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# D. A. Powell's *Chronic* and Twenty-first-Century Lyricism

*Chronic*, by D. A. Powell. Minneapolis, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2009.

D. A. Powell's first post-"trilogy" collection of poetry, *Chronic,* is his latest, and his first to be nominated for the National Book Award. Published in 2009, just prior to Powell's receiving the Kinglsey Tufts Poetry Award—a cool $100,000 for "a mid-career poet of promise" —*Chronic* offers the promise of a poet with an already powerful style and range revealing himself to be a major lyrical voice in this country and our time. It begins with an epigraph from Virgil's Ninth Eclogue:

> Time robs us of all, even of memory: oft as a boy I recall
> that with song I would lay the long forgotten days to rest.
> Now I have forgotten all my songs.

The Ninth Eclogue describes Virgil's emotional turmoil of having one's property (one's land, and so one's home and one's life) confiscated—by the Roman army in Virgil's case, and in Powell's case—who knows?

The book's title gives a clue. I think the poet probably intends for me to simultaneously call to mind that Zig Zagged, seminal 1992 work of Andre Romelle Young; the blanching of my wife's face in one of her regular attacks; and guilt-stricken memories of my own white face; the moon above my years of self-abuse. Each of us has similar associations; all of us have our private recurrences which seem like muted declarations of some kind of destiny—the failed relationships, the failed ventures, the medications, memory loss, hangovers, comfort food, the old quilted jacket we save for sad winter days. "Chronic," for all its forms and permutations, is endemic—it is a universal phase. But it is also a mutable and porous state, a proclivity or condition that mitigates both the external cause and the internal response. "Chronic" is a term we use to describe the slowly and intrinsically corrosive

relationship between the other and ourselves. The question of what is lost, and how we lose it, is fundamentally unanswerable; it's a question whose terms are constantly changing, even as we are.

This sensation of loss and of fading memory, shot through *Chronic,* is one of the oldest characteristics of lyrical poetry—as Carl Phillips said recently, "the lyric poem is always at some level a testimony at once to a love for the world we must lose, and to the fact of loss itself."[1] These simultaneities of intention and sensation are often expressed in lyrical poetry by the alchemically musical qualities of the speaker's voice. A real singer, a singer who listens to herself sing, doesn't sing a song the same way twice; the act of singing itself shows to the singer a direction toward the song's meaning, and informs the next performance. When the human voice sings of its own experiences, they are almost always experiences that have changed the singer in ways that can't be spoken of without music; the musical accompaniment, in Sappho's time through that of the troubadours and *jongleurs,* or of the musical quality of language itself in ours, simultaneously deepens and relieves the pain of exposing the private emotions of loss, failure, regret, and confusion. Like our myriad chronic conditions, the personal is universal. This is why we listen to the blues.

*Chronic* is a strange blues. Each discovery erases something else, and Powell's lament is laced with a defiant, proud acceptance of that *quid pro quo.* There is celebration and torment, moments captured and moments still being lived, memories of picnics and farms and rough sex and of sleepless nights, crumbling in our hands like yellow photographs, celluloid images curling into flame. Powell's poems employ a banquet of tropes, techniques, and modes: bracketed empty spaces, lines cracked open by empty spaces, interludes and asides, couplets and shattered stanzas, and lyrical stances ranging from the rough vernacular in "shut the fuck up and drink your gin & tonic" to the elevated aesthetic of "callas lover."

Even within the poem "callas lover," for instance (as in most poems in this collection), these far-ranging instincts play against each other, beginning with the pun in its title. Powell introduces us to the singer as "butterfly / brilliant riband, rice flour face, silken, even her voice a sashed kimono," but immediately measures himself against that kind of perfection:

1 Phillips, Carl. *Poetry, Love, Mercy.* Berkeley, California: University of California Bancroft Library, 2009.

if I were foolish like her
but aren't I foolish like her
spotting the coil of smoke and the billowed sail
against the verge of sky

Joining his voice with hers, mingling their vanities and silences, Powell fashions in the joining of two lamentations, in a few deft lines, a vaulted atmosphere: an apartment full of memory and moment, opera and open mouth.

"If the fool persisted in his folly he would be a wise man," said William Blake. While the maxim likely gives fools regrettable encouragement, this Proverb from Hell also raises an interesting question about how we read poetry today: do we place greater trust in the wise man or the fool—the priest or the pauper? Given the world we live in—fifty years past Pollock's prime, and eighty-five years since Archibald Macleish's "Ars Poetica"[2]—is coherence a mystery as great as chaos and confusion? How can poetry account for these values without privileging one over the other? If it's an arbitrary distinction (and it may well be), it is still instructive to ask ourselves what we might think to be a more compelling voice—one found in the poetry of a sage, or in the poetry of a fool persistently unspooling strands of coherence from his helplessly tangled life?

I carry the same baffled heart I have always carried
a bit more battered than before, a bit less joy
for I see the difficult charge of living in this declining sphere

In these lines from the title poem, we find an example of the paradoxical movements Powell uses to accomplish such a broad range of emotional expression. Past, present, and future tense; declarative and figurative tropes; both prescience and simplemindedness are synthesized into a truly lyrical sensibility, one that has the capacity to think, feel, touch, say, sing, quiver, and recoil with the same speed. Again:

in a week you could watch me crumble into smut: spend hues
spent perfumes. dust upon the lapel where a moment I rested

2 "A poem should not mean / But be."

yes, the moths have visited and deposited their velvet egg mass
the gnats were here: they smelled the wilt and blight. they
salivated

in the folds of my garments: you could practically taste the rot

*

Much has been made of Powell's formal consistencies: the dearth of titles, his lack of capitalization, very long lines (Graywolf innovatively left the middle page of *Chronic* uncut, so that two poems titled "Cinemascope" and "Centerfold" appear on paper twice as wide as the others, to accommodate lines comprising up to thirty words), and sporadic punctuation. In his riotous forms, in his use of the page, and his seeming ability to begin any poem in the middle of a thought, he shows his allegiance to the tropes of contemporary experimentalism. Yet, he is also an inheritor of lyricists like Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, who oscillated between "the rational and the vatic," in Powell's words. He conjures the wrecked fractals of the West Coast language poets; and in his short-phrased, intensely musical rhythms, he evinces the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins found in so many 20th-century poets who explore the overlap between sound and sense. These techniques are highly successful in amplifying a voice rooted terribly, frighteningly, and insistently in the currents of actual experiences. Powell is not a modern, narrative, confessional, or experimental poet *per se;* he is a songwriter, albeit a songwriter concerned with, among the varied difficulties of existence, the impossibly difficult task of singing.

Arguments about how to categorize Powell's poetics are not as helpful in understanding Powell's poetry as it is to hear the sound of his voice. In this era when "more poetry is being read and written than at any time in our history," says Charles Simic recently in *The New York Review of Books,*[3] it is lamentable that so many of the thousands of collections of poetry published in the last decade are utterly interchangeable. The formal innovations of "experimental poetry"—that elusive 21st-century *élan* cited in so many publishers' and presses' mission statements—have often been privileged at the expense of the very spirit we, as believers in poetry, desperately hope

3 "Confessions of a Poet Laureate." *NY Review of Books* Blog: April 27, 2010.

to find: the humanity of a voice in the void. The distinction between experimentalism and autonomy, of course, is ultimately an unnecessary one, and Powell is as good an argument as we have of the falsehood of that dichotomy: that formal innovation in service of the voice, and not at its expense, is both desirable and attainable.

D. A. Powell is a lyrical poet, and a truly powerful one. For him, the song is an uninhabitable memory, an act of recollection continually disturbed by the chaotic current of our lives. Seeing the other and speaking its name is a constantly generative, even symbiotic exchange:

> or I am the one who's no more dear, fumbling convalescent
> while you take the stage like a salvage scow: steal my number
> draw me limping by rote into this dramatic duet, this moment

Traveling across lines like these, the reader of *Chronic* is impressed by the paradoxical ethical imperative to forget who we are, or who we *think* we are, and how much we will have forgotten and lost when we remember "ourselves" again: how profoundly we, like Virgil, will have forgotten all our songs.