

In the Digital Age

Poetic Reason as an Alternative

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2024

a review of

Poetic Reason in the Age of Digital Control by Jesús Sepúlveda. Bad Idea Publishing, 2023

Jesús Sepúlveda's *Poetic Reason in the Age of Digital Control* addresses some of today's most pressing threats and sketches out some promising ideas of a strategy in response, which will hopefully be elaborated in future works.

Most of the book is devoted to describing the threats of ecological collapse, economic exploitation, neoliberal colonialism, rising totalitarianism, and a widespread failure of empathy. These phenomena are attributed to the root cause of the unrestrained rule of instrumental reason: "eclipsed by its reduction to an instrument—a tool that performs calculations," a totalitarian force leveraged by industries, bureaucracies, internet algorithms, and now by AI technologies.

The precise nature of the proposed response, poetic reason and its methods, is less developed, and sometimes gets lost amidst rhetoric or peripheral details. Sepúlveda bases his conception of poetic reason on an essentialist perspective, declaring that because "Nature's experience is unmediated, so is poetry, whose gratuity is not commodifiable because one cannot sell one's experience."

The examples of poetic reason offered, while relatively few, are drawn from a wide range of regions across the globe, including the animism of Amazonian indigenous peoples, and the balance of instrumental and poetic reason displayed in the construction of a windmill from recycled material in Malawi, in Kamkwanba and Mealer's memoir *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (albeit twice mis-cited as "The Boy Who Harnessed the Wing").

The precise nature of poetic reason nonetheless remains ambiguous and receives less attention and detail than the description of the general geopolitical situation. Some of this context is necessary, and the various factors of the global situation are persuasively woven into a strong critique of instrumental reason. The basic analysis will be familiar to anyone with a knowledge of green/anti-civ anarchy, *Fifth Estate*, or much of avant-garde poetics. However, this context takes up about three-fourths of the compact book. The focus shifts fully from describing the problem to presenting a solution about ten pages from the end, leaving little room for an in-depth exploration of poetic reason itself.

It is never made clear precisely what poetry itself, or by extension poetic reason, is for Sepúlveda. The relatively few poets cited, including the powerful examples of Vallejo and Paz, give some indication, but the reader trying to discern the exact nature of poetic reason's revolutionary core is left mainly with familiar, essentialist declarations of poetry's special purity. But what makes the reason of poetry more pure than that of prose? What constitutes its essential, radical nature: its speakable rhythms, its sensuous form? The social roles of the poet? Its evocation of imagery and symbol? Its alteration of the writer's and reader's state of consciousness?

It is never explained in what way poetry, a product of language, arguably mediation par excellence—is unmediated. Sepúlveda declares that "Written verses mediated by the market are not poetry," but it is unclear whether this is part of the working definition of poetry, a turn of rhetoric, or a practical call for gatekeeping against the selling

of all poetry. For instance, does selling a poem disprove this definition? Would this include zines? Busking? At least several of the poets he cites as inspiration have sometimes sold their poetry.

Sepúlveda certainly makes a strong case for the necessity of poetic reason, however defined, raising key questions: how exactly might we begin to cultivate it individually and/or culturally? How is it learned, how is it practiced beyond the confines of poetry itself? What are some strategies whereby it can combat systemic misery?

These questions have been energetically explored for generations, but there is no discussion of them here, nor of the multiple histories of anti-instrumental poetry, or analysis of the social roles or forms that characterize modern poetry.

No account is taken of poetry's evolution and its variety in countless societies, seemingly taking contemporary bourgeois culture's understanding of poetry for granted as a static concept.

Therefore, the idea of poetry that seems to be at play reflects the dominant model of lyric poetry which permeates bourgeois culture, regarding the purity of individual expression, its relation to mimesis (the representation of reality within art) and the social, cultural, and spiritual roles of the poet.

As a result, we miss the opportunity to explore some of the clearest, most developed, and most marvellous modes of poetic reason, including mysticism, ritual poetry, glossolalia, and shamanism. Though Brazilian Amazonian animism is offered as an example of the result of poetic reason, there is surprisingly no mention of their poetry, song, or use of language.

The modern movements and traditions which have explored this territory present an additional missed opportunity; despite the main concerns of Sepúlveda's thesis seeming apparently congruent with those of Romanticism and Surrealism, neither is mentioned. The poetic experiments and experience of Dada, Fluxus, the Situationists, Ethnopoetics, and asemic writing, despite the strong anarchist ties of all these movements, plus the theories of anarchist and radical linguistics and semiotics, currently thriving, are all missing from the discussion, aside from one reference to Debord's theory of the Spectacle. Explaining the reasons that Sepúlveda is, one must assume, dissatisfied with these approaches might go far in clarifying his own ideas.

The most intriguing aspect of the theory, which comes through in glancing hints and touches, concerns the relationship between poetry and time. Sepúlveda sees poetic reason as counteracting the linear time wielded by instrumental reason, leading to some thought-provoking notions regarding poetry, history, and chronology.

These scattered ruminations make one yearn for a more focused and fully manifested explanation. *Poetic Reason in the Age of Digital Control* stands as an eloquent critique of the pressing problems facing us in the current historical epoch and evokes a brief sketch of some ideas pointing toward a promising response.

It leaves the reader with a keen hope for future books that will flesh out this sketch into a fully articulated theory, which can provide us with a potent source of strategies for radical poetic reason and action.

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Fifth Estate #415, Summer 2024

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