

EPILOGUE

RETURNING TO THE “LAW-POEMS”

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To the best of my recollection, I wrote the “Law-Poems” in 1985. Through reading some of David Antin’s essays and talk-poems, and by looking (over many years) at a variety of examples in the visual arts—many of those examples dating from the first quarter of the twentieth-century—I became interested in writing collage-poems. One outcome of this interest was a series of ten collage-poems that became *INTER-(IR)RUPTIONS* (Generator Press, 1992)—poems which incorporate a range of layouts and materials, from baseball batting averages to critical theory, from fashion and interior design columns to research in neurophysiology. Another outcome was the “Law-Poems.” If these poems can be said to have a beginning, they began when I was evading another task: grading papers. I had taken a set of papers with me from my office to the library, telling myself that I could work better there. Any excuse to evade the task at hand. At the library, attempting to avoid people that I knew, I found a hide-out in the Government Documents section. Sitting down with the set of student papers to grade, I realized I was seated facing the volumes of the Alabama Legal Code. Rather than read and grade the papers I had brought with me, I began to browse the Code. In short order, I was writing down examples of laws and commentaries that fascinated me. Thus, began the “Law-Poems.” In returning to these poems eighteen years after I wrote them, a number of features catch my attention.

The poems strike me as simultaneously very “American,” while at the same time they were a means for me to come to grips with the rules, language, and nature of a specific locale (i.e., “Alabama”). Born and raised in California (1950-1971), I came to Alabama, by way of Virginia, in 1977. The reading required to write the “Law-Poems” and the incorporating of the Alabama Legal Code in “my” poems constituted part of an ongoing process of acclimatization and assimilation as an Alabamian. On a national or cultural scale, the law seems to me to be part of America’s sense of its own exemplariness—the city upon a hill phenomenon—with democracy and governance by laws essential to how we wish to be seen and thought of as an exemplary nation. In the poems, I try to weave this national (and local) experiment in democracy into both the laws and into my own writing.

Throughout the poem-cycle, I work on a deflationary project: letting some of the air out of the American “we-are-the-greatest-nation-on-earth” mythos, and simultaneously letting the air out of the Poet’s tendency to romanticize and bloat the roles of Poet and Poetry. A particularly pernicious American habit is our obsession with living in the present—with making it new, with being current and contemporary. Such an obsession tends to erase any informed historical perspective—as I write in the “Law-Poems,” a “mixture of amnesia and pollyanna” (“Law-Poems 1”), all of which produces a truncated and shallow version of the present.

In my specific critique of poetry’s romanticized self-inflation, I am most insistent on undercutting the assumed importance of the poet “finding his voice”—and so, the “Law-Poems” constitute an active rebuke of the tendency to equate contemporary American poetry with “personal expression.” (Of course, the “Law-Poems,” in their own way, *are* personally expressive, though that is hardly the dominant surface of the poems.) The heart of my quarrel with a version of poetic craft that insists upon the poet finding his unique or original voice gets stated in “Law-Poems 5”:

it does not begin as imitation but soon
you are in its snare having learned a
composite practice you proceed to play it as
your own composition which is not to say
that originality is what’s called for in fact
there’s no dumber project possible in some-
thing as intimately shared as language
against which voice is a smokescreen as if
to find your own voice in some way solved anything

The “Law-Poems” take up the side of language (including poetic language) as a shared, communal, social property, with the quest for some sort of idiosyncratically individualistic style or voice as a foolish mistake—a mistake, though, quite understandable in a capitalist culture bent on commodifying all products, including works of art, under the brand name of expressive individuality. The “Law-Poems” deliberately work in a different direction, seeking to incorporate different voices, styles, and uses of language—not just traditionally “poetic” language, but also the language of the law. The “Law-Poems” demonstrate what kinds of writing might take up residence in poetry; the poems deliberately involve voices that are *not* mine—both in the law sections and in “my” sections. In the “Law-Poems,” I work with the assumption that “my” voice is composed of other voices. At times, I engage in ventriloquism through other voices, including the voice (or voices) of the law

as one important avenue of expression. Such a composition seeks to re-think and re-write the “poetic.” Threading his way through this exploration of collage and other voices is T. S. Eliot, whose own poems *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, in the first quarter of the twentieth-century, provided some early versions of how such a poetry might proceed.

The law implicitly gives me a metaphor, or, even more oddly, a vocabulary to explore the contract between the reader and writer, a contract that I knew I would be straining as my writing became less conventional (and less conforming to the terms of more standard, implicit contractual arrangements between reader and writer). Hence, an interest in laws involving drafts, orders, compacts, summons, verity, safe habitation, consent, and related terms. Hence, the imagined letter of rebuke in “Law-Poems 7”; or, the admission that “it’s hard as hell to get very far away/ from the trail” (“Law-Poems 4”).

The law authorizes certain symbols and their circulation—see 32-6-54 regarding the “Heart of Dixie” (in “Law-Poems” 3). So too are poems an effort to make or explore a renewed symbolic language.

Laws regarding safe conveyance and rules of transportation parallel the experience of poetry as a mode of transport (or, as we find it summarized in “Law-Poems 3,” poetry as “a vehicle of thought”).

The key issues of collage are what goes with what, and how, and why. Indeed, any two objects or words may be juxtaposed, but not all such juxtapositions will be of equal interest nor are they equally pedagogical. In composing the “Law-Poems,” this is where I concentrated my attention: on the poetics (or ethics or heuristics) of collage as juxtaposition. I wanted “my” writing passages to enhance or amplify attention to the law. Merely to mock or ironize the law would be a minor (and easy) task. Instead, to produce greater scrutiny—heightened and engaged reading and listening—would be a better deed. I recall that when I made the final revisions for *Doublespace: Poems 1971-1989*, the book that includes the “Law-Poems,” I made one final rigorous, perhaps brutal, revision, taking the eighteen original poems and reducing them to eight final “Law-Poems.” The revision process, as I recall it, consisted of eliminating all passages and poems that did not hold my interest. In other words, I deleted those juxtapositions that, upon re-reading, did not sustain attention and did not reward re-reading.

But even the use of irony and humor in collage-poetry has a certain charge to it. I learned more about the politics of irony in 1993 when, as part of a cultural exchange trip to China, I included two of the “Law-Poems” in a selection of my poetry in a bilingual poetry book published in China. The *Law-Poem* that drew the attention of the publishers and government censors was poem #6, specifically the Alabama law 16-40-3

(c), which directs the Alabama educational system to produce a biased study of economics with an obligation to arrive at favorable conclusions about the American vs. the Soviet economy. Though the “Law-Poems” offer no direct commentary about the law, I thought it would be obvious that such directions and their enthusiastic rhetoric were ridiculous and ran counter to any notion of education as free and open inquiry. The Chinese publishers, however, removed this entire poem from the volume, fearing that if they did not do so, the Chinese censors might call into question the entire book project.

Perhaps the common denominator—for law and poetry—may be summed up in a word which has a peculiarly American resonance: accountability. The process of accounting is one that reverberates throughout American Puritan writings (especially in journals and diaries), Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, and in the less glamorous corporate scandals of the 1990s and early twenty-first century. But poetry too is perpetually on trial, called into question, and asked to account for itself and to state its value. From Plato to the present, we have been assessing the debits and credits of the spiritual, political, cultural, and rhetorical economy of poetry.

Laws and poems each stake a claim to education. The law proscribes which books, concepts, behaviors, and conclusions are permitted; the poem has its own more subtle (or not so subtle) ideological message.

Implicitly, through a few carefully placed stories and anecdotes, the “Law-Poems” ask: what is the place or status of individualized experience (particularly eccentric individual experience) within the context of the law and of history?

Implicitly, there is a tug of war for authority between these two conflicting modes of language use: the law’s passion for clarity (i.e., unambiguous) expression, and the poem’s equal passion for the *play* of language, for a language freed of its utilitarian obligations. Hence, the law’s obsessive (almost manic) habit of definition and the poem’s destabilizing (almost juvenile or childish) habit of punning and of paying attention to the *sounds* of words—“which field of words which field/dove words rich field of words this feel of words” (“Law-Poems 5”). This preference for sound and music deliberately interrupts an insistence upon the word’s sole serious duty to “convey information” and “to make a clear statement.”

Sometimes, the precise sound of the words also carries important conceptual information. The first *Law-Poem* bears the subtitle “Widow-shadow-meadow,” a chain of off-rhymed words (originally suggested to me by the philosopher Kenneth Burke when he visited Tuscaloosa in 1984). These off-rhymed words, in their demonstration of modulation, contrast, and slight difference, offer in miniature the kinds of relation-

ships and soundings that I have in mind with the juxtaposed sections of the law and “my” writing. I hope that the sounds of these words signal a reverberating or provocative relationship (of similarities and differences) that will be useful in reading the “Law-Poems.” The subtitles to the other seven “Law-Poems” send similar signals.

The poem, though, is no pristine object. Though we tend to etherealize and idealize the poem, it may (and should) be thought of also as a commodity. Thus the poem, or poetry, or the *book* of poems “rhymes” with other commodities addressed, protected, and regulated by the law: cows, livestock, baby rabbits, and baby chicks. These latter two, unlike poems, may not even be given away, so strong and irresistible is their beautiful seductive allure.

We live in a world of *over*-bombardment. We are saturated with voices and images: “a thin almost invisible fibre optic wire for/ transmitting light or voices cables buried all over the place” (“Law-Poems 8”). In the “Law-Poems,” I try to make a few more of these cables—along with their mechanisms for standardization and regulation—more audible and visible.

Of the two forces—law and poetry—isn’t it possible to think that the law may be *more* impassioned, *more* out of control, more willful in its headlong desire for and its *insistence* upon precision? Isn’t such a goal, such a governing desire, precisely what we might call a grandiose dream?

And really, has “poetic language” truly been kept above, beside, or separate from other more overtly manipulative language uses such as advertising, greeting cards, political speeches, and TV shows? David Antin, in a TV interview, referred to poetry as “an advertisement for nothing.” But don’t poems at least advertise *themselves* as worthy of your trust and the investment of your time?

So it *is* (still) time to open up our books!

