“Of weeds and words: Percival Everett’s poetry”

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Biographical note

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Summary

The quality and interest of Percival Everett’s poetry writing come as no surprise to the readers of his novels. He has indicated that he envisions poetry as a means of seeking a form of abstraction, or maybe an abstraction in form, that he wishes to achieve in the writing of fiction. This article aims at offering a reading of Percival Everett’s *ars poetica* as it is inscribed in his poetry more specifically, and as part of the writer’s general reflection on the creative and artistic process. We will see to what extent Everett’s poems work as a field for research and experimentation with “pure form” (to borrow the title of a poem from *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*).

Résumé

Les lecteurs des romans de Percival Everett ne sont pas surpris de découvrir que l'auteur est aussi poète. Il a d'ailleurs indiqué qu'il considère la poésie comme un moyen d'atteindre une forme d'abstraction, voire une abstraction formelle, dans l'écriture de la fiction. Cet article propose de lire la poésie de Percival Everett comme l'expression d'un art poétique qui contribue à la réflexion plus générale de l'écrivain sur les processus de la création artistique. Nous verrons en quoi les poèmes d'Everett fonctionnent comme champ de recherche et d'expérimentation avec la « forme pure » (pour reprendre le titre de l'un des poèmes du recueil *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*).

Keywords

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Mots-clés

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Ralph, the child prodigy of Percival Everett's 1999 novel *Glyph*, not only "dissects arguments in scholarly texts" and "comments on the structure of novels" at the age of 13 months or so, but he has produced a story which his mother does not understand, as she explains to a terrified psychologist, and he "also writes poems" (30). In the light of Percival Everett's publication of three volumes of poems, *Re: f(gesture)* [2006], *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (2008) and *Swimming Swimmers Swimming* (2011), and because of the high degree of narrative self-consciousness that characterizes the "meta-deconstructionist" metafiction of *Glyph*, it is tempting to think of Ralph's interest in poetry and language as a kind of tongue-in-cheek autobiographical inscription, an allusion to the author's own working towards the publication of his poems.

Despite Everett's repeated "disclaimer" that he is no poet, this article will argue in favor of the literary value of Percival Everett's "poetic gesture" in its commitment to a rewording of the world[1]. Why and how poetry appears in the writer's work will be my first point. I will then turn to each of the three volumes, selecting within the texts of a few poems what seems to be some of their significant characteristics conveying the writer's aesthetic reflection and choices.

Why and how poetry?

"The *line* is everything": The final words of *Glyph* take on a special resonance if one thinks of Percival Everett's work as being that of a poet and a painter, too. Two of Everett's "abstract" paintings, *Family Resemblance no. 2* and *Monarch*[2], show prominent lines crisscrossing the canvas – inviting the viewer's gaze to follow their meandering course, transforming the surface of the painting into the site of a constant circulation. In *Erasure*, the narrator offers the following aphoristic comment: "The surface, the paper or the canvas is not the work of art, but where the work lives" (208), which might contain a rejection of the petrification of the "work" into the sacralizing noun "work of art". But the opposition is also manifested in the grammatical difference between the nominal/notional syntagm "work of art" and the use of predication in "where the work lives", which emphasizes the experiential/existential dimension in the definition of art. One must write and read with a "grammatical" mind, not just a semantic one. Percival Everett's poetics may be approached though the writer's fascination for grammatical categories, syntactical logic, and the philosophy of language. For Everett, literary creation, writing and imagination ceaselessly explore how linguistic operations and functions produce meaning, and question our assertions in and about the world. Language categories and grammatical functions (noun vs. verb) are the medium through which an aesthetic position is given, which turns out to be central in Percival Everett's poetry writing.

[1] I borrow the phrase from William H. Gass's essay "Gertrude Stein and the Geography of the Sentence" where he describes Stein's work with sentences and words as a process of "denouncing" and "renaming": "So we must rid ourselves of the old titles and properties, recover a tutored innocence, and then fresh as a new-scrubbed Adam, reword the world." (*The World Within the Word*, 80).

[2] On display at the Maison de l'Université, Mont Saint Agnan campus, Université de Rouen, throughout the month of March 2013, with a selection of other paintings by Percival Everett presented on the occasion of the Percival Everett conference (Université de Rouen, 21-22 March 2013).

Looking at the two paintings mentioned above, we can also see numerous "points" in addition to the "lines". "Points" and "lines" inevitably bring to mind the fundamentals of abstract painting as theorized by Wassily Kandinsky in his essay *Point and Line* (1926), which takes us back to *Glyph*. The last section and last words of the novel read:

> In spite of my reunion with my mother, I learnt that nothing comes full circle, but stretches out like a line, extending infinitely toward some ideal terminal point that is necessarily only a point, just like I am a point on the line. But am I insignificant? No? The point is whole, the point is complete, but the line… the line is everything.
>
> The *line* is everything. (207-208)

The five occurrences of each word, "point" and "line", do not lead to a final equilibrium between the two, but to the emphasis on the line, which could be both the narrative line or the poetic line, where one genre contains another[3].

The same allusions to the "point" and "line" also appear in *The Water Cure*, which defines human existence in terms of mathematical coordinates and geometrical figures, is corroborated by the mention of the names of two 18thc. mathematicians, Lagrange and Cauchy[4]. Yet, the same vocabulary does not lead to a sense of fulfillment as in *Glyph* ("the point is complete", "the line is everything"), but rather to a nihilistic sense of loss, the disappearance of the supporting background ("space is nothing") without which no point and no line could actually be envisioned:

> We, all of us, are just and always points and lines. Rolle on big river. A circle is just a straight line that is at every point equidistant from one point. Oh, home on lagrange. A quadrangle is four lines intersecting in space. The point has no dimensions, is merely location. The line has no depth, is merely direction, and space is nothing. Move forward with cauchyson. (207).

In both novels, but with two narrators in widely different diegetic environments, the ontological definition of the subject ("I" in *Glyph*, a collective "we" in *The Water Cure*) is predicated upon the two "values" of the point and the line. What does this mean? As the poem "Averages" asserts, we are "riddled through/ and through/ and thoroughly/ riddled with words" (*Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, 22). We are directly confronted with the enigmatic quality of language, which the repetition tries to circumvent, but cannot eliminate.

Shifting from the potential philosophical content to the literary apprehension of the text, we can note that the "point" and the "line" are forms of inscription, which are not only connected to painting and mathematics, but also to writing and to poetry. The word "line", though ambivalent, is associated to the definition of poetry: the type, or absence, of "lineation" reveals aesthetic positions and participates in the history of poetry. Interestingly, in the paperback edition of *Glyph*, the ultimate sentence appears as a single, isolated line at the top of the very last page, which creates the necessary conditions for its metatextual interpretation.

The thematic and typographical foregrounding of "line" at the end of *Glyph* draws the readers' attention to the fact that the novel's "storyline" is rather fragmented, and

[3] This is in keeping with Everett's frequent dismissal of genre distinctions and boundaries.

[4] See also how the absence of capitalization levels the proper names into common nouns and transforms them into malleable units that can be woven them into the punning texture of the narrative line ("move with cauchyson" sounds like the stuttering extension of "move with caution").

that some of the fragments are actually poems, while other non-narrative segments presented in the form of lists acquire the visual aspect of a poem on the page. In such novels as *Erasure* and *The Water Cure*, the narrative space is explicitly and self-consciously treated by the narrator as a poetic space with the interaction between the shape of the line and the use of blanks, margins, and the space of the page. Let us consider another passage from *Erasure*:

> That these spaces have some kind of narrative significance or charge is not arguable, though the weight of such import might be, and most times is, infinitesimal. What is more interesting is the fact that narrative always travels in the same direction and so the spaces, the negative or white spaces[5] travel the same way. (52)

The "white spaces" suggest a revision of the narrative text as a continuous "linear" form[6]. The introduction of unusually large typographical blanks that fracture the line as in the quotation above makes suddenly more visible the traditionally unquestioned principle of the horizontal lineation of narrative. A sort of new lineation is created: a hybrid between the horizontal lineation of prose writing and the vertical lineation of poetic lines, which thus achieves the inclusion of the poetic form within the narrative line. That is also typical of the textual crossovers that have defeated any attempt at definition through generic categories since the later 19thc. Moderns and the 20thc. Modernists and Postmodernists, as Marjorie Perloff writes in *Radical Artifice*:

> From Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* to Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Pound's *Cantos*, to Susan Howe's *Articulations of Sound Forms in Time* and Christian Bök's *Cyborg Opera*, […] the word *poetry* cannot be understood as equivalent to "the lyric", much less the postromantic lyric. Indeed, generic classification has become much less important than the *poeticity* of the language itself. (5)

Poetry, Marjorie Perloff argues, is "the language art" (7), it is language "made strange […] by the use of verbal and sound repetition, visual configuration, and syntactic deformation", or "ordinary language" in "a new and unexpected context" (7), like the "uncreative" writings and appropriations of "ready-made" lexical units in the conceptual poetry of Kenneth Goldsmith's poetry, for instance.

For Percival Everett, writing is an exploration of something about language and about how language works, which also animates the heart of his narrative fiction. *Zulus, Erasure, The Water Cure* and *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* are "language novels". They include reflexive pauses in the narrative that question the links between the inscription of the stories in words, the narrative configuration itself (its relative contingency, depending on the reader's appropriation of the words), and meaning, or, more precisely, the possibility and the limits of meaning, as in the following from *The Water Cure*:

> The words on these pages are not the story. The words on these pages are not this story. The words on these pages are the words on these pages, not more, not less, simply the words on these pages, one after another, one at the beginning and one at the end, bearing possibly some but

[5] It is interesting that the narrator of *Erasure* should speak of "white spaces", which should not be automatically converted into "blank spaces". Contrary to "blank", which denotes emptiness and connotes inexpressiveness, white is a color, as both the narrator of *Erasure*—saying Ishmael-like "Call me Monk"— and the readers of American fiction know from the rhapsodic meditation on the whiteness of the whale in chapter 42 of Melville's *Moby Dick*. For the painter, the white space is not empty but filled with the color white.

[6] Taking "form" both in the larger sense of "genre" and in the literal sense of the visual shape of the line.

> probably no relation to each other, but they can, if you desire to find a connection, need to, or if it irresistibly, axiomatically, ineluctably reveals itself to you. […]
> I am not interested in what meaning you will make when reading the words on these pages, if you chose or can make any meaning at all, but in the limits of what meaning you can make. (48-49)

What, then, motivated the poetic "gesture", i.e. the publication of volumes of poetry, if the poetry was already there in the novels, anyway? Percival Everett himself has pointed at the organic link between his fiction writing and his poetry writing by indicating that he considers the latter as a means of seeking a form of abstraction, or even an abstraction in form that he wishes to achieve in the writing of fiction, but says he has not yet found[7]. Consequently, the writing of poetry serves as the opening of an experimental field, like the process of making studies and taking notes in preparation for a new creation. That is not to say that the poems are tentative drafts or incomplete pieces, but that they might be construed as spaces for letting the words "loose", without the constraints of producing a narrative sequence (though the poems also do that sometimes). They are places for enjoying space, the margins and the blanks spacing and framing the words.

The epistemological preoccupation with language and meaning is concentrated in tightly-knit poems where it permeates the texture, and disturbs the syntax. As we will see with a few examples, the word is very often the "point" of the "line". The word is both the manipulated object and subject matter, which brings strong echoes of Gertrude Stein as in the poem entitled "Rows" where we can hear, in the word "rows", the spectral sound of a *sub rosa* steinian rose—a palimpsestic and expanded rewriting of the famous ring "a rose is a rose is a rose". The poet's attention to "the word", to sounds and sense, to nouns, naming, and the whole syntax of meaning is at the core of his *ars poetica*[8].

Re: f (gesture): a programmatic gesture

The title of Everett's first published collection borrows from two languages apart from English: Latin, with "*re*", and mathematics, with the sign representing a function. Reading the title and finding the connection between its components is the first challenge. Signs resist to "meaning", which can only come as the result of an operation and a "translation", like the following: what the book—the poems, and maybe even the title itself—is about is a function of the variable termed "gesture", and the gesture itself, taken as a metapoetic image for the writing, could refer to the composition of the collection of poems. *Re: f (gesture)* is *re* its own writing.

The book is divided into three sections respectively entitled "Zulus", "Body", and "Logic". The first two are made of texts imported from the novels *Zulus* and *Glyph*, which can be easily established and makes the reader suspect that the contents of the

[7] An idea Everett reiterated on the occasion of the reading and talk he gave at the ODELA seminar, University Paris Diderot, 8 April 2013.

[8] See how Everett situates the defamiliarizing function of fiction, not in the narrative itself, but in the possibility of meaning: "No one is surprised to find he or she is reading a novel. There is no trap there. The trap is in the meaning, the making of the meaning, the idea that meaning can be made." (Interview with Anne-Laure Tissut, in *Percival Everett: Transatlantic Readings*, 186)

third section, "Logic", might also have been borrowed from another textual space in the writer's work.

The texts in the first section are the prologues situated at the head of each chapter in *Zulus*. Transported into *Re: f (gesture)*, the sentences are now displayed vertically on the page, which amounts to a performative "gesture" metamorphosing the prose pieces into poems. Appearances signify and define the nature of the text. The shift from the context of the novel to that of the collection of poems seems to imply that the poetic resides first and foremost in its visual manifestation. The vertical distribution of the previously horizontal, sequential text generates a spatial defamiliarization, which is underlined by the creation of run-on-lines favoring the bifurcations of meaning.

The second section of *Re: f (gesture)*, "Body", includes all the poems inserted in *Glyph* and attributed to the character of the child prodigy, Ralph. The poems are meditations inspired by anatomical parts—like "The Sternum", "Dura Mater", "Labyrinth"—and the texts develop from the unfolding of the scientific and medical lexica. *How* naming means is what the poems investigate. What "reality" do the words devise? How are they connected with the physical world? The link undoubtedly resides in, and returns to, language; the reality that is aimed at is essentially linguistic, as he very first poem indicates. It is dedicated to the "Hyoid bone", which supports the tongue and allows us to accomplish such "gestures" as speaking, kissing, and swallowing. It is the possibility of language, of articulating words, that matters most, as suggested by the "framing" of the poem between "Brace the words", which is the opening line, and "speech", which is the last word. From a thematic perspective, the poem insists on the fragility of the bone, designated as a "delicate instrument". The frailty is intimated by the repetition of the same line at the beginning of the last two stanzas, "Fracture this bone", followed by a warning about the consequences of such an injury, which would make speaking and swallowing painful. But that "message" is instrumental; no matter what degree of referential reading is allowed by the description of the object of the poem, the movement of the text is centripetal; no reading can stay in the outside world; we are permanently redirected back to the inside, to the linguistic universe of the poem. The nature and meaning of "Hyoid bone" are encapsulated in the etymology of "hyoid"[9]: the world is contained in letters, and the world of the poem is a world of words[10].

The last two poems in the collection, from the third section entitled "Logic", illustrate the poetic principle that derives the world of the text from the word. That is the case in poem 6, where the italics stress the use of "seven" as a linguistic sign:

> Seven men
> can be obliterated,
> burned or hanged
> or drowned in a lake

[9] According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, the hyoid bone is "the U-shaped bone in the neck that supports the tongue" and the word "hyoid", from the early 19thc., comes from the Greek *huoeidēs,* meaning "shaped like the letter upsilon (υ)".

[10] This is reminiscent of the poetry of Francis Ponge (in collections such as *Le Parti pris des choses*, *Pièces*), where the form of the poem originates in a phrase, a word, letters, or typographical and punctuation marks providing the semiotic motivation for the generation of the text. For a critical discussion of the issue of semiotic vs. semantic motivation, see Yves Abrioux, "De la motivation au motif (à partir de Francis Ponge)", *TLE* n°23, 1995, 59-96.

and forgotten.
Men gone, but
not *seven*.
Seven men lost,
but not *seven*.
Seven is, will be.
All men die
but not seven.

Not only does the poem begin with "seven" and end with "not seven", but the repetition of the word shows how language endures, being able to assert and negate the existence of something almost simultaneously[11]. Contrary to humans, signs cannot "die".

In poem 5, the word "rat" is engendered through the poetic game of the portmanteau word: the combination of the first two letters of "rags" and the "t" of "dust" produce the "rat", which in turn generates an intertextual reminiscence, of which the rat and the cellar are the verbal trace. The rat in the cellar inevitably evokes *The Hollow Men* by T.S. Eliot, whose poetry is one of the most evident Modernist references in Percival Everett's writing[12]. The nine sections of "Insinuation" (*Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, 13-21) appear to be as many experiments in appropriation. They rewrite T.S. Eliot's *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* with transformations like the division of the poem into numbered parts, or the substitution of certain words for others without changing the overall rhythm and syntax of the lines where the words appear. The general effect is that of a "sound palimpsest" that reactivates the rhythms of Eliot's poems under a thin layer of deceptively different words.

However, the first volume of poems published by Everett seems to have been conceived as a direct, literal emanation from the fictional texts, as if the writer wanted either to try a "transplantation" of the poetic elements, or to extract a poetic essence and give it its own separate space. We could read that first gesture, then, as the first move towards the achievement of that abstraction in writing that Percival Everett said he is seeking.

"Framing": *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*

To what extent are Everett's poems such a ground for research and experimentation with "pure form"[13]? The title of the collection is borrowed from that of the groundbreaking study published by the German art historian Wilhem Worringer in 1907. It is one of the first attempts at formulating the concept of abstraction in art. Worringer inherits from the 19thc. theory of psychological aesthetics based on the central concept of *Einfühlung*. The term refers to the feeling of spiritual well-being we experience when art reveals the organic nature of our relationship with the physical world. Worringer then

[11] "A poem should no mean/but be" (Archibald McLeish, "Ars Poetica"): "seven" is, in that way, just as there are six occurrences of the word "seven" in that poem no. 6.

[12] See the famous opening of the first section of the poem: "We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!/Our dried voices, when/We whisper together/Are quiet and meaningless/As wind in dry grass/Or rats' feet over broken glass/In our dry cellar".

[13] "Pure Form?" is the title of one of the seventeen triptychs composing the collection *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*. The poem is on pages 48 to 50.

argues that the concept of *Einfühlung* cannot give us access to certain art forms that do not stand in that organic relationship with nature. Abstract art forms are not imitations of nature but stylizations that cannot be apprehended in an experience of fusion or recognition (as with Renaissance painting, for instance). Whereas "Einfühlung" describes the sense of a felicitous connection with the phenomenological world, "Abstraktion" betrays the individual's anxiety when faced with the phenomenological world, a form of angst, a spiritual fear of space, which might, according to Worringer, be a source of artistic creation.

Quite a few poems bear traces of the tension between "Einfühlung" and "Abstraktion" embodied in the prevailing uncertainty about the existence of the work of art as such, as in the first poem of "Tableau": "Will the picture/exist in this frame?" The word "picture" is ambivalent: it can be the painting itself, or the represented image—in which case the poem questions the idea of art as representation, whether figurative or not, and, consequently, the possibility of any significance. The poet attributes the failure of the work to inadequate perception, to "unaimed vision", "errant sense data". Art as an idea is an illusion; art is first substance: "The picture is nothing/but surface, nail, wire/and fictive shadow". The anxiety is in the confrontation with space: the studies (p. 28) that the artist accumulates before the work reaches its final form are designed to "find some privileged space" but that space is only a question raised, as in the following line: "and still what is the actual subject?" (28)

Like the first poem in "The Blank Wall" which evokes the various appropriations and transformations of the iconic Mona Lisa by Duchamp, Léger and Warhol, other poems in the collection recall the necessity for modern art to break away from that "organic" reference to "life" that prompts the illusory *Einfühlung:* "This art cannot exist of borrowed life" (19), or, to quote from the sequence precisely entitled "Borrowed mask": no worthy or truthful creation comes out of a "borrowed mask", or from "the same old song once more" (22). Creation is "always new again" ("Borrowed Mask" 2, 23), with "No looking back./No back upon which/to look" (23). The aesthetic program is reminiscent of that of Modernist poetry ("make it new", as Ezra Pound insisted). But the fragility of meaning and the instability of language in Everett's writing show the failure of the Modernist hypostatizing of Art as the ultimate refuge. That is what the publisher's blurb on the back cover of *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* confirms, by associating Everett's "skewing perspective […] spiraling into the work as a way to get out of it" with the following conviction: "Often what stands in the way of art is art itself, a lingering delusion that there is such a thing as beauty, especially universal beauty".

"The Truth" is the title of the series in which the notions of authenticity, originality and singularity are most directly exposed as illusions by the poetic discourse, which uses the rhetoric of assertion and repetition in poem 1 (16), and the language of logic in poem 2 (17). In both cases, the disposition of the words on the page contributes to the rhetorical effect: the four successive affirmations on page 16 ("is the first one", "is no other", "the first one", "and only one") occur in four distinctly detached lines, moving toward the right of the page—where the blank margins confirm that no text, nothing, comes next, until one goes to the line below. The semantic content of the first four lines is voided by the four repetitions of "fake". Not only is the indeterminate "one" and "singular" declared a fake, but also the speaker of the poem, the "I" that literally frames

the "you" of the addressee/reader ("As I am a fake/As you are a fake/As I am a fake", 16).

In poem 2 of the same sequence, the last word—"itself"— is detached from the rest of the poem and isolated to the right hand of the page, which produces a paradoxical effect similar to the one created in poem 1 (where we are led to wonder about the truth value of a statement like "I am a fake"). "How can a thing equal/itself?" (17) actually reads like an aporetic performative. The use of "itself", enhanced by its position on the page, denotes the possibility of reflexivity, embodied in the propositions: "A equals A./X equals X. f(A) equals f(A)". But the question raised at the end ("How can a thing equal/itself?") undermines the previous demonstration of reflexivity, hence the aporia. Poem 2 is interesting because of the way it stages the text as a place for questioning the limits of formal language: there are "things" of the world that it cannot describe. Language can work with abstractions, letters, signs (A, X) and even functions [f(A)], but it cannot reach out much beyond itself into the phenomenological world.

Percival Everett's second volume of poetry asserts the separate existence of the poems with an aesthetic program suggested in the title. As opposed to the poems in the first volume, the pieces in *Abstraktion un Einfülung* are originals that are not extracted from the writer's fiction. The poems are organized in triptychs (the pictorial metaphor imposes itself here). This pattern is repeated throughout; it intimates the writer's desire to find an idiosyncratic frame for a collection of poems whose main subject is painting, as shown by the second poem in the sequence "Gauguin Paints Van Gogh" (hear the ricochet of "Gauguin"'s first syllable in "Gogh"). Poem 2 stages a characteristic chain of steinian repetitions saturating the page with the sound of the signifier /*paint*/ which becomes an "abstract", but also visual, image for the act of covering a canvas with paint ("Being painted/ by a painter painting/ the painter painting/ what is painted/ in the act", 43).

Most of the time in all the triptychs, the second poem is shorter, while the third one presents itself as a list of words, some of which are pure coinages, joycean-like translinguistic puns or portmanteau words. In fact those words are just remnants—not fragments shored against the ruin, as T.S. Eliot would have it, but ruined fragments of language, distorted reminiscences of parts of clauses, actually retrieved from the second poem of each series. The unfamiliar phonemes and of the unknown syllabic combinations—at first sight an obscure paradigm controlling nonsensical lists—have to be "deciphered" by activating the "sound system" inherent in silent reading, the inner voicing and hearing of language. The "sounds" recreated from the "defaced" spelling of the "regular" words approximate the sounds of the original words, so the meaning of the clause or sentence can be tentatively recovered, but what is the meaning of the repetition? Is it a play with "pure form"? For instance, in "Pure Form?", section 3 ("knot/a banruptury/hove/weirds", 50) is an ironical rewriting of "Not a bankruptcy of words" (49). In section 3, the transitive meaning of the sentence from section 2 is bankrupt; words seem to have become worthless as an exchange currency in the communication game. But the apparent nonsense of the list is made of meaningful signifiers that await the reader's investment. As Poem 2 says, if "[s]ome things can't be said", it is "[n]ot an inadequacy of language,/but a failure of speaking" (49). The verbal simulacra, the distorted words, barely play a critical function; they mostly act as the

revelation of the paragrammatic, infinite regress contained in language, the infinite power of language to speak about words[14].

Instances of such manipulation of words can be found in *Zulus*, or in the more recent novel *The Water Cure*, as in the following passage with its obvious reference to Wittgenstein's ladder (you cannot climb the same ladder twice, every repetition changes the meaning), its joycean wordplay (werewoof, soylent, winkinstein, finally rhyming with "stein" too, also contained in "Wittgenstein", while Sterne and Swift attend in "swiftly" and "sternely"), and the words slipping, the signifiers oozing down the line:

> Language is like a disposable ladder, one that once we achieve our level of meaning we kick away and wonder how we got to where we are. Werewoof one kinnot speak, theiroff one mist be soylent. All this while we play and pain with a language that is private. A draught peered into the old winkinstein.
> Rung after rung after rung after rung after rung after rung after rung after rung after rung
> To meaning dogs
> Grammars laid side by side, the bell rung ladder ring rung rigged to fall to fail to bail to boil to boll to roll to role to rove to love.
> Swiftly now drink sternely from they stein. (37)

The desire for "pure form […]/Untroubled, unhampered by contemplation of content" (*Abstraktion und Einfühlung"*, 48) is out of reach. Reversing Marjorie Perloff's suggestion that the semantics of a given poem can no longer be separated from its sound (*Radical Artifice,* 7), we can say that in Everett's second collection—and more particularly in each third section of each trio of poems—, the sound of a given poem can no longer be separated from its semantics, because sound is also where the semantics simultaneously dissoves and takes shape, unless sound is only "pure noise", which is never the case in Percival Everett's poems.

Although the strange words can be restored to partial, provisional significance through the reader's application, they are here to remain a "weedy" lot, "words" with the potential paronomastic "slippage" towards "weeds" in them, interferences in the production of a "pure form", a grammatical, orthographic and transparent language. They are here to remind us of the task of poetry which, from the suspension of meaning in the time of reading to the suspension of the line on the space of the page, aims at containing the uncontainable, reaching for the unreachable, and exists in a constant movement of making and unmaking. Such a movement involves the graphic and phonemic network of words as well as the rhythm of the syntactical disposition of signs, words and sentences in lines.

[14] My translation of Gilles Deleuze's sentence at the end of the following passage from *Logique du sens*: "Le sens est toujours présupposé dès que *je* commence à parler ; je ne pourrai pas commencer sans cette présupposition. En d'autres termes, je ne dis jamais le sens de ce que je dis. Mais en revanche, je peux toujours prendre le sens de ce que je dis comme l'objet d'une autre proposition dont, à sont tour, je ne dis pas le sens. J'entre alors dans la régression infinie du présupposé. Cette régression témoigne à la fois de la plus grande impuissance de celui qui parle, et de la plus haute puissance du langage : mon impuissance à dire le sens de ce que je dis, à dire à la fois quelque chose et son sens, mais aussi *le pouvoir infini du langage de parler sur les mots*" (my emphasis, 41).

"Weeds and words": The "poetry of sound"

The third volume of poems, *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, is another stage towards the autonomy of poetic writing in Percival Everett's work. The insertion of a three-line poem entitled "A Novel" (46) can be read both as ironical proof that at least for a while the order of priorities is changed and poetry comes first, and as a comment on the limited usefulness of generic classifications, pointed out by the inappropriate title. The three lines—recalling the pattern set by the title of the collection which is itself made of three words—contain a potential narrative as suggested by the use of the preterit. But even on such small a scale, the represented content, the barely emerging plot is deviated by sudden linguistic play, the correction of "no less" into "no fewer, as if the former had been a grammatical mistake: "We had no ordinary meeting./We were no less than two strangers./And no fewer." (46). The reader's attention is thus refocused from the incipient story to the actual quest for the right word. The movement is fairly characteristic of the whole collection. Even those poems that seem to open up onto a referential external place, like the poems evoking natural elements[15], finally fold back upon a semiotic space, which is that of the poem itself, as in "Cañon" (where the last words are "and the sentence", 33) or "Maps" (where the singing comes round to itself, 70). In the end, the referential space is not very different from the abstract, geometric spaces evoked in other poems, like "of minimal things" (69): the poem weaves a web of the same diphthong with "hope", "slope" and "sole" around a process of emergence that is also temporal. Something has happened with the last words, that was not here before —a transformation of the state of things ("changing you/into something you were not before"), that allows the poem to come into being[16].

The title "*Swimming Swimmers Swimming*" is quite idiosyncratic—it is not a quotation, and it does not so much contain an "idea" or a "theme" as a pattern of repetition[17] that disseminates through the whole collection in various ways. The repeated sounds and the ternary rhythm in the title of the collection are seminal for poems like "Instated" (with a line like "doubting doubts that doubted", 35), "Canter Counter Canter" (56) or "Maps" ("Songs sung singing", 70). The general title "instates" a minimal form of procedural poetics, offering a rule for repetition, setting the language forms in motion in a choreography of grammatical variations. How should the dance[18] of words be read? The apparent redundancy in "*Swimming Swimmers Swimming*" is funny and disturbing. It contains some of the pleasures of "babbling" also reminiscent of limericks, nonsense verse, and of the profoundly oral and rhythmic origins of poetry. With "*Swimming Swimmers Swimming*", the reading slides, glides—swims— from one word to the next, with the third word circling back to the first as in a ring-around-the

[15] See for instance "Weedy Weeds" (11), "Cañon" (33), "Bark Bark at the Sea in November" (57), "Fire" (66)…

[16] For another variation on the same cosmogonic theme, see "Instated" (35) that literally instates the presence of a tree in its very last line: "Except for *that* tree. It wasn't *there*" (my emphasis; the two deictics mark the position from which creation is made possible, in the distance from the past).

[17] In the traditional classification of rhetorical figures, it is a *polyptoton*, which is the repetition of words derived from the same root ("swim").

[18] My metaphor in this sentence and the preceding one is also inspired by the puzzling cover image of *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, which shows a ballerina in a swimsuit holding a position *en pointe* underwater. The photograph entitled "Ballet Composition II" comes from a series of 14 photographs on dance by photographer Nafis Azad.

rosy. But such a title also threatens the stability of designations: a swimmer is someone who swims, of course, but although the two "swimming" might not be of the same grammatical nature, (one is an adjective, the other a participle), the excessive determination and qualification of "swimmers" by the two "swimming"[19] also point at the destructive "conspiracy" of language against transitive communication, its power to turn against its own sense-making in order to free "affect" and let loose the "mean words [that] mean" and mean too much or not enough, as the poem "Averages" suggests (22).

In other poems, the repetitions seem to record a quest for expression that is conveyed through tentative sequences, until some satisfactory balance may be reached. One example of such a process can be found in "Cañon" with the quasi inversion of two words, "passage" and "sentences", from the opening line ("The passage is filled with sentences") to the closing one evoking the reversed image of a sentence "full of passages" ("The same better full of passages and the sentence"). A poem like "Conditions", whose title plays with metapoetic readings, intertwines grammatical words in a manner recalling Gertrude Stein's decision, after "caressing" nouns, to turn to "non semantic" words to compose her texts.

In "Conditions" (65), the density of repeated words slows down the reading and creates a visual impression, a blurring caused by the co-presence of similar or identical words in similar or identical configurations. That contributes to the irony of the final word, "found" (where a "founding", an "instating" can be heard, too), which is phonetically the only one of its kind in the poem, and which is placed in a line that lends itself to double reading.

In "Grammar" (26), the disturbance of the grammatical and syntactical orders, together with the combination of variations and the ubiquitous coordination "and", produce an effect that builds up to the final displacement of the tiniest item, the period. The punctuation mark is placed at the beginning of the last line, indicating the end of the sentence before it has begun, while allowing the poem to remain open-ended. The last word, "and", is suspended on the page. It does not connect with anything coming *after* in whatever minimal narrative the poem seems to be delineating (a confrontation between a "he" and a "she"). But it does connect to what was *before*, the opening line ("and she cries."), which the disposition of typographical and linguistic signs in the last line exactly mirrors (".cries she and").

The repetitions in Everett's poetic writing foreground what Craig Dworkin defines as "the relation of sound to poetry [which] has always been triangulated, implicitly or explicitly, by an equally nebulous third term: 'sense'" (*The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, 9). Sound patterns prove to be expressive, like the repetition of "echoes" and the echoes of repetitions in "Fire" (66). As Craig Dworkin explains, summarizing Benjamin Harshav's theory about the recursive feedback between poetic sound and sense:

> No sound pattern is inherently meaningful […]. However, once a reader identifies the presence of a sound pattern, certain referential statements from the poem—what one might think of as the conventional meaning of its "message"—are transferred onto that pattern, which in turn loops

[19] What is the limit between redundancy and difference? What is a "swimmer" if not "swimming", and what distinguishes a "swimming swimmer" from a "swimmer swimming"? Should the words be brought together, grouped together, or taken separately?

> back to reinforce and foreground particular themes in the message. (*The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, 12).

The repetitions lead the reading down the lines of the poem, along the flow of signifiers, sounds and words, as in "Weedy Weeds", the programmatic poem with a programmatic title opening the collection. The "weedy weeds" are the words where "we"—both the collective voice/subject in the poem and the signifier—"hide". Homophonic, paronomastic and anagrammatic wordplay structures the poem's rather disquieting tale of swimmers who end up hiding from the "yowly howls" of wolves. Isn't the saturation of sounds holding the poem together a screen that—to use a recurrent word in the collection—"covers" something we are denied access to? From the start, "Weedy Weeds" poses the failure of communication as a condition for the poem ("We're not talking…"). More importantly, the repetitions within and between the twelve couplet lines keep reintroducing imbalance ("same place" becomes "someplace", "reeds" leads to "weeds"). They give rise to the temporary illusion of the same, while the pull of the run-on-lines projects the reading into shifting rearrangements of meaning, led by the paronomastic and anagrammatic movement of the poem's language.

Like his fiction, Percival Everett's poetry enhances the place of words at the heart of the text's emergence. Words are the places where the crisis of language happens, where the disjunctions act as reminders of the fundamental instability of meanings, which are provisionally captured in formal and grammatical games. Together with that quintessentially postmodern experience of the disconnection between the world and the words, of our separation from the phenomenological world through language, the poems convey a playful energy, engaging the reader in serious play.

Within the context of Everett's *oeuvre*, the writer's poetic gesture is all the more meaningful as it resonates with his fiction. The most recent novels seem even more founded on the poetic intensification of the writing's self-reflexive turn. Expanding from an ongoing reflection on language and meaning, the narrativity of Everett's narrative fiction is increasingly modified by the insertion of a conceptual metanarrative often inspired by the philosophy of language. The storytelling no longer depends upon "facts", but upon the constant discussion by the narrative agency of the truth value of the statements upon which the possibility of the story rests.

For all that, which pertains to the postmodern condition of language and the postmodern condition itself, it is worth noting that *Swimming Swimmers Swimming* ends with a poem entitled "gift". In that poem, the interweaving of the words "fish", "love", "take" and "give" suggests a sort of poetic *agapè*, an exchange which ends with "given". The use of the past participle "given" indicates that the gesture has been made. The form of the poem frames the dynamic of the exchange between the reader and the text, between reading and writing, as intimated again by the interplay of sound patterns, syntax and line breaks, until we reach the "given". The "given" is the final word in which the last phoneme /*vən*/ resonates with the previous line in the poem where "given take" slides into "give and take". The "given" is the written, the poem we have just finished reading, but it is more than an object. It is an action that calls for the "taking". It provides content for the undetermined "gesture" alluded to in the title of Everett's first collection of poems. The poetic gesture, then, is double: it is a "gift" of words and a

taking in the shared space of the poem, where the writer and the reader can experience the bewildering reality and creative presence of language.

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