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The Post-Romantic "I": Reading the Multiverse in Amy Catanzano's *iEpiphany* and *Multiversal*

iEpiphany, by Amy Catanzano. Boulder: Erudite Fangs, 2008.

Multiversal, by Amy Catanzano. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.

Just before her debut collection, *iEpiphany*, went to press, Amy Catanzano's second poetry collection, *Multiversal*, was selected by Michael Palmer for the Fordham University Press 2007–2008 Poets Out Loud Prize, a triumphant achievement for any poet, especially one who despite an impressive record of journal publications (*Aufgabe*, *Conjunctions*, *Fence*, *Volt*, *Fracture*) had yet to publish a full-length collection of poems. Success, when it came, came in spades, but the fact that Catanzano's work was not immediately embraced by publishers may reflect the competitiveness of the current field, but also her poems' resistance to categorization. It is especially ironic that it should have taken so long for these books to reach a public because Catanzano is particularly good at imagining book-length sequences of poems; each of these volumes has a distinct shape and character of its own, though they both examine what as children we called the "universe," now hypothesized by many physicists to be a "multiverse" or "metaverse" composed of multiple parallel universes. *iEpiphany*, published under Anne Waldman's Erudite Fangs imprint, offers an intellectually daring interrogation of genre (science fiction and poetry), *Multiversal* a detailed account of the phenomenal world, starting with subatomic particles and extending to the furthest reaches of the cosmos, filtered through an imaginative consciousness. The encounter with the cosmological sublime in both books strikingly resembles the English and German 19th-century Romantic poets' encounter with Nature, though the scale is exponentially vaster—that is, the attitude of the speaker in Catanzano's poems confronting the multiverse has much in common with Shelley looking at Mont Blanc or Wordsworth contemplating the Vale of Grasmere. Like the speaker of *The Prelude*, the "I" in Catanzano's

poems self-consciously describes its encounter with the phenomenal world. Late 18th-century empiricists were absorbed by the study of the human mind, and many of them, such as the Scottish philosopher George Campbell, attempted to identify the separate faculties to which particular cognitive processes were assigned. This concern was still vital to Shelley in 1820 when he wrote his *Defence of Poetry*, which begins with a discussion of the faculties of reason and imagination; such distinctions helped to distinguish poetry from other genres, and argue for its unique importance. As a result, Romantic poetry tends to enact the encounter between self and other, and to dwell on the mental processes that allow the speaker to know what he sees and to transform this knowledge into poetry; the personality, or rather the mind, of the individual subject is the subject of the poem, as much as the world it encounters. In Catanzano's lyrical poems the "I" is a recognizable presence, although the voice (it is not clear whether it is masculine or feminine) remains disembodied. I am interested in these post-Romantic manifestations in Catanzano's work, and in how she manages to combine apparently irreconcilable approaches to poetry and experience in her poems—on one hand, a genuinely postmodern, pluralistic approach to poetic experience, and on the other, a lack of guilt about writing as an "I" or "lyric subject," the politics of which her mentor Lyn Hejinian has criticized in her essay "The Rejection of Closure," on the grounds that it reinforces "the established symbolic order, what Jacques Lacan has dubbed the Law of the Father."

The postmodern element in Catanzano's thinking is readily evident in her embrace of multiplicity, diversity, and non-linear and non-hierarchical modes of thinking. In the multiverse "comprised of multiple and perhaps infinite dimensions of space and time that are created by collisions between subatomic, vibrating membranes of energy" that she describes in her essay "Quantum Poetics: Writing the Speed of Light," presented as a lecture at Naropa and published on Jerome Rothenberg's blog, *Poems and Poetics*, Catanzano sees infinite possibilities. The word "multiversal"—"verse," i.e. poetry, and "multi-" invokes the polyvalent, diverse, non-hierarchical, various, inclusive character of the world as she envisions it and the poems she wants to write. In the same essay she writes, "Poems and other innovative languages also seem to be multiversal, invoking invisible ecosystems outside eye-level, molecular and astronomical scales, ambiguous spacetimes, and collisions between membranes or borders." Political arguments for an aesthetic that privileges multiplicity over unity, the indeterminate over the predetermined, "the encyclopedic impulse" over the "impulse to

boundedness," the "open" text over the closed, which rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and favors process over product, are familiar to anyone who reads much contemporary poetry.

The Language poets, whom poets of Catanzano's generation studied in undergraduate and graduate writing classes, made these arguments conscientiously, and to them, aesthetics *were*, necessarily and always, political. In some ways Catanzano's poems follow in the footsteps of Language poetry, but in the ways I have identified as post-Romantic they diverge from it. Whereas Hejinian and others were reacting against a dominant tendency to produce "closed" texts—Hejinian refers acidly to "the coercive, epiphanic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry"—what was formerly the poetic "mainstream" has been displaced to the margins, surviving in pockets and enjoying a certain popular acclaim, without seriously threatening the prospects of more experimental poets whose goal is to teach in universities. For quite a few years now, poets who write in "open" forms are just as likely, if not more likely, to be hired to teach MFA and doctoral students as their more conventional peers (Catanzano, for example, studied with Hejinian at Iowa, who was a visiting poet there as early as 1999). What has changed is the political landscape, which now actually favors poets writing in the Language and post-Language traditions. In general, this is a good thing, and it has made the field more vital than it had been in many decades.

It is altogether a brighter landscape for innovative poetry in the year 2010 than it was thirty years ago. The problem is that many of these "post-avant" writers have adopted the political and ethical (and aesthetic) codes of their mentors and models, a defiant, militant attitude which was appropriate when poetry seemed to be fighting for its life against mediocre writing and received ideas about what poetry was and ought to be. But the landscape has changed, and the entrenched resistance to innovation and experiment has largely fallen apart. In this friendlier climate, many younger writers are beginning to investigate formerly disgraced poetic concepts and modes such as confessionalism, realism, closure, and intentionality. The recent interest shown by elder figures such as Jerome Rothenberg and Charles Bernstein in Romantic poetry is an indication that it is permissible to acknowledge a debt to Shelley, or an interest in Clare. And the work of poets like Catanzano shows that younger writers are reclaiming territory avoided, ignored, or considered off-limits by previous generations. One of the Language poets' principal objections to Romantic poetry was that the Romantic poet's lyric claim to pure experience conceals its origins in

history and ideology. According to this theory, the conventions of Romantic poetry are implicated in legitimating transcendent authority and disguising the fact that it is actually a human construction. This transcendent authority is supported and represented by the patriarchal power structures that Hejninian critiques, the "Law of the Father" or "established symbolic order." Consequently, the ethical poet must resist such structures, evolving a language that challenges the illusion of the transparency of language by disallowing transparency and disrupting the naturalized linkage of word to world through "radical disjunction." Younger poets have responded to these ethical imperatives in a variety of ways, but few have ignored them. Catanzano's embrace of both lyric address and "open" forms would be impossible if these things were truly incompatible. As her poems demonstrate, there is plenty of ambiguity even in a deliberate speech act: "I become good at losing a tune by the law of this language." (What language? What law? What tune?)

iEpiphany

The poems in *iEpiphany* (2008) are carefully constructed, their language veering from sheerness to opacity. They have a resistance and substance not typical of much science-fiction writing, for which they might be mistaken in another context. The vocabulary and conventions of science fiction haunt this collection: "time machine," "warp drive," "bionic device," "multiple dimensions"; "We are poised for first contact." Despite their scientific jargon, the poems in *iEpiphany* are intensely lyrical—even the prose poems have a brittle lyricism, the measured, slightly artificial-sounding sentences and semantic precision conveying a sleekly modern atmosphere and tone. The discipline necessary to write these poems is evident in their consistency of tone and subject, their focused exploration of ideas, their carefully articulated syntax or "close dialect." Some poems are tantalizingly abstract, others are visually lucid. Rarely does one verb suffice to complete an action: even the apparently passive state of "appearing to oneself" requires multiple modifications: "Breathing but also crowding, distancing, uncovering." The action of these poems is phenomenological *and* ontological: seeing, thinking, dreaming, deciphering, locating, learning, imagining, and ultimately, at the limits of knowledge, inventing. But the "iEpiphany" occurs long before the closing lines: consciousness and existence are contiguous, dimensions which extend one another, overlapping in zones of imagination and invention and "reproduction."

What is most striking to me about this book, however, is the way Catanzano deals with the thorny issue of her essentially Romantic subjectivity. Her title, *iEpiphany*, suggests that she is consciously embracing and perhaps defending the disgraced Romantic epiphany. Sometimes she indulges in direct comment: "I introduce a resistant strain. As if autobiography can take the skin off our most durable starships"; more often, she simply ignores the ethical imperative many academics and poets seem to take for granted, that the lyric "I" *must* be "interrogated"—publicly, in one's poems—to show that one is indeed aware of the troublesome implications of representing oneself as a unified, self-directed and self-contained being capable of recovering experience fully through memory and then representing it fully in language. The interesting thing is that Catanzano uses the lyric "I" without conceding that in doing so she is engaging in a repressive political and aesthetic practice, because she doesn't seem to feel that using "I" validates such practices. Indeed, her poems convey a broad tolerance for difference of all kinds—aesthetic, ideological, ontological. Catanzano's "I" is lucid, interacting with a "you" who is likewise featureless, almost abstract, and the effect is of dissociated voices reaching the reader from across a vague but probably vast distance. This raises the question, if "I" am just one voice among many, in what sense am "I" unified? Is the "I" who dreams in dendrite compositions the same "I" who responds in a close dialect to the ruins of the seen? In a recent collection of conversations between older and younger poets, *12X12: Conversations in 21st-Century Poetry and Poetics*, co-editor Christina Mengert refers to a concern with "the ethics of writing the self, the interrogation of the lyric 'I'" that she feels is pervasive among the poets interviewed. Unlike these poets, Catanzano apparently has proceeded as if publicly and actively "interrogating" the "I" were no longer a necessary prelude to using it.

If Catanzano refrains from explicitly interrogating the lyric "I" in *iEpiphany*, she doesn't hesitate to exploit and explore genre categories and conventions. The variety of linguistic forms presented in this collection is one of its strengths: it is not an exaggeration to say, as Catanzano does, that the book is "a science fiction of genre" since the expressions of the "I" range from prose (poetry), to dialogue, to lists of titles, questions, and other spatial, generic and formal variants, in diction that simultaneously invokes and parodies the language of science fiction while enacting a cosmic "journey" that penetrates to the far reaches of the known world. Marrying a "high" form (poetry) with a "low" or "popular" form (science fiction) is rarely done, but it doesn't

seem unnatural, since both genres rely heavily (and characteristically) on imagination. With their emphasis on novel ideas, precise measurement, and phenomenological and ontological questioning, science fiction and science writing have a rigor that poems too often lack. The attraction of these sister genres is understandable, and Catanzano's fusion of the ideas and vocabulary of scientific writing with a poetic subjectivity is a noteworthy event.

Multiversal

In his introduction to *Multiversal* (2009), Michael Palmer emphasizes the poems' aleatory and pluralistic elements, their "multiple orders and multiple forms." It is a bit disappointing, but not really surprising, that for Palmer, the pluralism of Catanzano's poetry is the most valuable aspect of her work. He withholds comment on the "I" of the poems, instead deploring the inadequacy of realism or representative language, relative to which "the aleatory, the plural, the phantasmal and the expressionistic elements of the art" have gained currency, and celebrating the Barthesian "playfulness" of poetic language. Palmer, a contemporary of Hejninian's, sidesteps the "I" in his own poems by using "we" and "us" ("Wasn't it done then undone, by us and to us" ["Letter 1"]), but his passionate, song-like verses describe an essentially Romantic encounter with a world littered with language, in which words are as "real" as things.

A close reading of *Multiversal* reveals an almost obsessive concern with perceiving, measuring, interpreting, apprehending "reality" and transmuting that experience into descriptive or constitutive language. Mapping, measuring, calculating, charting the dimensions of perimeters, boundaries, territories, borders, peripheries is the work Catanzano proposes and pursues. The "extreme geographies" which fascinate her seem to hold the key to the mysteries of existence, if only knowledge of them could lead us to analogues on a human scale.

What does
It take
To see the
Inner
Rings?
Can full
Moons

Still tell
Time? I
Measure
Myself
Against
Unfamiliar
Clouds:

The effort of “measuring oneself against” something unlike oneself pays off when the result is a more complete account of existence. “Is it possible to write what is happening?” Catanzano asks in “Quantum Poetics.” In that essay, she expounds on some of the ideas, many borrowed from theoretical physics, which compel her imagination: the notion that because of the time it takes light to travel through space “the farther we look into space the farther we are looking back in time,” the neurosurgeon Leonard Shlain’s discovery that “breakthroughs in science often happen near the same time as similar breakthroughs in art,” the implications of Einstein’s theory of relativity, quantum theory, and string theory, as well as theories of quantum gravity, which seek to reconcile relativity with quantum theory, *clinamen* (the spontaneous swerving of atoms in space as they fall in a vertical path), novelty and consciousness, and the concept of the multiverse. But *Multiversal* can be pleurably read without much knowledge of astronomy or particle physics, because the names themselves—the “trampoline model of space,” the “Law of Fives”—are evocative. When a name fails to itself evoke an idea, Catanzano provides short explanations:

One of the islands
That was found
On the M-Theory planet
Corresponds to a theory
That lives not in 10
But in 11 dimensions

Deceptively simple at times, the poems in this volume display a high level of craft, a rare descriptive precision. Two of the poems, “Flowers of Space” and “Notes on the Enclosure of Notes” have a distinct song-like quality achieved through repetition and variation of the poem’s constituent elements. In these, Catanzano combines and recombines terms to create new phrases and new sense, as in

We should take a panoramic view,
for flowers have never appeared,
never arisen,
never vanished,
flowers have never been flowers,
space has never been space,
and space flowers

"Notes on the Enclosure of Notes" similarly runs changes on the words "free," "fixed," "move," "fall," "stars," "space," "sea," "clear," "words," and "populate," producing a rhythmic, hypnotic composition:

Space is free; I populate
the space with stars. We fall beneath them like the sea.
We clear the sea
of its space.
We are free; the sea is free. The sea
is fixed. The sea has
moved;
I am fixed by the falling stars.

How intentional the statements in this poem are is not finally knowable. Part of their beauty derives from their randomness, the accidental sense they make. Their insistent rhythm makes them seem inevitable. Nonetheless, in this sort of poem the poet acts as a medium upon which language operates, a machine of syntax recombining the words of the poem to form new sense-units, rather than a personality clothing an intention in language. The presence of poems like these in this collection, in which the "I" makes statements that are randomly composed, in which language seems to be directing the writing, rather than a writer using words to describe experience, might be seen as "complicating" the "I" (I hesitate to call this "interrogating" as Catanzano seems to accept that the "I" is capable of being constituted in diverse ways). In fact, her poems represent a multiplicity of structures and a range of levels of intentionality. In *iEpiphany* there are a comparatively greater number of what philosophers of language call speech acts (a statement that constitutes an effect, in addition to the act of uttering), or declarative statements, such as the one-line poem "periodic," the text of which runs:

This is more like the science fiction of genre than the genre of science fiction.

Most of the poems in *Multiversal*, however, seem to emerge from that dimly lit area between conscious and unconscious thought, produced by “turning off” or suspending conscious judgment long enough to record the spontaneous expressions of the mind. This is a difficult locus to inhabit for any length of time, and doing so requires practice and discipline. Of course, these expressions are later shaped—words, phrases, sentences discarded—but Catanzano’s inner censor is liberal. Sometimes the structure that generated the poem is visible, sometimes almost lost in subsequent revisions. “Notes on the Enclosure of Beams” seems to have begun as an abecedarian poem—the first line begins with “A,” the second stanza with “B,” and a “C” and a “D” follow, but then the “E” appears to have migrated back to before the “C,” and the last two stanzas contain no capitalized letters at all. From these arbitrary beginnings Catanzano molds a poem that is semantically and linguistically acute, and which balances neatly between intention and non-intention.

Taken together, *iEpiphany* and *Multiversal* exhibit a curious mind encountering and revolving often astonishing physical and metaphysical ideas. The idea of the poem as a public communication (or event) is assumed, and never abandoned, though Catanzano’s sense that language makes its own meaning, apart from the intentions of the maker, is evident in the linguistic play that is such a necessary and delightful element of her poems. Since I first began reading her work as a student at Iowa, the combination of control and freedom in Amy Catanzano’s poems has consistently amazed me. They are an example of what Hejinian calls “the conjunction of form with radical openness.” In them form does not always generate content, and speakers only sometimes mean what they say. But they are radically open because they do not exclude any possibility, of language or of meaning, and not because they embrace the multiverse, or see language as inadequate to the description of the world, or aesthetically demonstrate their author’s commitment to rejecting authority and resisting commodification.

In Catanzano’s poems, a human subject encounters the multiverse. This subject is permeable to the “outside.” Some of her utterances are intentionally, some arbitrarily conceived; most seem to have been “thought” semi-consciously. She wants to know: “Is the opposite of the moon the five-pointed star?” Working *with* language to write poems, she discovers what she knows. When the “I” is not bequeathing

instruments to the idea of the sea or striving to “crack and vaporize the medium,” she is marveling at the archimedean corals, unbreakable stars, and animatronic birds that populate her region of the multiverse. It is a strange, outrageous, complex world we are invited to explore in Catanzano’s poems, from the tiniest “atomic foliage” to the unthinkable 11th dimension. In “Portraiture,” the subject determines that “there’s a world out there” How does she know? Outcomes repeat themselves. She has seen it happen.