

Questions for Poets

October 1, 2013

Every poem
 until the revolution comes
 is only a list of questions

So mourn
 for each poet
who must mourn in their verse
 their verse.

“What is the answer?” Stein asked, and when no answer came she laughed and said: “What, then, is the question?”

“So many questions.” —Bertolt Brecht, “Questions from a Worker who Reads”²⁰

What is the direct trial that is today?²¹ Is it to end the 20th century or end the 21st century or to end all centuries? Is it the trial of survival? Is it surveillance? Is it the terrorist-romantic relation?²² Is it the wage relation? Is it the unwaged relation? Is it the furnace of affliction?²³ Is it the womb of fire?²⁴ Is it the grim work of mimesis, the paralysis

of speculation, the soft disappointment of prefiguration? Is it culture, capital, borders? Is it how to collapse a structure that will fall on our heads? Is the direct trial that is today the ordinary trial, like the family court trial, the debtor's court trial, the criminal court trial? Is it the trial in which we enter the court as if boarding an enemy ship over which our own flag flies?²⁵ Is it the trial of indeterminacy or is it the trial of what has already without us been determined? Or is it the trial of the opened body in the opened square under the opened sky in the opened streets in the opened city? Is it the trial of the indeterminacy of events with the determinacy of action? Is it the trial of not stopping for regulation, of declaring oneself the president of regulation, of declaring an end to all presidents, all declaring, all regulation?²⁶ Is it to make a memorial for an hour of pain, two hours of pleasure, eight hours of boredom, each night of worry, fifteen days of resistance, a decade of friendship, twenty minutes of violence? Is it to build the landscape in which our atomization ceases? Is it to reclaim the terrain in which our care could multiply? Does it send new ships, to seek what new feeling can be felt? Is it gymnastic? Is it in a startling cadence? Is it rhetorical? Does it take the form of inquiry? Does it throb with live interrogation? Does it immortalize when the poet lay in the green field with his head against the tree and Caesar's predecessors conquered the earth²⁷ or does it immortalize when a woman writes I have always been with the wretched and never given a living soul up to Caesar?²⁸ Is it a box of matches?²⁹ Is it

the last match in the box? Is it the box of matches as an art object or a poem about the box of matches as an art object or a Facebook post about a poem about a box of matches as an art object? Is it the last match burning the art object, the poem, Facebook? Is it a box of matches burning the museum



that displays the art object that is the box of matches? Or is it the box of matches in the hands of a child who knows he is hated in his police-filled school in his police-filled city? Is it the incendiary accident of that child? Is it how can language set fire to that? Is it how to set fire to fire? Is it the lighter in a girl's or woman's pocket or a lighter in the father's or the professor's or the poet's pocket? Is the trial of today a formal problem, its procedures and defenses discernible though the thinking through of patterns and shapes and methods? Is it a book of rules written in an accountant's log, which holds the balance of numbers always weighted toward that which can't be accounted for by math? Is it a book of rules written in blood and fire? Whose blood must the rules be written in? And whose tears will dampen the book's turning page? And what materials does the fire burn? And who will set it?

Is it poet's-fire or an anarchist's or a white supremacist's or a prime minister's or a CEO's?

Must the artists enter first that womb of fire? Is it the practice of the fun, the authentic, the intimate, the affective, the cooperative, the collaborative, the granted? Is it the practice of the quantified smile?³⁰ Is it the practice of a managed intimacy? Is it the practice of the scripted hello? Is it the practice of the controlled burn? Does it grow in the ruins of authorship? Does it grow in the ruins of ruins? Is it that the right relation of an artist to a city is for a city to fiddle while the artist burns? And what is the trial of today if art has lived on after its failed self-abolition, aerosolized, manic and ambulatory, freed from the constraints of medium and modality, living on as a form of management, living on a form of flexi-feeling, living on in an already granted self-dissolution, living on as resilience in all the resilient horror? Would it find a compromise in silence?³¹ Might it make a clandestine opening of a thousand leaves?

Is the trial of today to flood ourselves with the vast oceanic tides of the marketplace and false feeling and scripted hellos and the aerosolized and the ambulatory and shipping containers³² and social practice and smile scanners? Is it the vital and great, the epic, or the minor, the depreciated, the commodious, the scatological, the blithe or the charming? Is it a trial of weaponized data entry? Is it the testimony of pdfs? Is

it code moving through the interstices of the engine?³³ Is it all the facts of corporeal sterility? Is it none of them? Is it the trial of today of the easy facts of fungibility and recuperation? Or is it the trial to never blame what is recuperated for its recuperation?³⁴ Is it to never blame singing for the commodification of song? Is it the trial that every once beautiful thing is trampled and every always miserable thing is extended and that it is the fault neither of the beautiful nor the miserable for the trampling or the extending? Is it that there is no answer in and as poetry? And what is the direct trial of this today for the poet if there has not yet been any poetry? If what has gone on before us in the name of poetry has been in the service of tyrants and kings and presidents and CEOs? If it has been written into the clamoring silence of women and girls?³⁵ If what is poetry cannot be written until the infinite servitude of women has ended?³⁶ If it cannot be written until the property-less sensorium has arrived?³⁷ If it cannot be written till the revolution in its service has come?

Is the trial of today that if there is no answer in and as poetry then all poetry till the revolution comes is only a list of questions? Or is it that all poetry till the revolution comes is only a list of questions and the answer to them is almost always "no"? Is it to keep as a counter-poetry a record of each answer "no"? To keep the least of these records, to keep the least of records of the least of records, to keep poetry as the least and smallest, that is as the record of being a person or people who

said no, to keep a precise or general record of the various texture of these no's, when they are smooth no's or rough ones, also a precise or general record of the subtly shifting qualities of these refusals, a record of the way the light falls on each refusal, sometimes a warm light, sometimes a cold one, these different lights falling on the no, the light which is subject to its own record, of time, of climate and climatic alterations, of the end or intermingling of season itself, of the shadows cast by buildings are sunlight let fall by the building's absences, the light falling on each no tinted by the water or the sea next to the know or no water at all?

Is it to keep this smallest record of how each "no" to each question proliferates inside of capital's terrible and glittering yes, inside capital's bloodless and touchless yes, to keep a record of the proliferation's explanation, to document the proliferation's demonstrations, to learn fully each lesson of proliferation, to study that the no proliferating and circulating through the terrible yes is also to hear a lecture on the nature of the no, of who says it, the way the no and yes counter, what is weak about the no, what is weak about the yes, what is strong about both, too, and showing something of the weakness of the no and the yes also is it to study carefully and with great determination, with rigor and seriousness, the way any "no" must be backed with the movement and force and accumulation of bodies?

Is it to also remember not to blame what is not recuperated for its non-recuperation? To not blame what is ugly for its own ugliness? To not blame the fact of sight for what we can't see? Is it to perceive what is sub-perceptual, to speak what is sublinguistic, to politicize what is sub political?³⁸ Is it to make materials of the speech of we who are never quite people fully but who have all the burden, all the pains of people: the eating and sleeping and being born and dying and laboring? Is to make materials of the speech of the speechless, to make articulate the inarticulations of we who are not even animals, who are sub-animal for our wages, our rents, our smart phone contracts, our student loan debts? Is it to find our first articulations, our basic patterns of overcoming in the repatterning of the sounds we already make?³⁹ Is it that in our noises, our complaints, our indictments, our critiques, our narratives, our tears, our questions, a language that is the existent but unheard mostly or heard only as the small roar of doing-as-planned, as trying-our-best, as slyly-resisting, the undoing just enough, is it to make of our materials what remains a secret at literature, what remains as a code in unattraction, to make of these materials what repulses and shudders off hands that would grasp it and pull it into circulation, so that what might be in circulation poison the very circulation, what might be the poison shirt that the terrible yes wears and adulterates itself by? Is it what we could make that is all of that and also is it whatever is backed by the force of bodies, the arrangement of these bodies?

Is the trial the accumulation of adulterated bodies? Is it any body or only some of them? Is it the gathering of the adulterated, violable bodies, the penetrated bodies, into clusters of uninterest to data, into slices of quantifiable unbeing? Is the trial of today against total information, against satellites encasing the earth, against data reconfiguring its forms? Is it for the evergrowing communes of brothers and lovers, large, well-united, proud?⁴⁰ Or is it for the evergrowing communes of brothers and lovers infomaticized and diced, stored and surveilled? Is the trial of today a trial of cognitive distillation mainly, of algorithms and counter-algorithms? Is it the slow dripping or purifying or rendering of these materials? Is it the counter-planning of counter-rendering? And what is the direct trial of the today in a time when the sky is full of cop, at a time when there is no ground left to go under, at a time when a little sugar has been put on our lips but we are not allowed to lick them? What is the time when we are still hungry, with our friends, and still imagine before us the spread of the possible on the longest table? What is this today when we sing each other songs of such a feast we have imagined, and gather in cities to

talk about the songs we sing of the feast we have wanted, and tell each other in the morning the dreams of the table we had each night, but have never seen such a table, have seen only our most innocent and inchoate and clumsy and failed reaching for it? Will the longest table be that at which we will

finally be rested, at which the children won't whine? Is it the table at which we will sit and know that death is made in the bedroom, in the kitchen, in the office, in the classroom, in the car, in the mall, in the museum, in the prison, or the table at which we can finally forget? And what is the trial for the poet of the today, who knows that in the end each poem of the longest table is only as an infant's first word?

And what of all ages in common, relieved of the parceling of centuries, and what of the precise form of weeping of each epoch shall our weeping take? Is the only trial left to compose as if an elegy for disappearance or the disappearance of disappearance? Is it to end the future or begin it? Is it the touch of action? Is it the journey into unattainable regions? Is it with what companions we are roaming the streets of Babylon? Is it the professionalization of plunder? Is it a sincere radicalism shaped to professional specifications? Is it a glib radicalism shaped to professional specifications? Is it the trial of what can be put to administrative uses? Or is it subterranean forms of refusal, a thousand excuses, a thousand invented illnesses, a thousand slow responses, a thousand unsmiled smiles, a thousand forgotten tasks? Is it the open

laying out of charges and the battle that is also openly declared? Is it the struggle against the centers of luxurious cities? Is it the noise of riots ascending above the cities' loftiest towers? Is it the noise of the overturning of the buses, the

ripping off of glasses from pink faces, the hurling of desktops, the deleting of files, the breaking of fronts? Is it the noise of oblivion rising from an empire of ruins? Or is it the trial of preservation, self-preservation, everyday life, adaptation, conflict mediation, the release of tension, the survival of the objects of our love, the nourishment of ourselves and all the others? Is it all of that and how it is against ourselves? Is it to burst, to ruin, to disrupt our continuity with history?⁴¹ Is it

to have no history? Is it to have history never again? Is it the enclosing of tears? Is the trial of our materials, the materials of feminized affects, the vilified, vain, insubordinate, wasteful, unreasonable, scolding, witchy, and whorish?⁴² Is the trial of the materials of revolutionary affects, the vilified, vain, insubordinate, wasteful, unreasonable, scolding, witchy, and whorish? Is it the cage of identity and accident of birth? Is the trial to be submerged in the river several times then imprisoned for life?⁴³ Is it trial by microanalysis? Is it trial by macroeconomics? Is it a trial by macroaffects?

Is the trial of today questions for mutual location? Is it interrogative life amid the tentacles and branches of the world? Is it systemic genealogies and a picture of the present?⁴⁴ Is it “what time is it”? Is it “what time is it in London”?⁴⁵ Is it “what time is it in Berlin”? Is it “what time is it in Baltimore”? Is it “what time is it Glasgow”? Is it “what time is it in Zagreb”? Does it long for a new body, a new city, a new time,

does it long for our reproductive labor as the terrain from which to move?⁴⁶

Is the trial this semiogeography of interrogation? Must it be a landscape that ends in inflection? Or, must it take what is flat and bend it upward, must reach again and again outside the plane of the mere? Must it aspire, with its upturned ending, to move out of the plane of all leveled things? And is the trial of today the trial of the long, immense, deliberate disorder of all the sensitivities?⁴⁷ Is it trial by 3D printer? Is it by the long, immense, deliberate disorder of the Bitcoin market? When it tries to organize, does its wayward force explode?⁴⁸ Does it carve an eternal heaven on a stage? How about the panel table? How about the lectern? How about the prison wall? How about the kitchen counter? How about the hotel bed? Does it make the bitterest enemies partake of a secret desire that will blow up countries?

Does it promise so much that the promises it keeps will be a source of wonder and dismay?⁴⁹ Does it prepare in a dark window by watching the men named after days pass, memorizing their faces, each locked arm in arm?⁵⁰ Does it watch the women do this too? Is it the law? Is it the law's slippery other? Does it exist by anxious categorization? Does it transform the social order? Does it manage social excess? Does it mistake self-presentation as aim? Are the last words of Nero its first words? Is it a trial of lyrical enthusiasm? Is it the alge-

braic equation that makes the world intelligible?⁵¹ And what of this world do we want to be intelligible? And of what use is intelligibility in the disaster we can't contemplate?⁵² Is the trial of who would be a poet today? For in what other day can we issue forth no answers, but only a set of questions? And by which rhythm can the

questions ensue? Should they charm, or bore, or test, or enrage, or captivate? Should they aggress with their own insistence and against custom and with the repeating that is a question we can ask with our bodies?⁵³ Is the trial of the poet that is today an arena in which we perform only in fidelity to the tradition of what is unanswerable?⁵⁴ And how in this shall we in the arena of today make the new arenas, who must always stare in the eyes of the police?

-
20. "The young Alexander conquered India. Was he alone ? Caesar defeated the Gauls. Did he not even have a cook with him? Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down. Was he the only one to weep?"
21. "The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today." Walt Whitman
22. "Through the terrorist-romantic relation it has constructed between man and woman, capital tends continually to redirect the man's violence away from capital itself and towards repressing women's struggles. It is a wedge that continually pushes in the direction of deepening the stratification of power within the class"—Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa, *The Work of Love*.
23. "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction." Isaiah 48:10
24. "Believe me, if a thousand years thou bide within this womb of fire it cannot reave thy forehead of a hair." *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri Rendered into Spenserian English*.
25. "For us, every trial is a boarding of the enemy ship over which our flag flies." Louise Michel, *The Memoirs of Louise Michel*.
26. "He does not stop for any regulation . . . he is the president of regulation. What the eyesight does to the rest he does to the rest." Walt Whitman, *Preface to Leaves of Grass*.
27. "Time was when the poet lay in a green field with his head against a tree and played his diversion on a ha'penny whistle, and, Caesar's predecessors conquered the earth, and the predecessors of golden Crassus embezzled,