

George Bowering / THE POWER IS THERE

I am told that Fred Wah somewhere said that the poet is a “technician of the potent.” We know, from hanging around bookshelves and conferences that he is speaking in the context of Jerome Rothenberg’s phrase, “technicians of the sacred.”

As Wah would say, I like the shift. It is an Olsonian shift if you look at it closely enough. By the sacred we mean things that we have envalued in spiritual terms. No matter how sincere we are, we still place our spiritual needs first. We are likely to remain humanists. We are likely to be at best Wordsworthian priests of nature, with all the egotistical sublime that entails. Olson called it “sprawl.”

A technician of the potent, I take it, is possessed, if such a word be possible in this context, of Keats’s negative capability. One can find remnants of Keats’s prose ideas in Olson’s prose and earlier in that of William Carlos Williams. We are talking about Fred Wah’s inheritance here. Mine, too.

Here is the difference, if you have not yet figured me out. Whereas the idea of the sacred is left to human choice, the potent resides in the material and energy particles that might give themselves up to the poem. Not to the poet, but to the poem. The poet, too, should be giving himself up to the poem. That is the mystical application of Olson’s “objectism.” The potent might be apprehended to be in things you can image. I prefer to imagine its place to be in the language itself, in the phonemes we poets must become experts in.

When Wah says technician, he means to say that you poets have to study and practice so that you know our language structure the way an electronics wizard knows the inside of a transponder. Look at Wah’s imputed phrase: it involves conscious learning (*technos*) and power. I hear one of my favourite theoretical words here: potential.

What is potent? Or where is the potency (the potential)? It is in the possible combinations and recombinations of the basic materials of our language. We can perpetrate fusion at room temperature. God made us happen with a few words. We are the enactment of those words. We too can speak. As poets we should be careful of what we think we create.

That is to say, the technician should never get the idea that he is the source of the power. He is vouchsafed the privilege of channeling it,

from wherever it was proceeding when it came to him, to wherever he can direct it with care. He may be a poet transcreating an urn that is the transcreation of an Attic ditty. He may be learning to see through rather than with his eye.

If the poet is this technician, what techniques can he learn to avoid the sprawl of the ego? Some are obvious and basic: refusing the simile, for instance. The simile might once in a while be a given, but generally we can assume that the poet was trying to author an effective metaphor. That is, to authorize a reading of nature.

Along these lines the poet might learn to refuse the temptation of description. If he thinks he is in the business of representing the world, he can try methods of re-enacting experience rather than describing it. The act of description is a kind of constant low-energy simile-making. It entails appropriating the world, qualifying it, and emitting a somewhat abstracted amalgam of its materials. The sincere poet might begin by refusing any obviously abstract qualifier. Nothing “Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.”

The sincere poet might also refuse the temptation to appear poetical at the expense of the language and its normal beautiful shape. No attestation that “August is laughing across the sky.”

What is re-enactment? Well, it is really not possible, as old Heraclitus told us all two and a half millenia ago. But if a poem by Mr. Williams says:

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines —

our eyes travel as the poet's did, and we are privy to the discriminations. The poem is about small things breaking through the soil in spring, Williams's sempiternal image of potency. The seedling can split the pavement and the poet can only watch and say so. No metaphor will ever be as powerful as that.

No metaphor will ever be as powerful as the English alphabet. There is a potential energy within it equal to the power of the universe itself. Do you remember Blake's picture of Jehovah kneeling to free lightning bolts from his fingers? The poet is not Jehovah, no matter what the atheist Romantic poets say. The poet is the person waiting under the tree, waiting for lightning to strike. Waiting with pen in hand.