

Liberties Poets Take: Towards a Verbal Pedagogy of Revolt

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Abstract

Poetry has always been the tool of resistance for writers who seek to assert the voice of freedom against those who attempt to deny it to human beings. Its brevity and concise nature have often been associated with the sharp and surprising effect of weapons. In this paper I argue that of all genres, (resistance) poetry is the one that subversively grants a license to itself, that licenses itself and takes liberties for the defense of liberty. It is constantly preoccupied with innovative ways for infringing the seemingly rigid rules set up by despotic power. The liberties that a poet takes in recreating language, in transforming it from within, and the poetic licenses which are taken in defiance of the conventions of verse writing must be seen as emblematic of the essence of resistance poetry in particular and poetry in general which by nature is based on challenging all norms and standards. Resistance poets and the so-called poets of witness have therefore always associated their aesthetic modes with these liberties which they take at the level of diction, grammar and logic, a gesture which hints to how language must be radically changed or per(sub)verted in order to alter the vision of people with a view to liberating them at a subsequent stage. Poetry then offers the best pedagogy of revolt, one that drives forward the people in their rhythmic march towards what Jacques Derrida calls the 'arrivant' or the different future. I will take the liberty in this paper to start with license and end it with liberty or freedom or emancipation. This is because aesthetics and politics can never be split.

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Introduction

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton embodies the writer's daring tendency to take liberties as he departs from the Biblical text to create an imaginative world where he fills the gaps and reappropriates the narratives of the Old Testament and the New one. The poet claims that he invokes the Holy Spirit rather than the Greek Muses to inspire him to narrate the story of the Bible covering the Prelapsarian and Postlapsarian periods. Invoking the Divine muse is another way of covering or justifying the poetic licenses which the poet would take throughout the twelve chapters of the Epic. The reason for this is that any invocation of the Greek muses will bind the poet and compel him to follow the classical rules of composing the epic whereas invoking the Holy Ghost, a strategy never used before, is liberatory because it comes without any formal tradition behind it except the impetus to comply with the religious doctrines of the Bible. Milton finds in the Holy Ghost a voice that allows him to re-create the space of the epic in his own way and constitutes a point of reference that is self-validating.

Divine Authority

Milton thus gives the example of the first poet who takes his license from a Divine authority to write a story that is literary. This license which comes in the shape of an invocation is nothing but another way of seeking a justification for the many transgressions of the events as they have been recounted in the *Bible*. *Paradise Lost* also violates the order of the Biblical events and using the Hebraic Midrashi strategy of gap filling, Milton coins a new language to describe the story of genesis genealogically, i.e. from the worldly perspective of Seventeenth century England, its language and its history.

Poetic license in this paper refers to different practices: taking the liberty to violate the established rules or norms of language, infringing the social stratifications and political dogmas, rewriting the space delineating the roles traditionally assigned to

individuals and communities alike. In this sense, poetic license refers here to violations occurring both at the level of form and content, at the political as well as at the aesthetic level.

Why is it that the word license is mostly related to poetry and not to drama and fiction? Why is it called poetic? Should we consider this license as merely referring to poetry more than to prose? Or should we also call it poetic license even as it refers to prose writing? Perhaps the 'poetic' in 'poetic license' should not be seen not as a mere adjective that refers to the nature of the license. Rather, it should be viewed as a license derived from poetry, as if poetry itself granted this license. As will be seen later in this paper in the analysis of Frank Chipasula's poem Manifesto on "Ars Poetica", the fact that one has chosen the path of poetic writing contains in itself a license to speak, to create, to rewrite, to speak the truth about the self and about the other, about injustice and inequality, about oppression.

Who grants the poet this license to speak the truth to power and this license to 'veer' from the established lines of writing verse? Of the three basic literary genres, poetry is the one that is most bound by rules yet it is the one that mostly perverts these rules. Prose is naturally based on exposing facts through a detailed focus on space and time which provide the context and the background. Prosaic literature does violate expectations, but the focus is placed more on the historical dimension. Drama is more concerned with the mimetic model and is therefore more spatial as an art form. Poetry, having nothing else to offer, deprived as it is of the temporal and contextual aspects, is more focused on violating the word, and releasing different connotations from its seeds. It is for this reason that poetry becomes more self-reflexive than other literary genres. Because of the many limitations imposed on poetry as a genre, including rhythm, rhyme, musicality, assonance, consonance, and the constraints of form such as the vertical shape, the poem becomes dense in its lexical tenor and the

word itself becomes a locus that resonates and vibrates with meaning.

All licenses are normally granted by a licensor to a licensee, by a body that is superior which authorizes an inferior body to act in accordance within a certain framework and in accordance with the terms set from the start. Of all licenses granted to anyone, only poetic license is granted by language itself; i.e. by poetry as Ralph Waldo Emerson defined it¹. It is a license that is granted by the institution of poetry itself, an institution that authorizes itself, a self-regulatory framework that abides by certain rules only to flout them. Poetry is the most paradoxical of all modes of writing. It creates conventions such as the sonnet form, rhythm, rhyme schemes, verse in the sense of vertical writing, and then subverts them by granting to poets the license to violate the very rules which they made. Such is the logic of freedom. It is similar to the logic of stylistic deviations. There must always exist a rule that the poet will then break and bend. Freedom cannot exist without the existence of a law. As Charles Peguy poetically demonstrated in his poem "Freedom" where God is the speaker who addresses Man and explains how freedom is meaningless unless one is free to transgress the law:

Because if I am always holding
them up, if I hold them up too often,
They will never learn how to swim
by themselves.
But if I don't hold them up just at the
right moment,
Perhaps those poor children will
swallow more water than is healthy
for them.
Such is the difficulty, and it is a
great one.
And such is the doubleness itself,
the two faces of the problem.
On the one hand, they must work

out their salvation for themselves.
That is the rule.
It allows of no exception. Otherwise
it would not be interesting. They
would not be men.
Now I want them to be manly, to be
men, and to win by themselves
Their spurs of knighthood.
On the other hand, they must not
swallow more water than is healthy
for them,
Having made a dive into the
ingratitude of sin.
Such is the mystery of man's
freedom, says God,
And the mystery of my government
towards him and towards his
freedom.
If I hold him up too much, he is no
longer free
And if I don't hold him up
sufficiently, I am endangering his
salvation.
Two goods in a sense almost
equally precious.

It is in this sense that freedom or liberty is to be understood. It is a form of negotiation that survives as long as the rules are well demarcated. The poet is successful only when he masters the rules of his predecessors and knows well how to transgress them. The aim is not just to convey meaning in a disturbing way but to drive the audience to experience what Derrida calls 'the impossible'. If the poet does not explore the impossible, he remains within the fabric of the law. That law which he has himself had to respect before he took the liberty to infringe it.

Sometimes the poet sets up his own law and pattern only to transgress it at the end. This is what

¹In 'The Poet', Emerson develops the thesis that language was all poetic in its origin, but as poetry became overused and fossilized, it turned into language.

stylisticians call 'internal deviation' or 'second-order deviation'. The following poem by Robert Frost clearly illustrates this strategy:

The Rose is a rose
And was always a rose
But the theory now goes
That the apple's a rose
And the pear and so's
The plum I suppose
The Dear only knows
What will next prove a rose.
You of course are a rose
But were always a rose.

It is clear how the poet first sets a pattern that condemns the excessive use of metaphors till they become trite and insignificant. Having used an exclusionary rhetoric that disqualifies the use of such metaphorical vehicles as 'rose', the poet is in the end left with a measure to foreground his beloved as the only one that is worth of the title of 'rose'. Poetry always needs an Archimedean point from which it departs. Sometimes this Archimedean point is mentioned, but in general it is not. And it is the reader who must supply that norm from which the text departs.

The poet takes the liberty to challenge, deterritorialise (Deleuze), (re)name and create new significations (Emerson). The poet does not take a license to destabilize words, grammar, and punctuation for formalistic purposes. He reshapes people's way of thinking in order to open up new avenues of becoming in the Deleuzian sense. Thus the poet becomes the prototype of the Deleuzian concept of the nomad, the one who rhizomatically upsets hierarchies by first constructing them then subverting them. The poet is the agent who creates new assemblages of words and creates lines of flight as the words flee their denotative significations ascribed to them by the usage of the community and instill affects never experienced before by the audience.

The resistance poet in the final stance enunciates a verbal pedagogy of revolt because he seeks to emancipate the people through his verse. The

strategy of emancipation is here understood in Jacques Ranciere's terms. The French thinker grounds his understanding of emancipation on the concept of equality. For him politicians must always start with equality in order to liberate the people. Equality is not the goal of true politicians but their starting point. Political parties make promises to their partisans that they will achieve equality between the different social strata but for Ranciere, politicians should always start with the assumption that all people are equal and then build on that. Nobody is to contest the fact that all people are equal and that is a given and not an end.

Nevertheless, although the primary goal is to emancipate people and enable them to act freely and share all the advantages of life, politicians have almost always failed to secure this requirement because of the constraints imposed upon them. Their discourse is often marked by a mitigated and conciliatory rhetoric that is always dreading attacks from the media that supervises what is termed as their political correctness.

The emancipation of the people can only occur through the adoption of a verbal pedagogy of revolt, and that is secured by the rebellious voice of the poet who possesses a license to speak without having to account for it. This license he took from language and he never had to learn it. In this sense he is similar to Ranciere's Ignorant schoolmaster, the one who forced his students to learn the French language without teaching its rules and lexicon to them. Rather he merely provided them with a text and its translated version and encouraged them to read and come up with commentaries on the story they read in the new language which they learnt by themselves. By involving his students and by avoiding the traditional tool of explicating and filling up the minds of his students as if they were sausages, the teacher seeks to extract knowledge from within the students' minds because he assumes that all knowledge is hidden within us and that it is sufficient to prompt it to come out, an act similar to extracting the kernel of an oyster. The poet does the same. He never lectures upon his audience because that will make him feel superior to his

audience. Because he uses a language that is intelligent, subtle and ambivalent, the poet assumes that the audience is intelligent enough to understand him and thus conceives of them as his equals. In no way does the poet explain, as a prose writer does. The poet merely uses hints, apostrophes, lines of flights in the Deleuzian sense. He takes the liberty to deviate from common sense and in doing so he perverts the logic of reason which is responsible for the co-optive strategies of modernity. Such logic is primarily based on the fact that knowledge is to be disseminated with a view to rationalizing all aspects of life coherently and clearly. When the poet derails the audience by taking so many licenses, he creates affects because the nature of his language is based on subverting common beliefs. Such affects are responsible for emancipating the individual and the masses. When the poet takes the liberty to use a word in a deviant sense creating thus a metaphor, he creates an emotional effect based on surprising the audience. The secret of the poet lies in emancipating the word from its conventional or transcendental signified by making it secrete meanings never attached to it before.

The poet relies on the premise that not all is to be rationalized and that rather, reason must be continuously suspected because there are things more valuable in this world than persuasion through reason. Liberation assumes that if one is to liberate the potential of individuals, it is not by explaining things to them as if one were stuffing sausages but by adopting a discourse that respects the intelligence of people no matter how uneducated they are. By virtue of its paratactic discourse, poetry offers the best pedagogy for revolt. It is an emancipatory discourse because it never explains but is filled with gaps which a reader has to fill in and recreate depending on the context it is read in. A poem is secretive par excellence, and by being secretive, it recreates the world and reshapes it anew.

Poetic license has not been much theorized probably because it has always been associated with ways of violating language structures. The same

applies to stylistic deviations the study of which has been undermined because they presuppose the existence of a norm which they swerve from. Nevertheless, I take the case that stylistic deviations are valuable modes of resistance when the norm from which they deviate is clearly set. Indeed, unless the norm is well-defined, it is not all too clear how a deviation can be associated with poetic license. Poetic license or any deviation for that matter should never be read as just an aesthetic feature that is divorced from politics.

Freedom or liberty or license becomes significant only when some restriction is imposed on the individual, society or the text. The boundaries one crosses over must be clearly set, whether in politics or in poetics. Deviation becomes political if it deterritorialises a certain frame or a well-guarded territory, or in the case of style if it articulates a norm, or establishes a /the pattern it swerves from. To speak of figures of speech as examples of poetic license is senseless unless this is substantiated with a clear indication of the rules that the poet has transgressed. Internal deviations and deviations are modes of liberties poets take to surprise the reader, for without this affect of surprise the poetic fades.

The poet seizes the liberty to 'speak the truth to power' (Said) as when he addresses the despot about the reason behind the eccentric position he adopts when he dares to single himself out from the community and cry out the cry of freedom. Thus in "They said I abused the government", Femi Fatoba ironically shouts, at those who arrested him under the charge that he abused the ruler:

How I wish I had a mouth and the
right words

To insult, abuse and mock the
government.

To say the government is deaf

To the cries of the people

To say the government is blind and
does not see where she is going

That the government is a cannibal

Killing and eating her own children
Who am I to abuse the government!
I, a common slave of the
government
Who am I to abuse the government

The speaker ironically seizes the opportunity of the accusation and takes the liberty to accuse the government and then he very matter-of-factly abuses it. This is the trigger or the spark that prompts the poet to speak. The poet does not directly condemn the despotic regime but undoes the structure of oppression through the use of Socratic irony, a gesture that feigns ignorance only to teach. The poet becomes in the words of Ranciere, an ignorant schoolmaster, teaching the ruler how to abuse and not to abuse at the same time.

Very often, the oppressed poet tries to create a frame that will license him to speak. It is the choice of the frame that makes the poetry. Yet in Manifesto: "Ars Poetica" Chipasula conceives of poetry as making the frame for the emancipatory act of speech. It is the poem that grants him the license to speak or rather that orders him to speak, as if poetry had a life of its own and could truly extract or exact a confession from him. It is not that the poet is justifying himself out of fear of the ruler, but just that he creates an aesthetic frame for the act of speech so as to gain legitimacy and move the reader or audience to an affect of disclosure. For the resistance poem is primarily performative and seeks to question. Bear in mind that 'every questioning is a seeking', as Heidegger put it. Indeed, what the poet seeks is to guarantee freedom of his own speech and the freedom of the land from the monopoly of the despotic ruler. The poet discloses the injustice committed and speaks despite the fact he knows he cannot speak. Yet so he speaks that the ruler's logic becomes perverted not only by virtue of beauty (aesthetics) that merges with truth (freedom and justice) but also because "ancient salt is best packing" (Yeats) and this is only too clear in the way the poet chisels a space filled with metaphors that will pierce the

silence and unleash the spirit of rebellion that has been inhibited for long. By highlighting his unequal status in his own country and his inferior position, the poet undoes the hierarchy. The poem or the sarcastic humor of the text is the strategy that unsettles the binary,

My poetry is exacting a confession
From me...I will not wash the blood
off the image
I will not clean the poem to impress
the tyrant
I will not bend my verses in the bow
of a praise song
I will undress our land and expose
her wounds
I will pierce the silence around our
land with sharp metaphors

In "As the Dawn Breaks", Merle Collins justifies her freedom to speak on natural grounds. She is authorized to speak by nature itself. Though the poet ambivalently admits her lower position as a subject, and this is all too clear in her apologetic act.

We speak /because/ when the rain
falls in the mountains/
The river slowly swells/
Comes running down/over
boulders/across roads/
crumbling bridges/ that would hold
their power/against its force/
We do not speak/ to defy your
tenets/though we do/
Or upset your plans/ even though
we do
We speak/ in spite of the fact/ that
we do
We speak/ for the same reason.
That the flowers bloom/
that the sun sets/that the fruit
ripens/
Because temples built to honour
myths/must crumble/ as the dawn
breaks/

there is nothing you can do/
about your feeble bridges/ when the
rain falls/
inthe mountains/ and swells the flow
of rivers/

She reclaims her equality through the use of a logic that subverts from within. If the natural order of things is what rulers resort to in order to justify their presence as leaders of the nation, the poet shows that it is nature itself that will undo and dismantle their monopolizing rule. The pact between the reader and the poet is alone the pact that emancipates the audience because poetry is the unique discourse that posits a complicity between the reader and the writer, a complicity that is based on what Levinas calls responsibility for the other, and not one that subjects the reader to a univocal maneuvering of his will or control of his intelligence.

The last poet that could be used as an example of how the poet takes liberties in order to liberate the individual and the masses is Allan Hope, most famous under the name of Mutabaruka, the Jamaican performance poet.

The Eyes of Liberty
On that bridge I look an' see
The symbol of your justice and
equality
Standin' tall with her torch of flames
Now I ask wat is your aims

Yuh invade Grenada
You invade Nicaragua
You bomb Hirashima
You bomb Philidelphia

But the eyes of liberty is watchin'
you
To see wat nex' you will do
De eyes of liberty is watchin' you
Your liberty and justice is only for a
few
De true owners of your nation

Is forced to live on a reservation
Now I see you in my land
Makin' all kinds of plan
Spendin' billions of dollars every
year
To keep us all livin' in fear
Economical pressure is your game
Liberty reachin' with her torch of
flames
Yes de eyes of liberty is watchin'
you
To yourself you must be true
De eyes of justice is cryin' out
Wat is your democracy all about
Talk of invadin' Libya
No talk of invadin' South Afrika
But yuh invade de Sandinista
government
Usin' Jamaica as your Caribbean
investment
And de Palistenians are your
biggest resentment
Terrorism is de order of de day
Where will de children play?

Yuh invade Grenada
You invade Nicaragua
You bomb Hirashima
You bomb Philidelphia

De symbol of true justice and
equality
Stand erect for all to see
Makin' plans for de Haitians
Helpin' to keep down de black
Amerikans
But de eyes of liberty is watchin' you
Watchin' all de tings you do
De eyes of liberty is watchin' you
To yourself you must be true

Mutabaruka's poetry enacts all that can be said about the power of poetry to shake the establishment. It is

short in its lines and can therefore be used as slogans to mobilise the masses. It uses the language of the mob (creole). It is subversive in its irony (The eyes of liberty is watching you). It is a poem that uses the slogans of the oppressor only to make him feel ashamed of raising such slogans. For the poet unveils the contradictions inherent in the discourse of the US which claims it is disseminating democracy whilst it causes innumerable injustices everywhere in the world. Through performative art the poet makes America ashamed of being called the land of the free.

What Mutabaruka does is the same thing that Ranciere calls for the distribution of the sensible. The poet undoes the hierarchy between those who know and those who don't. He redistributes words which can be appropriated by anybody and be made to serve the cause who have been marginalized. The "distribution of the sensible." This distribution is composed of the *priori* laws which condition what is possible to see and

hear, to say and think, to do and make. It is important to stress this point: the distribution of the sensible is literally the condition of possibility for perception, thought, and activity, what it is possible to apprehend by the senses. The sensible is partitioned into various regimes and therefore delimits forms of inclusion and exclusion in a community.

Conclusion

I will close with this statement by Deleuze. Literature is about "the shame of being a human being" and all poetry condemns this sense of shameful seeing in proclaiming liberty for some people and wrenching from others. Mutabaruka shows how the USA uses a different discourse each time it addresses the Palestinians and the Jews. It is the task of the poet to unmask such inequality in the ideology of the oppressor.

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