

We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen, and, unhappily, they are intimate with us. – Wallace Stevens, *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words* (1951)¹

As the world strained to hear, the networks became the story. It was just past noon in Paris. A reporter for Agence France-Presse, the French news agency, was monitoring a routine radio broadcast from Cairo describing a military parade attended by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and other dignitaries. Suddenly a cacophony of explosions, machine-gun fire and anguished screams jolted him upright in his chair. Then, just as abruptly, the radio fell ominously silent. – Janice Castro, *Time Magazine* (October 19, 1981)²

PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after Wallace Stevens' lament in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" over the "extraordinary pressure of news" – which brought a "reality" that was "spiritually violent" for "everyone alive" (a reality the poet" must abstract" by "placing it in his imagination"³) – another broadcast from Cairo reported the assassination of Anwar Sadat, and with it, the termination of at least one possible "road map for peace".

Fifty years later, September 2001 saw a series of powerful broadcasts from America (and the Middle East), that marked a watershed in global "spiritual violence" for everyone alive, as Osama bin Laden's airline pilots (people that arguably Americans had never before "seen" or listened to) became unhappily all too "intimate" with us (the West) and provided a shocking dose of "reality".

If any reader of the first few hundred words of this essay should feel uncomfortable with the mixing of genres – that is, the discussion of contemporary geopolitics and mid-twentieth century American poetry – they would not be alone. It is a curious aspect of human thought that two of the most ancient subjects for philosophical consideration, Poetry and Politics, have been both conjoined and

¹ Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', in *Poetry In Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, ed. by Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 257-267 (p. 261).

²Janice Castro, *Time Magazine*, 1981, {<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,924964,00.html>}, [January 20, 2005].

³ *Stevens*, pp. 257-267.

heatedly disengaged from each other for the last few thousand years of “civilized” discourse, both in the academies and the streets. This paper wishes to briefly consider several representative interventions regarding this dialectic of poetry-politics.

The author of this paper⁴ is not, let it be admitted, an entirely disinterested party to the proceedings, but instead, has in the past been an active agent on the side of “political poetry”. I am the editor of “100 Poets Against The War” – a series of electronic books disseminated on the world wide web⁵ starting in January 27, 2003, and downloaded tens of thousands of times since then; in March 2003, the Internet books were re-edited by myself and published in a standard book form by the Cambridge, UK press Salt, under the same title⁶. I was also editorial co-ordinator for the US-based “Poets Against The War” movement in 2003. During this time of global anti-Iraq-war protest I organized protest readings in Washington DC, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, Austin, Boston, Oxford, London, Paris, Toronto, Montreal and Berlin.⁷

I do not intend to delve into the matter of these now-historical events in much depth. They do however provide something of a background to the question, central to this current paper, “what is the relation between poetry and politics?”, if only because it was striking to me then, as now, how often the issue was introduced, and too-simply resolved, by journalists and other commentators by reference to W.H. Auden’s infamous “For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making...”⁸.

⁴ This paper could in some ways be read as a manifesto.

⁵ See www.nthposition.com.

⁶ See for instance: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/antiwar/story/0,12809,885536,00.html>

⁷ This poetry peace movement was widely documented by the news media, such as BBC, CNN, Reuters, *The Times*, *LA Times*, *Globe & Mail* and *Le Monde*.

⁸ W.H. Auden, ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’, in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2nd edn, ed. by Richard Ellman and Robert O’Clair (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988), pp. 742-743 [p. 743].

Auden's actual and more ambiguous position (which should be clear to anyone who notes the second half of the statement: "it survives") will be addressed below. Suffice it to say that my reply was, at the time, that the act of disseminating poetry with "a message" was in itself "a way of happening" via the act of bearing witness to opposition to the Blair-Bush axis of aggression, and that it was far too early to claim that nothing had happened due to our "poetry" – though admittedly, and to the glee of some, those in the PAW movement⁹ had failed to "stop the war".

J. Bottum, of *The Weekly Standard* provided a long, often derogatory critique of protest poetry, which in many ways represents the standard arguments for those who do not believe that poetry should be politically engaged. It concluded:

In our poets against the war, you can perceive Vietnam envy, gleeful adolescent ill-manners, and straightforward political partisanship. But none of that entirely explains the *desperation* to make themselves matter as poets - even if the cost is writing what they must know doesn't matter as poetry, even if most of the verses collected by Swift and Hamill are attempts to prevent the emergence of a world in which poetry matters.¹⁰

Meanwhile, a recent editorial in *Poetry London*¹¹ took the position that "not since the Vietnam war has there been such a cause for political poetry" – providing examples from Auden (the "nothing happens" of course cited), Neruda, and Rukeyser. The editorial then posed a series of relevant questions:

Why do we not write more political poetry? One of the reasons is that it's particularly demanding - the difficulty of creating work that is never less than poetry, while avoiding the clichés of journalism, propaganda and rant. The poem's power must come out of memorable

⁹ The 2003 version of Poets Against The War was started by American poet and editor Sam Hamill in a globally transmitted email message sent out on January 19, 2003. The name and idea for the movement was inspired by the earlier anti-Vietnam movement, which saw poetry readings and other protest events featuring poets such as Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg.

¹⁰ J. Bottum, 'The Poets vs. The First Lady', *The Weekly Standard*, February 17, 2003, [<http://theweeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/002/228qjtzx.asp?pg=2>], [January 20, 2005].

¹¹ Scott Verner, 'Editorial', *Poetry London*, Issue No. 48 Summer 2004, [<http://www.poetrylondon.co.uk/edits/edit48.htm>], [January 20, 2005].

images and language comparable to that of, say, elegies and love poems. Why write it? To provide antidotes to the spin excreted by the White House, Downing Street and media. And because the poet feels it is necessary.

The subject of this essay, then, is not only an “academic question”. So-called “political poetry” is being written, published, and widely distributed – and is broadly popular – at the start of the 21st century, in a way that it has not been, at least in English, since the Vietnam era – and before then its heyday might arguably be the 1930s.

Given this near-cyclic aspect (becoming popular every 30-40 years) of political poetry, the ongoing, alternative and sometimes vehement belief that it should never be written *at all* is perhaps curious – as if pro-picnic editorials continued to be written against rainy days. Still, there is something, in some poetry critics, some poets, and some poetics, that does not like the beast known as the “political poem” and will not stop until such a creature is tracked down and eliminated¹². The rest of this essay hopes to illuminate both sides of this argument, by turning to certain poets, and poetic theories, that address the subject of politics and poetry.

¹² Since a political poem can represent any political position, such antagonism cannot simply be said to be the result of one side’s political bias – if so, they could always respond with a poem of their own; no, it must extend deeper than that, as we shall see.

PART TWO: SOME DEFINITIONS AND ANALYSIS

Poetry and politics always has been and still is ... a disagreeable and sometimes bloody theme, clouded by resentment and servility, suspicion and bad conscience. – Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Poetry and Politics* (1962)¹³

“Poetry” and “Politics” are the two words, or ideas, which form the boundaries of this inquiry. It is not mischievous or idle to conjoin them – many have done so. Together, they form the title of an essay written in 1962 by the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger, which will be discussed below; the title of C.M Bowra’s study of poetry between 1900-1960 (these dates form the sub-title) is *Poetry and Politics*¹⁴ and the introduction to Tom Paulin’s *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (1986) opens with the sentence: “We have been taught, many of us, to believe that art and politics are separated by the thickest and most enduring of partitions.”¹⁵ Later on, Paulin makes it clear that by “art” he also means more specifically “poetry”. So, poetry and politics. One of the debater’s tricks – and surely the analytic philosopher’s – is to attempt to narrow the problem at hand to one of simple definition of terms. Certainly, the temptation to define the terms “poetry” or “politics” in such a way as to render the poetry-politics dispute tautological is strong (as in, “poetry is all writing which is or is not political” would be one such attempt).

However, it is also the case that, at least according to Adrian Leftwich, “debates about its [Politics’] proper definition and the scope of its subject matter are themselves political”¹⁶; this potentially lethal paradox extends to our current concern, if one applies the above and says: “debates about Poetry’s proper definition and the scope of its subject matter are themselves political.” Both are interesting claims, and

¹³ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Poetry and Politics’ in *The Consciousness Industry*, trans. by Michael Roloff (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), pp.62-82 (p. 63).

¹⁴ C.M. Bowra, *Poetry and Politics: 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

¹⁵ Tom Paulin, ‘Introduction’, *The Faber Book of Political Verse*, ed. by Tom Paulin (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 15-52 (p. 15).

¹⁶ Adrian Leftwich, ‘Thinking Politically: On the politics of Politics’ in *What Is Politics?*, edited by Adrian Leftwich (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 1-22 (p. 2).

problematic. For, if, following from what we know of politics (that it is ultimately about the question of the exercise of power¹⁷), then surely it seems possible to contend that any debate about the possible political scope of poetry is political. Of course, this without even entertaining ideas of (poetic) language being inherently ideological (as so many post-structural cultural critics suggest) or considering that the very acts of editing, publishing and marketing poetry books in a capitalist society are political to some (often very considerable) degree (if only in terms of whose voices are heard, and whose are not)¹⁸.

Sophistry aside, it does seem that in this wrangle the world (at least the one in which such issues ever matter or are discussed) boils down to three positions:

- a) poetry and politics are compatible, if only some of the time;
- b) following from the “a position” then, “political poems” can be written – and more so, should be written;
- c) poetry and politics are incompatible, and following from this “not-a position”, then “political poems” cannot or should not be written.

Position A is not strictly-speaking deontological, but merely ontological, describing more or less the state of the world as it is, not should be. It is Positions B and C that are directly opposed the one to the other. They both present an ultimately ethical (or

¹⁷ *Leftwich*, pp. 1-22.

¹⁸ The ideas in this paragraph are so generally accepted now among “leftwing” thinkers that it is hard to suggest exact references, but certainly my earlier readings in Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva provide some of the insights indicated here. One instance of clear-cut ideological bias in poetry publishing is somewhat amusing. On the back cover of *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry* edited by Edna Longley (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2000) it says: “there is no place here for the poet as entertainer, cultural spokesman, feminist mythmaker or political commentator.” Doesn’t sound much like the 20th century I know.

at least political) belief or argument – that something should or should not be done. The matter is complicated by the fact that, while those who seek to defend Position B may openly justify their stance according to an ethical or political stance (“it is right to do so” i.e. to write a poem opposing an unjust act such as an illegal war or an unfair government law), those who defend Position C may do so from an aesthetic perspective (“political poetry is bad poetry and we don’t like bad poetry”) as opposed to an ethical one such as “political poetry may lead to justice/political change and we do not want justice/political change”.

From this analysis, we can see that, from the start, those who believe in political poetry, and those who abhor it, may be arguing from very different platforms: to debate Justice is not, to all people, to debate what is Beautiful (or Sublime).¹⁹ Is it to debate what is Noble?

Actually, both Position B and Position C likely share a sub-position that they would not perhaps recognize: namely “we don’t like bad poetry” – it is just that those who believe in political poetry do not consider it to be poor writing in the first place. In this sense, the main lines of antagonism can be boiled down to the following true-or-false propositions, which both sides seek to resolve:

1. Political Poetry *is* Badly Written Poetry.
2. Political Poetry Brings Political Change.

Proposition 1, properly, is the domain of those who study and write poetry, as it relates directly to what a “good poem” (as opposed to a badly-written one) might be. Proposition 2 is mainly of political interest, as it deals with the outcome or likely

¹⁹Longinus, ‘On The Sublime’ in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. by Penelope Murray and T.S. Dorsch (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 113-166.

effect of any poem aimed at change, from the most mild of protests, to the most radical of interventions.

Those who focus on Proposition 1 – of course – tend to hold to Position C. Those who focus on Proposition 2 hold to Position B. Those who hold to Position A (my position, incidentally) think that both Propositions 1 and 2 can, at various times, be “false” – but never both at once.

It is to be noted here that Auden’s phrase “poetry makes nothing happen” is concerned with Proposition 2, and thus does not, in fact, invalidate political poetry on aesthetic grounds, unless one is to believe (rather improbably) that there should be a third proposition: Only Good Poetry (i.e. non-political) Makes Things Happen.

As this paper is directed at poets and poetry theories, it will focus, in its third and fourth parts, on Proposition 1, which has been, post-Plato, a fertile ground for disagreement. It is to be noted, also, that Plato does, in fact, fear that Proposition 2 is the case – that poetry can alter, to its detriment, the political landscape, of his ideal city. His concern, surely, in *The Republic* is to defend the Political World, more so, at least, than to guarantee better poems²⁰.

Meanwhile, for Wallace Stevens: “the role of the poet is not to be found in morals”²¹ – by which we can also (arguably) mean ethical or political positions – but rather that “above everything else, poetry is words”.

I take him to mean by this that “morals/politics” and “words/poetry” pertain to different levels of human, civilized concern, and that the poet who wishes to do his or her job as well as they can should not be concerned with anything but words – even if such words, shall we say ignore or in fact make worse the moral/political level. This is the “fiddling while Rome Burns” argument – but in reverse – that a great violinist

²⁰ Plato, ‘Republic 10’ in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. by Penelope Murray and T.S. Dorsch (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 40-56.

²¹ *Stevens*, p. 264.

can only – should only - play, even as the moral world, Plato’s City, is in decline (as in his “bombings of London”²²).

In short, Stevens’ extreme Proposition 1 presents us with Formula W: Poetry = Language; Language ≠ Politics. In this Formula W, it is the violence and reality of the political world, the “extraordinary pressure of news”²³ in fact, that Poetry Language must do everything it can to counteract with its lend-lease of a “supreme fiction”. News is never Poetry Language that the poet can use, except as a force to escape from, perhaps the propulsive force that drives the poet towards the Noble. There is, then, a second Formula, Formula W2: News ≠ Nobility. It can be argued, as we will see Adrienne Rich do, that writing out of “News” – the contingent political world or her “historical continuity” – is not simply “grinding a political axe”²⁴ but in fact provides exactly the source language for further poetic development.

In other words: Can Poetry Language also (even sometimes) = News Language, that is, the historical, contingent language of the “bombings of Montreal or Toronto”²⁵? Could Stevens’ Poetry Language ever also be that of Rich’s? Is there, in fact, not one set of words for poetry, but perhaps, many, or multiple, words? Is the News, then, but another Supreme Fiction, another Poetry waiting to happen?

²² Stevens, p. 262.

²³ Stevens, p. 261.

²⁴ Adrienne Rich, ‘Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet’ in *Poetry In Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, ed. by Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 504-513 (p. 510).

²⁵ Stevens, p. 262.

PART THREE: POETRY AND/OR POLITICS

Campaign in poetry. Govern in prose – *Mario Cuomo*²⁶.

How often is it possible to hear two reasonable and charismatic political leaders, each representing their party (and each opposed to the other) supply convincing descriptions of the world, each of which, if true, would entirely invalidate the other?

There occurs an anxiety of eloquence, for such excess amounts of “noble rhetoric” cannot long sustain the burden of truth that is placed upon them: Utopia cannot be White and Black, X and Y, Finite and Infinite, and so on. In this story, then, politics is the art of telling lies or truths more beautifully than others.

So it is when coming to the literary battle over the relationship between poetry and politics. Can both of the following authors be telling the truth?:

... the expression “political poem” becomes suspect to the point where it is no longer of any use. Everyone knows he imagines what it means, but on closer examination we find that it is applied almost exclusively to writings serving the ends either of agitation or of the establishment... the results can be classified under battle songs and marching songs, poster rhymes and hymns, propaganda chants and manifestoes in verse... either they are useless for the purposes of those who commission them or they have nothing to do with poetry.²⁷

Many people dislike the notion that poetry can have any connection with politics and think that, even if we extend politics to cover a whole range of public events, it stands in awkward relation to poetry, that its incursions are usually unsuccessful and often deplorable, and that its influence defiles an otherwise pure art. Yet public themes have for centuries been common in many parts of the world and the unconscious avoidance of them is more often the exception than the rule.²⁸

²⁶ See {<http://www.basicquotations.com/index.php?cid=7>} [January 21, 2005]; note, sometimes attributed to President Richard M. Nixon as well.

²⁷ *Enzensberger*, p. 77.

²⁸ *Bowra*, p. 1.

In some ways, the first quote, from Enzensberger, resembles the position of *The Weekly Standard* quoted above; and the second, from Bowra, is similar to that of the *Poetry London* editorial previously cited. That is, the first quote is didactic and even derisive, and considers the “political poem” to be basically another term for either propaganda (if effective) or dreadful verse; whereas the second position seems to hold out the possibility for at least some poetry to rise above the expectations of its detractors.

It seems hard to reconcile both versions of the story: that political poetry has “nothing to do with poetry” and that such poetry has likewise (from Homer, through Dante, down to Hardy, Mayakovsky, and Edith Sitwell’s critique of the Atomic Bomb²⁹) “for centuries been common in many parts of the world”.

There are many ways to resolve a dispute. One way is to speak plainly. Enzensberger’s depiction of the relationship between politics and poetry is a thoughtful polemic, while Bowra’s is a factual survey. Both statements below can be made without necessary contradiction:

X. Many poets have written political poetry in the last thousand years.

Y. The language used in political poetry is either:

a) politically ineffective or;

b) effective propaganda, disqualified from being poetic language.

We know Proposition X is verifiably the case, since any reader is able to provide examples of such poems (Paulin’s anthology has 466 pages of such work, from Dante to Holub). With Proposition Y (Enzensberger’s claim) we are back in the territory of

²⁹ Bowra, p. 65.

our two earlier propositions, 1 and 2 – one aesthetic, the other regarding political efficacy (“things happening”).

Enzensberger argues that the very factors that would result in making a “political poem” (that is, a battle song, poster rhyme, chant, national anthem, etc.) effective as propaganda would in fact render them non-poetry. This is the other side of Stevens’ extreme Position 1. For Stevens, Poetry Language is not moral, not about news, the impinging world. For Enzensberger, Political Language cannot be poetic. In both cases, the claim is about the quality of language required to make a poem.

For Stevens, the flaw in the News Language – the language of cities being bombed – is that it exerts too much reality-pressure. For Enzensberger, the problem is one of “power-pressure” – *power corrupts poetry, absolutely*, could almost be his slogan. This is because poetry and politics are separate “historic processes” – “one in the medium of speech, the other in the medium of power”.

The forces that make poetry evolve through history – its styles and modes – may be contrary to those of politics – and may occur in quiet – that is, the best poets may be conservative homebodies, not progressive radicals; whereas, the forces that drive politics are founded in power relations incompatible with poetry.³⁰

This claim, that poetry and politics are historical processes that occur in different and dialectically opposite mediums (power versus language) is disputed by Tom Paulin, as we shall see in a moment. Let me suggest a more convoluted critique of Enzensberger’s argument beforehand.

I would argue that there are indeed various mediums, of which speech/language and power may be two. However, both are also the dialectical negation of the other, as well – that is, language constitutes being to the extent that it

³⁰ *Enzensberger*, pp. 81-82 (for two previous paragraphs).

permits or delimits the exercise of certain linguistic, expressive prerogatives – just as power (and its right-hand man ideology) equally goes to shape language; indeed, what else is propaganda, but language under the thumb of power?

That is: the histories of power and language criss-cross often, are complex, incestuous and perhaps even creatively related, in a much less austere and impoverished way than Enzensberger can admit. Is it not, for instance, thinkable, that the toxicity of some political slogans could be effectively used to spice up the language of poetry? Auden, Brecht, Pound and Charles Bernstein come immediately to mind, as poets who appropriate the remnants, the debris, of political history – its language remnants – to strong modernist and later post-modernist effect (pastiche and play).

Tom Paulin, in the introduction to his anthology of *Political Verse*, confronts the perceived problem of the political poem head on: “The poet who elects to write about political reality is no different from the poet who chooses love, landscape, or a painting by Cézanne as the subject for a poem. The choice of a political subject entails no necessary or complete commitment to an ideology...”³¹

For Paulin, then, the poet who decides to write a political poem is not choosing, as in Stevens, a different kind of language (News, morals, bombings, radio from Cairo, and so on) or a different set of power relations, as in Enzensberger. Politics is not a language, but a subject. Indeed, not only is it merely one more from the subject-kitty (love, landscape, French paintings) but the poet need not even be ideologically committed to any political ideals espoused in the poem, as if bad faith were but one more Yeatsian mask to try on.

³¹ Paulin, p 15.

This is tempting, but perhaps too easy a way out of the dilemma we have noted above. Certainly, with Paulin we are not in the realm of Proposition 2 – there is no need for his sort of political poem to “make anything happen” when it needn’t even be ideologically-driven or sincere (in a sense *could* be as phoney as much campaign rhetoric). As regards whether (re: Proposition 1) political poems can be well-written: well, why not? If the poet can write a good love poem, why not a good anti-war poem?

Paulin’s blithe and somewhat trivializing claims about political poetry remind me of the lion tamer who stuffed and mounted his savage animal in order to render it safe for public performance: you get the head, but no roar. Let us look more closely at the notion of “subject” and the notion of “commitment” here.

It does seem to be true that politics may be regarded as a subject. Take for instance one of the anthologized poems, W.H. Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron”³². The trope of the poem is that Auden is directly corresponding with Byron, in a style reminiscent of Byron’s own *Don Juan*, and imagining what if George Gordon were in fact a citizen of the British Empire in the late 1930s.

A political poem, once taken as a subject, necessitates two things at least, that all literary subjects, it seems to me, require: apt language or reference, and treatment of theme – in this instance, language that makes reference to either political theory, or political actors or events; and some attempt to discuss or play with ideas generated by such language.

So it is that Auden’s poem give us, among others: “data”; “Status Quo”; John Bull”; “Ypres”; “Disney”; “tax collector”; “private secretary”; “Security”; Teutonic/

³² Paulin, pp. 368-373.

Führer-Prinzip”; “Oswald’s call”; “The Pope”; “modern warfare”; “United Front”; “Empire”; “Pax Romana”; “Athens murdered Socrates” and finally “rigid nation”.

It seems hard to imagine a political theme or topic or public figure not included in this wide-ranging poem. Surely, the language in Auden’s poems is exactly the kind that Wallace Stevens would argue is *not the sort* poets should use to push up against the pressure of News (the real) and achieve Nobility (or some form of artifice escape).

If Formula W was rewritten by the Auden of this poem, to be Formula WH, it might be: Poetry = News. That is, the poem exists, like a stylish picnic hamper, to be packed with as many clever, contemporary and relevant linguistic goodies as possible. This is one way of saying that Paulin’s idea of the innocent selection of the political subject is in fact the central problem with the subject – the selection necessitates public themes and familiar language that, as Enzensberger would have it, smacks of the slogan, the anthem, the chant. Of course, Auden’s poem is jaunty and brilliant to a contemporary reader’s ears, and largely inoffensive, since the choices being forced upon the actors in the poem – to side with or against the British fascists in late but pre-war 1930s England – are no longer before us; the controversy is dead, but the poem, as an historical (satirical) document, lives on. It seems hard to claim that, in this instance, the use of political language, political words, has made it a bad poem. Perhaps contemporary anti-war poems with words and phrases such as “War On Terror” or “embedded” or “weapons of mass destruction”, poems like the Irish poet Kevin Higgins’ satire on George W. Bush swallowing a pretzel³³, will one day be read with the same disinterested enjoyment.

³³ See the e-book “100 Poets Against The War” at www.nthposition.com for this and other recent political poems.

But what of the commitment? Can it be the case that political poems may be written without any ideological motivation, as simple copy-book exercises? This returns us to the idea of definitions forming the final answer to this dispute. If a political poem is simply a public statement on a public theme, without any commitment, it is hardly the sort of political poem anyone is likely to be concerned with opposing in the first place, much like an invisible swastika is unlikely to offend the eye.

Or is this the case? It is assumed that the sort of public poems written by the British Poet Laureate on royal occasions do not flow from passionate commitment, but from professional duty, and yet they are still regularly mocked for their inherent (because political) mediocrity.

Enzensberger believes that the time for any poem being written for or against any public figure is long gone³⁴, though we may still address poems to private figures, such as friends, loved ones, or the local butcher. No more poems for Hitler, Kennedy, Nixon, Blair, Bush or Sadat; or the Queen, presumably.

Paulin's dismissal of ideological commitment as an essential ingredient for the political poem seems a backdoor-way of indicating what is, in fact, still ultimately the political poem's gravest sin: at heart, it *is* ideologically driven. The fear is not, as we have seen above with Proposition 2, that the poem may actually overthrow a royal family or end a poll tax, but that it may get written badly, since ideology and commitment are assumed to (somehow) blind the poet with partisan rage.

As *Poetry London* says: "the clichés of journalism, propaganda and rant" must be avoided. Here we can turn to Paulin and rightly ask – and what of the love poem? Need it not avoid its own genre-clichés as well?

³⁴ *Enzensberger*, pp. pp. 65-74.

We have seen what words political poetry might use – and it has seemed to be within the realm of the “good poem”. Now we must consider the idea that it is, in fact, something about the “desperation” (following Mr. Bottum) of the commitment, that renders such language more likely to become mere cliché, mere rant: dangerous.

PART FOUR: AUDEN AND RICH

I know I learned two things from [Yeats'] poetry, and those two things were at war with each other. One was that poetry can be “about”, can root itself in, politics. Even if it is a defence of privilege, even if it deplores political rebellion and revolution, it can, may have to, account for itself politically, consciously situate itself amid political conditions, without sacrificing intensity of language. – *Adrienne Rich, Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet (1986)*³⁵

In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely, that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous numbers, that *Homo Laborans* is also *Homo Ludens*. – *W.H. Auden, The Poet and The City (1962)*³⁶

It is curious that Auden, whose ironic later stance towards political poetry is thought to be well-known, is, in the quote given above, able to say about poetry “even if it is not terribly good” it should still be encouraged, and is inherently political in a useful way (reminding Management of something they need to know); whereas Adrienne Rich, who is thought to be, of the two, in her later work far more “politically active” or engaged, still needs to affirm that political poetry can be made without “sacrificing intensity of language.”

We here return to the split (our two propositions from above) between “good poetry” or Poetry Language and (political) efficacy. Rich seems to argue that political poems can in fact retain their linguistic intensity – words worthy of Yeats. Auden could care less about such quality control: let the poet play, and let the playing be the

³⁵ *Rich*, p. 507.

³⁶ W. H. Auden, ‘The Poet and the City’, in *Poetry In Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, ed. by Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 378-384 (p.383).

fly in the ointment that irks the leader and the technocrat of the modern age – and don't bother if the poem is not "terribly good".

In Auden's insistence on the significance of *Homo Ludens*, of play, we get another version of Enzensberger's idea³⁷ of the new kind of permissible political poem, the *not-political poem*, which is small-scale, personal, and not directed towards grand themes (it seems worth noting that both poet's essays were written and/or published in 1962, the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the world faced mutual annihilation).³⁸

It seems at least arguable that both poets (deeply familiar with Marxist writing and practice), by withdrawing either to fields of low-key play or personalist, even meditative, attention, are, pre-ecological poets: at any rate, the economy or environment (the field) in which they see future poetry with a social purpose occur is one that is neither strident or necessarily "well-made" – there is a homely quality to both projects (and of course Auden wrote more and more of the idea of home as he grew older).

For Rich, by the time that Vietnam, a few years later, had become a central concern for her person and her work, no such playful, quietist position is possible, though she acknowledges the feminist credo that "the personal is political"³⁹. Rich writes:

As part of the movement against United States militarism and Imperialism, white poets ... were writing and reading aloud poems addressing the war in Southeast Asia. In many of these poems, you sensed the poet's desperation in trying to encompass in the words the reality of napalm, the "pacification" of villages, trying to make vivid in

³⁷ *Enzensberger*: poetry's "political mission is to refuse any political mission and to continue to speak for everyone about things of which no one speaks, of a tree, a stone, of that which does not exist."; pp. 81-82.

³⁸ See for instance {<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/jk35/cuba/cuba01.htm>}, [January 22, 2005].

³⁹ *Rich*, p.510.

poetry what seemed to have minimal effect when shown on television.⁴⁰

This quote yields much that is worth noting. First, the word “desperation” again – though, not this time from someone aiming to critique anti-war poets, but rather to celebrate the extreme seriousness of their linguistic challenge and poetic calling in the given historical context of napalm, and other horrific war crimes against innocent civilians. More to the point, in direct contrast to Wallace Stevens, here it is the words that need to “encompass” more reality – more napalm, more bombing, more broadcasts from distant places – not less.

For Rich, the poet’s perceived challenge is not to escape the pressure of News (the television images of the war in this case) but to find a way for her words to do such news proper justice. There is a more than casual inversion here, in the shaping of the concept of the poet’s duty to language, and history. Properly, Rich’s Formula, Formula A is, News = Poetry (hopefully). The poet can only strive to achieve the “linguistic intensity” required to convey what is must be like to be burnt alive by napalm.

For Rich, such a poetic project is clearly both personal, and adequate to the pressures of the historic moment, but hardly, as in the case of Auden, merely playful; in the case of Enzensberger, removed from writing directly to power and its agencies; or in the case of Paulin, potentially non-committed. Rich provides perhaps the first fully acceptable (because full and open) model we have come across in this paper, for the contemporary “political poems”. It will:

⁴⁰ *Rich*, p. 510.

- a) Attempt to engage with the political-historical subject with encompassing and intense language;
- b) It will directly refer to and critique militarism and imperialism, that is, speak to power; governments and officials;
- c) It will be fully committed to its cause, personally and publicly.

This, more than Paulin's anodyne and apologetic model, seems to be the sort of political poem that actually threatens those who are in the habit of being threatened by such things. And, ironically (and in negation of my earlier claims and analysis) it inverts the primacy of our earlier Propositions 1 and 2. For, Rich's Model of Political Poetry does not concern itself, anymore, with the issue of whether the political is bad for poetry, but whether the poetry is worthy of the political – instead, the efficacy, the activist desire for praxis that makes something happen – is all.

Given that Rich's desire is not for a noble poem in Stevens' sense – but a poem fully engaged with what could be called the Supreme Reality of the historical process of news, or news about war, imperialism and so on – it seems that the very idea of what makes a poem a “good poem” is under attack, at least re-evaluation. It is hardly enough, it seems to me, to say, as Auden does, that “Poets are, by the nature of their interests and the nature of artistic fabrication, singularly ill-equipped to understand politics or economics”.⁴¹ Surely this is an emotional expression masquerading as a statement of possible fact. On closer inspection, it is weak. Firstly, let us address the phrase “the nature of their interests”.

This assumes, incorrectly, that poets share, through all time and history, an identical nature and consciousness, which is not exactly credible, given the multiple

⁴¹ *Auden*, p.382.

roles and qualities that various poets continue to exhibit through time – and is exactly the sort of position which would annul Rich’s Poetry Membership before she (and many other women and post-colonial writers) got in the front door. More directly, it assumes that whatever else a Poet might Be, they are not intelligent enough (unlike politicians) to understand politics; this seems absurd, and one hopes that Auden is being (as he often can be) ironic here – for in a democracy (let alone a tyranny), what citizen can be said to be ill-equipped to represent their own political interests?

The idea of the “nature of artistic fabrication” is of more interest. It returns us to what seems to be a fundamentalist position, a stumbling block, a view shared, in some way, by all the poets studied in this paper: the nature of poetry, its words (language) and the making of poems, when coming up against the rough grain of the world (news, broadcasts, bombings, napalm, reality) stumbles, and is supremely challenged by the political subject.

For Stevens⁴² (and *The Weekly Standard*) the conclusion is clear: the political poem is ultimately not a noble poem, and will fail to achieve the highest aims and purposes of poetry. For Auden and Enzensberger, such linguistic and historical challenges demand new models for the future poem engaged with social concern. For Paulin, such challenges are mimized, but clearly add the fizz that makes such works – often satires – potent and worth reading in the first place. But for Rich, and other committed poets, the difficulty is overcome in the full acceptance of the need to engage with the flow, process, noise, and yes, violence, of the News, the historical, the contingent, the world of broadcasts from Cairo.

⁴² On a personal note, while I disagree with Wallace Stevens on some issues, I rarely if ever disagree with his poems.

PART FIVE: CONCLUSION

Not that it is not possible to have a poetry which consciously seeks to promote cultural and political change and yet can still manage to operate with the fullest artistic integrity. – *Seamus Heaney, The Redress of Poetry (1995)*⁴³

In the end is at all about the fear that the language used to “encompass” this historical flux might become too passionate, too desperate, as if the seas of the real world were all-too-rough for the poets who sail on them to survive and swing around to the mastered shore of dispassionate, calm and noble eloquence? Perhaps, the very idea of the “political poem” is simply that of the poem which is not objective, in T.S. Eliot’s sense. Perhaps the fear of the politics in poetry is the fear of decorum being mishandled, and civility and proper diction, smashed. In this sense, it is not the content or the aim of the poetry which is the problem, but the methods the political poet must go to, to attempt to take the unnatural elements of napalm and gruesome war-time brutality (and other instrumental government uses of torture and violence) and “encompass” them with linguistic intensity. One does not need to be Edith Sitwell with her Atomic Bomb to believe that poets are capable of approaching the full range of the world’s objects and subjects and replying to them all in a poem – with Heaney’s “fullest artistic integrity”. It may even be the case, given the possibility that the political and personal are identical, that any poet who chooses to write out of her own experiences, her place in society, history, and the world, is speaking as nobly as she need do, in order to make poems that speak well, adequate to her own requirements, and the needs of those she chooses to represent. In this sense, and as, yes, the Internet provides extraordinary access to different communities to communicate their writing, their politics, both locally and globally, all future poetry will become increasingly political – and no harm done.

⁴³ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Redress of Poetry’ in *Poetry In Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, ed. by Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 571.

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