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## Book Review: David Rosen, "Power, Plain English, and the Rise of Modern Poetry"

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## BOOK REVIEW

Power, Plain English, and the Rise of Modern Poetry. *David Rosen*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. x+212.

At least in modernist studies, few critical approaches are less au courant than detailed treatments of poetic diction—an unfortunate lacuna if one considers the attention that poets from across the formal and literary political spectrum have always paid to their choice of language. One thinks of Josephine Miles, of Donald Davie, but of little more recent than Robert Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry* (1976).<sup>1</sup> Such an approach is just what David Rosen offers in this book, however, in a set of close readings avowedly (perhaps excessively) wary of the cultural turn in modernist studies and thus enjoying their own kind of paradoxical originality. Rosen shows compelling philosophical and psychological tensions and crucial career transitions at work in canonical and lesser-known texts by William Wordsworth, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden as he narrates the history of how plain English became a badge of poetic authenticity or sincerity. Some of Rosen's central methodological premises reflect his admitted distance from culturalist readings of poetry: a tendency to treat the history of poetry and of style via a small number of canonical examples and a sense that plain English develops or emerges not as a social process but as a function of the work of that same small band of powerful individual writers. In the wake of substantial criticism that

1. Josephine Miles, *The Primary Language of Poetry in the 1940's* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951); Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952; repr., New York: Schocken, 1967) (Davie found Wordsworth "technically incompetent at least until 1801" and argued that "diction hardly ever matters" in his work [112]); Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (Princeton University Press, 1976). Owen Barfield's oft-reprinted *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928) is, despite its title, more a study of poeticity than of diction.

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combines a culturalist methodology with expert close readings, there is much less basis than there may once have been for his suggestion that cultural studies has had little to say about poetry.<sup>2</sup> That said, a renewed formalism has indeed reemerged of which this book can be considered part.<sup>3</sup> Thus, for instance, while “power” in recent decades in the academy has been mainly a Foucauldian category, Rosen seeks to redeem a more traditional—poetic, psychological, and individualistic rather than social and ideological—sense of the term.

Rosen distinguishes between plain style (a capacious term not limited to diction) and plain English (a matter of the specific historical development of the English lexicon and thus a matter mainly of diction). He defines “plain English” or “the low register” familiarly enough as “an idiom consisting mainly of short, concrete, native words, purged of abstractions and low on foreign borrowings, deployed in simple syntax” (3). His main interest, however, is the often irrational appeal of this idiom to so many post-Romantic writers, seeking to explain its poetic force and its “seemingly groundless reputation for truthfulness”: “I look at the way poets from Wordsworth to Auden try to present themselves simultaneously as persons of power and as participating members of their communities,” with plain English “an expression of their desires for *both* vatic authority and social participation” (3)—their desires, in terms to which Rosen consistently returns, simultaneously for poetic power and meaning.

Rosen grounds his argument about the low register in Locke’s philosophy of language as expressed in book 3 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Rather dense as it is, the Locke section nevertheless provides necessary intellectual history that enables Rosen to differentiate Wordsworth from his peers via an acceptance and adaptation of Locke in which imagination is marked by “the perceptions of worldly facts, rendered in language of jarring immediacy and precision” (38). One consequence in particular of this empiricist view of imagination, especially as it developed during the decade 1796–1807, proved crucial for English-language poetry: Wordsworth’s revolutionary sense

2. See Michael Davidson, *Guys like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

3. See, e.g., Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown, eds., special issue, *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2000).

of the “seemingly inherent ability of plain English” to render the perception of images and facts “with an unprecedented claim to truthfulness” (40). A view of the imagination that rests on the appeal of the unthinking, eradicated self, on loss of consciousness, however, as in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” leaves Wordsworth no way to “be constructive” (46)—it may afford him rhetorical power but no (possibility of) meaning. The uncomfortable disjunction in that poem between passages of plain, objective description and inflated public address suggests strong ambivalence about the reduced consciousness of the beggar that Wordsworth tries to redeem.

Wordsworth’s solution is the sudden turn to the “autobiographical myth” famously articulated in “Tintern Abbey,” a myth in which the mindless immersion in nature characteristic of the beggar now becomes adopted as a feature of Wordsworth’s own childhood experience. In the process he succeeds, via an act of “double signification” (53), in having his language serve two functions, “signifying objects while also suggesting the operations of mind on those objects” (54–55). Within a few years, however, Wordsworth comes to feel the impossibility of representing and capturing the significance of past experiences, a shift reflected in the “Ode on Intimations of Immortality.” He gives up double signification for a split between a low register that remains “central to imaginative vision” and an elevated, highly figurative, Latinate diction that becomes “the vehicle for his new social, political, and moral concerns” (59)—a complexity of relationship between registers best represented in “Michael.” Accordingly, plain English drops out of Wordsworth’s lexicon in proportion as autobiography fades as a subject of his poetry.

Autobiography and the notion of a personal and poetic crisis period occupy a similarly central role in Rosen’s discussion of Yeats, who turns to plain English in *The Green Helmet* (1910) out of despair at his failed symbolist technique but also without any sense of gain. That is, he adopts plain English by default, so that his “use of plain English and his awareness of the futility of language are closely connected” (75). If Wordsworth constructs an autobiographical myth that couches development in terms of growth from child to man around an unbridgeable gap, but with mature poetic identity rooted in childhood encounters with self-annihilating visionary power, Yeats does the opposite: he claims a complete break with a personal past that he also resists examining psychologically, embraces the dissolution of his former self, and evades autobiography to become a visionary poet.

In this chapter, as throughout, Rosen is strikingly attentive to drafts, revision, and the writing process, appropriately so given his focus on poetic self-creation. His prose in some stretches is less than lively, in that way characteristic of sequentially ordered close readings (lots of

trees, little forest), but the textual basis for his views of his poets' development is hard to deny. Yeats's beginning to invoke the Anima Mundi or Spiritus Mundi in *Responsibilities* (1914), that "watershed in [his] use of plain English" (94), assumes a particular view of the image and of imagination: "If the poetic image truly exists a priori, the imagination must be not a *creative* but a *perceptive* faculty; it cannot invent, as he thought in his youth, but recover" (92). A new view of diction comes with this revised sense of the image. In the Symbolist Yeats, the image is mind created and thus the style opaque and the diction ornate; his crisis period brings a turn to a low register signifying things only, "plain but desiccated" with no layer of further meaning (93), and then to a merging of these tendencies, with the image emerging from the mind according to the philosophy of Spiritus Mundi but not mind created. After 1914, then, there are three Yeatsian low registers: the visionary idiom, concrete and powerful but enigmatic; a traditional "archaic but artificial" class-marked register; and the residual "plain, drained language" first seen in *The Green Helmet* (95).

"Power or meaning" is again the question (97). For both Wordsworth and Yeats, their visionary plain English "derives its suggestive power from the way its images resist paraphrase, context, reduction to metaphor—in short, meaning." However, if "the turn to this mode occurs at a moment annihilating to the ordinary self" (97), it is extremely limited as a vehicle for self-expression or for political and moral beliefs. Hence, the last two decades of Yeats's work play multiple registers against each other. Late Yeats becomes a master of what Rosen calls "lexical modulation" (110), and the implications for plain English as a poetic vehicle are far-reaching and potentially disturbing: if "the nineteenth century left to modernity a low register with a reputation for honesty in representing the world" (112), Yeats as rhetorician exploits plain English to cast a patina of truthfulness over his work. That is, he shows an awareness far in advance of his critics of plainness as itself a form of rhetoric, perhaps "the most dangerous rhetorical power" in its ability to command "an almost unthinking assent" (112).

Unlike Yeats, Eliot was never fully invested in the Symbolist metaphysical and simply borrowed techniques from it while writing a deliberately un- or antivisionary poetry. From Wordsworth to Yeats, we have a poetry of imagination, while "modern poetry after Eliot is a poetry of consciousness" (131)—a provocative, if perhaps too neat, divide. Consistent with his emphasis throughout, Rosen affirms, "I am interested in consciousness not as a social construct . . . but as an aspect of the individual mind" (131). Consciousness is the term and concept that Eliot uses, just as Wordsworth used "imagination," to describe poets' uniqueness and justify the writing of poetry: the special nature of the poet's

consciousness makes him or her uniquely qualified to render the consciousness of the age. Rosen admits, however, that the idea of a poetry of consciousness has no particular implications for the low register, partly because in Eliot's hands that poetry is little interested in "object reality," and "no type of discourse is privileged over the others" (138). All poetic registers are just different and equal aspects of consciousness. Beyond his foundational role in formulating the imagination-consciousness distinction, then, Eliot's place in a discussion of plain English is a little unclear, especially given the inattention to a poem preoccupied with matters of diction such as "Four Quartets."

With Auden, Rosen returns more explicitly to the power-meaning conflict: if the question is "why Auden, in rejecting the premises behind Wordsworth's verse, nevertheless retains his visionary low register" (155), the answer is that he seeks both power and meaning in a complementary relationship (he wants authoritative generalizations and has to find a way to win assent for them). Auden takes from Eliot the prematurely aged stance, the impersonality, the "emphasis on knowledge" (140)—all features that Rosen claims for the poetry of consciousness. The 1927 poem "The Watershed" marks a new (if brief) phase for Auden, however, one that mixes an Eliotic manner and technique with a claim to imaginative power; it is from his reading of Yeats, Rosen proposes, that Auden derives this "*strategy* for writing poetry both argumentative and suffused with visionary power" (155). In the year and poem "1929," he turns his back on Yeatsian vatic authority for a fatalistic foregrounding of necessity (under various names). The irrational power of poetic imagery becomes dangerous in Auden's view. Rosen explains Auden's "implacable, necessitarian outlook" (148), a move also away from his earlier Wordsworthianism (151), partly in terms of his homosexuality (the determinism of the body, I take it)—a reading that could perhaps take more account of recent queer studies work on Auden. Despite the turn away from Wordsworth, Auden comes to write about his youth much more than Yeats or Eliot, but he does so from the basis of Freudian psychology. The most discursive of Rosen's poets, Auden in his later work tends to explain what he once left mysterious, namely, the powerful images and landscapes of his youth; he rejects the visionary low register "as a remnant of regressive Romantic desires and because of its 'false identification' of words as sacred" (173). At the same time, he "retains . . . an unironic acceptance of the truthfulness of plain English" but one divorced from mysterious poetic power and thus involving a far more modest notion of "truth" (174).

As the culminating point in Rosen's history, "High Modernism in poetry may be understood as the period when the basis of the low register's claims to truthfulness were in transition or flux" (178). The book

provides terms for further analysis of English-language poetry along these lines, work that might attend to the appeal of plain Englishes (I use the plural advisedly) for other poets within and after modernism. Late twentieth-century poetics debates about “plain English” saw the American poetic “mainstream” of the 1970s and 1980s writing in a then-hegemonic style marked precisely by the association of plain (American) English with an authentic personal voice—an association in turn questioned by writers (Rae Armantrout or Charles Bernstein, say) who often used plain English to unpack rather than shore up ideas of authenticity and truth telling. “Flux” seems a more appropriately messy and less linear figure than “transition” for the subsequent centrifugal splintering of these differences, and if the resistance to considering poetry culturally marks one limit of Rosen’s model, he nevertheless provides a rich heuristic for considering not just one historical canon of English-language poetry but its multiple, ongoing, and often contradictory formal extensions.

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