

Lissa Wolsak's *Squeezed Light: Collected Poems 1994-2005: Thinking of Spirit and Spiritual*

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Consciousness breaks with its own imaginative skeleton to exist inside and outside the manner of things and can inquire through matter, energy, space..time, in anti-totalitarian postulates to the impinging nakedness and origins. Each dream follows the mouth. To let .. to culture .. (44)

—Lissa Wolsak, *An Heuristic Prolusion*

There is a sloppiness around the public use of the words “soul” and “spirit” which is evidence of their disappearance. These words are odd now and it is perhaps only their oddness that charges them. ... We need not return to them, and cannot in any sense that we now understand, but they haunt us. And they are, so to speak, tossed up by our task in language. They propose a binding and an entangling with the essential unknown that is part of the life of the known.

—Robin Blaser, “The Practice of Outside”

Dear reader: There are two previous pieces of my writing on Wolsak's *Squeezed Light* that feed into this particular essay/section. The first section is a review that appeared in the online edition of *Rain Taxi* (<http://www.raintaxi.com/online/2010fall/wolsak.shtml>). The second section appeared in *Golden Handcuffs Review* (<http://goldenhandcuffsreview.com/gh14content/Lazer.pdf> , Vol. 1, No. 14 [Winter-Spring 2011, pp. 238-242) and represents a more in-depth in consideration of a few key passages of Wolsak's poetry. It seems that with each piece of writing that I do on Wolsak's poetry, I become aware of another approach that is called for. This third essay/section explores a general concern: what exactly do we mean by the terms “spirit” and “spiritual” in relation to the kind of contemporary writing that we find in *Squeezed Light*? Dear reader, feel free to read the other two sections first, or, if you wish, plunge in to section three immediately...

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It occurs to me that in writing about Lissa Wolsak's poetry – and that of several others, John Taggart, and Peter O'Leary among them – that I am claiming that their writing is essential to a new mode of spiritual writing, but I have not really explored the terms “spirit” and “spirituality.” In this current piece of writing, I know at the outset that I will not settle our understanding of these terms, for they are terms with long and complex and contradictory histories in the writing of poetry, poetics, philosophy, and religion. And these key terms rub against equally complex

and contested terms such as the holy and the sacred. Even so, I would like to do some preliminary writing – preliminary to a longer essay – based on recent readings in Levinas and Blaser¹, with the hope that these preliminary thoughts and juxtapositionings might sharpen the focus upon “spirit” and “spiritual” when I/we assert that an innovative poetry such as Wolsak’s makes a fundamental contribution to a contemporary writing of spiritual experience.

For Levinas (and please note that all arguments and observations I am making in relation to Levinas and Blaser are assumed to have some level of applicability to Wolsak’s writing), “our question is how and to what degree one can be affected [*affection*] by what is not equal to the world, how one can be affected by what can be neither apprehended nor comprehended” (167). The poem, then, becomes the record of that affection – the wording and manifestation on the page of an engagement with “what can be neither apprehended nor comprehended.” The innovative appearance of Wolsak’s poems offers a “new realism,” a credible, faithful, even somewhat mimetic way to embody those moments of affection. But as with virtually every suggestion or approximation that I will offer for “spirit,” the suggestion remains haunted by a skepticism: how/why is that approximation – in this case that which can be neither apprehended or comprehended” – related to “spirit”? Is that really what constitutes “spirit,” and why should I call the incomprehensible by the name “spirit”?

In Levinas’ lectures (in the collection *God, Death, and Time*), Hegel’s writing occupies a central position, and the elements of Hegel’s thinking that Levinas addresses often turn out to be of pertinence to the explorations of Wolsak’s poetry: “In Hegel, the manifestation of being to consciousness is a moment of the unfolding of that being” (160). The poem might then be thought of as an occasion or instance – a giving form or shape – for that moment of manifestation, that profound and fleeting and inevitably incomplete (and often emotionally moving) experiencing of the tangibility of being. The poem, then, offers a specific language instance as a temporary insight into (and experiencing of) the nature of being. Not exactly a rigorous or traditional philosophical investigation of the question of being, but a lateral consideration of being, a manifestation of a matter at hand that is of fundamental interest to philosophical thinking. Thus perhaps another key approximation for “spirit” is being itself, a conceptual invisibility, an evasive fundamental that defies specification.

As Blaser points out, “Poetry always had to do with consciousness” (29). My reading of or feeling for Wolsak’s poetry suggests that it occurs at a kind of tipping point, at that moment that Levinas (via Hegel) describes as a rising into consciousness (of an understanding, however incomplete or fleeting, of being). Wolsak notes, “in cold mischief/ I insculpt/ the gasp of individual perception” (122). And in an interview with Pete Smith, Wolsak declares,

I choose, rather, to activate consciousness, and to keep a loose hold on the smoky, beguiling and sometime fatuous muse of controlled meaning, but not to exclude the

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; Robin Blaser, *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, ed. Miriam Nichols, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

genuinely intended or navigable. I am more a receiver of shape and form than an architect of same. (257)

Levinas, in summarizing Hegel, describes stages in Spirit's development:

... Spirit is thus like a sort of nature [*comme une nature*] before being opposed to itself. Hegel calls this stage of Spirit's immediacy *substance*. Spirit is substance, and it has before itself a progression whereby it must become a *subject*.

It is substance insofar as it makes its own history, develops itself "insofar as its spiritual content is engendered by itself." It will become a subject, become the Knowledge that Spirit has of itself, that is, absolute thought or the living truth that knows itself. From the Spirit that simply *is*, it will become the Self-Knowledge of that Spirit. (80)

Wolsak's poetry positions itself at this tipping point, where spirit as substance is becoming a realm of experience (and of awareness verging on knowledge) of the reading/writing subject. Wolsak notes, "*thoughts have mass*" (244), and her poems, in their placement on the page and in their necessary fragmentation, incorporate that inclination into substance that Levinas and Hegel are tracking:

. . . go with me,
disquisit · hour of terse·
touch and sight
transhumance,
fever themselves (74)

The poem occurs in that momentary slippage in which spirit, by a kind of self-opposition, becomes a way of knowing (though in Wolsak's work, that perhaps Germanic dream of completeness and totalization – "*the living truth*" – does not occur nor is it even wished for). Wolsak's poems then, in their tentativeness on the page, in their shifting and truncated residence in the word and phrase, link questing to questioning, much in the manner that Levinas thinks of philosophical writing: "The question mark of every question comes from the question: What does being signify?" (58). For me, questioning itself lies at the heart of a credible relationship to "spirit." Inherently, with respect to "spirit," one engages in a non-reciprocal relationship, with an invisibility that is at most a breath. While we can begin to stack up an array of approximations for the spiritual, for an engagement with "spirit" – being, consciousness, the invisible, that which cannot be apprehended or comprehended, thinking – each of these terms points toward an erratic and unsteady process, a flaring into awareness and its disappearance, rather than offering anything resembling a conventional definition.

In turning to Blaser's essays to help refine my sense of "spirit" and the "spiritual" in the poetry of Wolsak and other contemporary innovative poets, one key starting point that all share (though to differing degrees) is with a decisive avoidance: "It seems necessary to say that I am not writing about religion in the ordinary sense. That institutionalization of imaginary forms has become an immobility of foregone conclusions" (40). In fact, it seems to me that one of the most exciting developments in contemporary innovative poetry is this multifaceted exploration of new modes of writing spiritual experience in an a-institutional or non-institutional context², from the work of John Taggart to Peter O'Leary, from Fanny Howe to Lissa Wolsak, and including the work of many other poets. As Blaser argues, while many other domains of thought and art-making have abandoned entire terminologies of the "spiritual," such is not the case for poetry. Blaser asserts, "Poetry, however, has never let go of a 'discourse of cosmos' that keeps the attention of the old vocabulary of God, gods, and goddesses intelligent at least" (39). Blaser, by way of the writing of Mark Taylor, summarizes the essential discourses:

"God, self, history, and book are . . . bound in an intricate relationship in which each mirrors the other. No single concept can be changed without altering all the others" (Taylor 7). Each of these four terms represents a category of discourse and each involves a poetics, even if in one instance it may be the history of poetics. This in turn draws us into what I have called a "discourse of the cosmos," the complex poetics of the other, large and small. (56)

It is this poetics of the other that may be the essential term/concept for my exploration of a new poetry of "spirit" and "spiritual" experience.

Blaser cites Rilke with some frequency, and Rilke's remark in a letter explaining the Duino Elegies is of pertinence to my attempt to sharpen the focus on Wolsak's sense (and a more general sense) of the "spiritual." Rilke writes that "*We are the bees of the invisible*" (Blaser, 39), an image that suggests a process of flight, movement, exploration, and return. What is it that we go to explore and to gather? Blaser suggests what may be the flower and nectar that we seek: "The seat of the language in the Other is the necessary exploration" (34). The poetry I am highlighting both explores that Other-ness of/in language and manifests that exploration in a form that does not negate (or fully digest) that Other-ness. Consider, as an example of this dialectical relationship/residence in an othered language, Wolsak:

mock· cup-nest

manacle

proliferati mystico-nuclear

² I make this argument well aware of the Catholicism of Peter O'Leary and Fanny Howe, as well as the deeply sounded Christian riffs and phrases in John Taggart's work (Taggart being the son of a minister). Nonetheless, I would argue that the deeper residence or engagement of the poem itself constitutes an a-institutional domain.

mimicry (61)

Or, from Wolsak's *Pen Chants*,

and after,
istle, finnochio, ixia
"rich in apples"
they, for emissive
lips cooled forth
chilled persimmon sheathes,
disinterest in the speech of
ill-lit, rigor-like
ink flows on top of milk (113)

So that when Wolsak begins "Figmental" with these lines

Let this put me another way . . .
as a way of waking (159)

I feel that we are precisely in that unmastered/unmasterable relationship to language that is at the heart of Blaser's thinking, and of my own sense of what it means today to write a poetry of "spiritual" experience.³ Or, as Blaser concludes:

Language is not our own – no more than our life or death is in our ownership – historically or now. We have only to honor them. The notion that we have a god-spoken "sacred book" derives, I think, from that ancestral strange recognition. (98)

Along with Wolsak's sense that at the moment of composition one is being written/ridden ("Let this put me another way"), Blaser, in writing about Jack Spicer's writing methods, points toward a similarly unwilling or unmasterable way of proceeding throughout a series or book or ongoing poetic project: "Ideally, Jack worked in that long form without looking back and without thought of the previous poem, so that the poet could be *led by what was composing*" (emphasis mine, 119). I have to confess that Blaser's description of Spicer's method – to be led "by what was composing" – is a concise description of my own extended compositional method, particularly from *Days* (written in 1994-95) to the present.

³ Such a writing of "spiritual" experience resonates and rhymes with Mallarmé's "The Book A Spiritual Instrument." I offer that if language is the house of being, the book is a similarly large home.

Blaser gets at a crucial aspect of my own sense of “spirit” and “spirituality” with his recurring emphasis on the invisible – “I’m haunted by a sense of the invisibility of everything that comes into me (aware that nothing is more invisible than emotion)...” (3). Blaser has a sense of the elusiveness of that invisibility, but he is also insistent upon that invisible realm’s existence and about his own relationship to it: “I am literal about that other reality” (3). He is fully aware that many other readers/writers/persons simply dismiss that other reality “as if the spiritual were a day-dream rather than *active in the composition of the real*” (emphasis mine, 28). But for Blaser, it is “poets ... who have grasped the essential relationship between invisible passions and invisible thought to the real” (24).

And why might that be so? Perhaps poets have a peculiarly active awareness of the sacred and/or philosophical understanding that language is not something to master; language is an other-ness with which one develops an intimate, complex, ever-unfolding relationship. Yet, the drive or direction or inclination or point of view of the work, particularly of a heuristic or innovative mode, remains, for a *long* period of time invisible to the poet, at best, something that is subliminally sensed periodically, while the direction of the work becomes more apparent over time. The poet’s is a complex relationship to will, time, language, and coherence. Indeed, habitual coherence is suspended or avoided in favor of a heuristic relationship with a realm that is merely an invisible potential that *may* be actualized by means of a peculiarly developed placement and selection of language. As Wolsak writes, “Let this put me another way.” Language, by means of a body of poetry, Wolsak’s for example, makes manifest another instance of the possible – an instance particular as well to its moment, to the historical nature of its relationship to a manifestation or (human) awareness of being.

If we return to a more thorough consideration of poetry as engaged, through its liminal or threshold relationship at the intersection of the visible and the invisible, in the composition of the real, Blaser’s description of Jack Spicer’s later work speaks directly to poetic activity (in a way that I find useful in thinking about the methodology at work in Wolsak’s poetry as well):

From *After Lorca* on, Jack works in a poetry that is a “compound of the visible and the invisible.” These words are not so difficult once one realized that the visibility of men in speech opens on an invisibility he has not spoken or thought. The fundamental polarity extends into a space that is not recognized. The movement of Jack’s work is to retie language and experience as they are composed in the exchange of visibility and invisibility. Perhaps, it was his knowledge as professional linguist that brought him to this point in an understanding of a composing “real,” – as a “sense” seems visible and a “nonsense” seems fallen out of the visible or about to enter it. (118)

Such a description of a writing practice becomes a wonderful elucidation of the workings of Rilke’s bees of the invisible. The poem is a kind of commerce, a trade, a tracking, a means of moving back and forth, a shuttling to and fro. There is a metric to such motion, a metric of shifting location, a metric as well of engagement and disengagement, just as there is implicit in

Blaser's description of Spicer's poetry's relationship to the divine: "In Jack's work, the divine is resituated in a composition where belief and disbelief are composing elements of its meaning" (119). If one is to write a credible phenomenology of "spiritual" experience, it must, in my opinion, be composed of both belief and disbelief. A contemporary writing of "spirit" may indeed be characterized by an endlessly unpredictable movement in and out of belief, with a relationship to the divine being an unsteady but palpable (and invisible) adjacency.

Blaser's observations are consistent with my own tentative thinking toward "spirit" and "spiritual," and, I believe, the perspectives found in Wolsak's poetry. From a metaphysical or philosophical perspective, many of the fundamentals of our life-experience – being, time, death, g-d, sound/music, thinking, consciousness – have as a principle element of their constitution *invisibility*. I think of "spiritual" writing/poetry as a participation in a kind of tropism, a leaning toward and stammered articulation of a relationship with that invisibility and otherness. Blaser, by way of Olson, suggests a parallelism of our relation to the poem and our relation to the world:

The reading of a poem is the re-enactment of the images of contact with the world. In this sense, as Charles Olson puts it, "art is the only twin life has – its only valid metaphysic" (*Human Universe* 10; *Collected Prose* 162). We return again and again to the importance of language in its activity of holding on to the world and life in that world. (24)

The poem – which is at once a reading and a writing – presents a twin life, an image (not merely a visual analogy, but a world, a body of work) that is made so that, quoting Zukofsky (in "A-") quoting Einstein, "Everything should be as simple as it *can* be,/ Says Einstein,/ But not simpler." Or, to use the wonderfully precise word that Glenn Mott resorts to in *Analects*: *whelmed*. Neither over- nor under- but precisely *whelmed*; a twin to the world that is neither unnecessarily complex nor falsely simplified.

While there is remarkable little sense (for me) of Blaser's essays (many key essays from the late 1960s) being dated, his emphasis on the image does strike me as a bit dated – as part of its era of thinking. Wolsak's poetry, for example, has less emphasis on the individual image (or the conventional visual image/analogy) than it does on the overall mode of composition – the poem-series, or the book – as constituting a more comprehensive, indirect "image." The poem itself – its eccentricities of shape/form – becomes a perhaps more comprehensive image or twin of our relationship to the world. In Wolsak's writing, there is a scrupulous tentativeness, an ethically exact desire *not* to overstep or overstate what is known. Or, as Blaser puts it, "our poetic context involves relation to an unknown, not a knowledge or method of it" (54).⁴ Or, in quoting Rilke in his letters, Blaser cites Rilke's conclusion that "instead of possession one learns relation" (55). I find that it makes sense to think of this ethics of relation as a kind of faith or over-arching image

⁴ That relation to an unknown suggests proximity, beside-ness, an adjacency that involves a palpable current of energy-exchange which is often made manifest in a seemingly non-sensical lyricism.

of a relationship to “spirit.” Blaser, again by way of Olson, concludes “that all method is belief” (48), and I concur and point to Wolsak’s poetry as a crucial example.

Wolsak, in *An Heuristic Prolusion*, points toward an engaged tentativeness (which, I might note, bears an important relationship as well to the thinking of Arakawa and Gins in *Architectural Body*). Wolsak’s remarks stammer toward an almost simultaneous statement and an ethical withdrawal (or moving on):

Consciousness breaks with its own imaginative skeleton to exist inside and outside the manner of things ... in anti-totalitarian postulates[.] ... To find axis, or, an orbital angular moment, in rejection of its own centrality, always already disturbing its own refinement. (144-145)

That ethics of perpetual disturbance – of a kind of deliberate anti-mastery – is Wolsak’s method as belief. It is what leads to this sort of page from *Pen Chants*:

o, thoughtic sleeves,
enclued side-swipes ..
moteting gyro-vague and
part-time wooer .. kyriist,
fib-snout and booze-bonding
perfecto-distingo at San Marco...
do not rescind space
pangless between atoms ..
but at the shadows of
species and ideas
for the love of
the covering animal (136)

Blaser cites Lyotard (in *The Postmodern Condition*, 78): “I shall call modern the art which devotes its ‘little technical expertise’ . . . to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible” (47). In presenting the unrepresentable, poetry seeks and creates a next – not in a developmental, progressive, or evolutionary sense, but as a testament and bearing witness to a current (and thus historically specific) momentary relationship to being. The poem, in its formal

adventurousness, becomes that perhaps adequately complex “twin” for the unrepresentable. The poem is a leaning into, a tropism, a turning toward. For Blaser, as for Robert Duncan, and for many predecessors, from Blake to Dickinson, and for many contemporary poets, “Alongside the modern experience of the materiality of language, there is also afoot a materiality of soul” (41). Wolsak’s poetry is one of the most exciting, engaging contemporary instances of that materiality of the soul.

All the new poetry of “spiritual” experience is not the same; each has its own particularity, its own idiosyncratic inclination. I find Wolsak’s poetry, as collected in *Squeezed Light*, to be tracking “spirit” that is akin to Heidegger’s explorations of being (and his recurring question, what calls us into thinking). In *A Defence of Being, Second Ana*, Wolsak writes,

Awing us in
the open place
which inflects
being as in union or rapture (189)

In *An Heuristic Prolusion* the kinship to Heidegger’s tracking is more explicit:

~ “Humanity remains incapable of thinking,” said Heidegger, “as long as that which must be thought about withdraws.” “Once we are drawn into the withdrawal, we are, somewhat like migratory birds, but in an entirely different way, caught in the pull of what draws, attracts us by its withdrawal. And once we, being so attracted, are drawing toward what draws us, our essential being already bears the stamp of that ‘pull.’”

I am speaking .. into this pull, into the imperatives of wilderness, wilderness temptations.
(147)

The strands of the “spiritual” which we find in Wolsak’s poetry (to date) point toward a Heideggerian nexus, a sense of “spirit” which is at the intersection of a range of conceptual invisibilities: being, consciousness, thinking. In Blaser’s poetics, we find a language for the ethical un-mastering of method that is crucial to Wolsak’s writing practice, as well as a sense of reverence or wonder for the radical otherness of language itself.

If we read Levinas with care, we emerge in a realm of thinking that makes explicit the transcendent otherness – a kind of conceptual black hole – that is adjacent to this “spirituality” of the invisible: a relationship to G-d. The profoundly unsettling and powerful aspect of Levinas’ thinking is to critique Heidegger’s being-centric orientation in a manner that leads to an assertion of human relationship – of the claim of the other upon me and my subjectivity – as a prior foundation. Levinas explains that

The thinking of being, being in its truth, becomes knowledge [*savoir*] or comprehension of God: theo-logy. ... See, for example, Heidegger's reading of Aristotle: the problem posed by Aristotle is indeed that of being *qua* being (of being in its verbal quality), but being is immediately approached in the form of a foundation of beings, and, finally, it comes to be named God. (123)

Levinas makes visible the limitations of Heidegger's being-centric thinking: "Heidegger's thesis consists in positing that being is at the origin of all meaning. This immediately implies that one cannot think beyond being. All that is meaningful comes back to the understanding of being" (126). Levinas urges us to re-think the relationship between God and being: "Is the God of onto-theo-logy – who is perhaps dead – the only God; are there not other meanings of the word 'God'?" (59). Thus Levinas' thinking proves to be as foundationally audacious and pertinent as Heidegger's, and of equal pertinence to the questioning at the heart of new poetics of "spiritual" experience:

We are attempting, here, to think about God without the help of ontology. That is, we are looking for a thinking that contrasts with the philosophical tradition in which God is understood as being [*l'être*] *par excellence*, as being that is in a superior sense being[.] (153)

Levinas points toward a kind of thinking that resonates with the forms of the new poetics of "spirit":

Let us take up the question again: can we think of God outside of onto-theo-logy, outside of God's reference to being? To articulate this question, we are going to look for forms of thought different from intentionality, that is, forms of thought solicited by what overflows them. Thus the Kantian ideas are forms of thinking that overflow knowledge and point toward a subjectivity awakened by what it could not contain. (149)

Would it be unreasonable to think of Wolsak's writing as existing in (and promulgating and bearing witness to) the space of such questioning and as constituting the making (however tentative) of language-passages in concert with that experience of overflowing perception? That is part of what I mean by "spiritual" experience and a new (and renewing) poetry of "spirit."

Hank Lazer has published extensively on poetry and poetics; his most recent book of poetry is *Portions* (Lavender Ink 2009), and his most recent collection of essays is *Lyric & Spirit* (Omnidawn 2008).