

MATRIX REDUX: An Advanced Poetry and Printmaking Workshop

The hungering page attracts both printmakers and poets, taunting and inviting those verbal and visual articulations by which we turn the subjective, inexhaustible inner into the shapely, provisional outer, and vice versa. In this workshop, advanced printmaking students and poets will explore a wide array of print processes--both traditional etching methods and digital printmaking--and poetic techniques. The aim will be for each student to produce a hybrid suite of original poems and prints related by an individually chosen theme or obsession developed and pursued throughout the course of the semester. We will make forays into the gap [abyssal] between the matrix and the resulting print/poem--with the technical processes involved in printing and writing, working indirectly, as it were--& the joy [loss of intentionality] of working in that gap (matrix <L "the womb"). All participants will write poems and make prints, with an eye toward contributing a folio of poems and prints to a collective class book. Enrollment is limited to 16 students; admission to the class is by instructor permission: 8 printmaking students (Dass) and 8 poets (Spaar).

WHAT IS POETRY?

WALLACE STEVENS, from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

There was a myth *before* the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete,

From this the poem springs . . .

If the ultimate purpose of poetry is the employment of patterned ideas, images, and sounds in order to communicate something about those patterns and the semantic content, one must wonder: what is the *meaning* of that communicated pattern? *Nothing has meaning save in relation to something else; these patterns must then find their meaning in something outside the poem.* I am in pursuit of that "something" outside the poem, of which the patterns in the poem are the representation or the mime.

ROBERT HASS: "The word is elegy to what it signifies."

GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN: "In the beginning was the Word."

MARTIN BUBER: "In the beginning is the Relation."

Poems say the unsayable. Poetry "bodies forth" from the subjective realm (desire, loss, grief, longing, anomie, duende, god hunger) in part by means of the objective realm (what Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* called "the prison of the senses Five" – the physical, "verifiable" world of sight, sound, smell, touch, taste). Implicit in this experience is *figurative intelligence* (metaphor < L *metaphora* to transfer; < Gk meta- & -phore "along with" "a thing or part bearing something"). In the move from abstract to figurative, unsayable oneness to postlapsarian consciousness, poetry bears the weight of multiple realities, multiple worlds. What effects the frisson between these worlds? What defines and transforms the plush infinity of subjectivity into something metaphysical and meaningful, into expressions of the mystery of beauty and the mystery of being, into poetry?

PAUL CELAN (from "Todesfuge" [Death Fugue]): "A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the not always greatly hopeful belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense, too, are underway: they are making toward something . . ."

Is it possible to think of the *body* – its music, boundaries, finite structures, sensory “language” and structure — as this elusive, paradigmatic *Ur-poem*, **as the matrix**, so to speak, that must be intrinsic to all poem-making? And could it be in relation to this “central poem” (Stevens) of the body that all poems generate, reverberate, collide, caress, and move, an embodiment only “completed,” of course, within the reader? Could it be in the friction, the *frisson*, the world transpiring between the mystery of being, the mystery of beauty – the unsayable – and the finite, sensory capabilities of the body that poetry begins?

What, then, is the unsayable? From Plato’s “mousike” on, “music” [prior to & beyond language] has been the term that constantly recurs in any attempt to express the indefinable and ineffable elements in all communication. It bespeaks the power of this subterranean current in all the arts and particularly in poetry. The metaphor of music, then, the rich freight it bears, is at the very least part of this “something” that transpires between the poem’s matrix and its full embodiment in the reader as poetry. Could silence be the unsayable?

This elusive “more” can be called by any name one wishes: soul, spirit, psyche, “a small blue thing” – we are an “I am” that overflows beyond the limbs, beyond the limits that limit us. If this is so, then this quality of breaking out of the enclosure and its something “more” should somehow be expressed in lines that move us.

RILKE: “Gesang ist Dasein.” [song is existence; to sing is to be]

WILLIAM BLAKE: Introduction to the *Songs of Innocence*

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me.

Pipe a song about a Lamb:
So I piped with merry cheer,
Piper pipe that song again—
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy cheer,
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read—
So he vanish’d from my sight,
And I pluck’d a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain’d the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs,
Every child may joy to hear.

Here, a man dwelling in primordial chaos encounters something both fascinating and transcendent to which he is compelled to respond with an utterance. Man utters an Antwort to a Wort. It is not an utterance whereby man superimposes on the given world the world according to man. This is postlapsarian. For if one looks at the Genesis story, man does not superimpose his world on the given world in the act of naming the animals; rather, man brings them to their own true fulfillment by asserting his kinship, his unity, with them, a unity which to modern man, is a long-lost archaic relationship (Merleau-Ponty). This is a poem of passage – the ambivalent maturation from music to words to books. To celebrate innocence, the piper must leave it – in fact, as soon as he has an objective vision of Innocence, he is outside of it.

SHARON CAMERON, from *Lyric Time*: “In a search instigated by longing, language is by definition a backtracking through the space left in the wake of primordial presence, in the hopes that it might rediscover its source. . . . Language does not fulfill the desire it can learn how to express. . . . Desire for [prelapsarian] presence is at the heart of language almost as if what we desired through language were an extension of finite being. The impetus for meaning or for the extension of being sends language as far as it can go., and inevitably stops it short of the fulfillment of original desire. What stops it is human limit. For presence must suffer a translation into language. The transformations from a semiotic to a semantic sphere, from unconscious to conscious, desire to language, instinct to awareness, difference to reference, logos to godhead and back to logos again are the processes of poetry.”

DICKINSON (from a letter): “Oh, Vision of Language!”

For Dickinson, language is a kind of mourning for the lost, the unsayable:

I found the words to every thought
I ever had – but One –
And that – defies me –
As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

To Races – nurtured in the Dark –
How would your own – begin?
Can blaze be shown in Cochineal –
Or Noon – in Mazarin?

Here, language sings light’s praises by asserting its own inadequacy. So the thing itself, without representation, negates the world of imperfection from which representation arises. So language records the space it must faithfully record. Language, then, is a mediation.

Adam may have named the animals before the fall, but he had no real use for those names until after it. For poetry employs language not simply to record its own limitations, but also to remedy them.

DICKINSON, again:

This was a Poet – It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings –
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet – it is He –
Entitles Us – by Contrast –
To ceaseless Poverty –

Of Portion – so unconscious—
The Robbing – could not harm –
Himself – to Him – a Fortune –
Exterior – to Time –

JUSTUS LAWLER: “The poet is the shepherd of being, poetry is the dwelling place of being.”

STEVENS again (here from “The Idea of Order at Key West”):

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours, although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

Stevens, with Blake, tells us “what she sang was what she heard”—that is, her song is the Antwort to the Wort of the child on the cloud.

The poet’s process is not mimetic; it is ontomimetic: an imitation of Being itself. To employ Rilke’s metaphor, just as primitive man’s Antwort was an unmediated response to the primordial Wort, so the poet’s Gesang is an unmediated response to Dasein. “What she sang was what she heard”: “being.”

CELAN: “I went with my very being toward language.”

Some critics think of poetry as a perpetually self-displacing mode of discourse. Another way to think about this: The poem endlessly reinscribes “the place of loss”—the matrix / womb? – so perhaps this loss is something the intentional structure of the poem seeks to recuperate through its “bodying forth.”

Poetry involves, then, a strange transactional, transformative grace, a fluctuation between the mysterious, unsayable and/or invisible and the embodied, shapely, [momentarily] meaningful. It is a transaction, according to ANNE CARSON, between the lost and the unlost: “Memorable naming is the function of poetry . . . for the poet uses memory to transform our human relationship to time.” This process, poem-making, is a function of what poet PAUL CELAN called the “language mesh” that separates, cleanses, traps, keeps words. Celan speaks of language as being “enriched” by its passage through events and time; he uses the verb *hindurchgehen*, “to go through,” to describe the process of salvaging the subjective world into the objective, experiences into poetry.

The poet/poem is caught between worlds, a sort of hinge or bridge. CARSON: “Through songs of praise, [the poet] arranges a continuity between mortal and immortal life”—between the subjective and the objective, the invisible and the visible. The poet does not just *use* memory and experience; the poet *embodies* them.

POEMS HAVE BODIES

WHITMAN (on his poems): “Who touches this, touches a man.”

“It seems to me that in building the horizontal structures of lines and the vertical structures of stanzas or strophes or blocks or columns, a poem is using its segments, its joints, the contours of its syntax, the rippings of its diction, the movements of its hinges, its wrists and elbows and ankles and knees, to dramatize living movement and rest, action and quiet, that’s every bit the same as what bodies do. Poems have pulses. Poems have respiration. Their rhythms, auditory, visual, even tactile, are the same as our rhythms. There are the ones that are tight and rigid and muscle-bound. There are the ones that are flabby and soft and uncoordinated. There are the ones that come and go, ebb and flow, in ways that make us sit up, pay attention, and tingle. If the pleasures of good poems are physical pleasures, as I really feel they are, then it follows that the physical pleasures (or pains or sensations) of poems are simply an extension or an externalization of our own physical pleasures or pains or sensations. Or think of what happens in

lovemaking, the play of ebbing, flowing – the responsiveness & reciprocity. That's one body to another, and a poem, or a good one, does the same, doesn't it?"

–Stephen Cushman

The mouth is the primal mind. We know – we come to consciousness – through the body.

Poet [<GK *poietes* maker (var. of *poiein* to make)] Poets, makers, have bodies; it makes sense that their creations – what they make – will have bodies, as well.

To the question of philosophers “Am I my body?” there is an instinctive, certain realization that there is something “more” to me than body.

DONNE, on bodies: “They are ours, though they are not wee.”

David Lee Miller, *The Poem's Two Bodies*: Freud suggested that the adult ego derives from an intuition of the body surface as the threshold between self and world. This intuition of self emerges from a sort of primal metaphor, an instinctual carrying over of body values like wholeness and coordination into psychological, cognitive, aesthetic registers. Into poems.

In the course of this development, each of us also takes on and internalizes a special word, a proper name that serves as a sign of personhood . . . In this way our names call us to the ceaseless personal labor that produces us as metaphors of our bodies. And once this carrying over of values has begun, it is essentially open-ended. Our quest for the body's wholeness informs every realm of social and cultural experience. *As both the medium through which we know ourselves individually and the name we give to those mirages of collective wholeness that inform the symbolic realms of art, politics, and religion, the body is at once the most intimate and unapproachable of metaphors.*

LAWLER: *Human utterance (speech) occurred when the first primate experienced himself as separated from that totality surrounding him and, in response to that separation, “outered” what was within himself. No one knows how that emotive outerling becomes denotive sound. What does seem doubtless is that this outerling, this utterance, had about it some kind of “shape” or form that assuaged its speaker's fear, concern, and fascination at this mystery confronting him.*

Milton in *Paradise Lost*: “Immediate are the Acts of God, . . . but to human ears / Cannot without process of speech be told” (7.176-179)

The initial inspiration is complicated as it is refracted into the temporal and the sequential. First comes the primitive insight or inspiration [music], then the analogue [the Image] (the figuration that never exhausts or even perfectly approximates the initial inspiring impulse); then the “plot” of the poem [story]; & lastly its commentaries [structures]

POETRY & PRINTMAKING

The history of writing, like the history of relief printing, is the story of a human desire to communicate information, first through symbols and later through images and the printed word.

Most likely, engraving – making a groove in a resistant material – pre-dates speech. Ancient inscriptions were truly “talking stones. Carson tells us that the verbs for “to read” in Ancient Greek typically begin with a prefix like “again” or “on top of” as if reading were essential regarded as a sort of sympathetic vibration between letters composed by a writer and the voice in which a reader pulls them out of the silence of the stone on which they were engraved.

Many writers speak of poetry as a kind of engraving: “Whoever writes poetry engraves forms in our memory—wonderful old words for stone or leaf, tied to or released by new words, new signs of reality. And I believe that whoever inscribes these forms also disappears into them with his own breath, which he offers as the unrequited proof of these forms’ truth.” (INGEBORD BACHMANN)

CARSON: “As a poet who wrote on stone, Simonides had reason to concern himself with the processes of excision, eliding and removal of surface. To carve an inscription on stone is to cut away everything that is not the meaning.”

WEGGEBEIZT (“Bitten Away”) by Paul Celan:

Webbebeizt vom
Strahlenwind deiner Sprache
Das bunte Gerede des An-
Erlebten – das hundert-
Zungige Mien-
Gedicht, das Genicht.

[Bitten away by the
radiance winde of your language
the manycoloured talk of pasted-
on experience – the hundred-
tongued lie-
poem, the noem.]

[note: “noem” – “Genicht” – is a neologism, a word Celan made up possibly out of the noun Gedicht (“poem”) and the negative adverb “nicht” – “not”]

The addressee of this poem could be Celan’s wife, the graphic artist Giselle de Lestrang working with her language of acids, or perhaps God working with the language of radiance & wind. In either case, a contrast is drawn between the authenticity of these languages and the imprecise perjury of the verbal part, which is denounced as gossip and lies (though “Mein-gedicht” is ambiguous: “my-poem” is just as possible as “lie-poem”). Anne Carson: “Celan didn’t like very much twentieth-century poetry. . . . He wanted to do something different with words, something he called ‘measuring out the area of the given and the possible.’ *His envy of the printmaker’s precision* parallels Simonides’ concern for the physical facts of stonecutting. Both etching and epigraphy are processes of excision, which seek to construct a moment of attention by cutting away or biting away or eliding away what is irrelevant so as to leave a meaning exposed on the surface. Drastic negation is inherent in the physical act.”

Thus “noem”: a poem that both is and is not, a verse nothingness, a poeticized negativity, a word that makes use of the void to think the full. It glows with the wealth of a refused truth.

Carson: “From the process of etching we can perhaps derive an analogy for this rich refusal of the ‘noem.’ An etching begins with a drawing on a zinc or copper plate. The drawing is done with a needle or fine-pointed instrument. In order for the lines of the needle to be visible on the plate, whose surface is highly transparent, the ground of the plate is blackened. The etcher therefore makes a drawing of white lines on a black surface—it is an inside-out drawing, a negative design. It is the kind of thinking that mystics do when they say, as for example Meister Eckhart does, ‘God is not Being . . . I would be as wrong to call God a Being as I would be to call the sun black.’ Now an etcher has to learn to draw the sun black so that it will print white. In an interview, Paul Celan referred to this feature of the etching method as ‘undissembled ambiguity.’”

More CELAN:

KEINE SANDKUNST MEHR, kein Sandbuch, keine Meister

Nichts erwufelt. Wieviel
Stumme?
Siebenzehn.

Deine Frage – deine Antwort.
Dein Gesang, was weiss er?

Tiefimschnee,
Iefimnee,
I – i – e.

[NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters.

Nothing on the dice. How many
Mutes?
Seven and ten.

Your question – your answer.
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,
Eeepinow,
E – i – o.]

Celan permits us to see the name he is giving to reality, then to see it melt away into the different whiteness of the page. And here's an answer to his epistemological question: what a poet knows is how to imitate the human zero with a poetic "O!" Carson: "Poetry is an act of memory that carves its way between sand art and snow art, transforming what is innumerable and headed for oblivion into a timeless notation.

Justus Lawler, in *Celestial Pantomime*: "To return to the notion of poems having bodies: the form of this trope is dialectical in that it reinscribes ontological vacancy as a privation intrinsic to the body alone, which is refigured as a scene of emergence for the spirit. The text itself is also a body, the poetic "body natural"; its groundlessness is reappropriated as a controlled iconoclasm toward fleshly or graven images."

Nietzsche sees forgetting as a positive and derives memory from violence against the body. Oblivion appears to him as the genealogical ground of memory in that punitive violence arose as a mnemonic counterforce to its active power; it appears as the structural ground of memory in that its erasures provide the very space of representation within which memory operates – the "mystic writing pad" on which mnemonic notations are inscribed, or the force against which memory's counterforce must prevail to create *an impression*.

NIETZSCHE: "I often think I resemble the scribble drawn by an unknown power across the page, in order to try out a new pen."

DONNE: "One might almost say her body thought."

Arthur, in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*:

. . . the only good, that growes of passed feare,
Is to be wise, and ware of like agein.
This dayes ensample hath this lesson deare
Deepe written in my heart with yron pen,
That blisse may not abide in state of mortall men.
(I.viii.44. 5 – 9)

This passage alludes to the Biblical trope of memory *as a writing on the fleshy tables of the heart*.

Thoreau speaks about having a poetic rumination "engraved in his soul."

The phenomenologist Jules Michelet, speaks about poetry as a kind of house, and compares that house to bird nests, a kind of reverse or inverted engraving: "In reality, a bird is a worker without tools . . . a bird's tool is its own body, that is, its breast, with which it presses and tightens its materials until they have become absolutely pliant, well-blended and adapted to the general plan. [It is a] house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, in an intimacy that works physically. The form of the nest is commanded on the inside. Everything is a matter of inner pressure (printing < to press)."

Albrecht Dürer, Napster, and the History of the HyperImage.

I.

The traditional printmaking studio sparkles with a wisdom that can only come from some five hundred years of history. The sense of craftsmanship is palpable and ever present. The methods of etching copper plates, for instance, are so unchanging that even the beginning student has a fairly direct conversation with Rembrandt van Rijn. Conversely, the rich and long history of the craft of this discipline can also be viewed as a kind of sheer weight.

Today, however, the copper plates and ponderous etching presses, the ferric chloride baths and the lithographic limestones sit side by side with scanners, Apple G4 computers, digital cameras and inkjet printers. In the printmaking studios the keyboards on the G4s are covered with oily black printing ink; a residue of processes surviving from an earlier century. In the past few years it has become clear that digital methods, photography and traditional printmaking media have all become interchangeable and simultaneous. This has interesting implications for the production of works of art. That question in a sense is the history of our medium: a web of interrelated printing technologies. As artists and as pedagogues, we who work in these studios are interested exactly in letting old etching presses sit side by side with Apple computers in order to see what happens.

All printing technologies contain both utilitarian and expressive properties. In Jerome McGann's model of the HyperText Archive he expresses this as 'vehicular' and 'incarnational.' McGann quotes William Morris' observation that "You can't have good art without resistance in the materials." That can be stated in even stronger terms. In Fayerweather Hall we have a placard quoting the sculptor Elaine King: "Process rescues us from the poverty of our intentions."

The history of early printing technologies can be seen as proceeding from 'printed pictures' to autonomous artworks. Within a given historical period most "printed pictures" were of primarily utilitarian value, so that most [certainly not all!] early German and Flemish engravings, for instance, can be seen as analogous to watching CNN today. The value of these early printed works, printed after all with the latest and most efficient technology, is informational, about the news of the day, didactic and, simply put, pragmatically "useful." As each printing innovation was superseded by the next faster and more efficient method, it fell into "mere" artistic usage. Engraving was replaced by etching, which was replaced by lithography, which was replaced by photography, which competed with mezzotint and later serigraphy. The silver gelatin process that we today know as photography is itself the end result of a long line of earlier light sensitive chemical experiments. Photography opened into photolithography and photogravure as well as a host of other related processes. All of these processes are today taught as esoteric fine art media with all the aura of alchemy. They have mostly lost their utility. Today, for instance, mimeograph machines and old model photocopy machines are used in fine art studios as if they were etching presses. In our printmaking studio today we have various manual typewriters. These are now literally used as drawing machines, in that they scarcely have utilitarian value.

Yet they remain expressive, capable of revealing a capacity that was almost invisible when they were dominantly utilitarian. Usage changes, yet nothing is really replaced. New methods are added to old. The newest technologies are the ones with the closest ties to utilitarian value. Evidence for this is found by looking at various online sites utilizing the Flash software. Many of these sites demonstrate the "creative" potential of Flash in order to get you to buy something, especially the various related software. There are very close ties to utilitarian value with many such new software products.

Vehicular utility is demonstrated by the progressive evolution of printed pictures, and the history of the whole is progressively that of moving toward the production of autonomous artworks. These principles of semiotic shift, mirroring, and the distancing of the author are daily practice for those working in traditional printmaking studios.

This paradoxical conflict was apparent from the beginning of this history. Albrecht Dürer published his APOCALYPSE in 1498, a series of 15 woodcuts (approx. 28 x 39 cm each). This was the first book published by an artist in which the images were primary. The text was printed on the back of each page. The works had been published scarcely three years when Dürer was in Italy complaining to the Venetian Senate that many others, including, prominently, the well-known Italian artist Marcantonio Raimondi, were copying his works and publishing them. Does this issue sound familiar? The Senate's answer was to issue an edict saying that such copyists were forbidden from including Dürer's signature monogram on their copies. The Venetian Senate in 1506 came down squarely on the side of Napster. Information wants to be free.

II.

In the Finnish language, our word inkjet is translated literally as *ink-shower* [muste-suihku]. This is a fair description. Literally, the paper is showered with a fine spray from many separate nozzle heads. An artist teaching printmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago calls his inkjet prints 'watercolors.' Again, this is a literal description of how the inks behave. Artists are interested in these kinds of questions, for in exactly how inks and papers interact we find the material resistance that is both craft and process.

New digital technologies can be seen as having vehicular as well as incarnational possibilities. The delivery system, as it were, of *ink-shower* can be considered incarnational. The IATH archive of William Blake's work is justifiably quite well known. That site is virtually n-dimensional. But consider the possibility of a William Blake working in a way that is not only a HyperText archive of existing works but also as if he were actively producing new works from this model.

We have scarcely begun to ask questions about the relationship between traditional printed media and new digital media. We have scarcely begun to ask of digital art that it be incarnational rather than utilitarian. Mostly we are still formulating the questions rather than the answers. To think of the questions in terms of aesthetics rather than utilitarian value is already a new step. The intersection of *ink-shower* and paper as an aesthetic phenomenon is a new question. The possible relationship between traditional printed media and *ink-shower* is another new question. My work, and the work of my students, centers on these kinds of questions.