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READING HANK LAZER'S "LAW-POEMS"

"Poetry makes nothing happen/ it is a way of happening, a mouth," a notion about the potency of verse confirmed in Hank Lazer's mouthy poems—"Law-Poems." Lazer has taken language's most sacred of domains, the law, and desecrated it. Lazer has taken Alabama's and my State's most sovereign of domains, Its Laws, and broken them. If the language of the law is like a contract, or at least a promise, with the people who are governed by that language—that they can count on the law to mean what it says, while saying what it means, then Lazer's "Law-Poems" have demonstrated how law very often can mean other than what it's saying when placed in another context. By extension he has shown how slippery law's language is, how malleable, how unstable, how imprecise even in its drive for precision. If it is so unstable, so poetic, out of the context of its use and purpose, the law may not be so law-like when it is back where it belongs: codified in volumes. Lazer's "Law-Poems" demystify law's language by making it play like figures of speech. Then, when law gets back to being law again, we have trouble taking it so seriously, we can't help seeing its looseness, its capacity for play.

And the play is what Lazer captures in many of the laws he chooses to fool around with—laws that for one purpose or another at one time or another were entertained seriously by some legislator who proposed them, some legislature that passed them, some agent of peace who enforced them, some lawyers who argued for or against them, and some judge who ruled on or interpreted them. The chain of law set off by one set of laws is long and involved; Lazer sets his sights on exposing the weak links. Take as an exhibit Lazer's manipulation of the legal definition of the term "BRAND" in "Law-Poems 7/Catch of the Day:" "BRAND. Any recorded identification mark/applied to any position on the hide of live stock/by means of heat, acid or a chemical, except/tattoo marks in the ear or/ numbers used to keep production records or records of age." The idea of branding seems central to the work of anti-definition Lazer performs in this poem. The poem touches on various ways of branding, naming and defining and in so doing stretches, defaces, reconfigures the notion of what is branded as poetry, who is branded a poet, and what can be branded law.

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By re-branding the definition of a “Brand,” Lazer marks how the law of language is no firm law at all. Just as the “Law-Poems” act to defy conventional notions of poetic and legal language, so the act of reading the “Law-Poems” defies conventional expectations about how poems are presented and how one goes about reading poetry. The layout of the “Law-Poems” in *Doublespace* forces the reader to read from the back of the book forward—more evidence of Lazer’s felonious assault on the sensibilities of the common reader of poetry.

Speaking of the common reader of poetry, how have they reacted to the “Law-Poems”? I can’t say how the common reader reacts to them, but I can say how a group of uncommon readers, readers you might not think of as readers of poetry reacted. I’m talking here about readers of and makers of the Law. Several summers ago I taught a seminar called Law and Literature for a group of appellate court judges from various states. Along with Melville’s *Billy Budd* and Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, works generally included in such seminars, I included examples of poems that incorporated legal language or that were written by lawyers: *Beowulf*, selected Shakespeare’s sonnets, lyrics by Wallace Stevens, and Hank Lazer’s “Law-Poems.” Trained to use language as literally as possible, the judges struggled with the conventional metaphoric use of law in Shakespeare, and Stevens’ wordplay (notwithstanding the fact that Stevens was an insurance company executive and lawyer). When they got to Lazer’s poems they were at first horrified, then confused at what seemed to them the completely arbitrary nature of Lazer’s appropriation of legal language. I suggested to the judges that they approach the poems as they would a densely worded contract, or a complicated statute, or any document whose meaning was contested and required interpretation. Once they set to work on the poems as problems of language that they as judges needed to unknot, they began to see things in the poems that their more traditional assumptions about language had obscured. They saw how in “Law-Poems 1,” Lazer’s quotation of a case defining a term like “redemption” re-contextualizes the legal opinion, unmoors its authority: the opinion becomes another voice in a poem where the poet’s voice seems to be competing with the voices of poets past and present. That poem cites a case worried about the “Nature of ‘redemption’” of a legal obligation. “Redemption/ . . . is a transaction/ through which the mortgagor . . ./reacquires or buys back title which may have passed/under the mortgage. Long v. King (1936).” While the legal opinion defines how to redeem or reclaim lost title to property, the poet worries about the nature of redemption of literary and poetic obligations, about the value of obeying the law of poetry: “is there a law between us some pact/we go by my promise of intelligibility/ yours of attention . . .”

Once those appellate judges understood how meaning in language might be linked to ownership and title, and how meaning might metaphorically be mortgaged, they caught on to Lazer's notion that language might also be a worthless check, that a poem, and meaning within a poem, might be "kited" by the poet, or even by the reader: "6-5-285 The holder of a worthless check,/draft or order for the payment of money shall/ have a right of action against the person who unlawfully made . . . the same/ to him." So when the poet suggests to the reader—"it is time now to open up your books/for general inspection"—they began to get the idea that Lazer was calling for a general re-examination of his own poetic practices.

We worked (and played) with the "Law-Poems" for most of an afternoon. They sometimes quarreled with Lazer's more astonishing, or maddening, juxtapositions of legal and poetic language. For example, the judges didn't quite accept as productive of meaning his conjunction of a rumination about the first person pronoun with a definition for sexual intercourse in "Law-Poems 6." Although uncomfortable with the yoking of pronouns with sex, they became more comfortable with the way Lazer's poem blurred what they had assumed to be the intrinsic authority of an opinion or statute. In other words, they decided to acquit Lazer of any accusation that he might be floating worthless checks in his "Law-Poems."

I personally, though, want to hold Lazer liable for putting the Alabama Code to better use than it has often been put in recent years. From my standpoint as a reader of law, Lazer unleashes language that has been bounded by rigid definition and a profession determined to contain the semantic field of legal language. He may not have made the law sing, but he sure did make it zing.

