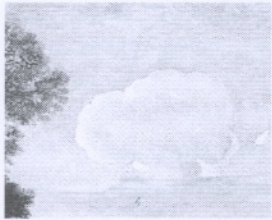


ABRADE AND WRITHE VERBALLY

Bahaar Ahsan



"Mourning draws on transcendent but representable justice, which makes the suffering of immediate experience visible and speakable. When completed, mourning returns the soul to the city, renewed and reinvigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city. The mourner returns to negotiate and challenge the changing inner and outer boundaries of the soul and of the city; she returns to their perennial anxiety."

— Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes The Law*

Yielding what's lent by distributed sound: shaping up to be a selection between one of four. Sounding what's given and the city's hard corners. Speech can be pruned for participation or it can concatenate. Patient only of our own infrangibility sharpened. For his death to be an allegory and a tight one which extends and slopes distributed sound.

Point of conduct: given, with a human face. In the mood very facile and fixed by metonym. Sucked for holding environment. Bring it into its sucked state astonishment epochal...

and with a human face. Glossed line would be the weakest possible attribution. Gulpd the assembly frantic traction. I looked and I saw the gulping, slowly.

In her book *Mourning Becomes the Law*, the British philosopher Gillian Rose describes to us a Poussin painting which depicts a scene taken from Plutarch's *Life of Phocion*, wherein the wife of Phocion gathers her dead husband's ashes outside the walls of Athens. Phocion was a pupil of Plato and an Athenian statesman regarded for his vir-

tue, his command over speech, and his inviolable, sometimes antagonistic, commitment to civic good. After being accused of treason and killed unjustly by those in power, his body was burned and his ashes left outside the walls of Athens. In an Antigone-type move, Phocion's widow left the city to furtively gather the discarded ashes and give them a proper burial. In Poussin's rendering of the scene, Phocion's wife is foregrounded, crouching to gather her dead husband's ashes, accompanied by another woman who keeps guard, while the buildings of Athens stand tall in the background. But Rose cautions against a reading of the painting which makes the city's architectural order stand in metonymically for unjust rule, or public ill, that is opposed to private love or in dividual good, represented by Phocion's wife and her clandestine mourning.¹ In an elegant formulation, Rose reframes the mourning of Phocion's wife as an act which belongs to the city and engenders an enlivened and ensouled relationship to politics and to public life. I am moved by Gillian Rose's idea of mourning not as a privately introspective psychic process but rather as work that is just that: work; inevitably social and politically animate. Mourning has a capacity to bring one further into relation. Mourning is what preserves our ability to imagine a just city and to act toward such an ideal.

Rose places great emphasis on the inauguration of such a process. Like Freud before her, Rose warns that when a loss is unnamed and unrepresented the work of mourning can not be inaugurated, leaving the would-be mourner in a melancholic and politically inanimate state

¹ It is amusing if not important to note that the reading against which Rose's argument is formulated doesn't come from a high brow art historical text but rather from a less than five minute long segment of the BBC television program *Sister Wendy's Odyssey*, which features a charming nun wandering the Walker Art Gallery offering interpretations of paintings by the great masters.

of interminable suffering. But how to inaugurate the kind of mourning Rose describes? How to name a loss so that it can belong to and animate one's civic and social life, while honoring that part of loss which is necessarily interior, private, and even inarticulable? We might consider that poetry is uniquely suited for such an inauguration: its forms socialize grief.

I am not the first person to point out poetry's capacity to sublimate immense and even unbearable feelings into strange forms and phonemic pleasure. Poetry has given itself some space from the indexicality that so much of language is bound to, and it is exactly this non-indexical way of wielding language that can cut through an experience like loss. I am thinking in particular of modes of experimental writing which produce what the late Lyn Hejinian calls *open text*. This writing uses form to articulate the raw material of experience while making it more, not less, vital, potent, and unstable. Language that is non-indexical can inaugurate mourning without ever having to violate through naming that most private part of grief.

Almost a year ago to the day at the time of writing, after having witnessed a death by overdose, I went over to the Brooklyn cat-sit of a poet friend and then-lover. I wanted to be held. A couple hours into my visit, unprepared to handle such an urgent feeling and stumbling in his uncertainty, he put on *Roaratorio*, a John Cage piece which utilizes text from *Finnegan's Wake*. It's a comical move in hindsight, but Cage's modernist play with sound and meaning touched me. The text rose to the occasion of my grief not by offering a recognition or ordering of my experience but by allowing me to stay in the space of non-meaning that follows loss, and my poet lover kept me company there. Poets play fast and loose with representation, and this makes it possible to confront intense affect without fixing or overdetermining it.

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Once inaugurated, poetry's mourning can happen in the social world that poets inhabit. Here I am thinking of writing groups, friendships between poets, and of course the most obvious scene of social life in poetry: the reading. Surely I am reticent to assign an outsized social or political import to poetry readings, but I have to acknowledge that these gatherings are undeniably of the city. The social life of poetry keeps time in the lives of poets. My life and the lives of many poets I know are organized around the public life of poetry, our sense of where and when we are comes from participation in this public life. In places like New York and the Bay Area, poets have produced self-historicizing traditions and communities, with frequent public readings at the center, which guarantee the movement of the poem from the often private act of its writing to a more

civically minded social space. The space of the reading has a capacity to be politically animated, wielded toward this representable justice Rose writes about. We've seen this in the months following October 7th, as readings have been a space for base building and public calls for accountability in line with organizing in support of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) and Palestinian resistance in general. Mourning through poetry helps us resist the temptation to respond to loss by retreating into private, apolitical, and antisocial life. This capacity to mourn through poetry of course requires the cultivation of a vital public and political poetic life, one which articulates its political commitments and resists the temptation to retreat into private life. It requires that our poetic communities be equipped to tend to the city's "perennial anxiety".

Twisting on a fine tip and abrade and writhe verbally, like a drunken horse, shingled in ice. Saturation of the proof and negative in finely ground. Seeing so much of myself outside of myself: I am talking about blood.

What could be read as parallel if one went West to meet it. But he *couldn't* come, for fledgling rasp or agon or something to be said about style. Altercation for brush, interest taken out against myself—my low regard for private abrasion. I know it isn't parable because it doubles and migrates, a bird with a just sharpened beak. Sharpened to ring. Where French habit is sap that stretches what I procure.

When it's writhing, it is not allegory or fish judged by its freshness. Twisting on the finer points. Milked dry while toppling, skates embarrassment. Differently shaded in arch swing down to meet in love and hoard and suffer, bring romance along with it.

Milk boil stare which precipitates some outbreak brushed back over. Only the outbreak is watching paint dry and taking the arched pulse.



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