Most of the daily language we use values efficiency and utility: *I'd like a pastrami on rye with mustard.* We rely on our words to be sturdy and clear. We, not surprisingly then, are inclined to praise the poem that displays a reasoned and coherent meaning, well-developed, connected and intact. These types of poems, also, were the reliable models used to initiate us into poetry in grammar school, the ones that, because familiar, make up our inner definition of what a poem is and does as it stops by woods on a snowy evening.

And so, many of us coming upon the “inaccessible poem,” discard its associative leaps, its disruptions, the pressured silences of the poem’s white-spaces as so much chaos and mumbo-jumbo. Why is this poem published in this journal, we say, a prestigious journal, no less! I can make absolutely no sense from it. More like the symphony or the Rothko painting, these poems present us with tones, atmospherics, possibilities, but unlike a painting or symphony, we may begrudge them this haziness because we are so accustomed to expect language that’s stable, that focuses for us its sense, makes clear its meanings. We thought we’d offer—in this installment of the poetry forum—a few thoughts meant to defuse the angst of diving into the “wreck” of the difficult poem. A few thoughts meant to situate such poems and then a humble attempt at enjoying and mining one “inaccessible” poem.

Before Deconstruction, it was William Carlos Williams who called for the poem to become not a static object of a thing, but a “field of action.” He proposed “sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure”—its scaffolding, its armature (281). He roused writers to open their poems to “new ways of managing the language. Primarily it means to me opportunity to expand the structure, the basis, the actual making of the poem” (291). Williams’ essay was based on a talk given at the University of Washington in 1948.

And then through the lens of poststructuralist theory we began to sense ways in which words are homeless, are “wanderers like the planets” (Coetzee). Words are wanderers in our minds; they call forth all sorts of idiosyncratic senses and memories and meanings. Contemporary poets currently writing the “inaccessible” poem make the poem a field for the slip and slide and search of words and images in transit—active—in motion. They may not be interested in the poem as still life. “Unlike the logical structure, the poem is an existence which can incorporate contradictions, inconsistencies, explanations and counter-explanations and still remain whole, unexhausted and inexhaustible,” writes A.R. Ammons in his essay “A Poem Is A Walk.” How fruitful and haunted by suggestion become a poem’s gaps and interstices, its hesitations and contradictory doublings-back.

And so here we are right at our fears and uncertainties: the places where we feel dumb, or accuse the poem of incomprehensibility. But the “inaccessible” poem is not a lesser than: it awakens us to the process of reading, the play of meanings and overlaps. In visual art we notice the play of brush stroke or light and dark; we see how the composition overall can provoke a certain mood or fleeting thought. This is a promising frame of mind in which to wade into the moving current of the “inaccessible” poem. Emily Dickinson—writing in the late 1800s—was way ahead of her time, reaching intriguingly for layerings and a rich simultaneity of meanings in her poems. We must relax our grip somewhat on cracking the poem’s code, wresting meaning from and thus dampening all other enjoyments afoot in the poem.

Anyone who’s taught rhetoric or composition or essay writing at any level, soon finds that it’s those students who can best frame a provocative and compelling set of questions in response to the topic who make of their writing the richest process, the most intriguing and successful product. What question features, what types of questions are inwardly devised helping students map out a step that allows for the topic or analysis to open up into a fruitful, well-developed paper? If we are to help students gain practice in framing these questions, we need to put them in the middle of texts that puzzle and provoke questioning so that
they ask and ask and ask and so that they can hear us ask and ask and ask. Could it be this thing or this? Does it mean this or this? Or could the poet mean both at the same time? If those of us teaching can abide by the discomfort of these resistant poems, and allow our own uncertainties to be part of the play of interpretation, admit that the uncertain is a part of the inner workings of such poems, then we can admit into our experience and perhaps the classroom experience a type of poem with as legitimate a set of aesthetic concerns as the “old master” type of American poem that has reigned in anthologies and on desktops.

Still Life w/ Influences

I stood at the modern knothole,  
my eyes on the pivoting modern stars and naphthalene green turfs and surfaces.

Behind me the stone fleur-de-lis  
sank back over the horizon,  
carving a fleur-de-lis-shaped track in air  
that spread into a bigger hole.

Up on the hill,  
a white tent had just got unsteadily to its feet  
like a foal or a just-foaled cathedral.
down on the beach, ten black whales were crashing  
slowly, through themselves,  
draped in wet bed sheets.
The bed sheets smoked into the air.

I opened my palm. A green edifice opened there.
It seemed to breathe but that was air breathing for it,  
lifting a corner or a column.

Goodbye, my thirteenth-century,  
* I folded the money away.  
What do ye do when ye see a whale?  
I sing out.  
(McSweeney, 1)

Observations and Questions

We know a still life is a usually still, painterly set of artfully arranged objects (think of Chardin or Cezanne) and we expect the poem to mimic this arrangement somehow. The modern knothole is our vantage point in modern time; we peer in—an opening from which to view or spy. The word “pivoting” provokes a kind of vertigo: not a stable scene glimpsed; the stars are not stable to map out a universe as they were for the ancients. Naphthalene green I picture as that bright Astroturf green and together with the word “surfaces” it suggests a fakeness. The ornate carved fleur-de-lis is a marker of artistic and heraldic achievement of some kind; it is setting/waning, and the track it leaves does not merely subside, it expands further into a gaping absence. This is the kind of opening a prior era of art might leave for a new aesthetic to fill. But the mood here is obviously not the hopeful burgeoning of a new artistic chapter. Notice how active the poem is: “I stood,” “behind,” “up slowly”—very cinematic and in motion like a movie camera doing a pan-shot. Is this still life?
There’s a great deal of oddity edging toward the surreal in stanza three. If I were teaching this poem with students I would ask what the implications are of thinking of a cathedral as something born/foaled swiftly when we know of the ongoing decades, the structural achievements and sophistications, the flying buttresses and their demands. And what associations do we have with a white tent? A circus tent? A war-time hospital tent?

In contrast, come the ten black whales. They have both a grandeur and scale of the cathedral, but may also sound half ludicrous and surreal. These whales (black ones in contrast to Melville’s great white one) feel both natural and literary and with enough attention given to the description here evolve into a kind of accuracy. The sheer weight of the whales is a weight that can collapse and crush in on themselves when beached. If thinking of mirroring water, then, they do come down into themselves and the water wrinkles and ripples (another of the poem’s surfaces) like a huge domestic bed sheet. Water spray becomes smoke.

“I opened my palm.” This compelling moment in the poem suggests momentarily that the entire terrain of the poem could somehow be a miniature taking place at the poet’s behest in the palm of her hand—she’s the clockmaker god begetting this and that. (And actually isn’t a poem just this type of miniature?)

Interestingly the architecture there in the palm echoes the green we’d come upon in the marred modern. It’s a strangely compromised vision on life support—although the possibility of grandeur does exist. The suggestion that the act of breathing could by happenstance just create a column relates to the earlier and strange ease of a cathedral being foaled. Does this repetition suggest a preoccupation of the poem’s with the ease or difficulty of the made? It seems to drain the artful out of the column/cathedral and put them on a par with natural phenomena that come and go (and what is a green edifice—could it be the rain forest, the fern?) Couldn’t a whale be an architecture then as well? But the mood is one of loss not abundance.

And then comes the poem’s high-rhetoric, high-drama moment, its voice as it closes up shop. The coy voice bids farewell to an earlier (and we assume influential) era and yet in doing so summons the lost and bygone near. If this is a statement about lost influence, there’s a tenderness in that touching “my” that brings and keeps influence at hand even midst that shocking K-Mart green. Is the money being folded away in italics a suggestion of our inability to buy back what’s gone before like a flea-market find? That cash and materialism run up against some limits here?

And then the two last lines get archaic so that the diction of what we miss from long ago lives and breathes in us, in the poem. The whales surprisingly reappear—but now somewhat far off as if glimpsed on some horizon. And the poet is still there to see, to beckon, to note, to sing. The poem ends with an atmosphere of both elegy and affirmation. Painted still lives partake of this same atmosphere of something necessarily passing but caught. Note the contrast of the curt, slang, oh-so-modern “w/” in the title and the grand tone of the archaic “ye” at the close of the poem.

Alternatively, we might view the last two stanzas as heralding the end of feudalism and the rise of naturalism in painting and literature, e.g., realistic human figures in painting and sculpture; essays and biographies in literature. And, not least, the rise of empirical science.

“Goodbye, my thirteenth-century//folded my money away” suggests the end of feudalism by the 1400s—the poet was placing no bets on lords and land. The poet sings out when s/he sees a whale, a natural wonder, a thing to be respected in its own right without need for Church sanction. The fourth stanza: a green edifice in the palm of a hand suggests the reductionism of science where the physical world can be reduced to atoms and DNA and genes—life and nature (green) in the palm of one’s hand. Empirical gods are we! (or so we may anxiously believe at times).

But the green edifice breathing, although the air seemed to breathe for it, lifting “a column,” could be the ecological unity of nature where all interacts with all. The lifting of a column affirms the radical effect of science on thought and society. Science challenges supernatural revelation, the core belief of most religions, in favor of the observe-hypothesize-test-revise “method” which, whatever its damage to nature through technology and population growth, or to art as a way of knowing, knits a coherent yet evolving system of ideas and action (experiments) which neither religion nor art can (or need) do.

And what are the influences then? Why might the poet think of all this as still life?

We solicit your questions and comments about the poem, your enticements and enjoyments in it or difficulties with it. Please send your commentary via the editor.

Works Consulted