

The *res poetica*

I.

A *relation* is a real thing, i.e. has physio-neuronal
instantiations between minds and in brains,
traceable through Positron Emission Tomography.

The *res poetica* is a relation realized through poetry.
It's a space made by "the legislators of the unacknowledged world."
It's not like "a city upon a hill" that "cannot be hidden."

2.

Poets are real; poets make poetry.
The *res poetica* is the set of relations that poetry creates, affirms,
diminishes, or destroys.
It is dependent on those relations.
It comes to be within all languages and, with effort, across languages.

3.

Poets can't help making poetry.
In defining participation in the *res poetica*:
upper limit "we live in the mind"
lower limit violence.

4.

Poets are formed by what Bishnupriya Ghosh calls "local struggles."
The poet constructs perspectives on local struggles,
carried through the *res poetica*.

5.

The *res poetica* is momentary, fragile,
propositional, temporally continuous or discontinuous,
materially real.
The prayers described in *Straight with the Medicine*,
and the entities described in *Imagined Communities*
work similarly.

6.

Anne-Lise François, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, calls an *open secret* a “gesture of self-canceling revelation.”

An open secret “permits a release
from the ethical imperative to act upon knowledge”
in environments of threat.

An open secret is “an essentially preventative or conservative mode
of communication that reveals to insiders what it
simultaneously hides from outsiders, or, more specifically,
protects them from what it is in their power to ignore.”

7.

Poetry can be an open secret,
“a way of imparting knowledge
such that it cannot be claimed and acted on.”

In that sense poetry “makes nothing happen.”
“No
one listens to poetry.”

8.

The *res poetica* can also take oppressive forms,
recycling existing control structures.

9.

Vivek Narayanan reads Shrikant Verma’s *Magadh* as an open secret:

“Bizarrely, Verma was a senior Congress Party functionary
under Indira Gandhi in the late 70s and early 80s.

“It’s hard, for me at least, to resist reading *Magadh*
as his way of speaking about some aspects of
that close-up experience in the only way he could.”

Corpses in Kashi

Have you seen Kashi?
Where corpses come and go
by the same road

And what of corpses?
Corpses will come
Corpses will go

Ask then, whose corpse is this?
Is it Rohitashva? No, no
all corpses cannot be Rohitashva

His corpse, you will recognize
from a distance
and if not from a distance

then from up close
and if not from up close
then it cannot be Rohitashva

And even if it is,
what difference
does it make?

Friends, you have seen Kashi
where corpses come and go
by the same road

and this is all you did—
made way and asked,
Whose corpse is this?

Whoever it was
whoever it was not
what difference did it make?

— Shrikant Verma
trans. by Rahul Soni

10.

Sheldon Pollock writes against “what often seems to be the single desperate choice we are offered: between, on the one hand, a national vernacularity dressed in the frayed period costume of violent revanchism and bent on preserving difference at all costs and, on the other, a clear-cutting, strip-mining multinational cosmopolitanism that is bent, at all costs, on eliminating it.”

Pollock wants to “think about cosmopolitanism and vernacularism as action rather than idea, as something people do rather than something they declare, as practice rather than proposition (least of all, philosophical proposition),” and also as a *choice*.

He gives examples of poets who have been “cosmopolitan or vernacular without directly professing either, perhaps while finding it impossible rationally to justify either.”

11.

Addressing a body called “The International Agency for Cities of Refuge,” at a conference on “The Charter of Cities of Refuge,” Jacques Derrida, defines such cities as being “as independent from the other and from the state as possible, but, nevertheless, allied to each other according to forms of solidarity yet to be invented.”

12.

Monolingual speakers of English can access re-representations of vernacular forms, but not the chains of meanings associated with their expressive contexts.

One recent response to lack of access to the conventional meanings of, for example, Tamil film, is to use the tools at hand to appropriate its form via heightened cuts, homophonic subtitles, and pasted voice-over.

13.

The failure of global capital to fulfill its implicit promise of total access is not quite ironized in the work like this that I’ve seen, which end up more like a fetish.

14.

I once published a poem that contained the following three racist lines :

The Asian woman sat eating Tam crackers.

I laughed.

This stuff is endless.

When I first read the poem at Halcyon in Brooklyn in 2000,
a member of the audience had a visible visceral reaction,
and the *res poetica*, running like a current
through that moment, was distorted and reduced.

In its physicality, its measurability, its effect, it was a kind of violence.

15.

Poetry can, I guess, attempt to recapitulate, frame, appropriate, or reiterate racist thought

without it resulting in violence, and without the poem's author
function seeming to be a node for drawing pleasure in its discharge.

In fact, a whole movement in poetry developed out of that premise.

Self-proclaimed self-implication had little effect.

16.

Pleasure in disgust, and pleasure generally, can freak people out,
but deriving pleasure from disgust and deriving pleasure
from handling highly-charged racist thought probably
can't be distinguished.

We'll have to wait for the fMRI.

Either way, any attempt requires permission,
which can only be rendered within the *res poetica*,

The *res poetica* takes the place of intention.

17.

Poetry does not have a fixed, final set formal characteristics.

Poetry has its own particular modes of reception.

18.

Reception, as defined by Auerbach, is a "subjectivistic-perspectivalistic procedure,"
one that, under certain conditions, "creat[es] a foreground and a background,
resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past."

The procedure Auerbach describes, however yuckily,
takes place, though poems, as part of the *res poetica*.

19.

Pheng Cheah argues that since we have “pre-comprehended an idea of humanity as the bearer of dignity, freedom, sociability, culture, or political life,” which is directly contradicted by the actual ways in which people are not the bearers of dignity, freedom, sociability, culture, and political life, “the task and challenge... may be to question this pre-comprehension of the human and, somewhat perversely, even to give it up.”

21.

Arun Kolatkar, published more than 15 books in Marathi.

He published *Jejuri*, his first book written in English, in 1976. The book is a serial panorama of a sacred Hindu site in Maharashtra. It incorporates numerous ironies that play the site’s actual physical state off its accepted spiritual significance.

Kolatkar’s second book written in English, titled *Kala Ghoda Poems* (after a once-faded Bombay district now as gentrified as the West Village or *le Marais*), was published in 2004, a year after his death.

His third, *Sarpa Satra*, a retelling of a tiny piece of the *Mahabharata*, was published that same year.

22.

Kolatkar’s writing in English is an open secret.

His poem “Pi-dog” ends when day breaks, and the Kala Ghoda dogs, who have ruled sections of the night roads, “surrender the city to its so-called masters.”

“Metaphysical blippety-blips
while sucking candor lozenge?”
— “The Cosmopolitans”
Sianne Ngai and Brian Kim Stefans

The *res poetica* was written in 2009 and first published in January, 2010.
It included the section on Anne-Lise François’s work.

Meena Alexander suggested Sheldon Pollock’s work after reading a draft of a thesis prospectus that contained sections included here.

If the Pollock quotations could be dropped or substituted for, the whole work would be composed using only internet resources, and without utilizing any pay-window enabled sites.

Searches reveal that O. Mandel (1961) and Wendy Steiner (1981) have used the term *res poetica*, which needs to be replaced.

“The actual choice is between revolutionary or shut-in,”
Anne Boyer’s daughter, Hazel, said.

The air has run out of the piety market.

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