

“Arch-Talk” and the Postmodern Gall of Josh Bell and Mark Bibbins

Keith Kopka

The term “postmodern” is tossed around a lot in the 21st century and has become an enigmatic umbrella. Visual art, architecture, television, and online media have all embraced the idea of the postmodern, and poetry is no exception. However, because of our culture’s ontological zeal to define things, postmodernism can often feel like a catchall. Any rough poetic beast that questions the formal order or unhinges its jaw around an “accepted” version of discourse has everyone running to sound the postmodern alarm bell.

But what does this label really mean for the poems to which we assign it? And what are the characteristics of successful postmodern poems that help them to stand out against the backdrop of modernity? Perhaps the lack of definitive answers to these questions is part of the used-car-salesman charm that is post-modernity. Still, this doesn’t stop writers from engaging with our cultural landscape to create voices and arguments in their work that would have seemed unlikely only twenty-five years ago.

However one feels about the idea of defining things by their temporal relationship to “modernity,” what can’t be denied is that this idea, despite all the debate, has become a quintessential aspect of the 21st century, and the poems that are the gems of this age handle their postmodern baggage with skill and grace. Two examples of this are Josh Bell’s “Epithalamion Ex Post Facto” (*No Planets Strike*, 2008) and Mark Bibbins’s “A Small Gesture of Gratitude” (*They Don’t Kill You Because They’re Hungry, They Kill You Because They’re Full*, 2014). Doing more than simply rejecting the cultural hierarchies constructed by poets like Pound and Eliot, these poems, with their expert craftsmanship, leap between disparate thought and cultural interrogation: the poems play tennis with our expectations about what a poem should be.

Both of these poems engage and subvert deeply embedded poetic institutions. Bell’s poem does this by using its title to connect its content with the tradition of the epithalamion, an odic form originated by the ancient Greeks, that contained invocations of blessing and predictions of happiness, written

for a bride on her wedding day. Bell immediately messes with that by adding “Ex Post Facto” to the title, which undermines the traditional structures of the wedding poem, placing the voice in a retroactive position. This awareness of tradition (and the subversion thereof) is apparent in the first lines of the poem as Bell launches into the familiar direct address of the epithalamion while simultaneously announcing that this poem is not about predicting happiness for the bride: “Ramona, you went ahead and married / the tannest Christian bank machine / in Illinois. For thirty years his infant lips / have cycled toward you, like an escalator / across his tiled face. Where was my invitation?” Through this opening salvo, Bell immediately lays to rest any lingering doubts about the way that he is upending the tradition of the epithalamion. These lines announce clearly that the true subject of the poem is, in fact, the speaker himself rather than the bride, and that when the bride is discussed, it will be through the context of the speaker’s angst.

The subversion of structural norms continues in the second section of the poem when Bell rewrites the wedding vows to imagine, across time and space, the love between the speaker and his former lover: “I also met you at the kindergarten dance, 1803. / Oh Hans, you pulled my pigtails, and we picked a cot and took our nap together. / We slept through bird-strike, through genocide, through crack-house and the sloughing off / of galaxies and scientific paradigm, at all times innocent of nothing. / You are the history of the world. I cross you, here and there, like a time-line.” As Bell purposefully and mischievously undermines the traditional, he creates a new voice of the postmodern in the 21st century: controlled calamity. This is a voice that is full of contradiction, and it playfully flaunts these contradictions to the advantage of the speaker.

The third section of the poem returns the reader to the past/present moment. In this retroactive present, the speaker is allowed to conflate themes from other sections of the poem with the present action of the wedding. This temporal breakdown, combined with the placement of increasingly absurdist imagery in direct conversation with common wedding symbols such as vows, flowers, dancing, toasts being made, etc., again creates tension between the poem’s voice and its form. As the poem’s temporal structure breaks down, the form becomes more stringent, culminating in Bell’s use of rhymed couplets in this last section:

If this were Chinese time, you’d be divorced by now.
You’ve punished all the powdered nymphs who plagiarized your vows

and I must infect myself with wedding toasts alone.
Pick up the flowers and the phone

Ramona. Drunk, I look wonderful. I smell good too.
I don't know French, and I know less you

If torn to rags your wedding dress could bandage a platoon.
You recline like a piano. You strike me like the moon

strikes up the tide. I will invent a little wedding dance
based on the Charleston, the defibrillator, and on the second chance.

So let the bride feel as if she's just been born.
Let the band play songs only heard in porn-

ographic movies, for I have left instructions for the groom in the corner stall.

With this masterful understanding and appreciation of structure, Bell playfully snubs expectations about the ways in which form and content are traditionally linked, and in doing so he creates a unique example of a 21st-century postmodern voice.

Unlike Bell's work, Bibbins's poem is not as directly engaged with formal traditions. However, it does connect itself referentially to canonical works and then uses those references to inform and upset the reader's comprehension. For example, the poem refers to the 24-hour news cycle as being filled with "human lampreys / who dole out the news with coffee spoons," an action that alludes to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where the speaker's life is "measured out in coffee spoons." The poem also compares the notoriety of Orpheus and Penelope to the notoriety the speaker gains through coining the term "boyband" as it relates to another coined term, "nontroversy." In fact, Bibbins is so aware of the ways in which he is engaged with poetic tradition that he calls himself out in the poem for letting the subversion of this engagement get away from him:

This poem is turning into a shuddering black hole
of broken rules, much like the Cheney/Bush regime,
albeit silly rules I tend to bray at my students about not
breaking: referring to the poem itself and (worse) to myself

writing it, invoking Penelope and Eliot and celebrities,
hawking awkward similes, referring to teaching poetry,
overusing quotes and/or italics, pay no attention to tenses.

These lines introduce a voice that is aware of the ways in which it has been co-opted. The speaker seems to have been coerced into participating in the blending of high/low culture that is often one of the stereotypical calling cards of postmodern poetry. In fact, there is a clear admission that the speaker ac-

tively works against this type of voice by teaching others not to engage with it. However, the voice in these lines isn't really the same voice that the speaker has rallied against in the past. As I noted earlier, tradition gets away from Bibbins in this poem, and these images seem out of the speaker's control. Because of this wildness, there is a sincerity in the voice that is part of 21st century postmodernity. The subversion of the tradition is no longer a subversion; it has become the tradition itself. These lines become an acknowledgement that the postmodern has consumed so much of our culture that many of us now have truths that can only be spoken in a new voice.

The voice in both of these poems is decidedly chatty and self-aware. Bibbins references the composition of the poem and flips between pop culture references (Joaquin Phoenix, Zombies, Sarah Palin, Nixon, LSD, etc.) as if he's auto-scanning the channels of a brand new picture-in-picture TV, and Bell delivers his scathing indictment of Ramona through flippant vignettes of violence and Americana: "I take thee corseted by whalebone, stoned on the halfshell, strolling down the esplanade. // And wasn't it just this Sunday last you drove me out behind the Super K and handed me the braided rope?"

Both of these voices are similar in their composition and in the difficulty of defining them in relation to any accepted poetic genre. Many critics have tried to define this kind of mostly accessible, fast, referential poem, and the poet David Graham examined the term "ultra-talk," which was invented earlier to describe the work of David Kirby, in a way that can be useful here:

Typically [these poems are] quite personal in tone without being unaware of the absurdities inherent in a self-presentational aesthetic; yet their ironies seem different in spirit from what has been termed the 'post-modern wink,' that sometimes predictable deployment of language to undercut its own rhetoric, thus denying readers many of the traditional pleasures of poetry. Many ultra-talk poems are very aware of postmodern theory, and may toy with ideas and techniques absorbed from that realm; but ultimately the emphasis is on the poem as giving pleasure.

This definition helps to illustrate not only some of the joys of Bibbins and Bell, but also some of the distinctions between "ultra-talk" poems and what these two poets do. It would be tempting to name the voice in these poems as "ultra-talk"; however, since Graham goes on to argue that ultra-talk poetry is a reaction "against theory-clotted verse, turgid political hectoring, and other varieties of aesthetic heavy-handedness," his definition doesn't quite fit them. Both of these poems *do* seem to have an awareness of the postmodern and are consciously using voice to subvert structures and expectations. But neither Bibbins

nor Bell shy away from the heavy-handed, the political, or the theoretical/conceptual. These poems definitely do not use predictable or simplistic language to purposefully undermine their poetic identity. So, if the voice in these poems is not “ultra-talk,” then we must find another term to describe its charm. I propose we call it “arch-talk,” a poetic voice marked by a deliberate impudence and a telegraphed playfulness.

These poems are self-aware, and they subvert traditional forms, but they maintain the tension, the invention, and the consistency of language that readers have come to name as the defining qualities of conventional poetry. It is this coupling—mischievousness and sincerity—that makes these poems uniquely 21st-century postmodern.

Jacques Derrida argues, “The center [of the structure] is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it.” In other words, the center of the structure must be a part of the structure for that structure to exist, but the center must also be independent of the structure in order to control it. If we take this idea of structure and use it to identify the organization of form and content in a poem, we begin to see how these foundational postmodern ideas are at work in Bell and Bibbins. With their voices and their formal choices, they create “Play,” a synthesis that challenges the organization and balance of known structures and our understanding of the contemporary world. If we have to define the voice in these poems, it is clear that it is controlled but chaotic, an “arch-talk” that is aware of the playful destruction it leaves in its wake. In other words, this new kind of 21st-century postmodernism is not only able to engage with the playfulness that readers and critics have identified in earlier examples of postmodern poetry, but these unique poetic gems also move beyond what are now the expected postmodern structures/tropes of cultural commentary and self-referential writing. This mature postmodern voice can do things like break the fourth wall and still comment coherently on politics and love. It is a voice that has become fully aware of its own self-awareness, and in this recognition, it is no longer satisfied with simply being clever.