

*Poiein*—Political  
Infinitive

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FROM A CERTAIN STANDPOINT, MARJORIE PERLOFF'S LAMENT, IN HER 2006 MLA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, THAT LITERARY STUDY HAS BEEN relegated to a secondary position in the research framework of our profession has merit. This standpoint, however, rests on a retrospective (if not nostalgic) comparison of today's institutional parameters with the enviable autonomy that literary study once enjoyed, a self-authorization that demarcated not merely the practice of literary study (or literary criticism) but even what we might call a literary way of thinking. This was how the institution of theory in American universities took hold, and it is elementary to recall that many other disciplines, principally in the social sciences but also in the arts, conceded to literary studies the vanguard of the methodological and epistemological reconfigurations of their own disciplinary boundaries. Anthropologists, historians, film critics, and art historians, who suddenly acceded to the position of theorist, came to regard literary studies as an inventory for whatever new terms or concepts they deemed necessary in unsettling their own disciplinary givens.

In this peculiar way, the advent of interdisciplinarity in the American academy took place from within the discipline of literary studies—indeed, as an excess of literary studies. (This remains the only academic space worldwide where one can claim that interdisciplinarity is real, though this claim is, in practice, overstated.) Whoever experienced this period firsthand (I would date it from the late 1970s to about 1990) probably remembers that this excessive condition had something ecstatic about it. It was a fecund period of radical interrogation, subversion of established modes of interpretation, daring conceptual ingenuity, and irreverent performativity. It mobilized groundbreaking opportunities for collective learning, oftentimes by relentless argument and counterargument. It was thus profoundly political, if in nothing else than the barest sense of exposing unquestioned domains in the structures of power (of both domination and liberation) and producing new modes of consciousness about what constitutes authority and agency, even (or especially) when the

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notions of author and agent were attacked head on. One should also recall how quickly the terrain of thought and argument was internationalized, much before discussions of globalization came to the fore in economics journals and market-research media.

The advent of interdisciplinarity, in this respect, was hardly aberrant. On the contrary, it was the inevitable outcome of the excessive interrogation of boundaries of all kinds—not merely epistemological but also historiographical, geographic, and cultural (in a culture eventually producing reconfigurations of lifestyle in the larger public sphere)—and emerged out of the academic parameters of literary studies, comparative literature in particular. Our field brokered exchanges between disciplinary languages, as they tried to reconfigure themselves in order to participate in the opening up of new domains of interrogation and make interdisciplinary dialogue possible. Graduate studies in comparative literature in the 1980s faced the challenge of mastering both the canonical knowledge of literary criticism and literary history and the rapidly emerging and proliferating new languages of theory, which opened paths to other disciplines. The work, in effect, was double—not in terms of quantity (because quantitatively it was tenfold) but in terms of orientation: learning the tradition and learning to dismantle the tradition, conducted simultaneously and polemically. This is what I mean by excessive and ecstatic. Yet this excessive element soon came back to haunt the literary studies world, rebounding against it as an indication of alleged undisciplinarity: lack of rigor, epistemological falsity, disingenuous methodology, contrived inquiry, and so on.

Perloff does not account for the phases of this historical trajectory, thereby missing a way out of the quandary she indexes in the present. Her argument rests on a reconfiguration of something archaic: “whatever the *inter-* . . . , there is one discipline that is conspicuously absent, and that discipline is what

the Greeks called *poiētikē*, the discipline of poetics” (655). This argument remains archaic for two reasons. First, Perloff does not inquire if “poetics” can be conducted nowadays in a fresh language, which at first glance may seem to have nothing to do with poetry; finding or constructing this language could become the work of literary theory or even poetic thinking. Second—and this is symptomatic of the first—her view of *poiētikē* may be narrowly conceived, not merely insofar as it remains archaic but even in its ancient usage as such.

I understand it’s not easy to grant genuineness to this condition of excess in the era of high theory, though the allegations about the consequences of the excess are motivated by resentment on the part of traditional disciplinarity. For a decade or more since 1990, the microidentitarian shift in theory precipitated a failure of self-interrogation, especially regarding the paradoxes of the new disciplinary parameters that emerged out of the practice of interdisciplinarity. As a result, literary studies (and other disciplines) suffered, not so much a defanging, as Perloff implies, but rather carelessness, perhaps even arrogance—one is a symptom of the other—which led the discipline to abandon self-interrogation and instead hop on the high horse of identity politics. In other words, if Perloff’s scenario for the relegation of literary studies to a secondary practice is legitimate, the devaluation is not external but self-induced.

The difference is decisive where it matters most: on the question of how to assert the different (and differential) epistemologies of literary thinking—or, more precisely for our purposes, the cognitive powers of the poetic element itself.<sup>1</sup> My experience does not agree with Perloff’s description of the field. This isn’t to say that what she describes does not exist; rather, what she describes is not entirely accurate. For one, if interdisciplinarity is indeed the *modus operandi* of graduate study in literature, the job market continues to punish interdisciplinary work. This of-

ten drives us, as advisers, to curtail our students' complex aspirations and imaginations. We do it out of a sense of responsibility, no doubt—we want them to get jobs—but I wonder whether we should rethink our responsibility and pressure institutions to create jobs that demand and reward interdisciplinarity and not so-called expertise. So as not to be misunderstood, I repeat that interdisciplinarity requires, by definition, the double work of mastering the canonical and the modes of interrogating it. Interdisciplinary training is first of all disciplinary training. It means taking the disciplinary logic to its limit in order to interrogate the construction of the limit. It is thus a transformation of this construction—yes, a *deconstruction*, if you will, so long as the (inter)disciplinarity of deconstruction itself is never reducible to its canon.

As transformation, this work is quintessentially poetic. It is a gesture of *poiein*, by which I mean not merely the art of making but the art of forming (thereby, in the domain of history, transforming). The poet as homo faber is the outcome of a modernist aspiration to shake the sublime burden of the Romantic artist; both personae bear the historical markings of modernity, no more and no less. The oldest notion of *poiein*, present in Homer—while it does not arbitrate the ambiguity between forming and making—pertains primarily to working on matter, shape, or form and only secondarily to abstraction, whereby it might suggest availing or producing forms. It is especially interesting to consider that the root reference to creativity (*dēmiourgia*) is instrumentalist. As opposed to a *poiētēs*, a *dēmiourgos* is one whose work derives its primary meaning from the public sphere—the word itself provides the evidence: *dēmos* and *ergon*, covering a range of action from being a seer to being a doctor. The notion is reversed in the modern world, arguably because of the Christian investment in the notion of creation out of the absolute. In Plato, one might say (even though in *Timaeus* you find both

notions intertwined) that *dēmiourgos* is in effect a worker, one who commits an *ergon*; the poet is a shaper, one who shapes forms. For Plato, of course, shaping forms is always, in the last instance, misshaping, de-forming. Hence his alarm at the poet as a shaper who (trans)forms morals—an entirely political, not ethical, decision, which leaves no fate for the poet but exile from the city.

From a modern point of view, then, *poiein* is characteristically a notion of creative action—creative and destructive—despite the fact that *dēmiourgein* is the verb that, in its Latin derivation (*creatio*), has taken over the range of signification. The struggle between what we can, abusively, call private and public poetics has not resolved, historically, the social demands posed by the idea of the poet as a shaper of forms. The force of Plato's political prejudice has been astonishingly long lasting and crucial in the formation of modernity. The transformative power of *poiein*, first of all as a social-imaginary but also as an artistic (poetic, strictly speaking) force, is consistently underplayed in favor of an analytic relation to knowledge, a philosophical scientia that, having fully engaged the permutations of *technē*, has formed the backbone of the pseudo-rationality that animates the instrumental logic of capitalist globalization. I say this because poetry continues to be intransigent and socially significant in largely precapitalist modes of life, even while capitalist logic rages infrastructurally (economically, technologically, even politically) at an extraordinary speed and on a large scale.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, philosophically speaking, we must entwine my understanding of *poiein* with a notion of *prattein* 'doing, acting'—so long as we don't take the latter to signify an instrumental(ist) process—to counter the permutations of *technē* as the primary agent of the production of knowledge and the making of history.

A great—if not widely known—poem by C. P. Cavafy stages this predicament inimitably. Because its internal argument is

theatrical, I submit it here in its full staging, despite the length, in my translation:

Dareios

Phernazis, the poet, is at work  
on the decisive part of his epic:  
how Dareios, son of Hystaspis,  
took over the Persian kingdom.  
(From him descends our glorious king,  
Mithridatis, Dionysos, and Eupator.)  
But this requires philosophy; Phernazis must  
analyze  
the feelings Dareios must have had.  
Arrogance, maybe, and intoxication? Not  
really—perhaps  
a certain insight into the vanities of grandeur.  
The poet profoundly contemplates the matter.

But his servant disrupts him, rushing in  
to announce the grave news.  
The war with the Romans has begun;  
most of our army has crossed the borders.

The poet is struck speechless. What a disaster!  
How can our glorious king,  
Mithridatis, Dionysos, and Eupator,  
bother about Greek poems now?  
Imagine! In the middle of a war, Greek poems!

Phernazis is torn with anxiety. What  
misfortune!  
Just as he'd made certain, with his *Dareios*,  
to distinguish himself, to silence fully  
his envious critics.  
What a setback, terrible setback, to his plans.

And if only a setback, it would not be so awful.  
Is there now any safety in Amisos?  
The town is hardly fortified,  
and the Romans are enemies striking terror.  
Do we, Cappadocians, really have a chance  
with them? Can it ever come to be?  
Are we now to go against the legions?  
Great gods, protectors of Asia, do help us!

But throughout this distress, throughout the  
despair  
stubbornly flashes the poetic idea:  
it is most likely, yes, arrogance and  
intoxication,  
it was arrogance and intoxication, that  
Dareios must have felt.<sup>3</sup>

A mindful reading of “Dareios” would perceive another staging of the controversial argument underlying one of Cavafy’s better-known poems, “Young Men of Sidon (400 AD),” written in the same year (1920). There Cavafy stages a scene where a young Sidonian poet disrupts a poetic memorial of Aeschylus, railing against the tragedian’s decision to glorify in his epitaph his achievements as a soldier and not as a poet. In “Dareios” Phernazis figures perhaps as a more thoughtful respondent to the classical Greek poetic tradition—both scenes representing a social imaginary that remains Greek in a world where the last vestiges of a Greek way of life are about to vanish. Phernazis’s task is to write an epic, monumental poem about the same Persian expedition that became the cause for Aeschylus’s heroics in the battle of Marathon, which the tragedian selected to memorialize in his epitaph. In dramatizing the Persian point of view, Phernazis, an imaginary Persian with Greek *paideia*, echoes the Aeschylean poetic gesture as well. Cavafy stages this crossroads with historical savvy. While Phernazis labors at the poetic representation of an ancient invasion, his own Persian polis (substantially hellenized in the Alexandrian era) finds itself under attack by the Romans, a people whose capacity to assimilate Greek modes was commensurable to the exactitude with which they extinguished them.

In this framing, the poet of the great past is at war in the present. The quandary is whether one should go on writing Greek poems in times of war, a matter of concern to the Athenian Aeschylus as well as to the Persian Phernazis, though the differential nature of history always demands a unique response. Before reality strikes—striking the poet speechless—Phernazis perceives *poiein* as a philosophical matter. He takes the shaping of form, which in this case significantly concerns the shaping of historical form (a recasting of an event from the standpoint of its internal psychological motive), as a matter of

analysis. Here writing Greek poems is hardly a predicament. The act is taken to be a matter of technique, of emulation by analysis—an act of literary criticism by virtue of poetic and pedagogical heritage alone, an emulation of the canonical (of Aeschylus himself), which Phernazis executes by virtue of not *poiein* but *technē*. The consciousness of writing Greek poems becomes possible only because of the war, because the present history disrupts the exercise of making poetry out of past history. Cavafy's own fondness for making poetry out of history folds this predicament over fabulously, except for a crucial twist in the fold of this particular poem: the act of poetically re-making history is conducted by an imaginary poet, a poet of poetic invention.

As he becomes conscious of his predicament and his act, Phernazis experiences a double insight: into the poverty of philosophical thinking, of analysis, in the act of poetry and—simultaneously, for this insight is dialectical—into the intrinsic affinity of poetry with reality, with the radical historical present. The astonishing realization is that reality itself is poetic—or, from another point of view, that reality is itself the force of *poiein*. Thus, Phernazis realizes that his question about the prudence of writing Greek poems in times of war is an academic question and thereby dismisses its premise. The dilemma, poetry or war, is false. Poetry cannot be understood except in relation to life; it is not a matter of technique, a vocation one puts aside to fight in a war. Even at war, as a warrior, the poet is at work. It is by working on reality, shaping reality into form, that poets encounter the fine predicaments of their art. Phernazis himself might be said to experience “arrogance and intoxication” in wrestling with this reality, with the poetic reality of this reality. He solves his poetic quandary because he grasps that the way to get into the psychic world of Dareios's founding the Persian kingdom that now Phernazis inhabits—several centuries later, centuries of hellenization, at the preci-

pice of its total catastrophe—is by imagining not what history must have felt like then but what history feels like now, in the radical present of the poem. The writing of the poem exists in co-incidence with the making of history. To write Greek poems is thus posed as a question of reality, and Phernazis's poetic quandary is solved. To write Greek poems has nothing to do with writing them in a specific form, in the Greek language, or as elements of a Greek poetic-political imaginary. Rather, it is a matter of being attuned to the elusive details of history in the making. It is to understand that making history is the most profound meaning of *poiein*.

This is why the poet should not be equated with the historian, even when a poem is indeed a bona fide historical document, a text that produces actual historical knowledge. Even if we accept (as I do) that the most precise historical writing must, at some level, be poetic, there is no equation between poetry and history because even the most poetic historical writing, the writing that does produce the past, does not (as it should not) obliterate the narrative frame of deciphering the world. And although, surely, poetry does also narrate, the force of *poiein* pertains to a radical sense of the present, as something, if not boundless, then indeterminately and perhaps even “interminably” bounded. When I link *poiein* to history in the making, I understand it as shaping matter into form in such a way that the form becomes a cipher for the elusive meaning of its own (trans)formation.

This shaping does not have a precise temporality; hence, traditional methods of historiography cannot grasp it. Its working is a perpetual, thorough reworking, which would not spare even itself. (The cliché notion that a poem is always working on itself, on making itself into a poem, should be understood here as an elemental force of *poiein*.) The duration of shaping matter into form, as Henri Bergson would have it, occurs in (or as) a radical present. This is a paradoxical condition, but

that is why its boundaries exceed the capacity of both narration and symbolization and can only be grasped in performance. The energy of *poiein* is theatrical: literally, to form is to change form (including one's own). It is an infinitive force, in a strange way an attribute of the infinite, yet pertaining not to space but to action in space—a force that forms and yet, grammatically, bears language's many forms. The political substance of *poiein* is thus signified not just by its constitutively transformative power, which would be a mere abstraction, but by the fact that, since its ancient meaning, it pertains to humanity's immanent (even if perpetually self-altering) encounter with the world.

## NOTES

1. I explore this claim in *Does Literature Think?*
2. For an exemplary discussion of the dialectical range of this problem, see Mufti 210–43.
3. Ο Δαρείος

‘Ο ποιητής Φερνάζης τὸ σπουδαῖον μέρος τοῦ ἐπικοῦ ποιήματός του κάμνει. Τὸ πῶς τὴν βασιλεία τῶν Περσῶν παρέλαβε ὁ Δαρεῖος Ὑστάσπου. (Ἀπὸ αὐτὸν κατάγεται ὁ ἔνδοξός μας βασιλεύς, ὁ Μιθριδάτης, Διόνυσος κ’ Εὐπάτωρ). Ἄλλ’ ἐδῶ χρειάζεται φιλοσοφία’ πρέπει ν’ ἀναλύσει τὰ αἰσθήματα ποῦ θὰ εἶχεν ὁ Δαρεῖος : ἴσως ὑπεροψίαν καὶ μέθην’ ὄχι ὅμως — μᾶλλον σὰν κατανόησι τῆς ματαιότητος τῶν μεγαλείων. Βαθέως σκέπτεται τὸ πρᾶγμα ὁ ποιητής.

Ἀλλὰ τὸν διακόπτει ὁ ὑπηρέτης του ποῦ μπαίνει τρέχοντας, καὶ τὴν βαρυσήμαντην εἶδησι ἀγγέλλει. Ἄρχισε ὁ πόλεμος μὲ τοὺς Ρωμαίους. Τὸ πλεῖστον τοῦ στρατοῦ μας πέρασε τὰ σύνορα.

Ὁ ποιητής μένει ἐνεός. Τί συμφορά ! Ποῦ τώρα ὁ ἔνδοξός μας βασιλεύς, ὁ Μιθριδάτης, Διόνυσος κ’ Εὐπάτωρ, μ’ ἑλληνικά ποιήματα ν’ ἀσχοληθεῖ. Μέσα σὲ πόλεμο — φαντάσου, ἑλληνικά ποιήματα.

Ἀδμονεῖ ὁ Φερνάζης. Ἀτυχία ! Ἐκεῖ ποῦ τὸ εἶχε θετικό μὲ τὸν «Δαρεῖο» ν’ ἀναδειχθεῖ, καὶ τοὺς ἐπικριτάς του, τοὺς φθονερούς, τελειωτικά ν’ ἀποστομώσει. Τί ἀναβολή, τί ἀναβολή στὰ σχέδιά του.

Καὶ νάταν μόνο ἀναβολή, πάλι καλά. Ἀλλὰ νὰ δοῦμε ἂν ἔχουμε κι ἀσφάλεια στὴν Ἀμισό. Δὲν εἶναι πολιτεία ἐκτάκτως ὄχυρή. Εἶναι φρικτότατοι ἐχθροὶ οἱ Ρωμαῖοι. Μποροῦμε νὰ τὰ βγάλουμε μ’ αὐτούς, οἱ Καππαδόκες; Γένεται ποτέ ; Εἶναι νὰ μετρηθοῦμε τώρα μὲ τὲς λεγεῶνες ; Θεοὶ μεγάλοι, τῆς Ἀσίας προστάται, βοηθήστε μας.—

Ὅμως μὲς σ’ ὅλη του τὴν ταραχὴ καὶ τὸ κακό, ἐπίμονα κ’ ἡ ποιητικὴ ἰδέα πάει κ’ ἔρχεται — τὸ πιθανότερο εἶναι, βέβαια, ὑπεροψίαν καὶ μέθην’ ὑπεροψίαν καὶ μέθην θὰ εἶχεν ὁ Δαρεῖος.

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