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Apology for Community: Complicity in Joshua Clover's Poetry

Arul Benito Gerard A

PhD Student

Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad

Kandi, Telangana

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Abstract:

In this essay, I study the contemporary American poet Joshua Clover's poetry in the context of a number of questions and theories raised with reference to commitment and complicity. I argue that his poetry offers evidence of the need for greater understanding of crowds and community in the light of the Occupy movement and other global protests. I begin by comparing Clover's own poetry with classical definitions of committed art. This is followed by a close reading of two of his poems "Apology" and "System" I conclude by highlighting the importance of understanding literary representation of crowds in contemporary poetry.

Keywords: Commitment, Complicity, Capital, Time, Poetry, Joshua Clover

Joshua Clover (b 1942) has published three volumes of poetry *Madonna Anno Domini* (1997), *The Totality for Kids* (2007), *Red Epic* (2015) and two books of criticism *Matrix* (2005) and *1989 The year Bob Dylan didn't have to sing about* (2009). Clover is an activist-poet. He was part of the 'Davis Dozen' that were charged for protesting against the entry of commercial banks into public educational institutes in 2011. He is one of the founders of the Commune Editions¹, a small press. His poetry is deeply rooted in politics of the Marxist kind. Like many other members of the contemporary left spectrum, he is described as "communist, though various communists don't think so" (Karp). His position within contemporary poetry is closer to the political poetry that has found resonance in the writings of poets such as Sean Bonney and Keston Sutherland. He is also a columnist for various publications such as *Film Quarterly*, *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, *The Sunday Book Review* and the *Village Voice*.

Clover in Comparison:

Let me begin by juxtaposing, Clover's poetry with César Vallejo's definition of Bolshevik art:

"Bolshevik art is principally propaganda and agitation. It is determined by preference to incite and instruct the revolt and organization of the masses for protest, for the recovery of what is theirs, and for class struggle. Its purposes are didactic, in the specific sense of

¹In an interview to *EntropyMag*, Joshua Clover, Julian Sphar, Jasper Bernes, the founders of the commune editions describe their motive as participating in an increasing radicalization of the poetics circles they found themselves in. The need to contribute inspired them to start the press.

the word. It is an art of proclamations, messages, harangues, grumblings, rages and admonitions. Its words thrive on accusation, polemics, militant eloquence against the ruling social system and its historical consequence" (Vallejo 23)

Joshua Clover's art is not propaganda. Unlike Bolshevik art, there is no state to propagandize for. One does not find a party line in the poetry of Clover. While his poetry creates a clearing in which only the militant Marxist survives it does not censor its failure. The poetry is not deterministic in spelling out actions. It is not programmatic and does not lay out an outline of cause and consequence. In Clover's poetry, the worker has already metamorphosed into an invisible nomad. The setting of his poetry is not in the factory but the exterior. There is a strong extroversion in his poetry that likes to watch things from the outside. A more specific feature would be the centrality of massive collectives such as city instead of particular groups such as workers. Clover does not appeal for a revolutionary overthrow of the state. The impossible is recovered only in parts and pieces. It focuses more on agitation than programmatic antagonism. There is very little pedagogy in his poetry and far fewer instances of direct addressing of the readers. The text is strongly knit with an immediacy which is more temporal than spatial. It does not convey successfully the nearness of the revolution. Next, I would like to bring into contrast Clover's practice and Vallejo's definition of Socialist poetry:

The socialist poet does not reduce his socialism to the themes or techniques of the poem. He does not reduce it to the inserting of fashionable words on economy, dialectics or Marxist law, to mobilizing ideas and political requisitions from invoices or communist sources nor to characterizing the actions of nature and the spirit with epithets taken from the socialist revolution (23)

The question of excavating an author's intention is very difficult. Does Clover's poetry reduce his socialism to themes or techniques? In terms of themes there is only one large plot that Clover repeatedly engages with: the failure of the twentieth century Marxism and form of agitation to be adapted to fight contemporary capitalism. He writes: "You will see a theme developing" (Red Epic 23). This theme is one of betrayal by the party and the need for belligerent intervention in our present day affairs. Clover is not a realist or a narrative poet, and hence technique is out of question. His texts prioritize their printed nature over their performance as spoken word. Despite this thematic fidelity which moves beyond party socialism, Clover's poetry reeks of 'fashionable words'. There are ample references to obscure works, economic terms, and abstract juxtapositions. While Clover refrains from engaging in doggerel and propaganda pieces, his work bear the markers of his ideology all out loud. Social life which is central to the definition of socialist art finds little place in Clover's work.

When Clover claims that all his poems are rehearsals for the perfect poem for the dawn after revolution, he is in tune with V. Mayakovsky who writes:

All these items of poetic stock are stored in my mind. The particularly difficult ones are written down. How they are to be used in the future I don't know, but I do know that everything will be used. (67)

Unlike Mayakovsky, Clover is writing before the revolution, whereas for Mayakovsky the revolution is part of the poetic stock. This echoes Clover's claim that poetry should be concerned with the future as against the past. Clover also fulfils Mayakovsky's dictum:

To understand social command correctly, the poet should be at the center of things and events. A knowledge of economic theory, a knowledge of the realities of life, a grounding in the study of scientific history, are more important for the poet in the early stages of his life – than are the scholastic textbooks of idealist professors who worship junk. (92)

Social command which is the scientific method of composing poetry on social reality is vividly evident in the poetry of Clover. The focus of course is different from the poetry written form Mayakovsky and instead focusses on the convergence/concretion of the abstract form of economic exchange with the everyday life. Similar to Mayakovsky, Jack Hirschman lights up the long history of art as protest in his "Culture and Struggle". He takes up the discarded portions of contemporary art and lines them up together to create a barricade against the exploitative machinery of capitalism. He tell us that all forms of art are equal and the act of dividing them by genres is itself a method of dividing proletarian solidarity. He drops the names of revolutionary poets beginning with Blake to Stephan-Alexis. He repeatedly affirms the revolutionary nature of art and its ability to yield emancipatory visions for the masses. He tells us of Jazz, Rap and Graffiti which have taken up the battle against economic injustice. He tells: "Towards that future, our responsibility as poets and painters and musicians and dancers, all interfacing and opening out, ought to be to "present the present" as irrefutably a part of the revolutionary process . . ." (417). Clover succeeds in presenting the present as he is rooted in the contemporary. His poems are live broadcast of contemporary struggles, bulleting about the recent riots, and documents on the growing inequality in society. He not only attempts to present it as it is found but also tries to define it and find form of dissent to change and shape its future.

My reading has three parts (1) I offer an introduction to the financial crisis, certain theoretical categories that have been in circulation with reference to the financial crisis and literature, (2) I provide a close reading to two poems of Joshua clover from his collection Red Epic and (3) I finally conclude by focusing on a particular gesture in the poetry in the form of love towards abstract conceptions of time and capital. I reason that these gestures are intended towards a conceptual reclamation of time. The urgency of this project, I argue is a utopian impulse to actively seek out contours of the possible in the political context of the financial crisis and its reverberations.

The financial crisis of 2008 and the long series of transactions that led to and emerged from the fall out can be defined as symptomatic of an economic system that dealt with the creation of wealth through the trade of immaterial properties. The crash of the housing market may be read

as the violent landing of the sign upon the signified cutting through the long chains of mortgage documents that were pooled together, rated off and traded for profit. It is thus tempting to identify the transformation of the economic system from the barter to gold standard of the Bretton Woods system into the free-floating fiat currency as a part of the larger shift from presence (or body cultures) to meaning (or symbolic cultures). Apart from the possibility of this fascinating narrative that the philosophy of presence of Ulrich Gumbrecht offers, the Italian theorist Franco Bifo Berardi offers another that perhaps contextualises this transformation within poetics. He situates this transformation of the relationship between sign and signified in symbolist poetics claiming that Mallarmé's and Rimbaud's emptying of the sign (dereferralization) as instances of the movement from presence into meaning culture in the literary sphere. While presence philosophy attempts a redemptive coup within textual and cultural phenomenon in their performative practices through categories of Stimmung or atmosphere, latency and presence, Berardi offers "refrain" and "swarm" as instances of affective strategies of poetry on the physical body and protest formations. The occupation of Zuccotti Park against the bailing out of the banks and other demonstrations confirm the need for theoretical intervention that is conscious of the interplay between presence and meaning cultures in both oppression and dissent.

The idea of community or the group is strong in both theoretical frameworks. Endowing language with rhythmic properties, presence philosophy claims it can co-ordinate the movements of individual bodies and for Berardi in a more heightened sense: "the refrain is the modality of semiotization that allows an individual (a group, a people, a subculture, a movement) to receive and project the world according to reproducible and communicable formats" (130). This makes poetry for Berardi: the language of non-exchangeability, the return of infinite hermeneutics of the sensuous body of language" and "irony" as the ethical form of the excessive power of language, the infinite game that words play to create and to skip and to shuffle meaning (140). The philosophy of presence perhaps more than Berardi's conceptions provides an emphasis on the non-exchangeability of poetry. But more importantly, it emphasises the epiphany possibilities during such moments of non-exchangeability.

I principally agree with the definition of utopia as "fictional forms of alternative organization" with a stress on the fact that "they can have the power to inspire forms of practice that can lead to actual alternatives" (299). In employing utopianism or the utopian impulse, I am borrowing this exposition of this relationship between fictional form and forms of practice which, in the words of Geoghegan Vincent:

This impulse is grounded in the human need, for fantasy; the perpetual conscious and unconscious rearranging of reality and one's place in it. It is the attempt to create an environment in which one is truly at ease (17).

Thus utopia, as I employ it, is closer to social dreaming and the impulses that motivate it.

In my reading of two poems of Joshua Clover from *Red Epic* (2013), I argue that the need for intimacy invites the poet to ‘make up’ with capital and ‘love time’. The former is a satiric attack of what is withheld under capital, The latter is a far more intimate and intricate attempt to convey that the realization of time plots space and therefore brings into presence community itself.

The first poem I read is titled “Apology”:

Oh Capital let’s kiss and make up
And I’ll take back all those things I said about you
To my friends and in poems. (48)

There is no exclamation mark after oh in the line. The ‘bang’ and shriek’ that follows the interjection ‘oh’ is replaced with exhaustion and mildness. Though deceptively named ‘Apology’ the poem is nearer to the root of the word as ‘defence’ before its sixteenth century sense of ‘feeling sorry’. ‘capital’ starting with small case ensures that we are in the presence of the abstract and not the person. But it’s also a self-reflexive critique of thinking with the head that capital stands for (and the huge number of cognitive and metaphoric functions that it serves). Perhaps the poet is tired of thinking too much. The immediacy of the sexual penance that the poem wishes to perform includes a larger community as the apostrophe in “let’s “contracts the larger us which includes “Friends, Pirates and Cats”(3) that he describes in the opening poem of the collection “My life in the New Millennium” and confirms this community in the end of the poem.

Of this life. Oh to be form’s content. Capital on behalf
Of myself and all my friends I want to apologize
For you know 1917 and hope we can put that behind us
And do whatever it takes to feel joined to everyone else
In this town and distant cities and every person in the system
That is at this time and in this space of flows the world (49)

The poem is ironic in its address. Its lack of rhyme and the presence of jargon-filled language spoken to capital is invariably cold, affectless, and even in tone. The second time that capital appears it comes awkwardly in the beginning of the sentence and is thus capitalized and the tone carries a greater weight than it appeared at the first instance. While the quirky sentimental “on behalf of myself” tempts to cut the speaker into two, the strange sequence of varying ‘s’ sounds from ‘apologize’, ‘us’ and ‘else’ come to a close with system, that reproduces an alliterative detour in the ‘t’ in ‘that’, ‘this’ and finally excruciatingly concludes the poem in ‘the world’. This ensures a struggle between expectation and exigency in the reading/reception of the poem. The poem stutters with heavy jargon, and there’s a crude note of sincerity attached to its expressions of sympathy and enquiry regarding the wellbeing of capital. The real prayer of the poem follows in the second iteration of the interjection ‘oh’, is the need to be form’s content. To use language transparently in what is increasingly becoming a symbolic network of human

relationships in the age of financial capital. If this is the request then then the real apologia or the failure of the poem as a poem then is perhaps in the opening lines of the text wherein he says “. . . I said about you/ To my friends and in poems” (48). Clover does not apologize on behalf of his readers, or performers, but only of his friends (with whom he shares the mutual interest of fire and Coca-Cola bottles). The conjunction ‘and’ marks that the channels of communication has clearly ruptured. A work such as “Apology” read in the context of other works by Joshua Clover's seeks some form of re-interpretation. It's presence in the collection ‘Red Epic’ warrants a tone of dissent. And it is only natural that the need “to feel joined” is the sacred ground upon which the parody of apology to capital is set up.

One of the exciting paradigms of considering presence philosophy in this context of the need “to feel joined” and the nature of protests as physical occupation is the reiteration that in a state of shrunken political dissent – the mode of dissent ultimately becomes *Habeas Corpus*. Among the many modes that might exist in the amalgamation of language and presence, Gumbrecht sketches six of them in his presence in language or presence achieved against language. First is of course presence through spoken language and its rhythms, second is the basic acts of philology, third is language that provokes aesthetic experience, fourth: mysticism, fifth: language that opens toward the world of things, and sixth language as a place of epiphany.

To understand utopianism in contemporary poetry is then to paraphrase either performative presence provoked by the reading of the poet or to duly admit that philological acts of individual reading that invent communities of readers. My own interest is in the ‘presentification’ of utopian sites or the possible within poetry either as ‘refrain’, ‘rhythm’, ‘irony’ or in a deep seated commitment in verse to establish such communitarian ideals. But there are difficulties in achieving such forms of epiphany during our contemporary times

I take up Clover's final insistence of time and space in my second reading of his poem “System”. The final part of a longer work “LCTM” (Long Term Capital Management). It begins:

System climbs up on the oikos and starts to sing and this song is the epic and economy.
They don't write'em like that anymore. (64)

Oikos (the Greek word for home) under the weight of the system marks the complete disintegration of the community. The juxtaposition of ‘sing’ and ‘song’ and ‘epic’ and ‘economy’ highlights the more complex relationship between the narratives of humanity and the economy. The epic as a central cultural artifact that plots the course of a community is singing the adventure and ventures of capital. The next line “They don't write'em like that anymore” (64) brings the strong contradiction that while remarking about the written text it dissolves itself into spoken speech. Without the centrality of humans within capitalism, a different system of regulation which allows human intervention is sought: that is time. He speaks of time:

I love you as I love time itself because we share the same apples and amours and alephs the same bricks and bad faith and Beckett translations the same contagion and the charisma of the negative. (65)

Thus Clover's twin objects of love: capital and time are a mark of despair over the all-pervasiveness of capital and the commercialization of space and time. Both time and capital are courted not in some Faustian sense of greater power but to find a sense of community. Time unlike capital allows a certain degree of simultaneity to ensure a sense of community without participation in the consumption economy. Infact, Instance of time-banks (where people exchange hours as pay or money) in Spain and Greece are examples of alternative conceptions of theeconomy that have cropped up where people reclaim time during the age of austerity.

It appears that time is seemingly closer, open to creativity, to the language of thinking and being than the other. It tends to open up space. Time is also closer to rhythm. The affinity to be modern in the end of the poem "In the lonely hour of the last instance/ one must be indifferently modern" (65) is thus an opening to epiphany. Epiphany, I understand is not only the site of oscillation between meaning and presence but between the subjects and object, individual and community. The final problem is of course that we are still caught in the language of others. Only the billboard of utopia has been seen and s(0)bject has not yet arrived. But poetry in its trial runs in language attempts to mine community by its plays. Clover's poetry alerts us to examine our interests of love, whether they are as naïve as they seem to be. It call us to "justify our own existence in real life". It is also central to understand Clover's poetry as being driven by the same motivation that constitutes the large crowds of protest. As Suman Gupta remarks in his "Presence and Conceptualization of Contemporary Protesting Crowds", our received notions of contemporary crowds is mediated through the visual medium. Looking at literary and linguistic exchanges of crowd formations is central to any further understanding of these crowds.

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