

Lyn Hejinian

FROM *The Rejection of Closure*

My title, "The Rejection of Closure," sounds judgmental, which is a little misleading—though only a little—since I am a happy reader of detective novels and an admiring, a very admiring, reader of Charles Dickens' novels.

Nevertheless, whatever the pleasures, in a fundamental way closure is a fiction—one of the amenities that fantasy or falsehood provides.

What then is the fundamental necessity for openness? Or, rather, what is there in language itself that compels and implements the rejection of closure?

I perceive the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete. What saves this from becoming a vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one's ability to make distinctions. Each written text may act as a distinction, may be a distinction. The experience of feeling overwhelmed by undifferentiated material is like claustrophobia. One feels panicky, closed in. The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is the form that opens it, in that case.

Two dangers never cease threatening in the world: order and disorder.

Language discovers what one might know. Therefore, the limits of language are the limits of what we might know. We discover the limits of language early, as children. Anything with limits can be imagined (correctly or incorrectly) as an object, by analogy with other objects—balls and rivers. Children objectify language when they render it their plaything, in jokes, puns, and riddles, or in glossolalic chants and rhymes. They discover that words are not equal to the world, that a shift, analogous to parallax in photography, occurs between things (events, ideas, objects) and the words for them—a displacement that leaves a gap. Among the most prevalent and persistent category of joke is that which identifies and makes use of the fallacious comparison of words to the world and delights in the ambiguity resulting from the discrepancy:

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Why did the moron eat hay?
To feed his hoarse voice.

Because we have language we find ourselves in a peculiar relationship to the objects, events, and situations which constitute what we imagine of the world. Language generates its own characteristics in the human psychological and spiritual condition. This psychology is generated by the struggle between language and that which it claims to depict or express, by our overwhelming experience of the vastness and uncertainty of the world and by what often seems to be the inadequacy of the imagination that longs to know it, and, for the poet, the even greater inadequacy of the language that appears to describe, discuss, or disclose it.

This inadequacy, however, is merely a disguise for other virtues.

"What mind worthy of the name," said Flaubert, "ever reached a conclusion?"

Language is one of the principal forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless. As Francis Ponge puts it, "Man is a curious body whose center of gravity is not in himself." Instead it seems to be located in language, by virtue of which we negotiate our mentalities and the world; off-balance, heavy at the mouth, we are pulled forward.

She is lying on her stomach with one eye closed, driving a toy truck along the road she has cleared with her fingers. Then the tantrum broke out, blue, without a breath of air. . . . You could increase the height by making lateral additions and building over them a sequence of steps, leaving tunnels, or windows, between the blocks, and I did. I made signs to them to be as quiet as possible. But a word is a bottomless pit. It became magically pregnant and one day split open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a football.

—*My Life*

Language itself is never in a state of rest. And the experience of using it, which includes the experience of understanding it, either as speech or as writing, is inevitably active. I mean both intellectually and emotionally active.

The progress of a line or sentence, or a series of lines or sentences, has spatial properties as well as temporal properties. The spatial density is both vertical and horizontal. The meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word's lateral reach, its contacts with its neighbors in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the other world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference. The very idea of reference is spatial: over here is word, over there is thing at which word is shooting amiable love-arrows.

Writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them.

Even words in storage, in the dictionary, seem frenetic with activity, as each individual entry attracts to itself other words as definition, example, and amplification. Thus, to open the dictionary at random, mastoid attracts nipplelike, temporal, bone, ear, and behind. Then turning to temporal we find that the definition includes time, space, life, world, transitory, and near the temples, but, significantly, not mastoid. There is no entry for nipplelike, but the definition for nipple brings protuberance, breast, udder, the female, milk, discharge, mouthpiece, and nursing bottle, and not mastoid, nor temporal, nor time, bone, ear, space, or world, etc. It is relevant that the exchanges are incompletely reciprocal.

and how did this happen like an excerpt
 beginning in a square white boat abob on a gray sea
 tootling of another message by the hacking lark
 as a child to the rescue and its spring
 many comedies emerge and in particular a group of girls
 in a great lock of letters
 like knock look
 a restless storage of a thousand boastings
 but cow dull bulge clump
 slippage thinks random patterns through wishes
 I intend greed as I intend pride
 patterns of roll extend over the wish
 —*Writing is an Aid to Memory*

The “rage to know” is one expression of restlessness produced by language.

As long as man keeps hearing words
 He’s sure that there’s a meaning somewhere

says Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*.

It’s in the nature of language to encourage, and in part to justify, such Faustian longings. The notion that language is the means and medium for attaining knowledge, and, concomitantly, power, is old, of course. The knowledge towards which we seem to be driven by language, or which language seems to promise, is inherently sacred as well as secular, redemptive as well as satisfying. The *nomina sunt numina* position (i.e., that there is an essential identity between name and thing, that the real nature of a thing is immanent and present in its name, that nouns are numinous) suggests that it is possible to find a language which will meet its object with perfect identity. If this were the case, we could, in speaking or in writing, achieve the at-oneness with the universe, at least in its particulars, that is the condition of paradise, or complete and perfect knowing—or of perfect mental health.

But if in the Edenic scenarios we acquired knowledge of the animals by naming them, it was not by virtue of any numinous immanence in the name but because Adam was a taxonomist. He distinguished the individual animals, discovered the concept of categories, and then organized the species according to their functions and relationships in a system.

What the naming provides is structure, not individual words.

As Benjamin Lee Whorf points out, “. . . every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.”

In this same essay, which appears to be the last he ever wrote (1941), entitled “Language, Mind, Reality,” Whorf goes on to express what seems to be stirrings of a religious motivation: “. . . what I have called patterns are basic in a really cosmic sense.” There is a “PREMONITION IN LANGUAGE of the unknown vaster world.” The idea

is too drastic to be penned up in a catch phrase. I would rather leave it unnamed. It is the view that a noumenal world—a world of hyperspace, of higher dimension—awaits discovery by all the sciences [linguistics being one of them], which it will unite and unify, awaits discovery under its first aspect of a realm of PATTERNED RELATIONS, inconceivably manifold and yet bearing a recognizable affinity to the rich and systematic organization of LANGUAGE.

It is as if what I’ve been calling, from *Faust*, the “rage to know,” which is in some respects a libidinous drive, seeks also a redemptive value from language. Both are appropriate to the Faustian legend.

Both also seem in many respects appropriate to psychoanalytic theory, if one can say that in the psychoanalytic vision the “cure” is social and cultural as well as personal.

Coming in part out of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, especially in France, is a body of feminist thought that is even more explicit in its identification of language with power and knowledge—a power and knowledge that is political, psychological, and aesthetic—and that is identified specifically with desire.

The project for these French feminist writers is to direct their attention to “language and the unconscious, not as separate entities, but language as a passageway, and the only one, to the unconscious, to that which has been repressed and which would, if allowed to rise, disrupt the established symbolic order, which Jacques Lacan has dubbed the Law of the Father” (Elaine Marks, *Signs*, Summer 1978).

If the established symbolic order is the “Law of the Father,” and it is

discovered to be repressive and incomplete, then the new symbolic order is to be a “woman’s language,” corresponding to a woman’s desire.

Luce Irigaray:

But woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere. Even without speaking of the hysterization of her entire body, one can say that the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined. . . . “She” is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, perturbed, capricious—not to mention her language in which “she” goes off in all directions. . . .

—*New French Feminisms*

I find myself in disagreement with the too narrow definition of desire, with the identification of desire solely with sexuality, and with the literalness of the genital model of women’s language that some of these writers insist on.

But what was striking to me in reading the collection of essays from which the above quote was taken was that the kinds of language that many of these writers advocate seem very close to, if not identical with, what I think of as characteristic of many contemporary avant-garde texts—including an interest in syntactic disjunctures and realignments, in montage and pastiche as structural devices, in the fragmentation and explosion of subject, etc., as well as an antagonism to closed structures of meaning. Yet of the writers from this area whom I have read to date, only Julia Kristeva is exploring this connection.

For me, too, the desire that is stirred by language seems to be located more interestingly within language, and hence it is androgynous. It is a desire to say, a desire to create the subject by saying, and even a feeling of doubt very like jealousy that springs from the impossibility of satisfying this desire.

This desire is like Wordsworth’s “underthirst / Of vigor seldom utterly allayed.”

Carla Harryman:

When I’m eating I want food. . . . The I expands. The individual is caught in a devouring machine, but she shines like the lone star on the horizon when we enter her thoughts, when she expounds on the immensity of her condition, the subject of the problem which interests nature.

—“Realisms”

If language induces a yearning for comprehension, for perfect and complete expression, it also guards against it. Hence the title of my poem “The Guard.”

Windows closed on wind in rows
 Night lights, unrumorlike, the reserve for events
 All day our postures were the same
 Next day the gentleman was very depressed and had a
 headache; so much laughing had upset him he thought
 The urge to tell the truth is strong
 Delightful, being somewhere else so much the moment of
 equivalence
 To be lucky a mediation
 To look like life in the face
 The definition quotes happiness
 The egg is peafowl
 The kitchen: everyone eats in different cycles—yeh,
 the dishes are all over the counter. . . . yeh, food’s
 left out, things are on the stove. . . . yeh, the floor’s
 filthy—that’s amazing! have you been there?
 Like the wind that by its bulk inspires confidence
 Red and yellow surefire reflect on the breakdown
 The forest is a vehicle of tremors
 When mad, aged nine, and dressed in calico
 Confusion is good for signs of generosity
 Each sentence replaces an hallucination
 But these distractions can’t safeguard my privacy
 During its absence, my presence
 Every hour demonstrates time’s porosity
 The ghosts that blend with daylight come out like stars
 in the dark longing to have their feet fit in boots
 And finish in Eden.

Faust complains:

It is written: “In the beginning was the Word!”
 Already I have to stop! Who’ll help me on?
 It is impossible to put such trust in the
 Word!

Such is a recurrent element in the argument of the lyric:

Alack, what poverty my Muse brings forth. . . .
 Those lines that I before have writ do lie. . . .
 For we / Have eyes to wonder but lack tongues to praise. . . .

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things, and we suffer from doubt and anxiety as to our capacity to do so because of the limits of language itself.

Yet the very incapacity of language to match the world allows it to do service as a medium of differentiation. The undifferentiated is one mass, the differentiated is multiple. The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would be in fact a closed text. It would be insufferable.

For me, a central activity of poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens—makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear. While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things.

Will Alexander

My Interior Vita

I was born under Leo, under its signpost of heat, and what has evolved from such coloration is a verbal momentum always magnetized to the uranic. A verbal rhythm prone to the upper hamlets of starlight, my predilection being instinctively honed to the fluidic motion of the sidereal. This is not to say that the protean aspects of Earth cease to amaze me, or cease to enthrall me with its natural magic. The winds, the bays, the deserts, ceaseless in my mind like a teeming field of Flamingo flowers, or a sun-charged clepsydra. Yet above all, the earth being for me the specificity of Africa, as revealed by Diop, and Jackson, and Van Sertima, and its electrical scent in the writings of Damas.

Because of this purview I have never been drawn to provincial description, or to the quiescent chemistry of a condensed domestic horizon. I've always been prone to exploring the larger scope of predominant mental criteria as exhibited by the influential civilizations over the span of time which we name as history. For instance, within the Roman or American criteria I see the active involvement of what is called the left brain and its natural gravitation towards separating life by means of active fragmentation. Yet at a more ancient remove there exists the example of Nubia and Kemet unconcerned with life as secular confiscation, but with the unification of disciplines, such as astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, law, as paths to the revelation of the self. Knowledge then, as alchemical operation, rather than an isolated expertise. So when various knowledges fuse in my writings, insights occur, revealing an inward light whose source is simultaneous with the riveting connection between flashes of lightning.

For me, language, by its very operation, is alchemical, mesmeric, total in the way that it condenses and at the same time proves capable of leaping the boundaries of genre. Be it the drama, the poem, the essay, the novel, language operates at a level of concentration modulated by the necessity of the character or the circumstance which is speaking. My feeling is that language is capable of creating shifts in the human neural field, capable of transmuting behaviours and judgments. Humans conduct themselves through language, and, when the latter transmutes, the human transmutes. The advertisers know this linkage, but to a superficial degree, so when language is mined at a more seminal depth of poetic strata, chance can take on a more lasting significance. And I do not

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