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When Hamlet Meets the Bomb

The Poetry and Criticism of John Gery

Poet and critic John Gery's recent book *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry* (hereafter cited as *NA*) is the first comprehensive study of poetry that concerns nuclear weapons and their threat to civilization. The public usually imagines no link between nuclear weapons and art in general or poetry in particular. If it does relate them, it tends to recall protest poems which may be shouted or chanted at political demonstrations. Gery, by contrast, scrutinizes the great range of American poetry written since Hiroshima that takes "annihilation" as its central issue. The possibility of the complete annihilation of humanity, the chance that "in the few hours it might take to complete a global nuclear war everything we know and take for granted could be eradicated," is unique to our generation (*NA* 1). Sociologists and psychologists have studied the effects of futurelessness on individuals and groups, but only in poetry, Gery argues, has there been any attention to the nuclear era's cost to the human spirit. The very existence of weapons of mass destruction suggests some sort of aberration in our nature, but exactly what kind? Even if we knew, how could we address it? Seeking answers to these questions for most Americans is difficult because "a basic understanding of nuclear weapons and power is almost entirely a symbolic, not a material, one" (*NA* 3). But for those of us who believe in deterrence and have

made a livelihood out of it, and who at the same time profess the power of art to portray meaningful human experience, John Gery's work demands a clearer understanding—if not a reconsideration—of our deeply held values.

Finding meaning in a day fraught with uncertainty is the central burden of Gery's writing, not only in his latest book but throughout the body of his poetry. *Charlemagne: a Song of Gestures*, which won the 1982 Plumbers Ink Poetry Award, juxtaposes a medieval backdrop with a modern age of restlessness where life lacks a center. In *The Burning of New Orleans*, an award-winning epic poem, archetypal lovers cope with the destruction of all they know. In certain other poems and in *Nuclear Annihilation*, he narrows his inquiry to "annihilation," the obliteration of everything into nothingness. He cites psychologist Robert Jay Lifton's study of the "existential absurdity" of carrying on life in the face of "nuclearism," which Lifton and political scientist Richard Faulk define as the dependence upon nuclear policy to solve human dilemmas (*NA* 2). To study nuclearism's toll on humanity, Gery creates a new criticism that treats annihilation as an object. He places poems into one of four groups, and each group uses a different preposition with respect to annihilation: "within," "against," "through," and "around." Poetry that works "within annihilation" considers the nature of nothingness itself. Speaking "against annihilation" includes the protest poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and others. Thinking "through annihilation" involves an individual response to one's own personal extinction. Finally, the psychosocial aspect of annihilation constitutes poetry written "around annihilation" which analyzes the societal and cultural context of nuclear weapons.

Interestingly, though, Gery's own poetry resists rigid classification into his critical categories. His "Light

Verse Against Darkness" characterizes his technique as it combines the first three approaches; it entertains the idea of nothingness itself, carries an implicit protest against it, and suggests an individual response.

> Should all the world cave in
> we'll lay another floor
> of straw, sand, brick, cork, wood,
> or corrugated tin.
> It won't be such a chore,
> I promise. But if it should
>
> seem worse than you expect
> to build again—like birds
> fresh tendrils when their nest
> is blown away or wrecked
> by heavy rains—with words
> unreasonably blessed
>
> new platforms to your liking,
> I'll dance on them until
> they crack (I'm good at that!)
> and keep collapse in striking
> distance always. And will,
> though this verse lean as Sprat
>
> your heart with confidence
> may not inspire, insist
> if not this music I
> with heaviness dispense.
> And if the world should list,
> so what! We'll learn to fly!

In this poem Gery demonstrates *Nuclear Annihilation*'s argument that poetry can effectively address the problems of annihilation. If the world caves in, as a poet he

promises to build "new platforms" with "words / unreasonably blessed." Through the power of his expressive language, he envisions making new structures of meaning that can mitigate utter uncertainty and fear; he will "keep collapse in striking / distance always."

When his persona in "Light Verse" claims such poetic power, it is in concert with *Nuclear Annihilation*'s articulation of the potency and necessity of poetry:

> By exposing how we have come to picture ourselves in the nuclear age, [and] the best poets express what is needed to outlive it—an articulation and critique of our current paradoxical situation. So although it is not wrong to say that nuclear-age poetry unites in resistance against annihilation, it also serves the more reconstructive function of portraying "ways of nothingness" by which . . . we can carry on meaningful existence. (*NA* 11)

This is a poetic which refuses nihilism. For Gery, poetry must be the key to understanding annihilation because knowing annihilation by direct experience requires mass death. He argues, "Herein lies a central paradox of the nuclear age: What we have come to know has forced us to acknowledge that what we do *not* know we now cannot afford to know" (*NA* 5, his italics). What we must know is the nature of nothingness and how it "has already changed our sense of the world, or else we may unwittingly help realize that potential" (*NA* 20). Art that asserts hope in the face of annihilation ("so what! We'll learn to fly!") counters both the dangerously willful naivete of ignoring nuclearism's threat, as well as the "psychic numbing" and "desensitization" that Lifton found among Auschwitz and Hiroshima survivors (*NA* 19).

Thus, it is appropriate that the above poem is "Light Verse *Against* Darkness" (my italics).

However, Gery's kind of implicit protest against the darkness of nothingness contrasts with the traditional protest poetry of the anti-nuclear movement. Allen Ginsberg's "Plutonium Ode" is the most famous of this genre. Ginsberg delivered it in person, chanting it as he and other activists blocked a rail line leading into the Rocky Mountain Flats weapons facility. While Gery holds this ode in high regard for its ability to "galvanize the resistance needed among the diverse citizenry in a democracy" as it "articulates the conscience of American activism" (*NA* 60), he implicitly questions its political efficacy. He comments that Ginsberg believes "by the resolute act of the poet's saying so, the evil of the plutonium has been conquered" (*NA* 59).

One can see Gery's demand for efficacy in his criticism of other protest poetry. When he was involved in the nuclear freeze movement in the mid-1980s he was troubled at times to see some protesters attack the character of their opponents in the nuclear establishment rather than provide a rhetoric that works toward a solution (Zimmerman). He shows this concern in his reading of Margaret Kay Biggs' poem "Dirty Words." When her persona spray paints "the vilest, filthiest words / I could summon" which are "WAR—NUKES—MELTDOWN," Gery takes her to task: "In [the poem's] eagerness to identify an enemy, it can be dangerously polarizing, rather than promoting the peace it seeks" (*NA* 52). When he reads Gary Snyder's "Turtle Island," he points out that rather than instruct us to take up arms against a sea of troubles, Snyder employs a Buddhist chant to fight a spiritual battle against nuclearism (*NA* 57). Gery wryly summarizes, "As a rallying cry for action, this mantra is not likely to find legions of followers. . . . [T]he imaginative reach of

this diatribe tends to diminish its political efficacy, despite its visionary stance" (*NA* 57-58).

It is interesting that in his critique of Synder, Gery quotes Hamlet, since Gery is involved in the same kind of dilemma: how can a literate, thoughtful person effectively confront such an abstract problem with such grave consequences? During his anti-nuclear activism fifteen years ago, Gery began thinking about how he could retell certain fairy tales in the post-modern age (Zimmerman). What would happen, say, to a contemporary Rumplestiltskin, and what would this tell us about annihilation and the human spirit? The result is "The Detonation of Rumplestiltskin."

> She's guessed it, she has, after all these years,
> and *Pop!* I feel it, breaking up like ice,
> the axing through my chest, groans in my ears,
> the sudden undulations, all my fears
> exploding to delirium, divis—
>
> ive but characteristically divine,
> that red arc blotting there above my head
> while the winds like women spinning gold entwine
> irradiated dust around my spine,
> splitting my heart, which crackles and goes dead.
>
> And she, in having finally set free
> the yoke around her imagination's throat,
> unfurls a moment, lording over me
> her, yes, admit it, shining victory—
> for which there is, of course, no antidote.

These lines embody Gery's poetic demands at the same moment that they violate his critical rubric. "Rumplestiltskin" works as a protest against annihilation, but the poem also looks "through" annihilation towards an indi-

vidual reaction to the destruction of the individual. Yet, this new Rumplestiltskin's identity is both singular and collective. He is a nuclear Everyman, for he symbolizes the man-become-bomb. In a separately published article, Gery discusses this kind of character in Paul Zimmer's poetry on the atomic tests where Zimmer creates a persona subsumed by "Imbellis." Imbellis is the war spirit incarnate, a self-destructive soul that lives in the heart of "Zimmer," his protagonist. After surviving one particular test near ground zero in Nevada, "Zimmer" reacts in horror at his own transformation into Imbellis, the cruelty that has become him (*NA* 90). Rumplestiltskin is another Imbellis—a "war within" that has become the human spirit.

Because of what "Rumplestiltskin" reveals about the human spirit, it is one of the more disturbing poems I have read. In the fairy tale, Rumplestiltskin guards his name's secrecy, for if any person discovers it, she will realize certain things: 1) that his name is identical to his true nature, 2) that speaking the name summons that nature, and 3) that summoning that nature necessarily leads to his destruction. In Gery's nuclear fairy land, the man-become-bomb has just such a secret identity. As readers, we are surprised to see Rumplestiltskin explode as a nuclear weapon rather than die, as in the conventional fairy tale's account, by suicide. But that surprise is part of Gery's point. Having created and learned to live with nuclear weapons, we as a society *are* Rumplestiltskin. The poem succeeds precisely because of the shock of self-discovery.

In *Nuclear Annihilation*, Gery asks if anyone can claim responsibility for nuclearism (8). "Rumplestiltskin" assumes that bombs are not external to our nature; they exist as a natural consequence of who we are. Deep inside human nature must be a sickness, a will to turn all into nothingness. Our heart is the pit of the bomb, our

own ground zero. Like Dr. Strangelove, we have a gloved right hand that can involuntarily seize our own throats and snuff out our own lives.

When Gery critiques poetry that thinks "through annihilation" (poetry that concentrates on an individual response), he implies that the problem with the human spirit is our own strange love. He studies William Carlos William's "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," in which annihilation is the outcome of misdirected love. The poem begins with "a complex argument for nurturing and revering love in the face not only of life's and the poet's failures but of death" (*NA* 43):

> The mere picture
> of the exploding bomb
> fascinates us
> so that we cannot wait
> to prostrate ourselves
> before it. We do not believe
> *that love*
> can so wreck our lives.
>
> (qtd. in *NA* 43, my italics)

Gery insightfully notes the dual meaning in "that love," which is "here as both a relative and a demonstrative pronoun [which] creates an ambiguity that ironically equates love of the bomb's destructiveness with physical love." It is here that "Williams registers his dismay at his own time's preoccupation with the wrong kind of power" (*NA* 44). Gery's own poetry attempts to define this "wrong kind of power." Perhaps we love security above relationships. Perhaps we seek security through the wrong means. But our civilization clearly loves something, some kind of self-appointed, self-created power, and this love is self-destructive.

In Gery's own "Lie #10: That Patriot Missiles Freed the Persian Gulf,"[1] he pushes the argument further. The narrator of the poem speaks in a dramatic monologue that unfolds and reveals both the intimate and political aspects of our humanity.

Watching the Patriots approach the Scuds
like "Gyno-col" committing spermicide,
she felt enamored, for a moment of
America: As bright blasts streamed in floods
of red, inside she almost burst with pride
imagining her body making love

devoid of shame and safe from scattering
debris. But then a Scud and Patriot fell
together, mingling in a spray of white
and blue, until, spreading in a fatter ring
of green ash, they receded. She could tell,
by looking closer, how the desert night

like tangled sheets lay barren. In one corner
her television next revealed a girl
no older than herself, her garments stripped,
and infant dangling from one arm. She'd born her
away from Baghdad to escape this whirl
of love's machinery, just to be blipped

to General Norman Schwarzkopf's outstretched prong
pointing to holes where oil tanks used to be,
bridges had stood, and soldiers had lain sleeping.
Throughout his briefing, the press laughed at his long
and surgically thorough mastery
of Saddam Hussein's private boxes. Leaping
to run away from what she'd seen, she'd seen
enough—the young Iraqi mother, that is—
but so had she in Cairo, Illinois

who later joined her friends at Dairy Queen
to suck ice cream and ask them where Kuwait is.
As pleased as she was that her steady boy

had not been blown out of his tent, she cried
at her decision not to have his child
before he went to war. "It's not the danger,"
she told her friends, "It's how that general lied.
He said no patriot would be defiled,
but I love one who's stranger than a stranger."

The American girlfriend discovers that she has a strange love, the kind of love that missile defense affords. A missile protects her, and when the projectile works as designed, it "commits spermicide" in a patriotic display of red, white, and blue. Significantly, these colors become a sickly green ash in the bomb's fallout. The rhetorical move here suggests that deterrence is ultimately a suicidal stance. Nuclear deterrence defends democracy by threatening democracy's own existence. Gery exposes such a policy to be as mad as MAD (mutually assured destruction) itself.

One may argue that "Lie #10" does not involve the Patriot missile destroying *American* lives, the lives it is designed to protect. But the poem's narrator does not allow the reader any wiggle room to escape identifying with the bomb's victims. To that end, in the fifth stanza, we are ingeniously fooled. The American girlfriend is dismayed at the images from her television: the ravished Iraqi mother and the cavalier Schwarzkopf. We think that when she leaps "to run away from what she'd seen," the "she" is the American. But in one brilliant moment, the narrator collapses the space between Cairo, Illinois and Iraq. The two-dimensional barrier of television evaporates, and for an instance we see a real Iraqi mother who is really terrified. In fact, we see through her eyes:

"she'd seen enough—the young Iraqi mother, that is— / but so had she in Cairo, Illinois. . . ." Gery refuses a distant, poststructural approach that views language as merely a chain of self-referential signifiers. Words hail a material reality and our collective survival depends upon us to materially identify with those whom we threaten. Otherwise, our humanity is not humane.

In "Lie #8: That 'Little Boy' Saved Half a Million Lives," Gery uses a more direct monologue that continues the expansion from a "through" to an "around" approach to annihilation; beginning with the voice of an insider who was part of the initial atomic testing team, Gery's interest takes a broader psychosocial scope.

> Someone proposed we drop it in the sea
> to demonstrate how our peace-loving dreams
> might spare the Japanese, but who was sure
> the thing would splash, shaping that blinding tree
> it first had in the desert. The hairbrained schemes
> from Fermi, Lawrence, Oppenheimer, and Bohr
>
> had not inspired fear before, so why,
> just after we had passed our greatest test,
> crushing the fascists, hesitate or halt
> in hopes a few more thousand wouldn't die?
> A few more thousand might convince the rest
> to realize it was Hirohito's fault,
>
> not ours, that we had had to go this far
> to stop another Eastern tyranny—
> both Genghis Khan and Mao came to mind.
> Even that peasant's son, pretender czar,
> would have to listen to us. Don't you see?
> No treaty would protect us from the blind.

Yet which of us was not blind? Truth be known,
we couldn't guess the casualties to come
with or without the thing. No one was certain.
So like a blind man in a room alone
who moves toward a window, reaching from
not to, both palms turned out, drawing the curtain

to touch the sun's rays penetrating glass,
we made our way by stumble, clutch, and pry.
We guessed not deaths but decibels of sound
and placed bets on the wind speed from the blast,
then held still. No one dared to prophesy
for good or ill: A few knelt on the ground.

The poem's speaker treats the bomb as a cultural rhetorical device. The weapon acts as an argument in place of words because the narrator sees failure in diplomacy. Only the unspoken power of the bomb can correct the barbarism of the East ("Genghis Khan and Mao come to mind"). When the narrator claims that Stalin, the "peasant's son, pretender czar, / would have to listen to us," the verbal attack becomes a statement of class conflict as well. Barbarism and low-mindedness can only understand a vision of annihilation.

But "vision" is the vehicle that pushes the narrator to implicate himself in his own argument. He addresses the reader directly when he pleads, "Don't you see?" Immediately, however, his apology for nuclearism subverts itself. The premise of his logic is that the enemy is utterly "other." This assumption begins to fall apart when he admits that humans may lie on the other end of a bomb's delivery; he labels them as "casualties." He then realizes that he cannot predict the extent of those casualties, or their suffering. Once the narrator confesses that he is not omniscient—that there may be some uncertainties, and that this "rhetorical device" could lead to

mass death—the hyper-scientific guesses of "decibels of sound" and "wind speed from the blast" become trivial in light of the bomb's physical and spiritual consequences: "No one dared prophesy / for good or ill: A few knelt on the ground."

John Gery insists that thinking, feeling people must think the unthinkable without making it thinkable. Avoiding annihilation, he argues, requires a right kind of love, for "without the prospect of love, of course, annihilation would be of no consequence" (*NA* 167). Understanding *that love* requires a stern imagination. Gery's poetry and criticism meet his own demanding criteria that artistic language must "not only affirm life but assert that poetry in fact *does* matter and *does* contribute to authentic cultural changes" (*NA* 185, his italics). The stakes are high, for, as he writes, "not to understand what annihilation means is not to understand being either, and it is our being to which we must attend, if we hope to avert its extinction" (*NA* 167). ❑

Notes

1. John Gery has written ten "Lie" poems. Don Zimmerman includes Lies 8 and 10 here. "Lie #5" appears, courtesy of Mr. Gery, following this essay. For those interested in reading the other six published "Lies," they may be found in the following places. "Lie #1: That Penelope Resisted Scores of Suitors" and "Lie #2: That Parkman Almost Died on the Oregon Trail": *Paris Review* 36.133 (Winter 1994): 178-80. "Lie #4: That Frances Osgood Slept with E.A. Poe" and "Lie #6: That Hart Crane Crawled in Bed Between the Cowleys": *Kenyon Review* 16.4 (Fall 1994): 30-32. "Lie #7: That Scott Fitzgerald Sent Himself a Postcard": *West Branch* 42 (1998), forthcoming. "Lie #9: That Oswald Was a Cuban Sympathizer": *Southern Anthology* (Lafayette, LA: The Southern Anthology, 1995): 36-37. "Lie #3:

That Mourning His Wife's Death Killed Mendelsohn" has not yet appeared in print.

Works Cited

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