

The Unending Meditation on Language:

Alvin Feinman's Poems as Self-Consuming Artifacts

JAMES GEARY

'I have an instinct for seeking out unsparingly, with tireless, remorseless, religious labor, the highest diving board, and that above the shallowest pools.'

This line, by the American poet Alvin Feinman, who died in 2008, comes from a black notebook, found in the spring of 2017 in an old leather briefcase, among a cache of Alvin's papers I discovered after traveling to the home he and his wife, Deborah Dorfman, had shared for decades in Bennington, Vermont. After Deborah's death in 2015, the property was to be sold, and I went there to retrieve Alvin's manuscripts and books.

Scrawled in pencil in the top-left corner of the notebook's first page is '1952 – or 3', which dates the thoughts on poetry and poetics the notebook contains to the same period in the 1950s during which Alvin composed almost all of his poems, which Dorfman and I collected in *Corrupted into Song*, published in 2016. Along with the black notebook, there were several other notebooks with Alvin's reflections on poetry, later versions of some of the poems published in *Corrupted into Song*, and several dozen poems unknown to me when Deborah and I were preparing the work in that volume.

Alvin's metaphor of the diving board and the shallowest pools serves as both a description of his working method and a fitting epitaph for the verse of this most difficult and taciturn of poets.

In *PN Review* 245 (Jan.–Feb. 2019, pp. 32–38), Chris Miller described Alvin's poems as 'at once an allegory/analysis of poetic creation... and an iconic work of aporia or despair'. The notebook entries support this characterization while also clarifying how Alvin himself seems to have regarded his work. 'I was born with a sense, a fore-sense of failure,' he writes elsewhere in the black notebook. 'I know that nothing I might attain would equal the destiny I should demand. It was from the beginning only a question of disinteresting myself in whatever destiny I came to learn the name of.'

Alvin continues this strain of elegiac, Ecclesiastes-like lament in another entry:

Surely it is an unspeakable sorrow to walk in the
jungle of the works of man. Surely it is a weight no
living man can bear.
There is one book only that is worth the making.
There is one book only that is not one more evil.
The last book.

The grave, almost grieving tone of the notebooks gives some sense of the remorseless, religious labor Alvin brought to his poems, and the tension between the ambitions he had for his poetry and his seeming certainty that he would fail to achieve those ambitions.

Yet in failing to write the 'last book', Alvin succeeded

in writing something more rare, more difficult and, ultimately, far more rewarding: poems that are so inextricably entwined with their own making that they cannot be reduced, resolved or paraphrased into anything other than themselves.

Each Feinman poem is what Stanley E. Fish described as a 'self-consuming artifact': a work that signifies 'most successfully when it fails, when it points *away* from itself to something that its forms cannot capture'. (Fish, Stanley E. *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972, p. 4.) Though Fish was writing about seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, his theory of self-consuming artifacts offers an entry point into Alvin's poetry, which so forcefully and so successfully resists explication.

Fish outlined two ways of looking at the world: the discursive, rational view in which the world is divided into discrete entities and the anti-discursive, anti-rational view in which those divisions fade. Poetry merges these opposing ways of experiencing and understanding the world, so that the object and our consciousness of the object – the poem and the 'subject' of the poem – become indistinguishable. A poem, Fish writes, is 'a dialectical presentation [that] succeeds at its own expense; for by conveying those who experience it to a point where they are beyond the aid that discursive or rational forms can offer, it becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment'. (Fish, p. 3.)

Alvin's poems constantly enact this dialectical ebb and flow of union, as in 'From a frosted train window', one of the poems discovered along with the notebooks, in which the act of writing – 'an error of desire objectified' – is undermined even as it is articulated, and the poem itself shines 'the clear, / the difficult / ungathered light' by which we see what we can't quite say:

Unwielded locus of all things,
all such and such
here blunted out: tree,
hill, house, overpass
hardly transgress their names.
The literal abstraction here accomplished
knows itself an error of desire objectified,
and you long for the clear,
the difficult
ungathered light.

Writing of Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, Fish outlined a method of understanding self-consuming artifacts that applies to Alvin's poetry: 'Augustine, in effect, has made language defeat itself by making it point away from the temporal-spatial vision it naturally reflects. Of

language such as this one cannot ask the question, “What does it mean?” for in everyday terms it doesn’t mean anything (as a statement it is self-consuming); in fact, in its refusal to “mean” in those terms lies its value. A more fruitful question would be, ‘What does it do?’” (Fish, p. 42.)

What Alvin’s language does is perform a feat of reverse prestidigitation, making conventional modes of seeing, meaning and knowing disappear before our very minds, directly implicating and involving the reader in an always unconsummated movement towards closure.

In another notebook, one that had the word ‘Record’ printed on the front, Alvin formulated his own version of the self-consuming artifact theory, as part of a consideration of Donald Davie’s *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry*, published in 1955:

key is: consciousness distinguishes and connects in the same awareness[.] to express this inside a one-one oriented demonstrative language, it must become dialectical – i.e. affirm and then deny ... poetry – having more resources than logic-shriveled discursive grammar – can present (to intuition) the total awareness[.]

The total awareness that poetry presents must include the opposing and finally irreconcilable forces that are consciousness – the imperative to distinguish and connect, to affirm and deny, what Alvin describes as ‘a doing and undoing’ in another newly discovered poem, ‘Begin, Prevail’:

Begin

its dawn
As a day begins, not as
An echo shadows through an act, or
After-image blurs the sequent view,
Or grasp prefigured in the poisoning hand

As weather stills, or quickens
In a leaf, as though leaf’s leisure
Pleased to speak a wind, or what wind will
Itself awaited, apart

As animals from looking, or a horse
From looking sideward presently
Or slowly bends, head lowering to grass,
Has bent a hill, a distance, outward, far.

Prevail

Stay to these soundings of your sense,
The burning sentence you would wrest
Once turns like bruised hands moving
Through their pain, pain’s plaything being;

Stay to the silence you attest, your
Striving’s stutter and its swell, its score
Record as the sea records only
Arhythm not a sense, not rhythm

But a beat, a holding rumor, a remorse

Or vow, a doing and undoing that can surge
Into itself, up-furl, or elsewhere
Shatter, hurl, and roll to calm.

Like his poetry, Alvin resisted explanation. Apart from the notebooks, his most extensive recorded remarks come from a November 1999 letter in response to Robert Dorsett, a student of Harold Bloom’s at Yale who was writing a paper on Alvin’s work. Dorsett asked if there was anything Alvin cared to say about his approach to poetry or his stance toward language. This is part of his reply:

I have always resisted talking about my poems; not only as to explication, but about the ‘unspoken’ – which the poem so-to-speak interrupts (crystalizes) – which includes the unending meditation on language. Most exactly the poem itself is the site of self-understanding, articulation, of its poetics ... all aspects of its provenance and project, the constraints that govern its formal (and spiritual) economy ... Certainly I subscribe to the idea (Romantic, no doubt) that the poem is the act of discovering more than is known at the outset; that, fatefully, it transforms and reconstitutes language and self and world; that as much as possible would be put in play – and as it were ‘used up’ – in the paradigmatic poem – (kenosis, theologically).

Alvin here restates the spare, rigorous poetics first set out in his notebooks more than forty years earlier. The poem alone is its own form and substance, its own language and lexicon. There is, in fact, nothing outside the poem itself to refer to or talk about. Such was the impossibly demanding ambition of Alvin’s poetry, and the impossibly demanding standard from which he never wavered.

His stance became a source of contention between Alvin and Bloom, friends since their graduate days at Yale. Bloom was an early and fervent supporter of Alvin’s work, and he was instrumental in persuading Oxford University Press to publish Alvin’s first book, *Preambles and Other Poems*, in 1964. But he was also frustrated by what he felt was Alvin’s obstructionism during the publication process – and the seemingly deliberate wasting of his poetic gift.

In late 1963, Bloom wrote a letter to Alvin ‘ten minutes after’ the two had quarreled about Alvin’s attitude toward Oxford University Press’s ideas about the *Preambles* dust jacket. Alvin, who had been withholding the full manuscript to continue revising the poems, apparently objected to the dust jacket; Bloom argued that the dust jacket was a commercial decision best left to the publisher, urging him to focus instead on what was inside the book and on the creation of new work. In the letter, posted with ‘Destroy this note’ written on the envelope, Bloom wrote:

You know that I love you. I also know you to be a very great poet if you will allow yourself to be one. You could write a Circumferences [the final poem in *Preambles*] that would be a better poem than Notes or The Rock. But only by writing, by releasing exuberance into words,

rather than in this endless interior monologue you conduct. Put that ceaseless meditation into a daily journal; make a rule for yourself henceforward, to write after you read. What I fear for you is waste, loss, dispersal; you have already squandered a decade of early maturity, with only one volume of lyrics to show for it, and only 8–12 of those really remarkable. Turn your discipline on yourself; you have had time to work, and yet you haven't worked. If it seemed too solitary to induce externalization of your broodings, that is over now; you have a publisher, you will have an audience. I'm not asking you to debase yourself to attract that audience; but don't insanely impede every sensible attempt to get that audience that others will make for you.

Alvin did not follow Bloom's advice. He neither kept a journal after the notebooks he wrote in the early 1950s, nor did he continue to produce a body of new work. He did not insanely impede attempts to acquire an audience, but he did nothing to foster one either.

What he did do was tirelessly, remorselessly, religiously compress an unending meditation on language into dense, dazzling poems that instigate a process of self-understanding and discovery that is renewed and left newly unfinished with each reading. As we climb up after him to that highest diving board above the shallowest pool, Alvin kicks away the ladder just as we reach the top.

Two Poems

DEAN BROWNE

Other

Spring proliferates blown red roses!
I mean behind the sunlit glass.

Thrushes ruckus the fresh green hedges!
I mean I'm trying to sleep here.

Red squirrel and coot hurrah the park!
I mean the swings are empty.

Nothing's far from fading.
A warped fence for your troubles.

Yet the salmon was never fresh here.
I mean my heart was torn.

I mean my future was sonnet-shaped
and you walked at the volta.

I lay you down now like a kitchen knife!
I mean sorry, wrong number.

What a moment to play Angel Olsen!
(It could have been Agnes Obel.)

But o the roquefort and beaujolais,
the kimonos some green tomorrow!

And o my clever wine-high lover!
I mean around the corner

like the sea: sooner or later.
Sloshing in with the *Mary Celeste*!

She is growing small bones
inside her, and the consequence

will be ours to love!
I mean I hope for other

than cataloguing my losses
as those one-trick prodigies

pony up, all shadows and facets
under my jeweller's loupe.