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Hugh Foley, '"The Reality-Based Community"'

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'The Reality-Based Community'

with no world to adhere to, there can be no photograph,
no women, no children, and certainly no battalion
shooting when there was nothing there to begin with.

Timothy Donnelly, 'The Malady That Took
the Place of Thinking' (2010, p.5).

In an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, journalist Ron Suskind related a 2002 encounter with a senior Bush aide. Taking issue with his reporting, the aide exiled Suskind to 'the reality based community':

> which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too. [...] We're history's actors [...] and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do" (2004).

This aide is widely believed to be Karl Rove, George W. Bush's election strategist since he ran for Governorship of Texas, and one of the most significant figures in the 'Neoconservative' movement (Danner, 2007, p.17). Rove, essentially Bush's propagandist, represents better than almost any other member of the Bush administration the way that the 'War on Terror' was fought both in the real world and in the media. Rove is not demanding here that journalists depict reality or study it 'judiciously', but that they should acknowledge the contingency of 'reality' instead (Suskind, 2004). This strangely relativist or even 'postmodern' way of justifying the actions of power, where the word 'actors' seems to consciously carry both its meanings, has a strange implication for Suskind and, by extension, other media, even those less directly concerned with the representation of reality than journalism. If the 'War on Terror' has demanded in its own rhetoric an increased interrogation of the construction of reality, then a medium like poetry – particularly within a genre such as ekphrasis, which is often engaged in this self-same interrogation – may find a new form of political reality embedded in its processes. When the borders between reality and its representation are explicitly troubled by those in power, those borders become, in a sense, part of the territory occupied by realism.

It is in light of this representational border troubling that the self-conscious exploration of image construction in recent American poetry merits scrutiny. The manner in which some recent poems discuss the construction of images, and the attendant pitfalls and ideological assumptions of this process, reveal a significant engagement with the issues of representation raised by the 'War on Terror'. This development in American poetry and its wartime context is not without antecedents; the ethics of violence and its representation have been an animating question for several generations of American poets, and photography played a crucial role in many of the so called 'New American' poets' (along with others) criticisms of the Vietnam War. In his poem on Robert Southwell's 'The Burning Babe', for example, Robert Duncan turned from the religiosity of Southwell's image of the burning Christ-child to consider the victims of U.S. Napalm attacks in Vietnam, writing:

> I cannot imagine, gazing upon photographs
>   of these young girls, the mind
> Transcending what's been done to them. (2014, p.512)

This poem was itself part of an intertextual dialogue about the ethics of representation the war had provoked between Duncan and Denise Levertov. Levertov's own poem 'Advent 1966', which Duncan was responding to, sees a vision of Southwell's burning babe 'multiplied', equally untranscendent:

> Seeing not the unique Holy Infant
> burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption,
> furnace in which souls are wrought into new life,
> but, as off a beltline, more, senseless figures aflame (2003, p.91).

Here, the technological process of death and the technological reproducibility of the images have merged to demand a new way of seeing from the poet. Both poets had, however, found the other's work concerning Vietnam unsatisfactory. As Anne Dewey puts it, 'although they begin to write poetry about the war with a common goal of making the war real to readers, their conceptions of how to communicate this reality soon diverge' (Dewey, 2006, p.114). Duncan in effect insisted on the imagination's capacity to refuse this vision of reality, on the unthinkability of responding to the demands of the photograph by subordinating the imagination to it. For Levertov, on the other hand, the war infected even 'the delicate, firm whole flesh of the still unburned' and therefore needed to be addressed directly (2003, p.91).

The question of what responsibility the poet has to the external world and how that is embodied in verse, which was the broader matter of the Duncan/Levertov argument, found echoes in other poetic arguments also precipitated by the Vietnam War such as the debate between John Ashbery and Louis Simpson in *The Nation*. There, Simpson attacked Ashbery's work for not being explicitly anti-war, despite Ashbery's public criticism of the war. Ashbery, like Duncan, responded by defending poetry's obligation to a different order of truth, claiming 'poetry is poetry, protest is protest, I believe in both forms of action' (Herd, 2000, p.93). The question of how distinct these two forms of action should be, of course, persists. Subsequent generations of readers and poets have, however, perhaps been more sympathetic to Duncan's idea of poetry which does not simply serve a directly political end, or of John Ashbery's defence of Frank O'Hara's poetry that '[i]t does not attack the establishment, it merely ignores its right to exist' (Herd, 2000, p.93). Indeed, many commentators have found more politically liberatory implications in the model

offered by Duncan, particularly as an influence on Language poetry (Gelpi, 2006, pp.181–198). Marjorie Perloff, for example, has written that:

> Duncan's pointed and passionate criticism may have lost him Levertov's friendship but it won him, I would posit here, a place among the major poetic theorists as well as major poets of his time (1996, p.38).

In his emphasis on creating poetic truth rather than representing reality, Duncan has to exclude the photograph from the poetic imagination. Duncan and Levertov's figure of this photograph, however, has a specific resonance in poetry written since the onset of the 'War on Terror'. Its use is not simply associated with an insistence on imagination as opposed to reality, or with an insistence on the necessary responsibility of the poet to engage with the social, but (perhaps as it is in both poets' actual work) with an attempt to depict a context in which imagination and reality are themselves subjects of political debate. The question asked by the poets in this essay is less how to represent war than how to differentiate war from its representations.

It is my contention that the question of the mediation of violence has acquired increased weight since the 9/11 attacks. This is not simply a question of the proliferation of the image in the decades since the Vietnam War, with an exponentially larger number of photographic images and media platforms, such that W.J.T. Mitchell has written that 'the problem of the twenty-first century may be the problem of the image' (1995, p.2). The diagnosis of an image-saturated culture, or spectacular society, has, as Mitchell immediately points out, a long tradition behind it, but in his later work, *Cloning Terror*, Mitchell stands by his argument for a 'pictorial turn' since the advent of the new millennium:

> Framed at each end by world-historic crises and by the deeply antithetical images of Bush and Obama, the era of the war on terror and of the Bush presidency will also be remembered as a time when the accelerated production and circulation of images in a host of new media […] ushered a pictorial turn into public consciousness (2010, p.2).

In late twentieth century poetry, the idea that representation determines reality is of course a significant rationale for the political valency of 'Language' writing. One could argue, however, that as well as this proliferation of images, the relationship between politics and representation has acquired in *this* century a powerfully defining image, something which might legitimate a more directly representational, or 'pictorial',

poetic than Language poetry normally allowed. In one of his *Lichtenberg Figures* sonnets, the poet and novelist Ben Lerner writes:

> In the early '00s, my concern with abstraction
> culminated in a series of public exhalations.
> I was praised for my repetitions. But, Alas,
> my work was understood.
>
> Then the towers collapsed
> and antimissile missiles tracked
> the night sky with ellipses
> I decided that what we needed was a plain style (2004, p.48).

It is the pun on plain/plane which makes the link between language and direct representation of the social world uncomfortably clear. In this context, Lerner's poem suggests it is possible, even preferable, to explore the ideological implications of language through a poetry which is also more conventionally referential; the ellipse of poetic difficulty and parataxis finds itself literally displayed on the sky as tracer bullets.

Outside of the world of poetry, the 9/11 attacks had quickly been read as almost as important for their afterlife as an image, an attack on the symbolic economy as much as they had been an act of violence against the literal one. Few people did more than Rove to help the American government counterattack on this front, and his comments about the 'reality-based community' represent something of the emotional or intellectual texture which poets have confronted since the towers fell. Dealing with the way that representations of war begin to influence its reality is crucial to the work of a recent strain in American poetry, here exemplified by Ben Lerner, Geoffrey G. O'Brien and Timothy Donnelly.

These poets' work often strives to articulate a feeling of blurred lines, to emphasize the disconnection between the concrete horrors of violence and its aestheticization. This can best be seen in a prose poem by Lerner, part of his 2006 sequence 'Angle of Yaw'. It describes a detective chasing a serial killer who, knowing that the detective is placing tacks in a map to mark the location of the killings, starts killing in places that will form a smiley face on the detective's map. '[T]he formal demands of the smiley face increasingly limit the shooter's area of operation', allowing the detective to anticipate where the killer is going to strike (Lerner, 2006, p.49). In this bizarre scenario:

> The plane on which the killings are represented, and the plane on which the killings take place, have merged in the minds of the detective and the shooter. The shooter dreams of pushing a red tack into the map, not of putting a bullet into a body. The detective begins to conceive of the town as a representation of the map. He drives metal stakes into the ground to indicate the tacks (Lerner, 2006, p.49).

It is not hard to read this as an image of the confusion of reality and representation engendered by the atmosphere of the 'War on Terror', with the detective disfiguring the real landscape in his pursuit of the killer through the abstract plane, somewhat like the U.S. Military. Indeed, the 'War on Terror' itself can be seen as a narrative that subsumes real wars into it, like the invasion of Iraq which was included within this framework despite no link between the Iraqi government and the leadership of Al-Qaeda. The Iraq War thus becomes '[a]n imaginary conflict with real victims', as Lerner writes (2006, p.106). Here Lerner alludes both to Marianne Moore's 'imaginary gardens with real toads', the production of which is one of the demands made on the poet in her famous 'Poetry', and to Jean Baudrillard's famous assertion that the first Gulf War 'did not take place' (Moore, 1953, p.267; Baudrillard, 1995). Lerner thus relates poetry and the imagination to the way they have been drafted into what Baudrillard calls a 'production', where it is not the killing that matters but the way that it has been represented. Baudrillard himself, in his essay 'The Spirit of Terrorism', argues that the terrorist could:

> Never attack the system in terms of relation of force. That is the revolutionary imagination the system itself forces upon you – the system which survives only by constantly drawing those attacking it into fighting in the ground of reality which is always its own. But [the terrorist should] shift the struggle into the symbolic sphere, where the rule is that of challenge, reversion and outbidding (2002, p.17).

The symbolic power of 9/11, according to Baudrillard, was such that it brought about a glimpse of something like the real; the conduct of the 'War on Terror', however, is like the first Gulf War, where representation triumphs:

> The terrorist attack corresponded to a precedence of the event over all interpretive models; whereas, this mindless military, technological war corresponds, conversely, to the model's precedence over the event, and hence to a conflict over phony stakes, to a situation of 'no contest'. War as continuation of the absence of politics by other means (2002, p.34).

Baudrillard's description conjures quite well a kind of broader political and affective environment to which Lerner seems to be responding – a recognition of this 'absence' in politics when the world itself seems more real than it had previously.

It is often in poems about photographs that these questions emerge most clearly, and that poets make the most effort to write in solidarity with the 'reality-based community'. In these ekphrastic works, the poets make use of what Mitchell calls:

> a metapicture of the image/text encounter, in which the word and the image are not abstractions or general classes, but concrete figures, characters in a drama, stereotypes in a Manichean allegory or interlocutors in a complex dialogue (1995, p.162).

Discussing these metapictures, particularly in the context of photography, enables these poets to relate the question of reality and representation to questions of the self and its relation to others, questions which, within the discourse surrounding the 'War on Terror', seem increasingly intertwined. One such intertwining in poetry is shown by Timothy Donnelly's 'The Malady that Took the Place of Thinking' from *The Cloud Corporation*, which describes a redefinition of knowledge that functions 'almost to the exclusion of all that I had taken to be the case, factwise' (2010, p.5). The poem, a note says, 'refers to a photograph taken during the My Lai Massacre (1968)' (2010, p.149). In it, the difference between representation and the real is blurred so that:

> There had seemed to be only one world to adhere to
>
> But now I see there really isn't any, just roads
> With signs directing further, towards and away
> From the same humiliating noplace you already are (2010, p.5).

The line 'all that I had taken to be the case factwise' plays on Wittgenstein's opening to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 'the world is everything that is the case', and 'the world is the totality of facts' (1981, p.31). Wittgenstein's facts are not objects, but represent the possibility of statements being meaningful. They are, however, dependent on the existence of objects. If the world had no substance then, Wittgenstein argues, 'we could not sketch any picture of the world' (1981, p.34), as the truth of propositions would only depend upon other propositions, just as in this poem there are no places but only directions to places, 'just roads'. The representation of

facts depends upon the existence of objects, but in this poem Donnelly uses this kind of logical process to undo the existence of the world. By a perverse twisting of the style rather than the substance of Wittgenstein's logic, the world does not exist. When one is merely arguing about multiple possible representations, the primacy of the imagined over any idea of objective reality is asserted, as the one world comes undone and assumes the form of its representations.

The poem suggests that as the barriers blur between fact and representation it becomes impossible to position oneself except in a manner that is disturbingly solipsistic, a 'humiliating noplace you already are' (2010, p.5). The 'are' combines both position and existence in its meaning; the 'signs' do not refer to anything except as far as one can relate them to oneself. The self is thus the only orientation possible in this world – 'towards and away from' are its directions – conjured by the mind of the perceiver. Wittgenstein, discussing his famous phrase 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world', writes:

> This remark provides a key to the question, to what extent solipsism is a truth. In fact what solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself. That the world is my world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of my world (1981, p.151).

Redefining the world in the way Donnelly does suggests something like Wittgenstein's idea of solipsism, not in the sense of a critique of the philosopher but of an attack on those whose action seems like an inept perversion of these kinds of logic. The philosophy actually present in the poem is not Wittgenstein's but one which re-enacts – on the smaller stage of the self and poetic language – the idea propounded by Rove that reality can be created by an empire.

The point is not that Donnelly is engaging in a philosophical debate with Wittgenstein about the nature of reality but by employing such language he can highlight the conceptual poverty of a kind of militarized indeterminacy. Military action and language are both capable of 'creating' worlds, as Rove put it (Suskind, 2004), but it is very much '*my* world'. The use of a 'humiliating noplace' undoes dreams of utopia, which literally means 'no place'. Against the notion that the poet can create utopia by rejecting reality, Donnelly shows that it will remain exactly that, a no place without any effect on the world unless it is redefined to mean the self. Empire and selfhood both become illusions of autonomy, preventing more

meaningful engagement with others. This is then brutally contrasted with the photograph of the My Lai massacre:

> If it looked like I was sorry to look at the photograph
> Of women and children shot down by an American
> Battalion on a bright clear day in March, look again:
>
> With no world to adhere to, there can be no photograph
> No women, no children, and certainly no battalion
> Shooting when there was nothing there to begin with (Donnelly, 2010, p.6).

The 'certainly' in the poem's penultimate line brilliantly serves to show how a rejection of objective truth plays into the hands of power. While everything else is apparently uncertain, suddenly we can see the voice of authority denying any wrongdoing on the part of the armed forces, undoing the very indeterminacy it exploits. By 'humiliating' utopia as solipsism, Donnelly can attack the grandiose claims of those who really are building nations and 'creating' reality, and whose actions lead down the road to photographs like the one of My Lai.

This ethical critique of solipsism and its corollary attack on the idea of creating reality, however, takes another darker form in these poets' work. Since 9/11 and the 'Falling Man' photograph, which newspapers ran and then had to remove because of outcries regarding the subject of the photo's suffering, photography has been central to how people have conceptualized the artist's relationship to this war (Junod, 2009). Moving beyond 9/11 to the campaign in Iraq, however, even more harrowing photographs emerged. Behind many of the poems concerned with photographs that Donnelly, Lerner and O'Brien have written, it is possible to see the shadow of Abu Ghraib. Donnelly, for example, includes imagery of people stood 'arms wide open / hoods pulled down over human faces / little live wires hooked to various parts of the bodies' (2010, p.14). Whether explicitly, as here in 'Partial Inventory of Airborne Debris', or in a more abstract vein, as will be seen below in O'Brien's 'Logic of Confession' from *Green and Gray*, the power-play of photographs becomes tied to the inhumane behaviour of those who kept the jails of liberated Iraq.

Part of the problem that the Abu Ghraib photographs posed to anyone writing about them is that they were themselves part of the torture, central to the logic of physical and sexual humiliation allegedly thought by American intelligence to be the best way to interrogate Arabs (Hersh, 2004). Again here, the representation is itself a

part of the reality, and so the ethical involvement of the poet looking at them and representing them becomes increasingly significant. O'Brien's poem 'Logic of Confession' begins with the lines:

> All photos are taken out of remorse
> Are of where the senses go when closed
> All photos are still lifes of the senses
> Are at least of loss of faith in the senses
> I've therefore seen all possible photos
> They aren't like my experience
> I see them as being all the same (2007, p.23)

As the poem goes on, the formal generalisations about photography are qualified, from 'all photos are still lifes of the senses' to 'at least of loss of faith in the senses'. The initial assertion that all photos are 'the same' is quickly reduced to 'similar' (2007, p.24). What this qualification mirrors is the sense of the purity of form declining into messy historical specificity. Intruding into this sense of the 'perfect fruit' of 'still life' comes 'the blood on the ground', until the general consideration of photography takes on sinister connotations (O'Brien, 2007, p.55). The contradictions in the phrase 'still life' are stressed, so that the 'remorse of the senses' almost seems to be that of having killed. The logic of perception from one fixed perspective and the logic of photography's aesthetic form can be seen as a performance of the same imperialist solipsism Donnelly's 'malady' attacks. O'Brien says 'All photos serve as a yes to a master / [...] unseen in the photo' (2007, p.24). War, present in the 'blood' and the 'tanks', assumes a determining role in the art of photography, summoning the images of people forced into degrading positions by 'a master'. The 'yes to [the unseen] master' can be read in both an abstract sense, where to represent the world is somehow to surrender to it since a photograph gives the status of fixed reality to one moment, and in the form of a direct critique of the masters who encouraged the kind of behaviour that was documented in Abu Ghraib and went unpunished (DOD, 2004, p.5). Like Donnelly, O'Brien undoes the logic of being able to construct reality. Here he turns inward, and utilizes the photo's capacity to position the observer in order to implicate himself in what it depicts:

> I still prefer not to see this master
> therefore I love photos, or photographs
> Especially those in which there are fruits

the fruit that have been taken out
of the life of which I'm a mistress (2007, p.55)

The last change from photos to photographs, introducing the Greek word for writing, shows that the poem too can be an act of domination. It employs what W.J.T. Mitchell calls 'ekphrastic fear' (1995, p.154), the fear of merging with the object described, typically thought of as an emasculation (here done by 'mistress') to show the fear of being on the receiving end of state violence. The poem ends by ironically endorsing photographs, preferring to gaze from higher ground than to be gazed on. As Mitchell remarks, this is the ethical problem which ekphrasis is uniquely positioned to dramatize:

> the "workings" of ekphrasis, even in its classic forms, tends to unravel the conventional suturing of the image-text and to expose the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire – representation as something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone (1995, p.180).

In a photo-ekphrastic poem, the claims of the photograph to depict reality reveal that even ostensible reality, unmediated by the artist's interfering subjectivity, can be examined more closely, and unravelled to show the power relations which constitute that 'reality'. The process of representation, taking reality as its subject and undoing it, can serve as a kind of realism about the nature of life during the 'War on Terror'. This is echoed in Lerner's *Angle of Yaw*, where:

> Photographed from above, the shadows of the soldiers seem to stand upright, casting bodies. Birds are rarely depicted from a bird's eye view. From this angle she doesn't love me. Half light, half ideology. Each of us is impressed as pixels into an ad for democracy […] The sixth sense, the sense with which we read, is the ability to perceive the loss of the other senses; we have lost this sense (2006, p.85).

The parallels between O'Brien and Lerner's poems of perspective and the loss of empathy indicate how these poets seek to show the process of thinking being twisted and distorted by its implication in the project of imperial subjectivity. The 'ability to perceive the loss of the other senses' that Lerner writes about stands for the idea of other points of view existing, something that the photographs of Abu Ghraib deny, emphatically asserting as they do a failure of empathy (2006, p.85). Donnelly's above

mentioned 'Partial inventory of Airborne Debris', which explicitly describes the Abu Ghraib pictures, likewise moves against any attempt by the poetic speaker to gain meaningful distance from the actions depicted in the Abu Ghraib photographs. The poem draws the photos directly into an emotional front of the 'War on Terror', having been taken 'to prolong / the swell an accomplishment / like that engenders' (Donnelly, 2010, p.19). Donnelly then goes on to talk about how the experience of the 'War on Terror' as representation, however, undermines its political impact:

> What kept us from
>
> discovering our selves'
>   worst wasn't the lack
> of evidence so much as
>
> a failure of delivery (2010, p.19)

The poem closes with the poet worried about his lack of strong feelings in response to the photos:

> I just feel soporose, so
>
> soporose tonight, uniquely
> soporose. You think
> I should be concerned? (2010, p.20)

The sarcasm that can be heard behind 'uniquely / soporose', making the individual poet's solipsism obvious is underscored by the line break. The poet dramatizes indifference and self-absorption to show the observer trapped in the perspective granted by the photos – that of the torturers. The journalist Lila Rajiva, writing about Abu Ghraib, suggests that the militarized atmosphere closes off empathy within America. Quoting an interview with General Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where he said, 'All you have to do is look at the photographs and know that's not how we do business, we don't torture people', Rajiva writes:

> That is, we are not to trust our own eyes but allow government to put the picture into the bigger context in which Americans "don't torture" [...] while the Arabs who celebrated 9/11 [...] are representative, those who torture with grins are aberrations, because for Myers it is a tale of two very different groups, *we* and *they* (2005, p.23).

These poets show the process of seeing, constructing the perspective of this *we,* denying humanity to the *they.*

Stephen F. Eisenman writes in *The Abu Ghraib Effect* that 'there is something about the pictures themselves, and past images of torture in different media, that has blunted the natural human response of outrage' (2007, p.52). He locates it in a pathos formula, an aestheticizing, eroticizing and rationalizing of pain and suffering', which is present in 'Hellenistic art' (2007, p.53). These poets seek to perform this loss of 'natural human [...] outrage', to use their own complicity against itself (2007, p.52). In this way, one can see a possibility for using ekphrasis to show how media representations of violence are symptomatic of, and even possibly reinforce, a kind of isolationism, a refusal of empathy for those unlike us. By illuminating the conditions in which war and even war crimes can be tolerated when their effect is on someone unknown and far away, these representations become a very real part of the war itself.

One hope of using poetry to reverse this process can be seen in Lerner's novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station.* The novel concerns an American poet whose numb existence on a fellowship in Madrid is contrasted with the 2004 bombing of the Atocha train station. Here, the title of the novel is one by which Lerner again emphasizes the relationship between representation and current reality. Like in the *Lichtenberg Figures* poem above, the idea of abstraction and non-representationality, gestured to by the use of one of Ashbery's most difficult and non-representational poems, is yoked to an image of real-world violence. Talking about Ashbery's work, the novel's protagonist says:

> The best Ashbery poems, I thought, although not in these words, describe what it is like to read an Ashbery poem [...] And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced immediately [...] [B]y reflecting your reading, Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence (Lerner, 2011, p.91).

The line about experiencing mediacy immediately, jokingly reinforced by the 'although not in these words', also occurs in a critical essay that Lerner wrote on Ashbery's poetry, 'Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', an essay primarily about Ashbery's emphasis on second-order representation, and in *Angle of Yaw* (2010, pp.201-13; 2006, p.35). Throughout *Angle of Yaw*, the way we experience representation is made the central thrust of the poems; in Lerner's work, *and* in the

work of Donnelly and O'Brien, there is the hope that other views might emerge in a poetry which foregrounds its own questions of representation, a poetry that allows one to see an object but resists being seen through straightforwardly. Lerner's 'Angle of Yaw' sequence ends with the line 'For God's sake people. Open your hearts' (2006, p.115). Its call for empathy is predicated on the reader having experienced how certain forms of representation demonstrate the lack of that empathy; the direct appeal is earned after its absence is made felt throughout the book.

In 'Didactic Elegy', Lerner writes 'violence is not yet modern; it has yet to acknowledge the limitations of its medium' (2006, p.67). In an ekphrastic poem, to acknowledge the limitations of one's medium can be taken farther in that one sees one's object ultimately slip away from the grasp of the new medium hoping to comprehend it. Within the context of photographic ekphrasis, this can also draw attentions to the limitations of the original medium which, as much as it is paper and light, is also the first-person view, the fixed perspective. This first-person view is something that has long been thought to be soluble in poetry, something poets often strive to move beyond, but in the representational context of the 'War on Terror', drawing attention to the limitations of the first-person perspective also gestures to the desire to represent a direct political reality, as well as the reality of other perspectives. It is not the absolute relativism or social construction of reality that the poetry of Lerner, Donnelly and O'Brien's defends, but the rejection of one dominant and ultimately mendacious perspective – not the self, but the self demanded of American citizens by their government in order to better conduct the war. In this sense, they belong as Suskind does to the 'reality based community'. Limited by the political realities of the present, and longing for a truth that seems to be occluded by these political realities, these poets' work finds solidarity in an expression of its limitation. By making the failed experience of constructed reality the primary subject, an ekphrastic poem that draws attention to its own usurpations upon its object can disallow violence its status as social fact. The deliberate failure of poetry to do justice to its subject, making this process itself the subject of the poem, might encourage the acceptance of other points of view, something that the photographs of Abu Ghraib reject. Aesthetic experience might be able to stage a political critique of imperialist, collective solipsism.

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