, violation—all that makes problematic the notion of the individual. What is honored in turn is something akin to the new in Williams's poem—that is, the moving target of the revisionary eye that makes a life into something of value.

By focusing on creative life as the ever-present origin of soul, Solie's poem begs the question: to what extent is "soul" different from "self"? The soul of the gull is *his* soul after all and occupies that contradictory space of radical permanence (circularity) and impermanence at the same time—creating itself in perpetuity. "Soul" might appear especially foreign to a postmodern epistemology since it traditionally feels characterized by the metaphysics of the eternal, but it is in part because of this that it enjoys some distance from the word "self" whose more readily perceived, constructed nature opens the reifying rhetoric of self up to so much contemporary criticism. The "soul" traditionally is hidden, private, and thus diametrically opposed to the "persona." As such, it makes conspicuous the impossibility of its representation, and yet of all modes of representation charged with the task is art; of all modes of discourse, poetry—language charged with speaking the unspeakable, yes, but also language most associated with paring away the inessential. The soul as a concept feels unabashedly essentialist, though in some of the more surprising contemporary poems, the soul's essentials are often haunted with contradictions, a sense of

elusive changeability that becomes, paradoxically, a soul's defining character and indefinable.

The poems of Adam Kirsch's new book, *Emblems of the Passing World: Poems after Photographs by August Sander*, are in the best sense keen on articulating essentials, on reaching through the surface of each photo portrait to touch something of the life there, and yet they too are haunted by the impossibility of access and revival. Moreover, this failure becomes key to the poems' complex authority. Kirsch's formalist restraint and relative clarity of statement figure in the most obvious ways as contrary to Solie in spirit, and yet both authors bring into focus the pressure of the new on what it is the new would represent—that is, the cultural and historical. They both make problematic and vital the role the spontaneous, interpretive imagination plays in both accessing and obscuring the real. In so doing, that "third term" that Solie mentions, that new phenomenon born of the imagination, becomes part of the fabric of the real. "It exists," as Solie says. The conversation with history becomes more than a mediation of history. It announces itself as something outside of history as well, outside of what the past has seen or can determine. "The real" becomes bound up in the new in ways that affirm some element of autonomy from the past, even as we gaze more deeply into the archive.

As ekphrastic poems, Kirsch's are refreshingly discursive, bold in identifying some animating conflict within each photograph that then occasions meditative development. As such, they not only interpret deeply; they register a self-consciousness about the act of interpretation. The inwardness of each figure in its portrait is largely denied us, and what we feel in its stead is the poet turning self-reflexively to his own psyche, to the universals embedded in the contemporary gaze. Thus, as empathetic as these poems are, their primary tone is not that of empathy, nor is their appeal as obviously emotional as we might expect. Their urge to understand the irretrievable cannot be disentangled from the will to make new some more enduring truth to the interpretive mind. The poem entitled "Fitter" for example begins:

Nature plays havoc with the stratified  
Society we struggle to impose,  
Mounting rebellions on behalf of those  
Whose natural equality's denied

By planting beauty like a bomb or mine  
In such a man, whose clothes declare his trade  
Is dirty, difficult, and badly paid,  
But whose bright face and golden hair define

Him as the natural aristocrat  
Everyone wants to be with or to be. (11)

What intrigues Kirsch most here are the competing hierarchies of nature and culture. Thus he registers but quickly moves beyond the theme of hardship, more obvious and thus vulnerable to sentimental redundancy. Also a common theme throughout the book is the author's powerlessness in representing the inner lives of those he contemplates. It is the clothes that speak of suffering; the face that speaks of beauty and self-assurance; but the fierce reality remains that the man cannot speak and never will.

Throughout the book, Kirsch is deft with his rhetoric in regarding the past as fundamentally other. The photos before us are appearances only, and while the temptation to conflate identity and appearance provides the premise for many of the speculations of the book, such claims are dialectically held in check. The book's final poem, "Photographer," thus concludes:

What you appear to be is what you are,  
Despite the pleas of subjectivity  
Whispering there is more to you by far  
Than the mere object you're compelled to be  
As soon as his remorseless shutter clicks—  
Unless, perhaps, he secretly agrees  
A man cannot be known by how he looks,  
Only by the infinity he sees. (115)

The passage works brilliantly if we read into the absurdity of the first line here a dramatic irony that gives the greater credibility, however problematic, to the final two lines. The passage is animated with contradiction, as if to suggest subjectivity might be something separate from the "you" compelled to be an object. To become (as a subject, a "you") a mere object must be understood as an impossible imaginative construct, and thus it articulates emotionally conflicted relation to the photographic artifact. Mere objectivity implies death, and yet those we call dead exist neither as subject nor object. It is the living imagination, however, that would conquer death, or rather some measure of our

anxieties about it, in the act of mythic seeing. The photographer's secret agreement is yet another thing, ironically, that the poem cannot witness. Thus the poet turns to the act of his own reading, how the historical imagination never arrives at its object, how it must entertain certain fictions to forge with the past a more personal relation.

Both Solie and Kirsch seek closure in the language of openness—the first with the image of the circle, the second with the mention of infinity—and thus they embody the fundamentally conflicted nature of poems that seek both continuity with and a break from the past. Solie's creator who comes into being the moment of his creation breaks free in some ways of our simple models of history, etiology, and the self. If the self has an enduring essence or soul, it paradoxically lies in its ability to change. Thus the lingering sense of the enduring remains. Something of the past repeats, and the hunger for universals continues. Kirsch too is driven by his pursuit of knowledge embedded in history that must remain unknown. The final gesture of infinity connotes neither the everlasting nor the complete, but rather a presence without boundaries or form. In this way and in ways explored by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, infinity suggests the opposite of totality—that is, an all-inclusive and stable structure that gives a multiplicity its meaning. And for Levinas, we feel exposure to the infinite most palpable in the human face, akin to those who meet us in Kirsch's book. The face is the gateway not only to the unknown, but to the unknowable, and it asks of us a degree of humility and surrender in the moment of encounter. Both Solie and Kirsch are mythic writers in the sense that their imaginative forms embody eternal irresolution, wonder, and the bewilderment. They give to our most fundamental anxieties a voice, to our confusions a symmetry, to our symmetries a fury, to poetry a dialectic of loss and retrieval, renewal and homage, erasure and compulsion—all that haunts the historical imagination. By formalizing the conflict between imagination and history, between living forward and knowing in reverse, both writers model a humility and yet perpetual curiosity and creative will, a sense of the limits of human understanding as salient and yet indefinable, as is the past. It is everywhere and nowhere—history, the news—and therefore it haunts the new, what it is we make that in turn makes us, what we see as still in part unseen, for the love of what is found there.