

“#WebPoetsSociety: Poetry in the Digital Public Sphere”

In the wake of the 2016 election of Donald Trump to the American presidency, a translation of a poem, “Motto,” by German playwright Bertolt Brecht began to circulate widely on social media networks:

In the dark times
 Will there also be singing?
 Yes, there will also be singing.
 About the dark times.

What’s puzzling about the popular circulation of this short poem is not only that the translation is rarer than some others that have been more popularly anthologized, but also that Brecht isn’t primarily known for his poetry. Why, then, turn to his poetry? And why, especially, turn to his poetry in English about bygone German Fascism as a response to a U.S. political transition?

Brecht’s wasn’t the only poem being circulated by Americans on the left who were fearful of a Donald Trump presidency. Leftist American Twitter also responded to the election with W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939,” a nine-stanza poem written on the outbreak of World War II, almost exclusively for two short quotations: (1) “We must love one another or die” and (2) various abridged or unabridged versions of the poem’s final stanza:

Defenceless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out wherever the Just
 Exchange their messages:
 May I, composed like them
 Of Eros and of dust,
 Beleaguered by the same
 Negation and despair,
 Show an affirming flame.

Auden would eventually revise the first of these quotations to “We must love one another *and die*” (emphasis mine) before disavowing the poem altogether for its reception that tended to reduce it to its most quotable quotes. Perhaps to his posthumous dismay, the poem largely lives on precisely for the above, its most excerptable lines. And isn’t excerptability rather the essential quality of free verse, verse that doesn’t adhere to rhyme or meter?

Americans’ remediations of Auden’s and Brecht’s poems point to a feeling on the left after the election: that Americans would be entering “dark times” through and against which they would need to “Show an affirming flame”—presumably by posting the Tweet. That is, while these poems aren’t particularly activist in the sense that they promote a particular political action or movement, they signal a resistance to a perceived incoming “dark” history akin to the rise of European Fascism in the 1930s. To circulate these poems suggests a faith in the durability of the social media network on which they’re circulated as well as a faith in the abiding wisdom of poets—that both will outlast the “dark times” and show the person remediating the poem(s) to have been, after the “dark times” are concluded, on the *right side of history*.

As a scholar of how literature is received and remediated by reading publics, I’m interested in how the quotationality or excerptability of free verse poetry allows readers to draw implicit comparisons, form and mobilize groups, and signal resistance. “#WebPoetsSociety” asks why readers in digital, public environments such as Twitter, turn to dead poets to respond to the present political world. What does it mean when American Twitter users use European writers to respond to American political crises? Moreover, even when the remediated writers are American, why poets?

In the year after a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, fatally shot Michael Brown, for instance, two of the Black writers most often quoted in Tweets about American police brutality using the hashtags #Ferguson or #BlackLivesMatter were Audre Lorde and Langston Hughes, both poets. And in 2018 when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee that Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh had attacked her as a teenager, Twitter users in support of Dr. Ford took to the network with a quotation from Muriel Rukeyser's "Käthe Kollwitz": "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open[.]" Reading publics often look to poets rather than other writers to formalize historical group sentiment. What kind of authority does this confer on poets and poetry, particularly on social media?

"#WebPoetsSociety" examines how poetry is used politically on public, digital networks. Along the way, it asks essential questions of free verse poetry as a mode of speech as well as of public, digital media. How and why are readers in the digital world (re)writing history with old poems, and (re)writing the poems and their authors in so doing? And why do these readers have faith that their remediating speech will outlast "dark times"?