Editorial: 'It will have blood'

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What I would have liked to be: A poet.

Jacques Derrida[[1]](#endnote-1)

Blood can mean life or death. It is here in this issue of OLR because for Artaud and Shakespeare, following poetic logic, there is something unstoppable about blood, something undeniable that spreads, that has consequences, that has to do with truth and living truth, and that frees speech from confinement in those prosaic sentences 'that circulate risk-free through the interchanges and let themselves be translated into any and all languages.'[[2]](#endnote-2) Blood will out, the English proverb says. It is a matter of containing the uncontainable in some poem that continues to refuse to be held in any but writing hands. There is a drama of the signifier and it must be played to time, in the time and the scene of writing and as honestly as possible.

Poetry does not hesitate to say what needs to be said but that a given language does not yet know how to say. It is not complicit with power, nor does it play along with 'a culture completely in the thrall of a means-end rationality.'[[3]](#endnote-3) Its truth takes it across or through languages, at an angle to the trodden paths. It watches over the national language in which it is written, from an inside that extends and opens that language. This issue is concerned with deconstruction and what is variously called poetry, the poem, a poem, some poem, the poetic, or the poematic.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Poematic interruption. It is, Derrida says, a matter of what comes 'of (or from) the other' ('Che' 233). Artaud coined the word 'poématique,' finding the Greek word -ema (meaning blood, or in French sang) in 'poème' and reinstating it in the middle of the word 'poetic'.[[5]](#endnote-5) (Sang: the past tense of the verb 'sing,' that popular synonym for writing poetry, is no longer the same with these translations and homophonic associations in mind, especially as Artaud disdained the musicality of English Coleridge and what he called 'le po-ème en chant. Et sanssang,'[[6]](#endnote-6) (the po-em in the form of a song. And *without* blood.) He doesn't want to chant verse syllable by syllable in assonant or consonant singsong, he wants writing that bleeds, lives, flows, pohaemorrages.) Artaud's sentences wrest themselves from French and at the same time they are untranslatable. You can’t get them out of French, like a stain. Poetry is everywhere, all over Artaud’s letter to Parisot, and already all over what he calls ‘the poematics of the real supersaturated with blood.’ He stutters furiously over the finicking formalistic bourgeois notion of Poetry: ‘Je dis la poésie poésie, la poésie poétique étique’ (I say poetry poetry, poetic etic poetry). The ‘etic’ echoing off ‘poetic’ suggests homophonically that polite poetrylike poetry peddles empty ethical and aesthetic consensus. It moralises, and there is something sickly about it, étique in the sense of scrawny, from the Greek ektikos, meaning habitual, constant, or hectic like a chronic fever. This bloodless poetry violently denies real cruel suffering in a ‘world of war and black markets,’ by putting it off till some unspecified hereafter (477). Each word separate, repeated or cut up (‘la poésie poésie, la poésie poétique étique’) denies the indivisible presence of blood. For Artaud traditional poetic lineation also cuts into writing, apparently creating a textual object which, Evelyne Grossman points out, can be possessed and consumed:

For after means (dit) ‘poematic,’ after will come the time of blood. Because ema, in Greek, means (veut dire) blood, and because po-ema must mean (vouloir dire)

after:

blood,

blood after.

Grossman's reading of this passage shows how Artaud's notion of poetry will not be deferred.[[7]](#endnote-7) Instead of waiting for an 'after,' a time in continuity with but comfortably not this time, a future time of blood, first the po- then afterwards the -ema, Artaud invites: 'Let us first make poem, with blood,' and without division of the signifier by hyphen (476). Poem right there in the letter. As Grossman says, the signifier poème is here 'sans coupure ni distance' (without cut or distance).

We have some experience of this dramatico-poetic immediacy in English too; the eruption or bringing forth of life, blood and poetic speech where, surely, it would be better not to? Macbeth, after the murders of Duncan and Banquo, and the appearance of Banquo's ghost, senses that he is in a time beyond before and after, a night without division into hours when signs come to life and unveil reality:

It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood.

Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak;

Augurs and understood relations have

By maggot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth

The secret'st man of blood. What is the night?[[8]](#endnote-8)

These unearthly Shakespearean events in the body of language have to do with what Derrida later called Anglish: strange avowals, words in the middle of other words, languages interrupting each other.[[9]](#endnote-9) Something that was already there but sleeping gets called out or conjured forth. It happens. It happens in the living body, this haruspication of the word, a consulting of the entrails that do not thereupon die into signs.

The word 'have,' for example, opens out in this speech of Macbeth's. It begins as if we were in a verbal phrase, describing, commenting and looking on: 'It will have - done something ...,' 'It will have - been something.' But instead the noun 'blood' comes, and with it news of a desire that seems to know no bounds. 'It will have blood,' denotes not a future yet to happen but the presence, visible only through words, of some thing capable of volition and possession. What is It? The answer is inseparable from poetic contagion, transference and multiplication: it is as if something were having blood like having children, acquiring more of it, greedy for more of the same, producing, spilling and consuming it, eating and drinking it (we are at table in this scene). The speech begins with three bloods in a line already, as if there were no end to it, no rebalancing the excess: the irrevocable is under way. Macbeth is intimate with and immersed in blood, so that he takes it for granted; the casual, aposiopetic, anonymous, omnivorous 'It' joins with the already-known, with what 'they say' about blood, according to general rules of signification and interpretation. The signs are understood and circulate all too freely, even beyond human society: stones and trees have been known to speak of blood. They do not remain silent, nor announce themselves but bring forth (make public or give birth to) the incomprehensible monster that is a secret revealed. Writing does not only augur or signify events, it inaugurates them and makes them start to happen. So it is when Macbeth imagines the monstrosity of blood, that which is contained inside the body and therefore properly hidden, getting out and coming to light. The man of blood is full-grown and new-born, wrongfully exposed to view, as if untimely ripped from the inside of the world. What night can hide one in whom birth and death meet? Night's darkness will not have or hold him, or perhaps we should say 'it.'

Poets go zig-zag, angling like hares, like mad, to escape imprisonment inside ancient defences of bloodline, affiliation, nationality, grammar, syntax and sign. Celan thought of poetry as a turning of breath. Stevens called poetry 'speech,' and called speech 'silence made ... dirtier.'[[10]](#endnote-10) For Derrida all writing has the possibility identified with poetry, to free everyday language from sedimentation and petrification, to be awake at night: 'paradoxically, inscription alone – although it is far from always doing so – has the power of poetry, in other words has the power to arouse speech from its slumber as sign.'[[11]](#endnote-11)

Derrida's discovery of writing as 'thing beyond languages' amounts to a rediscovery of languages, and to a realisation that one language is not enough ('Che' 229). Before their explanatory power as 'theory,' deconstruction, psychoanalysis and poetry are on the side of the undiscovered and beneath-notice in their freedom to come to notice. Freud thirsts for poetry, and considers the possibility that it is not a special property of poets but already at large among the 'common run of humanity':

If we could at least discover in ourselves or in people like ourselves an activity which was in some way akin to creative writing! (...) After all, creative writers themselves like to lessen the distance between their kind and the common run of humanity; they so often assure us that every man is a poet at heart and that the last poet will not perish till the last man does.[[12]](#endnote-12)

But how are we to know what is in us? Perhaps if language is made ready, It will come, as the blood comes, nameless at first and called by Macbeth in an old proverb? Cixous is wonderfully explicit about what she is doing when she recognises and works on her own language, French. She acknowledges there are: 'ways of degrammaticalizing or of agrammaticalizing French, of working in syntax for it to be an open, receptive, stretchable, tolerant, intelligent language, capable of hearing the voices of the other in its own body.'[[13]](#endnote-13) And she cites 'a great revolutionary tradition of French poetry,' naming Rimbaud, that readies French, offering 'a certain breach of the limit, a certain unfurling of language, above all, a certain work on the signifier and, of course a necessary political attitude.'

Her precision makes one wonder what the corresponding English or Anglophone revolutionary traditions might be. Are they partly obscured by the well-established canon of the imaginative left since Milton? And with poetry thriving in many Englishes, but also after Cixous' recognition that the 'authors we read have always been been the citizens of the other world, border crossers and outlaws,' does it make sense to hang on to the notion of national poetic tradition? And if not, by what auguries and upheavals of writing and reading are the treasures and freedoms of English to be sustained and renewed?

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1. Unpublished interview with Osvaldo Muñoz, quoted in Benoît Peeters, Derrida (Paris`: Flammarion, 2010) 510, my translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jacques Derrida, ‘“Che cos’è la poesia?"’ translated by Peggy Kamuf, in A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds, edited by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Timothy Clark, The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For Hillis Miller the preferred phrase is ‘deconstruction and a poem,’ because, he explains, deconstruction usually ‘takes its poems one at a time,’ also because the words for ‘poetry’ in French, Italian, Spanish and German ‘are notoriously equivocal,’ perhaps referring to the whole field of literature but perhaps much more narrowly to lyric (see ‘Deconstruction and A Poem,’ in Deconstructions: A User’s Guide, edited by Nicholas Royle (London: Palgrave, 2000) 171. Derrida refers to ‘some poem,’ ‘du poème’ and to the ‘poematic’ in ‘“Che cos’è la poesia?"’ (233, 232). He is precise: 'When, instead of "poetry," we said "poetic," we ought to have specified: "poematic"' (233). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Antonin Artaud, letter to Henri Parisot (letter known as 'Coleridge the Traitor'), November 17, 1946, translated by Helen Weaver, in Selected Writings, edited by Susan Sontag (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) 476. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Antonin Artaud, Oeuvres complètes XXIV: Cahiers du retour à Paris (octobre-novembre 1946) (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) 309. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Evelyne Grossman, Entre corps et langue: l'espace du texte (Antonin Artaud, James Joyce), thèse pour le Doctorat d'Etat des Lettres et Sciences humaines soutenue à l'Université Paris 7, le 20 décembre 1994, at http://antoninartaud.net/docs/entre\_corps\_langue\_espace\_du\_texte\_evelyne\_grossman.pdf (29/08/2011) 382. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Shakespeare, Macbeth Act 3, Scene 4, 121-125, in The Oxford Shakespeare, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 989. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 'Anglish Words' is Barbara Johnson's translation of Derrida's phrase 'les mots anglés,' alluding to Mallarmé's book Les mots anglais, English Words. Johnson explains how that book groups lists of words 'according to their initial sounds in order to demonstrate the "motivation" of the sign, the nonarbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified, the essential core of meaning conveyed by letters alone,' see Jacques Derrida, 'Foreword: Fors: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok,' translated by Barbara Johnson in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy, translated by Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) xi, xii. 'Anglish' describes the words worked on by Hungarian analysts, writing in French and reading the Russian, French and English words heard and swallowed by Freud's patient Wolf Man. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Wallace Stevens, 'Creations of Sound,' Collected Poems (New York: Vintage, 1982) 311. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jacques Derrida, 'Force and Signification,' Writing and Difference, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2002) 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Sigmund Freud, ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,’ Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud IX, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959) 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hélène Cixous, ‘Guardian of Language: Interview with Kathleen O'Grady,’ translated by Eric Prenowitz, in White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics, edited by Susan Sellers (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008) 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)