Three Reviews

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On the (im)possibility of Meditative Poetry: Jordan Scott's *blert* and Norman Fisher's *Charlotte's Way*

Meditative poetry and stuttering. I begin from a nostalgia for meditative poetry, or better put, a love of meditative poetry that has been placed under some stress for me in recent years. But today my reading takes me from meditation to stuttering, two categories that interrupt each other rather than join together. Meditation has meant flow, that vaunted state of sentencing that my students inform me they lack, even before I begin critiques of their often jumpy prose (or poetry). Stuttering is distraction, is the children running into my room as I read, or the in-laws about to come over now as I begin my meditation on stuttering. Stuttering is disturbance. If, as Susan Howe writes in "Incloser," "There is a direct relation between sound and meaning" (Birth Mark 49), she often seems more intrigued by silences: "The fractured syntax, the gaps, the silences are equal to the sounds in *Maximus*," she tells Edward Foster (Birth Mark 180). I am reminded of Howe on stuttering by Yunte Huang, in his fine book, *Transpacific Imaginings*; I am reminded that during a walk with Susan Howe in a Buffalo park she told me that a prominent expert on stuttering is also named Howe. Google gurgles that S.W. Howe co-wrote "Speech shadowing characteristics of stutterers under diotic and dichotic conditions" and published it in 1988, at about the time the other Howe was writing her essays in *The Birth Mark.* At the time I was trying to spread word of my book, *Dementia Blog*, I discovered that an authority on dementia shared my last name; he is Richard Schulz, who graciously answered my email to him. Howe and Howe, Schultz and Schulz are the opposite of stutters. They sound too right, as if the sonic idea rhymes rhymed with each other. To stutter (let alone to suffer dementia) takes away the fluency of that commutative equation between name and theme.

Meditative poetry has always seemed to me to render disjunctions (a kind of stutter) as fluidities. Temporal breaks, like loss of self or other or God, are seamed together ("let be be finale of seem") in the poet's quick conjunction of thoughts. Meditation suggests space, suggests time, suggests lag. Thinkers like Maryann Wolf, who wrote *Proust & the Squid* about dyslexia, worry that meditation is on its way out. Wolf:

> I worry, like Socrates long before me, that our children are becoming more "decoders of information" than true comprehenders. I worry that they are deluded by the seeming permanence and volume of their information, into thinking they "know it all"—when they have barely begun to fashion the kind of brain that has learned how to probe, infer, reflect, create, and move to whole new places on its own. ("Reading Worrier")

Meditation is about comprehension, and comprehension about inclusion, understanding, totality. Or at least one suspects there are inclusions to be made, totalities to be grasped,

even if or because they are tantalizingly beyond reach. “No man is an island” might well be a false statement, but John Donne implied a geography of the self in which continents held more value than atolls or islands. Even when systems break down, as at the beginning of John Ashbery's “The System,” which is the second of his *Three Poems*, their shadows promise a velvety landing, or at least comfort in the search. (This may be one of Ashbery's least comfortable books, but the writing is among his most seductive, like a romance novel about the mind.) Stevens, like Shelley, found his map in the sky, which is wide.

As I said earlier, meditative poetry is more problematic to me than it once was, no matter how much I will always adore early Ashbery and his imagined mentor, Thomas Traherne. As much as I instinctively reject the notion that Ashbery is merely the last flank of a great white army (if not whale) that presses down on islands from the eastern continent, his poetry does thrive on a luxuriousness that many people do not have, and a fluency that could be said to go along with it. Not that I'm against privilege, only the notion that privilege is in-clusive. But meditative poetry is not so much “inclusive” of world as it testifies to only a small province in it. New Haven (but only in the evening), New York (but only from the window), Rome (as the philosopher ascends to heaven): these are places where meditation goes on. Waipahu, Gary, not so much perhaps, at least in not so many words. To meditate in the age of consumption is not easy; I'm reminded of Wordsworth on his London Bridge, calling a rural scene to mind, even where he cannot see it. And that was the 19th century. Harder yet in a Walmart, though Ryan Oishi does his damndest in “Walmart: A Love Poem.” There is little fluidity in the goods, despite the tsunami in the aisles.

Canadian poet Jordan Scott is a stutterer, one for whom the act of speaking is a minefield. He has written a book, *blert*, that at first glance resembles a Christian Bök production, but which is less “conceptual” than “realist.” His is not the concept of the “stutter in the text,” or a metaphor for gaps and silences; instead, he writes the material language of the stutterer:

> The stutter here appears on its own terms, rejecting the metaphoric, thematic, graphic . . . or representational aspects of this language disturbance. The text is written as if my own gibbering mouth chomped upon the language system, then regurgitated the cud of difference. My symptoms are the agents of composition. (65)

Scott's meditations on his poems are composed in prose. Many poets use prose when they are meditating on their ideas, rather than enacting them. They include Howe, who stutters in her poems but flows (mainly) in her prose, and Kaia Sand, whose forthcoming Tinfish Press volume, *Remember to Wave*, includes essays on the stories she writes more fragmentary poems about. Explications take the stutter out of the poem. Perhaps Ashbery's *Three Poems* in prose can be read as a prolegomenon to his poems, although the poems tend to render as flow instances that are discrete; in that confusion we find what is most Ashberian.

For Scott, the act of speaking is physical, not metaphysical, literal, not figurative. Open Lisa Linn Kanae's book, *Sista Tongue*, and you find quotations on the act of speaking. From Wendell Johnson: "a speech disorder occurs when all of the basic functions of speech are affected to some degree and, in certain cases, one function may be more seriously disturbed than another." Or from Hanson: "The most important structure of articulation is the tongue, which is responsible for effecting the changes in the mouth basic to the production of all but a few sounds. The tongue is so essential to human speech, languages are often referred to as 'tongues.'" For Kanae, "improper" speech is often a label put on non-standard English speakers for reasons that have nothing to do with the tongue. For Scott, the tongue and the hyoid bone make the speaker, and hence the language—even before sociology takes its turn. He writes in the language of "articulation":

> Not articulated to any other bone, the hyoid bone lounges in the human neck. Suspended from the tips of styloid ligaments, only two plump bursas interrupt this hammocked marrow. In early life, the lateral borders are connected to the voice box by pretend membrane; after middle life, usually by bony union . . . Some muscles of the root of the tongue are attached to it, as well as some laryngeal muscles. It is not attached to any other bone, which it makes it something of a curiosity among bones. (42)

If stuttering is not metaphorical to Scott, then the mouth surely is. What *are* articulated are not words but bones. What is style is not writing but "styloid ligaments." Borders do not belong to words and phrases but to the voice box. Hammocks are not to be slept in but support the marrow. And so on. Our very mouths are metaphors, but their output is unmistakeably literal. We can meditate on the mouth, but words are tools used against their speaker. There is no meditation on language, because language resists thought, at least as it is spoken. Metaphorically speaking, then, Scott's speech is usually poetry, and his writing is generally speaking prose explication of that poetry. At times the two converge uneasily, but for the most part there are two Scotts as there were two Lears (stylistically, not thematically!).

Kanae's brother was a "late talker." He said "Itah, itah" for sister and "wuh-yol" for world and "too-too, too-too" for Popeye da Sailor Man. His sister translates for him, as she "translates" the story of Pidgin in Hawai`i to her readers. She begins from the material fact of language and gets into its less material (if hardly immaterial) station in local culture. Scott navigates a similar divide, albeit without ethnic and class ramifications. His poems present language as problem:

> Broca's
> camel clutch
> grapple thalamus flux
> box tonsils fresh black box
> tongue scatter suckle polygon
> syllable collar pop
> mullet split end

leg lock glottal
lip off:

fresh nugs
mouse milking
NASCAR

wrist flex
snorkel mosh
dental furrow
Jell-O shot
ease Pantene. (36)

Not much separates this section or many others from other poems by avant-garde contemporaries. What separates it is the particular meditation on it, which is built into the poetry. While many poets are conceptualizing qualities of language or facts of politics in their work, Scott is creating a literal concept. He is not a conceptual poet, but a poet of the brute obstacle. He uses a shovel to speak: "I open, shovel bug on tongue. Swing teeth into lip. Cicada for Chiclet. Trident itch. Pluck mucus in harpsichord" (17). It is as if the mouth were conceptualizing the mind, obliging it to think about something it started off trying to avoid. Where the Pidgin speaker knows what he or she is saying, but is found inarticulate by the larger culture, the stutterer cannot know what he or she is about to say. There may be a thought that precedes speech, but it is not the same thought that postdates the (f)act of speaking.

Charles Bernstein once said that he is a poet because he's dyslexic, because language is difficult for him. That Bernstein's "A Defence of Poetry" is difficult is testament not merely to the poet's obstreperousness, but also to his actual material difficulty with written words. But Bernstein instantly metaphorizes his difficulty. Difficulty will save us from ourselves. For Scott, difficulty is of another level of difficulty. It does not liberate us from itself, but immerses us in discomfort. We emerge less enlightened about the politics of language than about its resistances to us. We are its politics, not the other way around.

What, in the end, does any of this have to do with meditative poetry? I'm not sure yet; my thoughts are tentative. I won't say they stutter, but they certainly are not in NASCAR territory, burning rubber around the track. In my own writing, the meditative poem fell away (in the late 1990s, to be nearly exact). I could no longer justify to myself all the connections my syntax was making for me, connections that owed as much to previous meditative poems as to my existence, its stops and starts and recognitions. I took away line breaks and replaced them with prose sentences. No two sentences could touch ideas. They were ever discrete. Much as I want to return to meditation, I cannot seem to get there. Perhaps it's as biological an issue as that of tongue and enunciation. But in my thinking about it, I realize that I could not return now to meditation as any imitation of seamless thinking. It requires its breaks; it break dances (RIP MJ); it hits brick walls. Then again, when I look back to Stevens I hear more stuttering than I did before. In my "as if" stage of writing (in college, in other words), Alfred Corn referred me to "Bantams

in Pine-Woods” for a cure. The first two lines enact their last word, obliging the reader to yell and spit and nearly stutter:

> Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

Now it's not “Tongue and canine boing-boing until CH CH knockout chipmunk achoo” (Scott, 16), but it's closer than one might imagine.

A more "standard" (in the sense of standard English) meditative poem is Norman Fischer's *Charlotte's Way*, Tinfish's only accordion chapbook:

Fischer's lines are long and sometimes prosaic, but move fluidly through time and Fischer's meditations in and of it. A zen priest, Fischer is at home with wavering, with finding home as the place that is always moving (Jennifer Kwon Dobbs's notion of the adoptive imagination operates here, too). So his poems tend to be long, capacious, inclusive of ordinary and extraordinary detail. In the following passage from the chapbook he moves easily between the meta- and the physical:

EXACTLY ENOUGH TO MEET YOU RESTLESSLY
In the shadow of forgetting
Which occurs so quickly and in such detail
Even the tips of the cypress trees subtly quivering in the salt wind
Know of it and reflect it in their patterns now yielding
To another now
Under equally changeable skies

As I write this line a leaf blows by

What the design of this chapbook accomplishes is to show at once the fracturing of those meditations--both in the exaggerated separations between sections of the poem, and in the folds created in the middle of som sections. In the section after the one I just quoted, the page break comes between the word "feeling" and the phrase "That is a person":

AS I WROTE THAT LINE A LEAF BLEW BY
Which I'd've forgotten if not for
Writing which makes a new now frozen
And not frozen in a reader's fluid awareness
A face, or faces, a face is always plural like a sea or a sky
For clouds or waves just as surely roll across it
And light does too
Thought there's nothing to be fixed or retained
The face expresses a person, a feeling
That is a person each face a history
Of a reckoning and a history
And a request consented to
With courage making a singular life story
Journey on the seas back to an island
Bright in the sunlight

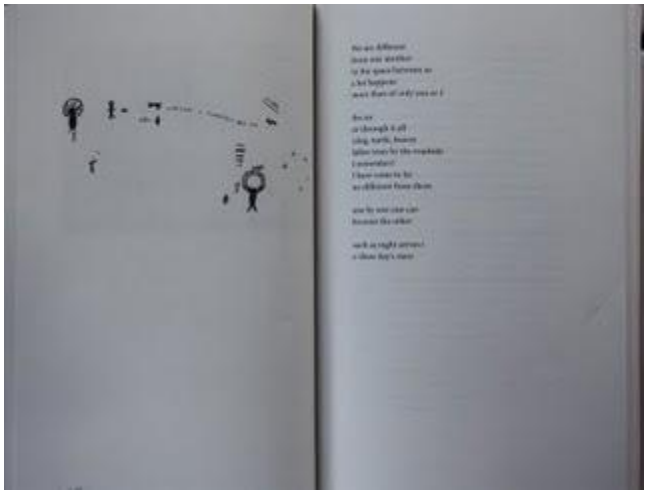
"[A] feeling / That is a person" is a double stutter in the text (line break followed by page fold) that is crucial to the larger meditation Fischer embarks upon. While the page breaks are accidents of the design, they add to the poem by distracting from its flow. They are accidents like the blowing leaf. They are collaborations after the fact between the poet (who has written the poem) and the designer (Terri Wada, who is reading and placing the poem on the page). Kanae's book was designed and transformed by Kristin Gonzales Lipman, without Kanae's input. This book, while it had more input from the poet, still incorporates the material felicities of its design into the content. The physical folds are like Scott's tongue, his hyoid bone; they break our reading up. But the accordion is incapable of ending except where it begins, almost. The accordion is circular, not linear, or merely accumulative, like most books, which convert pages into little piles and then stun them inside covers like butterflies for display. The riddle of time and its passage, then, is enacted by the book itself, a book that flows and stutters in nearly equal measure.

Fischer's lines move from plural to singular (faces to face, selves to self or at least to that self's story), from an unspoken continent to a marked island. Islands are where languages collide most quickly, shift, change, move from oral to written and back again. No man may be an island, but his voice can be. Words as islands are stutters in the text, but how right that sounds here on Oahu, where the stutter is the meditation and meditations only rarely pacific.

“The colour of a relational utterance”: Fred Wah and *The False Laws of Narrative*

It's a poetry reader's cliché, no doubt, but books do often come along just at the right time for their readers; this week, Louis Cabri's fine work of editing Fred Wah’s poetry arrived in the mail from Wilfred Laurier University Press in Ontario. The book is deliberately teacherly. As the General Editor of the series writes, “Our idea is to ask a critic (sometimes herself a poet) to select thirty-five poems from across a poet's career; write an engaging, accessible introduction; and have the poet write an afterword” (vii). Hence the reader, whether college student, general reader, or academic, approaches the poetry with her explicatory seatbelt firmly fastened.

Louis Cabri offers a marvelous map of Wah's concerns, which include form (questions of lyric and collage); Chinese Canadian history; local language and writing; interactions between the non-aboriginal poet and aboriginal texts; the influences of William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson; “improvisation” and “ratiocination” as modes of composition; the relationship of theory to poem (thoem); and, finally, the significance of sound to Wah's poetry. Cabri ties together many of these concerns when he writes that “The riprap of Wah's poetry learns from the grand collage epic, but takes off with the proprioceptive lyric. His riprap offers the juxtapositional openness and loose-endedness of collage, without collage's grand-historical, presumptive scale. Wah's riprap offers lyricism—without lyricism's I-centric, i-dentical iteration of poetic voice” (xiii).



["We are different," p. 25]

A poetry of loose stones (riprap) permits the poet an honesty that the grand lyric or epic would not. Thus Wah's use of aboriginal rock art, from which he writes improvisations (not translations), is neither reverential nor appropriative. And Wah's extended piece about Tiananmen Square opens into a personal meditation on his father. It is this last piece that most captured my attention, namely “Dead in My Tracks: Wildcat Creek Utaniki,” written during the summer of 1989. The piece is partly prose journal, partly poem, a meditation on self, on family, on the place where the poet is camping, and on

global histories. The mix hits us early:

> While we set up camp during the afternoon I'm in a global mode, you know, the simultaneity of the world going on right now. Paris. Kyoto. Beijing. The pavement of Tiananmen Square, the hotlines sniffing out the dissidents, CBC bulletin even email media drama of the last two months still in the air, even up here, radioless, only antennaed in my bones (our name is bones, and your name is my name). (54)

["Dead in My Tracks," beginning]

The poet pivots back: “from the lake to the treeline / all crumbly under foot at the edges / cruddy summer snow melt / soft wet twig and bough-sprung alpine fir” (54) and then back to world: “borders such thin thoughts (apples of our eyes) / selvage yesterday's Tiananmen” (55). See the composition by field above for a better sense of what the poem looks like.

The river and the “television's human river” collide, and the very rock becomes subject to its object: “shale shard weep shard shale weep shale weep shard shale weep” (57). The jet streams overhead come to the poet from Beijing, stitchings in his pixelated tapestry. This movement back and forth begins to seem ceaseless, although the poem is relatively compact. The poem ends where the stones and the soldiers in Beijing become one “thano-stone” (61), a relation that is still not of oneness but of two thoughts compressed. The collage of information, lyric, and observation, then, cannot join together without temporal and geographical seams left to show. Nor can the poem do anything but end; there are no conclusions to be drawn, except that we have been brought to a point where the wilderness cannot free us from global urban spaces of conflict.

The book itself ends with “Ripraps (Louis Cabri) and Afterwords (Fred Wah).” There's nothing new here, perhaps, except insofar as the collage moves from the poet's voice outward, permitting access to the critic's voice. To this reader, Cabri's most astute

commentary comes in the third Riprap, on meaning, where he notes a difference between Gary Snyder's use of Chinese sources and Wah's: “By contrast, *Mountain* enacts mountainness, and difference. *Mountain* has little to do with Snyder's sinophilic identifications and thematic treatments. Merely to put them in relation like this is to render them falsely equivalent projects. Mountain is not a project engaged with the ancient Chinese poetic tradition—as was the case for many progressive poets since the end of the Second World War and for many eurocentric modernists before them” (68). Ah, but the surprise here is that Wah responds by acknowledging the importance of Pound and the ideogram to his own method. “‘Movement, at any cost,’” Olson had reminded us, as Wah re-reminds us. Like Wayne Kaumalii Westlake in Hawai`i, Fred Wah is a modernist with a difference; one hopes that they (and significant others) point us toward a future poetics of negotiated, rather than enforced, differences.

Method is Public, Poetry Not so Much so (Perhaps)

For some reason, I keep thinking about the alphabet as a way to get at the private/public ricochet. It's not that Ron Silliman's *The Alphabet* sits rotundly on my poetry shelves, among other S's. And it's not that I'm currently reading new books by Mary Jo Bang (*The Bride of E*) and John Ashbery (*Planisphere*), both of which organize their poems according to the alphabet, and that I return often to Tiare Picard's twin alphabet poems from *Tinfish 18.5* for their richness, but also because I've always found the alphabet to be an odd way to organize the world (hence the chaos of my own paperwork?). The alphabet is a public form; a trip to any library will assure you of that. But to organize one's work alphabetically is to render it private. Or that's my hunch. This has something to do with the differences between method and practice, or that's my further hunch. The boundary between private and public in what we call "alphabetical order" blurs in both directions: the private becomes public, but the public also becomes private, which is the more radical direction, because less expected. The order the alphabet creates is arbitrary, paratactic. It's the kind of order that links "Nixon, Richard" with "non-absorptive writing," as in the index to my book of essays, *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*. There's surely something there, but its logic, while powerful, is accidental rather than considered. Yes, writing one's memoir takes one's private life and makes it available to a public one cannot see or even imagine. But there is a significant way in which the public is terribly private, too, not simply in the way we absorb public events, but in the way public events affect our language, our way of thinking. Our uses of language can illustrate the way privatization comes to make public/common spaces mysterious, and not always in ways beneficial to the community.

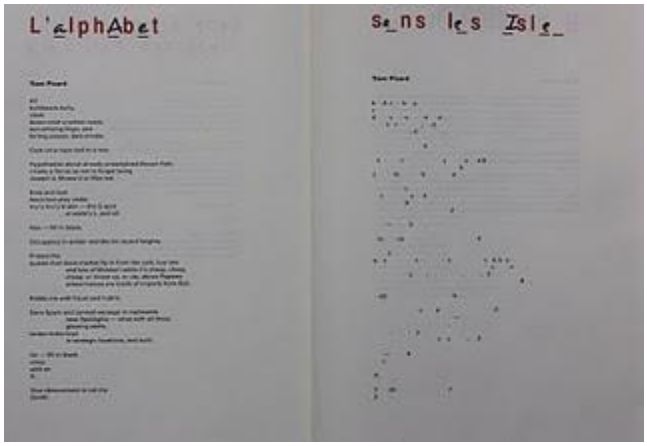
One of the few times I talked to John Ashbery, a few of us were sitting in a bar in a Washington, D.C. hotel in the mid-1980s. Behind me were bookshelves, the kind provided in bars as decor, not for the sake of knowledge. There was a line of books on the shelf behind me, so I pulled one out, and discovered that I held one letter of a children's encyclopedia. Ashbery's eyes grew even bigger than usual, as he told us that he'd memorized parts of that encyclopedia as a child. That Ashbery's new book is organized according to the alphabetical order of its titles should come as no surprise then, especially, as one of his earlier volumes was also organized in this way. My first encounter with *Planisphere* (this is not a review of the book!) reminded me of first encounters with other Ashbery books. Over and over I start out utterly baffled by his books, only to find ways of access later. (I'm not there yet.) So the book remains private to me, in code, and yet organized with the efficiency of a librarian or a shopkeeper. Mary Jo Bang's book is even more self-consciously an alphabet book, with titles like "B is for Beckett" and "E is Everywhere" and "I in a War," the last of these titles one of many that wanders away from its first principle. "For Freud" might be a subtitle of this book, as there are so many references to the ur-psychiatrist. Freud is called out by his letter as surely as is Mao Zedong in the "Z Stands for Zero Hour" poem that ends Part I of the book. History emerges out of a single letter, the private code (which is the alphabet for each of its users) rendered public. History as accidental passage.

Tiare Picard's two poems, "L'alphabet" and "Sans les Isles," make an opposing movement. Rather than summon history out of letters, Picard shows how history has privatized the very language we use, and in so doing, has rendered great parts of it into code. What was once history is now hidden, inaccessible, organized by letter only. Hence, "L'alphabet" begins with a colonial story told via the method of the alphabet poem:

All
bulldozers bully,
clank
down coral-crushed roads,
eunuchizing lingo, and
farting proper, dark smoke. (102)

The response, on the facing page, in "Sans les Isles," goes as follows:

b d z b y,
c
d c -c d d ,
c z , d
,d (103)
[layout below]



While terribly difficult to decipher, this is a very public move, from one poem to the next. In fact, that difficulty is part of the poem's (sharp) point, for the second poem is what happens to the first poem when the letters of the Polynesian alphabet are taken away from the English. That the English language embraces (or smothers) Polynesia comes clearest when Polynesia is taken out of it. When the bulldozers are done with Polynesian islands, when development has paved over the land, what the land is left with is scatter, the "coral-crushed roads" of the language itself. The book's design, which mimics word game puzzle books, accentuates the effect, as word games are those places where what has been kept secret is revealed as language.

In each of these instances, what is most public in the poem or the book of poems is the method. Alphabetical order is public; it's how we organize knowledge. Monks and Google have used it, as it's a- or trans-historical. What is private is the poem's content, even if the significance of privacy is very different, depending on whether you look at Ashbery or at Picard, at a poem that includes Freud because his name starts with F or at a poem that gets bulldozed by development, for reasons greater than the letter D. If C was a Comedian, this D is not, even if the poem is itself extremely playful. If method is always a public activity, then what method enables is less so. But the real blurring of method and poem comes in these instances, like the one in Bang's poems that invoke Freud and Mao because their names begin with F and M, or as in Picard's poems, where what is most public (development, what one cannot not see) effaces history (renders it private, cryptic).

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