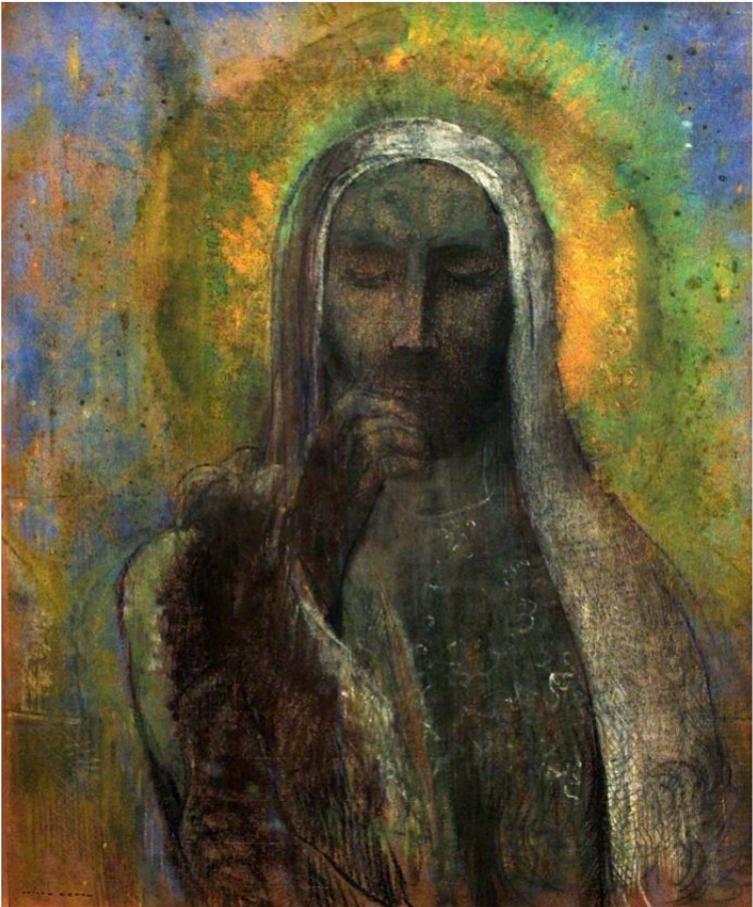




Poetry Editor Rachel Custer
Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice

The Artistic Power of Silence: On Letting Art Speak for Itself



2020 Pamphlet Series

Rachel Custer

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Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice

The Artistic Power of Silence: On Letting Art Speak for Itself

The power of art lies in its ability to transcend the boundaries within which the artist is forced to exist. Time, language, culture, place - those cells that contain the artist - eventually lose their power to contain the work itself, if it is great. Van Gogh's desperate illness falls away, overshadowed by *The Starry Night*. Picasso's marital failures pale next to *Guernica*. The Sistine Chapel stands - beyond Michelangelo's life and death, beyond the society that birthed and nurtured the Italian Renaissance with its immeasurable impact on Western art, and beyond the Renaissance itself - to silence us still before the sheer masterful immensity of its achievement.

Poetry, though bound more tightly by the constraints of language, is no different. From the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to *The Odyssey*, from "Ozymandias" to "Wild Geese," great poems outlive their poets. Great poetry outlives its culture. It taps into something simultaneously human and eternal in us and become part of a human conversation ongoing across time and space for as long as human beings have been creating. Art is a gathering place where we can sit across the table from Ovid and Robert Frost, simultaneously, and converse. There is no other place like it.

This power of art, then, suggests something about the power of the artist. If the power of great art is to transcend the artist's constraints, the power of the artist lies in the creation of something transcendent, the imbuing of the art itself with all the "voice" available. The artist speaks most effectively when she speaks in and through her work. The best exercise of the artist's power within her cultural constraint, then, is her own silence.

Culture is marked by a constant jostling for power between competing ideologies, individuals, or groups. Art that seeks to

operate within this power struggle, then, is of a certain type: if it seeks to solidify or promote power, it is propaganda; if it seeks to mollify or placate the population in general, it is popular culture. Great art, then - the masterpiece - seeks something beyond power for the artist or his own in-group and something beyond the general approval of the mob. The artist seeking to create great art must do the same. In any climate, then, in which power is exercised or consolidated by demanding the de-platforming of art, or in which the mob demands art, to maintain a platform cater to its whims, the most powerful (and indeed, the only rational) response of that artist who seeks transcendental greatness, is to let the art itself do the speaking.

Consider two recent examples of this phenomenon in action—1) the critical reception to Toby Martinez de las Rivas' excerpt from "Titan / All is Still" in *POETRY* magazine and the related editorial response and 2) the reaction to Anders Carlson-Wee's poem "How To" in *The Nation* and its related editorial response. In the first example, the poet himself chose (possibly at the request of the editorial staff) to attempt clarification through further explanation of his chosen imagery. In the second, the editorial staff chose to immediately apologize to those outraged, to add a note proclaiming their decision to publish the poem a "serious mistake," and to pledge a revision of their editorial process to align it with the demands of those outraged (relative) few.

Both responses, predictably, failed to mollify the critical mob. Both weighed down the work itself with cultural considerations of the day, with wrangling for political power, with the comfort of the reader. In so doing, both responses capitulated the work's power to the demands of the critical response and silenced the voice of the art itself. What transcendence there was to be found, what power there was in the art to converse across the constraining boundaries of history, was all but stifled by the actions of the editors, whose quick capitulation to current opinion served to chain it to a very specific creative moment.

The editor is vital to art's ability to transcend, at least in the moment. If art is an ongoing conversation between creators, we might conceive of the editor as a sort of "moderator of the debate." Great editorial work is an art in itself; beyond the artist,

nobody is more likely to add to a work's potential for greatness than a great editor. The converse is also true: nothing can harm a work or its potential for greatness like an editor who cannot, or will not, do his or her job. The most fundamental job of the editor is to present the art in its best form and to stand behind his choice of the work as worthy of presentation. If an editor cannot stand beneath the withering gaze of the critic, he is to editorial craft what a Vegas cover band is to music. Great editors don't take requests from the crowd.

One might (reasonably) wonder, then, what about the art that gives great offense? What is the editor to do in the face of valid criticism of the work of art she has previously deemed worthy? Assuming the editors in question approach their practice in good faith and truly come to believe a work of art is not, as in the case of "How-To," the piece they first read, how is the ethical editor to respond to the critic's offense? (For purposes of this essay, we must also assume the offense is taken in good faith, though in this age of addiction to outrage, that is a question that demands its own thorough exploration.)

The power of the editor, like the power of the creator, lies in her ability to remain silent and let the work itself speak. This is perhaps especially true in the case of art that risks enough to outrage or offend. Like a male ballroom dancer, the most important job of the editor is to showcase the work while personally fading into the background. When the editor responds to critics, it undermines the work and makes the editor the focus. Therefore, the most ethical thing an editor can do in the face of extensive criticism of art is to let the art speak for itself. If an editor truly believes, as did the editors of *The Nation*, she has misunderstood the work, the responsibility for that misreading falls squarely on the shoulders of the editor. She must bear up under the scrutiny and maintain her ethical showcasing of the artwork itself.

Quite apart from the issue of centering the editor over the work itself, it is worth remarking that silence seems the best course of action in general in the face of outrage mobs such as those that proliferate on social media. The Martinez de las Rivas explanation did nothing to quell the criticism of his work and indeed, only incensed **them** further at his being given more

space in which to defend his art. Furthermore, if any defense of art could say what needed to be said, the art would have been unnecessary in the first place. A poem is written to convey what cannot be conveyed without the poem. In the case of the Anders Carlson-Wee poem, the outraged mob was not mollified by the editors' immediate apology, nor was it satisfied with the shameful editorial note added to the poem.

What *would* appease the critical mob? Apparently, only ruination of their target, whether poem, poet, editor, or publication. If the poem is not immediately pulled from publication and the poet deplatformed for the foreseeable future, these critics complain the editors are not "listening." I am reminded of something my parents used to tell me when I was a child: *We are listening. We just aren't doing what you want us to do.* In a situation in which an artwork is received badly by a reactive mob making childish demands, it is the fundamental job of the editor to be the adult in the room. If she is unable to do so, she is incapable of performing the most basic function of editorial work. Editorial silence before critics is the most powerful exercise of the necessary editorial contribution to art.

The artist who aims for greatness (and what artist doesn't, if we're being honest?) must take a long view of history. We join a human tradition begun when our ancestors still huddled cold in prehistoric caves, painting the animals that populated their days. When we write, we stand outside time, listening as easily to those early artists as we speak to those a thousand years from now. To create is a great honor and an exercise of a power beyond the mere human. Art is amazing, in part, because it has the capacity to outlive its creator. It exists beyond the life of its maker. Its persistence in light of the artist's death is perhaps the best indicator of a work of art's contribution to the long conversation through history.

If we can agree that this is the case, then we can look beyond the politics of the day, beyond the artist's personal failings or successes, or even beyond the offense a work causes. As artists and editors, then, we can recognize that our art will eventually stand or fall on its own merit, anyway. Our power is best exercised, and our service to art best rendered, by remaining silent and letting the work speak for itself.

About the writer:

Rachel Custer is the Poetry Editor and a reviewer and editorialist at O:JA&L. Her first full-length poetry collection, *THE TEMPLE SHE BECAME*, is available from Five Oaks Press. Other work has previously been published or is forthcoming in *Rattle*, *OSU: The Journal*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *B O D Y*, [*Pank*], and *The Antigonish Review*. On February 13, 2019, Rachel Custer became a recipient of a 2019 Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Rachel Custer is the poetry editor at O:JA&L.

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