Portraits in Pain: The Psychology of Inspiration in Prose Poems by Lynn Emanuel

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Reconstructing notions such as potentiality and inspiration, Emanuel’s prose poems, whose thematic range spans from involvement with the paintings of her renowned father Akiba Emanuel (a model and ‘pupil’ of Matisse) to the ‘portraits’ of Gertrude Stein, illuminate the interrelationship between language and world, and the psychology of inhabiting both through inspiration. This paper will address the question of what fuels creativity when it is put to work through the involvement of other voices which are represented (in Emanuel’s case) as suffering from having their genius interrupted either by death, by lack of recognition, or by amnesia.

In all Emanuel’s three collections of poems, and a couple of other chap books, inspiration plays an important role, yet Emanuel is not interested in inspiration in the traditional sense to mean divine connection with a higher power or a muse, and romantic transcendence. Inspiration for Emanuel is always triggered by an attempt at understanding what pain is. The pain of creation and composition, and the pain of reading and writing promote two different types of understanding: first, that there is something to create out of nothing, and second, that ‘nothing’ is always a beginning. Inspiration for Emanuel is therefore the beginning of nothing. But how does one begin nothing, a created nothing, that is, a nothing which can be rendered and read and which can explain both the pain of understanding such relations and the inspiration that befalls them? One of Emanuel’s answers seems to be given through her use of amnesia. It is through the theme of forgetfulness that a connection between the writer and the reader is established. Emanuel is particularly a poet who writes for an audience for whom poetry means the objectification of subjects. In spite of Emanuel’s attempt at going beyond the poetics of modernism and its concern with inspiration as a relationship between the act of writing and death, she is close to some of the questions that concerned writers such as James Joyce. Joyce’s question in Ulysses: “What idiosyncrasies of the narrator were concomitant products of amnesia?”⁴, can be traced in some of Emanuel’s poems which research the ground covered by forgetfulness. For Emanuel, how to construe a narrative out of nothing, how to
objectify the nothing and then tell a story about it is an endeavor which involves the creative minds of others.

Emanuel, like her father before her, draws inspiration from the human figure as it is capable of experience. In an interview she recalls her father’s imperatives as she grew up in an environment where art meant the practice of either painting or poetry writing: “Lynn, draw that vase, make it your mother. Turn the green curtain into the woods she’s walking into”. Emanuel’s father, whose paintings only now are getting their deserved recognition and attention, was a master especially in the portraiture genre. Interestingly enough, however, some of his still life paintings can also pass as portraits especially insofar as they exhibit a human allure which makes them painful to look at. According to Avis Berman who wrote an essay accompanying a major exhibition of Akiba Emanuel’s work at the Alexander Gallery in New York, Emanuel’s art “was not a career, or a vocation, but a way to resolve his most private and intense emotional stresses and conundrums, which is why he willfully challenges viewers to recognize and comprehend him only if they dare”. Daring to confront Akiba Emanuel is a challenge mostly poets are invited to take up insofar as they share in the creative process a concern with interiority. As Berman puts it: “Akiba was a creator of interiors, psychological and actual” which enforces Emanuel’s own statement regarding the predicament of the artist: “there are no short cuts, creation is difficult, requiring every fiber of your mind and soul. It is an enormous personal sacrifice, there is no rest from it” (no pagination). The implication of Akiba Emanuel’s credo is that the artist can only create if he forgets himself. His art can only be worth looking at if it encompasses this forgetfulness.

It is against such a background that Lynn Emanuel’s own voice emerges. Poems such as “Inspiration” and “Inspiration, Two” from The Dig function as portraits of the human experience as it is traceable as the poem-portrait itself. Writes Emanuel in “Inspiration”:

I am tired of the tundra of the mind,
where a few shabby thoughts hunker
around a shabby fire. All day from my window
I watch girls and boys hanging out
in the dark arcades of adolescent desire.

Tonight, everything is strict with cold,
the houses closed, the ice botched by skaters.
I am tired of saying things about the world,
and yet, sometimes, these streets are so
slick and bold they remind me of the wet

zink bar at the Café Marseilles, and suddenly the sea
is green and lust is everywhere in a red cravat,
leaning on his walk stick and whispering,
I am a city, you are my pilgrim,
meet me this evening. Love, Pierre." (Emanuel, 1995: 42)

This poem’s double take on inspiration, first as a paratext in the title and then as a theme which informs the title as well, is an attempt at forging together the experience of having had a lover, desiring to forget him, and the pain in responding by rushing to meet the lover when he calls. The sense of wariness and tiredness of things previously said is also a sense which is conducive to inspiration that is guided by pain and amnesia. The speaker’s declarations of fatigue are in fact performances of an amnesiac psychology of the pain experienced, that is, the pain of wanting to forget how events turn into non-events. In his “Amnesia Manifesto” the Bolivian poet and literary critic Nicomedes Suárez-Araúz argues that “the totality of human existence is circumscribed by amnesia” and that “amnesia is everything and nothing, qualities which have been attributed to divinities” further suggesting that, insofar as amnesia is also a source of inspiration, it is certain. Its certainty affirms what Suárez-Araúz claims is the “undeniable presence and essence of our personal and collective worlds”5. By the same token the speaker or narrator in Emanuel’s poem is not inspired by what she remembers she has forgotten but by the certainty with which she asserts her forgotten experience of having been certain places and having seen certain things. It is the amnesiac inspiration that brings about the sudden change in the colors of the sea and Pierre’s cravat, which in the quoted lines is imagined but later in the last stanza materialized as such. What Emanuel is interested in portraying in this poem is how the distance between the speaker and the listener is obliterated by the various idiosyncrasies in the experience of pain.

The poem “Inspiration, Two” follows a timeline which seemingly obliterated what Joyce calls “the migrations in narrator and listener” to the point where what is given is, in Joyce’s apt words, “the consequence of the action of distraction upon vicarious experiences”6. While amnesia seems to be a notion that seems to know itself in spite of us and our obliviousness, it also marks an unknown time which we nonetheless experience. What interests me in these poems is the relationship between experience and amnesia as a manifestation of pain and inspiration. When Emanuel writes in “Inspiration, Two” that “the problem is how to say / smartly what is used to being said beautifully, only”7 she returns to the idea of depicting, rather in pictorial terms, the colors of pain, and the inspiration inherent in oblivion. There is a subtle hint here to the languages that a poet and a painter speak. A poet seeks to be smart, whereas as a painter seeks beauty. Growing up in places other than where she was born,
namely Denver, Colorado, Emanuel is preoccupied with the loss of action and occurrences which such places as New York are capable of. The fact that nothing ever happens in places such as Denver, in Emanuel’s depiction, “the featureless amnesias of Idaho, Nebraska, Nevada, / states rich only in vowel sounds and alliteration” causes the speaker of the poem “Out of Metropolis” to seek to solve the tension between action and beauty, between occurrence and forgetfulness. The underlying question here seems to be, to what extent does inspiration matter when the mediation of one’s position vis-à-vis one’s dwelling place is filtered through amnesia?

From poems which depict inspiration in an objectified form Emanuel has moved into the realm where the figure of the father becomes an inspiration, yet separate from the way in which the loss of a creative mind is being dealt with. Emanuel’s latest collection of poems, *Then, Suddenly-* (1999) begins with the quick energy of movement, then slows down, and moves more contemplatively towards new beginnings which seem to have life at a standstill. From depicting portraits of places, much in the same manner as her father depicted objects with a human soul, Emanuel engages in a process of depicting and dealing with the pain of losing her father. As Andrena Zawinski remarks in her review of *Then, Suddenly-* Emanuel’s deceased father “interrupts the text, its narrative, its poetry, much like anyone might be interrupted by the voice of grief when it seems to speak to us.” Here I would suggest that while the interruption of narrative comes from a desire to forget the painful event, it also functions as the initiator for a sought after moment of inspiration. The poem “Halfway Through the Book I’m Writing” which announces already in the title that the role of the reader is not just to read but watch how the event of portrayal takes plays, Emanuel’s speaker takes over the voice of the dead father and a certain psychology of inspiration is triggered. The event of pain is turned into a plot, the result being a portrayal of a character who partakes in the action of writing poetry. As Emanuel puts it:

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My father dies and is buried in his Brooks Brothers suit.
But I can’t seem to keep him underground.
Suddenly, I turn around and there he is just
as I’m getting a handle on the train-pulls-
into-the-station poem. “What gives?”
I ask him. “I’m alone and dead,” he says,
and I say, “Father, there’s nothing I can do about
all that. Get your mind off it. Help me with the poem

about the train. “I hate the poem about the train,”
he says. But since he’s dead and I’m a patient woman
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I turn back to the poem in which the crowds have gone home and the janitor pushes the big mustache of his broom across the floor, and I ask, “Dad, is that you in there?”

“No it’s not.”

Emanuel’s exteriorization of a need to get help in the creative act of writing a poem, as she had forgotten what she wanted to write, is an expression of how collective memory works. In her case here, it works by proxy. The question “What gives?” can be understood as an attempt to avoid backtracking into myth and history, as that would mean a search for amnesiacs who cannot recognize each other. In Emanuel’s poem the father becomes a cloud resembling Magritte’s bowler who hangs over the train station giving instructions as to what her poem should contain, further demanding:

“I want to go to a museum; put one in the poem beside the station.”

[...] “And when I get to the museum I want to see Soutine, Miró, Picasso, or Dali, I want eyes in my armpits And my fingers, eyes in the air, the trees, the dirt.”

What the speaker has to say about the father’s discourse is the remark that he is already “an eye-in-the-dirt”. The idea that the father is able to express desires beyond the grave in a visual way by literally turning his fragmented self into the object of seeing, the eye-in-the-dirt, is interesting on two accounts: first, because it points to the relation between decomposition and composition and second because it formulates an aesthetics of inspiration. Akiba Emanuel, who himself has gone through a cubist period, seems here to suggest that only by going to the museum and being reminded of others’ works of art can one say, forget about Picasso, or Miró, and catch your own train. Thus, what is emphasized here is the fact that oblivion marks a division between a poet and his precursor and functions as the condition for the representation of an interior – be it the grave, or the psyche. Only in this divide can one go beyond immediate self-expression and instead of merely representing, perform a creative act. In his book, The Theory of Inspiration, Timothy Clark forwards the claim, similar to Akiba Emanuel’s idea of interiority, that a writer’s conception of a creative inner power is often “an image of an anticipated rhetorical effect.” Writes Clark:

The aesthetic of inspiration has not always been the simplistic notion of heightened and immediate self-expression for which it is now usually taken. Instead, it often situates the act of composition as a space of division, rupture or
possibility between the mundane subjectivity of the writer and alternative and usually unforeseeable modes of being or subjectivity to which the unique interaction and intercontamination of the psychic and textual seems to give access. Inspiration recurrently forms part of an anti-formalist aesthetic which renders composition a kind of experiment upon the writer’s psyche and received determinations both of the human and of art.  

The father’s decomposition in Emanuel’s poem, his imperative to forget about writing poems and go to museums instead, is a way of defamiliarizing the traditional notion of inspiration. The artist’s pain and anxiety of influence, to use Bloom’s idea, is here dealt with by transforming the anticipated rhetorical effect of the working of imagination, the rhetoric of interiority that is, not into composition but decomposition.  

In her other poems from the same collection dealing with the figure of the father, Emanuel anchors the notion of decomposed inspiration to a poetics of self-empowerment following the construction of pain as a death-drive. Writes Emanuel in “The Burial”:

After I’ve goosed up the fire in the stove with Starter Logg so that it burns like fire on amphetamines; after it’s imprisoned, screaming and thrashing, behind the stove door; after I’ve listened to the dead composers and watched the brown-plus-gray deer compose into Cubism the trees whose name I don’t know (pine I think); after I’ve holed up in my loneliness staring at the young buck whose two new antlers are like a snail’s stalked eyes and I’ve let this conceit lead me to the eyes-on-stems of the faces of Picasso and from there to my dead father; after I’ve chased the deer away [...]; then I bend down over the sea of keys to write this poem about my father in his grave.

It isn’t easy.  

Standing by the father’s grave with a shovel in her hand the speaker goes on to notice the inert body of her father drooping besides her as if in a state of anesthesia. The interesting thing about anesthesia is that it induces the body in a state of unconsciousness with the absence of pain sensation, in other words, it blocks the memory so that the body becomes either catatonic or amnesiac. In Emanuel’s poem there is a desire to undo the inevitable pain by identifying parts of the speaker’s body with the objects surrounding her, here particularly the shovel. The speaker’s arm becomes an extension of the shovel. As she puts it, “it grows cool and sedate under the influence of his flesh”, thus suggesting that the memory of what one is doing, taking an active part in burying another, can be obliterated by making the body enter a state of
sedation. There is thus a tension between action and inertia which is felt throughout the book. Being under the influence of the decomposed body is what enables the speaker to compose herself both literally and metaphorically. The last line of the poem thus reads: “The body alone, in the dark, in the cold, without a coat. I would not wish that on my greatest enemy. Which, in a sense, my father was.”

Then, Suddenly- begins, as the title itself indicates, with a double aim: to anticipate and then render the plot of a story. The second part of the book, although having action as slow motion, is very much concerned with how quickly we perceive occurrences. The thematization of trains and transportation in the first part here acquires a metaphorical significance, as if when we say that some news hit us like a train. The book’s second part is furthermore accompanied by an epigraph by Einstein which makes us think of Einstein’s experiments with trains which are now famous. The epigraph reads: “Nothing happens until something moves”. Einstein’s statement is here part of the poet’s general formulations of a poetics of inspiration which exalts the resources of amnesia, yet not at the expense of action, but by making forgetfulness an action with potential. This is much expressed in the poems which deal with self-portraiture. Having pushed for movement forward and by empowering herself with death beyond the grave, the speaker of the poem “Persona” informs us:

When the reader’s radar tracked me down,
I had given up and become the dead man.
I throbbed in the big fog of his white shirt.
I called down the long tunnel of his throat
Oh dead man, where are we going?
He called back –

Everybody is a door: Open: Enter: Become.

Taking over the body of a man, impersonating him by wearing his coat, the speaker inhabits the dead man’s subjectivity. Interestingly, however, this is not done without first making recourse to the numbing of the senses, here in the form of lobotomy, which is also a component of amnesia. As the speaker puts it:

[…] I shoved my head
into the mouth of his tragic hat, I donned
the trench coat with the lobotomy, and just like
that, I was a man. On my finger I bore the tourniquet
of his ring, and I was happy inside my lonely
rayon blazer when a voice said suddenly –

LYNN EMANUEL, IS THAT YOU IN THERE?
No, I said, standing there clothed in the raiment
of a dead man. No, said the voice of the dead
man limping up and down the stairs of my voice.
No, no, no, said the voice of the dead man limping
Down the long dark corridor of my throat.  

Forgetfulness here functions as the door opened towards the potential to become another
person, especially a dead person. The speaker who does not want to identify herself as Lynn
Emanuel wants the reader to forget about the author and relate his reading experience not to
the senses in the poem but its plot, its action.

It can be contended that Emanuel’s poems in their advocating for a relation between the
writer and the reader in which each forgets the other, yet each is given the possibility to
contemplate the functionality of reading and writing, are poems which engage with inspiration
in a decomposed way. That is to say, Emanuel’s poems are consolidations of the absent,
circular, and amnesiac nature of inspiration. One is inspired but only in a fictional,
decomposed way.

In his introduction to the collections of short stories and excerpts from novels dealing
with amnesia, titled The Vintage Book of Amnesia, Jonathan Lethem makes the following
observation on what characterizes the protagonist suffering from amnesia: “an even more
disheartening realization for the amnesiac is that he’s only a fictional character. Call it
Pirandello’s Syndrome”  

Emanuel’s poems seem to have the same quality to them: they are
impersonations of a fictional character who forgets she is the author and as such is in search
for a reader who would deliver her from the forgotten memory of a pain which is portrayed as
potent inspiration. Emanuel’s poems are inspirations of a forgotten genre, the one which has
“the book as the subject of the book”, to quote the Edmond Jabès epigraph for the whole of
Then Suddenly-. 
Works Cited:


---. *Then Suddenly–*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999


