Theories and Methodologies

Poems, Pandemic: Early Thoughts

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The alliteration of this section's title, "Poetry and Pandemic," creates a strangely natural pairing, language's way of hinting that poetry is ready to respond to pandemic. Signs may be arbitrary, but poems put words together in ways that point the signs in new directions. That impression was confirmed to me by the return of the podcast *Poetry Unbound* in September 2020, hosted by Pádraig Ó Tuama. He gave a splendid reading of the alliterative genius of Ada Limón's poem "Wonder Woman," and he began by reminding listeners that "poetry isn't necessarily interested in telling the whole story. Poetry is really interested in stopping in small moments and telling the story of that moment."

Poems can of course tell vast, complex stories, and there will surely be staggering, consciousness-changing poems about this pandemic when we are on the other side of it, perhaps sooner.[1] But Ó Tuama rightly pulls us back from the compulsion to tell a finished story and beckons us to look at poems that fix the small moments that will add up eventually to that whole. At this early moment, too, scholarly inquiry might best hold itself to provisional, partial observations. Here are some such thoughts, basically a list of ideas that circle back on themselves, almost like palindromes. The coursing back, the repetitions in form and theme, are by design, the better to study emerging patterns in the pandemic's poems.

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[I]

There is no pandemic poetry without a sense of history, but what would that history be, and whose history? I thought immediately of the poetry of HIV/AIDS as a point of comparison. As I read through many poems, some of them familiar and long loved, I experienced

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them differently. Instead of encouraging me to learn from those poems how to read the present, as I had hoped, our epidemic was changing how I read earlier texts, and some images strangely stood out. Melvin Dixon's poem "Heartbeats," for example, has a repeating metaphor of breathing that seemed eerily of our moment. The following short stanza appears not long before the end of the poem: "No air. Breathe in. / Breathe in. No air." Dixon's poem is about a body that is losing its ability to pull life from the air, but rather than the miasmic air that spreads COVID-19, the utter absence of air forms the threat in this poem, as if the atmosphere were a vacuum. I noticed that image of air as if it were electrified, which in turn made me pay a different kind of attention to how Dixon gave breath and movement to the air itself. He created an endless absence, intensified by the palindrome structure of the phrase "no air" wrapped around the command to inhale, itself repeated. These structures—the repeating phrase, the imperative—have proved durable in this new era of disease and death, and I will loop back to them. But the poems of HIV/AIDS have at least one more lesson to teach first.

[II]

There is no pandemic poetry without politics. Poets like Thom Gunn or Mark Doty or Tory Dent ironically laced their poems with the wrathful public discourse around those who were infected with HIV in the greatest numbers, including gay men. Politics in the COVID-19 pandemic would surely put on display the indifference of many in power toward those whom the virus has killed or displaced or rendered jobless—the poor, the uninsured and underinsured, members of minority groups, to speak only of the disparities in the United States. A number of poems do that and do it well. Jericho Brown, in "Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry," builds his text around vulnerable workers, those who "have washed their hands for you."

Brown's poem reminds us that other dangers do not disappear in a pandemic. He locates those essential workers near and far:

> Right up the street and in cities I mispronounce,
> In towns too tiny for my big black
> Car to quit, and in every wide corner
> Of Kansas where going to school means
> At least one fieldtrip
> To a slaughterhouse.

Here, geographic movement suggests the spreading virus, and the references to cars and buses—the poem ends with workers going home on the bus—create a sense of movement that sharply contrasts the widespread immobility during the lockdown in force when the poem appeared. But the enjambment after "black" means that readers also sense a shadowy reference to a Black person's body that the "too tiny" towns might find threatening. "I want so little," the poet will write, and later the speaker mentions a smile hidden beneath his mask, as if gestures of reassurance could keep him safe.

Brown's poem makes sure we cannot forget the broader political context that makes COVID-19 one of several dangers for Black people, and not only for them. As I write these words, we are beset by massive wildfires in the West and by a presidential election that weekly threatens to go off the rails. Extraordinary protest is happening in and beyond the United States. On the streets of Belarus, for instance, where an authoritarian president has stolen an election from people who are not ready to concede, women and men are marching weekly. Risks are being taken across the United States in protests against systemic racism and police violence.

These and many other crises circle the globe as quickly as the virus itself, so that the poems of one nation can take on the political woes of another. A poem by the Russian poet Irina Kotova, Визуализация жизни / смерти ("Vizualizatsiia zhizni / smerti"; "Visualizing Life / Death"), posted to *Facebook* and read at an online event in May 2020, evoked the respirators and intubations that Kotova (also a doctor) was witnessing in Moscow hospitals. But it also included as a one-line refrain the image of a Black man walking along a highway. That single line alluded to a larger narrative of race and vulnerability, and it allowed Kotova to remind her readers

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of dangers far beyond the hospital's walls, dangers not of disease but of social inequality.

[III]

Pandemic poetry is also, necessarily, the poetry of illness, and a vast archive of work that stands ready to be comprehended through the theories of disability studies, gender and sexuality studies, critical race theory, and the medical humanities. The literature of HIV/AIDS established a significant context here as well, especially as HIV became not a lethal but a chronic illness. The extreme fear of contagion, which is a defining trait of COVID-19, will make the poetry of this pandemic one in which danger is seen as if everywhere. In our media-saturated environment, seeing threats may be accompanied by other ways to visualize the disease, and death itself.

Kotova's poem begins by trying to fix such acts of visualization in memory:

гигабайты фотографий заполняют стены
потом—комнату
комната становится бассейном
ты погружаешься в него живым тёплым телом
вся прошедшая жизнь—ее конденсат / концентрат
останавливается / схватывается плотностью стен

медиа-пространство захлёбывается
визуализацией жизни / смерти

gigabytes of photos fill the walls
then fill the room
the room becomes a pool
you bury your live warm body in it
all of past life—its condensation / concentration
pauses / grasps at the solidity of the walls

the media space is choking
on the visualizations of life / death[2]

Kotova, unusually for her, uses a slash between words to make meaning waver between life and death, between actions and residues. Because this room will prove to be in a hospital, the photographic representations loom as if so many X-rays meant to diagnose "all of past life." There are too many images (gigabytes of them), and these digitized visualizations are choking a media space that is more like a wall or a barrier than a conduit for the free flow of information. Later in the poem, Kotova describes Albrecht Dürer drawing his own dying face from a mirror as a model for Christ—this is, I take it, her radical point of contrast to the computer-assisted visualizations of her own age. Dürer uses a mirror to make his drawing; his self-reflecting gesture, like the many reflexive verbs in Kotova's poem, returns us to the notion of return itself.

Like the syntactic palindromes of Dixon's poem, Kotova's use of Dürer suggests a back-and-forth relationship between creator and created. Kotova does not find such a symmetry in the relationship between doctor and patient.[3] But others have. In "An American Nurse Foresees Her Death," Amit Majmudar writes:

> Nurses I know are nursing nurses
> through the never-ending fevers
> ending them. That will be me soon,
> one or the other, or one then the other.

Again, we see densely recursive language, sounds and whole words returning on themselves. Only the forward movement of time separates those who are ill from those who nurse them back to health—or not, and thus the title foresees death. In "Antiviral Cocktail: A Sequence," the larger text of which this poem is a part, one poem ends with the flat statement, "We go to work with the bodies we have" ("Body Armor"), a clear reference to Donald Rumsfeld's infamous observation during the war in Iraq that "you go to war with the army you have" (qtd. in Schmitt). Majmudar's revision of that line foregrounds the vulnerable bodies of those who provide care and reinforces the terrible circular logic of this poem.

[IV]

There is no pandemic poetry without the poetry of death, as these poems all hint. But Majmudar's dispassionate poem, like Kotova's, shows us that the poetry of death is no longer the poetry of elegy.

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Comforting gestures of commemoration and ritual are impossible when people cannot assemble; where deaths in some places have happened so thick and fast that refrigerator trucks were kept running to hold the corpses; where, as was suspected in Iran, mass graves were dug (Cunningham and Bennett); and where, in hospitals and at home, thousands of people died alone.

How in such a moment could the consolations of elegy be imagined?[4] How indeed could elegy's movement from grief to consolation be thinkable, while the deaths pile up? Rather than the questioning format thought so appropriate to elegy (Sacks 22), the rhetorical trope that stands out from current poems of this pandemic is the list, whether of persons or images or material objects on which illness and isolation are imprinted. They pile up, their meanings additive, because they cannot yet be meaningfully categorized or comprehended.

The refusal of elegy is beautifully registered in Evie Shockley's poem "an inoculation against innocence." It starts with a list, and Shockley presents the poem with visibly divided lines on the page that intensify the centrifugal force of that list. Her poem is set as two columns: on the left, we read "wwiii floated the globe a common" separated by about an inch of blank space from the rest of that line, "enemy. as usual, we were all in it." The columns slow down our horizontal reading of the lines, as we do the work to reassemble the phrase "a common enemy," and the lines further slow us because they are embedded with interruptions, explanations, and internal commentary. The first five lines contain a list of "contaminants" that "coat the surface of everything we / touch." That list includes "doorknobs, compassion, [space before the line continues] healthcare, all teeming with germs / of the past." The break in the middle of the line lets us see how oddly the terms "doorknobs, compassion, healthcare" go together, and thus how germs on doorknobs are the least of what has contaminated compassion or a broken health-care system. Another list comes a few lines later ("no protective clothing, no / tests, no ventilators, no plan"). This is a more coherent collection, which gathers the missing elements of a failed public health response (and reiterated later in the poem: "not even / a clean pair of gloves").

Shockley's poem also takes on the task of writing with a sense of history (the mention of "wwiii" in line 1, by which the poet refers to the pandemic, is followed up by a comment on "the 2nd world war"). Like Brown, who firmly grasps the inequalities exposed by pandemic suffering in "Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry," Shockley archly asks, "will the folks who can stay at home / pay the ones who can't?" Her poem concludes with the impending losses of those who are dear and beloved, ringing what the poem calls the bell of distress. Politics, history, death—all seem hopelessly intertwined here.

[V]

The poems of lists and death, of politics and history, can, however, take a different turn. An untitled work, published in Russia in July 2020 by a young Almaty poet, Selina Taisengirova, uses the rhetoric of lists in a refrain of persons and dates. No proper nouns, no names, just division by gender and by generation. Women and men get one line each, and a varying list of the years in which they were born. These lists amount to a litany of response to the pandemic as a form of mass death.[5]

Taisengirova's poem gives us an unexpected allegory for that mass death. Her poem spreads out over its stanzas not just the repeating lists of birth dates for men and women but also an evocation of the last days of the dinosaurs. In the second half of the poem, Taisengirova asks what it feels like to be a species dying out:

думали ли динозавры
находясь в самом конце эпохи
что это происходит с кем-то другим
верили
ли
что скоро все станет как прежде

мужчины 1973, 1966, 1944, 1970 и 1962 годов
  рождения
женщины 1956 и 1954 годов рождения.

а может в самый последний день
строили планы

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барбекю с друзьями на выходных
пара недель отпуска на морском берегу
концерт на спортивной арене
где все обнимутся заплачут
и запоют одну песню

мужчины 1945, 1938, 1979, 1973, 1945, 1951, 1953, 1955, 1967, 1946, 1956 и 1961 годов рождения
женщины 1970, 1972, 1947, 1956, 1954, 1950, 1988, 1965, 1947, 1980, 1979 и 1949 годов рождения

did the dinosaurs think
when they found themselves at the very end of the era
that this was happening to someone else
did they
believe
that soon everything would go back to the way it was

men born in 1973, 1966, 1944, 1970, and 1962
women born in 1956 and 1954

or maybe on the very last day
they were making plans
a barbecue with friends on the weekend
a couple of weeks of vacation on the shore
a concert in a sports stadium
where everyone will embrace will cry
will sing the same song

men born in 1945, 1938, 1979, 1973, 1945, 1951, 1953, 1955, 1967, 1946, 1956, and 1961
women born in 1970, 1972, 1947, 1956, 1954, 1950, 1988, 1965, 1947, 1980, 1979, and 1949

Taisengirova embeds signals of modernity—barbecues, vacations, concert plans—so that the phrase "at the very end of the era" becomes ambiguous. Public gatherings, embraces, and singing in unison, impossible at the moment the poem was written, become legible retrospectively as signs of imminent demise. The fantasy of everything reverting to some lost version of the past is as ridiculous as it would have been for the dinosaurs, now long-extinct. What we can know of the losses is like what we learn from carbon-dating the bones of dinosaurs: when they were born.

The comparison to the mass extinction of dinosaurs lets Taisengirova set her poem in the long expanse of deep time, pulling our thoughts about human loss into the vastly greater context of animate life before the Anthropocene. What does it do for us, at this moment, to imagine deep time? One answer is that it situates the epidemiological crisis that began with COVID-19 in the broader climate crisis that has been building for decades.

[VI]

There can be poetry of the pandemic without that ecological crisis, but perhaps running away from it is ill advised. That is one way to read the double entendre in the title of Jorie Graham's 2020 book *Runaway*, which was likely finalized before the pandemic set in. It ends with "Poem," a title that stands out among the usually very expressive titles Graham gives to her poems.[6] The poem's imaginative powers and its reach are vast, belying any modesty the title might suggest. The earth is shown enduring our trampling destructions and yet able to speak. "Poem" ends,

> The earth
> said remember
>
> me. I am the
> earth it said. Re-
> member me. (83)

The command to remember wraps around a phrase like an embracing rhyme. "Poem" begins with that same command ("The earth said / remember me" [82]). This poem returns us to the palindromes and repetitions of Dixon and others, but in such a stripped-down format that it leaves us with almost nothing but the repetitions themselves.

"Poem," first published in print in the fall of 2020, would seem to have no particular relation to the pandemic. But Graham recontextualized the poem tellingly when it served as her contribution to Harvard's Pause for Art, an online "daily dose of artistic inspiration" for anyone "looking for ways to stay connected to a larger community beyond the necessary practices of social distancing and isolation." Pause for Art promised "comfort and joy" ("Pause for Art: Creative Moments").[7] I am not convinced that Graham proposed comfort,

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although a reviewer of *Runaway* called "Poem" a benediction (Gordinier).

If that is true, then the blessing comes not from the poet but from the earth to which she listens. It is an offering of grace, tempered by quiet sternness. Graham writes at the start of the poem, "The earth said / don't let go," which seems a hand extended (82). "Poem," among its many virtues, has returned us to the question of consolation, which pushes and pulls at the poetry of pandemic. The fear of offering empty solace, surely, is real for many poets. Poems cannot cure disease or cure social isolation—what, indeed, can the poetry of pandemic do, besides create a record in charged language of what we live through?[8]

The answer resides in the language and its range of electrical charges, for poems have the capacity to change the valence of metaphors and patterns of thought. Surely that is one reason Shockley chose the title "an inoculation against innocence" for her poem. Not a palindrome but a strangely symmetrical phrase, it brushes two nouns against each other so that the patterns of their consonants and the morphology of their syllables resound in repetition. We study the words all the more closely as a result. To inoculate, we realize, is to introduce a small amount of lethal disease into an organism in order to build its immunities. And Shockley, with that one word "inoculation," opens up the possibility that something that is salvific could attach to the virus. Even the metaphor of the virus's attributes can be turned to productive political discussion. As Romi Crawford has written, "In 2020 'I can't breathe' intertwines the history of the coronavirus with the history of racially inflected police violence." I do not know that the language of poetry can work that magic with all the historical, political, and epidemiological elements in our current pandemic. But as more poems are written and as, we hope, the pandemic recedes, we can be on the lookout for more possibilities—in the crisis of COVID-19 and in so many other social and political woes of 2020. These poems will point the words of our lives in new directions, and not a moment too soon.

Notes

1. Outka has argued that *The Waste Land* is such a poem for the 1918 flu pandemic, finding in it a "post-pandemic consciousness." The result, she writes, is "a powerful record of the pandemic's enduring emotional and physical costs, as well as a record of the denial that surrounded it" (144). In her book, Outka considers only one text that was written during the pandemic, W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming"; for popular poetic texts written at the time, see Foss.

2. All translations are my own.

3. Although, she hints at it: the speaker's living, warm body descends into a pool of water as if into a burial site.

4. Writing after the work of Sacks, scholars who focus on more modern poetry have retained his model of elegy and its Freudian basis, although they use it to show that consolation is out of reach (Fuss; Ramazani).

5. In the seminar for Project Rhizome about what it called the "mediatization of death" (медиатизацией смерти), where Kotova also read the poem discussed here, the sociologist and psychologist Irina Kaspe spoke about the spreading pandemic as a form of mass death. She compared it to the Holocaust or Stalin's Terror in terms of degrees of separation, arguing that people will remember it based on how close it came to them personally ("Mozhem li my" 00:18:40–22:43).

6. In an earlier collection, Graham wrote a poem called simply "Earth," to which this one offers itself in stark comparison. Unlike the lengthy, intricately spaced out "Earth," "Poem" is compact, stretching long only because of its very short lines.

7. For Graham's reading of "Poem," see "Pause for Art—Jorie Graham."

8. In choosing Taisengirova's poem for inclusion on the *Telegram* poetry channel Metazhurnal, Bannikov exhorted poets to write about the pandemic for this very reason: not all will survive it, he noted darkly, and the pandemic and the epidemic of information of this moment are phenomena that beg to be comprehended.

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Можем ли мы, может ли искусство справиться с медиатизацией смерти? ["Mozhem li my, mozhet li iskusstvo spravit'sia s mediatizatsiei smerti?"]. *YouTube*, uploaded by Проект РИЗОМА / RHIZOME Project, 7 May 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=86kKIOrcYEs.

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