

An Open Letter of Poetics to Steve Farmer (revised for the CIPM Newsletter Sept 99):

A letter like this one begins with an apology. I agree with much of what you say and yet I feel whatever I say will be inadequate to articulate the hours we spend in a condition of poetry, or I find it difficult tonight to separate myself from my work and my work with the world. It is an unruly drama of desire and its depiction. A shape, or a sound, a sentence to compose what is and what isn't. A circulation that travels an ellipse; sometimes it wobbles and then breaks and from that a poem will begin to take form. A figure announcing itself beside itself. It needn't be fancy: not unlike a dog barking at its shadow, confusing its own sound as the other's. Or a solitaire in front of the television speaking back to it out of habit. A mother singing in the nursery. A stoner at the light talking to himself with the radio blasting "it's like this and like that and like this and a." I balk at description. It fails me just now. I question even this rhetoric.

We were talking recently about "aporia," the difficulty of trying to say what you do at the same time that you mistrust the form in which you have to express it. When you have a sense that things are in free play, that things (the context, the movement of the poem) are more intuitive than outlined, it's difficult to name what is happening. To work from poem to poem, from book to book. I distrust the notion of a signature style. What I'm talking about doesn't have to do with style or mode but something like what Spicer tried to articulate—that there's something at the moment of creation that's illegible and unknowable. So it's hard to know how to talk about it.

As I listen to a poem unfold in my ear it becomes clear to me that for every line I hear there is another one or more lines resonating in the same field of meaning. Listening is everything in poetry: to the silences, the pauses, shifts in syntax, tone and content. Always for me a poem is about tracking what is not said and the particular place I can go to know what that is by what is stated. As if there are always two poems in my ear. What amazes me is how specific the "other" or phantom poem can be, and it occurs to me how language, when arranged, manipulated, built, or what you will, is saying both readings—together and separate. I imagine that the lyric is next to my life, but isn't my life at the same time that it is real. Think of breath on a mirror. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I can record this "other" poem and make it my own. But mostly it is a fragment felt and struggled with. I find myself left to develop the ruins of what did not come through. These hours spent listening, however, are what I believe to be the exceptional experience of poetry. The same way nightingales inhabit Romanticism and are unsupported by any real concrete image, "birds as words" Zukofsky would say. They are an experience in the mind both heard and as Cavalcanti would suggest, "tis felt I say." To "risk vulnerability," as you say. Which is why irony, I agree, can "read like a crutch," in that it generates a paradoxically

stable (static) reading. And too often it's dismissive. And while it's sexy to be ironic (right), it's not altogether interesting anymore, like saying "I'm an avant-garde poet." So? The problem with trying to risk something, articulate something larger, is that it's bound to failure, and the thing about taking on something stable is that it's bound to succeed but it's ultimately unsatisfying. It's more complicated to use intuitive thought "almost successfully". Like you, I am fascinated by the varieties of emotive experience.

To speak to our interest in troubadour models: on my end *Artificial Heart* initially began as "A Textbook of Chivalry" for which I wrote a number of formal poems—a villanelle, a sestina, etc. The canzon "Decoration Day" is the only one that remains in the collection. It was a way for me to do my "homework" as a poet, to reach into the masterbox and help get me started toward a conversation, a poem. I was interested in various notions of trobar—which simply means "invention."

trobar leu—easy song ("How to Care for a Small Bird")

trobar ric—rich song ("A Textbook of Chivalry")

trobar clus—closed song, or hermetic song ("Zero Elegy"). Also, there is the

"planctus"—which is a lament, a grieving song, ("The De-evolution of the Father," "Mourning & Materiality," "Caption," or "From a Field Glass"; all of them voicing a kind of inexplicable celebration of survival as well). For me the figure of the planctus could be represented as the grieving vowel, 'O,' the lyric enunciation of desire, or the zero of the fool.

In one sense my work recuperates the concerns of the 11th-century troubadours—their oblique display of love, politics, statehood, and grief. But, as the book developed I became increasingly interested in mixing ancient and contemporary textures. As a result, the folktale became more attractive—with its flexible narrative gestures, trenchant intertextuality, transformational space, asymmetric groupings of events—which gave me a way to recognize how I work—and I began to see it as a dynamic model for contemporary lyric practice in an age of the "mix," sampling, and collage.

As for my poems that come out of other work, I imagine these poems behaving much in the same way the folk tradition works. Or the way John Cage's "Cheap Imitation" works in relation to Eric Satie's "Socrate"; or for that matter how Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice" is a version of Johnny Cash's "Understand Your Man." Likewise one could probably find an antecedent to the Cash song. Or the way David Byrne was writing 60's soul songs in the late 70's in a new cultural

context. There are endless models, and being receptive to this enfolding is one way to create community, context, ground (in the musical sense as well). The new work isn't a replacement of its predecessor, but exists along with it, beside it, in consort with it. None of the work stands alone but it also doesn't depend on it either. Even Da Vinci had a "master" (Verrocchio); Dickinson too. I want the field of my work to also include other works, displacing context to create narrative, emotional, psychological, and formal turbulence. I think of these gestures of narrative disturbance, this quoting out of context, this bending and borrowing and blending of tradition as musical notations to create depth, emotive effect, even sincerity.

But I wanted to resist the positivism of canned sincerity, and so I started experimenting with negation as a way to say something new. For instance, I discovered that to use a negative simile—to say something is "unlike" something else—brings into focus the gap between the two things rather than the objects themselves. Not in ideas or things but in the space between them. It creates a field around a body and makes that space (song) palpable ("makes space around a toy majestic").

When I moved to California I was in the middle of writing *Artificial Heart* as well as in the middle of working on Jack Spicer's lectures on poetics. In the midst of this work I began reading a remarkable book by Isabel Fonseca entitled *Bury Me Standing*, which is a history and a linguistic mapping of the Eastern European gypsy culture. The model this book provided came at a perfect moment to bridge both of my projects. As Spicer recognized, poetry is a subculture in much the same way that the gypsies remain a subculture—or, for that matter, the way the troubadours were a subculture within the larger court system. But the most important aspect of this comparison is that the gypsies actively maintain themselves as a marginal culture; it's what gives them their identity and their way of life. This is of course also true for poets—we have our own codes that give meaning and a context to our social and textual activities.

You mention my poem "Pierced" which (like "Another Day on the Pilgrimage" and "Ding Repair") is, among other things, a meditation on the "long road" (the lungo drom). In her book, Fonseca describes the lungo drom as a nostalgia for utopia or (as she translates it) "a return to nowhere." Home is established only in the act of singing, the moment of song. I read this return as an evolutionary movement, the way Zeno's arrow has multiple sites on its arc. I am interested in nostalgia but I would renovate its use: it's not just a return to home (or origins, the texts that inform me) but a survival of home (a process of individuation). For an artist it means to survive the poems, texts that compose one—the awesome ground (power) of Modernism. We are its children, much in the way the ground for the troubadours was Classical literature. And there's

an exhaustion to this process, this movement because there is no actual site to return to. As you put it: a movement “from a desire to critique/dismantle to a desire to rebuild.” How to at once accommodate the gorgeous traditions of poetry and the fact that we are also simply “folk”? To build a comprehensive music.

I guess what I’m after is closer to an environment, an experience of structure that collects in me. As you said about my work, “the diastolic nature” of it, “filling up and emptying out again.” This condition of openness also figures a constant grappling with absence and lack. In a sense all my work is about this reckoning and displacement, enacted through an experience of lyric possession. A form of animism, but in it I would replace essentialism or soul with aesthetics or a core that is empty, a kind of holding open to allow poetic tendencies of cadence, form, tone, coloring to move through a flexible core—a force that is both a construction of self and an emptying of self—not autobiographical but autographical—flexible to accommodate figures, things, voices, documentation; to combine, build and dissolve being, boundaries—to somehow let the poem become itself.

Yours,
Peter

PG; in conversation with Steve Farmer at the Philly Talks; March 1, 1999 (revised Sept. 99)