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## Poetry in Use of Power? Politics of and in American Inauguration Poems

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### 1. Introduction

Presidential inauguration is probably the most important political ceremony in the United States. After usually very intense period of hard fight over presidency nation gathers to celebrate its new leader. It is also typically a ceremony of recuperation: Issues that divided nation through campaign are laid aside and issues that connect people are taken up. In that sense, when politics is seen as a confrontation and struggle for power, inaugurations turn out to be, paradoxically, very non-political occasions. When considering that, it is perhaps not very surprising that some presidents have used poetry as a part of the ceremony – one could rather say it is surprising how rare it actually has been.

Poetry has been seen as a non-political sphere par excellence. According to still very dominant description, derived especially from Baudelaire, art is for arts sake and poetry is a special case of individual presentation of private emotions. Even longer tradition, which may be dated back to *katharsis* –effect outlined by Aristotle, states that poetry creates harmony when bridging the gap between individual emotions and interests of community. In the American poetic tradition one of the central issues from the early 1800's was to create a national language and poetry, which would show America as having its independent character also in the field of culture. Summoned with nationalism, nation and its poetry have been seen as equal, as quotation from Walt Whitman proves: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem."<sup>[i]</sup> In this tradition of mimetic representation, Whitman being its central proponent, unity is created by shifting the hierarchical boundaries by vernacular language and free verse.

But I want to argue that utilizations of poems in politics, and also poets themselves, are not that innocent, and that even in as depoliticised occasions as inaugurations they may actually carry with them more powerful political messages as is indeed found in inauguration speeches. I exemplify my point in this essay focusing on two cases. First one is poem by Robert Frost, which he wrote for inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961, the second a poem by Maya Angelou, written for Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993.

From these considerations I also wish to create a bit larger view on interconnectedness of politics and poetry by taking examples of some occurrences of poetry in American politics from recent years. Literature scholar Hank Lazer has argued that two overlapping areas of thinking may be seen as pivotal in contemporary American poetry: First he calls dissemination of "the subject", accomplished by formal innovation and theoretical arguments; second is the politics of poetry as a resistance to the official verse culture and hegemonic ideologies.<sup>[ii]</sup> Both poetic styles are essentially political, first one being connected among others to feminist poetry of Adrienne Rich, second centring on language-poetry of Bob Perelman and Ron Silliman.

But outside these academic and dissident realms, which might easily be labelled as poetic self-centredness, one may perhaps read more interesting or at least politically more revealing stories

of poetical politics found inside the mainstream politics. Therefore, I seek to illuminate in this essay some points in “officially” recognized poetry and perhaps from my part also to widen the understanding of what is usually seen as political poetry. In my opinion, politics is more or less an aspect that may be read-out from a broad spectrum of different kinds of poetries. There is always a two-way movement from politics to poetry and vice-versa; from utilization of poetry in politics to utilization of politics in poetry.

## 2. Inaugurations of Kennedy and Clinton <sup>[iii]</sup>

Inauguration speeches have a long history and have been from the very beginning kind of a eulogy of the nation. Each speaker provides there his vision for his beginning term in office and defines what he sees as essential in character of America and its citizens. References to the most commonly shared characterizations of America, which are often called master narratives, “city on a hill”, “frontier nation” and “manifest destiny”, are included in most of the speeches.

Many felt that inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 20th of January in 1961 was a starting point of a new era and in his speech elected new president did not let down the expectations but reflected those feelings in a way that may be counted among the highlights in the history of public orations. Kennedy called the nation into “a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.” His speech urged the citizen to take responsibility, to join the service of nation. One may easily find in it some republican undertones; republican in a sense of active citizenship and positive freedom. This posited him also against previous administration and pointed to a long tradition of ideological rivalry between liberalism and republicanism. <sup>[iv]</sup>

Kennedy emphasised the basic understanding of humanity as a universal destiny towards freedom and solidarity. America was, in a tradition of manifest destiny, a leading spirit among freedom loving countries. People of United States had also an enormous responsibility being citizens of the greatest nation. Isolation was no option.

Clinton’s speech in 20th of January in 1993 reflected in many parts the same ideas of rebirth and responsibility that were a salient point in Kennedy’s speech. Clinton accentuated that America was a strong and vital nation despite some problems in economy. Following the genre of inaugurations, he explicitly stated that every generation has to define what it means to be an American. He challenged the nation to service and referred directly to Kennedy when speaking of the trumpets calling to take responsibility, which was an obvious reference to “city on a hill” – phrase as well. As a concrete republican statement he urged that “To renew America, we must revitalize our democracy.” America was characterized as a leader and the maker of the world: “Clearly America must continue to lead the world we did so much to make.”

Both speeches called the people into a common enterprise. This pursuit of the unity and active citizenship wrapped up the political juxtapositions which dominated the campaigns. One may find here an evident paradox when noticing that those juxtapositions are actually better revealed in poems read at the same ceremony. Poems seemed to be combining political styles of idealism and realism in an unexpected way.

## 3. Poetry and political styles

There are only few occasions when poetry has directly linked with American presidency. One may of course find several poems about presidents, the most famous undeniably being Walt Whitman’s Lincoln-poem “O Captain! My Captain!” and some presidents have also published poetry when not being in office, most notably John Quincy Adams, Lincoln and Carter. But in presidential speeches and ceremonies poetry has been almost invisible. Therefore inaugurations of Kennedy and Clinton are important objects of study when considering the role of poetry in politics. Before going deeper into the inauguration poems I shall take a short glimpse into the two “literary” styles of politics, those of prosaistic and poetic.

Clinton cites in his Memoirs an interesting analogy by Mario Cuomo stating that we “govern by prose, campaign by poetry.”<sup>[v]</sup> Poetry is according the analogy an art of exceptional situations which is used in order to open up new possibilities and in a sense more political. Men of realpolitik see this a bit differently: Nixon used to quote words by Metternich, who said that “I am a man of prose, not of poetry.” Idealism of poetry and realism of prose are here analogies of two different styles of politics.

Larry Sabato, head of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia saw, when asked about John Kerry’s use of poetry in his campaign, that “A president of the United States, at least in the American mind, is the leader of the free world. And a leader of the free world is supposed to be grounded in reality, in realpolitik. And quoting poetry suggests someone who may be a daydreamer and we tend not to elect daydreamers as president.”<sup>[vi]</sup> As Kerry’s case shows, reckless use of poetry might indeed turn against its user, a theme which I will discuss more below.

Clinton follows his ponderings between prose and poetry writing that “the statement is basically accurate, but a lot of campaigning is prose, too: putting together the nuts and bolts, going through the required rituals, and responding to the press. Day two of the campaign was more prose than poetry: a series of interviews designed to get me on television nationally and in major local markets, and to answer the threshold question of why I had gone back on my commitment to finish my term and whether that meant I was untrustworthy. I answered the questions as best I could and moved on to the campaign message. It was all prosaic, but it got us to day three.”

John F. Kennedy stated his idealist stand when considering poetry in his last major public address at dedication of Robert Frost (sic!) Library at Amherst College in 26 October 1963 that “when power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses”.

From the statements above one may find that use of poetry divides politicians into two categories, which are at the very core of the political action: It is more or less of right combination between idealism and realism. Max Weber talked in his lecture in 1919 about basic elements of successful political action arguing that “passion, sense of responsibility, judgement” should be balanced in mind of a politician. Vision and idealism, which are usually connected to poetry, should not prevent taking distance from things and people. “Problem is this: how are hot passions and cool judgement to be forced together in a single soul?”<sup>[vii]</sup>

I take it that problem which Weber highlighted is, though being basically unsolvable, possible to unravel in poetry when not taking divisions between genres and styles as fundamentally distinctive as notions above and one made by Hank Lazer would suggest. I think T.S. Eliot has put it somewhat correctly when writing that “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”<sup>[viii]</sup> Objectivity and poetry are not necessarily inconceivable.

#### 4. “Dedication” by Robert Frost<sup>[ix]</sup>

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was in time of inauguration at the end of his long career. He was involved in early 1920’s in movement of modernist, establishing a friendship with Ezra Pound, but mainly remained outside of poetic fashions. One could say he was a poet of traditional form, not influenced by avant-gardes with their political dissidentism, and thus perhaps seemed as suitable to promote ideas of new administration.

As Donna Binkiewicz notes, inviting a poet to inauguration was not supposed to be a political act but more like a symbolic manifestation of a new style: “Kennedy initially conceived of his gesture to invite prominent artists to his inauguration as more symbolic than substantive. August

Heckscher later recalled that ‘I don’t think he [Kennedy] had any idea of the stir it would cause.’  
 “[x] And one thing he anyway could not predict: Frost did not read the poem written for inauguration. “Unfortunately, even with Lyndon Johnson trying to shield the lectern, glaring winter sunlight prevented Frost from completing his reading and forced him to conclude by reciting from memory “The Gift Outright,” a poem with a similar theme of pioneering and promise. “[xi] As the last sentence proves, Binkiewicz seems to be passing all nuances of the poems – being one of the many similar readers.

Poem written for inauguration, “Dedication”, by Robert Frost is actually untypically political in its linguistic level: he refers with a good sense of irony to politics as a game, speaks of stalemates and sports, and also takes up the issue of close elections. Even poems form hinted to irony: Although not particularly a proponent of free verse, Frost did not usually use such simplified forms which in “Dedication” sound like children’s rhyme. Whereas Kennedy let all the partisanship aside, Frost took all those controversial issues back in. It is actually not even today very common to refer to politics as game, and when done so it happens usually in a pejorative purpose, and even in this sense Frost makes an important exception. It seemed almost like, when Kennedy tried to convince his audience him being the President of the whole nation, Frost was making claims to be the poet of the party. He spoke of another America, that of dissidence and division, of Cold War America instead of a Frontier Nation of Kennedy’s.

In following lines Frost makes a poignant statement about the relationship between politics and power, both being diminished into a dirty struggle for glory for glory’s sake :

Glory is out of date in life and art.  
 Our venture in revolution and outlawry  
 Has justified itself in freedom’s story  
 Right down to now in glory upon glory.

Whereas speech restated the master narratives, Frost provided alternative models to understand America. Frost was ready to “play any game the nations want to play,” echoing the tones of *Realpolitik* which lacked mostly from speech of the president.

But poem which he actually read in occasion, “The Gift Outright”, was even harsher to political idealism: Poems first lines already lead to this pessimism: “Land was ours before we were the land’s”. Hamida Bosmajian has noticed there an evident paradox. Land was ours only in appearance; we did not really possess it. Bosmajian continues that “The nationalistic attitude does not allow the speaker to say: America has not achieved cultural harmony and she probably never will; therefore, her moment of grace is lost. But as poet he can express his deep chagrin at the loss of that promise.”[xii]

Last lines of poem reflect underlying cynicism of “Dedication”:

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
 Such as she was, such as she would become.

According to poem, nothing has much changed since the days of colonization and Augustan era of poetical glory will not come back, if it even ever was so glorious. Interesting detail shows the lack of ironical sense of President Kennedy: he wanted to change second last word from “would” to “will”, making it even more cynical, more destined to artlessness.[xiii] When brought back to its original context, the poem reveals its antipathy and cynicism against master narratives: Poem that follows “The Gift Outright”, “The Lesson for Today” in Witness Tree (1942) shows manifest

destiny as a sickness, "Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space". Whole collection of poems written in the days of war is pregnant with deep pessimism.

### 5. "On the Pulse of Morning" by Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou is probably best known for her autobiographical books, but she is also a poet, historian, songwriter, playwright, dancer, stage and screen producer, director, performer, singer, and civil rights activist. As a poet she may be counted among the most politically active Afro-American writers having participated in Civil Rights Movement from the very early stage.

Bill Clinton describes Maya Angelou's poem and its reception in his memoirs as follows: "Maya's poem, 'On the Pulse of Morning,' riveted the crowd. Built on powerful images of a rock to stand on, a river to rest by, and a tree with roots in all the cultures and kinds that make up the American mosaic, the poem issued a passionate plea in the form of a neighborly invitation".<sup>[xiv]</sup> But despite Clinton's naturalistic feelings, to ask Maya Angelou to write and perform a poem was itself an obvious political act, recognition to his African-American supporters.

Angelou's poem has not much been praised by the literary scholars; just to take one example, Marjorie Perloff called it "dreadful".<sup>[xv]</sup> But the credits of poem are not so much in its linguistical virtuosity but rather in its performance and content. Compared to Clinton's speech based on ratio and sophisticated argumentation, Angelou gives passionate performance with great pathos. Clinton's policy of term is contrasted there with politics and poetics of the moment.

Her lines in the beginning of the long poem initiate reader to poems message, to individual struggle against destiny.<sup>[xvi]</sup>

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,  
Come, you may stand upon my  
Back and face your distant destiny,  
But seek no haven in my shadow.

Destiny in poem is not relative to "manifest destiny", it is rather just the opposite, fighting individualism in spirit of Langston Hughes.

In many comments her political message was reduced her being the first black, the first woman to read a poem in inauguration. Some commentators amalgamated its visions with Clinton's speech: "When Maya Angelou read "On the Pulse of Morning," she bathed in the magic then surrounding the new administration. The poem, like the incoming president, offered the dream of hope".<sup>[xvii]</sup>

But Angelou's appeal for Native Americans, gays, homeless, Eskimos, Jews, West Africans, Muslims was actually not present in speech. However, unlike poem by Frost, Angelou's poem does not turn its back to the message of the president but rather fulfils it by taking the argument much further than Clinton could have done in his speech.

As Mary Jane Lupton has commented<sup>[xviii]</sup>, "her theatrical rendering of "On the Pulse of Morning" is, in a sense, a return to African American oral tradition [--] The ode also echoes the rhetorical grace of the African American sermon, as practiced and modified by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan." Angelou gave the speech its lacking spirit.

But there are some moments in poem which actually does not fit in with Clinton's message: As Clinton won the election at least according to most commentators because he stressed the meaning of strong economy, he argued in his speech that "we must invest more in our own

people, in their jobs, in their future, and at the same time cut our massive debt.” Clinton’s metaphors are more or less concerning the circulation of the financial sector and grand industry; Angelou writes with harsh criticism about pollution and despair when facing the environmental disaster: “The dinosaur, who left dry tokens / Of their sojourn here / On our planet floor, / Any broad alarm of their hastening doom / Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.”

It seems almost like the politician has to be Wittgensteinian – whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent - but same limitation does not concern the poet. Angelou opened Clinton’s message to more political, and therefore also more controversial, spheres.

## 6. Unintended causes of poetry: some recent examples from the politics of United States

As Max Weber has noticed, political action is newer totally manageable: “Eventual outcome of political action frequently, indeed regularly, stands in quite inadequate, even paradoxical relation to its original, intended meaning and purpose”<sup>[xix]</sup>

This contingent nature of politics prevails even more, of course, when considering linguistic level. It lies in the very essence of politics to fight with words and try to occupy uncharted areas through linguistic manoeuvres. Issues previously outside the political realm may be politicized by skilful use of language. But linguistic performances are constantly under negotiation and disagreement. As previous analysis proves, poetry is with its refined vocabulary good tool when trying to say the unsayable. Borrowing from poets therefore may sharpen the message but also opens ones own message to attacks. This was clearly shown when John Kerry, democratic nominee in 2004 elections, took his slogan from Langston Hughes, poet of the so called Harlem renaissance.<sup>[xx]</sup>

Kerry’s campaign slogan, “Let America Be America Again” was borrowed from Hughes’ poem with same name. Unfortunately, campaign organisation did not probably do their homework well enough: Slogan was easy target for republicans first of all because it made Kerry an easy target for charges of elitism; and secondly, which was more harmful, because it was written by writer who declared himself as a Stalinist. Kerry quoted poem in many occasions, but intentionally passed some embarrassing lines. It didn’t help much stating that Bush had earlier praised Langston Hughes when celebrating the National African American History Month: “This month, and throughout the year, let us celebrate and remember these stories, which reflect the history of African Americans and all Americans. We can all enjoy the works of writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes”.<sup>[xxi]</sup>

An example from the republican side shows how problematic it is to try to keep spheres of culture and politics separated from each other. Laura Bush's "Poetry and the American Voice" symposium was canceled after several prominent poets - including former U.S. poet laureates Rita Dove and Stanley Kunitz - declined her invitation. The White House feared the event would become less a literary event than a political forum. Obviously the First Lady wanted to promote her literariness and also the idea of American unity in plurality of voices, *e pluribus unum*. Some conservative observers claimed that meeting was about to be cultural, non-political and that poets politicized it. However, the idea of the symposium was to celebrate the poetry of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes and Emily Dickinson, at least first two being utmost political writers in all senses of word, and then the place, Whitehouse, non-political? "There is nothing political about American literature," Laura Bush said.<sup>[xxii]</sup>

These two examples show how unforeseeable tool poetry is, when used in politics. Putting it in terms of rough generalization, especially republicans seem to be eager to depoliticize poetry, democrats attack by repoliticizing it – demarcation which may be seen stemming from Walter Benjamin’s and Bertol Brecht’s notions of aestheticization of politics. Poetry has in many occasions, despite the political intensions to use it to simplify the message, had too complex connotations to be effective in politics. One could hope perhaps some sense of irony and nuances in politics, but they are not very easily clarified to the large audiences. Very recently, the so called “cartoon war” has dramatically shown these dangers of lacking sense of nuances and irony.

## 7. Conclusion

As previous chapters have shown, it is not an easy issue to use poetry as a tool for politics and even in most ceremonial occasions the power of language mastered by skilful poet might turn against the purposes of politician. One may also note that in order to reveal what is political in poetry one might, and I suggest, should actually ask how it is political. Most commentators have, for example, not noticed sharp irony in poem of Frost which probably went unnoticed also by the staff of the president or searched political aspects of Angelou's poem from wrong places leaving the performative and juxtapositional aspects unnoticed. Politics in poetry is not to be simplified into a simple form, but lies in various contingent elements.

Getting too close to power is of course possible threat to poets integrity, but when that opportunity is used skilfully, it provides also a chance not only to promote ones poetry, but also to promote ones views of politics and nation, implicitly or explicitly. From politicians' point of view, giving space for poetical gaming is anyhow also both threat and a chance: Their message may be crystallized in an elegant way, but may also be damaged in many ways. "Augustan era", mentioned ironically by Frost, of poetry and power going hand in hand is probably an illusion, but so is in my opinion also non-political nature of art. So if one considers these sometimes unintended meanings and causes in poetry, it makes sense for a politician to avoid using it. Plato's message when banishing the artists from his polis is still worth of study.

In the beginning of this essay I quoted Hank Lazer's characterization of contemporary poetry where he divided it into categories of formalism and political marginalism. These two strands deal with politics basically in mirroring ways: in first one politics is sort of aesthetized away, in second aesthetics is politicized thoroughly. As Donald Marshall has, in my opinion correctly, noticed, famous argument of Walter Benjamin concerning aestheticization of politics and politicization of aesthetics is leading nowhere: both forms leave arts as a minor part or even as a tool for political designs and as Marshall notes, both socialistic realism and national socialist art are not real art but kitsch. <sup>[xxiii]</sup> As a play with language and form one could see politics and poetry more like analogical forms of invention and creation of meaning. From this perspective, poetry and politics wouldn't neutralize each other but could be treated as occasional partners, not as hostile rivals or negligent strangers.

### Notes

<sup>[i]</sup> Walt Whitman, "Preface to 'Leaves of Grass'", in *Literary criticism in America*, ed. Albert Van Nostrand (New York, Liberal Arts Press. 1957), p. 114.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Hank Lazer, "The Politics of Form and Poetry's Other Subjects: Reading Contemporary American Poetry", in *American Literary History* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Autumn 1990), 503-527 p. 504.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Speeches in the internet: <http://www.bartleby.com/124/>

<sup>[iv]</sup> About republican tradition in American politics, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1975)

<sup>[v]</sup> Bill Clinton, *My Life*. (Westminster, MD: Knopf Publishing Group, 2005), p 375.

<sup>[vi]</sup> Dan Brown, "Poetry in Politics. John Kerry's poetic gamble". CBC News Online | July 26, 2004. In <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/features/poetryinpolitics/>

<sup>[vii]</sup> Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics", in *Max Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1994) 309-369, pp. 352-353)

[viii] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber 1950), pp. 124-125.

[ix] All quotations are from Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged* (Henry Holt and co. 1979). “The Gift Outright” p. 348, “The Lesson for today” p. 350 and “Dedication” p. 291.

[x] Binkiewicz, Donna M., *Federalizing the Muse* (Chapel Hill, NC, USA: University of North Carolina Press 2004), p 45.

[xi] Binkiewicz, p 43.

[xii] Hamida Bosmajian, “Robert Frost’s ‘ The Gift Outright’ : Wish and Reality in History and Poetry” (*American Quarterly* , Vol 22, No. 1. Spring 1970, pp. 95-105), p. 100.

[xiii] Bosmajian, p. 100.

[xiv] Clinton, p 478.

[xv] Marjorie Perloff “The Coming of Age of Language Poetry” in *Contemporary Literature* XXXVIII, 3 (1997), 558-568, p. 565.

[xvi] Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Random House, 1994), p. 269.

[xvii] Mary Jane Lupton, *Maya Angelou : A Critical Companion*. (Westport, CT, Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 1998), p. 17.

[xviii] Lupton, p. 18.

[xix] Weber, p. 355.

[xx] See more in Brown 2004.

[xxi] Quoted in <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/02/20010201-2.html>

[xxii] Discussed in several papers, here is a link to The Nation’s article: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20030224/pollitt>

[xxiii] Donald Marshall, “‘Death Is the Mother of Beauty’: Aesthetics, Politics, and History in Gadamer” in Steve Martinot, Ed. *Maps and Mirrors: Topologies of Art and Politics*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 2001).



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