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# Towards a Poetics of Narcissism

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## TOWARDS A POETICS OF NARCISSISM

An eye is not an eye because you see it.  
It is an eye because it sees you.

- Antonio Machado

As this sad and paralyzing decade comes to a close, I think it fitting to attempt making a few sweeping generalizations about the poetry that has been written in it. Throughout the seventies we've endured a proliferation of little magazines and poetry presses on an epidemic scale, both in the Bay Area and across the nation. A few years ago I would not have hesitated to defend their promulgation; the small presses have been publishing the work of poets born since 1945, my generation, when the "establishment" literary magazines and corporate trade publishers have not. Though a few university presses have awarded prizes for first books by young poets, their tastes have largely shadowed the trends in academic criticism. Most of the young poets they have published are also young university professors or would be professors. This circumstance is pathologically borne out in anthologies such as *The American Poetry Anthology* edited by Daniel Halpern. But it is not just to the academics I address my criticism.

The little poetry magazines, most of them now supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, have sprouted in large enough numbers to embrace every conceivable literary "school". In fact, judging from the editorial standards of some of them, there shouldn't be an unpublished poet left in the United States. Despite the recent attacks on them which have appeared in the national literary press (which wants to raise poetry to such a level of obscurity that it would intimidate the most formidable scholar), it is inconceivable to me how even the most strongly determined reader could make it through the majority of poetry magazines from cover to cover. To do so would invite not only stupefying boredom but unyielding hostility. This is not to say there are not a few good poems written by younger poets being published in the magazines. To say otherwise would be untrue. But mining the periodicals for high grade material can be psychically damaging. We have the situation which has recently been testified to by David P. Young, the co-editor of a rather good magazine called *Field*, in a panel at the Library of Congress in 1975. Young reported that *Field* receives on the average between two and three thousand unsolicited manuscripts a month. This figure can be given perspective when you consider that this magazine gains only a small number of new subscribers in the same time. Put in this light, it might appear that the National Endowment is actively discouraging the reading of poetry by encouraging the writing of it.

Poetry magazine for years had as its motto a line from Walt Whitman: "To have great poets there must be great audiences too". The new generation has taken this dictum to heart. We have moved towards a poetics of narcissism. We are our own audience, and not a devoted one at that. Individually, we are interested only in the writing that reminds us of ourselves.

The situation of our poetics is inevitable. We are a narcissistic generation that has grown up in what Christopher Lasch has called *The Culture of Narcissism*, the title of his recent book. We, as a generation, have sought fulfillment by perfecting our personalities in the reflection of one mirror or another, through consciousness expansion, eastern religions, est, movement therapies, language, or whatever is available. Lasch writes that "the narcissist sees the world as a mirror of himself and has no interest in external events except as they throw back a reflection of his own image". Despite the numerous stylistic differences among the younger poets, this is a common situation in our poetics.

We have met the void within us. We can apply to much of the writing we have produced what Blake wrote about the eighteenth century: "the languid strings do scarcely move! The sound is forced, the notes a few." This might be partially accounted for in the fact that so many young poets were trained in university creative writing programs. There we learned craft - that is to write without anything to say, just to write in a way that reflects favorably on us. As Lasch explains, "the narcissist depends upon others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without an admiring audience." Writing workshops in the universities are not bad for us just because poets like Robert Bly say they are evil. They are bad because in exchange for the support and criticism of our peers and teachers we got wrapped up in ourselves and failed to be educated. We did not study the poetry of the past or of other cultures with enough deep feeling, and we were not made to read hard enough. Consequently we have gained an easy competence over poetic language. We may even know something about form. Ninety percent of workshop poetry is dead to the ear and to the feelings.

The recent little magazines are crowded with competent, uninteresting poetry. Not just the academic journals, but even those publications that are considered to be avant-garde. There is a dryness in what should be the most fluid area of language and ideas, a dryness like locusts rubbing their wings together. Most of the experimental writing consciously points back to Pound, Stein, Zukofsky, Williams, O'Hara, or Olson. But few experimentalists are capable of that acknowledgement. Therefore, they've created a body of work untempered by history, just by poetic sensibility. The narcissist, in this case, does not care if the reader's eyes glaze over in fatigue or bewilderment after a few lines as long as the reader is willing to be impressed by the poet's brilliance. Avant-garde poetry in New York and the Bay Area tends to be dense and ponderous. Here the style dominated the content. In many ways these poets, to use Lasch's words, are

"overcome not by the sense of endless possibility, but the banality of the social order ... They feel themselves overwhelmed by annihilating boredom, like animals whose instincts have withered in captivity."

This same difficulty holds true with the new surrealism. The heightened language employed in surrealist poetry often is an attempt to disguise the poem's lack of subject. Magazines such as *Kayak* have helped bring this poetry into fashion. Though *Kayak* has printed a great deal of good poetry over the years, it has become more and more dominated by poems which consist of mechanically generated images. Though designed to give pleasure through their great jumps of association, these poems are not grounded in emotion and are too often immediately forgettable. The poet is consciously trying to win the reader over by "blowing his mind". These poems do not contain even a shadow of the wild emotional energy of the unconscious as it appears in Lorca or Neruda or Charles Simic. In the United States, young surrealist poets seem to dissipate early, as James Tate has for instance. His last book, *Viper Jazz*, does not contain a single good poem, and only half a dozen or so good lines.

The common quality of the narcissistic poem is the poet's extreme self-consciousness. Younger poets who write quite skillfully can ultimately fail when their poem is intruded upon by their egos. This is also true of Janet Rodney's long poem, *Crystals*, just published by North Atlantic Books. It claims to be revealing something about love relationships, but it is deceiving. The subject is the poet's perception. The poem "fills one revolving shadow with love for another." The poet after all has told us, "I am the world's business."

The narcissism of the last generation of confessional poets had done young writers no favor either. The ego-ridden works of Sexton and Plath have been particularly destructive to women's poetry. Women's poetry presents political and aesthetic issues which are doubtlessly beyond my range of experience. However, I sense in much women's writing a therapeutic sensibility. There is a difference between the private act of writing as therapy and the public act of writing a poem. The race of Adrienne Rich or Susan Griffin is energy turned outward. When lesser poets turn this same energy inward their narcissism trivializes experience by attaching a meaning to it imposed by political or psychological cliché. The point becomes not writing about a problem in one's life in order to clarify a universal human situation for the benefit of others, but rather writing about a problem in order to become identified with it and to bask in its reflected glory.

In many ways poetry has become one-issue-politics. In California and elsewhere rural and wilderness areas still abound there has arisen a new generation of nature poets. But regarding this genre we should heed David Ignatow's warning: "I wish I could look at a mountain without seeing it as a comment on my life." Poets of the younger generation are prone to usurping the landscape itself and using it as an inner symbolism. We are in danger of not producing any poets whose work actually speaks for the land because we are so heavily invested in the human ego. When I read a poem about a beautiful mountain I am interested in that mountain, not in the poet's appreciation of his or her own vision of it. When this self-conscious appreciation is evident in the imagery, the poem becomes one step removed from its object, unlike classical Chinese or Japanese nature poetry. The primary interest of our nature poems, it seems, is not whales or mountains or redwood trees. The world's wondrous inventory has simply been turned into grist for the poetic mill.

I've given you but a few wild and probably upsetting generalizations about something that has become deeply troubling. What is so painful to me in reading much of the poetry of our generation is the utter desolation of spirit it implies. The last decade has seen a flourishing of mediocre writing without respect to which school it is affiliated. It would seem as though many of us write in order to gain the love and admiration we desire, not because something in the world deserves our scorn or praise. Our childhood wish for omnipotence seems to be returning. Our self-consciousness, in Lasch's words, extends from "the waning belief in the reality of the external world, which has lost its immediacy in a society pervaded by symbolically mediated information." As critics, we must be held accountable for not condemning the dullness, timidity, and lack of energy in our poetry. We've settled for what is merely interesting instead of what is good. I'll comment more specifically on these issues in future articles.

- Alan Soldofsky

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