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Interview with D. A. Powell

Devon Wootten

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An Interview with D.A. Powell

This interview took place via email during fall 2005

Devon Wootten: *In Cocktails, and I'm thinking specifically of the second and third sections, the poems begin with a reference to something outside the poetic utterance; either a film (in section two) or a biblical narrative (in section three), and it seems, though this may be my own misreading, that these references create a space in which the poem can exist. At the same time, these references seem also to 'limit,' to 'delineate' what is possible for the poem. I'm curious if you feel this to be the case, and if so, how do you see this tension working in your poems?*

D.A. Powell: I think of these poems as extremely traditional, in that they are springing forth from pre-existing sources. I think of Milton, H.D., Yeats, and Sterling Brown as models. The folktale, the myth, the Homeric hymn all create a space in which the imagination might linger, choosing new textural fabrics, new sensory perceptions and new images to elongate and reanimate these familiar structures. Films are perhaps much newer sources, but we live in a world where their storylines and visual components are as familiar to us as the paintings of Giotto or the Eclogues of Virgil might have been to a literate audience in some other time. The structure of narrative (or "sub-narrative," since these aren't really poems that tell stories qua stories) is a trellis for me. Yes, it has its finite field. But I believe, as Duncan believed, that the open field of poetry includes all of the finite fields as subsets. Just as much discovery can occur through limitation as can occur through boundlessness: one must be able to solve the problem of finite mathematics in the same way that one must be able to solve the problem of infinity. In fact, very often, the problem of the closed field presents an extraordinary opportunity: the narrative underneath the text acts as a pressure upon the language as well as upon the imagination. Marianne Moore quotes Heraclitus thusly: "compression is the first grace of style." I feel that the ache of art is its ability to transcend such external forces or to use them as values in a series of set problems. It's why we're moved by Klee's canvases or by Eisenstein's films or by Calder's sculptures—because a formal balance is created through careful arrangement of color, shape, images that often seem so very different from one another, the effect of which is to surprise us with this new entity, the finished work.

DW: *The idea of a 'trellis' is fascinating to me, though I can't say that I understand it completely. I'm attracted to the idea that the poem 'adapts' itself to the form of the trellis. My question then becomes if the pre-existing form allows the poem*

to approach the 'difficult' themes which your poems often take as their subjects. Certainly the end result is a measure of transcendence, and this suggest to me a moving through (or toward) something, via this medium; but this movement also seems to gesture at its origin—a certain 'fallen state' from which poems, in general, seem to speak—perhaps this has to do with this "ache of art" you mention. That doesn't seem very much like a question, so feel free to respond in kind.

DP: Well, I suppose 'difficulty' is part and parcel of the particular structures that interest me—trying to push against a largely heterosexualized world, including the existing traditional narratives, to make a space for this other way of being in the world—queer—that is as viable as any germ planted by humankind, and as common. But I don't even like to limit the work to this polarized, flat surface. After all, a poem is not an argument. As Emerson said, arguments convince nobody: we look at them, we weigh them, we turn them over, and we decide against them. So I'm not merely trying to do that thing queer poets try to do, that "hey, look over here; I'm loud and I'm queer" kind of gesturing. Rather, I choose images, textures, language that pleases me. And the combination of artifacts that I assemble just happens to be suggestive of my queer life. I think of Hart Crane and Marianne Moore as two poets whose lapidary diction and acute visuals create a world quite suited to their tastes for the carnal, on the one hand, or the rarefied on the other. I happen to be as comfortable in back alleys as I am in museums, so I choose language that registers in both places, and I don't mind the shifts from sublime to duende, from Roman Catholic to Roman orgy.

Maybe the best way to think about this idea of an 'adapting' organism within the poem is to think about Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar." The speaker in that poem notes that once the foreign object, the jar, has been inserted into the landscape, the wilderness rises up to it and "sprawls" around, "no longer wild." For me, these movies, these saints, these bits of narrative are like that jar: I put them into worlds and see what happens. (God, I hope that doesn't sound too much like what one does with a dildo).

A good case in point would be the poem in *Cocktails* entitled "[he tastes the air with his tongue. his eyes a gory kitling]." Here, I've taken the bit of the Gospel of St. Matthew where John the Baptist is washing people with water unto repentance, in the river Jordan. John sees that many of the folk showing up are Pharisees and Sadducees and he calls them "a nest of vipers," saying "who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" What struck me immediately about that passage was the way in which snakes are vilified. I began to think about the way in which this prevalent

orphidiophobia, which one finds throughout the Bible, must have occurred. After all, snakes are worshipped in so many early religions; they're held as gods of the underworld, gods of fertility, sources (strangely, I suppose) of healing. And I figured that (mind you, this is my own theory and I don't know that it's provable) the anti-snake sentiment of the Bible had its beginnings during the enslavement under Pharaoh. After all, for the Egyptians, the snake was a god. So it seems perfectly plausible that the early authors of Genesis made a conscious decision to portray Satan as a serpent. And from thence forward, snakes became associated with evil, corruption, danger, etc.

So, while my mind was trying to wrap around the "evil snake" imagery of the Bible on the one hand, I began to research snake-handling sects of Protestants in the Deep South. And I found it curious that their interpretation of Mark 16:18 led them to this older, pre-Judeo-Christian view of the snake as a source of healing: if one had sufficient faith to take up the deadly snake, one would overcome the snake's toxicity; and, once this occurred, one could lay hands on the sick and heal them, one could become immune to poisons, etc. You can see what an intriguing (if somewhat dangerous) act of faith this is. So, I wanted to put John's healings of the soul, through baptism, into the context of these healings of the body, through snake handling. As I worked, I envisioned the kind of riverbanks with which I was most familiar, in Georgia and Tennessee and in California's Central Valley. But the weird thing about most of those riverbanks that I had known was that they were cruising areas, where men would go to have sex with other men. Well! It wasn't so very far a step, once I'd gone down those particular levees of the imagination, to then overlay the idea of the potentially poisonous snake with the idea of the potentially dangerous penis, especially in light of the AIDS pandemic. So, the poem weaves together the language of infection and anonymous sex and faith healing and snake handling, all while threading through the lattice of John the Baptist's trellis. It seems a great leap in some respects, though it's only two verses prior to Mark 16:18 that we're told "he that believeth and be baptized shall be saved." The question for me, since John talks about baptism both by water and by "the holy spirit" and "fire" was "what other substances are suitable for baptizing?" Would snake venom work? Would semen? Isn't the substance merely symbolic, while the true deciding factor is faith?

So, that's what kind of thinking went into the writing of the poem. But the poem isn't really "about" any of it. If I were interested in "aboutness," I'd put it all into an essay. Rather, for me, the wonder of writing is that alchemical magic that happens when language begins to act upon language. It certainly gestures to all of this sub-structure, but it doesn't rely upon "telling" as a

method. Did this even come close to not answering the question you didn't ask?

DW: Absolutely. I'm particularly interested in two examples you gave; first, the "lapidary diction and images" that you reference in Crane and Moore—a lapidary tradition which I would say your poetry participates in; and secondly, the idea of the "alchemical magic that happens when language begins to act upon language." The first image seems to speak back to the idea of "carving space for another way of being in the world," and if we extend the lapidary metaphor, the hetero-normal world acquires a gem-like resistance to queer discourse. But the second idea, a belief in the "magic" of language, implies to me a certain humility—a certain faith in language, a humbling of oneself to forces beyond our own comprehension. While these two impulses do not seem entirely contradictory, it suggests a tension in the act of creation that fascinates me. Is this accurate?

DP: Humility or faith is one way of thinking about the magical tradition. I like what Spicer says, the poet's job is to get out of the way of the poem.

As for "carving space" through lapidary diction, I think that's a fine idea. But I don't know that I'm chipping away at other people's gems so much as I'm attending to my own surfaces and allowing them to be made visible.

These two impulses are indeed at odds with one another, and the shuttling between them might at first seem peculiar. But I think that very different ways of making can coexist. To think about gemology, we have rocks that are formed through heat and rocks that are formed through pressure (the igneous on the one hand, the sedimentary on the other). But there's a third group, the metamorphic, formed through both heat and pressure.

The "poem as made object" thinking is not completely separate from the "magical." Robert Duncan is a poet who feels heavily indebted to the spiritus mundi, and who trusts in the organic underlying structure—held, in part, within the poet at a cellular level and acted upon through chance occurrences—to create what he terms "significant form." His science harkens back to an alchemical tradition but opens up to include 20th century theories. And, though he participates in the vatic utterance as a kind of sybil, he also manipulates the text as a jeweler manipulates stones. His words are sharply faceted at times, returned to their older spellings or staged as voice: "damerging a nuv" he writes in "A Poem Beginning with a Line from Pindar." And he often arrives at a rarefied diction—though not nearly as florid as Crane—through his painterly impasto.

Duncan is but one example of a poet whose work melds the “arranged” with the “magic.” Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw, Edward Taylor, Christopher Smart, John Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, W. B. Yeats, Elsa Barker, Theodore Roethke, Cesar Vallejo, Federico Garcia Lorca. But the admixture of golden echo and leaden echo is unique in each, a kind of poetic signature. One could not in any way mistake the poem of one of the aforementioned poets as being the work of one of the others. And I don’t know that that has as much to do with “voice” as it does with the peculiarity of concerns that weigh upon each poet, coupled with the mechanism of choosing that each employs. Mind you, I don’t mention these poets to draw comparison to my own work; they are masters and I’m still very much a novice in the world. But I mention them by way of establishing a tradition that allows for my own practice as a writer.

Oh, I hate talking theoretically about poems as if they’re in any way governed by theories—theories don’t write poems; they very often don’t even help to explain poems. I suppose we have to say something more about a poem than “I like the image of the cow” or “you sure know a lot of dirty words.” But at the same time, I keep hearing O’Hara’s marvelous aside each time I say something remotely lofty: “but I hate all that crap.” The balloon of speech should never be more than twice the size of the character’s head; I think that’s the rule for cartoonists. When I feel the balloon swelling, I want to go back and let out some of the hot air.

DW: You’re right. It seems often that there is a tendency in ‘Poetry’ to turn to theory as way of explaining the importance of our poems; as if they risk being dismissed entirely if we can’t explain what they’re doing. It’s true that when I’m enjoying a poem, theory fades into the background. It’s only in retrospect that I can think about what the poem was doing or how it was working. I wanted to ask you about a poem which I very much enjoyed, [college roommate: his hamper full. I’ll do us both a favor]. While there are certainly moments of humor, I come away from this poem with a feeling of tenderness that is refreshing. It seems too often, especially in the current political climate, that poems are forced into irony and cleverness. Do you feel pressured to write messaged poetry?

DP: No, I don’t feel any pressure to write “messaged” poetry. Where would such pressure come from? Maybe if someone were paying me to be a poet, they could exert some pressure. But it’s hard to control someone if you have no leverage.

I suppose there is a certain amount of “peer pressure” among poets. Folks love to coalesce into schools and then accuse other people of conspiring. Graduates of the Buffalo Poetics Program, for example, like to say that graduates of Iowa are trying to control the aesthetics of American poetry—as if the Buffaloners are not, by putting forth such an argument, essentially doing the same thing. But I hesitate even to talk in such generalities, as it’s almost always the least interesting writers who worry over “the pie” and who’s getting what slice. I think it’s mildly entertaining, like watching pro-life demonstrators try to disseminate their message: you want to just walk up to them and say, “look, if this matters so much to you, go adopt all the retarded kids at your local orphanage.”

Irony and cleverness are the tropes du jour, just as the “overly sincere” dominated in the early 1980s. And, as Pound says, “what the expert is tired of today, the public will be tired of tomorrow.” Irony and cleverness must run their course, like a tropical disease for which there is no cure except time, sleep, and a good crap.

The real question is always, “what poems are going to stand the test of time?” And I don’t know that anyone can really answer that. Each of us probably has the list of poems that we go back to, the ones that deepen upon each successive reading. And it’ll be these lists of poems that eventually transform the landscape, the way that Stevens’ jar transformed the landscape that we inhabit now.

DW: I read an essay a couple of weeks ago that referred to Cocktails as cynical. Though I can't recall exactly how this author formed this opinion, his review stuck with me because the characterization of Cocktails as 'cynical' was antithetical to the impression I came away with. I left Cocktails with a feeling of hope, as if I had been part of a celebration of continued existence. Poetry has always seemed to me an inherently joyous process—even when it takes difficult issues as its subject matter. Is this the case for you? Do you find a measure of hope in words?

DP: I suppose Cocktails could be read as cynical. Bob Hass says that a good poem contains its opposite. So I suppose there is a current of cynicism in the book. But, I hope that’s not what the reader ultimately comes away with.

We live in a time when most people have lost their faith in words. I think the loss of faith goes back to WWI, when euphemistic speech was used as a way of cleaning up the horror of warfare. Pound, in Canto LXXVIII writes “theatre of war” and then, underneath, “‘theatre’ is good. There are those who

did not want it to come to an end." Post-Watergate, post-Vietnam, poets saw how language was being used to lie to and to manipulate people, and there were some who felt that, if language were being used to such ends, they'd have no part in it. Now, we have so much poetry that calls language into question; that posits absolutely everything as ironic. And what have we gained? We still have "theatre of war." And "non-enemy combatants," "war against terror," "collateral damage," "friendly fire," "the Patriot Act," "No Child Left Behind," "Clear Skies Initiative," "Operation Iraqi Freedom," etc, etc. By retreating from the war of words, we haven't gained a fucking thing.

I think it's time for the pendulum to swing back. I think it's time for poets to reclaim the power of words and to use language in a manner that is precise. It doesn't mean we can't still comment on our distrust of authority; it doesn't mean we can't still call into question the cognitive domain of language. But at some point we also have to understand that words do mean. If I say "the US has been hijacked by corporate monkeys" it's not the same as saying "the language is a trope." (Thanks, Barrett Watten, for pointing out the most obvious thing and pretending you've given us insight).

Borges and Duncan are two poets who believe in the magical power of words. And Borges gives us a wonderful third example in his Harvard lectures. He recounts how someone once asked George Bernard Shaw if he really believed that the Holy Ghost wrote the Bible. Shaw responded that he not only believed that to be true, but that he also believed the Holy Ghost was the author of all books.

In this age, when we're used to thinking of the poem as a made object, or, as Williams put it, "a machine made of words," it's probably heresy to talk about inspiration, hope, magic, and the Holy Ghost. But I do think that a word has an interior life, a light that radiates forth. When we handle language as makers, we're not—for the most part (Vallejo is an exception, and I suppose there are others)—inventing language from scratch. We're working with these things that already have a life, a history. Our job is to use them in such a way as to extend their life, not to destroy it.

Jack Spicer knew the intimate connection, through language, to the source of creation. He wrote "Most things happen in twilight when neither eye is open and the earth dances... unbind the dreamers. Poet, be like God."

Alone at night, scribbling out notes that may or may not become parts of poems, I find great solace, the way a monk in another century found solace

illuminating a manuscript of sacred text. Sometimes, in poring over the words I have at my disposal, I find a new way of putting them together that isn't merely pleasant but which actually reveals to me something new about the world. For a moment, I'm receiving wisdom from someplace else. Maybe it's just a trick of the mind. But for me, it's magic. Yes, it's an infinite measure of hope.