

(From Twenty Poems That Could Save America by Tony Hoagland)

Je Suis ein Americano: The Genius of American Diction

We American poets are millionaires; we possess a vocabulary extracted, imported, and patched together from so many tongues and sources, we can write checks with our mouths all day. We inhabit a linguistic landscape so etymologically wealthy that our most minor communications are studded with high and low improvisations. We have tinhorn and yahoo and meshuganah; we have yonder and redneck and hokeypokey, we have lily-livered and bumbershoot and rockabilly. Our diction is already mixed— a mixture of nationalities, jargons, eras, and attitudes. “The English language,” said Whitman, “is the accretion and growth of every dialect, race, and range of time.... It is indeed a sort of universal absorber, combiner, and conqueror.” The receptivity of English to creative mongrelization may spring from its hybrid origins— from the Norman Conquest, in 1066, when Anglo-Saxon met French-Latin, and Middle English was conceived. Our forked tongue thus includes both work and labor, both dead and mortified, both hungry and famished. As a result perhaps, English, and especially American English, seems never to have taken a puritanical stance toward vocabulary. It has enlarged itself by freely absorbing vocabulary from Arabic, Iroquoian, and Indonesian. Other countries, such as France, have striven to shield and protect the purity of their language. But Americans love coinages and improvisation— linguistically, we don’t mind being “balkanized.”

In consequence, English is fantastically elastic and adroit. We possess so many alternative options for naming that our available expressive range is vast. Each synonym carries different implications, or connotations, of relative high and low, of attitude, formality, distance, and inflection. Thus, a poet can “say the same thing” on a semantic level while spinning the message in any variety of ways: pregnant is also knocked-up, gravid, expecting, bun in the oven, one on the way, great with child, and so on and so on.

Few poems illustrate the multiple and practical implications (or dilemmas) of word choice better than “The Beautiful American Word Guy,” by John Weir:

The beautiful American word “guy.” It always gets me. For one thing, a guy is never alone. What if your name were Guy? Then you’d think that all the men behind all the deli counters on Ninth Avenue were talking to you. “What’ll it be, Guy?” “Mayo, Guy?” “We’re outta sesame, Guy, how about onion?” Guy is friendly, whereas “man” is hostile and competitive. “I hear you, man,” actually means, “Back off, dickhead, I’m in charge here.” “Dude” is useful, but thanks to Bart Simpson it’s never sincere. “Buddy,” “buster,” and “pal” are sturdy but

tainted by camp, like dialogue from old Hollywood movies. “Boss” scares me, and “chief” sounds undemocratic and maybe politically incorrect.

I like “brother” sometimes. “Brother, you gotta be kidding,” a truck driver yelled at me once on Eighth Avenue, because I was reading a book and crossing the street against the light. He twisted the word around to mean, “Die, motherfucker,” but I’m a romantic, and I heard him saying, “Cling to me as we plunge together manfully into the abyss.”

Still, guy is the most inclusive and universally tender, taking the back of your neck in its creased palm and saying, “I’m counting on you.” It’s a promise and a threat, a stroke, a supplication, and a plea. If there were an epic poem of America in muscular four-beat Old English lines, its first word would not be “Hwaet,” but “Guy.”

Weir’s poem rejoices in and agonizes over the wealth of alternative nouns by which one man can address another in American. Looked at as a dilemma of vocabulary, the poem can be seen as simply a catalog, or rehearsal, of available synonyms — each one with its own history, baggage, and connotations: man, dickhead, chief, motherfucker, buddy. Looked at as a predicament of masculinity, or politics, and we are deep inside not just the psyche but the history of the world.

To illustrate, consider one of the synonyms in Weir’s poem, “chief.” Chief has etymological roots in the word chief in Old French, and the word capum or caput in Latin, meaning head. But in the history of its usage, English users know the word from its frequent use in John Wayne movies, and from the popular-culture tales of cowboys and Indians; we involuntarily are reminded of stone-faced Native Americans, dressed in feathered headdresses. Likewise, we are aware of the latter-day controversy surrounding the use of chief as a label for this “American ethnic minority,” a context to which the poem refers as “maybe politically incorrect.” The circumstances of the word chief, like many words, are so complicated and enmeshed, they can’t be easily shaken off.

Thus, to use any interesting word is not just to pinpoint one meaning but also to invoke a whole resonating web of vocabularies, contexts, and ideas. In this particular way, diction is very much an instrument of associative imagination, and one of the many modes of intellect that collaborate in the making of a poem.

Diction as a Focusing Device

Diction’s greatest power lies in its conceptual precision — in its compressed embodiment of discriminating intelligence. If a speaker says, “I am a connoisseur of hotdogs,” we recognize that the description is a deliberately incongruous combination of high-class and low-class elements, of French nomenclature and American vernacular. The effect is comic,

satirical, and conceptually precise; we intuit that the speaker, by applying one diction to the topic of another, is mocking certain kinds of pretension. Or perhaps he is affectionately acknowledging his own lack of sophistication. The layered implications are socially complex and intellectually compressed.

Diction in this sense can be most usefully thought of as a focusing system, one that operates on both conceptual and emotive levels. After all, diction is the main instrument of constructing tone, and it is tone that orients our attention and inflects our attitude toward a scene, a person, or a topic.

“Connoisseur of hotdogs” is a rather garish performance of mixed diction. Diction used in a more tempered, orchestrated way can be found in August Kleinzahler’s poem “Watching Dogwood Blossoms Fall in a Parking Lot Off Route 46.” The diction of the title itself— its juxtaposition of “Route 46” and “Watching Dogwood Blossoms” — brings into focus the poem’s central theme: the coexistence of pastoral beauty and man-made reality.

Here is most of the poem:

Dogwood blossoms drift down at evening
as semis pound past Phoenix Seafood

and the Savarin plant, west to the Turnpike,
Patterson or hills beyond.

The adulterated, pearly light and bleak perfume
of benzene and exhaust

make this solitary tree and the last of its bloom
as stirring somehow ...

as that shower of peach blossoms Tu Fu watched
fall on the riverbank

from the shadows of the Jade Pavilion.

“Watching Dogwood Blossoms” is a kind of elegant still life, combining images of the modern and the bucolic. But the effectiveness of the poem is not merely a matter of contrasting juxtaposed nouns, such as semis and peach blossoms— nor is its intention merely ironic, although one feels the presence of that possibility. The poetical formality of phrases like “the last of its bloom” indicates that the speaker’s claims for beauty are sincere. Even conventionally disagreeable phenomena are descriptively elevated to aesthetic status by diction choices. Pollution creates an “adulterated, pearly light,” a phrase in which the Latinate formality of *adulterate* actually dignifies the contamination to

which it refers. Likewise, *bleak* is a word choice of erudite expressiveness; *perfume* dresses up *benzene and exhaust*. Kleinzahler's pastoral poem registers a contest between the ugly modern and the beautiful eternal, but spiritual elevation is ultimately given the advantage by the relative weights of diction.

Through its lyrical, light-handed layering of mixed dictions toward a very particular conceptual focus, "Watching Dogwood Blossoms" makes a transcendental claim for beauty, achieved against the resistance of its own unpoetic landscape. By presenting simultaneously rapturous and realist perspectives, the diction of the poem actually *trains* our cognition, instructing us in how to perceive the world in a very particular way: skeptically, yet also receptively, and appreciatively.

Hayden Carruth's poem "Une Présence Absolue" is essentially a prayer, one that employs diction in a building pattern of gradual escalation and then, abrupt descent, moving from an increasingly sacred rhetoric to vulgar self-acknowledgment. The theatrical effect is to present and then to collapse the distance between two realities, through two dictions, in order to make a sharply focused composite:

Not aware of it much of the time, but of course we are
Heedless folk, under the distracting stars, among the great
cedars,
And so we give to ourselves casual pardon. It is there,
though, always,
The continuum of what really is, what only is.
The rest is babble and fury. Imagination, let me pay more
attention to you,
You alone have this letting power; give me your own gift,
which is the one
absolution.
I am this poor stupid bastard half-asleep under this bridge.

The first half of Carruth's poem, though not radically elevated, contains a smattering of high-discourse formal inflections, in both vocabulary and syntax: "we are / Heedless folk ... among the great cedars, / And so we give to ourselves casual pardon." *Heedless, pardon, babble, fury*—all these word choices invoke a formal literariness and the aura of serious public address. The poem reaches its rhetorical and emotional climax in lines five and six, at the speaker's reverent invocation of imagination.

What happens next, in the poem's abrupt final sentence—"I am this poor stupid bastard half-asleep ..."—is a plunging demotion of the high diction that has immediately preceded it. In the speaker's blunt declaration of his own crudity and ignorance, we get an accurate, focused acknowledgment of the distance between heaven and earth, between human nature and divinity, between the speaker's aspiration and his own humble actuality.

This satisfying dramatic effect carries a conceptual and emotional punch; a complex revelation wrought mostly through diction. Not only does Carruth's vocabulary de-escalate (*poor/ stupid/bastard*), but the meditation is suddenly grounded in a specific narrative moment and setting, "under this bridge." The speaker is no longer a talking meditative head, but a mere man, made of flesh in a lowly physical landscape.

Of course the modulations of diction are a continuum; throughout the poem, and in the course of a single sentence, word choices fluctuate in minute and nuanced ways. Even early in the poem, Carruth is toying with the equilibrium between lofty and plain rhetoric. The phrase "we are heedless folk," for example, gives off an aura of casual seriousness, because *heedless* is formal and almost archaic, whereas *folk* has a casual plainness to it. Similarly, *of course* is informal, while "among the great cedars" conveys an atmosphere of veneration, as does "we give to ourselves pardon." Had the poet wished to elevate his rhetorical register even more at this moment, he easily might have said, "we grant ourselves casual pardon." All such subtle, word-by-word choices are instrumental in the poet's careful orchestration of a building swell, which is then abruptly deflated by the last sentence of the poem. Carruth's poem is rhetorically expert, and diction is his primary tool.

The Material Imagination

The selective material imagination of a poem — that is, the poem's nouns — comprise a consequential diction of their own. To have a painting by Vermeer in a poem presents a worldview different from a poem containing a convenience store and a Ping-Pong table. To have a string quartet and a Port-A-Potty in the same poem suggests a democratic universe, and possibly an ironic or comically observant speaker. Some poems are more "mixed" than others.

Kleinzahler's poem "Watching Dogwood Blossoms," discussed earlier, can be lucidly understood solely on the basis of its nouns. On the one hand, declares the poem, "semis pound past"; on the other, "watching dogwood blossoms." On the one hand, the seafood market, and on the other, a memory of ancient Chinese poetry. The poet's appreciation of an impure world is precisely configured by the counterpoint of nouns in the poem.

Any poet who wishes to enlarge or revitalize her aesthetic range might simply introduce a more diverse vocabulary of things into her poetry. The love poet who can incorporate Tylenol and violin lessons into a sonnet to the beloved has dilated and complicated the poetics of romance.

Mixed Diction as Culture Fest

Varietal diction in a poem is also an expression of a culture's breadth, of the conversation that culture is having with itself, among its many parts. If language is equivalent to the consciousness of a nation or culture, the range of vocabulary used in any work of literature is to some degree the representation of the range of cultural inclusiveness — conscious and unconscious.

Such a view of mixed diction is dialectical. According to this vision of poetry, mixed word choices, such as concubine and pooch, precipitous and bean counter, hula dance and Kervorkian, mingle like citizens inside a paragraph or stanza, shoulder each other aside and exchange gossip. This potpourri of speech gives the reader an idea of the complex social forces that must be accounted for in any description of reality.

To include, as Robert Pinsky does in his poem "Louie Louie," the Beastie Boys (a white hip-hop band formed in the 1980s) and the Scottsboro Boys (defendants in a 1931 racially motivated rape trial) in the same poem makes a statement about the breadth, variety, and contradictions of the known world:

I have heard of Black Irish but I never
Heard of White Catholic or White Jew.
I have heard of "Is Poetry Popular?" but I
Never heard of Lawrence Welk Drove
Sid Caesar Off Television

I have heard of Kwanzaa but I have
Never heard of Bert Williams.
I have never heard of Will Rogers
or Roger Williams or
Buck Rogers or Pearl Buck
Or Frank Buck or Frank
Merriwell At Yale.

.....

I have heard of the Pig Boy.
I have never heard of the Beastie
Boys or the Scottsboro Boys but I
Have heard singing Boys, what
They were called I forget.
I have never heard America
Singing but I have heard of I
Hear America Singing, I think
It must have been a book
We had in school, I forget.

Pinsky's poem may be a nonsense song, but it is also implicitly offered as a portrait of America. "Louie Louie" is a lyric about the complex dance of history, memory, artifact, and tribe. It suggests that we Americans are shallow but erudite, ignorant but sophisticated, and that we live suspended in an

atmosphere of references of which we are mostly unconscious. The chant itself is a way of spraying an aerosol of names into the air, waking them up before stirring them back into the culture batter, in their broth of rhyme, memory, nonsense, and reason.

And the truth is, naming as a game is a primal oral pleasure that goes back to our childhood use of language — “ Betty and Tiger sitting in a tree / K-I-S-S-I-N-G.” “Mona got mono from Monroe in Morocco.” Naming is a pleasure game that reminds us of learning the alphabet and skipping rope, and Pinsky’s poem evokes that deep play activity with vocabulary for its own sake. Simply to move our mouths around the shifting shapes of our vocabulary is one of the deep levels of poetry pleasure.

Diction’s Comic Possibilities

On these and other grounds, the intricate energies of diction offer great opportunity for comedy; the frictive sonic play between vowel and consonant, the endless combinatory possibilities for pace, the rhythmic play between single-syllable and polysyllabic words — it all constitutes a rich erotic field of amusement in itself. But diction’s comedic power is also deeply social and cognitive. The comedy of diction almost always springs from the colliding energies of playfulness and utility. Words chosen and used for utility are usually pragmatically economical and semantically clear, what is called “transparent”: “The dog slept in the shadow of the pickup truck .” But word choices made for the sake of sonic pleasure, or for the sake of rhetorical inflation, or deflation, can easily exceed, ornament, distort, or derail the speech task purportedly at hand. “Jasper’s geriatric bluetick lay comatose in the spilled shade of his Civil War– era Buick.” Such riffing can be observed in the routines of any talented stand-up comedian — and almost any good comedic poet.

Sheer *excessiveness* of diction is a highly entertaining effect. Consider this hyperbolic and hyperactive passage from Barbara Hamby’s verbose, comically alliterative “Betrothal in B minor,” a treatise against marriage:

... Oh, no, my dear

mademoiselle, marriage is no *déjeuner sur l’herbe*,
no bebop with Little Richard for eternity,

no bedazzled buying spree at Bergdorf or Bendel,
no clinch on the beach with Burt Lancaster.

Although it is sometimes all these things, it is
more often, to quote la Marquise de Merteuil, “War,” ...

Most good poetic users of diction, like Hamby, have great theatrical instincts , and are talented ventriloquists, or mimes, of speech mannerisms. The comedy of Hamby’s tirade

derives from her stylistic parody of a Victorian lecture, addled by the jazzed-up lexicon of the speaker's analogies — for instance, that marriage is “no bebop with Little Richard for eternity.”

In Marianne Moore's “Critics and Connoisseurs,” a largely straight-faced poem, we can see the way that a high affectedness of Latinate diction performs double functions: on the one hand, Moore exhibits a wonderful particularity, which seems intended and earned; on the other, Moore's polysyllabic, psychological, and abstract (Latinate) diction below, creates an ornamental, comically intellectualized affectedness — an impersonation of which the speaker is conscious.

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford,
with flamingo-colored, maple-
leaflike feet. It reconnoitered like a battle-
ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were
ingredients in its
disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was
not proof against its
proclivity to more fully appraise such bits
of food as the stream

bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it
to eat.

Wallace Stevens is another example of a modernist poet who employs stylistically exaggerated diction, sometimes for gravitas, and sometimes for comedic clown-like purposes. His poem “Bantams in Pine Woods” begins with the sonically absurd, Dr. Seuss-like couplet:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

The pleasures here are sonic, comic, nutty, and childlike, crossing the line from sense making into joyful babble. Stevens, often represented to college students as the major philosopher of modern American poetry, is in fact one of its true comedians.

Mixed Diction as Heightened Mannerism

Some contemporary poems employ an especially heightened and hybrid vocabulary to create musical and textural effects that reach for atmospheres beyond the comical. Lucie Brock-Broido's evocative poetic language is often pitched far from the registers we know

as conversational. The gorgeous, exotic lexicon of her poems is deliberately far-fetched; sometimes baroque enough to leave subject matter almost behind, as in “Basic Poem in a Basic Tongue”:

Here is the maudlin petty bourgeoisie of ruin.

A sullen pity-craft before the fallows of Allhallowmas.

The aristocracy in one green cortege at the registry of Vehicle
and Animus.

A muster of pale stars stationed like gazelles just looking-up,
Before the rustle of the coming kill.

At home, the hoi polloi keep tendering the books of Job's
despond, in braille.

The girl at open half-door in her early Netherlandish light of
melancholia.

So many brooding swans like floating inkstains on a lake
of slender wakefulness.

Conventional questions about location, theme, and narrative will be somewhat frustrated here. What is the “maudlin petty bourgeoisie of ruin”? The musical texture of Brock-Broido’s language is lush and beautiful, the sensibility aesthetically exaggerated, both in image (“A muster of pale stars stationed like gazelles”) and in sound (“a sullen pity-craft before the fallows of Allhallowmas”). Brock-Broido’s diction is self-consciously, exotically cranked up.

Nonetheless, in a manneristic, intentionally artificial mode like this, mixed diction is not to be held to strict semantic requirements; the poem is more a demonstration of linguistic melodrama than it is a report from the realm of experience. One feels that the poetic language rejoices in its own flamboyance; it is an art of theatrical performance, with only a glance toward subject matter. Sound is as important to this aesthetic style as reference, even if reference is not left entirely behind. Moreover, the poem is still emotionally readable: a responsive reader will intuit the general atmosphere of narcotic, languorous mourning, and bathe in it.

Of the many craft elements to admire here, exotically mixed diction is surely one: hoi polloi and the books of Job, “the registry of Vehicle and Animus,” and “the Netherlandish light of melancholia.” Brock-Broido’s coinages and combinations are sumptuous and decadent with a postmodern, sometimes tongue-in-cheek spin. In the defiantly titled “Basic Poem in a Basic Tongue,” we are given a cornucopia of pure poetry, but we are not directed to any specific world beyond the poetic canvas. The allegiance to

Beauty over Fidelity deploys the function of diction toward an aesthetic center of pleasure, not accuracy.

Although Brock-Broido's poem wanders freely beyond the known fields of sense, and even tinkers with inconsistency of tone, nonetheless the poem preserves a kind of commanding romantic intensity. Brock-Broido's poem is still — and the distinction is crucial — recognizably expressive. "Basic Poem in a Basic Tongue" intends to both seduce and mystify the reader with its sonic expressive romance.

The Aesthetic of Diction Disjointedness

As poetic diction moves further away from its tethered connectedness to things, further away from an identifiable context, we find poetry moving toward a realm of autonomous language constructions, something like abstract expressionist paintings. One can see the seed of such an impulse in Brock-Broido's poem. When we think about diction in experimental or postmodern poetry, we begin to encounter a host of unconventional agendas, motives, and practices: strategies flashy, dissonant, and sometimes cryptic. Such cutting loose of style from content has become a playground for experiment in American poetry.

This has consequences for poetry. When poetic vocabulary gets more and more unhinged from its specific conventional meanings, and becomes an end in itself, diction no longer is employed as a focusing device. This in itself is not a bad thing — the ravishments and nuancings of style are marvelous poetical constituents. But when diction is deliberately employed as a counterfeit currency, language may be rendered into a sort of art nouveau shell, hollow of meaning. Likewise, when diction is deployed to be intentionally dislocated and opaque, it can create an eccentric screen that is at once seductive and impenetrable. The venerable John Ashbery, our era's most prominent modernist, is a case in point. Ashbery's improvisations are very much composed of mixed dictions and idioms, and Ashbery has written many richly expressive poems — but he also has produced plenty of empty, arbitrary language structures, which exploit the motley character of American speech. Here is the first half of Ashbery's "Marivaudage":

We are all patting sleeping shoes
on a string. The board of selection
takes precedence at such times as arise
in the sky broken conduits and stresses
and as such may be over, this time.
Pass the Durkee's. And repent.

Yes sir it shall be done unto you

as the maze requests, fiber inspected
and the president is eight months old.

Disjointedness is really the point of this stylistic exercise. “The board of selection takes precedence,” “Pass the Durkee’s,” “it shall be done unto you.” Ashbery’s vocabulary of familiar speech samples is marvelously wide: it is a diction circus. Yet no single voice or tone dominates, and no context (pattern, theme, narrative, voice) is offered that might unify this diaspora. The extremely mixed discontinuity of “Marivaudage” reveals no focusing intention. Nor is the poem, on the other hand, like Brock-Broido’s poem, working sonically to evoke a particular emotional atmosphere. Instead, Ashbery’s anarchy is dissociative — his aesthetic intent is simply to make a kind of Lego lyric of odd parts. The import here is disarray, and the rich mix of diction is merely the buzz of sensation. To wrestle such a poem for significance is like pressing your ear to the side of a refrigerator and trying to guess its contents — what you hear is only electrical current moving through wires.

What’s missing from “Marivaudage ,” and many other such “textual” experiments, are two related poetic values: emphasis and reciprocity. Without a discernible emphasis, without some hint of authorial allegiance assigned to some moment in the poem over others, we cannot begin the process of response. We need to be able to identify what and where the stakes are in a poem; where the gravity, or weight, is located. Ultimately, this amounts to existential commitment: knowledge or perspective that has been gained from suffering the world. Without such a stake or declaration, regardless of style, the poem will lack substance.

Similarly, without a reciprocal relationship between a poem and a reader, that is, a relationship that deepens through responsiveness and rereading, one of the most basic reasons for poetry has been inexplicably abandoned. At that point, virtuosity, verbal facility , and intelligence are beside the point. If the poem does not need the reader, the reader does not need the poem.

The Impossible Is Possible

Yet, in poetry almost anything is possible, and in fact, it is possible to employ radically exaggerated, manneristic, even disjunct, diction mixing in a powerfully successful poem. What is necessary for such aesthetic self-consciousness to be successful, however, is an anchoring intellectual or emotional occasion. This primary expressive motive must establish a reliable center of gravity in the poem’s spectrum of diction. The second requirement follows from the first: the poem must build a relationship of trust and

reciprocity with the reader, so that the poem rewards and responds to the reader's investment of attention.

Michael Palmer's "I Do Not" is an example of a poem that embraces artificiality and abrupt, multiple chord changes on the diction spectrum. Yet the poem guides and rewards the reader fully, by elliptically identifying the background occasion of the poem as a whole. In this case, the occasion is the subject of war, which accounts for the dyslexia of the speaker's displacements:

I do not know English.

I do not know English, and therefore I can have nothing to say
about this latest war, flowering through a nightscope in the evening sky.
I do not know English and therefore, when hungry, can do no more
than point repeatedly to my mouth.

Yet such a gesture might be taken to mean any number of things.

I do not know English and therefore cannot seek the requisite
permissions, as outlined in the recent protocol.

Such as: May I utter a term of endearment; may I now proceed to put
my arm or arms around you and apply gentle pressure;
may I now kiss you directly on the lips; now on the left tendon
of the neck; now on the nipple of each breast? And so on.

"I Do Not" presents a catalog of experiences that, contends the speaker, are unsayable — to him, at least. The shifts and strains between various dictions are evident. Yet what is also evident, from the very beginning of the poem, is the central background subject matter — war. That is the emphatic background, or context of the poem, in the foreground of which language itself is inadequate. Though the poem's journey drifts through diction cluster after diction cluster, our consciousness of the deep structure topic of war persists, and is in subtle ways reiterated:

I do not know English. Therefore I have no way of communicating
that I prefer this painting of nothing to that one of something.

.....
No way to differentiate the hall of mirrors from the meadow of mullein, the
beetlebung
from the pinkletink, the kettlehole from the ventifact.

Nor can I utter the words science, seance, silence, language and languish.

Nor can I tell of the arboreal shadows elongated and shifting along the wall
as the
sun's angle approaches maximum hibernal declination.

.....

I cannot repeat the words of the Recording Angel or those of the Angel of
Erasure.

Can speak neither of things abounding nor of things disappearing.
.....

Because I do not know English I have been variously called Mr. Twisted,
The One Undone, the Nonrespondent, The Truly Lost
Boy, and Laughed-At-By-Horses.

The war is declared ended, almost before it has begun.

They have named it The Ultimate Combat between Nearness and Distance.

I do not know English.

Palmer's poem, on the one hand, announces the defeat of speech, but it does so in a poignant and sprawingly inclusive way, anchored to an experiential occasion — war. Human activity continues, but the enterprise of war, and the profound dissonance of modern experience, negate the meaning of all other human activities and the speech for saying them. The result is a kind of dyslexia, or autism, which the speaker embodies. As in a play by Samuel Beckett, Palmer's negation of the sayable is resounding and provocative, moving and memorable, and shows some of the powerful capacity of modernist techniques.

"I Do Not" can be explored rewardingly at length, but merely to observe the motley array of dictions inside it suggests how a poem can manage to retain cohesion even while radically stretching those limits. Palmer successively visits and discards the dictions of intimacy, of appetite, of bureaucratic dissembling ("the requisite permissions, as outlined in the recent protocol"), of indigenous naming ("Laughed-At-By-Horses"), of prophecy. He plays chords of mannerist silliness ("No way to differentiate the hall of mirrors from the meadow of mullein, the beetlebung from the pinkletink, the kettlehole from the ventifact"), he slips and slides between the phonemic resemblances of science and seance, language and languish. The poem's deducible and very modernist inference is that none of this language suffices or manages to matter — and yet Palmer's linguistic brokenness is expressive, poignant, and reciprocates the reader's responsiveness.

American English is a great experiment in progress, and American poetry is its laboratory upon a hill. Several decades ago, the poet Tim Dlugos published a chapbook of poems with the title *Je Suis ein Americano*, as if making the point of this essay in brief.

I suppose the mythic analogue might be the story of Frankenstein's monster. The creature we know as Frankenstein is patched together by a mad doctor, who employs a cut-and-paste method using the recycled parts of executed criminals. The monster escapes, descends from the mountain, and terrorizes the villagers. It sounds a lot like postmodernism, doesn't it? Yet the big, interestingly fabricated fellow is trying to communicate something—maybe he just wants a hug, but he can't make himself understood to the frightened townspeople. Their natural-enough tribal reaction is to try to kill him. In American poetry, too, the boundary between the natural and unnatural continues to shift, and American poets keep pushing the limits, searching for a creation at once wide awake and divine.