



POETRY FOUNDATION

FEATURED BLOGGER

No

BY ANNE BOYER

History is full of people who just didn't. They said *no thank you*, turned away, ran away to the desert, stood on the streets in rags, lived in barrels, burned down their own houses, walked barefoot through town, killed their rapists, pushed away dinner, meditated into the light. Even babies refuse, and the elderly, too. All types of animals refuse: at the zoo they gaze dead-eyed through plexiglass, fling feces at the human faces, stop having babies. Classes refuse. The poor throw their lives onto barricades. Workers slow the line. Enslaved people have always refused, poisoning the feasts, aborting the embryos. And the diligent, flamboyant jaywalkers assert themselves against traffic as the first and foremost visible, daily lesson in *just not*.

Saying nothing is a preliminary method of *no*. To practice unspeaking is to practice to being unbending: more so in a crowd. Cicero wrote “cum tacent, clamant”—“in silence they clamor”—and he was right: only a loudmouth would mistake silence for agreement. Silence is as often conspiracy as it is consent. A room of otherwise lively people saying nothing, staring at a figure of authority, is silence as the inchoate of a now-initiated *we won't*.

Sometimes our refusal is in our staying put. We perfect the loiter before we perfect the hustle. Like every other toddler, each of us once let all adult commotion move around our small bodies as we inspected clover or floor tile. As teens we loitered, too, required “security” to dislodge us, like how once in a country full of freely roaming dogs, I saw the primary occupation of the police was to try to keep the dogs out of the public fountains,

and as the cops had moved the dogs from the fountains, a new group of dogs had moved in. This was just like being a teenager at the mall.

Some days my only certain *we* is this certain *we* that didn't, that wouldn't, whose bodies or spirits wouldn't go along. That *we* slowed, stood around, blocked the way, kept a stone face when the others were woeful and complicit with smiles. And still we ghost, and no-show, and in the enigma of refusal, we find—despite ourselves—that we endogenously produce our own incapacity to even try, grow sick and depressed and motionless under all the merciless and circulatory conditions of all the capitalist *yes* and just can't, even if we thought we really wanted to. This is as if a river, who saw the scale of the levees, decided that rather to try to exceed them, it would outwit them by drying up.

And while it is true that refusal is a partner to death—I think it was Mary McCarthy who said even a gun to the head is merely an invitation—death is also a partner to refusal, as in mostly not the best option, but an option nonetheless. Death as refusal requires as its material only life, which if rendered cheap enough by the conditions that spark the refusal, can become precious again when selectively and heroically deployed as a *no*.

Poetry is sometimes a *no*. Its relative silence is the negative's underhanded form of singing. Its flights into a range-y interior are, in the world of fervid external motion, sometimes a method of standing still. Poetry is semi-popular with teenagers and revolutionaries and good at going against, saying whatever is the opposite of whatever, providing nonsense for sense and sense despite the world's alarming nonsense. Of all the poems of *no*, Venezuelan poet Miguel James's *Against the Police*, as translated by Guillermo Parra, refuses most elegantly:

AGAINST THE POLICE

My entire Oeuvre is against the police
If I write a Love poem it's against the police

And if I sing the nakedness of bodies I sing against the police
 And if I make this Earth a metaphor I make a metaphor
 against the police
 If I speak wildly in my poems I speak against the police
 And if I manage to create a poem it's against the police
 I haven't written a single word, a verse, a stanza that isn't
 against the police
 All my prose is against the police
 My entire Oeuvre
 Including this poem
 My whole Oeuvre
 Is against the police.

Poets have famously enstatuated themselves among hermits and saints as an expert-class of refusers. Emily Dickinson, Gwendolyn Brooks, George Oppen stand in that pantheon of “not this,” who sometimes wore their laurels like a crown of thorns. The pantheon of those who won't—Alice Notley's “I had left the American poetry masons in their burnt-down hall”—is the best church poetry has to offer. It's a temple with the incense of sacrificed literary reputation, littered with bankruptcy notices for cynical cultural capital, warmed by the greater fire of the intrinsic, populated by the most famous and the most anon. No more poetry in the shape of a cowardly *maybe*, or florescent *yes*, or cloying, collaborating, reactionary, status-loving, and desperately eager *whatever-they-say-I'll-do*.

I like *no*. It's sidewise to a reverse mantra (om). It's stealthy, portable, and unslouching. It presides over the logic of my art, and even when it is uttered erringly there is something admirable in its articulation. But even the greatest refusalists of the poets might be a somewhat ironic deployers of that refusal, for what is refused often amplifies what is not. The *no* of a poet is so often a *yes* in the carapace of *no*. The *no* of a poet is sometimes but rarely a *no* to a poem itself, but more usually a *no* to all dismal aggregations and landscapes outside of the poem. It's a *no* to chemical banalities and wars, a *no* to employment and legalisms, a *no* to the wretched arrangements of history and the tattered and Bannon-laminated earth.

Sometimes poetry enacts its refusal in its formal strategies, and of these formal strategies

of refusal, among the simplest is the technique of poetry called "turning the world upside down." This Walt Whitman poem, called *Transpositions*, depends entirely upon reversal as enacted refusal:

Let the reformers descend from the stands where they are
 forever bawling—let an idiot or insane person appear on
 each of the stands;
 Let the judges and criminals be transposed—let the prison
 keepers be put in prison—let those that were prisoners
 take the keys;
 Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest.

Transpositions uses the formal trick of moving around social classes so that the structure that enforces the existence of those social classes is exposed as unworkable. Whitman's poem is generous and ongoing in that anyone reading this could practice the same mode of refusal, write some transpositions, too. Here's how: take what is, and turn it upside down. Or take what is and make it what isn't. Or take what isn't and make it what is. Or take what is and shake it till change falls out of its pockets. Or take any hierarchy and plug the constituents of its bottom into the categories of its top. Or take any number of hierarchies and mix up their parts.

In Bertolt Brecht's essay, *Writing the Truth: The Five Difficulties*, there's a fragment of an ancient Egyptian poem of reversal:

So it is: the nobles lament and the servants rejoice. Every city says: Let us drive the strong from out of our midst. The offices are broken open and the documents removed. The slaves are becoming masters.

So it is: the son of a well-born man can no longer be recognized. The mistress's child becomes her slave girl's son.

So it is: The burghers have been bound to the millstones. Those who never saw the day have gone out into the light.

So it is: The ebony poor boxes are being broken up; the noble sesban wood is cut up into beds.
Behold, the capital city has collapsed in an hour. Behold, the poor of the land have become rich.

Through reversal, in this poem, the impossible is now slightly less so. Now that the unfamiliar order has been given a cognitive rehearsal, it doesn't seem quite as unlikely after reading it that the capital city could collapse in an hour. But more than a cognitive rehearsal, that city's collapse also has a social one: it has not only been staged in one person's mind, it has also been shared, and in its sharing, another step toward its enactment has occurred.

But refusal, which is only sometimes a kind of poetry, does not have to be limited to poetry, and turning the world upside down, which is often a kind of poetry, doesn't have to be limited to words. Words are useful for upending the world in that they are cheap, ordinary, portable, and generous and they don't mess us up too badly if we use them wrong, not like if we use matches or a machete wrong, but poetry is made up of figures and figurations and syntaxes as much as it is made up of words. We can make a poetry without language because language as the rehearsal material of poetry has made the way for another poetry, that of objects, actions, and environments. This is not saying to be a poet means you only have to *rehearse* turning over the world: now try putting the chair on your head.

Transpositions and upendings refuse and then reorder the world. And so, too, poetry manages a transposition of vocabulary: a refusalist poet's "against" is an agile and capacious "for," expanding the negative to genius and the *opposite of* to unforeseen collapses and inclusions. These words mean something else, or as the British poet Sean Bonney writes:

Our word for Satan is not their word for Satan. Our word for Evil is not their word for Evil. Our word for Death is not their word for Death.

There is a lot of meaning-space inside a "no" spoken in the tremendous logic of a refused

order of the world. Poetry's *no* can protect a potential *yes*—or more precisely, poetry's *no* is the one that can protect the *hell yeah*, or every *hell yeah's* multiple variations. In this way, a poem against the police is also and always a guardian of love for the world.

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Poet and essayist Anne Boyer was born and raised in Kansas. She earned a BA from Kansas State University and an MFA from Wichita State University. Her works include *The Romance of Happy Workers* (2006), *My Common Heart* (2011), *Garments Against Women* (2015, 2016), which Maureen McLane described as “a...

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61 West Superior Street,
Chicago, IL 60654

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