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Nicole Roche

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NICOLE ROCHE

AN INTERVIEW WITH GREGORY PARDLO

Gregory Pardlo's collection *Digest* (Four Way Books) won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. *Digest* was also shortlisted for the 2015 NAACP Image Award and was a finalist for the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award. His other honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts; his first collection *Totem* was selected by Brenda Hillman for the APR/Honickman Prize in 2007. He is also the author of *Air Traffic*, a memoir in essays forthcoming from Knopf. *CutBank's* online managing editor, Nicole Roche, sat down with him for this generous interview at the Montana Book Festival, September 23, 2016.

NR: *I have to ask you about the Pulitzer. In a New York Times article from last April, you were saying after the announcement, you felt like you were following around another guy everyone was congratulating. I'm wondering if a year and a half later, if it's finally sunk in that you are that guy.*

GP: Yes, it has sunk in. I mean, it's been a learning curve. I think I've always had a problem with accepting praise and congratulations, so that's just a character flaw that I've always had. But I've also had to learn—I've had to learn how to give interviews. It's something that I never thought

about doing, or thought would be a part of my job, as a poet. The whole learning curve has just been rethinking how I can be effective in the world in the way that I want to off the page as much as on the page. I guess in that process I've integrated the formerly alienated self.

NR: *Ira Glass talks about this gap that exists between a beginning writer's intentions and what actually makes it onto the page. I'm wondering if there was a moment, a period in your writing, when you sort of said, "Hey, you know, I am starting to close that gap?"*

GP: No. I think I might be a little different, at least process-wise. I don't start a poem knowing where it's going to go. I pretty much have no clue what I'm getting myself into, so I don't have any expectations on the back end. So whatever happens, and I think this is true about my work in general, it's process-oriented. What I think is most demonstrated on the page is my thought process. My thinking through formal restraints, or thinking through the historical and social intersections. I just keep shoveling information into the poem and see what comes up, see what I can make of it. So the result is I don't feel like it hasn't met my expectations.

Now, of course, it never meets my expectations. Not to say I'm happy with the work. I don't jump up from the desk patting myself on the back every time I finish a poem. But I can sort of keep pushing to do something beyond what I may have thought was in the poem.

NR: *I have to admit I was a little intimidated to interview a writer whose (Pulitzer-Prize winning) book includes the following quotation: “Hegel says, ‘before setting out for a quotation, first dig two graves.’” But I wanted to ask you how you composed the poems that begin with the epigraphs from the various philosophers, “The Conatus Improvisations” and “The Clinamen Improvisations.” How did those pieces come to be?*

GP: Similar to what I’ve been explaining, I created a set of restraints and I shoveled in content and challenged myself to see what I could do. First, I got to tell you, the joke in that poem is, Hegel didn’t say that. Confucius said that. So the poem is about misquoting. It was a happy accident that the two graves were also the quotation marks. You set out to quote, you dig two graves... These are all bad jokes, is what I’m telling you. It’s funny—people do read them as conveying this intellectual heft and this training, and no, they’re just really corny jokes.

Here are the parameters for these bad jokes. In my reading for my PhD, and first of all, in reading student work, I’d lose patience with what I call the gargyle epigraph. Not just students do this. Lots of poets do this. They put an epigraph over the poem that has absolutely nothing to do with the poem, but it’s by Wallace Stevens or Emily Dickinson. The idea is to give the thing this endorsement from beyond.

In my reading I would find these passages that would make really obnoxious epigraphs. So I started collecting them. But then I didn’t have poems to put them on. So now I’m writing poems in response to these

epigraphs. The project was to misread them, to have fun with them, to play with them, and not attempt to meet the epigraphs on their own terms. The running theme of the book is to take these things and to digest them and make them my own. Clinamen and Conatus were terms that seemed completely baggy and abstract. Every time I looked for a definition, I would find some other interpretation of these works. So they became interesting organizing principles for the poems.

So the gargoyle epigraph—that explains the Cervantes quote in “The Clinamen Improvisations” that precedes the list of authors and promises “a surprising look of authority.” About this idea of authority—I started thinking about a Bertrand Russell quote in which he states that philosophy, like science, “appeals to human reason rather than authority.” He calls philosophy “a No Man’s Land” between science and theology. Do you agree with this conception? Do you see any of these ideas playing out in your work?

I disagree that philosophy does not appeal to authority, or is not subject to the influence of authority. I think there are very authoritative ways of thinking that routinize the philosophical enterprise, which is another part of the project, the formal project, in the book. I’m not interested so much in answering unanswerable question as I am in finding the unanswerable questions and using them as a form in which I can be lyrically playful. There’s a quote that I’m trying to remember about the relationship between poetry and philosophy that would make me sound really smart.

I guess I don't characterize it as a no man's land because I think metaphysical poetry has always occupied that space between philosophy and spiritualism, let's say, between the pretense toward science and fact and submission to blind faith—between those two is the content, the territory of the poet.

NR: *Digest says so much about history, about the burdens of history or the burdens of legacy, including legacies that are played out in increasingly sanitized or domestic ways, like the boys shooting off fireworks—"the household paraphernalia of war"—in "Problemata." Do you think history leaves a tangible imprint on a place, on people, on the here and now?*

GP: Yes. So, it's kind of reactionary against the notion of realism in literature. We celebrate Hemingway, for example, for this stripped-down style. And the way I had been sold that style is that it gets to the bare "real," to things as they are, and I distrusted that without knowing why. Part of what I'm interested in in terms of time in this book is that—first of all, I think realism is as much of an affected style as any other form of literature, and it is not getting any closer to the stripped-down real, and why should the stripped-down real itself be something we should want to pursue? So then, step two, I started thinking, why should we want the stripped-down real? Well, we want the stripped-down real because we are so desperately anxious and haunted by the history in our landscapes and in our environments. You can't look at the American prairie without

evoking the ghosts or the crimes from which we all benefit. Faulkner's "history is in us"—whatever the quote is. You can't look at a Southern plantation and render that scene with realism, because it's unreal to do so. It is a contrivance to do so. For example, when I walk across campus at Colombia, I don't look at the campus without thinking about all of my heroes that have gone to school there, all of the history. The reason I'm there is because of its romance. The reason I'm in New York is because of the romance that I have with New York. I want the history, as sordid and as beautiful as it is. It's a part of human perception, first of all, that we only perceive place through the associations of time. If it's a new place, we're bringing our own projections to this new place. So A, I don't think it's humanly possible not to associate history with a place. And B, I think it's unethical to ignore the fact that history and place are intertwined.

NR: *What are our responsibilities to that history?*

GP: I don't think of it as a responsibility. I'm hearing responsibility as obligation to history. I don't think we have an obligation to history. But I do think it is a distortion—it's the motive that I have a beef with. So, if I want to render place minus history, I have to ask myself why I want to do that. And if the reason I want to do that is because the history that is entwined in a place makes me uncomfortable, then that's a dishonorable motive in my worldview. I guess I want to leave the door open for projects that want to reimagine the history that's present. So I don't think there is a

rigid record of what has happened in a place, I don't think there's a single record of place, but some of those records indict us. And some of the ways we think about place indict us. If I have a guilty motive, that's a problem. If I have an aesthetic motive... I'm uncomfortable with that, because it seems dodgy. But I think that gets to the basis of what I mean by ethical. Who am I protecting? Am I protecting my ego, or am I genuinely trying to create something?

NR: *“Problemata” invites us to “Consider the dear evangelists who canvass our homes / Saturday mornings.” You go on to quote Spinoza for your reasoning behind this: “The good / which a man desires for himself and loves, he will love / more constantly if he sees that others love it also; / he will therefore endeavor that others should love it also.” Reading that and thinking about other themes running through Digest, I started thinking about the roles of historians, or philosophers, or evangelists. I wondered if these weren't also somehow the roles of a writer. Are writers not at once historians, philosophers, and evangelists?*

GP: Absolutely. So I'm trying to be sneaky with all of these. In just about every poem there are ulterior motives. If not one, there are several. Here I am arguing against the kind of rigidity, the kind of—not xenophobia, xenophobia's too strong a word—resistance to strangers, the fear—I guess it is xenophobia. The reasons that cause us to shut the doors on each other in regular daily interactions. If we can imagine a world in which the Jehovah's Witness that comes knocking on the door Saturday morning

is tolerated, that we're not responding to that person with annoyance, if not disgust, then I think there are all kinds of other forms of tolerance, or ways that we can be tolerant to one another. So that poem started with the Abraham and Isaac story. I was thinking about Abraham and Isaac, and then I started reading Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in which Kierkegaard is thinking about Abraham and Isaac, and thinking that we're all just trying to figure out our various relationships. And one of the central relationships is domesticity, the central construction of domesticity. So I was thinking about the stranger that comes to your door. What is the least welcome person? At least for me. And it was a challenge for me to imagine, to make my mind imagine, if not welcoming them in, then certainly not vilifying them. So that was the kind of project I wanted to pursue.

NR: *I'm assuming there are limits to that tolerance.*

GP: It's a question. In the philosophical vein, I'm not looking for the answer there. So the Gouverneur Morris poem before that—who has the power to draw the line of what constitutes the domestic and ensure domestic tranquility? Do you mean in my house? No, you mean under your jurisdiction. How far beyond family and physical home is the circumference of domesticity? What do we include in that circle? That's the question that I'm asking.

NR: *So is that concern directly related to your choice to write about things like going to the supermarket with your daughter?*

GP: Yes, and the boys with their precariously domesticated manhoods.

NR: *The line “You often size up the random demographic holiday / traffic makes hoping to see yourself inside a picture bigger / than the neighborhood you know” also seems to speak to that idea of the domestic and how it ripples out from there.*

GP: Yes. That’s not a part of that series, but it’s absolutely a part of that thinking. And even the tattoo poem. What is the role of patriarchy in defining the boundaries of domesticity? Do we have dominion over our children, and obviously, women’s bodies?

NR: *A few University of Montana students who had workshop with you this week told me that you sort of instinctively knew what each of them needed, what was blocking their vision or their ability to realize their vision in a piece. I asked them, “So he’s some sort of poem doctor, huh?” And one them said to me, “No, more like a poet doctor.” Do you think all writers, or many writers, have this internal obstacle or hangup that prevents them from making their best work or their true work?*

GP: Yes. We have denial for a very good reason. We go into denial to

protect our psyches so that we can move through our day with some degree of sanity. But as artists, our job is to circumvent those mechanisms of denial, the walls that we build. It's important to know where the most delicate material is, what we're most protecting. So one metaphor I have for this I call "the nuclear core," the power source. It's also the place of most resistance. In confronting that place of most resistance, there is the most potential for the release of energy. In teaching over the years, I've gotten frustrated with the approach of "Well, if you move this line here, or maybe you should try a different word, or this image isn't quite working." I'd rather ask the question, "Is this the poem you want to write?" I think if we find the poem that you want to write, or at least the question that you want to ask, then all these other problems will begin to fall into place. So I don't instinctively know anything. I look at what they put on the page. It's all on the page. If I had a nickel for every time a student said, "How did you know about my sick grandmother?" I'm like, it's right here! You wrote it! I'm not reading your mind. It's in the poem. What's fascinating is that we're the last person, the author, the poet, is often the last person to see it. We hand it to other people—but the problem is, most people are too polite to say what they see in the poem. I respect my students enough. You know, we're here, we've expended an awful lot of energy and resources and time to come here, and I'm not going to bullshit you. I'm going to tell you what I see in the poem. If the poem adds up to some deep, dark secret that you never want to tell anyone, well, I'm going to tell you that you're hinting at some deep, dark secret that you never want to tell anyone. And

A, you can either get over it and put it in the poem and write about it. Or B, write about something different. But you don't get to say, "Reader, take my word for it, there's something really powerful and important but I'm not going to tell you what it is."

NR: *In that NY Times article about winning the Pulitzer, there's this grinning picture of you and you sound so incredulous. And now, hearing your thoughts about it—well, you're such a personable guy. But I think a lot of people would say, "That guy's made it. He's totally made it." Do you feel any pressure now to live up that expectation? Do you fear it has any effect on your work?*

GP: To be honest, yes. Of course it influences my work, and it influences how I conceptualize the reader. My reader is much farther abroad now. My reader could be anywhere in the world now, as opposed to a reader within proximity. Changing that relationship fundamentally changes my approach to the poem. That said, I am nonetheless self-doubting and insecure, and a perfectionist. So none of that stuff goes away. Nothing has been lifted from my shoulders. I still agonize. I'm still an anxious wreck when I sit down to write.

NR: *As someone who has "made it," throw a bone to us MFA students and other beginning writers. What advice can you offer up?*

GP: Find your superpower. What do you do that no one else can do? What can you put on the page that no one else can put on the page? I think so often in MFA programs, the culture is a competition to write the Richard Hugo poem or to write the Sharon Olds poem. We want to prove our cred by doing what someone else has done before. Some people will say you need to find your voice—I think that's kind of trite, overworn, and not helpful. But there is something to say for a healthy self-awareness. We're flawed, we're beautifully flawed, damaged, and all-powerful beings. And the more of that we can accept in its uniqueness, then the more we can allow to be on the page.