

## Counter-Mythologies

*They know so much more, and so much less,  
"innocent details" and other.*  
—John Ashbery

*When I was up against putting down the complete conception that I had  
gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience, I was faced by the  
trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it  
completely at one time. Now that may never have been a trouble to you but it  
was a terrible trouble to me.*  
—Gertrude Stein

I have begun this book with the assumption that Emanuel's poems, by conjuring a tight proximity between the writer and the reader, have a specific political aim, namely to pulverize the image that ideological doctrines have, especially as they relate to the programmatic aspect of poetry. While attention has been given to the "mythologies of America" through individual readings that showed how some of these mythologies rest on decoding, misinterpreting, and reconstructing European portraits of thought, here, at the end, what must be emphasized, however, is also the aspect of the writer who takes pleasure in her craft.

Emanuel is not merely a political poet, nor merely fancifully a philosophical thinker, nor, finally a brilliant American cultural theorist, but a writer who understands words well. She knows the power of words. She knows what their discursive and aesthetic function and effect consist of. Writing, for Emanuel, can almost be said to be part of a larger epistemological quest, which, however, does not stand individually but is pushed towards converging with ontological ideas about how poems come into existence, what they can do to a reader's own background knowledge, and how they can widen the reader's perspective through specific cultural referencing. She is thus a poet interested in the methodology of creativity as an overall epistemic project. How to formulate into writing what you come to know is a concern which Emanuel takes on board and extends particularly from Gertrude Stein.

In her study, *Gertrude Stein: Woman without Qualities*, G.F. Mitrano asserts that what is specifically important for the depiction of portraits with words is taking stock of how knowledge acquisition (of things and others) occurs and over what period of time. As she puts it: "the problem of the gradual knowledge of others, and whether it can pass into writing, is a version of the question of truth in philosophy [...] writing is always a figure of knowing – its portrait" (Mitrano, 2006: 133). For Emanuel, this 'knowing' occurs in the grounding of subjectivity in craft. In other words, the challenge is to make explicitly public, or rather literally public that which is implicitly private. Whereas for Stein this project was achieved by means of formally dismantling the sentence, thus creating a poetics of syntactical and abstract essence, Emanuel allows the dismantled sentence to be re-constructed along the lines of a poetics of cultural creativity. On Stein's portraits, and

the desire to see the portrait “as exemplary of a writing open to externality,” Mitrano further adds that “the portrait impacts on us as a moment of knowing rather than representation” (133). This moment of openness of writing through the visual impact is for Emanuel a moment of representation which continuously becomes a depiction of knowing the thing in itself (*an sich*). The culture of the thing is not only to take ‘the thing’ literally, but at the same time also to think about it.

I have also suggested that although Emanuel is consistent in her critique of literalism, her own poems can be read quite literally. Her depiction of portraits, whether of writers, actors, philosophers, or unskilled others, can be seen against the background of a desire to be as inclusive and non-prejudiced as possible. It is thus never an accident of failed imagery when the depictions of Gertrude Stein, for instance, invite more to a catachrestic rather than symbolic reading. Comical relief is achieved, to be sure, when one imagines Stein as a typewriter with a dress, but for Emanuel, neither the typewriter nor the dress is there merely for artificial purpose. What Emanuel does is speak the language of the objects. Speaking the language of inarticulate beings is remarkable and innovative also from the point of view of the critic who desires to assess her ‘Americanness’ against the background of an European legacy in terms of aesthetics and history of ideas.

But one cannot be mistaken. Emanuel’s Americanness consists of America itself. This can be seen in the way in which she insists on continuing the line of the poetic thought of the most iconic of the American poets, such as Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, and John Ashbery. These poets are at their best when they embody America. As America, having become

America, one can see what is wrong with America, what America is, from within. And it starts with taking the clothes off America. Whitman suggested it, Ginsberg did, O'Hara paraded its nakedness and Ashbery approved. Emanuel's work taken together is a feast of celebrating the poet, not in all the poet's glory, but in all the poet's naked vulnerability. America is great when America is naked. Even Gertrude Stein can be seen as part of the American poets whose strategy of transcending America is by stripping. Emanuel can't make herself suggest that Gertrude Stein may have entertained such an idea, quite literally, but the fact that we get to have Stein's dress associated with her typewriter rather than her body leaves room for imagining some other scenario. For Emanuel, as for the others mentioned here, the body is the last object to love beyond its submission to discursive powers. It is remarkable to note how Emanuel moves from the language of the body as inscribed by diction in *Hotel Fiesta*, to the language of the body as a relic in *The Dig*. In *Then Suddenly*— we have a shift again to the language of the body as self-conscious diction, which then culminates in the language of the body as inscribed by pure subversive linguistic hybridity in *Noose and Hook*. The body talks many things in Emanuel. And the reader gets the distinct impression that, for Emanuel, the aim of the poet is to attend to these things which are articulated each in their own particular and special way. The aim of the poet is to stand as a guard, watching.

*Hotel Fiesta* ends with the poem entitled: "The Poet in the Garret in America" and we read lines which unambiguously indicate what it means to want to escape representation but realize that such a desire is impossible. What remains is the vocative: "America!," the poet exclaims, thus evoking a whole tradition of

invoking America continued by poets whose best cry also consisted of this direct address, as if wanting to say: *America, what's wrong with you, snap out of whatever it is that ails you! America, I love you forever!* Thus writes Emanuel, in prose that is more beautiful than the suggested clichés here, which, however, although clichés, can also be said to constitute the most moving moments in anyone's lives:

I come up here to be disembodied and abstract,  
 To feel the sycamore astir against my naked psyche.  
 [...] America, I want to transcend you.  
 Like this cardinal in the sycamore I love  
 My own beautiful sensibility and have come here  
 To be issued an invitation as exact and stunning  
 As Eve's was in her green, frail, and sacramental  
 World. Under all my winsome diction, you and I  
 Are standing toe to toe, the diurnal, the divine.  
 America, I am still hopeful and a woman of my time.

(Emanuel, 1995: 119)

The poet who utters these words is not a simpleton, but one who knows how to construe an allegory of the way in which she loves America, actually as a romantic romance permeated with French sophistication. Such prophetic tone still reverberates with even more force in the subsequent works. In *The Dig*, "We, the Poets of America" proclaim what it is that one deals with here, in America, namely with the good and the bad as the *donnée*, the special gift of both/and:

We are like you, America,  
 when you were a rough draft,  
 a marsh, a swamp, newt and savannah.

[...] We have come to point out all  
 your mistakes chalked blurrily  
 on the beyond's blurry slates,

to tell you that you're a blot and hell  
 is vacant, dirty, dark and that there's  
 nothing for miles but tragedy and grief  
 and a squad of girls like us with which  
 to spend eternity, dusting the infernal dust. (40-41)

Emanuel is not kidding when she takes it upon herself to instruct. And how lucky the ones who let themselves be instructed. In the poem "In English in a Poem" from *Then Suddenly—*, she thus says:

I am giving a lecture on poetry  
 to the painters who creak like saddles  
 in their black leather jackets; in the studio,  
 where a fire is burning like a painting of  
 a fire, I am explaining my current work  
 on the erotics of narrative.  
 [...] Gertrude Stein said America  
 was a *space filled with moving*, but I hate being moving.  
 If you want to *feel*, go to the movies, because poetry  
 has not intention of being moving; it is perhaps one  
 of the few things left in America that is not moving.  
 And yet, I am a fatalist when it comes to art  
 and orgasm in English, because in English  
 even a simile is a story and there is no trip  
 so predictable that some poem won't take it.  
 And just as I am finishing my lecture, here  
 is the snowy hem of the end of the page  
 and one of the painters says to me, "Actually,  
 I found that very moving. Get in the car.  
 I'll drive you home." (Emanuel, 1999: 60-61)

Emanuel on a lecture tour through America, making sure to pass on some wisdom and words of beauty to the unenlightened is a powerful image. Especially as one imagines that all this has taken place in actual fact. The title poem "Then Suddenly—" from *Then Suddenly*— surely indicates this much, as it sends shivers down the spine at the moment when the speaker in the poem addresses the cowboys of America, who know nothing, are unsophisticated and say "garsh a lot." She shouts at them: "get a life," but then this demand returns as an echo, and she hears the call herself:

"Get a life in another world, because this is  
a page as bare and smooth as a bowling alley,"  
and then, suddenly – renouncing all matter –  
I am gone, and all that's left is a voice, soaring,  
invisible, disembodied, gobbling up the landscape,  
an airborne cloud of selfhood giving a poetry reading  
in which, Reader, I have made our paths cross! (62-63)

The careful reader will recognize that, indeed, after such a *tour de force*, the line in Emanuel's next work, *Noose and Hook*, "America, you don't need poetry" (42) calls for something more complex. What America needs is not words, but devotion, as devotion is beyond judgement.

Culminating thus with *Noose and Hook*, Emanuel has succeeded in being true to her own agenda as a writer who makes political and pleasurable gestures at once, namely by persisting in the myth of her own American anonymity, as intimated in her address to the Poetry Society of America (referred to in the introduction). The other aim expressed in such a manifesto was to show that as an American 'anonymous' writer, she is a writer who is not only able to confront the gaze of the antropomorphized

grave that she digs for herself, but also speak its language. What does speaking the language of digs and dogs mean, one might ask, for the understanding of the significance of placing a cornerstone on top of an edifice made out of pulverized pebbles? And yet, what else would hold “secrets,” “privacy,” “deposits of the inarticulate and incomprehensible,” “the queer,” “the *recherché*,” “the national?” would Emanuel answer, thus posing another question in return, but one which is not merely rhetorical.

These key notions can be said to represent part of Emanuel’s project of formulating a poetry of becoming. What is new, however, and what sets Emanuel apart from other American contemporary poets who shift between epistemological and existential concerns is the fact that her questioning movement from: ‘how do I know this world of which I am part?, or ‘who am I in this world?,’ goes back to earlier forms of representation, prior to the separation of aesthetics from science.

Emanuel’s pulverized portraits suggest a return to a Shakespearean approach: *how can I know thee?* — *You can’t*, one can imagine Shakespeare answering back. And this is good enough for Emanuel. It is here, in this unintended search for knowledge that her poems display a multifaceted evaluation of the multiple significations that such words as “the secret,” “privacy,” “the incomprehensible,” “the queer,” and “the *recherché*” can hold for the reader who reads with dust in her eyes. For Emanuel, the poetry of becoming is the poetry of knowing by sensing; the poetry of knowing what it does know that it knows.

The pulverized portraits of poetry and poets alike are thus ‘eradicating’ mythologies against whose background the following propositional demand emerges: that any ontology must first be a style, and any epistemology must first be poetic.