

Into the Open: A Way Forward for Cascadia Poetry

I'm still thinking about the notion of how Seattle, with its strong commitment to reading and literacy, has never birthed an innovative movement in writing. In my last post I wrote:

Seattle has been a conservative poetry town without any innovative movements indigenous to the town. (Vancouver has had TISH and Portland, Reed College poets like Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch (Dharma Eco-Poetics Trev Carolan likes to call it) and later, Leslie Scalapino LANGPO). Roethke by the time of "In a Dark Time" had not yet abandoned formalism and by 1963 this is a good 50 years into Modernism and perhaps another 18 or so since the advent of Postmodernism!

And I've this sense that any innovation will have as one of its qualities, being open. Which takes me to a couple of places. My June 12, 1994, interview of Allen Ginsberg revealed this beautiful piece on the Open as practiced by Walt Whitman:

Whitman was the first major world poet, aside from Poe, who had tremendous penetration around the world, incidentally. But he was the one that introduced a whole new language of open form, vernacular talk, exuberance and self-empowerment, very democratically into the literatures of all the countries in the world, from up to China in 1919. There were a couple of poets, Guo Moruo and Ai Qing who translated Whitman for the first time, and it had a tremendously energizing effect on poetry all over the world, even for the surrealists and the futurists in Russia, 1907 – 1910.

And in America he's 'like a mountain too vast to be seen,' which is what I've said a number of times, and that we take him for granted. But if any kid, at the age of 15, 16, sits down and reads through all of Whitman in a couple weeks, beginning to end [laughs] is-, it'd be like taking acid. It just opens up the head and you know, gives a breath of fresh air into the heart, especially. In this recognition of oneself as open and as friendly and as tolerant as Whitman, himself. Secrets that one kept to oneself about Eros or cowardness or one's one idiocy, are all revealed in Whitman in a way that makes them into transparent humor and generosity and exuberance, and friendliness. So it leads people to become friendly to themselves and friendly to others. It's all sort of a energizing and uplifting, in a very interesting

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way, and it's only in the last 20 years that Whitman has finally begun to find his place in America as a kind of hero. At first it was the literary idea, 'Oh, he didn't write in rhymes and verses and stanzas like Longfellow, so he couldn't be a superior writer.' And he's obviously, an awkward, crude provincial jerk-off individual that didn't know what he was doing literarily. And yet the style of open form became an international style, whereas the more limited Longfellow style was really just limited to the 19th Century, basically. And as imitations of classic meters from Greek and Latin but sort of by putting American literature into a kind of a corset or a straightjacket. So Whitman got out of that straightjacket, mentally and physically in the first line and inspired a whole new wave of poets, including Ezra Pound, who felt he was more sophisticated but really finally had to come around and say, 'I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman. I've been pigheaded long enough.' And of course, that goes into William Carlos Williams who began experimenting with living vernacular idiomatic American-ese and that influenced everybody, including me and Robert Creeley and Kerouac and just the whole world of poetry. Even Robert Lowell, the academic poet, champ, finally in the '50s, opened up his verse form so he could speak in American-ese and use the cadences that you use when you're talking...

And while Ginsberg's description of Whitman (and just the process of interviewing him) opened huge new realms for me, the notion of the Open continues to reveal more energy and complexity and yet I do not fully understand it or its history. Here we are, just past the turn of the century (and millennium) and fishing through the remnants of the last century for a guide as to what's happening and what's to come. Of course no era gets a clear description until it is history itself, and trying to name something is usually inspired by the notion of trying to control it, but I am looking for a way forward in poetry that gathers the best of what's happening now, in our society, as species go extinct daily and the climate system fights us back. Looking for the innovative impulse that actually catalyzes something. I'd be happy for that search to have its effect on me, but I do sense a profound "hunger for liberation" to use Michael McClure's words and I suspect something large is in the offing.

Google *Open Form* and find the Wikipedia entry:

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Open form is a term coined by Heinrich Wölfflin in 1915 to describe a characteristic of Baroque art opposed to the "closed form" of the Renaissance... In an open form, which is characteristic of 17th-century painting, the style "everywhere points out beyond itself and purposely looks limitless", in contrast to the self-contained entity of a closed form, in which everything is "pointing everywhere back to itself..."

And this is what it really comes down to. Robin Blaser called what he and Jack Spicer were doing *The Practice of Outside* and this notion led them to the serial poem. I think this is about as open as you can get, writing the serial poem and knew that instinctively when I set out to write *A Time Before Slaughter*. That Cascadian poets would jump on this is a testament to the quality of the consciousness here. Blaser would relocate to Cascadia in 1965 and become one of the most celebrated and honored poets, creating a huge mark with his serial poem *The Holy Forest* and his collected essays *The Fire*. Spicer's Vancouver lectures are some of the best statements on poetics ever, certainly some of the most salient ever given in this bioregion and the new edition of his collected poems sold more copies in Vancouver than in any other city besides Spicer's native San Francisco.

In an interview I conducted August 24, 2012, with Nate Mackey, he elaborated on the appeal of the serial poem, that it was open and that:

...you're groping your way, you're feeling your way. You have a bit of light, you go into the poem with some sense of what you're doing and what you wish to say, but you also leave yourself open to the information you get from the poem itself in the act of writing and the act of exploring and thinking about writing. You find out what the work might want to say that you hadn't necessarily intended to say. So it's kind of a dialogue with the work, more of a dialogue with the work than a certain other model of writing might propose, which is that you are in command, you are in control and you simply have to find the technical means of executing your will...

Using the act of writing to figure out what you think. For the closed as described by Heinrich Wölfflin, this is perhaps an absurd notion. To find out what I think, why do I need to go "outside of myself?" I am kind of stunned by the effect on me of this kind of poetry, the high the open gives, but also by the closed feeling I get from poets who have learned to

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manipulate feelings. Those honed by being involved in the poetry Slam community are especially egregious. There is a manipulation in the work. It's not the open, inviting you in and giving you enough space in the work to decide for yourself what to take and how to respond, but it wants you to feel a specific emotion. It's like the bad movies that have the violin music that subliminally says: "FEEL SAD NOW." I can feel my body close down when I hear work like this. I yawn and it's almost as if something in me has gone into a sort of passive self-defense mode. I'm stunned as to why others don't get this and, thinking about it, it sort of feels like some vodou being practiced. It is and my body knows it before my head does just like my summer hat knows a breeze has arrived before I do.

The Body

This brings me to another facet critical to the work here as it goes ahead. It has to be embodied. As we wade through the wreckage of empire and capitalism and their symptoms, environmental degradation, mass species extinction, climate system chaos, water shortages, climate refugees and any number of other looming catastrophes the one constant we each have is our body, its sense of where it is in the world (i.d.'d by Olson's interest in the concept of proprioception) and how it is divine feedback device for the mind's patterns with the notion of pain as a corrective mechanism. How it's our link to the larger body we inhabit. The mind separate from the body is what allows such catastrophes to happen. Seattle poet Judith Roche would write that could be mistaken as a poem to her late beloved teacher Robert Duncan in the poem "Dear Robert"

Now when I talk to you I feel on the edge of something cold
trembling on the lip of the sickness you sustain,
your body out of control and eating itself
and I want to say to you, it's not that I ignore
your wheel of suffering and unspeakable damage,
but that we are bigger than our bodies (easier to say
than to live when the house is falling down).
Whatever feeds the nest of the fire inside we need
and what diminishes the flame we don't... (27)

As Pound said that abstractions have to be earned, when we stray too far away from the meat in any matter, we lose the ground. This impulse leads us to what Vancouver poet Trevor Carolan would tell me in an interview

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was an important quality in the Eco-Dharma school of poetry, strong in Cascadia. That would be *compassion*, a quality which feeds that nest of flame Roche would allude to in her Duncan tribute, itself an allusion to a 1964 Robert Duncan poem “STRUCTURE OF RIME XXV” in which he said:

beings strive in the Sun’s
chemistry as we strive in our meat to realize images of manhood
immanent we have not reached, but leave, as if they fell from us... (37)

Duncan always after the noble human impulse in his writing, but it’s the meat striving he understands is at the core of the truly poetic impulse and one so necessary when the large body to which we all return is under siege from the cancerous requirements of capitalism, empire and the need for domination and other such impulses. When the open impulse is combined with the kinesthetic intelligence, the *sh’te* as Vancouver poet Daphne Marlatt would call it, from the Japanese, the *inhabiting presence* can sing *through us* and we don’t even need to understand. An heuristic prolusion, Lissa Wolsak (also Vancouver) has called it. This sense would lead to the *transhuman* impulse Wolsak would also be after, or Michael McClure’s mammal patriotism, affinity with all the creatures that breathe, including the planet breathing in and out with the tides. One gets that sense from the work written in this way, call it Open, or The Practice of Outside, or Experimental Lyric. A field emits from the work and on some level we recognize it. The disembodied, fun as it can be if you’re into mind candy (as Sam Hamill calls it), is an extravagance the planet requires us to transcend for the sake of the species. The planet, a living body itself, will find a way to survive as I suspect it has done in the past. But more immediately, in this time of great velocity, the karmic payback for thought patterns has quickened as well, so our own health and well-being is at stake as individuals in a culture poisoned by the requirements of capitalism.

A recent presentation at the AWP¹ entitled “Magic and the Intellect” in which the panelist reportedly said that when one casts a spell, special words and objects are used and then “something happens in the world.” Said panelist went on to read a segment of her work that quotes a number of dead baby jokes and the happening that was created was an outburst by at least one audience member who did not care for her brand of “magic.” The panelist was reported to get a standing ovation, but I am sure “something

¹ <http://naomijwilliams.wordpress.com/2014/02/28/magic-and-the-intellect-a-remarkable-occurrence-at-awp-2014/>

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happens in the world” when we do a number of things like shit in a paper bag, light the bag on fire on a neighbor’s porch and ring the doorbell and other tricks we might have played in 7th grade. I’m reminded of the parlor tricks of “shamans” who end up fucking their students. Black magic. Also reminded of section of a prose poem by Juan Carlos Flores (translated by Kristin Dykstra) called “The chameleon” which says:

Magician of cheap magic, if I practice magic, it’s because I’d like to be able to turn myself into an idiot, nothing gives me more pleasure than rolling little balls with me laryngo-nasal fluids and other fluids, sticking them into everything that could serve as a medium, materialist art, liberation of the materialist artist, the only and last material artist (109).

A far cry from Jack Spicer’s late 50s San Francisco Magic Workshop in which he’d give an assignment like: “write a poem that should create a universe.” The black magic separation of the mind from the body is separation of the human from the environment. Same as separation of thinking from experience that’s plagued Western culture for too long and is in dire need of the kind of antidote we expect from poets, artists, visionaries, culture workers. Look at this, by comparison.

In meditation, our legs disappeared.

says Vancouver poet Jen Currin in the poem “The Surprising Play.” She also says: “I wished I could bring/ myself to like a book as much as the mountains.” While she gets no standing ovation, this is an image that will stick with you. This will give the young person who has not experienced meditation something to shoot for should they initiate their own practice. A prehension of mountains so deep, the “I” begins to fade. Such is the practice of outside when what’s “I” and “not I” gets harder to discern. Marlatt in the description of a workshop she would facilitate talks about language being the sill between the outer an inner worlds. Language as attempt to negotiate that edge between distinct states of consciousness which become less distinct as the human moves toward the nobility that no black magic can replicate.

Marlatt could very well be alluding to the kind of black magic we urban dwellers fight every day when she says late in the book *Liquidities*: “what the city drinks eats is people.” Near the end of the book, quoting Dogen, she

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is back to an impulse the black magicians and their agenda of separatism will never get, again a prehension that blurs the “I”:

Mountains walking...

just like human walking.

Through the open, sourced in the body, are all the answers to the kinds of actions in the dangerous opportunity life in a chaotic time is all about. A time for which we were born. Rocks are called “Grandfather” in the sweat lodge because they’ve been around a while and, with practice, we can grok what wisdom they might have for us. To build the imagination (use of which is critical and could spawn a whole essay in itself) so that one understands the feeling of merging so deep with facets of the landscape one prehends them is part of the charge I seek in my own work. With the vast array of mountains, glaciers, islands, waterfalls, wildlife, the energy of Cascadia has yet to be fully translated into verse. It’s the open impulse that is the best bet to get some poet there.

So, yes to the impulses Juliana Spahr and David Buuck suggest they like in contemporary poetry:

the sort that stretches language to reveal its potential for ambiguity, fragmentation, and self-assertion within chaos, the sort that uses open forms and cross-cultural content, the sort that appropriates images from popular culture and the media and refashions them (11)

Yes to the compassion that’s not idiot compassion and yes to the desire to create magic. But no to the poetry that’s the equivalent of shitting in a bag. Our bioregion won’t settle for that anymore. And the indigenous people of Cascadia have been trying to tell us that for a long time.

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