

On (Open): Merging Form and Meaning in Contemporary Poetics
Reading Ann Lauterbach, Elizabeth Willis, Lisa Fishman and Pam Rehm

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*By my Window have I for Scenery
Just a sea—with a Stem—
If the Bird and the Farmer—deem it a “Pine”—
The Opinion will serve—for them—*

*It has no Port, nor a “Line”—but the Jays—
That split their route to the Sky—
Or a Squirrel, whose giddy Peninsula
May be easier reached—this way—*

—Emily Dickinson

The image that stands out most for me in the history of poetry is Emily Dickinson’s “sea with a stem,” or in other words, the “pine tree,” she glimpsed from her bedroom window. Having never seen the actual ocean, she saw its image both metaphorically, and in abstraction. How, we as readers ask, is a pine tree the same as a sea? They look nothing alike. A sea is vast and fluid; a pine tree holds solid form, has branches and needles, etc. However, if we decide not to consider detail, if we look simply at the tree for the shape it makes, then how it relates to being a sea begins to come into focus. A pine tree points upward, as an arrow, into another, vast, fluid mass of considerably unknown quantity. Here is the sea, with its stem, the trunk held firm to the ground and its root, the system of branches, exposed to view. The pine tree contains branches, systems of movement, current, and needles, which, on the sea, remind me of the compass needle. Dickinson’s imaging takes two very different entities and draws them into a parallel relationship, making them metaphorical and at the same time, unburdened by specific form. The sea and the pine tree begin to look the same, because they mean the same.

Image is not description alone. It is how we glean information from the world around us, and also from the poem. Today, because of Dickinson's "sea with a stem," an image that succeeded in "taking the top of my head off," I ask every new poem I read, did you too succeed in merging image with meaning; did you see further than just the surface of the objects in your poems? I find that few poems, or poets, have the same concerns that Dickinson seemed to have.

Narrative in poetry tends to narrate description alone, whether by being linear and realistic or by attempting to break traditional narrative flow. Some narrative poetry might even use tricks of juxtaposition, pun, and sound sense to deepen its meaning, but few poets, for me, succeed at merging form, what a poem or an image looks like, with what the poem or the image means. I expect poetry to use its images or its words, to give me hints about how language is working, in the poem and in the world. I want to see how it exists on the page and I want to feel that it also exists as a concept, as a law of gravity, as a theory of mathematics, in the world. This is how *I* know it is poetry. There are few poets who have struck my eye and ear, with their sense of form and meaning in poetry. Ann Lauterbach, Elizabeth Willis, Lisa Fishman and Pam Rehm are some of those few.

On Ann Lauterbach

Ann Lauterbach has often discussed her theory on how the fragment, as a fragment, also creates a whole. This idea seems to be her response to how it is possible to write both image and meaning at the same time. Metaphor itself does not stand alone to contain

these two types of information. Something external, form based or other, must exist outside it, to put pressure on it. The poem, “On (Open),” in Lauterbach’s collection *On a Stair*, looks at first to be a series of unrelated fragments, but by the time we reach the bottom of the list, the “story” becomes clear. Metaphor and simile are not written out in the lines, but fall in the gaps between them. An “island” is “as a circle,” and we see their relationship, not because it is stated directly, but because it is drawn out by their parallel positions in the line, one on top of the other, almost like a slant rhyme for image. Fragments become whole, in large part, because of what she did not say.

ON (Open)

Sheaf or sheet or sheer (hearing
 a turn closer than
 an island, proportion of mind
 as a circle (sorrow comes round
 voracious and pungent
girl meets boy the waiting emblem
 geography’s spirit (too close to count)
 and a hint of mercy in the weeds, the goodly weeds,
 the wand of the keeper
 (circus in town, hand of a stranger)
 weighted tents open to all.
 Nothing is optional. Nothing closed.

Looking closer at the entire poem, we can find that words act, not just as things, but as entities derivative of meaning. Lauterbach herself points out what she recognized in the first lines, that certain words contain gender. We can even get an idea of the sex of the speaker, not from admissions by or about the “I,” as each individual word is in some way, also an individual “I,” but from hints the words bring to us through anagram. “The opening words (“sheaf/sheet/sheer”) all contain the word *she*.” Lauterbach continues,

“The word hearing, which follows, alerts the reader to listen to the words rather than just notice them as things” (Kane 107).

Things have a fixed position in a poem, how we listen to those things, shifts, is “open.” Perception seems to come to us as breath comes, or as the eye, blinking, strings images together in a syntax that is always shifting, depending upon where we are facing in space. There are small gaps as we inhale, changes as we exhale, microseconds lost as we blink and readjustments to space as we open our eyes. To experience language this way is perhaps to be more honest about how we exist as temporal beings. Language, we all know, can betray us. Shakespeare’s fool is constantly reminding us of this, and so are Lauterbach’s mimes, clowns, and circus men.

On Elizabeth Willis

Elizabeth Willis is a poet who, like Lauterbach, employs the use of fragment to bind her images through shifted, or sifted meaning. She considers the way words fit into one another through sound, alliteration, consonance, and tone. She says of her own work, “I became fascinated by the ways in which lines arranged themselves around a focal point—generally grounded in sound and the underlying affiliations between words rather than events...” (“Working Notes”). Her poems, in other words, are textual, tactile, and of a sensory quality. Relationships are listened to, held up to the light of the ear, primarily, secondarily to the eye. Action takes place in an auditory space, rather than, as she says, in a space of “event” alone.

Loving the human bird—
 the bright converse
 of yellow-flowered grasses—
 why aren't we lying
 in miles of weedy clover?
 The bright boat, tumbling through it
 the blue of it—Or,
 taking the kid out of the picture
 (what you loved to see)
 a girl who talks to birds—Don't go
 Let's delay or—like Shakespeare—"fly"
 all disappointment
 in the green and untidy
 molecular air

The eighth of Willis's *Eight Untitled Sonnets* is continually shifting one image into another image, one space of meaning, into another. For instance, the "human" becomes a "bird," the "yellow-flowered grasses" become "weedy clover," which in turn becomes water a boat tumbles through and then a picture, and then sight again (the picture preserving "what you loved to see," back to birds, not human birds, just birds, flying (the blue water is now the blue sky, which turns "green and untidy" and "molecular." Are these images open or solid form? How do their molecules move?

The final two lines of the poem, the traditional sonnet's refrain, could easily be read as the location of the first two lines, or as our starting point. The images play the magic trick of turning out of themselves and once we have read the poem a second time, turning back into themselves. The comparisons are complete only when the poem has been read twice.

On Lisa Fishman

Lisa Fishman's, "Dear, Read," uses the way language shifts to determine a sense of identity in her poems. Like Willis, Fishman acknowledges that what is important in poetry is not just the ways in which words tell a literal story, but the ways in which words shape themselves into a story, the permutation of sound into meaning, how the origins of words echo in association, the story that is told in underlay to the story (we know) we are telling.

Vein
 I have another
 an other have I—
 self, leafs
 without a

In her poem, *Vein*, we find that the "I" and "you" are a kind of palindrome, through anagram, —without what? Without a division perhaps, without a designated self or other, because both are the self, at least in writing, the various veins all lead to the same whole, without an article to implicate the parts.

Also implicit in Fishman's work is the idea that words are physical or material, that they come through sound from the body, are in fact, part of the body. This allows me to believe that the way words arrange themselves, through sound, through association, through relation to the origin of the body, is something that is beyond any definition we might try to impose on them. As Fishman seems to suggest in her writing, all we can do is listen, place letters near one another, allow them to make new arrangements, see how

they are related, not just through rhyme, but through anagram, shared letters, syllables, shapes and textures.

The “I” in Fishman’s poetry, both address the reader and the self as what is written, what is read, and who is reading. She asks, “is a is a / name the making of / logic → identity?” And deconstructs her own name, “I Sail,” or I, Lisa, sail. She shifts as the letters in her name shift, identity spilling out of the words themselves.

On Pam Rehm

“Why can’t I ever say believed itself in the center?” Rehm asks in her poem, *In Another Place* and this line itself strikes me as the best example of how image and meaning merge in her writing. Between the words “say” and “believe” the thing that “can’t” exists. The parallel between the missing thing’s location in the poem and the actual saying “in the center” is a nearly perfect example of how a poem’s form teaches us to read that poem’s meaning. It causes me to ask, “What is saying?” “What is believing?” “What falls into the gap between them?” Does this exist, “In Another Place?” The poem continues:

The sky is our walk constantly
around the earth. Likewise, motionless
to whatever god there was a temple.
I approached the steps with only arms. Extended.

As we know, straight lines could be arcs of
great circles. To be found if lights
are provided.

In relation to these two stanzas the meaning of the line becomes even clearer. Two points are too far from one another for us to see them both clearly. Or as Wittgenstein says, “What is mirrored in language we cannot use language to express.” Lauterbach’s addition, “It is us” (“Found Credo”). What is missing in this poem is what language cannot transgress. It is unreachable by who we are. Even the arms at the temple, extended, cannot fathom the length it would take to reach from one end to the other end of, the universe, the earth, the curve of a line, etc.

The first stanza accesses language in yet another type of collision of form and meaning. Here the motion of walking, because it is *constant*, becomes “motionless”. Two things exist at the same time, and in a way, as one another. Metaphor states that “this is the same as this,” yet separates them in time and space. What Rehm adds, is the ability for those two comparisons to co-exist, to aid and at the same time, to cancel one another. As in Dickinson, a tree is an arrow, is a sea, is an opening, is a root pointing upwards. The image becomes a palimpsest of itself, and in Rehm, also a palindrome, a line, the equator, circling back on itself or beginning in either direction.

On (Open)

What does all of this mean for poetry today? What would it mean to Emily Dickinson? I would never dare to say that Lauterbach, Willis, Fishman and Rehm are of the same tradition as Dickinson. I don’t even think that that’s true; however, I do believe that what all of these poets are and were concerned with, is of a similar vein. While metaphor exists to clarify, it also has a tendency to limit the truth in a given situation. When we

use metaphor, we are trying to make known what is, as of yet, unknowable. This new experience is *like*, what I've experienced in this situation. A pine tree is like a sea. A pine tree is a sea. Without taking this parallel a step further, the situation bears no clarification in my mind as a reader. What must be understood is that two abstractions are being related. What is concrete between them is their relationship as images. What they bear in common, is the abstraction they are relying on one another to express. Poets who have experienced with their entire being, sight, sound, sense, etc. from one word or one image in a poem, understand that what we are writing, is both the telling, and the un-telling, of a story. And that story is not found just in the lines of the poem, or in its rhythm or breadth of description, or in its imagery, but also in its ability to make a word be what it means, as well as, be what it images.

Ernest Fellonosa, in his essay, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* says that "A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only terminal points, or rather the meeting of points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things..."(511). If we keep in mind how "things" act in the world we can develop a better sense of how "things" (words) have new possibility in poetry. And this, I believe, is what Dickinson meant all along.

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