

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:  
THE TRANSCENDENTAL CIRCUIT

JOSHUA COREY

*The Hatred of Poetry*

Ben Lerner

FSG Originals, 2016

96 pages; paperback; \$12

*Citizen: An American Lyric*

Claudia Rankine

Graywolf Press, 2014

160 pages; paperback; \$20

*How Poems Think*

Reginald Gibbons

University of Chicago Press, 2015

208 pages; paperback; \$25

*It's No Good*

Kirill Medvedev

Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012

288 pages; paperback; \$17

Plato saw poets as intrinsically corrosive of the values of his ideal state; they are dangerous to the republic because the poet “awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason.”<sup>1</sup> The poets exaggerate and lie; they imitate virtuous action without real knowledge of virtue; they excite ignoble passions and are indifferent to the guidance of the law; they are “the eulogists of tyranny.”<sup>2</sup> In this

---

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 2, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1871), 447.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.

dire political moment, that description should give us fresh pause; it seems to describe not a poet in the usual sense of the word but the means by which a person sufficiently lawless and sufficiently intuitive might achieve enormous power. I am talking, of course, about Donald J. Trump, soon to be the forty-fifth president of the United States; I am talking most specifically about his way with words. In a speech a few weeks before the 2016 election, the tech billionaire and Trump supporter Peter Thiel—a man who has used his enormous wealth to sue the news outlet Gawker out of business—summed up Trump’s rhetorical appeal in a few now notorious sentences:

I think one thing that should be distinguished here is that the media is always taking Trump literally. It never takes him seriously, but it always takes him literally.... I think a lot of voters who vote for Trump take Trump seriously but not literally, so when they hear things like the Muslim comment or the wall comment their question is not, “Are you going to build a wall like the Great Wall of China?” or, you know, “How exactly are you going to enforce these tests?” What they hear is we’re going to have a saner, more sensible immigration policy.<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean to take Trump’s language, or anyone’s language, “seriously but not literally”? Is there not a dark echo here of Shelley, of unacknowledged legislation hiding in plain sight? Is there not a kind of perverse poetry to be ascribed to the rhetoric of a man who continually invites his listeners to insert their own darkest fears into the sinister repetition of bland statements like “There’s something going on”?

American society, if not the whole of the West, has reached a tipping point, marked by the fecklessness and moral bankruptcy of our elites and the mounting rage and despair of masses of people who have been led to blame people of color, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, and women for the very real decline in their social and economic prospects brought about by the inexorable logic of global capitalism. In the run-up to this election, we saw how the best not only lacked all conviction, but lost themselves in the echo chamber of social media, which turned out to be a driver of the legacy media’s narrative that

---

<sup>3</sup> Julia Carrie Wong, “Peter Thiel Takes Trump’s Muslim Ban ‘Seriously but not Literally,’” *The Guardian* (November 1, 2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/oct/31/peter-thiel-defends-donald-trump-muslim-ban-mexico-wall>.

Trump could not possibly win rather than any sort of reality check. Meanwhile the worst have brought their passionate intensity to the cause of a man who campaigned against language itself, in a kind of grim parody of old deconstructionist arguments about the endlessness of the signifying chain: "There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts."<sup>4</sup> When it comes to Trump and his language, and its appeal to millions of white voters who feel themselves to be disenfranchised, and who are coming to an appalling new consciousness of themselves *as* white, we cannot really be concerned with a *defense* of poetry. We are looking at something much more like an *attack*.

Does the hatred of poetry translate, all too easily, into the poetry of hatred?

## I.

"Poetry," Ben Lerner writes near the beginning of his very brief, much-discussed new book, "arises from the desire to get beyond the finite and the historical—the human world of violence and difference—and to reach the transcendent or divine" (7–8). We are already in difficulties, for before we can encounter the core of Lerner's argument—basically, that the unheard melodies of *poetry* are inevitably sweeter than the heard melodies of any actual *poems*—we must contend with this surprisingly narrow claim that a desire to transcend is central to the poetic impulse. To define poetry as "the desire to get beyond the finite and the historical" restricts poetry, if not actual poems, to the category of the anti-civil or the orphic, heedless of the long history of Horatian and other discursive poetries concerned with the deeds of men. More problematically, it seems to leave out the kind of political or civic poem that inscribes historically excluded and oppressed persons into the language—we might call this the poetic task of creating a usable linguistic personhood for those at the margins of society. Lerner's attempt to recover this dimension of poetry later in his argument, with a discussion of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, centers

---

<sup>4</sup> Erik Wemple, "CNN Commentator Scottie Nell Hughes: Facts No Longer Exist," *The Washington Post* (December 1, 2016): [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2016/12/01/cnn-commentator-scottie-nell-hughes-facts-no-longer-exist/?utm\\_term=.6bd18a8fc714](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2016/12/01/cnn-commentator-scottie-nell-hughes-facts-no-longer-exist/?utm_term=.6bd18a8fc714). The misplaced preposition (of for as) seems weirdly telling, even poetically mimetic of the relationship to language Hughes (mis)articulates.

on that book's un- or anti-poetic qualities. Citing the book's conjuring of "the experience of depersonalization—numbness, desensitization, media saturation" (67), Lerner remarks, "What I encounter in Rankine is the felt unavailability of traditional lyric categories; the instruction to read her writing as poetry—and especially as lyric poetry—catalyzes an experience of their loss, like a sensation in a phantom limb" (68). The suppression of the speaker's lyric presence—the feeling, sensitivity, and contemplative solitude associated with the Wordsworthian lyric self—enables a troubled and troubling transcendence of the speaker's historical particulars. In his discussion of one of the many scenes of racial microaggression documented by *Citizen*, Lerner focuses on her substitution of the second person for the first person, which performs in effect a reverse transcendence on the (white, male) reader: "My privilege excludes me—that is, protects me—from the 'you' in a way that focuses my attention on the much graver (and mundane) exclusion of a person of color from the 'you' that the scene recounts" (70–71). The "American lyric" of the book's subtitle operates as a zone of indeterminacy, a pathos triangulated on its (black, female) author's distance from the status of being a fully "American" citizen but also her inability—maybe anyone's inability—to occupy the curious position suggested by "lyric citizen." This extrapolation is a contradiction in terms that mirrors the historical contradiction of "Black American citizen" explored and exploded by the book. The question for Lerner, and for us, is whether the contradiction suggested by "lyric citizen" is historically contingent or something closer to an ontological fact, a fatal flaw inside poetry itself.

Lerner's argument centers on the practice of poetry as a *via negativa* aimed not at God but at Marianne Moore's "place for the genuine," a kind of transcendental location canceled or obstructed by actual poems. Only through suppressing the specifically lyric qualities of actual poems can the phantom limb of poetry make its throb be felt, a throb that we recognize as the pathos of limitation. I am reminded here of something William Empson says in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, regarding what he identifies as the deeper truth beneath the otherwise "bourgeois ideology" of Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard": "it is only in degree that any improvement of society could prevent wastage of human powers; the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply,

and is the central feeling of tragedy.”<sup>5</sup> Gray’s poem naturalizes the “mute, inglorious Milton[s]” of its titular churchyard; “Full many a flower is born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air.” But the “you” of Rankine’s *Citizen* was not “born” to be either unseen (“I didn’t see you” is a recurring phrase in the book) or else to be seen as some kind of inhuman, monstrous, or animalistic threat (detailed most memorably for this reader in Rankine’s meditations on the racism directed at tennis star Serena Williams). The dialectic of black invisibility and hypervisibility is historically contingent, that might and must be otherwise, and Rankine’s widely acclaimed *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a blow struck on behalf of that “otherwise.”

Poetry’s marginality, and its ability to capitalize on its minimal means—all you need to write a poem is a pencil and a scrap of paper, all you need to publish or perform it is a social media account or a YouTube video—seems intrinsic to its peculiar political power of voicing the otherwise. Transcendence is still important to this kind of poetry, but it is a specific transcendence of particular historical conditions that would otherwise bar utterance. Transcendence, in other words, is not a destination for such poetry but a *route* that returns the poet to the historical world, gifted by the powers of language with a face or name.<sup>6</sup> This Adamic capacity of poetry to name is a political capacity, as demonstrated for example by Danez Smith’s poem “alternate names for black boys.” The “names” inscribed by Smith’s poem are really evocations or incantations, presented in a numbered list:

4. coal awaiting spark & wind
5. guilty until proven dead
6. oil heavy starlight
7. monster until proven ghost.<sup>7</sup>

---

5 William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 5.

6 I am thinking here of George Oppen’s poem by that title: “There is a force of clarity, it is / Of what is not autonomous in us, / We suffer a certain fear.” Oppen’s version of “Objectivist” poetry comes very close, tonally, to the anti-lyrical depersonalization that Lerner identifies in Rankine: “All this is reportage.” “Route,” *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 185, 193.

7 I am grateful to Poetry editor Don Share who called the audience’s attention to this poem at a symposium sponsored by The Point magazine, “What Is Poetry For?,” held at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago on July 13, 2016.

The poem resonates because it anticipates and speaks for the political moment of which Ferguson, Missouri, is the metonym—in spite of the fact that it first appeared in the March 2014 issue of *Poetry*, five months before Michael Brown was murdered by the Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. (Consider this a politically charged variation on the Eliotic “ideal order” of “existing monuments...modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.”)<sup>8</sup> The poem’s power derives from the absence gestured at by the “alternate names” it offers, none of which, of course, are actually names but represent the displacements of personhood and citizenship suffered by “black boys” in American society. Personhood, agency, a seat at the civic table—these things are as out of reach as the names that the poem metonymically evokes without providing. The ache of this is made felt, in part, by the lyric beauty of some of the lines and images, warped with the weft of the unbeautiful: “monster until proven ghost” is the most succinct possible summary of the dialectic of (in)visibility that Rankine unfolds more gradually and analytically in *Citizen*.

What Lerner, adapting a phrase from Allen Grossman, calls “the bitter logic of the poetic principle” is not a merely structural bitterness but a historical one. This is something that Lerner sometimes seems to forget; though his book can be read as a trot or distillation of Grossman’s complex and rebarbative prose, when Lerner intones that “the poet is a tragic figure,” the phrase lacks the specific gravity of Grossman’s texts. Consider, for example, what Grossman has to say about Allen Ginsberg and the relation of Ginsberg’s poetry to his Jewishness. “The Jew,” writes Grossman, “like the Irishman, presents himself as a type of the sufferer in history”; “the Jew is a symbolic representative of man overthrown by history.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, “For Ginsberg the poetic identity must supersede the ethnic identity if the poet is to survive.”<sup>10</sup> Grossman here seems to confirm the idea implicit in Lerner’s statement, that the poetic reaches down to some fundamental ground—or up to some transcendental height—beyond

---

8 T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69400>.

9 Allen Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 151, 153.

10 *Ibid.*, 156.

historical, ethnic, identitarian particulars. Insofar as I am fallen into any historical identity, I can identify with the symbol of “the Jew.” And yet Jews can only be the bearer of this alleged symbolic capacity because of the actual secular history of their oppression and diaspora, and because of their theological and linguistic response to that history; as Grossman puts it in another essay, “the Jew’s place is the word,” Torah, a word that “strictly speaking, is One (holy, sacred, *Kadosh*), and is unlike all other words in that it does not signify by difference but rather serves the Master who is difference—which is to say, existence itself.”<sup>11</sup> Or as every teacher of creative writing knows: the royal road to the universal *is* difference. We can only take root in humanity by way of identity, which is always political and specific. Any “transcendence” of identity by poetic means can only be accomplished by a paradoxical form of sublation, preserving and remembering that identity in a different form.

“Poetry,” Grossman writes in the preface to *The Sighted Singer*, “is a principle of power invoked by all of us against our vanishing.”<sup>12</sup> That *all of us* is a sweeping, universalizing, dare I say transcendentalizing gesture, one Lerner seems to follow when he claims that “we are all poets simply by virtue of being human.... Since language is the stuff of the social and poetry the expression in language of our irreducible individuality, our personhood is tied up with our poethood”<sup>13</sup> (10). Lerner writes that “the falling away from poetry [is] a falling away from the pure potentiality of being human into the vicissitudes of being an actual person in a concrete historical situation”<sup>14</sup> (11). No wonder Lerner repeats with Marianne Moore that “I, too, dislike it.” What is the value of a writing that can only succeed by its failure to present “pure potentiality”?

One answer might be in how poetry’s potential powers—another name for the virtual—metonymically resemble the virtuality of personhood itself. Lerner’s argument somewhat clumsily encapsulates what Rankine puts much more clearly in *Citizen* as the distinction between “historical self” and “self-self”:

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Allen Grossman, *The Sighted Singer* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), ix.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: FSG, 2016), 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

A friend argues that Americans battle between the “historical self” and the “self self.” By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning. Then you are standing face-to-face in seconds that wipe the affable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say? Instantaneously your attachment seems fragile, tenuous, subject to any transgression of your historical self. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant. (14)

*What did you say?* A momentary slip of the tongue, a slip of the mask, yields up the gap between the transcendental “self self” and the immanent “historical self,” as Rankine and her friend are forced to confront language’s painful power to simultaneously address and erase. As Rankine puts it elsewhere in *Citizen*, paraphrasing Judith Butler, “Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this” (49). Needless to say, there is a mirroring pain evoked here, the pain of exclusion from an address: the appeal of Trump and his epigones to “real Americans” with the nostalgic fantasy that they will “make America great again” excises and excludes Americans of color, gay Americans, immigrants, and everyone else who understands that the phantasmic America of the past Trump’s language hints at is an America without them. And I might include in that list of the excluded the educated, and within that group—the excluded of the excluded—intellectuals; and beyond even them, excluded to the third power, poets, and their (phantasmal?) readers.

## II.

Politicians are expected to campaign in poetry and to govern in prose. In the case of Trump, I am expecting a catastrophic attempt to govern in the apocalyptic reality-show poetry of his campaign; the man seems incapable of “prose” if we define that word by its connotations of seriousness, sobriety, and the management of day-to-day affairs. As W. H. Auden warned us in his essay “The Poet and the City,” “All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes,

conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman."<sup>15</sup> Auden's essay anticipates a number of Lerner's concerns; when Lerner writes of the "awkward and even tense exchange between a poet and non-poet—they often happen on an airplane or in a doctor's office or some other contemporary no-place" (12), he echoes the scene in which Auden confesses his embarrassment at admitting he's a poet to "a stranger in the train."<sup>16</sup> Auden centers the problem on the lack of social position for a writer-qua-writer: "the so-called fine arts have lost the social utility they once had"; not only that, but "in a society governed by the values appropriate to Labor...the gratuitous is no longer regarded—most earlier cultures thought differently—as sacred."<sup>17</sup> His solution therefore to the problem of the stranger on a train who asks him what he does, "satisfactory because it withers curiosity, is to say *Medieval Historian*."<sup>18</sup> This is amusing and telling; though Auden's own imagination was industrial rather than pre-Raphaelite, the Middle Ages persist in our fragmented historical memory as our most consistent image of a society organized on the principle of the sacred—a principle we now relegate, with increasing uneasiness, to the category of culture.

Lerner too is embarrassed by poetry's lack of social utility; "If my seatmate in a holding pattern over Denver calls on me to sing, demands a poem from me that will unite coach and first class in one community, I can't do it" (13). But the "contempt" that poetry evokes from this straw-man "seatmate" is strongest in Lerner himself, an internalization of the much larger problem of the sheer power of anti-intellectualism in American life. Much of Lerner's essay bears the marks of this internalized contempt, expressed wryly or anxiously by turns: "Anybody who reads (or reads the *SparkNotes* for) *The Republic* is imbued with the sense that poetry is a burning social question" (19). The parenthetical deprecation speaks volumes: the "hatred of poetry" alleged by Lerner's title is a parochial manifestation of the hatred of education itself—a phenomenon acutely expressed by Trump's most

---

15 W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 84.

16 *Ibid.*, 74.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

ardent supporters,<sup>19</sup> whose votes were in part an expression of hatred for the academics and other educated elites that have ignored or condescended to them for so long. No poet or troubadour spoke for or to this group (the best Trump could do was Ted Nugent, while Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and Bruce Springsteen all sang for Hillary Clinton); given both the president-elect's documented contempt for literacy and the politically liberal leanings of most American poets, it seems unlikely that his inauguration will be graced by a poem, and the contents of such a poem are in any case unimaginable unless parodic.

In any case, as I have been hinting, Trump's rhetoric seems to be poetry enough for his supporters, in large part because it is a virulent address to the grievances of a politically potent minority which as of this writing controls the levers of power in all three branches of the federal government and the overwhelming majority of the states. It is a poetry of coach versus first-class; never mind that it leaves behind vast numbers of Americans who are disadvantaged historically, economically, and socially. What it names it excludes. Consider for example one of the most notorious pieces of Trump's rhetorical poetry, taken from his announcement of his presidential bid in Trump Tower on June 16, 2015:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.<sup>20</sup>

---

19 "Trump's margin among whites without a college degree is the largest among any candidate in exit polls since 1980. Two-thirds (67%) of non-college whites backed Trump, compared with just 28% who supported Clinton, resulting in a 39-point advantage for Trump among this group. In 2012 and 2008, non-college whites also preferred the Republican over the Democratic candidate but by less one-sided margins (61%–36% and 58%–40%, respectively)." Alec Tyson and Shiva Manian, "Behind Trump's Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education," Pew Research Center website (November 9, 2016): <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>.

20 "Full text: Donald Trump announces a presidential bid," Washington Post (June 16, 2015): [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/?utm\\_term=.58ccdd541734](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/?utm_term=.58ccdd541734).

The mobility of the *they* in this passage is typical of Trumpian poetics: it starts out as a referent to Mexico itself, suggesting without being definitive that Mexican immigration is a policy of the Mexican government. The *they* mutates in the fourth sentence: in the first clause it's still referring to Mexico but in the second clause it seems to refer to the migrants themselves, and this shift is accompanied by a strange deformation of the preposition in that clause: "*with us*" instead of "*to us*." It's tempting to dismiss this as the kind of prepositional mutation all too typical in undergraduate papers, or else to say that Trump misspoke. But I read this *with us* as a kind of echo or semantic rhyme of "You're either with us or against us"—an echo of the exclusionary rhetoric associated with the last Republican president, George W. Bush. The *with* also suggests the insidiousness of Mexican immigration: the "*they*" is trying to get *with us*, to sexually invade the pure (white) body politic of the "*you*" and the "*us*" repeated in this passage of Trump's speech. This sexual interpretation is made explicit by the penultimate sentence, "*They're rapists,*" a gasp-inducing line that the speaker then pseudo-apologizes for by ending the passage with the phrase "good people." But this move is not enough to restore the humanity of Mexican immigrants because the sentence, like all the other sentences in this excerpt, is not addressed to them. It is addressed to a *you* and *us* that implicitly includes the "best" and excludes the *they*.

The natural objection is that Trump is not a poet, nor do his deliberately vague and repetitive speeches count as poems. But let me write out the passage again, using the pauses in Trump's delivery as indicative of line breaks:

When Mexico sends its people,  
they're not sending their best.  
They're not sending you.  
They're not sending you.  
They're sending people  
that have lots of problems.  
And they're bringing those problems  
with us.  
They're bringing drugs,  
they're bringing crime.  
They're rapists. And some  
I assume are good people.

Written out in this form—and verse, it should be noted, has a natural advantage over prose in its ability to replicate speech on the page—we notice the contesting end words: *people* (three times), *best*, *you* (twice), *problems* (twice), *us*, *drugs*, *crime*, and *some*. As I hear Trump’s delivery, *rapists* comes in the center of the penultimate line before a caesura, and the *some* is enjambed to emphasize the exception Trump is making. But the *people* at the end echoes the *people* at the beginning—the dehumanized people of an *its* who are not *best*. The poem uses repetition effectively—notice the five uses of variations on *send* and *sending*, which is then echoed by the three uses of *bringing*, effectively and frighteningly closing the distance between the pure *you* and the impure *them*. There’s even some subtle alliterative play at the end: the *p* and *s* of *rapists* are echoed and redistributed in the words that are supposed to take back some of its venom: “And some / I assume are good *people*.” It’s the poetry of demagoguery, the demagoguery of poetry. And it works. It has “social utility,” though that utility in this case is the utility of a dagger aimed at the heart of the ethnically inclusive social contract that many of us thought to be the promise of America.

Poetry, as Yeats reminds us, makes nothing happen; it is a *way* of happening; it is a mouth that can both speak (and thus acknowledge) and needs nourishment (and be itself acknowledged). The mouth of Trump is a bottomless pit into which his listeners pour themselves; they feel themselves to be unified in his other-excluding song. They transcend, for the moment, the sense of alienation that they attribute—with some justice—to the indifference and contempt of educated elites. But a transcendence that does not return to real historical conditions, that is not itself changed by those conditions, is either a white supremacist fantasy—transcendence as erasure and restoration—or straight-up nihilism.

So I return to the notion of poetry as transcendental route, or river, that returns us to the world as it is, with a view of how it might be otherwise.

### III.

We can thank Ben Lerner and his essay for fostering conversation about the role of poetry today, even as we might deplore the shallowness of his argument or the provincial narrowness of his references

(there are few or no references to poets who do not write in English, for example). For a book that covers some of the same territory but in more intricate, certainly more loving detail, there is Reginald Gibbons's *How Poems Think*, the title of which suggests a task for poetry undreamt of in Lerner's philosophy. Lerner, after all, is primarily concerned with how poems make us *feel*, and takes as a given that what we are most likely to feel in the face of actual poems is fear or resentment, while reserving a muzzy sort of reverence for the *idea* of poetry. Gibbons, on the other hand, is concerned with how poetry might shape ideas, or rather how its peculiar forms of play with language constitute realms of ideation distinct from the capabilities of prose. The tones of the two books could also not be more different. Lerner's essay has an aw-shucks tone recognizably akin to the first-person narrators of his two novels, *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*, both of which center on their protagonists' painful skepticism about their, or anyone's, ability to have "a profound experience of art."<sup>21</sup> He seems embarrassed not only by poetry but by intellectuality itself; it is a book written from a defensive crouch. Gibbons, however, opens his book with a moving autobiographical excursus about his experiences as a student of poetry at Stanford in the 1960s, in which he is not afraid to portray himself as a young man in pursuit of his soul, in reaction to and in tune with his times. The suggestion, always, is that we might judge the present on the basis of examples offered by the past, and rarely or never the reverse.

The central drama of Gibbons's book is articulated in the character of his mentor Donald Davie, the English critic and poet whom Gibbons presents as sharply as the hero of a novel. Gibbons quotes Davie commenting tellingly on his own work: "It is true that I am not a poet by nature, only by inclination; for my mind moves most easily and happily among abstractions, it relates ideas far more readily than it relates experiences. I have little appetite, only profound admiration, for sensuous fullness and immediacy; I have not the poet's need of concreteness" (28). This passage is a key to Gibbons's book, which in essence divides poems into two kinds: the poetry of "sensuous fullness and immediacy," the poetry of named persons, things, and

---

<sup>21</sup> Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2011), 8.

places, which he holds to be central to the tradition of poetry in English; and another poetry that Gibbons terms “the apophatic,” which works to evoke the nonphysical and nonpresent; even, indeed, the nonthought, or rather the thought that can not be paraphrased or imagined by nonpoetic means. Much of Gibbons’s book pursues the apophatic in poetries other than the English; French poetry, Spanish poetry, Greek poetry, and, above all, Russian poetry offer alternatives to what Gibbons calls the “cataphatic,” or the poetry of naming and showing. “We can see the implications for poetry,” Gibbons writes, “in the contrast between an active, Adamic, cataphatic artistic impulse to evoke the visible world by naming it and a meditative, apophatic artistic impulse to evoke the invisible, the elusive, the absent, the not quite conceivable, the unnameable” (93).

The active and the meditative; we can begin to pin down here some of the stakes for poetry in these terms, evocative of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* that return us to the question of poetry’s social utility. But let us return for the moment to Donald Davie and the last paragraph of the passage from which Gibbons quotes:

For a true poem can be written by a mind not naturally poetic—though by the inhuman labor of thwarting at every point the natural grain and bent. This working against the grain does not damage the mind, nor is it foolish; on the contrary, only by doing this does each true poem as it is written become an authentic widening of experience—a truth won from life against all odds, because a truth in and about a mode of experience to which the mind is normally closed. (28)

“There is a larger grain than the poet’s own,” Gibbons comments, “and that is the language the poet speaks” (29). Davie’s predicament—almost his tragedy—is not that he is not a natural poet but that he is, or so Gibbons seems to suggest, a naturally *apophatic* poet writing in English, a *cataphatic* language. Davie denigrates certain poems he has written as “not truly poems, simply because the thought in them could have been expressed—at whatever cost in terseness and point—in a non-poetic way” (28). A poet like Keats yearns for “a life of sensation rather than of thoughts”;<sup>22</sup> that shows his own sense of distance

---

22 John Keats, “Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817,” in *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, vol. 1, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 185.

from the sensuous world, and Keats's poetry is the heroic record of his astonishingly successful struggle to close that distance. Davie by contrast has "little appetite" for the sensuous; he is instead committed to writing a "true poem...an authentic widening of experience" by means of specifically poetic means of *thought*.

Such are the means of thought that Gibbons seeks to explore in his delightfully wayward book, in which Donald Davie represents one lodestar and the other, somewhat surprisingly, is the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous, whose emphasis on Joycean linguistic play goes against the grain of French poetry as surely as Davie's intellectualism goes against the grain of English. But Gibbons is not particularly interested in being evenhanded; his experience as a translator, most particularly of Russian poetry, has left him more interested in the poetics of apophysis and the intangible, which seems to come close to the Grossman-Lerner concept of poetic virtuality, but without the bitterness. Perhaps neither Grossman nor Lerner have looked far enough outside the cage of English to recognize the possibility of an actual poem that can do the work of a more generalized "poetry" in creating a space for "pure potentiality." Yet Gibbons is also interested in what he calls "the necessary and productive self-alienation of the poet" who must use "his or her little canon as a self-chosen challenge rather than as a source of approval" (9). He or she

must work in words so closely, and with such openness to language, that only by coming to see the words on the page, and to hear them in the ear, as belonging as much to themselves and to the language as to the poet who composes them, can the poet discover *how* to think *with* them and *through* them, beyond the artistic limits of the ingrained individual habits of language and poetic thinking, and beyond the limits imposed by the poet's self-positioning within culture. (9, emphasis in original)

The poet, in other words, can choose neither the "self self" nor the "historical self" to write from; there is a third position that we might call the linguistic self, or the point of view of the poem itself. It is the position, Gibbons argues, that makes possible the transcendent route of the poem, making it a kind of circuit that connects all three selves, and the intimate, historical, and linguistic communities that encompass them.

Nowhere are the stakes for this made clearer than in a section in the book's second chapter where Gibbons discusses "the relevance and value of self-alienation" in the work of three very different writers,

Frederick Douglass, Emily Dickinson, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom, Gibbons persuasively claims, were alienated from the very communities to and for which they most wished to speak: Douglass because the vast majority of black slaves were illiterate; Dickinson because her “poetic innovation and mastery” were beyond both her Amherst intimates and the supposedly more sophisticated literary community of Boston; Williams because of the gap in “functional and cultural” literacy between himself as physician and the immigrant families “about whom he sometimes wrote with intense acknowledgment of their fullness as human beings” (48). These writers do not abandon their audiences so much as address a point of alienation and otherness that a part of themselves also occupies. “Rimbaud’s formulation of poetic liberation, *je est un autre*,” Gibbons writes, “might be not only a given or sought-for psychological state—as we all take it to be—but also a social effect of the very act of writing” (49). The hatred of poetry—more commonly phrased as the question of poetry’s *inaccessibility*—may be intrinsic to the need for transcendence, not for transcendence’s sake but for the sake of a kind of thought for an alienated community that includes oneself.

I lack the space to summarize the richness of Gibbons’s succeeding chapters, except to say that they wind an idiosyncratic course, evaluating the capability of various poetic techniques and constraints to act as modes “of producing discovery, improvisation, liberation, ideas, and otherwise unattainable articulation” (61). Rhyme is one of these techniques, or it can be; Gibbons distinguishes between merely “ornamental” rhyme and rhyme as a goad for cognition: “The sound leads the thinking” (65). Other chapters explore in detail the “apophatic poetics” of the unnameable, which English in its “word-thinginess” can have difficulty in accessing (though Gibbons rightly names Dickinson as one of the greatest poets of apophasis). Other chapters of the book preoccupy themselves with demonstrating the persistence of poetic *technē* in the most ancient Greek and Latin poems, rooting that persistence in the essential orality of the poem, its origins as ritual and song. Another chapter, “Simultaneities” (150–175) speaks to the poem’s ability to move along various lines of thought and temporality simultaneously through repetition, etymological play, allusion, and visual as well as aural rhymes. Throughout the book he quotes from a generous range of poets: in a single paragraph on intensified sound

patterns he cites Wallace Stevens, Robert Hayden, Lorine Niedecker, Bruce Weigl, Nathaniel Mackey, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Natasha Trethewey, and Alexander Pope (142). There is an appealing catholicism, in the old sense of the word, to Gibbons's generous tastes in poetry; I would not necessarily have expected him to have much interest in the work of a poet like Robert Duncan, but he gives over three pages to quote "At the Loom—*Passages 2*" in full, the better to demonstrate its "thematic and sensuous" weaving of "sounds, rhythms, word-forms, structures of language, and threads of thought and story in language" with "the sensuous 'imagery' of sight, sound, touch and taste" (171).

Lerner speaks much less than Gibbons to particular *techniques* of poetry; he is mostly concerned with partial or deformed encounters with poems, as though *all* poems were apophatic demonstrations of something they are not and could never be. To quote Lerner quoting the narrator of his own *Leaving the Atocha Station*, "I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility" (22–23). Though he does provide nominal close readings of poems by three poets—the notoriously talentless nineteenth-century Scots poet William Topaz McGonagall, John Keats, and Emily Dickinson—he collapses the considerable distance between them by arguing that they all, in different ways, "make a place for the genuine by providing a negative image of the ideal Poem we cannot write in time" (37). The limitation of Lerner's thought may center on that word *image*: though he dutifully remarks on the prosody of Dickinson's "I dwell in Possibility," he seems deaf to the actual music of poems, focused as he is on what he calls, quoting the critic Michael Clune, the "images of virtual music" in a poet like Keats (32). Lerner scorns the claims of critics who argue that "the music of [Keats's] lines induces a trance"; "I've never seen any critic in a trancelike state" (32), he quips. My trouble with this rather arch, self-defended stance is that by discarding the sweetness of "Heard melodies" in favor of "those unheard," Lerner discards not profundity but experience itself. And as Gibbons takes pains to show, it is the experience of reading actual poems—not gauzy appeals to the "pure potentiality" of poetry—that makes possible the circuit from self to alienation and back to enlarged possibilities of thought

and sympathy. This may or may not be a “profound” experience but it is certainly an *experience*, of and by language unfolding in time and not in an image.

Gibbons’s work as a translator of Russian poetry, often in collaboration with the Russian poet Ilya Kutik, leads him to assert that “Russian makes it possible for poetry to think a meaning that includes, rather than chooses between, opposites, and also to apprehend a verbal negative space (analogous somehow to such space in sculpture) that is created by paradox, absence, negatives, and invisible qualities and entities rather than visible ones” (69–70). Implicit here is that not only the Russian language but Russian poetic culture is friendlier to the alienation-in-language central to the poetic route than the Anglo-American culture taken for granted by Lerner. And yet the English title of the contemporary Russian poet Kirill Medvedev’s collection of poems, essays, and “actions,” *It’s No Good* (originally published in English by Ugly Duckling Presse in 2012; a second edition came out in 2016), suggests something of the same unhappy alienation from his own medium that worries Lerner. In the case of Medvedev, it is the closed horizon of Putinism that seems to foreclose the revolutionary and elegiac potentialities of great predecessors like Pasternak, Mandelstam, Brodsky, and Akhmatova, with her singular promise of her poet’s ability to record and remember the atrocities of Stalinism. The expression of Medvedev’s alienation has come in his disavowal, circa 2003, of anything resembling a “literary career,” as well as refusing the copyright to his own work: he is still writing and performing poems of an appealing casual shagginess, often centering on his own sense of disorientation and unease in a society where the suture between poetry and politics is continually coming undone. At the same time, I read Medvedev’s writing as more of a rebuke to Lerner’s stance than in harmony with it, as when he attacks “critics”:

who write  
that what’s lacking in my poems  
according to them  
is some kind of depth of experience  
jesus christ  
depth of experience  
(I think that wanting depth of experience from a poem  
means not having any inkling of your own worth)

...

I think  
that my poems are some kind of test;  
a trial  
for perfection or rather a test  
to determine the capacity for perfection  
to determine  
THE CAPACITY  
to see and accept yourself  
as you are;  
miserable, ugly, worthless,  
vain, selfish,  
head hanging low in a vast space  
over some sparkling stinking abyss  
(I think that for somebody hanging over a stinking abyss—  
and the majority of people are—  
“deep thoughts” are  
beside the point) (74–75)

And with that stinking abyss I must circle back, at the close of this article, to the poetry of hatred—to the tweets and effusions and neo-fascist ejaculations of our next president, Donald J. Trump. The anxiety after “profundity,” like the anxiety over “deep thoughts,” may be beside the point when we consider the sheer dangerousness of poetic language *as image*—detached, that is, from the poetic techniques that perform the necessary circuit of transcendence and return I have tried to describe in this essay. What is Donald Trump’s America—the one he’s going to make great again—but a radically and violently simplified virtual image of the America his language carves out of a texture infinitely more complex and contradictory than he or his supporters seem to find bearable? If “the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem,” as Whitman said,<sup>23</sup> it is that poem—America as multi-ethnic, polyglot, diverse in thought and expression—that is essentially most hated. The “poetry” that Lerner seeks to catch like the wind in his rhetorical net is a phantom that I fear he fails to sufficiently separate from the “Make America Great Again” white supremacist transcendence that is an end in itself for Trump, and for all the critics, well-meaning or not, who call for

---

23 *Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1959), 5.*

a magical restoration of the transcendental and universal in poetry, the kind supposedly accomplished by Robert Lowell or Robert Frost or some other equally acceptable flinty or neurotic white male New Englander.

In the article that he composed a week before the election, in expectation of a Hillary Clinton win, the political commentator Matthew Yglesias wrote, “The cliché is that you campaign in poetry—and Clinton is, frankly, a lousy poet.”<sup>24</sup> Clinton, Yglesias goes on to say, is a master of the prose of governance—but before you can govern, “you really do need to win the election first.” That takes a poetry that goes beyond the “micro-targeting” of various political constituencies; it does require something like Lerner’s deprecated poem “that will unite coach and first class in one community” (13). “I suspect that,” Yglesias writes, “somewhat paradoxically, continuing to put forward candidates of color may be crucial to speaking more compellingly to white voters since they can speak credibly about a cross-racial politics without sounding like they are trying to sideline nonwhite people’s concerns.”

The route of a genuinely inclusive politics, and an inclusive poetics, passes through a circuit for which transcendence can never be the goal, only a means. And it may well be that any poetry or politics worthy of the label “progressive” will best succeed at this moment if it is put forth by “candidates of color.” White men—like Lerner and Gibbons and myself—who wish to write against a Trumpian poetry of hatred will have to renounce any hatred of poetry that centers on discomfort at the poet’s ambiguous status. It is not the white male poet’s burden to elevate or be elevated by “the song of the infinite” only to be “compromised by the finitude of its terms” (8). That leaves such a writer prey to the kind of *ressentiment* that helped to elevate Trump to his present appalling perch. Let us instead look to poems that think, through and into the otherness of otherness, as Rankine and Medvedev do by their very different means, and as Gibbons does with his thoughtful, quirky survey of the past two thousand years of poetic *technē* in a universe unbounded by language.

---

24 Matthew Yglesias, “The lead to my prewritten ‘Clinton wins’ story explains a lot about why she lost,” Vox (December 5, 2016): <http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/12/5/13794586/why-hillary-clinton-lost>.