

INTRODUCTION

In putting together this collection of essays, I have been aware of the fact that they will be read as poetics rather than poetry. But it would be a mistake to regard the poetics represented here as a discourse for which poetry is merely exemplary, one for which poetry stands at a distance, objectified and under scrutiny. Rather, these essays assume poetry as the dynamic process through which poetics, itself a dynamic process, is carried out. The two practices are mutually constitutive and they are reciprocally transformative. It is at least in part for this reason that poetry has its capacity for poetics, for self-reflexivity, for speaking about itself; it is by virtue of this that poetry can turn language upon itself and thus exceed its own limits.

Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts. Such contexts rarely coalesce into images, rarely come to terms. They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation into relation.

Poetry, to use William James's phrase, "is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected."¹ This is not to say that poetry is about transitions but that "aboutness" (in poetry, but, I would argue, also in life) is transitional, transitory; indeed, poetry (and perhaps life) calls conventional notions of "aboutness" into question.

Not all poets have an interest in poetics, and those who do hold very diverse notions of what such an interest might involve, what its scope and concerns might be, how much and what type of territory it might survey. For my own part, in reading over these essays, I realize that I have tended to cast *poetics* into the role of articulating how and why a poet works, elaborating her reasoning and reasons. *Poetics*, in this respect, seems as much a philosophical realm as a literary one. But it is a pragmatic realm, nonetheless; the reasons and reasoning that motivate poet (and poem) are embedded in the world and in the language with which we bring it into view. The resulting praxis is addressed to phenomenological and epistemological concerns.

But it is also a denotatively social and therefore political practice. Poetry comes to know that things are. But this is not knowledge in the strictest sense; it is, rather, acknowledgment—and that constitutes a sort of unknowing. To know *that* things are is not to know *what* they are, and to know *that* without *what* is to know otherness (i.e., the unknown and perhaps unknowable). Poetry undertakes acknowledgment as a preservation of otherness—a notion that can be offered in a political, as well as an epistemological, context.

This acknowledging is a process, not a definitive act; it is an inquiry, a thinking on. And it is a process in and of language, whose most complex, swift, and subtle forms are to be found in

poetry—which is to say in poetic language (whether it occurs in passages of verse or prose). The language of poetry is a language of inquiry, not the language of a genre. It is that language in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of the perception. Poetry, therefore, takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience.

Poetic language is also a language of improvisation and intention. The intention provides the field for inquiry and improvisation is the means of inquiring. Or, to phrase it another way, the act of writing is a process of improvisation within a framework (form) of intention.

In the course of the experiencing of experience, poetic language puts into play the widest possible array of logics, and especially it takes advantage of the numerous logics operative in language, some of which take shape as grammar, some as sonic chains, some as metaphors, metonyms, ironies, etc. There are also logics of irrationality, impossibility, and a logic of infinite speed. All of these logics make connections, forge linkages. That, indeed, is the function of logics; they motivate the moves from one place to another. But the emphasis in poetry is on the moving rather than on the places—poetry follows pathways of thinking and it is that that creates patterns of coherence. It is at points of linkage—in contexts of encounter, at what André Breton called *points sublimes*—that one discovers the reality of *being in time*, of *taking one's chance*, of *becoming another*, all with the implicit understanding that *this is happening*. These notions are central even in the earliest of the essays collected here, though they are most explicit in the later ones.

The essays are presented chronologically. The first, “A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking,” was written in the

spring of 1976, and the last, “Happily,” was finished on February 1, 1999. For the most part, they have undergone only superficial revision, but each essay is preceded by a headnote describing something of the occasion in and for which it was written. Where I felt it necessary, I have attempted in the headnotes to “update” my thinking on certain topics. I chose to do this updating in headnotes rather than in revisions to the essays because the notion of “changing one’s mind” is extremely important in aesthetics as in ethics. The phrase “there are no opposites” appears more than once in the poetry I have written; its companion phrase says “there are no end to contradictions.” The headnotes, then, in addition to contextualizing the essays, are meant to assert their hermeneutic character and preserve the spirit of provisionality in which they were first written. That, too, is the spirit in which they are now offered.

The last essays in the book explicitly seek to place poetry in the most complex of experiential situations, that of being “in context.” Like George Oppen, I am aware that poets work in the context of “being numerous.” These essays were prompted by invitations and called into existence by occasions, but their true context is a community—literary and pedagogical—in which challenges and encouragement, provocations and excitement, contention and insights have been generated over the years in a mode which I would define as friendship of the most supreme kind. The spaces in which meaning occurs are social spaces, ones in which human practice as well as artistic practice is at stake.

These essays, then, are rooted in conversations with and writings by a number of friends, mostly poets and particularly those either closely or loosely associated with Language writing. For almost thirty years now, I have depended on the friendship and

on the challenges they have offered. They have provided a context for my work; they have given it meaning and made the undertaking of it meaningful, at least to me. My gratitude for this is enormous.

At an immediate and practical level, this book is indebted to several people.

Hank Lazer was the first to suggest that I consider publishing a collection of essays. Michael Davidson and Charles Bernstein encouraged me to take the suggestion seriously, and it was Charles who first put me in touch with Linda Norton, my editor at the University of California Press. Linda has provided unswerving support to the project and to me as I undertook it, through friendship and, more important, through her understanding of the book itself, in whole and in its diverse parts.

At several points which I perceived as moments of crisis, I have received much-needed technical assistance from Anthony Miller and from Travis Ortiz, and I thank them most sincerely for their generosity and patience.

There are two other persons to whom I owe particular thanks and to whom I feel a magnitude of gratitude that is probably impossible to convey.

Lytle Shaw responded to my initial doubts about the sense and value of these essays (and hence about the worth of putting this book together) by offering not just adamant arguments in favor of the project but also prolonged and meticulous conversations about them. He has read through the contents of this book at every stage of its development, and his lengthy and inspiring commentary and criticism have provided the excitement as well as the ideas and information that made revisions and additions to the manuscript possible. If my arguments still aren't perfect and

if my understanding remains incomplete, it is certainly not his fault.

Over the years, the person in conversation with whom I have most passionately tested thoughts and modes of thinking has been Barrett Watten. Without his example and guidance, I would be a far weaker and worse thinker than I am.

And above all, always, I thank Larry Ochs. He inhabits my continuous context and makes it a happy one.

Note

1. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 42.