

**8b~Benjamin Hollander to Joshua Schuster.****“the third term”**

Dear Joshua Schuster,

If “poetry is vigilance,” if “it makes us wonder ... who is looking after us and into us,” perhaps we can call this tension: the vigilance of the third term. Perhaps we can call on its *attention*.

You ask me if, “through [my] poetry and [my] ability to understand, well, Celanese,” “the poetry we’ve known can continue in this future,” a future of “the three superpowers (money, media, technology)” and their triumphant legitimacy. I would like to say: in order to continue, the poetry we’ve known must *come from* this future. Perhaps it is the future of these three superpowers or perhaps three virtual others. We cannot know and it may not matter the particular form of a future *egonomy* to which we will have become so used – “grown too used to itself” – that we will not even recognize how much of our conversion or “redemption” we see in it, in “our place in the sun” – the law to come. I would like to say – with Rilke: “We cannot say who [or what] has come, perhaps we will never know, but many signs indicate that the future enters into us ... in order to transform itself in us long before it happens.” Poetry is perhaps one of these “many signs” which, in its *attention*, will assume the care of this intimate elsewhere: the third term.

In our other correspondence about this “third term,” you have said it has a loaded significance, so I should say where we are not, which you already know. We are not – here – within a Hegelian tradition where opposites (either/or) can be reconciled through a transcendent third term. And we are not – here – in that other dialectic (both/and) which would leave these opposites to be equally held together in the mind in an order which affirms them both but keeps them unresolved. And we are not – here – partly because we are asking what happens when the two terms in a binary argument are not able to anticipate “the third term,” as I would like to call it. Here, I should say, there appears Levinas’ alien challenge to Hamlet’s condition, and it asks: how can Hamlet’s Being possibly see the forest-for-the-trees? How can he anticipate a *dis-interested-ness* outside the order of “to be or not to be” in order – because it is out of order – to assume or even consider another option, a radical responsibility for the other, an “otherwise than Being,” a third term?

Imagine then – and at the risk of the kind of incomprehension which would soon enough find Hamlet and his audience out the theatre doors demanding a full refund – a way out – and the poem, on the run, needs this way out – which takes the form of a presence hovering above the “as-it-is,” above the conflict – and if there is perpetual conflict then it is as-it-is in our minds – a presence in the poem which makes us “wonder ... who is looking after us and into us” because it is mindful of the still-already-there while opening and inhabiting a space for the still-to-come – from a distance – in order – because it is out of order – to displace the recurrence of the same, often mundane terms of the argument, of “everything” which is “already here.” Still-already-there and still-to-come: it is addressed – or it is not addressed – in the second part of George Oppen’s “A Language of New York”\*:

Unable to begin  
At the beginning, the fortunate  
Find everything already here. They are shoppers,  
Choosers, judges...And here the brutal  
Is without issue, a dead end.

They develop  
Argument in order to speak, they become  
unreal, unreal, life loses  
solidity, loses extent, baseball’s their game  
because baseball is not a game  
but an argument and difference of opinion  
makes the horse races. They are ghosts that endanger

One’s soul. There is change  
In an air

That smells stale, they will come to the end  
 Of an era  
 First of all peoples  
 And one may honorably keep  
 His distance  
 If he can.

Can there only be silence for a "peoples" who can only "develop argument in order to speak?" Or does Oppen's poem say – because it does not say – that there is hope – but is it for us – in an art that increases the possibility of an ethics which comes to us from a distance yet is so familiar a part of our galaxy: a third term: how does it come, how does it appear, how is it realized?

In another Oppen poem, "The Forms of Love," "it" is realized: "it" appears just as that and so much more, and it does so without increasing or decreasing the possibility of where an ethics of the poem might come from. This is not – here – Oppen's "concern" – poems, it should be clear, have multiple concerns, multiple attentions, multiple responsibilities beyond the ethical – even as he shapes or unravels "The Forms of Love"\*:

Parked in the fields  
 All night  
 So many years ago,  
 We saw  
 A lake beside us  
 When the moon rose.  
 I remember

Leaving that ancient car  
 Together. I remember  
 Standing in the white grass  
 Beside it. We groped  
 Our way together  
 Downhill in the bright  
 Incredible light

Beginning to wonder  
 Whether it could be lake  
 Or fog  
 We saw, our heads  
 Ringing under the stars we walked  
 To where it would have wet our feet  
 Had it been water.

I can only follow the narrative of this poem and wonder if Oppen knew where these lovers were going, or if the poem has taken him to a place where the references he has marked along the way – "that ancient car," "the white grass" – give way to "the bright / Incredible light" which blurs where exactly this couple is standing only to reinforce their attention to each other. I wonder. There seems to be an unforeseen surplus of care beyond measure – in this case so transforming an experience that one wonders whether the "forms" of love can hold it – which the word "it" realizes at the end of the poem. It seems as if "it," which could be "lake" or "fog," is neither the "fog" or the "water" which "wet[s] our feet." Or: it seems as if "it" could be both. Or something else. I wonder. I can only be sure that "it" puts into question the memory of where the couple is standing, of "everything" which is "already here." One could say: it seems as if the memory of "it" is still to arrive. One could say: "it" is still-already-there and still-to come: a third term.

I thought – you know – to represent the poetry which is realized through the vigilance of this third term – a way out as a way in to "unlock the events of the century" – in the figure of a publicly engaged extraterrestrial who knew everything about us but was still very much an innocent, curious about what made us tick: a figure who would not only move us beyond the terms of the argument but, as you have written me elsewhere, would "instantaneously collapse all the old arguments," and, "even if benevolent,

would likely destroy what we call the terms of humanity.” And, even if we could not understand its way of speaking because we were so caught up in our own, we might still understand “where it was coming from.” Still, as you have written me elsewhere, this “Being” sounds too messianic – recalling Heidegger’s “only a God can save us.” Your representation is truer: “the alien who shows up dressed in 17<sup>th</sup> century courtly wear.” Such a figure would understand, in your words, “how close, how prior, the future is. The best poets’ futurism lies in this sense of ‘to come’ which is linked to a sense of history.” Yes, in order to continue, the poetry we’ve known must *come from* this future. On this path, it can mark the way out as a way in to “unlock the events of the century” and engage the politics of our moment – and here, of course, the future is also our moment.

In the much beleaguered and often reductive talk today about the poem’s representation of the political, there is an opening here to address the politics of our moment as the still-already-there and the still-to-come – from a distance – instance of the poem. Like you, “I am wondering where this language can take us,” where it can come from, where “this concern for concern can develop.” You write that Levinas has said that “Inertia is the grand law of being, but a human being can surge above that and disturb it. For a long while? For a moment? The human is a scandal in being.” A remarkable line which makes me wonder about the instance and insistence of the poem as if it were a moment of this “human”: can this instance, I wonder, also “surge above” and “disturb” “the grand law of being,” its as-it-is, its “inertia,” in order – because it is out of order – to be “a scandal in being?” This is, I believe, one responsibility the poem could stake for itself and for us in our egonomies and our eras of reasoned retributive “justices”: a poem to disturb, to interrupt these “justices”:

But justice itself cannot make us forget the origin of the right or the uniqueness of the other, henceforth covered over by the particularity and generality of the human. It cannot abandon that uniqueness to political history, which is engaged in the determinism of powers, reasons of state, totalitarian temptations and complacencies. It awaits the voices that will recall, to the judgments of the judges and statesmen, the human face dissimulated beneath the identities of citizens. Perhaps these are the “prophetic voices.”

An anachronism that may bring a smile to the lips! But prophetic voices probably mean the possibility of unforeseen acts of kindness of which the *I* is still capable in uniqueness preceding all genus or freed from all genera. They are sometimes heard in the cries that rise up from the interstices of politics and that, independently of official authority, defend “the rights of man”... sometimes in the songs of the poets; sometimes simply in the press or in the public forum of the liberal states, in which freedom of expression is ranked as the first freedom and justice is always a revision of justice and the expectation of a better justice. (Levinas, “Uniqueness”)

For the poem to be heard “in the cries that rise up from the interstices of [the] politics” of our moment “and that, independently of official authority, defend ‘the rights of man’,” it could take what Celan called the step “beyond human nature ... yet not devoid of human characteristics,” the concerned step which could expose the scandal of the human in being. Yet this scandal would not be a source of disgrace. It would be a violation – a violation to displace “our place in the sun” when the sun stands still – which could grace the propriety, the order, “the very interestedness of [our] being.” Here – and being aware that *in the days the judges ruled* the violation to *come after you* and *act as next of kin* could be the most acutely political response to our moment – the scandal of the poem – as if it were a moment of the human – would be that, across its measure, through its rite of return, it could yield a surplus of concern which goes beyond “fair play”: a third term.

I sometimes tell a story about a father and his nine-year-old son, both of whom have a history of reacting to each other with a heavily invested – one might almost say self-righteous – sense of “fair play”:

One evening a father comes home to find his older, normally unruffled teenage daughter losing patience with her younger brother. More than several times she tells him to “shut up.” The son snaps at his father: “Punish her. She’s not allowed to say that to me. You’d punish me if I said that to her. Send her to her room!” The father, of course, knows that the age difference between these two makes it apparent that the same rules don’t necessarily apply and that one can – in these matters – withstand and handle one (older) child’s “outbursts” more judiciously than the other’s – with a secret diplomacy, of sorts. So he asks his daughter to rehearse the preceding sibling drama, and she then offers a reasonable explanation for her actions. The father listens, nods, and calmly tells her to please be a little more patient with her brother – he is, after all, “only the baby.” And so it ends, yet the boy will have none of it:

“Punish her, dad! She’s just not allowed to say “shut up” to me. Send her to her room.” So the father, needing to do something to assuage his now distracted son, winks at his daughter and, with suppressed laughter, in a pure moment of theater between them, says: “O.K – You go to your room and don’t come out until I tell you!” The daughter, smiling at the father when her brother has been looking the other way, obliges. But the boy senses what’s up: “You didn’t mean it,” he lashes out, “you didn’t mean it when you punished her!” He runs to his room in tears and slams the door behind him.

A few minutes later the door opens and the boy, his tears now so overblown that the eyes look as if they’ve contracted a rash, rushes at his father with his raised arms about to strike against his chest. The boy is now screaming: “You’re not being fair, you’re not being fair, you’re not being fair!” In disbelief and in a parallel rage at the way things are spinning out of his control, the father stiffens to protect himself and, as he is about to stop the approaching blows and angrily grab his son’s fists, he looks into his eyes and drops his arms, extends them, and lets the child almost slump into an unguarded embrace. He does not plan this, he does not mean to do this, and he does not know how or why both their helpless rages have, in an instant, surrendered to this helpless embrace. All he knows is that the tears have stopped and that the boy, in a whimpering calm, has slouched against his body.

A few minutes pass and the father quietly asks his son why he was so upset. The boy repeats what he said earlier: “Because if I had said “shut up” to her, you would have really punished me. It’s just not fair. I mean, if I can’t say “shut up,” why can she? You wouldn’t let me do that. I’d be breaking one of the rules.” The father listens and then asks his son: “So what are the rules about how you should speak to me? I mean: are you allowed to yell at me and raise your fists against me.” “No,” says the boy, “if I did that, you’d really punish me.” “So when you were about to attack me a few moments ago because of how unfair you thought I was being, was it fair, was it right, what I did to you in return?”

Perhaps to protect his sense of “fair play,” the son does not respond. Or, perhaps, the young boy has no way to respond.

I tell this story because I wonder where, as with “the young boy,” such a rupture in the order of things can take us even as we, like “the son,” desperately desire to protect the rightness of that “order” to the very end: to defend “our place in the sun” when the sun stands still. Perhaps another kind of justice intervenes here in a clearing where one’s identity is exterior to what can be calculated on the scales or motivated by the *inter-estedness* with which our will and reason determine “the rights of man.” Like the father’s “unforeseen act” which, in the end, both suspends and supplements his “right of return,” this kind of justice would require our attention to the way out as a way in to develop “a concern for concern,” “as if,” Levinas writes, “in going toward the other, I were reunited with myself,” [or] “as if the distancing of the I drew me closer to myself, discharged of the full weight of my identity.” Like you, in your letter, it makes me wonder, this “concern for concern,” this kind of attention, “this question of vigilance,” it makes me wonder how similar can be the effects of a poem which cannot anticipate the surplus of care-beyond measure – it will produce, it will stake. It makes me wonder what is – exactly – at stake.

In your letter, you write that my “poetry is perhaps the most paranoid poetry written today” and that, “suffice it to say,” you are “paranoid about the lack of paranoia in most poetry.” You equate this paranoia with the desire to see beyond the systems and progressions, with a poetry which is “watching over those who watch over us.” Yes, I agree. However, what I would like to know is what happens to a poem when its “beyond measure” keys its fracture, its “what-will-happen-next,” its “fear-to-be-orphaned,” “its alien-in-the-native register,” its “where will this language take us,” its “concern for concern?” I’m not paranoid,” a man accused of paranoia once justified to his daughter, “I’m just being *careful*.” Perhaps, in this condition, and where others see no apparent danger, the poem – as if it were a moment of the human – commits a crime of *over-attention* because it desires to know too much about what it cannot know until, in a curious irony which would remove the smile from our lips, its vigilance becomes a curse on its caring. Yes, it looks out “after you” but in a frequency beyond measure, beyond understanding, like the distorted syllables of a lone synthesized voice guarding a house and desperately trying to compose itself in order to call the police on a prowler. It over-scales its watch. It becomes suspect. Its one witness is taken as no witness. It believes “it gives” for the others but only guards the grounds of its own Being there *in order to constantly* rehearse *the Same* – danger, only to be sure, to be sure, there is no danger. It may be charged with spying, *beyond-signing*, occluding, *auto-affection*. It may be perceived as an *overbearing outcast vigilance* which believes it is taking the way out – and the poem, on the run, needs this way out – as a way in to watch over “those who watch over us,” but is unable “to see what we need to see ... to locate and preserve moments of humanity” because it has too much turned in on itself, being “beside itself,” on the

margins of the margins which it can – rightfully, sadly – claim as a center, its concentration or heightened attention a form of anxious protectiveness which ultimately rushes ahead of – detached from – the humanity it cares for and hopes to shelter. Its panic for the world outruns its place in it. In this state, looking back from this condition – and facing those who “have the heaviest hands in what looks to be the outbuilding of the future” – what does it risk in being this *outcast vigilance*? What does it stake? “No one listens to poetry,” Jack Spicer wrote, perhaps because where it is there to develop a “concern for concern,” where it cares too much, where its *over-attention* calls us on our lack of *attention*, its voice recalls “our” incomprehension at its demands, as if we were asking it out of frustration, out of “progression,” out of our law, out of “our place in the sun”: “how much do you want of us” or “who are you to put us in question,” like a fugitive moving in the light across borders, not away from but towards his accusers, a fugitive marked only to witness the other’s response to his mark, his “crime,” his sentence, his fear, his care, his scandal, his wandering, his still-to-come in a clearing. “As if,” Levinas writes in his reflection on Celan, “as if the utopian were not the lot of some accursed wandering, but rather the clearing in which man shows himself: ‘in light of u-topia ... And human beings? And all living creatures? ... In this light’.”

In this light, from this future, before this fugitive, who will show up?

After You,  
Benjamin Hollander  
January 2001

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