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Margins: The poetic text and its theoretical gesturing

*Dites-vous bien, lecteur ou lectrice, ou dis-toi bien (car a
me lire tu deviendras de mes proches) que si je dis ici, c'est
plus pour dire que pour dire quelque-chose.*
- Michel Leiris, *Le Ruban au cou d'Olympia*

Say poem and I see margins emerging. Question. How marginal is poetry? To answer my question I must shift to the margins of poetics and you must be prepared to occupy the margins of poetry. Why? Because the discourse produced in that kind of 'in-between' space stakes out for itself and shows how poetry is a language mode that challenges speech and thought frames as it displaces them towards, or within, various margins. And why? Because poetry puts its finger on the disjunction between speech and writing. After all, Rilke says somewhere that poetry is the capacity to 'remain in the open', the ability to take risks. And so, any attempt to define a marginal space for poetry implies some desire to leave poetic texts open, mobile, and not to lock them forever in neat structures produced by criticism - interpretations that would exhaust them. As Michel Serres puts it in *Passages du Nord-Ouest (Northwest Passage)*: '*La critique est une science des bords. Elle est science de la mort*' (Serres 1980: 59). You could translate this sentence in two ways at least: 'Criticism is the science of borders. It is the science of death'; or 'Criticism is the art of cutting. It is a deadly art', a kind of know(l)edge.

I would gladly extend this view of criticism to poetics, which is a space where one is two, i.e., both poet and critic, where my task overlaps with your task. And this task is to unmap the passage from the known to its edges and to expose the gaps in between to conceive of writing as an acceptance of the turbulence of an uncharted passage rather than as an appropriating of new territories (which, by the way, can never be done without some amount of terror, as etymology tells us). For writing, I'd say, has made me aware that one of the displacements poetry effects is to place me always and already in the margin.

But what do I mean by margin? Well, let's say that the margin is less a vanishing point (a desirable, potentially sublime horizon, which might sound a bit escapist) than an interstitial space (a spacing, a tension, a disjunction), which would, by this virtue, be a figurative representation of the condition of poetic speech. In other words, the concept of margin refers to both topology and trope.

Homeward Bound

Tugging at
the moorings
at break of day
I cast off
and slip out
of mourning
telling

tales

of days

like seagulls taking off
on a shore that rings
of heroic deeds - days
like big waves shaking off
surfers from their curling
backs, and out of the way,
until the words rip off
time and space and reveal
ahead of me the zeal
of winged poets surfing.

Poetry, it seems to me, raises the questions of margins and marginality in obvious ways, if only because of the paradoxical status of verse, which is perceived as peripheral in terms of today's literary institutions - by contrast with fiction of course (the novel more specifically), but also non-fiction, and yet poetry is central in terms of its contribution to language and thought, if not knowledge. According to the American poet Bob Perelman, who distantly echoes Shelley's famous defence of the legitimacy of poetry, the question of the *situation* of poetry within the space of discourse is closely intertwined with that of poetic *value*:

The very weakness of the links between poet, community, and state makes the issues of power and place in society vital for the poet. The fact that poets are hardly on the map adds an intense twist to these questions, what kind of maps are poems? What authority does the poet have as mapmaker? (Perelman 1996: 110)

Ghost Map

And you hang over leaf-
age as words hover
break up in a tangle
of leaves pointing
downwards. You teeter
on the edge of confusion.

Presently You're taken
aback. You trail off
into the muck Shuffle and shift your bearings.

You take each clue to task
 feeling your way about
 careening off
 craving
 as shapes emerge from the gunk.

Like a snail's trail on this footworn lawn
 your tracing's slight jagged and crook:
 a colophon turning to bone in the ghosting sun.

The poet as mapmaker, why not? But I feel that in the twenty-first century poetics and poetry need to interact with each other in the enactment of what might be called a *poethics* (Retallack 1996), that is, an active marginalisation of language, decentering the power of words, representational as well as political such as you find in the work of contemporary Australian poets, like michael farrell, Ania Walwicz and even Gig Ryan.

Margins and marginality can be thought of in at least three ways: iconic, generic and political. These three types of margins can, of course, overlap or interact, and the marginality of the appropriate critical space used to describe them derives from its own capacity to absorb such overlapping or interaction. Marginal poetry, in other words, invites critical discourse to recognize its own marginality or perhaps, irrelevance.

Hunt the Slipper

Witz esprit bon mot

Spostamento-

Huida.

A slipper is a slipper is not a slipper.

Et dans la tete une tempete.

The thrill of linguistic activity.

Zufall.

But how to explain the colour of the universe

the gleam of insect blood

the luminescence of mother of pearl

the ruby-like resonance of saffron water

the shades of snow, fish, fire

the taste of tamarillos, tannin, tears

the coldness in this voice, heat in that glance

the frisson criss-crossing your spine?

The importance of margins as constitutive of any page of poetry seems to go without saying: margins (unjustified right-hand-side margins, or, more generally, all kinds of blanks generated by lineation) have for a long time now defined poems by opposition to prose. Thus, the margins of the poem may be conceived of as a figurative representation of the poem's definition, and consequently may contribute to a blurring *on the page itself* of the border separating the space of the poem properly-speaking from the space of the poetics of the poem. That this defining should be challenged by various strategies in contemporary poetic practice, notably in the prose poem or in 'sentence writing', shows that an assessment of the status of margins is crucial in any attempt to define poetry, insofar as one of the

central aesthetic gestures of the poem is to challenge the clear-cut distinction between poetic theory and poetic practice. In the margin, a transaction between poem and poetry takes place: *Which frames the other?* becomes an undecidable question, and this at least shows that the framing of language is specifically the question which poetry raises.

In-Between

You are speaking sleek.
 I take your words
 out of context
 and throw them out
 of language.
 I take on your accent-
 the mellow tone of voice
 that erases all traces
 and smudges the faces
 of those lost
 in translation.
 I am in transit:
 the transition
 Between English and Greek

The same question can therefore be raised in relation to the whole genre of poetry. Working on the concept of marginalization involves a rethinking of the relative importance of poetic theory and poetic practice as constituents of poetry. Imagine using formal devices to figure in your texts the interaction of the literary value of the margin with the political and social dimensions of marginalization, as Lisa Belear does, for instance, or II.O. Here, marginalization can no longer be simply considered as a social phenomenon and should clearly appear, by contrast, as a theoretical statement, a prerequisite for the writing of a poetry which aims to maintain its critical opposition to the uniformization of speech. In other words, the marginal position of poetry on the literary scene is partly the reflection of the inner distortions and dislocations achieved by the effects proper to the language of poetry: poetry can only stake out its proper place for itself resisting today's media-saturated world by creating unconforming forms that ceaselessly raise the question of how meaning is articulated in language.

Out of Bounds

You seem
 to have
 lost
 the power
of speech,
 they sneer.
 And so I run.
 I run away
 from the wrath
 ringing
 ringing back
 bringing back
 the smack

the lack
 I run backwards
 back
 to the wretch
 the wreck
 where whosoever
 raps
 the wind-
 wrings
 a tongue
 RINGS.
 This is Viola
 Viola Dali.
C'est la vie.
 Speech
 lost
 me-
 out-slot
 Id
 me-
 sneak I'lland.
 The voice and the eyes
 and the eyes in the voice-
 devising lenses
 veering words-
 devouring rows of vowels
 riots of consonants
 CLICKS OF THE TONGUE.
 Vox the fox.
 And so I'll be
 writing-
 ways
 out
 in tongues:
Hierborn
hear dad
hare dead
lip lipping away
lap
wing
her
M'elle borne la did ah!
Vie oh la...
la voix-ci
la dit ta!

'Poetry is the aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms, or can

be,' says Charles Bernstein in his introduction to *A Poetics* (Bernstein 1992: 106). If a common (shared) space for the practice of innovative poetry is to be envisaged together with a kind of theory that provides its internal dynamics, it obviously cannot be organized around an illusory *consensus* that would immediately idealize poetic expression by rendering it uniform, transforming it into some kind of recognizable 'canon' sanctioned by the media, the publishing industry, and various cultural institutions (university curricula, academies, literary awards, etc). This is because consensus 'essentializ[es] the mode of difference and incorporat[es] the product (never the process) into its own cultural space' (Bernstein 1992: 6). The more marginal space of poetry, therefore, might rather be that of a *dissensus*, of which the pull toward margins would be a figurative representation. This would include the claim for poetry as a scattered community of utterance rather than a speech form submitted to a unified and unique subjectivity, the claim for the demise of established literary genres, the claim for the granting of a political value to the formal elements of poetry, whose artificiality and resistance are supposed to lead the reader to a realization of how language may serve ideological control, especially if it is presented as 'natural'.

Couchgrass

It is dense & growing denser
between rocks
on the site of our trust
& all the ants & all the sand
you could wish for flow

among roots with no history

Upright trees look down
in the scorching heat

Shrivelled,
my mouth cracks open-

How come
your paddocks
never seem to need water?

A question mark is a hook
for uprooting runners
back
to tree planting day
when woman was pulled

forward & further

backward

book after Book
to partake of the great weeding scheme-
to learn how to tend
twisted boughs
& sever her own growths

Now I say if your pen writes She is the root of evil
she'll grow runners-
for Eve will not suffice
nor her children survive

His story

in the heat of words spreading
 like couchgrass after summer rains
 on my tongue.

Now, there is a catch. By giving marginality the status of a dominant trope of poetic writing, I run the risk of granting it a predominance that its very nature would seem to reject. It seems to me crucial, therefore, to insist on the multiple forms margins do take, because this multiplicity, as it decentres the locus of poetic ideology and theory, is a good representation of the 'tropological a priory' I played with at the beginning of this paper. An example of such multiplicity would be a poetics that enhances the possible *difformities* of language (and there are many forms) in order to avoid being entrapped in, or seduced by, ideological *conformity*. This is what I try to achieve in some experimental works with the kind of 'linguistic acrobatics' you've just read, for instance, where the heightened formalism is based on mis-shaping language through interlingual cut and paste - a refusal of uni-formity that needs to be watched like anything, lest it con-forms the way parody does:

FOOTNOTE

French's out of reach
 English edging away
 German high and low past the frame
 Esperanto out of speech
 Facts fall flat & (I) in the cracks

of typographical margins

ET ON TO OF*-

(*) Try painting.

Although apparently self-defeating, a piece like 'Footnote' forces us to think of the text and its theoretical gesturing as belonging to the same writing procedure, and consequently to relativize the explanatory power of a theoretical discourse that would speak back to the text. For, when confronted with a text using theoretical concepts in a 'creative' or 'aesthetic' manner - even if the intent or effect is above all parodic, so as to expose the largely rhetorical nature of such concepts - a meta-theoretical loop must lead critical discourse to redefine the place of its own institutional and heuristic position in the field of writing. Ultimately, posed between margins at once public and private, such writing problematizes the linearity and coherence we have been taught to expect from most histories of modern poetry and urges us to explore those axiomatic forces that shape literary traditions as well as the world outside the text.

There is no last phrase, no end to phrasing, since any 'last word' on a subject is itself a phrase, as is the silence following it (Lyotard 1988: 85).

Note

This paper is an adaptation of a talk given at the Melbourne Poets Union on 27 July 2003 as part of a forum on 21st Century Poetries.

Except for 'Couchgrass' (*SideWaLK* 6, 2000), 'Ghostmap' (*Papertiger* 2004), 'Hunt the Slipper' and 'Footnote', all poems quoted are from Dominique Hecq, *Good Grief* (Papyrus, 2002).

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