The Problem with Documentary Poetry
2011 Sosland Prize in Expository Writing

Here have been more genocides in the 20th century than can be comfortably listed or discussed; and yet, for most of us, the horrors of history exist only at a remove. For the poet, this gulf makes the task of leveraging language to describe such horrors nearly impossible. What words can confront the unspeakable? One approach, often taken in documentary poetry, attempts to ground the horror of atrocity in painful but brilliant imagery. In Carolyn Forché’s prose poem “The Colonel,” for instance, she invokes scenes of torture so specific we cannot help but imagine the physical realities behind her descriptions. The poem, which marks her experience visiting a military official at his house in El Salvador, vivifies the atrocity of torture in the clarity of detail: the salt and mangoes brought by a silent maid, the shards of broken glass nested in concrete retaining walls, the human ears poured on the floor like “dried peach halves” (16). Hers is a poem intended to document, but not necessarily discuss, her experience inside the house of a torturer. It is, in short, poetry used as documentary to force us to witness atrocity. The sort of blazing imagery she uses is the mark of much of documentary poetry, and she combines this imagery with understated emotion to give the sense that what she has recorded lies beyond our ability to comprehend it. Her poem, in other words, lies wholly outside our normal experience, even as we are called to witness what it describes. This sort of poetry becomes troubling, then, because of the way it encourages us to read: we cannot presume to know what is beyond our own imagining. Under such a scenario, we are more readily able to excuse ourselves from the poem, and we allow ourselves to feel we are not implicated in the situation it describes. Poetry written about atrocity becomes problematic not so much because its language falls short of what it seeks to represent, but rather because it cannot or will not give us a means to respond to it. The muted emotion in documentary verse like “The Colonel” forces us to remain silent. But how can we remain mute in the face of such tragedy?

We might find an answer to that question in an extended reading of a poem by Dan Pagis, an Israeli poet and holocaust survivor who escaped from a Ukrainian concentration camp at the age of 14. His most famous poem, *written in pencil in the sealed railway-car*, seems a ready example of documentary poetry, one that on the surface promises to expose us to the locked innards of a boxcar bound for a death camp. In this poem,
there is much to be read as documentary verse. Pagis never overtly appears in the poem, for instance; instead, we are given an achingly clear title, a pencil scrawl in a shut boxcar, and the cryptic words that follow; because the title here implies these words are not even his, one could argue this poem is more documentary than poems like “The Colonel.” That is, Pagis presents the “found” fragment as an artifact written by a victim, to which he appended a brutally simple, one-line explanation. If we further examine the poem, however, we find it does much more than merely document a victim’s experience, and in doing so, it invites us to be far more than silent witnesses. In short, the work captures a vicious moment, with lines so harrowing that we become trapped in that boxcar. The poem, in other words, bridges the gulf between witness and experience by creating a situation that requires us to psychologically participate in it. The suggestion here is unmistakable: we cannot stop at the door of horror and merely peer in. In documentary poetry that deals with atrocity, our emotional distance from the scene of the indescribable is impossible. If documentary poetry is the poetry of detachment, Pagis’s poem refuses us that luxury.
If popular wisdom can be trusted, “nice guys finish last.” It is an aphorism especially apt in the realm of romance, dating, and sex, in which the perfect gentleman is often perceived as well-intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful and sometimes even pathetic. Perhaps this stereotype is perpetuated largely by the ostensible accuracy of its inverse: bad boys often seem to finish first. After all, James Bond, James Dean, and Jesse James all share a dangerous, roguish persona, and women in our popular perception seem to find them hard to resist. Indeed, existing scientific literature upholds the idea that bad boys are irresistible. These studies, of course, couch that irresistibility in the reproductive success of bad boys. In other words, studies examining dominance and hypermasculinity show that bad boys have more sexual partners and are perceived as more attractive than their more considerate counterparts (Sadalla et al. 1987; Bogaert and Fisher 1995). At the same time, however, studies by the likes of Urbaniak and Kilmann (2003) and Herold and Milhausen (1999) indicate that women adamantly claim to prefer nice guys. There is, then, an apparent discrepancy within current scientific literature on the subject of female attraction.

Such a discrepancy might lead us to argue that the studies are inconclusive. Worse, they might have us conclude that women don’t know what they want. But we can make two claims here that might make sense of this discrepancy. First, we can see that what women say they want may actually be at odds with what they truly desire. There might be a host of issues here like social expectations that can explain that the difference between their stated preferences and their actual choices are, in fact, genuine. The second claim we can make, and the focus of this paper, is that we can bridge the discrepancy by seeing the good guy and bad boy model as a gradient rather than a dichotomy. That is, we may be served by introducing a bad boy “threshold” that does not see the world of men in mutually exclusive terms. In other words, to make sense of the divergent literature on the subject we need to understand that women desire men who exceed a certain minimum of bad boy qualities. This would allow us to argue that bad boy qualities are a requirement that must be met, and that nice guy attributes are attractive only once an individual has proven himself sufficiently “bad.”
Martin Luther King Jr.’s Troubled Attitude Toward Nonviolent Resistance

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When it comes to the image of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., there would seem to be little to debate: he was an idealistic martyr for civil rights, a man who pressed for his “Dream” through doctrines of nonviolent resistance, patience and redemption. In a certain sense, he is a model of what can only be described as superhuman restraint, godly wisdom and infinite love, and it was these characteristics that positioned King to lead a successful civil rights movement that transformed the basic social and legal framework of the United States. But this image of King persists despite a critical fact we have yet to address fully: in his later writings, King began to question his emphasis on patience, redemption and brotherly love. Where he professed in 1958 a “deep faith in the future” and the “democratic ideal of freedom and equality ... for all,” a decade later he was conceding that his staunch belief in nonviolent resistance needed a different reckoning. Today, we seem to know little of the extent to which he found that his work had not achieved true equality, in his words, beyond a mere “absence of brutality and unregenerate evil.” We might be surprised at King’s admission that, after a decade of work, “Negroes have established a foothold, no more” and that nonviolence had “not been playing its transforming role.” King in these later writings had lost faith in the transformative potential of his earlier belief in nonviolence, and it is a loss of faith we rarely acknowledge.

How do we make sense of this change in King’s beliefs, and how do we account for our image of King as an unshakable crusader for nonviolent resistance, universal justice, and brotherhood? It might be easier of us to deal with King’s own professed inconsistencies and questions by ignoring them, dismissing them or marginalizing them. However, it would be deceptive to believe in such a depiction of King or to accept the enormous potential of nonviolent resistance as King originally presented it. To examine this unexplored transformation, we will consider works from the earliest and latest points of King’s civil rights career: his 1958 memoir Stride toward Freedom, a 1968 reflection called Where do We Go from Here?, and a 1968 reflection article titled “Showdown for Nonviolence.” By focusing on these moments that bookend much of his work, we can more clearly see the stark contrast in King’s changing ideology. There is, in other words, an important shift in the course of King’s work that these moments highlight. We may be tempted to understand
this shift as simply a reflection of the difficulties of the time period, and to write off King’s wavering faith as simply his acceptance of the slow pace of change. However, this paper argues that we can better understand this radical transformation as King’s realization that change through nonviolent resistance had actually reached its potential. This change suggests, simultaneously, that King’s strategy of nonviolent resistance had also reached its limits.
Endnotes


2 Ibid., 190.


4 Ibid., 20.