Walking Forward in a Poet’s Light

By RANDY MALAMUD

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER had some tough competition for her inaugural poem, "Praise Song for the Day." It was just one part of an almost overwhelming multimedia cavalcade of aesthetic, rhetorical, political, and historical experiences. It took its place among John Williams's exuberant music (also written for this ceremony) "Air and Simple Gifts", Rev. Joseph E. Lowery's engaging benediction, the intense sonic bundle of Washington crowds, iconography, and public architecture, and of course, the hardest imaginable act to follow, the brilliantly moving oratory of President Barack Obama’s inaugural address—and she did, actually, immediately follow that.

But Alexander did her part, and she did it well. The Yale professor, incoming chair of African-American studies and author of five books of poetry and two collections of critical essays, is only the fourth poet invited to read at an inauguration (following Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, and Miller Williams), and it strikes my fellow humanities as a promising omen that the new president values and promotes the arts so prominently.

Speaking in November on a Poetry Foundation podcast, Alexander expressed her respect for Obama’s attention to words: "From the very beginning, in his public utterances, we've seen that Obama is someone who takes great care with language, who understands that language is the medium that we travel in. It's what we have to communicate with each other. And so his words have always been unusually precise, unusually careful, and certainly beautiful but not for beauty's sake.”

"This is someone who appears to care about poetry itself," she said, noting that he was photographed three days after the election carrying Derek Walcott's Collected Poems. "Poets just absolutely couldn't believe that...a few days after being elected president, to find the time for contemplation that poetry provides.”

Like most of Alexander's poetry, "Praise Song for the Day" is at first glance conversational, understated—a pasteiche of ordinary images. It doesn't convey a heavily worked poetics (rhyme, meter, traditional sonnet form). Instead, her distinctive voice is achieved through subtle rhythms and resonances. Notice, for example, her consciously woven repetition of key words and concepts: “praise,” “song,” “words,” “love.”

Especially striking, she frequently repeats the simple word “we,” accented through the device of asaphs (a word echoed at the beginning of a series of clauses) to emphasize our commonality as a culture.

Alexander invokes the poet’s occasion, simply but effectively, near the end: “In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, anything can be made, any sentence begun.” Making reference to the season, the weather, indicates that the poem was written for this specific moment in time. It strikes me as interesting, by contrast, how much of the

Praise Song for the Day
A Poem for Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration

By ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our encounters on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin.

We encounter each other in words, words
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
the will of some one and then others, who said
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.
We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plainly that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,
picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that can't be an ending pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
anything can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brink, on the cup,
praise song for walking forward in that light.

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occasion’s concrete and historic backdrop is not in this poem: not Obama’s image, not the fact of his having broken barriers that many thought would never fall in our lifetimes, not any allusion (except perhaps cries so subtly in the final images of “the brink,” “the brim,” “the cup”) to the crises of the day.

That is typical of Alexander’s aesthetic: foregrounding the small, everyday details as opposed to the epic and heroic. Perhaps she believes it is easier for the common reader to relate to the great stories she tells about American culture, and thus to tap into and take part in them, if she writes them on a more pedestrian scale, looking at microcosmic rather than macrocosmic aspects of the narrative at hand. (See the sequence “Amistad,” in her 2005 volume American Sandstone, for a compelling example of this approach.)

And so her inaugural poem does not loudly trumpet the immense social achievement of the day—probably she realized that the speaker who preceded her would convey a pretty adequate sense of the day’s awe. Instead, like Walt Whitman, she asks us to envision America by thinking about a panoply of common citizens: a farmer, a mother and son, migrant workers, bridge builders, a protestor.

William Shakespeare, in “Praise Song for the Day,” ends as an observation that probably depends on how well President Obama himself stands the test of time. If he ends up presiding over a period like FDR’s New Deal or Kennedy’s Camelot, if he cuts a figure comparable to Lincoln and Washington (and after a tear-jerking day watching the ceremony on television, I’ll bet yes on all counts), then the poem, hitched to Obama’s wagon, will serve as a keon textual artifact, a somber reminder of the day that, as we’ve all been telling our children, they will someday tell their own children about.

There are lots of lines and devices that I find inspired: “A teacher says, Take out yourselv.”. Begin.” I like the way Alexander here parallels the incredibly difficult challenge Obama confronts today and the smaller, more imminent challenges we all face every time we take a test. It’s as if she’s saying: Just as we have all done that, so he, and we can do this, too.

“Someone is stitching up a hem, darning/a hole in a uniform, patching a tire/repairing the things in need of repair.”

In those lines, Alexander delicately conveys how profoundly broken American society has become, what a mess President George W. Bush has left his successor, but she chooses the quiet metaphor over the cataclysmic political accusation, making this poem more unifying (as befits a “praise song”) than partisan.

Even when Alexander reminds us that “many have died for this day,” we automatically recall Martin Luther King Jr., Emmett Till, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner; the girls from the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, and so many others, the poem doesn’t stoke the flames of mourning or anger. Instead, as befits the transcendent occasion, she ends with an eloquently abstract image that captures the progress, the uplifting, that so many Americans expect to see in this presidency: “walking forward in that light.”

The poem is pervasively about language and expression: “speaking,” “noisy,” “tongues”; “music,” “song,” “pencil,” “words/spicy or smooth, whispered or declaimed,” “hand-lettered sign,” and so on. As a poet, Alexander richly voices her sense of the day’s unbridled potential—any sentence may be begun—by parading the tools of her craft. She thus invites all the rest of us, with our own tools, to join in the task at hand, and to walk forward together.

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