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POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a Meditation (variant on the manner of Aurelius and Descartes) concerning the immediate situation, in the United States, of poetry as a discourse of political engagement. As such, the paper is a highly personal one. It means to offer an account of the peculiar limits within which contemporary poetry in the United States is forced to get carried on, as well as an explanation of the context in which those limits were defined. It also suggests possible ways to exploit the special resources of contemporary poetry (formally and socially conceived) for political discourse and social critique. The paper is most centrally concerned to illuminate the special kinds of critical reflection which contemporary poetry, by virtue of its marginal position, makes available. The paper's two main sections involve the author's own reflexive analysis of his encounters with certain texts by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Theodor Adorno, and Carolyn Forché.

POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Jerome J. McGann

(for Clayton, Jill, Marjorie, Paul, Susan)

We do know what's going on, and we let it go on.

(T. Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow)

Privileged people often tell personal stories about themselves which show how their lives connect with more significant human lives or with more important social and political matters. Poets and writers do this all the time, sometimes in order to serve their own interests, occasionally to illuminate, through the negative and darkened glass of their experiences, the character of the larger world and its recurrent darkness. Such histories, even the most self-serving, are eventually delivered over to someone's critical reflection, and their full -- often mystified -- meaning gets exposed. In the first volume of his History of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky immortalized the tawdry diaries of Tzar Nicholas II.

What follows here is the personal narrative of an episode in a writing career. I give it because it throws into relief several matters of importance relating to the social and institutional frameworks of contemporary American poetry, and because it may help one to reflect upon

the significance of those frameworks -- to reflect upon the need for reflection, and the possible consequence of not doing so.

I shall begin with a summary. In 1975 I left Chicago (after 10 years) and moved back east, and I decided not to publish or try to publish my poetry any longer (I was active in these pursuits between 1968-1975). I did not stop writing verse, however, or publishing it privately in collaboration with other writers and artists. In 1982, having moved to southern California, I found myself reconsidering my decision of 1975. I also found that the idea of reconnecting with public channels of poetry -- even more, the idea that I might actually consider such a possibility -- was deeply disturbing. Later, when a friend of mine forced me to reflect upon this history, I reached certain conclusions which before had only seemed dimly apparent.

Here is the narrative, the reflections, and the emerging conclusions.

I.

In 1975 I read for the first time a series of essays by Hans Magnus Enzensberger on the industries of consciousness, and in particular his trenchant essay "The Aporias of the Avant Garde."[1] Enzensberger's prose is implacable and my encounter with it left me ashamed.

> Since [World War I] imperialism has developed such mighty instruments for the industrial manipulation of consciousness that it is no longer dependent on literature. Vice versa, literature's critical function has been shrinking. Already in the

thirties Walter Benjamin could ascertain "that the bourgeois production and publication apparatus can assimilate, even propagate, an astonishing mass of revolutionary themes without putting its own existence into serious doubt." (90-91)

Passages like these seemed to me, at the time, revelations -- not merely for their explicit ideas, but even more for their spiritual character, their moral stance. Enzensberger's style sets a high privilege upon clarity of mind, freedom from hypocrisy and self-deception, and uncompromised intellectual integrity.

By now, of course, his arguments have themselves been fully acculturated and his work suffers the inevitable threat of diminishment by exploitive repetition: "Deliver, consume; deliver, consume: that is the imperative of the market" (85). In the United States, the repetition appears in the literary-intellectual work which is delivered and consumed in the post-modern (thus it is named and identified) consciousness industries: that is to say, quite simply, in the organs and media which exist in and finally serve the interests of the state ideological apparatuses.

The problem is at once simple and terrible. Can the artist, intellectual, <u>anyone</u> serve both god and mammon? Enzensberger's uncompromising answer to this question seemed to me -- still seems to me -- impressive. Yet there are problems.

> [Poetry's] political mission is to...continue to speak to everyone about things of which no one speaks.... This is the most difficult of missions. None is easier to forget. There is no one to demand an accounting; on the contrary, the

> man who betrays his mission to the interests of those in authority is rewarded. But in poetry there are no extenuating circumstances. A poem that offers itself for sale, whether in error or from baseness, is condemned to death; there is no reprieve. (81-82)

If this is a powerful, even a heroic, statement, the very clarity of its view exposes its problematic character. In the first place, Enzensberger's own words seem to belong to another world, the way Evan Dhu's heroic statement to the courtroom in _Waverley_ fell upon those who had no ears to hear. To a postmodern consciousness, these words must seem naive, for their own bibliographical history -- their transmission across various state boundaries and into different languages -- testifies to the domination against which they are protesting. A complex ideological network carries this message across half the world and thereby the message undergoes a transubstantiation. The process is at once wondrous and terrible.

In the second place, Enzensberger's ideas about poetry seem odd, even anachronistic. To speak as he does of the possibility that poetry and poets might betray some high mission or calling, that the value of poetical work could be debased in our time if poets are not on their moral guard: these ideas have surely blinked at certain quotidian matters. What is the market value of poetry and poets, what is their _moral_ value that any market should take them seriously? What, in short, is the _meaning_ of Enzensberger's metaphors? Poetry today does not command a position of great social importance. Rather,

it has become a kind of social ornament which the industries of consciousness permit into the dominant layers of culture because they find it convenient to do so. Poetry now has persuaded few people that they should tremble to think that it might "betray its mission," or be condemned, without reprieve, to death.

However I would read Enzensberger's arguments -- sympathetically or critically, with an eye on Enzensberger or with an eye on his subject matter -- the problem appeared the same. How is one to operate at all, in poetry or in polemical prose, within the consciousness industries, how use (or be used by) the ideological apparatuses of the states? In 1975 it appeared to me neither right nor possible to develop a politically conscious poetry within social structures which were by their historical nature committed to altering its critical force. That a fair number of poets since the Second World War had been able to produce such poetry seemed to me simply anomalous, and I let it go at that.

During the seven years between 1975-1982 my view of the history of contemporary American poetry did not appreciably change. My sense of the importance of Enzensberger's comments on the consciousness industry also remained intact, nor did it matter in the least whether I emphasized to myself the blindness or the insight of his commentary. More than anything else I was impressed by the comprehensiveness -- perhaps, the absoluteness -- of his criticisms. It was a moral attitude and mode of thought to which I was prepared to respond. The appropriation of poetry by the academy, its production and reproduction through that most conservative of cultural institutions,

had become a fact of poetry's life which most poets seemed either unwilling or unable to resist. Or rather, the poetry had come to take the stamp of the academy and the world which that academy served: Nihil obstat, Imprimatur. Everywhere the books seemed impressed by their culture.

It is now apparent to me that this view of American poetry is absolutely corrupt: not (as it were) without its truth, but rather with its truths fundamentally weakened by virtue of its absolutist perspective. A great deal of American poetry stands and has long stood at a peripheral or antagonistic remove from the academy and the channels of the high book trade. If these dominant cultural institutions often (later) absorb and seek to co-opt this "other" work, that negative reproductive process cannot finally alter the work's original historical character or its permanent human value. At most it can obscure or mystify these matters. And if the culture's dominant institutions often (in the immediate present) turn away from and invisibilize this other work, that blindness does not change the reality of the actual situation.

Of course one always knows these things. Nevertheless, so strong is the perspective of our centers of culture, especially on academic minds like my own, that its illusions can maintain their force even in the face of recognized reality: so we call peripheral poetry peripheral, and the center, the center. And we suspect that if the center is corrupt, the outback is cut off and doomed. Thus we are to be deceived by words and the images they mount up.

But what if the center is an illusion in itself? Or: if the center were imagined not to exist, would the elsewhere go away?

II. The Imperative of Reflection

Questions like these, and their corollary significances, began to frame themselves in my mind in 1982 through my experiences with the radically, and often deliberately, marginal work of poets and artists in southern California. These experiences were brought into clearer focus through my encounter with two books: Theodor Adorno's Minima Moralia, which I read for the first time a year ago, and Carolyn Forché's The Country Between Us. Forché's poems have been much praised for their ability to utter persuasive political ideas in the medium of a highly "personal" and "sensuous" poetry; they have also been occasionally attacked (on the same score) as factitious and inauthentic. I want to consider Forché's poems and the responses they have evoked because this entire event, I think, helps to clarify the problems now facing politically conscious artists and intellectuals in the United States. But first I want to remark briefly on Minima Moralia since that book's grim and severe meditations set the terms in which, on the one hand, I came to reconsider some of my original ideas about political poetry, and, on the other, I was to understand Forché's book and its reviewers.

Adorno's book, originally published in 1951, is -- like Enzensberger's -- consciously written against the background of Gramsci's and Benjamin's ideas about the responsibilities of artists and intellectuals in powerful, late capitalist societies. No subject

brings out more sharply the idiosyncratic differences which mark off their (basically congruent) approaches toward a critique of western society in the twentieth century. Benjamin's and Adorno's discussions of movies and the film industry epitomize the character of the various (implicit or explicit) exchanges which get carried on. That is to say, because the topics are so difficult and problematic, the controversies surface repeatedly at the most fundamental levels. Reading these exchanges, one is often forced to radical shifts of position.

Gramsci's life and work, and Enzensberger's writings, may highlight the critical privilege which alienation creates for the artist and intellectual. But a set of remarks by Adorno may overthrow the illusions of such a privilege; for in a world which seeks to transform all radical social critique into "constructive social criticism", no position or idea can ever count itself secure.

> Antithesis. He who stands aloof runs the risk of believing himself better than others and misusing his critique of society as an ideology for his private interest. While he gropingly forms his own life in the frail image of a true existence, he should never forget its frailty, nor how little the image is a substitute for true life. Against such awareness, however, pulls the momentum of the bourgeois within him. The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is his insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such. His own distance from business at large is a luxury which only that

> business confers. This is why the very movement of withdrawal bears features of what it negates. It is forced to develop a coldness indistinguishable from that of the bourgeois.[2]

I have sketched the Marxian context of these remarks in order to prevent a misunderstanding of what Adorno is talking about. Read by itself this passage might appear as a traditional call to political engagement, a plea that artists and intellectuals give up the illusion that they occupy a neutral critical position in society. But this is not what Adorno is saying. Rather, his commentary -- like Enzensberger's -- offers an interpretation of the desperate significance of the history of Marxian critical thought in the 20th century. Because all critique is threatened with appropriation by the state, Enzensberger counsels an abandonment of traditional avant-garde positions. Adorno, however, has glimpsed the aporias of the postmodern Marxian consciousness, and he counters it not with a program of action but with a call for deeper reflection.

Reading Adorno in this context exposes realities which we understand but, for all that, which we still find difficult to accept: that in the present social structure all courses of action are formally and theoretically compromised in advance. Scholars, poets, artists, intellectuals operate within or without the academy, they make use of and are used by institutions and their organs of expression; or, they refuse involvement and operate in local groups and at the periphery of the dominant culture -- in small cells or reading groups that can be found throughout the country. In the latter you avoid being cursed to the

cycles of consumption and delivery, but this special privilege attaching to voluntary alienation carries it own sorts of peril, as Adorno suggests. Besides, the avoidance itself may be only an immediate condition which conceals an eventual temptation or fate, if not a hidden and hypocritical project. Will Mail Art maintain the fragile yet devastating critique of the ideologies which dominate contemporary art? Will local success spoil the Language Poets? Who can tell. Adorno's meditation suggests that the cultural obliquity of these movements and their representatives is a guarantee of nothing so far as artistic authenticity is concerned. In such matters, as Shelley once said, "Each to himself must be the oracle."

Adorno's call for a deeper critical reflexiveness supplies a double advantage/obligation for artists and intellectuals in postmodern capitalist societies, most especially in the United States. First, by calling attention to the (ultimately Romantic) illusion of non-compromised ideological activities, Adorno paradoxically licenses authentic action in any quarter of the dominant cultural system. Second, this license lays down a reciprocal demand, that each person's intellectual and artistic practise be scrupulously analyzed in terms of the (moral and social) imperatives which are exposed in the institutionalized frameworks where artists function. In particular, a poet must seek to make explicit his or her precise relation to the ideologies of the center or the periphery. There can be no business as usual, either within the structures supported by the state or outside those structures, in the cadres of saints or the cenacles of our saving remnants.

"Under which king, Bezonian; speak, or die."

Both Enzensberger and Adorno remind poets and intellectuals of their obligation to reflect upon the social engagements of their work. This demand gains a special urgency in Adorno, who has a more precise and comprehensive awareness of the social and political nexus of every type of artistic and ideological product. Poets will find an exemplary form of conscience in his work, a model of the double act of reflection which should be expected of them: first, the primary consciousness that poetical work is socially engaged willy nilly; and then the secondary consciousness which probes the specific character of the social engagement to be found in one's experience and to be re-presented in one's poetry.

III. Poetry in a Compromised Society

The charge brought against Caroline Forché's The Country Between Us is essentially mauvais foi: according to Eliot Weinberger, in this book "El Salvador was being reduced to Forché".

> I don't see Forché as a political poet at all, for the poems neither illuminate a political situation, are an exhortation to arms, nor artifacts themselves of a political reality. They belong, rather, to the genre of revolutionary tourism.[3]

This is a devastating critique, justified in relation to the lines which Weinberger quotes,[4] troubling with respect to the book as a whole. For Forché personally, Weinberger's is a review which might well draw her to a fresh examination of her writing projects. For American (by which I mean United States) poets in general, his remarks drive home --

in several senses -- an idea that has come to seem important in my own work: that social critique mounted from a *de facto* compromised position might regard itself and its own cultural vantage as its primary subject.

Caroline Forché is nowadays taken to be a political poet *because she writes about El Salvador*. Furthermore, this judgment about her "politicalness" assumes that "political poet" and "revolutionary inspiration" are more or less equivalent. But these ideas are true only in certain particular circumstances (e.g., in periods of social turmoil when radical change is an immediate and viable issue). In other places and circumstances, to assume this kind of "politicalness" might be called (by politicians) "adventurism", and perhaps (by artists at work themselves) "tourism" or even "careerism". In such other places and circumstances -- witness the exemplary cases of Rossetti or Baudelaire -- the most profoundly "political" writer, the most telling social judgment, may well come from voices which raise to our awareness their own evident contradictions and self-destructive limits; or from books -- I have in mind the novels of Balzac and James -- which expose the social networks in which certain kinds of human beings are at once complicit and brutalized, the accomplices as well as the victims of their own social orders.

In practical terms, if an American poet is to write about Central America now, he or she may arrogate solidarity with such exploitation and suffering only at a fearful -- perhaps even an intolerable -- risk. The case of El Salvador is especially clear. An American writer -- any writer -- might well engage to write propaganda for justice and freedom

in El Salvador, and this could be a work of great honor. But poetry? That task might better fall to the poets who live through, who are a part of, the special fire and contradictions of which we are only (at best) the witnesses, and (at worst) the spectators. The projects of translating into English the recent (or even the ancient) poetry of Central and South America seem especially impressive precisely because these projects have taken into full account the political structure of this hemisphere's present and past history.

Whatever one's thoughts on that matter, Forché's assumption of solidarity with the struggle in El Salvador is an important event for academic poets because her gesture helps to clarify the problem of how one writes political poetry in a compromised society. Traditionally, (i.e., since the early 19th century), left-wing poets have expressed their sympathy via a maneuver toward identification with those who suffer: we recall Shelley and Byron in particular. But Shelley's and Byron's philhellenism is not compromised the way Swinburne's raptures of distress over Italy are compromised, because England's position in relation to Greece and Italy is, in each case, quite different; and Forché's America stands, in relation to El Savador, already judged, weighed, and found sorely wanting. Neither Forché nor any other American poet can evade the consequences of that social fact, as her verse so painfully shows:

> You will fight
>
> and fighting, you will die. I will live
>
> and living cry out until my voice is gone

to its hollow of earth, where with our
hands and by the lives we have chosen
we will dig deep into our deaths.
I have done all that I could do.
Link hands, link arms with me....

("Message" p. 21)

This is neither poetry nor propaganda, it is simply (or at best) bad, misconceived writing (at worst it is a scandal to the cause it means to honor). Weinberger's critique of Forché's book finds its deepest justification in passages like this, where Forché only persuades us that she has _not_ done all that she could -- all that she must -- do. For her sympathy here is precisely _conscienceless_, empty of all but the shallowest critical reflection upon her social position.

Nevertheless, Forché's book is important for having forced to the open, once again in America, the whole social structure of the issue of serious political poetry. More than that, her book's political themes may not always fail to strike true on the ear. Consider this passage from "Photograph of My Room":

Under the bed, a pouch of money:
pesetas, _dinar_, _francs_, the coins
of no value in any other place.
In the notebooks you will find
those places: the damp inner thighs,
the delicate rash left by kisses,
fingers on the tongue, a swallow

of brandy, a fire.

It is all there, the lies

told to myself because of Paris,

the stories I believed in Salvador

and Granada.... (p.35)

I remark this passage in particular because Weinberger singled it out for special dispraise.

> "Paris" and "Granada" are unexplained elsewhere; ...the sex is strictly Playboy, complete with brandy and fire....all the bases are swiftly touched in an air of world-weariness: the victim who suffers because of distant events in which she has no part. (p. 163)

It is true, I think, that the whole poem accumulates to the sentimental result which Weinberger has noted. But perhaps not this passage, the point of which Weinberger may have missed. It is difficult to say for certain if Forché intended the effect, but the details here make a sharp, self-critical arrangement, a satire on the rich person's transcontinental life which has been nourishing its "glamour" on liberal and left-wing ideology.[5]

Forché's poetry carries a negative significance for Weinberger, yet many have been moved by her work. For myself, reading her has called to mind Adorno's views on critical reflexiveness. Forché has reached for a political verse of sympathy and solidarity, very much in the manner of Shelley, Byron, and Swinburne; and that is well, whatever the value of the poetry as such. But other choices are possible. American writing might reach for other kinds of home truths, a

deeper reflection on the experience of contemporary America. For -- and this in contrast to Central America -- "Meaningful social change" does not seem to lie on the immediate horizon of this country, only "constructive social criticism" with its growing twilight and eventual darkness -- metallic dawn, and a plastic, engineered noon. No one is better placed to express what it means to live in such a world than the pure products and poets of America. And the life of this peculiar world is even a matter of importance to people living anywhere, whether inside of it, at its periphery, or in its orbit.

> Instantaneously and repeatedly. Blank serves as a station for our senses, making possible an impression of continuance. Subject comes to be formed in much the same way. And so, Blank comes to be found thoroughly interspersed throughout Subject, forming an integral part of any act. When trying to bring it into focus, it must be remembered that Blank is widely dispersed, capable of behaving in many different ways at once, and itself plays a fundamental role in the act of focusing.[6]

> If I were you I would begin with hate, where you may be certain of your footing. This is not something you can learn over there or ever by yourself. But I can help you.
>
> Here in Pasadena you start by coming south across Colorado Blvd., or north beyond Foothill. You are looking for San Marino or the best parts of Pasadena, or those lovely sections near the arroyo or up near the hills in Altadena.

> The places where people care about their homes and do all they can for their children's education. This is where you should begin, though it appears, I agree, a most unlikely place. But here if the people are not smiling or talking affably to anyone they meet (yourself included), they will be serious and busy, they will be moving everywhere with evident purpose and self-direction, though they may only be jogging.[7]

Those are two possible ways of putting it, I think, home truths that need to be told. In this kind of poetry one is meant to observe what it means to suffer the truth of a life that has been given, accepted, and discovered or unmasked too late: an uncompromised poetry of a compromised society. Why else do we read Martial (or don't we)? Why else has Alan Dugan been so soon, so wrongly, forgotten by the very academy which once thought it had discovered him?

American poets now might do well to put their hand to this work. We are a culture whose lineaments of gratified desire are not what Blake had in mind when he coined that phrase. This land of gratification, along with the peculiar incoherences and suffering which it generates at home and abroad, needs to find its true voice of feeling. How else are we to understand the dialectic which is the misery and the happiness of America, the lies which compose the architecture of its awful truths?

> _Truth is lies_ which have hardened.
>
> This should be obvious from the fact that the obverse is also

> correct. The same obviousness obtains for correctness. Truth, which will never be more than the notion of truth, keeps for itself only its own over-guarded presences.... Truth is the purest notions of dominations, not without persons, not without social exigencies, and not aside from the facets of the experienced tracts of truth. It is, in and by itself, the misnomer.
>
> (Alan Davies, "Lies")

For human beings living north of Mexico, a useful way to see El Salvador is by looking carefully at the places we live in, the people we talk to, the things we do. Our truths about that country, left and right, have hardened into the discourse of our media, the texts and screens where we now may learn -- if we look carefully -- to see ourselves. Surely one of our poetry's chief functions must be to re-present this world to ourselves, to reflect its strange and estranged humanness back to the people who are its citizens, representatives, and victims.

This is the solidarity of America's social conscience, whose poets have the privilege to reveal a world where every sphere of its life lies under the dominion of its own imperial power. Poems come from this land to expose its reality in such a way that (a) its falseness becomes manifest (critique); (b) an actual human world may be glimpsed as an Idea (utopia); (c) the present character of "the way we live now" is given back to the reader as a field of very particular contradictions which appear in the verse as the special set of its emotional tensions.

Thirty years ago and more Ginsberg invented a rhetoric that served,

as Rossetti, in fading 19th century England, invented a precious mandarin style which also served. Kaddish and The House of Life are terrible poems about hell, lost paradises, and tragic illusions -- about the worlds and the peoples which gave birth to those things, and about the poets who then imagined what they knew. Now, of course, the myth of innocence which Ginsberg was able to invoke is not possible for an American poet, and it may not be possible again for a long time. Much closer to us stand Rossetti's (and, after him, Stevens') fantastic castles of evasion and flight, a self-conscious poetry expressing its knowledge of fear, threat, and pain in the illusions of their absence.

Do we know that from the vantage of such supreme fictions one may produce the poetry of a hope that appears everywhere as despair? We cannot until we recognize the appearance of despair in the illusions of their absence.

Do we know that people will find a use for such verse, even in Central America?

IV.

"Can the goal you seek be found by starting from the ground of moral biography? Or must the Subject...first be dislodged?... Make sure that 'writing' gets to the page before 'I' do."

A friend said this to me in response to an earlier version of the previous "writing". He also said: "It is the voice of the logic of the totality which says that 'all courses of action are formally and theoretically compromised in advance.' Why speak for that voice? For

possibility is the very thing which cannot be foreclosed."

Possibilities should not be foreclosed. It is possible that The Country Between Us was conceived in bad faith and will be used wrongly -- indeed, the latter is likely, even inevitable; and it is equally possible that Forché has unwittingly reduced El Salvador to herself in her book. But it is also possible that the act of that book will make a difference, has already -- in certain quarters, for some people -- made a difference. Possibilities are not to be foreclosed.

It is also possible that "the voice" of "the logic of the totality" requires expression in verse. Might someone need to know, to realize, or to remember that "all courses of action are formally and theoretically compromised in advance"? In those thoughts lies a reason for silence, or a reason for speaking. Nor can we tell in advance, by the logic of some other totalized thought, what will be the value of such silence or such speech.

A few last things remain to be said here. First, after the pursuit of silence and Subjectlessness -- after the experience of our cultural resorts during the past decade or so -- some new acts of writing or speaking, in verse or otherwise, on the matter of the politics of poetry, do not seem out of place. In her book Forché makes a clear and simple set of statements. If her work does not encourage (or dramatize) a reflection on the act of her own art, or the context (academic, North American) out of which it was made, it does other things that may be equally necessary. (For one thing it may encourage us to sympathize with -- to enter into -- a culture which is not, on the one

hand, our own, but which is, on the other, subject to our culture's inherited and arbitrary political power.)

Second, Forché's work need not set before our minds a definition or limit of what may be demanded of poetry in respect to politics. Indeed, one may perhaps have (good) reasons for believing that "moral biography" is a solid ground to start from. Is "dislodging the Subject" a totalized thought? Does anything at all get done which is not done by the Subject, acting alone or in concert? Does "Something Happen" when the Subject is dislodged, is Joseph Heller right when he suggests the following meaning for that phrase: the language/illusion generated by dislodged subjects in order to create the figment of a virtue (or a vice) out of the appearance of a necessity?

Adorno has counseled a permanent need to reflect, and reflect upon, the events and deeds of our worlds. A poet is one locus of particular deeds and events, as poetry is a special kind of reflective work. Reading Enzensberger one may feel -- I certainly felt -- that a special responsibility and privilege has been laid upon poets and poetry, as if they were the "last and only place of refuge" for a degrading society. But they are not, and probably never have been, though sometimes it has been fruitful to <u>think</u> that they are (for example, in the early 19th century).

Indeed, to think that one's work and mode of work makes a difference is perhaps an absolute for vital human conduct.

Which brings me to a last point. Poetry is a marginal activity in our age, whether it is carried on within relatively large institutions

(like the academy) or at even more extreme peripheries (as in the many local centers of poetic work, and small presses, and transitory groups). The dominant art media of our day -- TV and the movies -- are licensed to expressive possibilities which are closed to contemporary poets. (Adorno was hopelessly misguided when he condescended to these forms of artistic work.) But poetry possesses -- by virtue of its marginality -- a special critical privilege. No one is in a better position to reflect upon the invisible and suppressed aspects of a world than the person who is its most alienated member. Trotsky called this "the privilege of historical backwardness", and the entire Marxian analytic is grounded to its truth.

This very moment is, therefore, peculiarly opportune for the resort of poetry: the Subject occupies the margins of culture, the poet is an all-but invisible communicator honored in memory rather than event, and the forms of poetic discourse have achieved an acute stage of historical backwardness.

-- "Why would anyone choose such a mode of discourse?"

-- "Partly because in poetry you may say things which no one need pay any attention to -- until it is too late, and the censors have been already escaped."

-- "Too late for what?

-- That is something we shall have to find out. In any case, too late to stop what has found its voice."

Footnotes

1. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, The Consciousness Industry. On Literature, Politics, and the Media (New York, 1974).

2. Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia (London, 1974), 26.

3. See Eliot Weinberger's review of The Country Between Us (New York, 1981), in Sulfur 6 (1983), 161, 164.

4. See the passage from Forché's poem "Message", quoted below.

5. The next three and one-half lines of this passage go soft, flinching away from the preceding voice of judgment which ought to have warned Forché against further, facile maneuvers. She does not listen to that voice often enough in The Country Between Us.

6. This is from an untitled poem by Arakawa and Madeline Gins, collected in a group of poems called "Language Sampler" edited and with an Introduction by Charles Bernstein (Paris Review 86 [Winter, 1982], pp. 75ff.). The passage from "Lies" by Alan Davies is also taken from this selection of "Language" poems.

7. From my own "In Memory of Herzen," in Sulfur 7 (1983), 48.