

The Effects of the 2007-2008 Financial Crisis on United States Poetry as Shown

by Joshua Clover's *Red Epic*

By Joseph Hunter Roberts

There will be a revolution or there will not. If the latter these poems were nothing but entertainments. If the former it will succeed or fail. If the latter these poems were better than nothing. If the former it will feature riots, fire and looting and these will spread or they will not. If the latter these poems were curiosities. If the former it will feature further riots, manifestos, barricades and slogans and these will leap into popular songs or they will not. (Joshua Clover, *Red Epic*, 3)

This new millennium began with a moment of great crisis. The monolithic fabrications of capital, property, and finance shook under the weight of their ever-growing bulk. When one of the countless threads making up the web of global financial infrastructure frayed and snapped, it sent out ripples that can still be felt to this day a decade and a half later. That moment was the 2007-2008 financial crisis; a financial crisis perhaps unlike any that came before it. A moment in our recent history that inspired many responses. For some, it was a moment that called for change. It inspired marches, protests, and occupations. It was a crisis that demanded a response on all fronts, as it shook the United States down to the foundations. The changes caused by the financial crisis spanned the entirety of U.S. society. As such, there was and is a need for poetry to respond to it. The question becomes: what is the purpose of poetry in such a moment and beyond? What can poetry do in the face of money, power, and tradition? That is the question raised by Joshua Clover's *Red Epic* (2015).

The book begins by placing itself in this very specific moment in time by starting with the poem "My Life in the New Millennium." The title of this poem places it in the early 2000s, and its placing as the book's first poem sets the precedent that all other poems are written in relation to that moment as well. This poem, and the book of poetry as a whole, is a response to the early 2000s, not as a distant analytical description but rather as something personal and lived through author. The personal nature of the poetry brings the reader closer to the speaker to experience the life of the new millennium. The poem opens with the speaker in a state of isolation and resentment: "It was true that the more I hated people the more I loved cats." (Clover 13). This quotation is a use of cliché and an example of the dry humor found throughout the book of poetry, but one that works very well. It is a simple and easily digested line that helps ease the reader into not only a complicated poem but a complicated and dense book of poetry.

There is an immediate shift in tone, with the following lines changing from distant and indifferent to surprised and fascinated: "Then people started to surprise me. / Often this involved fire or Coca-Cola bottles with petrol which amounts to the same thing." (Clover 13). The speaker is surprised by the fire. Specifically he is surprised that there are people willing to start them; this implies that the earlier hate was not rooted in others' actions but rather in their inactions. The speaker's hate is shattered at the same time as the bottle. The exact diction of these lines is also very important to look at. The use of a brand name in the Molotov cocktails can be read in two ways. The first is that anything and everything will be used, and even the product of the powerful will be thrown back as a tool of destruction and change. The second is one posed more directly by the poem itself: "Once fire is the form of the spectacle the problem / becomes how to set fire to fire." (Clover 13). Is there any point in setting fire if the bottle used to do it is a product placement? Can the poet learn to burn even fire?.

Over the course of this essay, I will be exploring the effects of the economy, especially moments of economic distress, on poetry. Specifically I will examine the effects of the 2007-2008 financial crisis on U.S. poetry as shown by the book of poetry *Red Epic* by Joshua Clover. First, I will take a moment to explain the crisis before moving on to the background of Joshua Clover and *Red Epic*. Lastly, I will investigate the relationship between the crisis and poetry via close readings of several poems from the book, focusing on its description of revolution and the intended audience for *Red Epic*.

The Financial Crisis

For as long as there have been economies of any worthwhile scale, there have been booms and busts. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the Great Depression swooping in on the heels of the roaring twenties. So if this has happened before then, the question becomes what made the 2007-2008 financial crisis different for those that came before. That must be understood before its effects on poetry can be adequately examined. John B. Taylor, in his paper "The Financial Crisis and the Policy Responses: An Empirical Analysis of What Went Wrong," states that the catalyst for the crisis was the housing boom and bust that led to further turmoil (Taylor 1). There were several new factors at play in this crisis that had not been present in any before. These are the globalization of the economy, the founding of the shadow banking industry, new mortgage systems, and unforeseen federal involvement.

Outside of the housing crisis, the other major factor in the crisis was globalization. The globalization of the world's economy has led many economists to believe that it has become too big to fail— that if any one aspect of the great web of transactions and capital were to fray, there would be enough support to keep the frayed thread from snapping. This obviously was not the

case. This misplaced faith in the globalization of the economy explains some of the actions that ultimately led to the financial crisis. Joshua Clover is familiar with this globalization, writing in the poem "My Life in the New Millennium", "land as the place of politics and the sea as the space of commerce" (Clover 13). The politics of land have become interconnected by the commerce of the sea; this has been true for centuries but never more so than now. In the modern day, the world's countries are all connected to each other to the point of near-complete interdependence.

With this globalization in mind, the Federal Reserve enacted several changes to monetary policy. The simple explanation for those changes was that the federal interest rate was lowered. A lower federal interest rate is meant to stimulate economic growth. For a period of time, these policies were successful, but they had created a situation where "monetary policy was too easy" (Taylor 5). This 'easy' economy was making access to capital easier for everyone. Easy capital for some allowed them to make great profits, and for others, it was a false sense of wealth. There is a real difference between cash in hand and loans, but lower interest rates meant more consumers and businesses were taking out more loans which meant there was more money moving around the economy. This sort of growth, though, has to be maintained; otherwise, it will start to cost money, as people fail to pay back their loans. This was especially true of the housing market. The bigger the economic bubble got, the more mortgages were handed out to less and less reliable borrowers, until it inevitably reached a critical mass and popped. This critical mass was reached partly because of the easy monetary policy encouraging risk-taking for lenders and borrowers alike.

This, while definitely not good, would have ultimately been fine if not for another new aspect of the modern economy - the shadow banking industry. There is an important distinction

between traditional banks and the shadow banking industry. Traditional banks have several safety measures in place to stop cascading failures, such as Deposit Insurance and the Federal Reserve's responsibility to act as a lender of last resort. The shadow banking industry had no such safety measures. This lack of regulation made shadow banking significantly more lucrative than traditional banks, but it obviously came with much more risk.

These large investment firms, which made up the shadow banking industry, also standardized the use of complex securities. These financial securities are things that hold value and can be traded between two parties, such as stocks and bonds. Complex financial securities are many smaller assets cut apart and then bundled together again to form a new whole security. The purpose of this is to create a more diversified and, therefore, less risky asset. On complex securities and the role they played in the crisis, Taylor writes:

A significant amplification of these problems occurred because the adjustable-rate subprime and other mortgages were packed into mortgage-backed securities of great complexity. The risk of these were underestimated by the rating agencies either because of a lack of competition, poor accountability, or, most likely, an inherent difficulty in assessing risk due to the complexity. (Taylor 14).

In the years leading up to the crisis, these misjudged securities were filtered all across the United States financial sector like gold-plated land mines. The better off any one of these financial firms was doing, the more of the land mines they were likely to have, so highly were these securities valued. Eventually, an unwary foot landed and set off a massive chain reaction.

And with that unwary step, the over-bloated housing bubble bursts and cripples the United States financial sector in ways that can still be felt even now over a decade later.

These hidden threats continued to plague the economy as it attempted to recover. Unlike the next most recent financial crisis, there was no issue of liquidity or how much tangible money there was to be circulated, but "rather it was due to fundamental problems in the financial sector relating to risk" (Taylor 17). The financial sector had lost faith in its own ability to make rational choices, which stagnated its ability to recover from the damages the faulty securities had caused. This trepidation and confusion found its way to the very top end of money management, that is, the Federal Reserve ('the Fed'). Finding ways to prevent and recover from economic crisis is one of the Fed's primary responsibilities. Unfortunately, there were no existing procedures or methods for dealing with this new crisis. This led the Federal Reserve to keep their plans secretive as they tested various methods of economic recovery so as to not give false hope or a temporary solution which was actually just a stopgap before worse economic turmoil. Ultimately, such methods amounted to ruin.

In 2008, a year after the crisis had begun, it suddenly and for many unexpectedly worsened: "This lack of predictability about Treasury-Fed intervention policy and recognition of the harm it could do to markets likely increased in the fall of 2008 when the underlying uncertainty was revealed for all to see." (Taylor 28). A predictable Federal Reserve policy is an essential cornerstone for the financial sector of any economy. It is that predictability that nearly all other aspects of the sector are based on. Since people were unable to predict that cornerstone, the economy broke down even more.

This economic instability disturbed many aspects of U.S. life, notable especially through the mistrust and confusion directed toward the Federal Reserve and the federal government. This

mistrust led to many protests, with some of the most prominent in the discussion of poetry being Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Oakland.

Red Epic and The Revolution

It was the Occupy Oakland movement that inspired Joshua Clover to write *Red Epic*. Joshua Clover has written several books, both poetry as well as books of cultural and political theory. His books of poetry include *Red Epic* (2015) and *The Totality for Kids* (2006). Some of his other books are *Riot.Strike.Riot* (2016) and *The Matrix* (2005). He is also a journalist that writes for *The Nation* as well as being a founding editor of Commune Editions.

Red Epic is the first book published by Commune Editions, a publishing house Clover, Jasper Bernes, and Juliana Spahr started in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis. The Occupy Oakland movement inspired the publishing house, and the group's primary focus was to harbor and nurture the new kind of poetry they felt was forming in such conditions. Their website goes as far as to say, "A provisionally new strain of poetry has begun to emerge from the entanglement of the communist and the anarchist organizing, theorizing, and struggle "(Commune). As a name like Commune Publishing would suggest, they are a source of anarchist, anti-capitalist, and anti-establishment poetry, in line with this their publications can be downloaded for free from their website. Understanding this helps to contextualize *Red Epic*. In 2010, it was the first book Commune Editions ever published. Its release placed it to perfectly follow and respond to the at the time still-fresh wound left by the 2007-2008 financial crisis. It is a collection of poetry that echoes the call of the Occupy movement. It expresses a desire to see the current systems in place dismantled and changed. It is a book of poetry that recognizes the financial crisis for the intense moment of change it was and tries to capitalize on it. That is why it

makes such a fitting example of the ways the 2007-2008 financial crisis affected U.S. poetic literature.

In many ways by establishing a publication house Red Epic is a self published work. This is apparent in several ways, both good and bad. On the one hand, it allowed the books to be published quickly as to remain relevant to the moment in history it was trying to capture. It also causes the book to be full of Joshua clovers style, going so far as to be full of neologisms of his own creation, such as, “In the main hall of the century the décor was a jumble of americanoiserie” from “Spring Georgic” (Clover 20). On the bad side also shows a lack of refinement that can be found in more traditionally published works. Ultimately I feel the personal style and quickness of publication make up for the lack of refinement.

Red Epic is a dense book of poetry with a lot of allusion to both the works of other poets as well as economists and philosophers. There are three primary forms the poetry in this book takes. First, a typical free verse style using line breaks without a set meter or rhyme scheme; the second, a prose poem both with and without punctuation; and lastly, a staggered diagonal form used to create an artificial meter within the poem. Each of these forms is used many times throughout this book of poetry.

The density does not just come from the poetic form but also the content of the book. The many references to a revolutionist tradition of poetry coupled with those made to philosophers and economists make this a profoundly political work. It is also very personal attempting to place the reader into dialog with the speaker as it poses its many questions.

Ultimately, this book of poetry is a response not only to the 2007-2008 financial crisis but the long traditions of economic theory and poetic theory. The crisis was a moment of instability in the great monolith that was the global economy. It showed not only that such a thing could

break, but that when it broke, it would be normal everyday people that would be caught in the fallout. Normal is a broad term, and I use it as such. The financial crisis hit all aspects of the economy but those hit hardest were the poor and the middle class. While those already in poverty certainly had the most difficulty, it is essential to note that many well-off middle-class homeowners were also brought low. It was the wide-sweeping nature of the crisis that brought forth the political unrest that spawned the Occupy movement, which inspired *Red Epic* and the poem "2. Transistor," a poem that calls for a revolution despite its uncertainty that such a thing will ever happen.

"2. Transistor," is an interesting poem also in its placement within the book. It is part of a larger three-part section called "Fire Sermon," functioning as both an independent piece as well as part of a larger whole. It is the center of this three-part collection, its purpose within its section and in the overall book being similar. Through the use of the prose form and parallel syntax, the poem pulls the reader to a stop and demands they consider the book as a whole in a new light.

There will be a revolution or there will not. If the latter these poems were nothing but entertainments. If the former it will succeed or fail. If the latter these poems were better than nothing. If the former it will feature riots, fire and looting and these will spread or they will not. If the latter these poems were curiosities. If the former it will feature further riots manifestos barricades and slogans and these will leap into popular songs or they will not. If the latter that's that. If the former these popular songs will be overcome or they will not. If the latter these poems were no different than the songs. If the former the popular itself will be abolished via riots barricades manifestos occupations and fire or it will not. If the latter we will spend several more decades talking about culture. If the

former the revolution will at this point be destroyed from within or without. If the latter these poems went down fighting. If the former it will feature awful confrontations with former friends and there will be further manifestoes new slogans ongoing occupations and communes and lovers will be enemies. We do not know what will happen after this point but surely this is enough to draw some preliminary conclusions. The poem must be on the side of riots looting barricades occupations manifestos communes slogans fire and enemies. (Clover 22)

This is one the clearest example of the prose form with punctuation. The poem sits at the center of the page as a large block, both inviting the reader in while also challenging them to dig into its complexities. It reads almost like a letter or manifesto. As it alternates between what the world will or will not be. Is this poem a call to arms or a lament for something that will never be? The answer is both. The poem uses the white space of the page in an interesting way. The block of prose poetry sits at the center of the page like an island condensed and isolated by the white sea all around. It places the contradictions next to and in line with each other. The form of the poem forces the reader to consider the contradictions in the text as a singular whole rather than two separate parts.

It is that contradiction that rests at the center of not only this poem but the core concept of the book. "There will be a revolution or there will not." (Clover 12) It isn't phrased as a question within the poem but as a statement, because it isn't the question the poem is asking. The poem tells the reader that there will or won't be a revolution. This is an ironclad fact as far as the speaker is concerned. The rest of the poem goes on guessing what will or won't be and what the poems will or won't be. It asserts that, while the revolution may be messy and violent, it

promises a change. A lack of revolution does not have the violence or mess but also does not have passion or change. This passion and change is considered vital for poetry by the speaker; without that passion, poetry becomes "no different than the songs" (Clover 22). This rhetoric is repeated throughout the book of poetry with clover repeating not only the idea of revolution but the words fire, riots, and violence throughout the book.

But it is the last two sentences that pose the real question or conundrum of the poetry to the reader: "We do not know what will happen after this point but surely this is enough to draw some preliminary conclusions." (Clover 12) The question asked in these lines is not explicitly asked. I find the question to be asked in the lack of certainty about what will happen next. If we don't know what will happen, then why should we take that next step? It is important that the poem says "we," including the reader for the first time. It says we are at the edge of something, and all we can really do is guess. However, it also says that that doesn't matter. That revolution or no, "The poem must be on the side of riots looting barricades occupations manifestos communes slogans fire and enemies." (Clover 12) The only option for poetry is the option of change. The only certainty the speaker can offer is the statement the speaker can give is that poetry cannot stand on the side of power. It must side with change. It must side with revolution and fire.

If the revolution holds the promise of change at the cost of being messy and volatile, then what is it that warrants such a price to be paid? What about the world is in such desperate need of change that fires and riots are not only seen as appropriate but necessary? What does this poetry identify as the oppressor that stands against change?

The revolution called for in this book is against the stagnant monolithic nature the speaker sees in the world. It is a call to action against a capitalistic society and the art that it

pushes on the world. The poem "(Stop it with your strategies)" has several quotes that make great examples of this stagnant culture: "You listen to a song no one will remember in 30 months."; The mind as we know it was developed in winter gardens, Panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, train stations—O architecture You are the greatest art, your content is modernity!"; "You've taken everything else, the Pop Years is over, here comes China." (Clover 55) A poem that calls to the enemy of the revolution and lays it out for the reader to see. The enemy of the revolution, the enemy of passion, is mundanity and conformity. It is the easiness of modern pop music and the attempt every modern building makes to be as inoffensively pleasing to as many people as it can. The call on China is on the economic aspect of art and culture. Most modern artists must worry about whether or not their art can be sold. As such, the growing economic power of China changes art as artists must sanitize their ideas to be marketable in the Chinese market.

This poetry marks the 2008 financial crisis as the moment in time modernity was at its lowest point. This is made most explicitly clear in the poem "Tranche 1". The title itself is worth looking at. A tranche is a small section of a financial security - an aspect of the financial sector that went so rotten it led to total collapse (Merriam-Webster). As such, the title fully ties the poem to the financial crisis and what it represented. The rest of the poem follows in line with the tone set by such a title.

I have lived through the end of syntax I have lived through the imperial grammars I have lived through the bursting of a bubble visible from space I have lived through the suicide of money to preserve the life of value I have lived through the fatal sacrifice of philosophy to avoid the jaws of the dialectic I have watched the spiral of Vico become

the spiral of Sismondi and then watched that become le vrai viral livre I have stood atop a small hill with Mallarmé in one hand and in the other a cognitive balm and of what virtue were our pretty phrases against a thousand beautiful men standing in rank near the sunlit shore (Clover 16).

This is another of the poems that take the form of prose poetry. Much like "2. Transistor" the form creates both a feeling of closeness or informality, which also forces the reader to dig through the block of text and find the meaning for themselves. The use of the past tense is also important to this text. This moment that is being described has already come to pass. The "I have lived through the bursting of a bubble visible from space", and "I have lived through the suicide of money to preserve the life of value". These things have already happened, and there is nothing that can be done to change that fact. The sense of finality is further driven by the repetition of the words, "I have lived through". This parallel syntax drives the point that this is not an abstraction about the future or observation of the distant past but something personally experienced by the speaker of the poem.

It is the last few lines of the poem that once again pull to the core question of this collection and of this moment in poetry: "...of what virtue were our pretty phrases against a thousand beautiful men standing in rank near the sunlit shore" (Clover 16). What is the point of poetry? What value do pretty phrases hold against the powerful, against the conformity of "a thousand beautiful men standing in rank"? There is an order and grandeur to the enemy the revolution is meant to face. Meanwhile, poetry is described as nothing more than a phrase and fractions an imperfect aspect of itself with only some novelty to bring it any worth.

Who are the "beautiful men standing in rank near the sunlit shore" (Clover 16)? There is an obvious answer given by the diction of the line. They are soldiers standing in perfect order, a promise of violence and retribution against those that would oppose conformity. That is why the speaker questions the use of poetry when standing against this force of known order. It is also a moment of reference to the epic traditions calling in the imagery of grand armies standing ready to do war. This makes the comparison between these people and poetry even starker.

Poetry for Poets

There are also three names given in this poem, "Tranche 1", that not only contribute to its meaning but also the purpose of the book as a whole. The amount of allusion in this book of poetry makes it a difficult book for someone not already well-versed in politics, economics, and poetry to parse. As such, it is not difficult to conclude the poetry of this book is for fellow poets. Understanding that this is poetry for poets changes the way it should be read and interpreted. It creates a connection between the author and the reader, both of them poets.

The first name given is "Vico". His full name is Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher from the late 1600s to early 1700s. He is often credited with the invention of the philosophy of history. The philosophy of history is the study and analysis of history in all of its parts. Much of his work was focused on the matter of class and the historical persistence of class struggles (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). He is named in this poem to add to its credibility and to call attention to the long tradition of questioning class struggles.

The next name continues the same thread, but instead of a philosopher, he is an economist. Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi was a French economist from the late 1700s to the early 1800s. In simple terms, he was an early proponent of socialism before such a term had

even came into circulation (Encyclopedia Britannica). He is included much for the same reason as the philosopher. The speaker, or rather the poet, says "I have watched the spiral of Vico become the spiral of Sismondi" (Clover 16). The poet watches them as they spiral, studying them and learning from them but not one of them.

But the poet does stand with the third name given, "have stood atop a small hill with Mallarmé" (Clover 16). This name is both a fellow poet and questioner of the status quo. The interesting part is the placement. Mallarmé is a French poet, orator, and school teacher from the late 1800s often considered to be the leader of the symbolist movement (Encyclopedia Britannica). While the first two are set apart from the speaker, Mallarmé is near. They stand together, slightly elevated, as they watch the march of history, as shown by the other two spiraling into each other.

"Tranche 1" is immediately followed by "Tranche 2". And while being similar in form, it is very different from the first. "Tranche 2" begins with: "We have given our hearts away we have given away all our dollar-denominated assets including our hearts we like regular anarchy we like rational derangement" (Clover 17). "Tranche 1" illuminates this great tradition of revolutionist thought and asks what it could possibly do when confronted by the powers that be. "Tranche 2" turns that illumination to the reader. The poem starts with the word we a clear invitation for the reader to immerse themselves into the waiting text. It is not only the speaker that has fallen victim to structured over-the-counter counter-culture but also the reader. Both have allowed their hearts to become "dollar-denominated assets" (Clover 17). The poem includes the reader as it makes it clear even anarchy is starting to become standardized.

The poetry insists that the reader is just as much complicit in the domination of the dollar as the speaker. Both the speaker and the reader made a point to come to this place. There was a

meaning to that choice, but that meaning is changing. That place is poetry. The only thing that would connect the speaker of this poem to the reader of this poem is the poem itself. This is further strengthened by "Tranche 1" as the speaker stands next to Mallarmé, giving a clear indication the speaker is a poet in some way.

The poem that immediately follows "Tranche 2" cements this idea of not only poetry for poets but revolutionary poetry for poets. Called "Haeceity," its opening stanza reads: "If what you want is calm / to be restored you are still the enemy / you have not thought thru clearly / what that means" (Clover 18). This is a clear allusion to Diane Di Prima's "Revolutionary letter #19" which marks those that want anything short of revolution as the enemy. The poetry still asks the question of what is the purpose of a poem. But the audience it is asking that question to matters. It asks poets why they write poetry. It calls for its poet readers to answer "of what virtue were our pretty phrases" (Clover 16); what is the point of this revolutionary tradition of poetics if the perfect moment has slipped by without change?

It is not only with names or text this tradition is brought to the readers' attention but also in some of the poetries forms. Many of the poems in this work are triadic-line poetry.

It was raining in das Kapital

it was raining in the City

population 111,000

in 1631 current population

eight thousand souls.

It was raining in das Kapital

it was raining in the City

at the busy intersection
of many great circles.
And maybe you are
a serotonin-slathered neuron
crackling synapse to synapse
or a eurodollar riding the infosphere
toward the City
or away which is also
toward the City...(Clover 33)

This is a modernist form created by William Carlos Williams and is used to generate a nontraditional foot or meter. It is not something that a non-poetry reader may recognize immediately or even know to mark as part of the meaning of the poem. Using such a form further pushes the idea that this work of poetry is meant for people already engaged in the world of poetry, either as writers or readers.

The form also adds an exciting element to the content of the poem. The staggered indented lines make each thought slightly disconnected from the previous line. This helps to build on what the poem is saying. When the speaker observes the world, they see people being separated and pulled apart by modern society. So by using a modern form, the message of the poem is conveyed not only by the words chosen but how they have been arranged on the page.

There is also something to be said for Clover's lyrical abilities. Within the forms and political purpose of his work beats a heart of craft and attention to detail that makes his poetry resonate. He understands how to elicit responses from the reader with his diction, "a serotonin-

slathered neuron / crackling synapse to synapse”(Clover 33). The use of alliteration and the general mastery of sonics within these lines are representative of much of Clover’s poetry. He creates a driving beat that captures the reader into the poet’s rhythm.

Some of the poems in this work use both form and reference to convey this revolutionary message to fellow poets.

He died unable to lift himself above the shoals of everyday life.

This is the sin of despair.

I speak of course of Mayakovsky.

In the twentieth century the best you could say of a person was this.

The revolution betrayed him

before he betrayed the revolution. (Clover 23)

This is the first page of "The Transformation Problem". The form is unique and complex, with a combination of enjambment and changing starting points for the lines. The line that introduces the name is both centered and placed as the focal point of the page calling attention to it as a matter of importance.

The allusion comes from naming Vladimir Mayakovsky. Who was a Russian futurist that came into prominence in the 1920s before killing himself in 1930. His poetry was acutely anti-capitalist and anti-authority to the point of often placing him in contention with the Soviet Union. While the nature of his death has been debated, the poem takes it as suicide—he could not rise above despair.

There is a fundamental difference between modern United States poetry and the poetry of Mayakovsky. The risk to the modern poet in a place like the United States is significantly less. This lack of risk is something that is noted by the poetry as it speaks of the safety and conformity of the world without revolution. When poets are more focused on whether they will be famous as opposed to what their work really means is when the light of the revolution dies. Mayakovsky died for his work. This isn't something that should be aspired to but there is an honor to be found in such commitment.

The revolution betrayed him. It did not come to his rescue it did not make a world fit for him. The poem says: "best you could say of a person was this. /The revolution betrayed him / before he betrayed the revolution." (Clover 23) It assumes that a person would betray the revolution. It asserts that when the sin of despair arrives, there are only two options: to give up on yourself or to give up on the revolution. When the first is chosen, you are betrayed, and when the second is chosen, it is the revolution that is betrayed. It is given personification by this poem. By personifying the revolution, it is given the ability to be both trusted and be trusted and as such, it can also betray and be betrayed.

The Purpose of Poetry

The understanding that the poetry of this book is for fellow poets re-contextualizes the poem that I started this essay with, "My Life in the New Millennium". When the speaker says "Some friends were prepared to help," there is an implication that those friends are other poets (Clover 3). The speaker goes on to say "Without an understanding / of the world system and the underlying truth of land / as the place of politics and the sea as the space of commerce." (Clover 3). This is to say that the poet's friends do not understand the implications of their readiness to

help. The modern revolutionist isn't aware of the tradition this work is so steeped in. That is why this book is so full of that tradition. It is to inform its reader of the history of this revolution.

This is both similar and different to the description of the revolution painted in "The Transformation Problem". That poem makes it clear that there was a time when people knew what it meant to be part of the revolution this poetry is so fixated on, but that understanding was lost or maybe just changed somewhere along the way. This is not treated as a fault, just an explanation for why the revolution has become more complicated. The poem does not condemn these new poets; it cherishes them, ending with, "it comes down / to comrades known and elsewhere." (Clover 3)

The purpose of this poetry is not to convince other poets that the revolution is some magic spell that will fix all the world's problems. It isn't really to convince its reader to do anything specific, at least not directly, instead, it poses a simple but also highly complex question to its reader. What is the purpose of poetry? Why should someone write poems about the world if the world will not yield to poetry? This book only gives a partial answer to this question. The partial answer was given in "2. Transistor". The poem ends with, "The poem must be on the side of riots looting barricades occupations manifestos communes slogans fire and enemies." (Clover 12). This is the only truly definitive statement given by this poem about the purpose of poetry. This statement sets the poem as the equal to fire and riots, and it is. A poem is capable of great things in the right circumstance. There are times when a poem changes the course of a person's entire life. However, there are also times when the same poem does nothing, like a coca cola bottle left on the side of the road. It can be a component in fire and change under the right circumstance, but it can also be nothing. Sometimes it is just a bit of trash on the side of the road.

Then what is the answer? As complicated as the question may be the answer can be made into a single simple point. The reason to write poetry is that it might mean something to someone. The poetry is written for "comrades known and unknown." (Clover 3) This poetry speaks to a long tradition, but that should not be looked at as a negative. It may be true that there are harsh realities within the revolution that is being called for in this poetry, but there is also a hope for something better. That is why poetry must not side with those that already have authority and power. This book attempts through questioning to drive the point that it is only through community and understanding between those who love poetry that it has the power to do anything at all. It admits that even all together, it all might come to nothing, but if people are separate, it will undoubtedly be for nothing.

Conclusion

Red Epic is a book of poetry that is both passionate and despondent. The question of whether or not the revolution will come plagues it from start to finish. It looks at the modern day and laments that the perfect moment passed as the 2007-2008 financial crisis was slowly but inevitably left behind. The movements spawned from it and did what they could, but ultimately the monoliths of money still stood. Their cracked foundations are slowly covered in plaster.

The poetry of this book holds onto the traditions of revolution tightly as it tries to convey the rebels of the past to the poets of the present. It says look at all that has come before this moment. On the one hand, it praises that tradition and aspires to continue it, and on the other, despairs that despite the power of that tradition, the revolution has yet to come. There has been no grand cleansing flame to make a world where Mayakovsky gets to live in peace. There are still to many people who prefer it when things are calm.

These poems have not become war songs of revolution, but they are not passing entertainments either. Just because this mystical great upheaval has not happened does not mean there hasn't been changed. These poems are a part of that long tradition of one more brick in the commune wall or straw on the back of the capitalist camel.

It is also true that the moment created by the 2007-2008 financial crisis has not passed. Those plaster-covered cracks are beginning to reveal themselves again as the United States stares down the barrel of another banking crisis. 2023 may see the monoliths once again struggle to uphold their own bloated weight. There may once again be protests and riots as those that have desperately flail to keep from losing and in doing so take from those who have nothing to give.

There will once again be a chance for poetry to be there. In this time of turbulence and change, poetry must be there. It must side with the fires and the protesters. It must be pretty phrases that light the end of a rag stuffed into the open mouth of a coca cola bottle.

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