

Poetry & Motion

for Bob McAllister and Robert Sund

This exploration, based on Robert Sund's "The Thoughts of Turtles are all Turtles" in The Sullivan Slough Review, Archibald MacLeish's Poetry and Experience, Gary Snyder's Regarding Wave, and Marshall McLuhan's Through the Vanishing Point, was written under Robert McAllister at Cannon Beach, Spring 1973.

A poem is a great silence like the ocean. I go to the ocean whenever I can, not to hear the all-pervasive om of those waters, but to hear the silence of myself that is washed up on those shores. The things I hear are not in me, not in the ocean, but somewhere in between.

This silence of great agedness is there for me in poetry too. It is not in the words of the poem, not in myself, but in the many-feathered flight between.

A poem takes place instantaneously, simultaneously, like the flight of many birds. The best definition of a poem is a poem. It cannot be defined – try to probe it.

Poetry does not live in the terms of definition. Definition is an ordering, a restraining to the rational, the sequential, the logical, the visual. The visual sense, according to Marshall McLuhan, dominates our culture, our way of thinking. We are accustomed to seeing things connected rationally, defined logically, ordered sequentially. All these are manifestations of the visual sense. A poem does not exist in a single-sensory world. It is multi-sensory.

A poem does not exist in the manifestation, the connection. It takes flight in interval and connection. The salt waters, my body – these are manifest, materially tangible. Silence is tangible too, but neither visual nor even rational. The sense of great age it sometimes imparts exists in no world of physical fact. This silence is found in the waters, in me, and in the interval between.

The words of a poem, the images of my mind, these too are manifest, though not where the hand can grasp. The poem means beyond, like an urgent wind. There is an interval there, a space in which the poem moves free of rational ordering. A good poem disorders the senses, sets them rustling like leaves.

Archibald MacLeish holds that the eye accepts its images *too easily and something else must therefore understand*. These images, he goes on, *exist in relationship*. And in relationship, they find their meaning – but *Neither one nor the other. The emotion is in the place between – they place where they are together – where they meet*. How then, he asks of poetry, does its words contain it? *By not speaking of it [directly], he answers, By speaking of two things which, like parentheses, can include between them what neither of them says. By leaving a space between one sensed image and another where what cannot be said can be*. This, he says, is *inexplicable* to reason.

To define a poem would be to define the time and space of its existence. A good poem creates in its motion its own time and space. (As Einstein tells us, does all matter.) Rather we should say, a poem probes time and space, much as I hope to probe poetry itself here.

To define space is to box it, to ship it along a fragmented visual gradient. You get a sight-seeing tour of San Francisco from a coach – what of the city, its character, have you experienced? You must get out on the streets, feel the Bay breeze, smell Fisherman's Wharf, hear the ding-ding of the trolley cars on the hills: none of this can be done from within an air-conditioned luxury liner. Neither can poetry be written nor experienced from the scaffold of formalized structure, nor from any definitive criteria which seek to enfold and restrain.

To write from such formalized criteria is to create verse. Everything is roped together, battened down: the storm will leave the ship safe, but exactly as it was. Poetry is never exactly what it is, what is said.

Poetry is the realization, the experience of a meaning beyond the logically verifiable; the sensing of a deeper relationship than the analysis of words will take you. Robert Sund wrote *the movement of a poem is more important than the images in it. That is why we go to the banks of moving streams, though we wash our hands in water every day*.

The movement of a poem is not the experience of it, but the means to experiencing. It is in the motion from myself to the sea and back that I encounter timeless silence. The poet today is traveling in his poems to realms beyond academic analysis, to a place where motion is effortless because it is inevitable. The relationship of poet, poem and reader has changed. We no longer watch the poet, like a fatigued athlete, trying, striving for a goal, an effect. We move now, from image to image within an experience; in that movement in which poet and reader become part of the poem.

Great poets, from Rumi and Shakespeare to Whitman, Rilke, Eliot, Stevens, Neruda, and Jimenez are particularly adept at probing the motions of space, of an experience. In the second half of the twentieth century the greatest American heirs to this tradition are Galway Kinnell and Gary Snyder:

Running Water Music

under the trees
under the clouds
by the river
on the beach,

“sea roads”
whales great sea-path beasts

salt; cold
water; smoky fire
steam, cereal,
stone, wood boards.
bone awl, pelts
bamboo pins and spoons.
unglazed bowl.
a band around the hair.

beyond wounds.

sat on a rock in the sun,
watched the old pine
wave
over blinding fine white
river sand.

Snyder never says anything about any of the relationships among the images in his poem. They are all direct, immediate, “right now.” But moving through the poem I am made aware

of a great number of extremely imminent sensations. I am aware as well of a recognition within me of the sensation of movement itself, of spaces wide and brightly clear, of probing out past the vanishing point and yet barely beginning.

Robert Sund again: *The good poem has the effect of collapsing all the sides of many separate boxes, to reveal a realm we could all travel through freely.*

This I recognize in Snyder’s poems: many boxes collapsed, obstacles removed – a sudden rush as if wind, and I am in motion. I recognize, I am not told. The poem conveys no message, it does not represent, it is the images themselves; the representation falls like a Hollywood slow-motion façade to reveal the poem itself, being itself, moving beyond all messages that need to be rationally coded.

Perhaps Snyder is so adept at this motion of the poem beyond its words because he is well acquainted with ecology; because he knows that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. So is a poem.

“But what,” ask the critics, the sonorous deacons of verse of whom Sund speaks, the formalists, “does the poem mean?” What, they want to know, is this space revealed by these collapsing boxes? How does motion take place?

Motion is that which occurs of itself wherever space appears – it is that which responds to the tension of interval and connection.

But what are interval and connection? How is their tension reconciled in an effortless poem?

Take the space of a room. The reality of the room is not in its walls and roof, although those make it visually appear. The room we experience is the space which these structures enclose, expose, and probe. Space itself appears as motion. The spaces that exist in a poem are those probed by the structures of the poem, its word, its images – and my mind.

It is in the interval between these structures that motion can happen. Those intervals in turn are an exploration taken by mind, soul, and spirit. This is why formal structure cannot be the basis of modern poetry. Motion cannot take place where the space is creosoted with the

edicts of pretentious deacons of verse. Poetry bumps from pole to pole, confused.

The words of these deacons frosted in an exceptional freeze and were erected in rigid ornamentation. As Robert Sund says, *the basement is full of ping-pong and potato salad*. Poetry must realize that these are abstractions. They are not really there.

Motion is the rustling in tall grass. Try to define it. Harvested grass does not rustle. All the grasshoppers hide.

“Connection” is the manifest, the physical, the “real”; “interval” is the space, the between, the ground of motion. In their relationship, their tension, is the birth of motion. Some refer to this as “texture.” There is texture to everything. Poetry is the experience of texture.

There is texture in the wide clean pores on the breast and in the ridges and whorls of the fingers that explore it. Is the sensory experience, the poem, in their actual touching, or in the anticipation of the next touch?

Texture arises from space and points of sensation. Their changes in relationships give us textures: bumpy, smooth, wispy, grating. There is texture as well in intangible things – your mind brushes them, not your fingers. Words, images, ideas, poems all have a “feel” to them. It is here that motion takes place; from the relationship, the tension, the feeling of space and sensation, interval and connection, texture. Snyder illustrates:

Song of the Slip

SLEPT
folded in girls
feeling their folds; whorls;
 the lips, leafs,
of the curling soft-sliding
 serpent-sleep dream.

 roaring and faring
 to beach high on the dark shoal
 seed prow

moves in and makes home in the whole.

Here is a sensation so tangible I can taste its dusky movement, smell its warm-sweaty odor. For another reader, a different feeling perhaps, but all readers will feel a motion.

The poem largely achieves motion in this way: between connection and interval, through space; but there are other aspects of motion that ought to be considered, motion on other “levels”, in other senses.

One reason a poem is so easily able to move me – and one reason poetry is so important a medium – is because it is multi-sensuous. Again, McLuhan: *As the Western world has invested...an intense stress on visual experience, [this] results in fragmentation... [the] need for integral sensory orientation. Poetry disorders the procedures of space that are uniform, continuous and connected; it puts us back in a world of all the senses. It may even allow senses other than the five physical to enter our comprehension. It moves unrestrained through them all, from each to the others.*

How then does motion arrive at recognition? Emotion, like poetry, is not confined within logic. Emotions cannot be pinched between the thumb and finger of rational explication. Even this table on which I’ve written for 17 days now has become suffused with an emotion. Rationality adopts a position; poetry moves through the texture of many positions. The images of a poem do not sit dumbly side by side. They strike up a dance, a relationship; one can feel their warm pulsing like a resting heart, their rapid breathing, or their cold shoulders icicle-sharp against one another. They mean together, they move together.

Snyder writes of the birth of his son Kai as he make his way into the heavy world from his wife Masa’s lightening belly:

And out from her
 (dolphins leaping in threes
 through blinding silver inter-
 faces, Persian
 Gulf tanker’s wave-slip
 opening, boundless
 whap
 as they fall back
 arcing
 into her –)
 sea

Snyder has taken his wife, his son, dolphins, Persian Gulf tankers, and the changing seas to make an image that moves as fast as “blinding silver interfaces” and as personally as my hand; a motion to the core.

Snyder has not formalized his meter – he is not in the cab business; he is not looking for a form of mass transportation. Nor has he formalized his rhythm, nor even his use of space on the page. He has made his poem move by not forcing it to move; he has made it emotionally moving by not forcing it to say.

Snyder has allowed the images to form their own relationships, he has not said that his wife is a sea; he has not said that his son’s birth is like dolphins leaping from her, and in not saying so he has said much more. The images are left to wander like gypsies, stealing what they will.

A poem is not the perfection of a predetermined thought, but is in itself a thinking, moving from perception to perception – so Archibald MacLeish, who also famously wrote, A poem should not mean, but be.

In these two sentences MacLeish has summed up much of poetry itself. A poem cannot be possessed like your electric can opener or a candy bar. It does not exist in such time and space. To put it there is to make of it the nothingness of one-perceptual thought, one-dimensional, visual, fragmented from the whole.

A poem is a movement in itself. It is the thinking of the thought, it is the being of the object. It is not a description, representation, message, handy code or formal theorem to help you get to another difficult level of thought or mode of perception. It is the thing in itself.

The poet does not say “this is that” or “this means that.” The poem is allowed to be on its own terms; its images are allowed to mean together. In doing this, the poem goes *on beyond, to a recognition of something known, something known before and now, in the space between one image and another, something is created.* (Archibald MacLeish again, on the lip of something is indefinitely thrilling as the first snow of winter when I was seven.)

MacLeish further hypothesizes that the images, couple together in their relationship, evoke in this “on beyond” place an emotion, which, turning on its creators, changes them, charges them *with something the emotion knows – something more immediate than knowledge, something tangible and felt, something as tangible as experience itself, felt immediately as experience. Is it human experience itself, in its livingness as experience, these coupled images and the emotion they evoke have captured?”*

Is this true? Is this how the motion between myself and the ocean arrives at the great aged silence? Is this sense of experience the child of emotion, born of the motion between the images in a poem, the silences of the poem’s intervals, through the spaces revealed by the collapsed sides of many boxes? Look at another of Snyder’s poems:

EVERYBODY LYING ON THEIR STOMACHS HEAD TOWARD THE CANDLE READING, SLEEPING, DRAWING

The corrugated roof
Booms and fades night-long to

million-darted rain
squalls and

outside

lightning

Photographs in the brain
Wind-bent bamboo
Through

the plank shutter
set

Half-open on eternity.

Ah! Through the spaces of this poem Snyder moves from candle to roof to squall of rain to plank shutter, to arrive at the end at eternity, a word that could not otherwise carry meaningful weight. I am drawn to move as wild and unsteady as the night of which he writes until I feel the cold draughts through the shutter, the wet graininess of its planks, the

million-darted rain tattooing the roof, and the safe warmth of companions lying around the candle – and I can just see, though they are not mentioned in the poem, the dark corners unlit – so that when Snyder unlatches the shutter he unlatches the poem and with it my mind too set “half-open on eternity.”

MacLeish teaches *One image is established... Another image is put beside it. And a meaning appears which is neither the meaning of one...nor the meaning of the other nor even the sum of both but a consequence of both.* He asks, *“Is there also, and on beyond, a recognition of something known, something known before and now, in the space between [the images], realized?”*

It is relationship here as elsewhere in poetry which provides the means to meaning. Metaphors, symbols, coupled images make sense of the world by showing us relationships we had not seen.

Although MacLeish gets sidetracked in a figure of speech Baudelaire used to describe this experience as “universal analogy” he is describing nondual reality, that which Snyder was in Japan to study, sitting zazen. MacLeish writes *it would make sense of experience...in its own terms....If the fragments of experience are in truth parts of a whole, and if the relation of the parts to each other and thus to the whole can in truth be seen, sensed, felt in the fragments themselves, then there is meaning in that seeing, in that sensing, in that feeling – extraordinary meaning. Even, sometimes, unbearable meaning.*

It is, he says, right, and unexpectedly right. *We feel a knowledge that we cannot think.*

I’d taken part in the motion of the poem, felt the breeziness of its space, felt it thrill alive some part of me of which I was unaware, lived its experience. This poem is an experience, meaning on its own terms. A poem does not mean, it is. Similarly, meaning is attached to experience after the fact, a tag. Lived, it is. Good poetry is immediate; it does not describe but is what it describes. It is not a message about something that happened, it is happening, in motion, moving the reader and with the reader.

Motion cannot happen in the past or future. Motion in poetry is the means by which

recognition may occur – the recognition of experience, emotion, self, great silence, collapsed boxes. Such recognition is only later “understood” and it loses something in an analytic understanding. What it loses is its immediacy, the complete involvement that the present moment evokes; we become, as McLuhan complains, detached: *Thought distinguishes itself from things in order to reflect upon them.*

McLuhan writes, *intense stress on visual experience results in fragmentation.* This is, he thinks, the mode of Western thought, to become detached, apart, in order to rationally deal with the subject. Only a little time spent with Kant is needed to confirm this. The poem does the opposite. It may disorder the visual world, it carries the reader through spaces of a multi-dimensional, multi-sensual experiential world. The reader becomes the “vanishing point”, becomes the probe, becomes ultimately the poem as the poem becomes the experience. Compare these two images from Sylvia Plath:

- 1 – the mongrel dog working his legs to a gallop
hustles the gull flock to flap off the sandspit

- 2 – Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Which of these two carries the reader into motion; it which of these does the imagery itself become the vanishing point? Is this not the effect that MacLeish describes?

As poetry breaks free to move, we may see less use of words to “place”, words that limit time, position, or relative relationship when these things are irrelevant clutter; less use of connecting word and modifiers that slow down the motion. Words such as “you, the, like, as, then, when, it, and I” are extraneous padding in much of what Snyder writes; these and others like them can be understood in the motion, and in allowing them to remain understood, Snyder allows the reader that much more motion. See how much less restrained we are in this:

and the patterns they take. There is the physical motion of the lips that pronounce each word and their sounds like smoke in the air. There is the motion of breath that carries each word from within the body out through the lips.

Words such as *lucid* or *ponderous* evoke flights directly into themselves and into their context within the poem. Each sound is a texture on the tongue, each has its intervals and points of contact.

There is also the motion of a word through its history, which adds dimension to the poem. The history of the word *wilderness*, for example, as explored by Roderick Nash in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind*. *Wild* is a contraction of *willed*, he thinks, reflecting the perception of the Wild as a place that, to the settlers arriving from the Old World, was a primeval wood, willful and uncontrollable, immense and trackless, where to wrench ones living from the land took tremendous will and where the land itself and the wild beasts that inhabited it were themselves willful and not subject to the civilizing will of man. *Deor* is Old English for *animal* and hence we have *wil(le)d-doer-ness* – *wilderness*.

Each word, according to Ciardi, is either a metaphor or an onomatopoeia if its history is explored far back enough.

There is the motion of words into words, as meanings and sounds slide into each other, vocabulary is built. Take the word *slide* for example, combine it with *fluid* and one has *sluice* – to wash with a sudden flow of water.

There is the rhythm words take in a poem, their pauses and accelerations, their space on the page and tongue, a dance in themselves until, masterfully done, *how shall I tell the dancer from the dance?* It is a motion between words and between words and images that changes their relationships and gives meaning.

The poetic catalogue moves through the parts of a scene on any perceptual plane. The motion is to the scene what the motion from image to image is to the poem.

There is the motion of word as individuals into the societies they form, the flowing, as in Logan's poem, of right words into their "rightness" through the company they keep and in which they form their relationships. The

words imperceptibly become images; the images the poem. This is motion not just from meanings, but through the textures of word-imagery-poem. For example, the mood created by the relationships of words in Gary Snyder's short poem:

Shinkygoko. Kyoto

in the dusk
between movie halls
the squeak of the chain
of swings

There are motions that take place within the imagery of a poem itself: image proper, metaphor, symbol. The space of two visually disconnected images and their relationship; the strange borrowing of metaphor so that each part both becomes the other and adds to itself; the "shining through" in the symbol of the invisible understood through its earthly counterpart that gives this form its unusual translucence.

And finally there is the musical movement of all these motions together, the interactions of all the parts of the poem, connotation and denotation, the movement of the poem from one or more of its phrases or images into the whole, the ripple spread from Ciardi's rock dropped in a still pool, the *shifting-and-being-at-the-same-instant* like a waterfall of music, the motion of images as they enter the poem, sometimes each called in a way by the one before, sometimes each striking up a pose against the other, sometimes entering like bashful stagehands at curtain-call – the poem moves through its images, through its words, and through the spaces they probe.

Consider these motions, the music of the words, their rightness and flow, the spaces they create in this poem of Sylvia Plath's:

Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald
cry
Took its place among the elements.
Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New
statue.

In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as
walls.

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own
slow
Effacement at the winds hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and
floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window
square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Robert Sund, in his editorial entitled "The Thoughts of Turtles Are All Turtles" in the *Sullivan Slough Review* (Spring 1969) says *To define poetry in safely discussed abstractions like 'texture' is a waste of life. He says the joyless formalized poets dress like deacons and show up at pretentious gatherings. Occasionally one of them climbs into the pulpit to speak, but no matter how much he says, or in how sonorous a tone of voice he says it, his church accomplishes no freedom from the real world. The basement is full of ping-pong and potato salad.*

Why then should I defend a reading of texture in poetry that goes in motion? Perhaps because Marshall McLuhan's concept of space in *Beyond the Vanishing Point* and Robert Sund's concept of motion seem to anticipate and reconcile one another. For McLuhan, perspective is singling out a piece of the whole, fragmenting it to look.

For MacLeish, perspective pulls all the pieces together while allowing them to remain separate: *meaning in a poem is perspective – the perspective that puts everything in place. The [Real] is never seen but in perspective – in that glimpse.*

Sund: *Poetry has nothing to do with apparent reality.*

McLuhan: *subject matter has been almost totally eliminated in favor of the moving lines of force of the general environment.*

Sund: *There are various types of movement...*

Inward.

Into space.

Into this earth.

Hovering on wings.

To the point of vanishing, and beyond.

The American poets who do this well, says Sund, are James Wright, John Logan, Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, and Gary Snyder. Perhaps these new thoughts of turtles may see them freed of their crawling shells, take wing, becoming turtledoves, moving in ways unknown to formalized criticism. It is still incomplete. It needs more work. But there are other birds besides turtledoves and they may perhaps find a place to land. It may be the most unlikely birds that do:

Where We Must Look for Help

Robert Bly

The dove returns; it found no resting place;
It was in flight all night above the shaken seas;
Beneath ark eaves
The dove shall magnify the tiger's bed;
Give the dove peace.
The split-tail swallows leave the sill at dawn;
At dusk blue swallows shall return.
On the third day the crow shall fly;
The crow, the crow, the spider-coloured crow,
The crow shall find new mud to walk upon.

Robert Bly does not belong to the church of formalized poetry. The deacons have excommunicated the crows. Do not listen to them. Fly, fly in search of new mud to walk upon.

Sund: *"We want to hear from poets who have mud on their shoes."*

