



## THE STATE OF THE CRAFT

*A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination.* Angus Fletcher. Harvard University Press, 2004.

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In his “In Memory of My Feelings,” Frank O’Hara offered an image of “democracy” that has entered into a state of unsure, convulsive and distancing fragilities; or has possibly surrendered into finally disposable facades that have in these twentieth and twenty-first centuries become at most an inconvenience:

...the bush full of white flags  
fleeing a hunter,  
which is our democracy

but the prey  
is always fragile and like something, as a seashell can be  
a great Courbet, if it wishes. To bend the ear of the outer world.

I don’t know exactly which “democracy” might be the poet’s reference in these lines. I do remember, however, his essay on Balanchine entitled, “Roma,” where in discussing *Ivesiana*, O’Hara stated that Balanchine: “focuses his attention on the traumatic aspects of American life in several telling episodes, leaving no ‘outs’ of achievement of charm or viewpoint. Nobody escapes....”

The poet’s phrase “and like something” offers the space by which to consider *A New Theory for American Poetry* by Angus Fletcher. Fletcher has been one of America’s most imaginative and active scholars for over fifty years. His books include *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, *The Prophetic Moment: An Essay on Spencer*, *The Transcendental Masque: An Essay on Milton’s Comus*, *The Stranger God: A Theoretical Study of the Myth of Dionysus*, and *Thresholds: A Critical Approach to the English Renaissance*. He lives and works in New Mexico and will be a visiting scholar and teacher at Princeton in the fall of 2005. Fletcher is one of our finest visionary scholars of poetry, and through that—in terms of how one might regard this book—of the present state of our democratic longings and crafts. I can think of no other way to imagine the resources and implications of this troubling, extraordinary work than as the sapling of a tree enjoined to Whitman’s desire for “a readjustment of the whole theory and nature of poetry;” and what this diction begins to tell us about nineteenth-century America and



its methods for the “solutions” of various problems, which included the “Indians” and any possible disposable “others” who were presented with the “mercy” of our exterminations. Our nineteenth-century invention of a “solutions” vocabulary and Whitman’s fully voiced and conscious poise is a counter and challenge to this on-going trivialization and ransom of the public trust. It reveals his more precise sense of “a readjustment,” as well as terrible questions about our on-going creative crisis and the raw power and games of ignorance that have stupefied our body politic and made our deepest cruelties seem normal, seem as if their place belongs at the farthest moral boundaries where we can neither examine them nor care about their ugly disorder at the core of our lives. This book and its examination brings the creative crisis of those boundaries to the palms of our hands.

“To bend the ear of the outer world” might also be the phrase to initiate an examination and discussion of “The Person” and central Persons of this book. “The Person” is Whitman’s name for the individual citizen exemplifying the potentially extravagant, immense humanity and inventive dignity such identity might hold. The two most peculiar, unruly, and intensified “facts” celebrated in this book are that “nothing could be stranger than our best poetry,” nor can anything be stranger or more paradoxical than a great poetry’s animated, wandering witness and bewilderment before the mystery of an “Environmental Belonging.” The quality of that strangeness and its expression of new experiences focuses on two Americans: John Ashberry and Walt Whitman, and one Englishman, John Clare. Each of these poets in their centuries shares essential experiences: the evaporation of their world through unrelenting exploitation, the lethal secrets of a new knowledge based upon that mutilation, and the necessity in Fletcher’s terms for a “visionary reserve” in order to describe and “animate” the new “disordered laboratory” of a nature that cannot and will not easily pose for its description, although being central to the imaginative extremity Fletcher calls the “environment-poem;” an art that “shows dramatically how we need to understand the time-frames, scale differences, and the cardinal role of numbers in the political and social worlds and more largely in the environment. Only a poetry that resists its own transcendental impulses as...the environmental-poem resists them, will usefully address the most serious conditions of our time...” What equally resonates in this study are the tensions of radicalism posed by “the poet’s role of a voiced consciousness” and the grammatical foundations of Whitman’s phrase and its use “as a democratic device ...radiating outwards into various general questions” regarding literature and the humanities. “The training ground for educating the imagination,” is how Fletcher defines these unofficial disciplines of creativity and events

in a possible “territory of conscience” (to paraphrase Pasternak). This sense of a “territory,” for me, calls up an unstated fourth “Person” of Fletcher’s inquiry, *Nature* itself—the impenetrable nostalgically prodding “thingness” now so distant from our common experience, and what it poses as a central epistemology: “In fact, by finding mystery in the ordinary, the descriptive endeavor explores the same deep questions of what we take to be real and what we understand to be our intuitions of the real as given by nature....” Through such primary study, one of the questions that has arisen for myself as a reader is, “Where can Justice reside other than the extravagant resources of language itself as residence in the Public Trust, the unexpected, the ordinary from which we cannot turn away from or hide?”

If loss can be defined at this moment of such cruelly dilated losses then how can we regard Fletcher’s locating, watchfully frightened observation: “We seem as societies to lack what poetry teaches, namely, the capacity to imagine what may or may not happen...?” One could be fooled by the surface of gentle scholarly disillusion, but there is a rigorously coherent, patient, tense rectitude and anger at the core of this study that allows it not only its audacity but its generative correspondences with a participatory heritage of mind, sustainable, “complete as possible” (as Henry James said about what the novel or any living humane object might require). That “participation” combined with the often indeterminate, shattering anesthetics we must live through discovers a rarely seen yearning scholarship in this book trying to wander out of what he called the “iron closure” or “the coming all of men into one fate,” as Robert Duncan called the “The drama of our time” in “Rites of Participation.”

The “Theory” is presented in “Fourteen Doors Opening Outward” upon the problems of “horizon,” “the fate of description,” the paradoxes of the wandering mind and body in Physical as well as Imaginative space, “Ashberry’s Clare;” the naturalist who wandered through the familiar wonders of his rural England, the recognitions of daily rhythms and the differences between the poet and journalist and the crucial discussion about how “Justice is not a forbidden subject for this poetry; *however, the poetry must first discover the living moment in which questions of social justice are embedded for actual human beings...*” Whitman’s radical discovery allowing a new vision of nature and man-made environments, “The Environment Poem” and its aspiration to “surround the reader” with a recognition that an environment is real and present, *Leaves of Grass* as “a contour map” of wave-like undulations revealing “America, its lands, its peoples;” the scale and sum (if there can be a sum) of the materials provides the reader with the transport of a great scholar terribly conscious of his own time, directing himself to the



constant pressure of authentically concrete vivid thought and the sadnesses of a lucidity that comes with the necessary work of a lifetime. There is nothing superfluous before what this scholar's living pen will not yield.

