

PULVERIZING | PORTRAITS

Other books from **EyeCorner Press**

<http://eyecornerpress.com/>

JAGGED TIMELINE

by ROBERT GIBBONS

(poetry, bilingual ed. with an intro by B. Sørensen, Dec. 2009)

BETWEEN GAZES:

FEMINIST, QUEER, AND 'OTHER' FILMS

by CAMELIA ELIAS

(criticism, March 2009)

PASSION SPENT:

LOVE, IDENTITY, AND REASON IN E.A. POE

by BENT SØRENSEN

(criticism, July 2008)

FEDERMAN FRENZY

by CAMELIA ELIAS, ed.

(criticism, October 2008)

FIVE FACES OF DERRIDA

by BENT SØRENSEN, ed.

(criticism, July 2008)

ÅRSTIDER I SKEPTIKERENS HIMMEL

by VALERIU BUTULESCU

(aforismer; udvalgt og oversat af C.Elias & B. Sørensen, July 2008)

EIGHT SENSES PLUS TWO

by CAMELIA ELIAS

(poetry, July 2008)

UNTITLED

by CAMELIA ELIAS, ed.

(criticism, July 2008)

PULVERIZING | PORTRAITS

LYNN EMANUEL'S POETRY
OF
BECOMING

CAMELIA ELIAS



EYECORNER PRESS

© Camelia Elias | 2010

Pulverizing Portraits: Lynn Emanuel's Poetry of Becoming

Published by EYECORNER PRESS, January 2010

ISBN: 978-87-992456-8-0

© The author and EyeCorner Press 2010

Cover design and lay-out: Camelia Elias

Cover image: Camelia Elias, *Isolde's Philosophy* (oil on canvas)

Printed in the US and UK

For Mana

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was composed as a direct response to a demand from readers of poetry. At various conferences on literature, poetry, and philosophy, and presenting on the poetry of Lynn Emanuel, I have often been asked whether my essays were part of a larger work on Emanuel. My answer to that was always in the negative. However, having found myself elaborating on the reason for not writing a more sustained study, which had to do with my conviction that what I was doing was more an activity directed towards pleasing myself, thus suggesting that the work of Emanuel is somewhat special and above the levels strictly related to academic demands – these days mainly to produce something that is ‘relevant’ and which therefore has a commercial value and can sell – I ended up asking myself this question: why not? – Especially since some readers have started anticipating a monograph on Emanuel for the very same reason: that here is a poet who is special and worth reading and thinking about regardless of institutional contexts. My first thanks thus go to these devoted readers for insisting. Then to Emanuel herself. Not only has she supported this project from the beginning, but she also invited me to talk to her. We did it in Berlin some years ago, while visiting cafés and museums. I cherish the way in which Emanuel’s thought has enriched my own thinking and I feel privileged to count myself among her friends. Speaking of friends who also possess a high intellectual calibre, my gratitude goes to the two very fine poetry experts, Bent Sørensen and Søren Hattesen Balle; without their insightful comments this book would have been poorer both in form and content. Lastly, my thanks go to Mana Hojda, my sister, who is an avid poetry reader and the first to have instilled in me my love of poetry. I dedicate this book to her.

Camelia Elias

Roskilde, January 2010

CONTENTS

Prologuing Portraits | 9

Counter-frames | 29

Becoming | 45

Genius | 59

Divas | 75

Untitled | 91

Portrait | 107

Hegemony | 123

Greeting | 149

Counter-mythologies | 173

References | 181

Prologuing Portraits

... one has to be in possession of literature.

—Jean-Luc Nancy

Eating is her subject.

—Gertrude Stein

Creating cultural portraits through poetry, particularly prose poetry, is a modern way of combining cultural awareness with formal approaches to genre and poetics. The practitioner of prose poetry is first and foremost a teacher of poetry, then a critic of poetry, and then a poet as such. This book, which is a first study of contemporary American poet Lynn Emanuel, aims at showing how through activating all three capacities at once, the poet succeeds in creating a tight proximity with her readers who become aware of the value and social relevance of poetry.

Lynn Emanuel is one of the crucial figures in American poetry today. Apart from being a celebrated poet she is also a professor at the University of Pittsburgh where she teaches English and creative writing, an activity which she claims keeps her close to things as they happen. Her three books, *Hotel Fiesta* (1984), *The Dig* (1991) and *Then Suddenly—* (1999) have won various prizes such as The National Poetry Series Award, and her poems have

been featured in *The Pushcart Prize Anthology* and *Best American Poetry* in 1994, 1995, and 1998.

Emanuel's poetry is significant because it situates itself in relation to current debates about the state of poetry, creative writing in the academia, and the importance of drawing on interdisciplinary approaches to poetry via visual aesthetics, post-structuralist literary and theoretical perspectives, and philosophy. For Emanuel, creating proximity to her readers has a dual function: first, to instruct and inspire, and second, to formulate a poetics of prose poetry as a gesture that shows that poetry is not 'only' poetry, nor the territory of established meanings. For Emanuel, poetry which is neither merely formalistic, nor merely didactic is of a self-reflective nature, but it is not so introspective as to leave no room for acknowledging that inspiration comes as a result of a writer being acutely aware of a reader's presence. If it is not a play of gazes that guides the writing – the poet looks around, registers what and how she sees and then reduces the essence of this perception to form or to the limits that language imposes on perception as form – then, it is certainly a play of gestures that informs the writing process: the poet, by acknowledging the presence of a reader, acknowledges the fact that form without performative content is devoid of its potential to create an insightful and personal experience.

One way of dealing with capturing what poetry does culturally is by creating relevant stories that combine narrative techniques with a lyrical mode in the genre of the prose poem. This genre, which is made up by its own internal contradictions – poetry or prose? – lends itself to investigations into what poetry no longer seems to be able to grasp, and what it nonetheless grasps at a cultural and aesthetic level.

The fact that most of Emanuel's poems are written in prose form, even when some of them subscribe more visibly to traditional forms, such as lines, meter, and various sound patterns that rely on the use of alliteration, and other such tropes, indicates that the practitioner of prose poetry situates herself between taking formalist approaches to poetry and teaching poetics.

As much of Lynn Emanuel's poetry pays homage to writers and artists who are keenly aware of the significance of portraying a specific cultural *geist*, this book construes readings of Emanuel's work also against the background of such inspirational figures as Gertrude Stein, Emanuel's father, the painter and former pupil and model of Matisse, Akiba Emanuel, and the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (particularly his work on the politics of gesture). The main questions that spring from considering the interrelation between culture, poetics, philosophy, and the visual arts suggest that poetry is not only a creative act in itself but also a creative politics which maintains its relevance in connection with writing programs in the universities. The book thus addresses the following line of inquiry: can poetry make communicable the implications of a gesture as a means to draw on the reader's experiences as they are being translated into the writer's text? Can poetry create a proximity to that quality in language which has the potential to express and hence represent the 'less-than-human'? Can poetry disclose the role of aesthetic analysis in contemporary culture? Furthermore, writings engaged with proximity, potentiality, and genre in its constitutive form as a performative gesture (and here we have fine examples in modernist poets such as Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot) are in part responses to medieval parables and sophistries, which reflect the extent to which, and

under what conditions, discourse can be said to (have) become a failure (or a success). It is with the modernist writers that poetry has become a conscious gesture towards prose. This gesture has mediated between politics and discourse through the means of a heightened sense of style, and has now taken new forms in contemporary writings.

Within this framework, the book looks at what characterizes contemporary American prose poetry today, namely an intensified awareness of being close to something. Poets such as Lynn Emanuel have been increasingly concerned with making style a performative gesture, that is, making poetry a tool for cultural criticism. More than a poet, Emanuel can be considered a cultural theorist, who combines intrinsic and formal constraints with extrinsic and socio-historical methodologies. Insofar as being close to something also means being close to both the inside and the outside, the container and the contained, beginnings and endings alike, the question of proximity invariably poses itself to Emanuel as a question of appropriation, duality, hegemony, inspiration, potentiality, and portrayal. Can we appropriate genius, or the language of the Other by means of becoming "subgeniuses" or subalterns? Can we understand the duality between craft and critique in the academia by means of emphasizing singularity? Can we avoid hegemony by means of dehumanizing discourse, and thus let others (esp. other species than the *homo sapiens*) speak on our behalf? Through these questions, which combine close textual readings with cultural text studies, the book furthers the debate about what constitutes good teaching material in creative writing programs and suggests ways of practicing creative writing which is always relevant, intelligent, and uncompromising.

Pulverizing Portraits attempts to extract the essence of Emanuel's politics of gesture, which is defined by her creating a space in which poetry performs a cultural act in which both the writer's and the reader's experiences are translated into a shared text. The consequence of such an event has implications for the ways in which we respond to poetry as it relates to the recording of personal experience yet in a highly constructed form. I propose that what constitutes the performative element in Emanuel's poems is the idea that experience is form, and that any identification that the reader might make with the 'personal' in Emanuel's poetry will not take place in the personal as such but in the proximity to the personal. Emanuel achieves this proximity by way of strong imagery, which, however, does not rely on the use of metaphor, but rather makes recourse to visual elements, almost of filmic proportions. My claim is that when reading, the reader does not follow an idea as much as she 'sees' what is happening.

The inferences that we make regarding what the poetic inspires us to do call for a consideration of the performative in culture: through the poet's eyes, it is not enough to limit our observations to what is immediately available as public gesture and behavior; reference would also have to be made to the self-understanding of the poet who is involved in the creation of a shared reality. Obviously from the poet's perspective, it makes a difference to know that the reader also knows, or realizes when reading, for instance, the poem "Homage to Sharon Stone," that the writer Gertrude Stein was fat or that the actress Sharon Stone is always concerned with her hair. However, as several levels of intentionality are brought together, it is not always easy to determine what agent is responsible for what action. While this state-

ment may be taken to reflect a certain *noir* aesthetics as it brings in intentional levels of description – and Emanuel was influenced by writers within this genre such as Larry Levis, Donald Justice, Marilyn Chin, and Raymond Chandler – it also suggests that her interest in the *noir* iconography, such as dirt, grime, and lushness, all at the same time, extends to concerns with issues of class, money, power, and gender which are obsessive, repetitive, and ultimately improper to what is dictated as proper in a community.

Emanuel's poems, while taking politics through a black and white grinding machine, are also a reflection of the colors of thought which challenge a writer: how to write a book when Italo Calvino and Gertrude Stein have already said and done it all?¹ Repeating Calvino's own black and white aesthetics and Stein's colorful philosophy of form expresses a poetics of the book of poetry which is based on interconnectedness. Yet Emanuel's poems, in spite of their global range of associations, also emphasize the local precisely at the moment when "influences choose the writer" (Svalina, 2002). However, as she observes, the space that she creates in her poetry is not a space of anxiety, but a space of "inhabitation." This idea is central to the poetics of the prose poem which inhabits the borders of its own genre as well as those of its related neighbors: prose, poetry, the fragment, the personal or philosophical essay, and so on.

What conditions inhabitation is both an expropriation of style, as well as a process of becoming, and I suggest that what Emanuel's poems do is make a gesture towards a re-configuration of

1 Lynn Emanuel has generously pointed out what some of the sources of inspiration for her books have been. See here, Mathias Svalina's thought-provoking interview (2002).

both prose and poetry, by allowing each to inhabit the other, each to appropriate the other, each to expropriate the other, and each to pulverize the other. This gesture establishes a matter-of-fact situation which the reader can identify with something other than questions of truth or falsehood that invite to validation, interpretation, or dismissal. What we see is thus what we get. We have an example in a prose poem written in response to the question "What is American about American Poetry?" – formulated by *The Poetry Society of America* and posed to influential poets. Emanuel here clearly addresses the relation of the poet's craft to criticism and the poet's power to destabilize established trends. While she begins with invoking the craft of another literary giant, Edmond Jabès, alongside her father, who was a painter and a powerful creative figure, she ponders on what it means to translate their experiences into her own text. She then continues by suggesting that what the poet must learn is to be fearless in her critique of current ideologies and traditions alike and act out of an independent conviction, which, however, rises out of shared memories that are anchored in a sense for a community. I quote here four stanzas, as they capture the ideas that I am interested in pursuing in this book. These ideas have to do with how we see poetry operating according to a cultural matrix in which what is said creatively enhances the cultural production of discourse, thus illuminating the relationship between discursive action and human understanding: how do we write, how do we speak, how do we think? How do these interrelated dimensions affect our understanding of our own cultural situatedness vis-à-vis the nature of our social affinities?

Another gray day. I stoop again to the lathe of the sentence, the wheel turning, turning, noun and verb, subject and object, the

perfect relentless form of it manufactured not by me but by the typesetter, the printer, by the white of the page itself. Currently, I am writing a book which is an allegory about the sentence and the page, an American allegory, an allegory of the village; I speak in an idiom, a dialect of landscape, my allegory won't let me travel beyond the national boundaries, perhaps it will not even travel beyond the boundaries of the island of a few readers. I persist in the myth of my own American anonymity, my hickishness and oaten oafishness. The very thing Poe railed against so brilliantly in his arguments for symbolism I cling to, I nurture into being, and it opens its eye on the page, in the blur of the terminal and stares at me. We look at each other, myself and the grave I have dug for myself.

I am not an internationalist. I find most of the formulations of the literary global village both dull and horrifyingly public. I want secrets, privacy, I want deposits of the inarticulate and incomprehensible, the queer, the recherche, the national. I want tension between and among specific, intact, intractable particularities, not the warm broth of internationalism that is often poured over everything by uniformed translation. All translation is ideological. I am suspicious of American forays into the literatures of other peoples. I am suspicious of how pleasant and accessible these literatures sound in American English, how available, naked, and transparent these "foreign" texts are. And how flabby, finally, my relation to them must be. There is no tension between their language and my own, there is nothing significant to wrestle with, like Jacob with the angel, no strange visitation, there is no tension, only the flaccid moment of familiarity and agreement: the world really is recognizable and friendly and available for my delectation and consumption.

I know enough about the mythologies of America to know how to inhabit one on the page, as I have here. In "real life" I have

been reading Rosemarie Waldrop's extraordinary translations of Edmond Jabès and the tension between us, between Jabès and me, is palpable. I cannot receive Jabès except with respectful irony. Jabès writes about the landscape of the word and the page, the black figure on the white field as divine moment, a landscape out of time and place.

But this is America, no one can write about white and black, the page and the word, without also writing about the skin. That's why Jabès seems remote, strange. That's why he's the author I must enter into argument with. His page and his word are mystical, my page and my world are racial. This is America. I am I, the black word on the white page, I am inside that, I is inside me, my finger ruined by the lathe, the wheel, I type with a limp, heavy, soft, heavy, soft, the ruined stump, the severed foot, stalking the keys, stamping down the black word, I am the press, the typesetter, the type, the typist. I am the type, the specimen that is used to type all the others here on the page written inside America. (Emanuel's address to *The Society of American Poetry*; no date & no pagination specified.)

We can think of these lines as Emanuel's attempt to engage her reader politically and consider how literary bonds are created across nationalities, race, and class. As will become apparent in my subsequent readings of her poems, while Emanuel clearly is as American a poet as one might infer – given how she engages and reworks, for instance, the thoughts of the Beat generation poets and the New York school poets – her poetry is also as French as one might think – given how she struggles in composition particularly with the influences of French modernists, such as Jabès. Being an American poet is here contrasted with a lack of tensions rather than a potential that she might become like Jabès if his language would not reach the speaker in a translated and thus

mediated form. This is significant. While the quoted passages assert with some degree of certitude the material values of American poetry – down to the typewriter – they do not seem to agree on what kind of immaterial gesture Jabès’s mythologies, allegories, and mysticisms consist of. Here, the reader feels the effect of Emanuel’s certain uncertainties on her own skin and is thus performatively pulled into the world of images which turn race into “the specimen” that embodies all human potential. The play on the words “type” and “specimen,” evoking Whitman, furthermore enhances the proximity that is created between the writer and the reader as the one makes a gesture towards typ(ify)ing the other, and thus draws her into the speaker’s specifying the specimen or specificity of her Americanness.

Here I am interested in the cultural and literary implications of the philosophy of the politics of gesture as it has been conceptualized by Giorgio Agamben. For Agamben the politics of gesture does not have much to do with its ‘popular’ usage, as in “gesture politics” that describes the discourse of lying politicians; nor is it a politics which renders political discourse as a result of cynical, manipulative media spectacle that reflects our contemporary “pseudo-democracy” (Agamben, 2000). The politics of gesture is seen by Agamben as a positive idiom and an alternative to the community which uses gesture as a means to absorb images like commodities. The positive connotation in Agamben’s politics of gesture thus has an adversarial function where the popular meaning of the term is concerned insofar as what he distinguishes is not between the wrong or right cultural implications of false gestures and genuine gestures, but between the alternatives that consider under which condition the politics of gesture enables an encounter between signifiers: text and context, writing and

culture, human and less-than-human. Gestures, in Agamben's sense, ought to reflect a means without an end, and ought to constitute a community that is not taken for granted. As he puts it: "What unites human beings among themselves is not a nature, a voice, or a common imprisonment in signifying language; it is the vision of language itself and, therefore, of experiencing language's limits, its *end*. A true community can only be a community that is *not presupposed*" (Agamben, 2000: 47; author's emphasis).

The implication of Agamben's thought for literature in general and for poetry in particular is that writing is not so much about communication as it is about communicability. Here the central challenge is how to make communicable, for instance, the separation of the human from the animal, which Agamben argues is based on a "constitutive political act" rather than on anthropological fact (Agamben, 2002: 39). As I shall argue, contemporary poetry writers extrapolate Agamben's thought and ask similar questions regarding what we can and cannot separate when we constrain gestures to genres.

The move from gesture to genre that the poet consciously engages in reflects some choices that she makes regarding mannerism and style. As manner in its archaic meaning indicates making a gesture, and thus a move, style indicates constraint, and thus reflects a stand-still position. One modernist who has challenged the separation of gesture from manner is, again, Gertrude Stein whose practice of creating a tensioned proximity between the poetry that moves and that which 'becomes' movement, between poetry which resembles prose and poetry which 'is' prose has inspired contemporary poets. Poets such as Lynn Emanuel have taken Stein's effort to displace the cultural aes-

thetics of her time to their own, and hence ask questions that follow Stein's lead: what poetic thinking and gestures contribute to making poetry communicable and experienced as a certain act (a manifesto, a political statement, or a literary act)? It is with the modernist writers that poetry has become a conscious gesture towards prose. This gesture has mediated between politics and discourse through the means of a heightened sense of style, and has now taken new forms in contemporary writings.

One of the central turns in contemporary American poetry thus thrusts the reader into the ambiguous land of prose and its relation to specific cultural manifestations: prose in relation to poetry; poetry as prose, or prose as poetry; poetry in academia; poets as professors, or professors as poets; creative writing as a business and the business of creativity. The rise of creative writing programs in the US in the 70s discloses a deep concern with what it is that is being produced and recorded in creative circles.² This concern is also deeply rooted in a desire to see that the results of the creative writing produced in academia are properly situated in relation to the social and human conditions present at the time.

One of the interesting things about writing cultural texts – and prose poems can be seen as prime examples hereof – is the realization that any creative discourse is culturally determined. As creativity was institutionalized throughout the 70s in the form of writing workshops and MFA programs – which now are more popular than ever and have more impact on the social and pro-

2 The most recent study that looks at the history of creative writing in the US is Mark McGurl's work, *The Program Era* (2009) in which he takes issue, among other things, with the question of the extent to which creative writing can be taught particularly when the ones who teach it have never tried creative writing themselves.

fessional life of students – the link between literary structuredness and cultural constructedness was established. The assumption was then that while students are not poets, they can become poets. Their work can take off by virtue of performing writing tasks which are submitted and subjected to criticism. The communal aspect of writing, revising under guidance, and receiving feedback from aspiring fellow students and established poets alike resulted in the actualization of a writing phenomenon which thus primarily relied on reading performances that enhanced even more the relation of proximity between text and context (or writer and audience). As the 'meaning' of a poem was carefully crafted according to its 'function,' it is clear that writing workshops developed their text production in close proximity to the culture that allowed for such a thing to happen.

Some of the wider implications of this book relate to the fact that both lay people and academics are becoming more and more attracted to creative writing. Creative writing programs at universities are still expanding as there is an increasing interest in the "politics of narrative" and in using texts as identity tools. The prose poem as a quasi-aphoristic genre lends itself particularly to statements about the general human condition, and is therefore the ideal vehicle for both the poet's project of self-expression, and for the audience's desire to mirror its identities in the words of the poet. Text can thus be seen as culture and culture as text.³ But writing poetry with the purpose of making a gesture towards

3 I have dealt elsewhere with the dynamics of seeing text as culture and culture as text in the book series initiated at Aalborg University, *Cultural Text Studies (CTS)*. For further details, see the two volumes of essays in the series: *An Introduction* (2005) and *Transatlantic* (2006), both of which I have been involved in co-editing.

a cultural understanding that deals with the creation, interpretation, and manipulation of meaning on the one hand, and on the other hand, with establishing a close proximity between creativity and the means of producing creativity (by contextualizing the author/audience relation) is no new thing.

Beginning with leading modernists such as Gertrude Stein, the idea that 'poetry' can only be put into words as 'prose' emphasizes both a shift and a return to the classical thought that poetry, like music and nature, first, has to 'make' meaning, second, it has to 'be' meaning, and third, it has to 'become' meaning. While the first stage emphasizes a proximity between the writer and her intent, the second stage foregrounds a relation between the writer and an audience for whom the meaning that 'is' is presupposed. The third stage highlights a relation between the creative product, the poem, and the interpreter. In critical discourse these stages might be identified in the first case as formalism, in which the poem makes meaning by virtue of its formal elements, such as defamiliarization, when the reader is enabled to see that the poem makes meaning because something strange is at stake; the second case follows the lessons of structuralism, in which meaning lies in a presupposed grammar according to whose rules the reader reads; the third case is a clear example of deconstruction in which meaning is rendered unstable, and fluctuating between hierarchies – here, neither the reader nor the meaning of the text is privileged, yet the interaction between the two situates meaning in a displaced position, thus putting it on a track of forever 'becoming' something else.

Many a writer would identify the state of 'becoming' in writing as being a particularly postmodern phenomenon, yet if the notion of an unknown excess prevalent in poetry and taken to its

extreme in prose poetry is considered, then one would have to realize that the notion of becoming indicates a propensity towards generic forms. These forms operate across different periods in a synthetic way by way of proximity: prose is close to the poetic, poetry is close to the prosaic, hence there is a potential that the one becomes the other, that the one displaces the other. What enables such a superimposition of genre upon genre is precisely a surplus, an excess, which brings the 'being' of prose closer to its 'becoming' poetry. As such, the postmodern element in this process is as much pre-modern as it is modern, insofar as it constitutes itself as a contemporary response to what has been and what is a politics of gesture.

In the first chapter of this book I thus propose to situate Lynn Emanuel's work within the literary genre called prose poetry. There has been a growing critical interest in this genre, but despite the fact that in 2003 a collection of prose poems appeared with an introduction by David Lehman defining the field, there are only a couple of book-length studies of the genre, and none focusing on a single author writing prose poems.

The following chapters each frame Emanuel differently by looking at her work, for instance, against the background of modernist writing and art with special attention to her father, Akiba Emanuel, and Gertrude Stein, who can be seen as a literary foremother for Emanuel. Emanuel's personal and writerly identity emerges partly as a development of the modernist tradition and its penchant for high art, and partly as an irreverent and humorous break with that tradition. My discussion of tradition is done by looking at the function of the prose poem as it lends itself to instruction on subjectivity, existentialism, ethics, and pleasure through the transformation of thought into wit, or a return

of thought to witty representation. These first chapters also constitute individual readings of Emanuel's three collections of poems: *The Dig* (1984), *Hotel Fiesta* (1992) and *Then Suddenly—* (1999). Here the focus is on such notions as, for instance, potentiality, inspiration, amnesia, and titling. In terms of a more sustained focus on each of Emanuel's works, insofar as her later production employs more vigorously the genre of the prose poem, more attention will be given to *Then Suddenly—* and the latest, *Noose and Hook*. (2010).

In terms of considering Emanuel's engagement with form on a general level, it can be said that her poems have a form close to the aphorism and the aphorism's function in philosophical communication. More specifically, the poems express a philosophy of communicating wit. Her books, while engaging with departures from the modernist preoccupation with the relationship of the poet's language to the observable world, retain an interest in narratives of inspiration. However, although not all of Emanuel's poems are prose poems as such, insofar as they obey the rule of the broken line, her desire for narrative betrays her commitment to the kind of inspiration that relies more on composition rather than imagination. In other words, while her books do not explore the language/world relationship through the form of traditional poems, they do rely on the poet communicating with the reader mainly through the form of the prose poem. Furthermore, the prose poem for Emanuel lends itself to explorations of the proximity of language to the world. This proximity is investigated through various representations of the notion of inspiration. Here, Emanuel performs a double step: away from the modernist subjective crisis and transformations, yet returning or looking back unto what delimits the modernist limit-experience. My analysis considers the modernist concern with genius from Ger-

trude Stein to John Ashbery. As genius requires a medium for representation, the pictorial canvas is literally seen as the space where combinations across ideas (borrowed and original) can unfold. I thus look at *ekphrastic* representations in Gertrude Stein and develop the idea of notional *ekphrasis* in Emanuel's 'concrete' poems. Particularly details, such as Gertrude Stein being a fat woman looking like a typewriter with a dress, are addressed in the context of Romantic inspiration.

Contemporary poets writing in the genre of prose poetry gather their inspiration from their close relationships with their audiences – they often do readings which are followed by comments from the audience. These comments serve as grounds for revisions in subsequent poems. The prose poem thus signals a shift in the relationship between audience and poet. Unlike some modernists (Eliot), who were convinced that only some people were well enough educated and thus capable of understanding high art, poets such as Lynn Emanuel believe that everybody in an audience has the potential to make valid comments which ultimately say something about certain cultural manifestations in society. Poets like her are thus at the foreground of a benevolent postmodern reevaluation of American poetry as a voice mediating between artist and audience, enabling both parties to grow from the exchange.

The book concludes with addressing the prose poem as a cultural text which consolidates the idea that culture, as it is played out in contemporary poetry, is about the interplay of differences within the organization of structures. Yet this organization is in turn undermined by both literary and extraliterary discursive practices. Doing cultural text studies means focusing on processes that emphasize the play between experience and modalities

of experience, or how experience gets to be translated into text, which is to say that the questions asked invariably address the issues of what is at stake right here and now, and what *becomes* what *is* right here and now. Thomas Carlyle's maxim in which he defines culture still captures the dynamics of this creative movement: "The great law of culture is: Let each become all that he was created capable of being" (Carlyle, 1827: 23).⁴ This definition lends itself to modernist endeavors that place emphasis on composition rather than reconstruction in language, and suggests that 'becoming' is at the height of cultural transformation. But not any transformation. For example, it has been said of Gertrude Stein that she had no quarrel with either culture, history, or the self, as Eliot, Joyce and Yeats did. As W. F. Dupee put it:

Culture in her terminology becomes "composition," an aggregate of institutions, technologies, and human relations which the artist, as artist, accepts as it is, eliciting its meanings primar-

4 In an interesting study tellingly titled, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Toward the Redefinition of Culture* (1971) George Steiner continues such traditions as carried on by literary figures such as Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin, and Leavis for whom culture and anarchy counterbalance each other precisely in a process of one (culture) becoming the other (anarchy). Advancing the claim that we live in a post-culture era, Steiner proposes that we need to relate to any theory of culture a theory of barbarism (29), thus anticipating some of Agamben's thoughts in philosophy and postmodern thoughts such as Emanuel's in poetry, for whom the internal relations between the structures of the inhuman are of equal importance for the way in which culture puts forth and advances the production of its own aesthetics through proximity to the "barbaric". For Steiner, the demand for considering the "dark" places in literature in close proximity with "culture" is clear, as passing them by would leave no room for "a serious discussion of the human potential": "Art, intellectual pursuits, the development of the natural sciences, many branches of scholarship flourished in the close spatial, temporal proximity to massacre and the death camps. It is the structure and the meaning of that proximity which must be looked at" (30).

ily through eye and ear rather than through mind, memory, or imagination. And words like the other materials of the literary medium, become useful to the artist, assume a character purely aesthetic, in proportion as they can be converted from bearers of established meaning and consciousness association into plastic entities (Dupee in Stein, 1962: xii).

Emanuel's interest in the poetry of becoming, which is all about creating compositions out of culturally loaded composite characters (a subversive and double-edged move), quite appropriately takes its cue from such apt cultural theorists as Carlyle and Stein, and instead of developing solutions as means to an end regarding new reconstructions of form and language, she sets out to make distinctions that situate the unstable features of verbal aesthetics within their cultural milieu. My argument will thus be that in pulverizing portraits, especially those of the "bearers of established meanings," Emanuel illuminates cultural aspects of 'the-very-thing-that-happens' kind, both in their temporal and spatial dimensions. The commitment to the potential in the idea of 'becoming' is here seen as a strategy for a cultural practice that has *being* on the move, and in close proximity to *becoming*.

What attracts me to Emanuel's poetry is the fact that while she can be said to offer the most insightful comments on the state of poetry in the US today – and for that matter anywhere else – her desire is to remain anonymous. Several of her poems, not only submit to this desire but they also testify to it. And why is this so? And how is this compatible with the notion that a writer must make an impact, judging from the now standard formulations that publishing houses use in connection with the publication of anything? One senses that what is at stake in Emanuel's poetry is how to make a gesture towards saying something forceful

against the cult of the visible which is linked precisely to such demands which target not the quality of the impact but its commercial, blockbusting potential. According to this potential, writers have to make themselves more visible, show more virility, and act more independently. In Emanuel's poetry one can trace a critique of this sad development which aims at getting writers to publish more rather than think more. Due to this line of argument, *Pulverizing Portraits* deliberately resists offering a synthesis of what can be termed "Emanuel's thought;" it resists turning her ideas into a traditional monograph that sounds like a textbook, or an introduction to this or that. Rather, *Pulverizing Portraits*, aims at allowing for the emergence of Emanuel's ideas as they do in their interrelations, in their establishing connections across genres and genders, readers and restrictions, being and becoming. Here, I intend to demonstrate not only aspects of the dynamics of cultural practice, but also show how performing readings of as yet unpublished texts can be seen to contribute to the idea of pulverizing traditional and surpassed thoughts through destabilizing hegemony, and through didactic instruction.

The last chapters of this book thus deal with Emanuel's work in progress. First I offer a reading of a set of three poems which led Emanuel to her latest work, *Noose and Hook* (2010). Although these texts are not in the public domain, I find it rewarding to pursue a thought in the making, particularly as it proves some of my points regarding creative writing that draws on academic training and that also 'happens' within the academia.

The book thus concludes precisely with performing a moment of *becoming*, as a gesture towards a more sustained opening of the creative impetus that the academic writer, who is also a poet *par excellence*, is capable of.