

ORGONE GRINDING AND ITS DISCONTENTS: THE POETRY OF FRANK ROGACZEWSKI

Mike Barrett

Thus one volume of Propertius and eight ounces of snuff may have the same exchange-value, despite the dissimilar use-values of snuff and elegies.

Karl Marx

There is some goggling and conversation coming from the box.

Charles Bernstein

Frank Rogaczewski's book of prose poetry, *Jeepers and Criminy! Are You Following This?* is erudite and slapstick, mad and maddening. Packed with outrage and narrative, it may even help you own up to your own material position. Activated by the current political scene, these poems reach far in history and long in parsecs. It is challenging reading, though *Jeepers & Criminy* comes with great rewards. While these political poems remain defiantly outside the market, they remain inside the libidinal economy of reading pleasure.

Rogaczewski is Marxist, so I'll borrow terms from Marx's "The Commodity" in *Critique of Political Economy*, to frame my discussion of his work, and political poetry in general. The "use-value" of a thing is its micro-economic function, the worth it provides in being used, "Use-value, as such, since it is independent of the determinate economic form, lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy." It gains the determinate form of exchange-value only when traded, and thus enters the political economy as a commodity.

To be sure, much poetry exists independent of economic form, realized only in the process of *composition*—poets find it a useful activity for its own sake. Many mute inglorious Miltons would attest to this. We can use these terms when poetry enters into a rhetorical or economic exchange. For example, in a recent essay "Politics and Poetry," in the *New York Times*, Tracy K. Smith argues that poets Danez Smith, CA Conrad, Jos Charles, and Justin Phillip Reed employ a post-Romantic lyrical "I." The poet's body is a site of conflict with status quo power and the "I" speaks from that site of conflict. The audience pays attention and in exchange may be transformed. In addition to traditional publishing, such first person political poetry is heard in slams, spoken-word performances, and Louder than a Bomb competitions.

Identity-based political poetry is left out of David Orr's 2008 essay in *Poetry*, "The Politics of Poetry." Orr argues that there are structural proper-

ties of audience that make it unlikely that political poetry can have much intentional efficacy. Orr's is a revealing position:

Most contemporary political poems are written for contemporary American poets, which means that political poems generally have more relevance to the politics of the poetry world than to the politics of America. The Language Poets have yet to topple capitalism by undermining narrative, but they've gotten some coveted jobs and made their way onto syllabi.

You can read Mainstream Verse Culture's (MVC) values in this passage. Orr indicates that there is little rhetorical *use-value* for the kind of poetry that Language Writers produce, yet he notes its efficacy as *exchange-value*—it has gained them “coveted” jobs and real estate on syllabi. This is the caricature of MVC—a poem's value as means of exchange. The program is to have the poem accepted into the MVC capital market where jobs, prizes, and publications are paid out.

Frank Rogaczewski employs an “I” narrator and the identity of his narrator is outsider-poet. He has plenty to say about the Modernists, but not much about MVC. In fact, his poetry enters the marketplace as neither use-value nor exchange-value. His poetry is not only the product of labor; his poetry *is* labor. The poems work against the market. He is in a lineage of revolutionary American poets, like Thomas McGrath, shown in these lines from *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*:

For my purpose (as I keep saying) is nothing less
Than the interpositioning of a fence of ghosts (living and dead)
Between atomic sewing machines of bourgeois ideology...
“To perform instantaneous lobotomies for
removing
The man-eating spinning wheels from the heads of our
capitalists.” (108)

The Hate Socialist Collective declares a similar aim in “Leave the Manifesto Alone: A Manifesto” (published in, and a statement against, *Poetry*):

The manifesto is obligated to be political at every instant.

To use the forms and worldviews on offer only for bitter mockery.

To be not an alternative to destruction but a complement.

To speak of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, the former as the enemy, the latter *defined as the social class which does not want to be named*.

The subtitle of Rogaczewski's book is: *A Helpful If Inexact Proletarian/Smart Ars Poetic Manifesto*. The potent element of Rogaczewski's *ars poetica* is the subversive role of comedy, "always, always, go for the joke at the expense of capital" (121). In his book *Only a Joke Can Save Us*, Todd McGowan formulates a thesis for comedy based on Lacanian psychology, "comedy requires spectators to be located in just the right position, where they can view excess and lack intersect in the comic object" (127). Conducting dialectical materialist analysis will always reveal these oppositions.

There is dialectic in all the poems of *Jeepers & Criminy*. In "Toward Smart-Ass Proletarian Poetry," Lewis Powell's 1971 apocalyptic warning about the threats to capitalism is countered by Rogaczewski's comedic call to arms to bring that apocalypse about:

humor for smart-ass proletarian poetry is an open field: anecdotal, blue, burlesque, gallows, deadpan, droll, epigrammatic, cosmic, farcical, fractured, fragmented, deadpan gallows, highbrow, lowbrow, hyperbolic, lowperbolic, middlebrowberbolic, gallows burlesque, lyrical, ironic, linguistic, mordant, morbid, parodic, juvenile, penile, anti-coagulant, troll-like, crocodile burlesque... economical tragicomical... (116)

Al Filreis's book *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry 1945-1960* quotes Donald Davidson's 1953 critique of left-wing poetry as being "treacherous political irresponsibility in the act of eschewing cause and effect while letting related elements stand in unordered, unsubordinated lists." Rogaczewski's riposte is, "Lists are great for poetry. Nothing's more listless than a listless poem" (120).

The form of *Jeepers and Criminy* accommodates this comedic approach; most of the poems are printed with left and right side justified margins with no paragraph divisions. Even conventionally lineated poems are formatted in prose, like this poem about Frost and Althusser:

Whose woods these are I think I know—/Some old New England capitalist's/He doesn't scare me any though/For I'm a communist!//These woods are quaint, but I'll be gone/For I have theses to write upon/And years of therapy with Lacan/And years of therapy with Lacan. (114)

I see these poems as boxes of Brownian motion where particles are suspended in a medium and, being bombarded by the medium's particles, move energetically and haphazardly around. The box is also Rogaczewski's consciousness—ideas bounce wildly there.

Another way to think about *Jeepers & Criminy* is as portmanteau narratives. Many narratives fit within the margins of the page. In the poem

“How Economics Became a Discipline,” Rogaczewski wonders if the word “portmanteau” is effective in describing a container for multiple elements. In a time when capitalists gather an excess of space and everyone else lacks it, “portmanteau” may just be too fancy a term:

forty-something years of class war by the elite on the rest of us, more and more of us joining the precariat so that we have to give up the *portmanteau* part of the expression *portmanteau word* and settle for *backpack word* or maybe even *extra-hefty garbage bag word*. (18)

As Rogaczewski continues, the portmanteau subdivisions become nodes of association or metonymic substitution:

And this economic situation obtains even though the *panoptikant* as portmanteau word combines Jeremy Bentham’s ideal and unrealizable institutional design whereby all (*pan*) prisoners in a given prison may be observed (*-opti-*) by a single keeper without the prisoners being able to tell they are being watched, with Immanuel Kant (*-kant*), the philosopher who gave us the thing-in-itself, which we may never know—I hope you’re keeping up now; this is no time for lollygagging in game theory or bartering apples for tomatoes with which to brain landscape painters—hence we bring together the unknowable and the unrealizable, in the neoliberal capitalist negation of negation, investing all our tomorrows with unaffordability, unacceptability, and, most certainly, unexchangeability. (19)

A passage like this must be the Marxist sublime. How else can you put things together by taking them apart?

Rogaczewski’s comedic associational style has its antecedent in the New York School (he notes Kenneth Fearing got there first), and the work of Language Writing, most notably, Charles Bernstein. For example, Bernstein’s 1991 poem, “Of Time and the Line,” uses different meanings of the word “line” as associational nodes with which to move the poem forward:

Nowadays, you can often spot a work
of poetry by whether it’s in lines
or no; if it’s in prose, there’s a good chance
it’s a poem. While there is no lesson in
the line more useful than the pick-
et line, the line that has caused the most ad-
versity is the bloodline. In Russia
everyone is worried about long lines;
back in the U.S.A. it’s strictly soup-
lines.

Rogaczewski uses the same technique on the same word:

Hence, certain ideas held by a political organization (and its individual members) could be called one's *line*, as in *party line* or "What's your organization's *line* on the Soviet Union, and why don't you think it's a degenerated workers' state, and how can you call yourself a Trotskyist if you don't, given that Trotsky himself coined the term in *The Revolution Betrayed*?" So, you see, the party line leads us right to the poetic line. (111)

What's the line on Rogaczewski? Is he a comedic associational Wobbly with a heart of gold? Poems like "Don't Vote, Vomit," and "Armed Teachers [With Mental Illness]" reveal the edges of his humor. Intense anger seethes in this verse, and if thoughts were guns, Rogaczewski is well-armed.

"Don't Vote, Vomit" begins with quantum speculation on how thought may shape reality, then Rogaczewski thinks up a way to weaponize political nausea:

Or think: Ronald Reagan shows up in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three civil rights workers—Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman—were murdered by a sheriff's officer/Klan alliance in 1964, and just as Reagan opens his mouth to speak of states' rights and kick off his presidential campaign—a miracle! Half-digested jellybeans rain down from the sky...(25)

Rogaczewski imagines that projectile vomiting is able to cleanse the entire corrupt system:

Yes, and think about it: neoliberalism washed away on a veritable tsunami of vomit while the Eugene Debs/Emma Goldman bloc takes the White House and hires union labor to paint it red and black. (26)

The poem "Armed Teachers [With Mental Illness]" has a similar origin—violence is imagined as a thought experiment. The narrator speculates that if Betsy DeVos and Donald Trump armed teachers, a violent revolt may be the unintended consequence:

The solution is obvious: teachers in tanks! Teachers with bazookas, grenades, AK-47s, AR-15s, heat-seeking missiles, weaponized drones, nuclear arsenals. Call them weapons of mass education...Imagine the nightmares! Betsy DeVos: after a difficult day of avoiding public schools in urban areas, encouraging legislation to break teachers' unions and hold down salaries, and seeking spiritual pathways to subvert Title IX, dreams of armed teachers stealing her family's nine yachts and turning them into floating grammar schools for inner-city kids. Paul Ryan dreams he's hiding behind his hardcover signed copy of Ayn Rand's *Atlas*

Shrugged when the red-state teachers arrive...and invite him to “show us your inventive little Personal Responsibility Two-Step Paul.” BLAM! BLAMMETY!
(98)

The poem ends with a unified education front including the downtrodden adjunct class, “And Donald Trump’s nightmares are the worst: red and blue state adjuncts teach him a lesson” (98).

These poems manifest the powerful psychic energy generated in reaction to the current political climate. How can the negation of negation occur without intense negativity? *Jeepers and Criminy* does not explicitly call for armed revolt, but *thinks* about weapons of vomit, and *dreams* about weapons of war.

Although Rogaczewski’s historical sweep is wide in these poems, the topicality of the collection recalls a distinction of political poetry Thomas McGrath made. McGrath called political poetry that addressed specific political concerns, “tactical political poetry.” Poetry with an eye toward the horizon of history, whose purpose is consciousness raising, McGrath named “strategic political poetry.”

“Amazing Scientific Breakthrough: Poem=Orgone Accumulator!” is an example of a “strategic” political poem. The figure at the center of the poem is Wilhelm Reich. Reich¹ was a psychoanalyst and renegade scientist. During the rise of Nazism he was active in the Communist Party in Germany, which, at the time, was engaged in opposition, sometimes violent, to the Nazi Party. His psychoanalytical circle shunned him for his unconventional views on adolescent sexuality and he was kicked out of the Communist Party for being too critical of the Stalinist line—Reich pointed out that communists delivered abstruse Marxist analysis to restive Germans while Hitler stirred crowds into orgiastic frenzies.

Reich ended up in America, via Norway, where he gathered a small group of followers who worked with him on his theory of “orgone energy,” a blue-colored cosmic/orgasmic force he believed resides in the atmosphere and inheres in all living things. Reich constructed boxes, called “orgone accumulators,” which were meant to capture orgone energy and deliver it to a person seated in the box. Eventually, the FDA investigated Reich. He violated a court order by shipping orgone accumulators. He was imprisoned and the FDA² destroyed his inventions and burned his books. Reich died in prison, shortly before his release on parole, in 1957.

1. Information on Reich is taken from his biography by Myron Sharaf, *Fury on Earth*, and the collection of his essays on sex and politics, *Sex-Pol Essays 1929-1934*.

2. Sharaf speculates that it may have been American Communist Party members who set the FDA on Reich in order to settle an old score. If so, Reich was getting it coming and going.

The initial dialectic in “Amazing Scientific Breakthrough...” is Ezra Pound and Wilhelm Reich. The poem opens with Ezra Pound “sitting in St. Elizabeth’s, guest of the state, free to roam the grounds, to import gourmet food and groupies, to indoctrinate and proselytize right-wing bohemian-wannabes” (62). Pound can be found in a garden where:

Feathers fly all around the cantankerous old fellow like the many wishes that his *Cantos* weren’t so pedantic and boring. Even John Adams wants out of them. And I can’t tell you how many Chinese dynasties. Mussolini, shot and hung upside down, feels more put upon by being in *The Cantos*. (62)

People want to get out of Pound’s *Cantos*, but they can hang out in a poem as orgone accumulator, “If Wilhelm Reich were still with us, this poem would be an orgone accumulator” (63). Rogaczewski’s dialectic of Pound to Reich reveals an astonishing contradiction. Pound, a traitor to the USA, receives visitors, New Directions publishes the Rock-Drill *Cantos* (1956), and writers agitate for his release, while Reich is imprisoned, his books burnt, and work destroyed because he sought to find a way to generate and store procreative energy.

Rogaczewski argues “Orgone” is a better term than Mesmer’s “animal magnetism,” Carl Reichenbach’s “Odic Force,” and Henri Bergson’s *élan vital*, because, “bioenergetics analogues are mightily misnominated when contrasted with *orgone*’s proximity to so poetic a term as *orgasm*” (65). Procreative energy accrues in an orgone accumulator poem, “It’s the same orgone energy pulses through us all!—the blue force through the larva, pupa and imago stage drives the mightily blue-eyed Lepidoptera drives the living blue matter of humanity!” (68). This positive countervailing force is necessary because thoughts can get so dark:

You get to thinking that capital’s all powerful: a vampire or a virus or the Anti-God of John Carpenter’s *Prince of Darkness*, in which perturbed priest Donald Pleasance tells us, “He lives in the smallest parts of it. Atoms. Smaller. Invisible,” and you realize that the workday can be subdivided down to the nanosecond and still within each nanosecond is the portion in labor which the laborer works for herself and the portion in which her labor feeds the Anti-God. (67-8)

Even if this capitalist system burns from its combustible contradictions, scorching the earth and humanity in the process (a victory for the Anti-God) there is room in the orgone accumulator poem to envision a different outcome:

you can sit here in the accumulator. Alone with your thoughts, like Neil Armstrong walking on the moon and surrounded in the blue light of orgone... Like Kate Bush, you can remake the world in your own image. Metamorphose the poem into a cloudbuster. Bring the rain on the rich and poor alike. The directors and the waterboarded alike. The White House and the tent citted alike. The shifty and the truthful. And then let the sun shine. Let the sun shine in. The sun. Shine in. (71)

Perhaps it is my own bourgeois sentimentality to believe that in raising consciousness one can see beyond class relations into the light of creative energy, the cosmic force that through the blue fuse drives. At least that's the story I read in "Amazing Scientific Breakthrough: Poem=Orgone Accumulator!":

Did I say there was a story? I meant a narrative poem. Or a poem en prose in any event. I can't say for sure that it's narrative in the sense you'd normally think of when you use the term. Or do you say "utilize"? If you do, why? You know, *normal*, like beginning, middle, and... Anyway, it might be apocryphal. Or apocalyptic? There were birds in the sky. Or just some random anecdote. But I never saw them winging. That I shall never see. No, I never saw them at all... (75)

Rogaczewski deploys a unique kind of negative capability in *Jeepers & Criminy*—he is universally capable of uncovering the negative in culture. Fortunately, he also jokes at its expense. This certainly dispels the glamour of the bourgeois. How to avoid communist asceticism? Humor helps with that, as does orgone energy. A spouse, dogs, cold beer, and music may assist in the endeavor, "Redbud tree in our yard where pear used to be. Beverly and I sit out there—cold beer after cold beer. Tall brown grass. Dogs lie nearby on cement. I remember Laura Nyro sang, 'Brown Earth'" (80).

In *The Function of the Orgasm*, Reich notes, "knowledge, work, and natural love are the sources of our life. They should govern it" (13). Moments in *Jeepers & Criminy* envision such possible governance, but only "God willing and the people resisting" (Rogaczewski 34). And while the book itself may not topple the capitalist system, it is Rogaczewski's righteous labor, and our reading pleasure, to work for that end.