

Cheshire Poetics

My statement of poetics is going to be a personal narrative of sorts. I spent my twenties (during the 1970's) in the Bay Area—at one of the origin points for what came to be known as “Language poetry” and I am, of course, one of the people associated with that group. Most of you know that—but when you know that, what do you know? This group is as varied, as diverse as any poetic school you can think of. So I want to look farther back—at what first drew me to poetry. When I was a teenager I was given an anthology, and the poets I most loved there were William Carlos Williams and Emily Dickinson. So I was drawn to poems that seemed as if they were either going to vanish or explode—to extremes, in other words, radical poetries. But how do we define “radical?” Perhaps by how much is put at risk in the text, how far the arc of implication can reach and still seem apt. But so much rides, as always, on that word “seems.” Is a writing radical when it risks being wrong, when it acknowledges our wrongness? I think my poetry involves an equal counterweight of assertion and doubt. It's a Cheshire poetics, one that points two ways then vanishes in the blur of what is seen and what is seeing, what can be known and what it is to know. That double-bind. But where was I?

I was saying that I discovered Williams (and the other Imagists) early on and was very much moved by them. By what, though? I would say now it was by their attempt to make the object speak, to put things in dialogue with mind and somehow make them hold up their end of the conversation. This is both an important project and a doomed one. The world enters the poem only through a kind of ventriloquy. *Thing* and *idea* don't really merge, as the poets themselves knew. That red wheelbarrow is essentially separate from the “so much” that depends upon it. But there is so much poignancy in that gap! It is as if the Imagist poet wants to spin around suddenly and catch the world unaware, in dishevelment, see it as it is when we're not looking. And how can we not want that?

One of my favorite Williams poems is “The Attic Which Is Desire.” This poem does an amazing balancing act; it is simultaneously a realist depiction of an urban scene and an apotheosis of projected desire.

The Attic Which is Desire

the unused tent
of

bare beams
beyond which

directly wait
the night

and day—
Here

from the street
by

S
O
D
A

ringed with
running lights

the darkened
pane

exactly
down the center

is
transfixed

I encountered this poem when I was quite young and discovering sexuality. I understood that narrow, vaginal column of text, transfixed by the ejaculatory soda, as an amazing embodiment. I loved the way the poem was both about orgasm and about seeing the lights of a sign reflected in a dark window. In other words, I liked its doubleness. That's not a term usually associated with Imagism, perhaps. As Bob Perelman has pointed out, Pound praised H.D.'s writing by saying it was "straight as the Greek" and with no "slither." It took me awhile to see the gynophobia behind such rhetoric. I wanted my Imagism and my slither too. My precision and my doubleness.

My earliest published poems were minimalist and neo-Imagist. A good example would be "View."

View

Not the city lights. We want
—the moon—

The Moon

none of our own doing!

Looking back on it now, I see an exacerbated form of the doubleness which interested me in Williams's "Attic." "View" has not only two meanings, but two dissonant meanings. On the one hand, "we" (an already suspect first person plural) want to see the moon as separate from our own activity (a bit of the world caught unawares). On the other hand, our yearning is framed by deflating clichés. To want the moon is to want the impossible. Our thrust toward the non-human moon can't escape the gravity of received language. The purportedly single voice of the nature lover and the words of a somewhat cynical crowd seem to collide.

So this is a poetics of collisions and overlaps, contested spaces. The border of the public and private is just such a contested space. To use dream imagery in a poem, for instance, is to expose something private, but what if a recent film inspired the dream? As I have become increasingly conscious of such contested spaces and the voices that articulate them, my poems have become somewhat longer and more complicated.

The concept of voice has long been associated with poetry. We all hear voices, on the radio, in the newspaper, in memory. As Whitman says, "I contain multitudes." As Satan says, "My name is legion." Various voices speak in my poems. I code-shift. I am many things: a white person, a working class person with roots in the South, a woman, an academic of sorts, a '60s person who still likes rock and roll, someone who was raised on the Bible, a skeptic, etc. My voices manifest their own social unrest. In the last decade or so, academics have been raising the question of who speaks in literary works, who speaks and for whom. There is a contemporary poetry which enacts these same questions. Consider my poem, "The Creation."

The Creation

Impressions
bribe or threaten
in order to live.

Retreating palisades
offer
a lasting
previousness.

Let us
move fast
enough, in a small
enough space, and
our travels
will take first
shape, then substance.

In the beginning
there was measurement.

How much
does self-scrutiny
resemble mother-touch?

Die Mommy scum!

To come true,
a thing must come second.

In the third and fourth stanzas, a Biblical voice and the voice of scientific reason overlap in a farcical attempt to account for origin. In the final stanza, a third voice, apparently that of a child, breaks in. This voice seems to have a more immediate authority. But the last statement, "To come true/a thing must come second," while it may sound true, also makes truth secondary. Such declarative statements have a "truth-effect," like a false bottom, which gives way on second thought. There is, in fact, no voice which can be trusted in this poem. Mine is a poetics of the double take, the crossroads.

As I looked over my poems, trying to extract a "poetics" for this talk, I noticed how often my poems parody and undermine some voice of social control. My poem, "A Story" might be an example of that.

A Story

Despite our infractions
we are loved
by the good mother
who speaks carefully:

"I love you, but I don't
like the way you lie there
pinching your nipples
while I'm trying to read you a story."

Once there was an old lady who told her son she must go to the doctor because she was bleeding down there. She didn't look alarmed, but suppressed a smile, as if she were "tickled," as if she were going to get away with something. "Look," said the doctor, "you are confusing infraction with profusion. Despite may be divided into two equal segments: Exceptional and Spiteful."

But the stubborn old woman just answered, "When names perform a function, that's fiction."

The characters of the Good Mother and the Doctor here try to keep things in their proper places. They want pleasure postponed, categories upheld. The Child who pinches her nipples and the Stubborn Old Woman who thinks a name is a fiction are skeptics and dissidents. There is a way in which I am all of these characters—the doctor and the mother as well as the rebellious old woman and the child. These power struggles begin in the public sphere and are reenacted in private. The mother is charged with reproducing the social (linguistic) body within the single body of the child. Having been both mother and daughter, I have a vivid sense of the pain this involves. Clearly, gender has a lot to do with the power struggles in my poems. Increasingly so perhaps.

Would Pound have seen such identity confusion as a kind of distasteful "slither?" Well, let me appropriate an ally by invoking a Dickinson poem I love—one with plenty of slither.

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A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met Him—did you not
His notice sudden is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre
A floor too cool for Corn—
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash

Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality—

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

Pound called for "direct treatment of the thing" and this certainly isn't that. Dickinson never identifies what she's seen as a snake. She first personifies it, rather comically, as a fellow. (Note the mock casualness, the mock intimacy there. Dickinson is mistress/master of sinister humor.) The snake is then Him, capitalized like God. Subsequently it appears as a comb, a rather phallic shaft, and a whiplash. It is gendered male—but then so is Dickinson—she presents herself as a boy. So the gender dynamic is complex. There is more going on than a virginal fear of penetration. The last two lines evoke vividly the fear the snake arouses—but I would argue that, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, the snake is the real hero of the poem. Dickinson's persona, the barefoot boy, is just too cordial with "Nature's People."

There's something almost Norman Rockwell-esque about this boy, reaching to "secure" whatever he sees. He deserves the unsecurable, eerie snake who "occasionally rides." Dickinson, I would argue, is at least as much the snake as the boy. Her poems reveal the fissures in identity and ideology.

And now back to me. There's no good segue from Dickinson. But, in their own way, I think, my poems enact such fissures. They are composed of conflicting voices. Formally, too, they are often disjunctive. The relation between stanza and stanza or section and section is often oblique, multiple or partial. This isn't an accident. It's a way to explore the relation of part to whole. This relation is a vexed one. Does the part represent the whole? Is metaphor fair to the matter it represents? Does representative democracy work? I think of my poetry as inherently political. (Though it is not a poetry of opinion.) In an optimistic mood, one might see the multiple, optional relations of parts in such work as a kind of anarchic cooperation.

Finally, poetry, at least the poetry I value, can reproduce our conflicts and fractures and yet be held together in the ghost embrace of assonance and consonance, in the echoed and echoing body of language.