

John Rigney

Avant-Garde: A Manifesto*

The avant-garde doesn't ask for permission.
It does not have a structure, a roster or an application form.
The poetry of the avant-garde has sources but no footnotes.
It seeks no justification in academic hallways.
There are no blessings in dissertations.
And no one is saved by criticism except the critic.
The avant-garde is not seeking publication.
The avant-garde is not a synonym for cutting-edge, hip or au-courant.
Avant-garde is not an adjective one can use about oneself.
I am told that the term avant-garde was first used by Olinde Rodrigues
in 1825 to describe the artist's duty to lead the way to a new and better humanity.
I cannot verify this, as a translation of the essay is not readily available.
Does your avant-garde lead anyone anywhere
other than to the wine and cheese spread at a well-funded reception?
The avant-garde does not accept honorariums.
The avant-garde does not want a job.
The avant-garde is not a container for empty aesthetic posturing.
The avant-garde lives at the forward edge of history—
not on the promontory of stacked-up art objects
held together with the mortar of academic jargon
and made toxic by radioactive, self-congratulating elitist attitudes.
The avant-garde is not a prerequisite for a Fulbright.
The avant-garde has no use for a stipend.
The avant-garde is a reconnaissance force for possibility.
The avant-garde occupies the space between the now and its then—
because that is the location where humanity loses sight of its dreams.
If the avant-garde looks anywhere but forward it will be shot in the back of the head,
according to the logic of its foundational metaphor.

When the avant-garde is dead it is given a name and included in an anthology.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with irrelevant chatter.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with courting stability.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with your tenure-track position.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with the avant-garde.

*I am not now, nor ever have been a member of the avant-garde.

The Dead Cry Out

The dead cry out
in the silence of photographs
which hold them, forever, in their leaving.

On the way to Tahrir Square,
the street cleaner comes
before the dawn of the morning after
and pushes together a neat pile
of pellets, petals, scraps of bloodstained ribbon, a scarf—
an ingathering of yesterday's sacrifice
swept up with candy wrappers, lost tickets, cigarette butts—
the ordinary refuse of traffic
that are the usual objects of his care.

The street is a place of our forgetting
of dropping things
discarding
throwing away.
The street is a place of our forgetting
of walking by;
it is there to move us, take us out, away.

It is a crime to usurp the street for remembering
for stopping, pausing,
standing still, so as to say
“I know that you were here,
and I still miss you.”
To lay flowers on the street
is a capital offense.

In the photograph, I see you
held in the arms of one who can not say goodbye.
I hear you
weeping in the silence of an empty page.

On January 24, 2015, the poet and activist Shaimaa el Sabbagh was murdered by police as she went with a group of twenty-five others to Tahrir Square to lay a wreath at a memorial for those who died in the uprising of 2011.

The Language
After Creeley, backwards

The Language
is a mouth
aching, speech
of holes

and words, full
crowd into
mute, unspeaking
anatomies.

Throats, gullets
sites of transit—
of air, and intent
muscles'
electric impulse
held up
delayed
stopped
on neural-net
express ways jammed
with
desire
and regret

for - to - with
parts of speech
become an emptiness
between us

Love:

I say
Everything

so much
I want
so

but words
are
in
my eyes—
my fingertips

and
you
are
not
here.

Words mean so much, so little.

They are holes
to throw the past in
which won't stop growing,
like a weed

They are blunt
instruments
hurtling through
the spaces between our solitudes
at our helpless, mute desires

They hold us
as if mothers and prison wardens
were one and the same:
tenderly and without the possibility of parole.

Words mean so much, so little.

They are the names of God
secret, potent, unknowable.

They are
battle maps
execution orders
stays
pardons
sentences.

They are struggles,
contentions
unfinished attempts
to connect
elusive, reluctant impossibilities.

Words mean so much, so little.

They are dreams

fading

along the curve and slant

the shapes, the forms, of letters,

crushed in the grasp of our remembering.

They are surrounded by silences

emptinesses

leaching into intention

leaving only incomplete desires.

They are acts

products of the body

things,

made

of will and air,

blood and muscle.

facts, proof, history.

Words mean so much, so little.

We try

so hard,

want

so much

to say

so much

and yet

they fail.

“Words meant everything.”

- Rep. John Lewis, recalling the Selma March, 2015

There is a fire made of words

letter upon letter upon letter

the alphabets of humanity

burning, burning.

Words were prison bars

made of prohibitions and exclusions

of put-downs, pass-overs, cast asides

of excuses and empty promises

of histories written on unwilling skin

of futures whispered into ears that always meant “not now”

of drive-by disillusionments

sprayed, slow motion, at the walking pace

of a man crossing to the other side of the street.

Words were ropes

thick twines, binds

reminders of arrests, incarcerations delineations

lacerate pronouns of “you” and “them.”

Words were a bed

made of straw

gathered from fields by unpaid hands

where fugitive bodies rested

soaked in the brine

of generations of flammable weeping.

There is a fire made of words
burning, burning.

Two words became a match
that started this conflagration:
“no more”
scratched against the rough surface
of the ugly face of hatred,
blossoming, sulfur –hissing
into a flower of crackling refusal.

There is a fire made of words
burning, burning.

The flames are crying out
consuming the air in syllables of elemental desire,
shouting against the silences
which seek to steal our names.

There is a fire made of words
burning and burning and burning
exploding into dictionaries
lexicons
where the definitions
of dignity
of respect
love
opportunity
safety
justice
now
bear
the name
of
everyone.

Zurita

In 1973 they arrested Raul Zurita
on suspicion of subversion against the state.
They threw his poems, his *Purgatorio*
(indicted as subversions, coded in unbreakable terza rima)
into the sea.

As his pages took on water,
wept ink,
and drowned ,
crying out, sea-silent
their protests mingling with the salt-stained echoes
of Prospero's executive, submersive, order

did Zurita, the poet, the prisoner
as various forms of torture were applied to his body
did Zurita think of Yeats,
who said,
"Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry"

And, as his body broke,
And as the soldiers laid it on
Did he find
that all suffering
is poetry?

All suffering
is passive:
unwilled, uninvited, unwelcome?

And that safety,
that other , distant shore,
 so far from home
 from which the sea is not a hiding place for dangerous ideas
that safety can not be found
 In struggle, but in letting go—
 in sinking, silently beneath the surface
That endurance is made not of
 fighting
But of doing nothing
 Except composing
 a poem
 Which waits for tomorrow's pen and paper?