

Long story short, I'm dissatisfied with how I've been engaging writers and their work, especially within the specific community of poets I find myself navigating, mostly here in New York. I'm tired of the poles—self-imposed, no doubt—of uninhibited praise to save face vs. closed-door shit-talk to blow off steam. Avoidance tactics through and through.

I was already in the thick of writing something that might address and particularize these ambivalences when Joseph Bradshaw sent me (and several others) a link to a poem of his in *Elective Affinities*, saying he'd written us into it or had us in mind while writing. It's called *The New York School*.

In it he harks back the energy and associative speed of a poetry heir to an older New York City, then sifts it through trends of tone and technology particular to our currency. We, who live and write here now. Same name, different city.

I read the piece as a kind of slant “meditation in an emergency” on friendship, influence, and tradition, which gathers its energy in the quick accumulation of names. The activity of naming. Names that most poets, at this point, know.

But there's something about it ... It's the kind of thing I'd normally toss my two cents about in private, cringed as I was and not knowing why. So there it was: an entrance. A solicitation.

The New York School is ecstatic in its name-dropping. Everything's game, so there's big generosity by way of inclusion. Humor is a hinge, crossing party lines. Or it's just for shits and giggles, no strings attached. And this buoyancy throughout grinds on all the looming hints of a new ethos of relation; one seemingly imposed by the most common modes of thought or uses of technology. I'm thinking specifically of the way in which the dynamics of real-time/space relationships get flattened by the very nature of certain forms of social media (i.e., one size fits all status posts and like-or-silence replies). More specifically, I'm thinking of how the notion of friendship is often reduced to that of acquaintanceship, without any corresponding shift in title or name. In forms of social media like Facebook, “knowing” someone very often gets conflated with “knowing of” someone, which then flies under the exact same flag (friendship), at least in name.

In the case of Joseph's poem, proper names function almost identically: distinctions are rarely made between the names of people he knows personally and the names of people he knows only via their work, rumor, their reputation, or just flat out day-dream. And even when such distinctions are made (Joseph talks about receiving text-messages or hanging out with friends at certain instances in the piece, for example), the tone with which the names in question are handled is often blanketed. The effect is one that levels, to a certain degree, the nature of the relationships between Joseph and those names he lists. What's foregrounded, then,

is the surface of relationship. All the signs of relationship. And the significance of each name is distilled to its associative function within the poem Joseph's writing. In other words, they're treated as material and laid bare as such in that treatment. And this begs the question: how aren't we always doing that when we use proper names in any poem? Which is interesting.

But I took the bait, miffed by the way it makes less-than-flattering sketches from the names of so many nuanced poets and artists. Some dead and some I know and love. It burns through them. Fuel for the speed, street for trajectory. And while it clearly demonstrates a version of the relative fluidity of myth certain names exude and the range of associations available, to say nothing of value, it also hardly cracks the shiny surfaces of iconography for the unpacking of raw goods beneath: meanings made by those named, their poems, the generative dirt. None of that dug up.

So, what is excavated by all this naming? Is that question a total mis-fire of expectation?

Joseph, I think I should address you directly here.

Look, I know, I'm pretty snagged up in old modes of heroics and your piece, in tone alone, helps me check my inflated sense of poet-lore or canonizing lines or the mythical status I've given to artists of all kinds in faux-coronation. But trivializing lives doesn't undermine their lime-light, and bad-taste is no curb against the tendency to pedestal. It's just romanticizing's jealous twin.

I KNOW poetry's not the same thing as life. And names aren't the same thing as people. But Schuyler and O'Hara left a whole lot more than the tread of an aging face and grace in a Roman nose. And Guest gets tossed in as gender counter-weight with no defense from that reduction. And, really? this is what comes to mind when you think about Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley:

I often wonder about the flirtations between Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley, when Berrigan was visiting faculty at the Iowa Writers Workshop and Notley was so young and full of admiration for the wily New York poet. She must have wanted so badly to be part of the poetic life of New York City, to be filled with the breath and babies of this poet named Ted, who was 11 years her senior, and Berrigan I'm sure loved fucking Notley (they were both Scorpios) and he loved knowing Notley would probably cook him dinner and she'd listen to all his new poems afterward as if she's hearing the true secrets of the pope's depravity.

Alice Ordered Me to Be Made, Waltzing Matilda, Margaret & Dusty, At Night the States, Close to Me and Closer ... (The Language of Heaven) and Desamere, The Descent of Alette, Mysteries of Small Houses, In the Pines, Reason and Other

Women, Culture of One to name some other names. And none make Notley seem wide-eyed in want of house-wifedom or redemption by virtue of “real-poet” hubby.

male principle of the poetry, you earnestly sexed
character of your poetry fucking
me across the decades like we
poets like or centuries why aren't you

my obstetrician, are you?
for they forgot us a midwife...

That's Notley, from *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby*.

It's not like these names need to be defended or held up in any particular way. It's just that we seem to be living through a situation, especially in poetry, in which the knock-off monument increasingly replaces the thing commemorated, giving no entrance to the lives, poems, and legacies of those named, which are really just relics without our aid. There's this overwhelming tone of irreverent euphoria, and I just don't trust it. It's like throwing up money—“making it rain”—as the ship goes down. Which is fact, I guess, because it's everywhere around us. That's a general mood, being cool with that. Fine. But in the case of your piece, Joseph, it's done under the guise of what I read as a genuine desire for renewal:

I was born the same year Paul Thek made a list of all the possible people in his life who might love him unconditionally and forever. There were a lot of NOs on Thek's list. Robert Wilson and Peter Hugar are two I remember. The only YES, I think, was Susan Sontag, who Thek hadn't spoken with in over a decade. I can't imagine taking such a bleak inventory. The closest I come is when I write the names of my friends and the people I don't know in my poems, as I sit and wait for another call or text to summon the transformation of this totally ordinary and idle afternoon, though I don't need to write YES or NO beside Eileen Myles or Bethany Ides or Jamie Townsend or Tim Dlugos or anyone because love renews our static names, and I can be Joseph “Paul Thek” Bradshaw and add as many friends to my poem as I wish, and each name is both YES and NO, and together we'll never think of anything horrible ever again YES and NO and I'll never be lonely YES and NO with you so close YES and NO and six Google searches related to the New York School are *new york school john* and *poetry twentieth century english poetry* and *new york school district* and *new york law school* and *language poetry* and *confessional poetry*.

Yes, love does “renew our static names” and while obliterating binaries is a potent means toward that anti-end, I don't think just any breed of “YES and NO” actually banks transcendence or eases ontological angst. And maybe that's not the point. But the piece itself starts to read like the strains of a “heart dying,” as you write.

Which is a state we can all relate to, resigned to downplay any antidote for that condition.

I guess in my want for cuts against that grain, in seeing that poetry is a practice capable of performing those cuts, I believe in the revitalizing potential of naming and I've always admired the aspect of your work that engages those questions which inevitably arise when writing directly about others (other people, living or dead). They're rich, generative questions that sharply resist all the most gentrifying and homogenizing forms of social relation. And they're weary of the ways in which those forms might come to dictate how relationship is represented (and experienced), both in poetry and in general. So, I wonder why the names (and the lives those names imply) that largely make up *The New York School* suddenly seem to enact the very forms your previous work seems to resist. I wonder if that's actually true? Is it? I'm still thinking about it.

I don't mean to be a hater or a pendulum or a ricochet either. "Poetry can handle it," as I've heard Rob Fitterman say on several occasions. And I agree. I appreciate that you just went ahead and made a scene. It definitely teased out a whole topography of unchecked assumptions that I perceived via friction: my own senses of affinity, community-life and how I'd like to write it.

I know that sounds like clean-up work, but it's not.

"I'm looking to make a stricture swell into a heart" (Alice Notley)

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