
The Problem with Documentary Poetry

2011 Sosland Prize in Expository Writing

THERE HAVE BEEN MORE GENOCIDES IN THE 20TH CENTURY THAN can be comfortably listed or discussed; and yet, for most of us, the horrors of history exist only at a remove. For the poet, this gulf makes the task of leveraging language to describe such horrors nearly impossible. What words can confront the unspeakable? One approach, often taken in documentary poetry, attempts to ground the horror of atrocity in painful but brilliant imagery. In Carolyn Forché's prose poem "The Colonel," for instance, she invokes scenes of torture so specific we cannot help but imagine the physical realities behind her descriptions. The poem, which marks her experience visiting a military official at his house in El Salvador, vivifies the atrocity of torture in the clarity of detail: the salt and mangoes brought by a silent maid, the shards of broken glass nested in concrete retaining walls, the human ears poured on the floor like "dried peach halves" (16). Hers is a poem intended to document, but not necessarily

discuss, her experience inside the house of a torturer. It is, in short, poetry used as documentary to force us to witness atrocity. The sort of blazing imagery she uses is the mark of much of documentary poetry, and she combines this imagery with understated emotion to give the sense that what she has recorded lies beyond our ability to comprehend it. Her poem, in other words, lies wholly outside our normal experience, even as we are called to witness what it describes. This sort of poetry becomes troubling, then, because of the way it encourages us to read: we cannot presume to know what is beyond our own imagining. Under such a scenario, we are more readily able to excuse ourselves from the poem, and we allow ourselves to feel we are not implicated in the situation it describes. Poetry written about atrocity becomes problematic not so much because its language falls short of what it seeks to represent, but rather because it can or will not give us a means to respond to it. The muted emotion in documentary verse like "The Colonel" forces us to remain silent. But how can we remain mute in the face of such tragedy?

We might find an answer to that question in an extended reading of a poem by Dan Pagis, an Israeli poet and holocaust survivor who escaped from a Ukrainian concentration camp at the age of 14. His most famous poem, *written in pencil in the sealed railway-car*, seems a ready example of documentary poetry, one that on the surface promises to expose us to the locked innards of a boxcar bound for a death camp. In this poem, there is much to be read as documentary verse. Pagis never overtly appears in the poem, for instance; instead, we are given an aching clear title, a pencil scrawl in a shut boxcar, and the cryptic words that follow; because the title here implies these words are not even his, one could argue this poem is more

documentary than poems like “The Colonel.” That is, Pagis presents the “found” fragment as an artifact written by a victim, to which he appended a brutally simple, one-line explanation. If we further examine the poem, however, we find it does much more than merely document a victim’s experience, and in doing so, it invites us to be far more than silent witnesses. In short, the work captures a vicious moment, with lines so harrowing that we become trapped in that boxcar. The poem, in other words, bridges the gulf between witness and experience by creating a situation that requires us to psychologically participate in it. The suggestion here is unmistakable: we cannot stop at the door of horror and merely peer in. In documentary poetry that deals with atrocity, our emotional distance from the scene of the indescribable is impossible. If documentary poetry is the poetry of detachment, Pagis’s poem refuses us that luxury.

Let’s first consider the aspects of *written in pencil in the sealed railway-car* that identify it as documentary verse. The title is perhaps our clearest indication of documentary: it frames the poem as an artifact from the Holocaust rather than a poem composed after the fact; and we are led to believe we have found these terrible penciled words in a sealed boxcar, much the way Pagis himself suggests he discovered them. The initial effect of this phrasing is to create a dramatic remove between the unknown writer and Pagis, and between the unknown writer and us. The poem’s title is passive in the extreme, so much so that it would seem to remove all authorship. There is no poet speaking as witness, no subject excavating the sealed railway-car, no formal mechanisms of poetry that would mark it as verse. It is, quite simply, written in pencil in the sealed railway-car.

The precision of the title only adds to its documentary character: the fragment was found “written in pencil,” the railway-car was “sealed.” In the original Hebrew of the poem, the sentence is composed using words that are far newer to the language than the rest of the poem – “pencil,” for instance, and “railway” – the effect of which is to distance the title (and its audience) from the writing that follows. This distance makes the words seem like a fragment discovered long after the act of writing. The fragment itself, meanwhile, seems to exist in real time, with a message that was somehow cut off, and only later found: the sixth and final line of the fragment, “tell him that I,” ends suddenly on an incomplete appeal, and it is here that we reach the horror of the situation. The abruptness makes the line feel as if guards had caught the writer in the act of documenting herself. Its end implies that this woman was cut short before her final expression of soul or self could escape her, and it is in this state of incompleteness that the poem captures the horrors it seeks to suggest. The poem’s title and broken scrawl become a way to document a moment. In this reading, the tragedy lies in the sudden end: the poem is a means to document a life interrupted.

However, if we interpret this poem as the work of documentary, we perhaps rely too heavily on our immediate impressions of the poem’s title and ending. When we consider the fragment itself, particularly its sparse language and the double meanings of some of the original Hebrew, we find that the poem becomes much more participatory than its documentary title might suggest. The poem, as we will see, pulls us into itself until we become part of its telling. Part of this is because the poem is cyclical, and as its terrible story repeats

itself it has time to become more than a framed narrative from which we can remain detached. Instead, its repetitions sweep us into the story being told; in our involvement in the story, we, too, find ourselves trapped in that sealed railway-car. It is this kind of inevitable participation that casts the documentary frame of the poem aside, and forces us to psychologically participate in its scene of horror.

Before moving forward, then, it might be worth looking at the entire poem, with a closer eye on how it translates and on how the original Hebrew makes multiple suggestions for reading. The poem, in its entirety, reads:

written in pencil in the sealed railway-car

here in this carload
I am eve
with abel my son
if you see my older son
cain son of adam
tell him that I

The title's "sealed railway-car" is the first intimation of the poem's overwhelming sense of containment, and the fragment that follows lays before us a sense of her inevitable destiny: Eve and those with her are trapped, "sealed" in with no escape, heading towards death. In the "railway-car" they are totally severed from the world outside, and the immediacy of the poem's language demands that we, too, be present "here in this carload." But a more careful reading here in the context of the original Hebrew suggests that the poem is not so much fragmentary as it

is cyclical. Consider again the poem's last line, "tell him that I." In Hebrew, the "to be" verb is contained within the subject, so "tell him that I" could just as easily be translated as "tell him that I am." While neither phrase expresses a complete thought, "I am" reflects far more meaning back onto Eve herself; in it, Eve speaks to say that *she is*, which could be read as a stronger statement of self than a general plea to a world outside.

In other words, if we consider the translated ending as we did initially, "tell him that I," the poem seems to sway much more toward the "documentary" interpretation already put forth: these are a woman's final words, cut short, fragmented and later excavated, sent as a cry for help or hope into a world in which she no longer exists. The interpretation emerging from the original Hebrew, however, points toward a possibility that the poem itself is more cyclical than fragmentary: the last line, "tell him that I am," is to be followed by returning us to the first line, "here in this carload." This would make sense. In Judaism, passages of scripture are read over and over; when one finishes reading, one goes back to the beginning to start reading once more. It is possible that this poem is intended in a similar manner, that Pagis has constructed a poem that connects *tell him that I am* back to *here in this carload*. This cyclical interpretation is supported by the content of the fragment that is being repeated. The name "Eve" in Hebrew is nearly identical to the word for life, which allows the sentence "I am eve" to easily read as "I am alive." And so we can trace the continuing cycle of her survival: Eve is "here in this carload," she is alive (for now). The poem has moved away from fitting neatly into the documentary context of its title. Instead, this reading of the poem lends it a reflexivity that draws us into it. This re-

circulating writing asks us to re-examine the poem, to involve ourselves in it. In the examination, we become pulled into its logic: in the poem's never-ending cycle, there is no end to the words, and once their repetition has begun, there is no clear place for speaker or her audience to stop. Any end at all will seem forced.

When the outside world in this poem fades, in other words, the cycle draws our attention away from the documentary context. Its pull serves to diminish the power of the documentary title, for as it wraps us into its desperate repetition, it pulls apart from the frame with its own momentum; the poem is totally self-contained, a universe apart. Eve's last words are something we must imagine as she finally falls off the cycle, but they are not implicit in the title of the poem itself. We can picture them, but with terrifying latitude. Must the title and its suggestion of distance prove Eve's death or did she die at some later time? Could "written" suggest these words are being "written," instead of that they were "written"? No matter our interpretation, the poem has sidestepped its initial enclosure into something far more frightening: it has assumed an indeterminate end, and it has drawn us into it. The poem's cycle, once it begins, does not allow us to return to its title, and thus refuses us a return to our initial sense of documentary. The objective remove we are accustomed to experiencing at the hand of documentary verse is compromised as this poem turns in on itself; a human hand, a larger message, has become visible in its creation. In the process of iteration and reiteration, we become part of the process of writing.

If the problem of documentary poetry is that it separates us from what it summons us to witness, Pagis's poem makes such detachment difficult. But it is not just the cyclical nature of the poem that draws us in; also at work here is a universal narrative that we are meant to more readily comprehend than, say, a genocide as brutal as the Holocaust. So, where a more detached witness might read Eve's words as her singular prayers as she recognizes her life ending, the Genesis narratives that Eve invokes make the poem more than the final thoughts of a dying woman. As the poem repeats itself, we re-examine the people who act and move within it, and we find that its cycle shifts again from a personal litany of a faceless woman to something far more universal. In other words, we might be led to interpret Pagis's use of the Biblical name Eve as a conceit meant to emphasize the significance of each life lost in the Holocaust without having to name a particular individual; we might likewise read Eve in the poem as a conceit meant to emphasize the magnitude of the lives lost. But either reading would render Eve a generality. Eve, however, cannot be a generality; hers is a name and a word that encircles all of humanity, and it therefore implicates us in the terror of that shut boxcar. The loss of Eve is not just the loss of an originator of a people, but also the loss of our own ancestor, a threat to some fundamental part of our identity.

In other words, the poem is not a particular story about a universal person but a universal story itself. Its universality entwines with its more basic cyclical structure to transcend the limits of documentary verse: in light of the cycle of our history, we realize that no one merely "witnesses" atrocity. Let's take a look, then, at a few of the instances in which this poem broadens past the prayers of a single woman. In Hebrew, the words "with

abel my son" (3) can also be read as "the people of abel," broadening the poem to include multitudes. The people of Abel, of course, are the people who are being killed. Cain, the "older son" referenced in line 5, is not simply the son of Adam; the roots of the word "adam" could imply that he is also "cain the son of blood," "cain the son of the soil," or, in the Hebrew turn of phrase, *cain ben adam* – "cain the human." The poem's narration of a Biblical story suggests that the atrocity it describes is, in some way, a repetition of a more primordial atrocity, perhaps the first homicide. More disturbing is the suggestion that this sort of atrocity is cyclical, that the Holocaust is but one more iteration of a violence that has yet to end. The poem reaches its own depth of terror here, when it marks that the true horror may not be behind us, but within and ahead of us. We are alone with ourselves in the boxcar of our civilization. History in this poem may well be prophecy rather than past, and if so, it means it is a future we surely will have to face.

The immediate suggestion in the poem, of course, is not the possibility of more horror on the horizon. Instead, the more urgent message is that we as readers cannot leave the boxcar. Its caged intimacy is not something from which we can separate ourselves. Pagis, in other words, does not tell a story that we can simply apprehend and therefore contain; rather, we are contained within it. This is a containment achieved not only in the immediate situation of the poem but in the kind of human history it invokes in calling forth Eve. We are all still bound by our own ancestry, in which the earth is not a roomy enough boxcar to separate us from other stories. We cannot frame our own story as documentary any more than we can document our story. The reasoning here is simple: we must also live that story

and participate in it. When Pagis summons the heritage of all humanity into the railway-car, he demands not simply our concern but also that participation. We must live the fate of Eve and not merely bear witness to it. That fate must invoke a visceral reaction, for "eve" is the proverbial mother of everyone; if she is caught by the guards in the act of documenting her life, if she herself dies, then what must this mean for us?

The poem's sense of inclusion is only broadened by the double meanings in its various shades of translation. Depending on how we understand the original Hebrew, we can read the poem as drawing entire groups of people into individual names; Eve is, in one translation, among "the people of abel," and she is speaking of "cain the human." Abel has grown from a brother to a tribe, and Cain from an elder brother to "the human." Their expansion suggests not only that the atrocity of the Holocaust is a form of repetition of some original act of violence, but also that we are still contained within the same family, that even a horror as systemized and impersonal as that which was sealed in the railway-car is fratricide, and that any instinct we have to remove ourselves from these horrors is illusory. Eve's capture and extermination is no longer an enclosed or discreet act of violence from which we can detach ourselves; it is terrifyingly intimate. Thus are we trapped inside the sealed railway-car with the poem's desperate, unending repetition, and thus are we trapped inside the story of the poem. This isn't to argue that the poem sidesteps its more immediate story of violence and genocide. While the narrative it relates is an artifact of the Holocaust, its overtones are of a much older homicide that repeats itself. It is in the light of this terrifying enclosure that the poem becomes

participatory for us as readers: our enclosure transforms our act of witness into an act of involvement.

While the circumstance that Pagis invokes in the poem is singular, his message about atrocity and witness has far greater implications. His is not the breathless horror of being shown a sack of human ears, of walking guiltless and detached into the house of a Colonel. Rather, in summoning Eve and Adam and Cain and Abel, he reminds each of us of our own vast capacity for horror, and reveals that this ancestral horror is one that is still renewing itself. Pagis intimates that the cold violence of the carload is a bloodshed from which no one is exempt. More profoundly, perhaps, the poem suggests that detachment is not blameless, that to persist in silence, to distance oneself from the boxcar, does not wash blood from our hands. We examine the role of “cain the human,” the absent child to whom Eve is appealing, and we find that though there are several ways to interpret Cain’s role in the poem, one truth is clear: though Cain is “human,” and though his connection with the sealed railway-car is uncertain, he is still marked with the blood of his sibling. There are none who go unimplicated.

The consequences of detachment, moreover, are terrifying. In the fragment Pagis offers, it is not simply Abel who is being killed, as in the Biblical story, but also Eve. The story has been twisted on itself in the intervening centuries, and the death of Eve suggests that it has spun out of control, that it promises an irreparable negation of parts of our identity. For, while the scriptures hold that Cain and Abel had another brother, there was only ever one Eve. Her death would be an irreparable contortion of the human mythology. As such, the threat on Eve’s

life in this poem is not simply a repeating pattern in human history but an atrocity that has become twisted as we attempted to remove ourselves from it. Though we may attempt to contain atrocity and to distance ourselves from what proceeds in sealed spaces, we still cannot absolve our responsibility or negate our heritage. In fact, in allowing such detachment, we might allow the atrocity to consume us all. It is in participation, and not in witness, that we have hope in understanding; it is likewise in participation, and not in witness, that documentary poetry can apprehend what is otherwise impossible to articulate. And perhaps it is ultimately in participation, in the transfer of the mind that shows us inside every boxcar we construct, that the cycle of horror in our history may finally be made to cease.

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Works Cited

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