

Joshua Clover

Red Epic

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***Red Epic*: ‘how to set fire to fire?’**

Epic is a difficult form for leftist poetry in our epoch, given the lack of a transcendent that partial struggles could echo. Communism is that idea, but in the now it lacks material force or place. Joshua Clover’s book is exceptional in this sense because it brings the force of the Oakland Occupation and General Strike into poetry. He writes, in ‘Tranche 1’,

I have lived through the end of syntax I have lived through the imperial grammars I have lived through the bursting of a bubble visible from space I have lived through the suicide of money to preserve the life of value I have lived through the fatal sacrifice of philosophy to avoid the jaws of the dialectic [. . .] I have stood atop a small hill with Mallarmé in one hand and in the other a cognitive balm and of what virtue were our pretty phrases against a thousand beautiful men standing in rank near the sunlit shore

The epic therefore exists at a limit, where literature — as it currently stands — stops because it encounters a force and a form outside it. Here is the aura or excessive effect of collective struggle and the fact that poetry can embody it maybe better than anything else. But the epic event, the objective dialectic of occurrence, becomes in time other than itself and breaks away from the subjective poetic of the moment: “the men are beautiful and the women are beautiful and we remember that we meant to come here and never leave we meant this over and over but it meant something else” (‘Tranche 2’). Two types of subject here, the one epic, the

other tinged by loss and melancholy, the second marks the predominant poetic subject of Clover's book.

The "something else" finds its fullest meaning in the relation between language and history: "To say it is a new era is to say / it has discovered a new style of time / we do / not do this in language / first but in terrain we have not chosen and do not yet / understand" ("Spring Georgic"). Then what needs to be done at this point? And, first of all, how to hold this point of scission between poetry and history? How does the poetry of this book carry the pressures under which it places itself? — the particular placing of itself which, precisely, makes it exceptional. And that generates another question that's necessary for our situation now: what are the makeable forms of artistic and political resistance? It's right that poetry should be asking the question.

"We do / not do this in language / first but in terrain we have not chosen," speaks of a limit of language within a Marxist sense of limits of present practice as involving 'circumstances [we] have not chosen.' So to reach, in this specific way, the limit of language is to exit from linguistic idealism (as, e.g. in Language poetry) into the terrain where poetry makes present what's not being named, where the limit of specific forms of expression is given in revolutionary practice.

Whether the poetry can sustain the pressure here indicated might be tested in various ways. Take the 'I'-form (or we-form), which is where becoming poetry and becoming subject coincide. The I, despite its militant engagement tends to float above ("atop a small hill") the incomplete specifics of struggle; it is sustained by poetic tradition and knowledge, where the former is marked by predilection for classical ("O capital") rhetoric and for self as wit, and the latter takes the form of the poem-essay. Poem as essay in the best instances (some really strong ones in this book, e.g. "Gilded Age") consists of dialectics, where the encounter with external limits becomes internal, producing a scission of the 'I'. So it's possible to say — having read *Red Epic* — that Frank O'Hara too practices the splitting of the I-form —

O'Hara being the point where Clover holds on to poetic tradition most intensely. But then it would also have to be said that where knowing, as relation with the outside (the city), is in O'Hara immersed in affect — this is what splits it — it can in Clover fall into mere speculative dexterity. In other words, what kind of ability is that? What's its place in political struggle? Isn't it a type of specialism, separated out from general intellect? How to deploy knowledge in poetry without it producing separation from struggle? This is our problem, as militant writers and readers, strongly presented by Clover.

Discourse, give us some discourse, is what society constantly demands (see Frank Wilderson on social death). In poetry, this demand coagulates as the wall of words that protects the poem and the living space it offers from outside forces. Literature. What breaks through it? Bliss, pain, and agitation; emotion and music.

The strong form of annihilation in *Red Epic* is riots and confidence in this form of destruction shapes its primary political belief. Here too a limit — to what petrol in Coca-Cola bottles can do — presents itself: “once fire is the form of the spectacle the problem / becomes how to set fire to fire?” How to set fire to fire? This magnificent phrase is the knot in which the tensions of *Red Epic* are most tightly compressed. It indexes the limits of annihilation as well as the desire that it should be complete. It expresses the question of our time. How so? This knot has several dimensions. The most obvious is the capacity of triumphant capitalism to re-appropriate any gesture of opposition. Spectacle but also the police. The difficulty becomes how to extend “riots fire and lootin” into revolution. These things ‘will’ happen ‘if there will be a revolution’: the grammatical torsion is notable, it doubles the force of the ‘if’, overcoming and not a syntactic — better, a temporal — block to revolution. “Fire is materialised time” (Hegel) so the question is about what obstaculates revolutionary time and what can feed it. And what can fuel the word and prevent it being exhausted? Just as words-concepts get both emptied and filled in Heraclitus's riotous dialectic.

In the end, *Red Epic* is more epigrammatic than epic: it condenses epochal time into the ephemeral moment. It does this formally with sentences that cross over themselves, rather than loosing themselves to a militant interlocutor, i.e. with statements inscribed in their own space of observation rather than that of political struggle.

Clover proposes that to vitalize language, poetry has to display the wreckage of old forms of expression: “language [. . .] must be cajoled / into open air / by dangling the old forms / in their wrack and wreckage.” Better than dangle, smash them against the present violence of social antagonism. And then? There’s a hiatus or missing segment of time at this point, and *Red Epic* leaps over it. “What true act would make every word in the dictionary political”: but aren’t they already? And again: “There will be a revolution or there will not. If the latter these poems were nothing but entertainments.” Isn’t poetry already entertainment or not (entertainment and not). And if there’s no revolution, won’t there be destruction of the earth? Why this stoical resignation? Is it the other side of the poem’s (possibly failed) wish to be the expression of revolution? Then yes, here is the struggle of leftist poetry, the other side of which is how the militant self can get elevated into ideality (“The revolution betrayed him / before he betrayed the revolution”: who is this Mayakovsky being referred to?), a stance that correlates with freezing revolution in one of its moments.

One of finest of the poems is “Gilded Age”. It’s driven by the double passion of revolution as annihilation and of loss of what the I loves. The highest intensity comes after a passage through Language poetry and out the other side into the real now of militant art, thought and action and of the crucial need for a new political subject: “I want to be honest about how much I love this all of this its pleasure is my pleasure and its wine is my wine [. . .] and I am holding this in mind as truth and measure when I say it must be annihilated not as text but really now.” Again, the bottom line is confidence in destruction, and the extent of what’s to be destroyed is fed by negation of the I’s present attachments. How far does that go.

In a poem that re-works one of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, there's this statement: "if you want // another review panel a Justice Dept / study a return to democracy rather than / for riot and looting to leap beyond / itself from county to county / rift to rift until it becomes general / you have not understood / what a revolution is it's just this". Confidence in destruction is accurate to the phase of nihilistic confinement that we are living through now. But if general riot does not move beyond itself to something like emancipatory will, will there be a revolution? If fire can be taken as the permanence of revolution (the absolute dialectic), doesn't general riot fall into the category of "adherence to one of the transit points of the social revolution against another" (Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*) Clover's poem rewrites one of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, which ends, "ask for / everything." Isn't that the point.

Ok, different historical moments, and why shouldn't poetry take its stance from the current one? But revolution has a relation with transcendence. This comes across in an intense but also difficult way in the second poem of the book ("Years of Analysis for a Day of Synthesis"). Here the relation between poetry, history, and political will is taken to a high point, an epic point, something very hard to do in contemporary time: "who will take / the owners of debt / and make them whole / and who will take the shareholders / and make them whole / and who will take / the debauched and defaulted / and make them whole / and who will take / our brothers and sisters in the equity / and mezzanine tranches / and make them whole / and when will this end and really / what will be money's Jena" It's right that the transcendent should appear at this point of vast longing and multiple, colliding intersections. The legal meaning of 'make whole' is to pay back damages to the party who was damaged. The common meaning is to heal. But the phrase also has theological echoes ("a leper approached Jesus, fell to his knees, and pleaded, 'Jesus, if you want to, you can make me whole again,'" , Mark 1: 40). And it recalls Walter Benjamin's demand that the incompleteness of the past suffering of the oppressed should fuel revolution in the present. Yet shareholders are neither owed damages nor

sick nor oppressed. Is the longing for revolution to be preserved by irony? Or has it fallen back into general love? Neither is sufficient ...

The lines just quoted express political struggle as a shuddering and deeply contradictory demand. “How to set fire to fire?” is a question that rightly makes us shudder. How do we sustain ourselves in the incompleteness of total commitment? It’s enough to smash you to pieces. *Red Epic* seeks to hold this place. But also — and this too is part of our time — it falls into confidence in a merely intensive logic of fire and its reversal into the loss of melancholy. The merely incremental fire, despite its apparent wildness, remains within the sphere of repetition. How to break out?