"The poverty is mundane, the wealth outrageous."

Natalie Shapero's poetry: *Popular Longing* and the "look outward"

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Pick up a book of contemporary poetry, and you are likely to find either personal recollections, observations of nature, a focus on race or sexuality or melancholy introspection. You are not likely to find references to councilmen on the take, polluted rivers, financial speculation and continuous war. *Popular Longing,* the third and latest book of poetry by Natalie Shapero, contains all these things. Its reflection of contemporary social reality, and of the effects that this reality has on our personal lives, is bracingly vivid.

Difficult to find in *Popular Longing* is any endorsement of identity politics. The universities (where most contemporary poets have careers) strongly promote this reactionary tendency as part of "progressive" politics. Although she teaches at Tufts University in the Boston area, Shapero does not follow this trend.

"It is a task of living in our world to be cognizant of the ways in which we're invited, again and again, to feel like the real work of our lives is to take care of ourselves rather than to look outward," she said in an interview with National Public Radio. This comment suggests that Shapero understands that while engagement with the world is necessary, identity politics instead encourages self-absorption. Shapero's "look outward" is much more artistically productive than the orientation many of her peers adopt.

Shapero's style has affinities with that of the New York School of poets. This group, which was prominent in the 1950s and '60s, wrote lyric verse characterized by informal diction, wit and an interest in both pop culture and fine art. Shapero's poems share these qualities. Her conversational tone calls Frank O'Hara (1926–1966) to mind. Her humor, though, is often darker than O'Hara's, and sometimes even bitter. This difference no doubt reflects in part the distinct historical periods that the two poets inhabit.

A healthy revulsion at the relentless quest for profit pervades many of the poems in *Popular Longing.* One of Shapero's well-aimed barbs strikes "the magnate hyping his new memoir of depression, / in interviews across a range of platforms." The afflicted soul "knew he was ill / when he surveyed the unchecked magnitude of his / holdings and still felt numb." But the magnate did not need his holdings to help him diagnose himself. "We already have that power, / to stare back at tycoons and have them feel nothing," Shapero concludes acidly.

She apparently understands in a general way that the existing social order is the source of the crisis she describes so pungently. "The symphony's out of funding again," she observes. Elsewhere: "The river is heavy with phosphorus and scum," and "the poverty is mundane, the wealth outrageous." But the poet expresses little hope that this situation can be changed, even though she rhetorically rebels against it.

Shapero occasionally acknowledges the importance of human connection in times of crisis. In "Green," she attempts to overcome her coworkers' perception that she is inexperienced by affecting profound stoicism and intoning, "Death is a part of life." Finally, she drops this act and calls the mother of a deceased friend to share reminiscences about him. Her self-parody thus changes into a touching acknowledgment of the value of mutual support, even if it cannot fully compensate for the loss of a loved one.

However, *Popular Longing* shows disturbing trends, as well. A long poem called "Don't Spend It All in One Place" refers repeatedly to attacks on art. "I can't /

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even view a painting anymore without picturing / its future: knife-marks, singes, punctures in the canvas, / patches of varnish half-eaten by splatters of lye," Shapero writes. What is this about? She mentions the vandalism of Michelangelo's *Pietà* and imagines people lining up to throw projectiles at a painting. There's no reason to believe that Shapero approves of these acts, but the imagery suggests intense frustration, rage and even self-destructiveness.

References to death abound, as well. In some poems, it is mentioned as a grim reality, but in others it becomes the object of a morbid fascination. In "And Stay Out," Shapero describes holding still with the lights off and "trying to live / as though dead, to satisfy / or at least dampen the inclination / to actually die." In another poem, Shapero mentions that if she ever submerged herself completely in the bathtub, she would

> … ponder the woman
> flooring it into the cinderblock
> wall from fifty feet away. I don't think that image
> comes from the movies. I think it comes
> from the future. The future, with its color
> palette of airport whites and its
> unrushed glance, its involute
> beckoning. I see it. I can see it. At least
> somebody wants me.

These chilling lines equate the future with death and present both as simultaneously banal and seductive. Together with the book's intermittent expressions of futility and misanthropy, they convey a serious demoralization.

The objective basis for such a sentiment is not hard to find. Shapero was born, in 1982, in Chester, Pennsylvania. By that point, the once-booming city had been deindustrialized through plant closures that began in the 1960s. Chester had become home to a new Superfund site: the Wade Dump, where industrial chemicals had been discarded illegally. Other undesirable facilities were established in Chester throughout the 1980s, such as the Westinghouse trash incinerator, a sewage treatment plant and a prison. In 1995, state officials named Chester a "financially distressed" municipality, one of those terms that does not begin to communicate the level of social misery.

More generally, Shapero and her generation have known nothing but continuous wars of plunder organized and led by the US in the Middle East and Central Asia, increased repression and a shift to the right by both major parties, the growth of a vast and malignant social divide, cultural decline and regression.

These developments have rightly distressed Shapero and left their imprint on her sensitive consciousness. They find expression in images of landfills and of beer bottles smashing into passing cars. Behind this debasement lurk the titans of finance, "flipping on the money / channel, watching that arrow soar."

It is vital for contemporary poetry to face these issues. Many poets merely allude to them timidly, and Shapero's blunt, even provocative, approach is tonic. She is one step ahead of many of her peers.

Yet despite flashes of indignation and moments of humor, a sense of despair, as noted, hangs over these poems. Though this may be understandable, it is mistaken and needs to be overcome. The same world that produces such terrible ills also produces the basis of their solution. The poet must look actively for that, too. It is not impossible to find. Shapero's identification of the problems is salutary. Better still would be to inspire courage by revealing the reserves on which we can draw and the elements of modern life we can use to solve these problems.

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