

THOMAS FINK

## On David Shapiro

*New and Selected Poems* by David Shapiro. Woodstock & New York: Overlook Press, 2007.

In recent years, a growing number of readers have expressed major admiration for David Shapiro's work. Often, they laud Shapiro, though "discovered" by first-generation New York School poets, as an innovator who eludes classification. His *New and Selected Poems* will permit them to examine the breadth and depth of his accomplishment. For others, however, it is a chance to catch up with a poet who has too often been relegated to the periphery in historical accounts of American experimental writing but deserves a solid place at the center. Each of Shapiro's books since 1971 has featured a balance of short poems and either a long poem or a long sequence or two. This selection of work ranging from 1965 to 2006 has preserved the balance beautifully. I find that all of the strongest smaller and protracted texts in Shapiro's nine books are present.

Shapiro's first book, *January* (1965), appeared when he was eighteen. The opening tercet of "The Will," dated 1961, demonstrates the surrealistic imagery and complex trope-building that came to full fruition in the seventies: "I know the party of the sun / The sun dirigent and wealthy over the hair / The sun of round cancer on the gray breasts of the sky." While surreal elements in *January* sometimes evince joy in nature, eros, or parental intimacy, more often they exude the aura of foreboding (even terror) expressed in this passage. These poems are close to Hölderlin's Romantic ethos and even Roethke's "greenhouse" poems, yet unusual words like "dirigent" suggest Stevens's influence, Koch's penchant for anaphora is present, and a New York School tolerance for disjunction sometimes surfaces, though more consistently in Shapiro's next book, *Poems from Deal* (1969). This first volume's predominant pronoun is "I"; soon, Shapiro picks up Ashbery's tendency to embrace shifting perspectives by populating many poems with a full range of pronouns.

The subject of love/sex is prominent in each of Shapiro's books. "In Memory of Your Body," a sequence in *Poems from Deal*, is boiled

down to a compelling, paragraph-long prose-poem of troubling, surreal eroticism:

Your body has narrow slits instead of windows. And inside, your brain turns around, silent. The more mouth you have the more pleasure. Your eyes look like stables, look like dungeons, though they are hard and white, of course, as your legs. Nor are those legs without ornament: Two chains of great size and profundity keep you prisoner.

When he wrote this poem, Shapiro was a fledgling art critic; metaphorical transformations might be read, not as an expression of the poet's sexual anxiety and stabs at mastery, but as an ironic critique of European surrealism's "narrow," near-paranoid, "imprisoning" objectification of women. If a man complains of danger in a woman's "eyes" and of the emotional "dungeon" of unrequited desire, *his* depiction "silences" her intellect. "Ornamental" signifying "chains" may be "profoundly" imaginative compared to greeting card love-poetry but also extremely restrictive. The strange calculation of the quantity of "pleasure" according to the mouth's size obviously benefits him, not the woman.

Demonstrating very different stylistic approaches, the elegant metaphysical quatrains of "The Night Sky" (*The Page-Turner*, 1973) and rabidly hyperbolic pop music parody of "A Song" (*To an Idea*, 1983) revisit the problematic of how love's rhetoric betrays the flux of power relations. "Dante and Beatrice (At Forty-Seven)" (from *A Burning Interior*, 2002) compiles fragmentary, hyperbolic narrative moments, pseudo-myth-making allusions, and reflections—both poignant and whimsical—that suggest the mutual pleasures, conflicts, and compromises of a middle-aged couple's long marriage:

So if a person loves you they could say  
I want to be in Hell with you forever  
like two bats summoned on a windy  
word by a poet having a mid-life decision  
Both are ready for bed after six centuries  
of poetry and epic youth and new songs  
but I don't think they will do much  
in bitter Riverdale like intense butterflies  
She's perhaps too much the mother of Christ  
and he's had a bad day in exile's  
office writing to Miss Stone a stone himself in grass

Another way of being "in Hell with" someone "forever" is the pursuit of elegy, an important aspect of Shapiro's poetry, beginning with "Ode," his poem for Frank O'Hara in *Poems from Deal*: "Permit me to take this sleeping man / And I will help him on his way." While the title-poem of *Lateness* (1977) assembles a pastiche of difficult, arresting images fraught with melancholic mourning that shows how "it is difficult to distinguish between the living and the dead," the sequence "Friday Night Quartet" (from *To an Idea*) "realistically" laments the poet's mother's passing with representations of her own voice describing her illness and treatment, family memories, and a fantasy of musical transcendence. Clear, poignant elegy merges with political protest in the seventh section of the title-sequence of *A Man Holding an Acoustic Panel* (1971); "The Funeral of Jan Palach" refers to a martyr during the protest against the 1968 return of Soviet totalitarianism, after a brief "spring," to Czechoslovakia:

When I entered the first meditation,  
I escaped the gravity of the object,  
I experienced the emptiness,  
And I have been dead a long time.

When I had a voice you could call a voice,  
My mother wept to me:  
My son, my beloved son,  
I never thought this possible,

I'll follow you on foot.

As in other politically inflected poems like "To the Earth" (from *To an Idea*), Shapiro's declarative simplicity does not compromise his language's great agility, but much of his political poetry features the tropological and imagistic "thickness" found in his other work. Written between Iraq wars, "For the Evening Land" (from *A Burning Interior*) sounds quasi-prophetic lamentation and warning without apocalyptic mystification:

If there is a sound before death in America  
What causes that sound  
Asks the newspaper  
For most there is no sound  
Only a dream of two words: White black

Irreversible or the dream without words  
There is no voice in America  
Only the finite  
Reading the voices  
But let me die singing, like the forefathers. . . .  
There is no sound before death in America  
You do not see the charred soldier, only pleasure.  
We have done away with all noise, but the agony of respiration.  
And autumn will be the flag of that new nation.

Like the "white black" binary, in which notions of racial conflict and thinking about life/death, presence/absence, and dogmatic ideologies trouble each other, tropes of voice(s), voicelessness, noise, and respiration cry out against camouflaging and denial of war's deadly consequences and against hegemonic tendencies to stifle dissent. Shapiro's urgent *voice*, contesting proscription of "voice," communicates the necessity of seeing "the charred soldier" (previously ignored). The ambiguous concluding sentence resists attempts to assess whether "autumn" marks progress toward the planet's annihilation or whether "that new nation" will raise a "flag" for a truer democracy and lasting peace.

Since *To an Idea*, which includes such poems as "The Counter-Example," "To an Idea," "November Twenty-Seventh," and "The Night Sky and to Walter Benjamin," Shapiro has thought strenuously and passionately in his work about the nature and functioning of language itself. In a new poem, "The Foot Speaks," such thinking is celebratory; the (surreal) linguistic imagination can make everything "speak": "Each car has its own idiolect. / The street uses English, even. / Each door aims to be clearer. / . . . Quoth the raven: I am language. / I am language, / And nothing in language is strange, to me." Yet to "make it strange" (new) for readers is to extend perceptual powers and to transcend ordinary "realism's" dullness. In another new poem, "A Riverdale Address," which punningly substitutes the poet's home-district for Lincoln's Gettysburg, parodistic homage questions the notion that language should serve as a stand-in for an ego's desire to be advertised: "Now I am engaged / in a great civil war / testing—whether my "I" / or any "I" can long endure." Shapiro's speaker is a socially, linguistically, and psychologically constructed self engaged in "civil war" against whatever community ("we") has promulgated narcissistic poetry: "We have met / on a portion of that self / to dedicate a poor ion. It is not fitting /

or filling or proper, / but 'we' did it." Note the similarity in sound between "portion" and "poor ion." Affirming "that the poetry / of earth is as good / as the poetry / of language," the speaker declares the future dissolution of a self-centered poetics so that writing /speech affirming ecological values (and not recklessly selfish exploitation of global resources) can help ensure the earth's survival:

And that poetry of  
the self by the self and for  
the self will perish  
from the earth and  
that the poetry of the  
earth without contempt  
for an apple (The whole tree  
repeats the leaf)  
will not perish, like the earth.

For Shapiro, "the poetry / of language" stands alongside socially progressive "poetry/ of earth," since investigation of constitutive features of language helps one analyze how worldly actions are justified, proscribed, doubted, etc.: "If students visit for signs / Or signatures we would discuss traces. / We would examine each other for doubts" ("House [Blown Apart]"). While Shapiro's first long poem, "About This Course" (from *The Page-Turner*) ponders various children's physics experiments to evoke both admiration for and skepticism about modern science's truth-claims, this poetry of linguistic examination—intersecting gracefully with other thematic elements that I noted earlier—is especially evident in his last three books' title-sequences.

The title-sequence of *After a Lost Original* (1994), for example, begins with the complex dramatic situation of "when the translation and the original meet / The doubtful original and the strong mistranslation" and proceeds to question translatability in various ways. While "The Snow Is Alive" both asserts and denies the personification in its title, "Walter Benjamin: A Lost Poem" dreams up a "fairly simple" "lost original" that nevertheless includes tantalizing ellipsis—"David or King David / How / did you / *done* / your door"—not far from early Clark Coolidge; alluding to Freud's "infamous" trope about the unconscious, he focuses on the challenge of linguistic traces: "Unfortunately, many of Benjamin's remarks on poetry were now simple scratches on the cover of the book, effaced like the infamous magic writing pad and indecipherable as hidden love (as opposed to open rebuke)." Other

sections echo this moment of illegibility (absence) stymying the will to read (desire for presence), even as "the book's" surface is a reminder of origins: "On the road to a door / On the way to a window"—on a journey of interpretation—one finds an articulation of failure to unite signifier and signified: "Nothing equals nothing like a word" ("After *Asturiana*"). In "House of the Secret," language's inadequacy as full unification of disparate elements is starkly declared: "We think it is a bridge because it is silver. It is not a bridge. / Lost is lost."

"For Victims," the last section, opens with a political illustration of a figurative "bridge" that represents victims' subjugation: "They have used the bodies of children / as improvised bridges, / Which they later cross." Dislocation is cloaked in the guise of connection. The section following the Benjamin piece, "In Germany," identifies the country of the Jewish Benjamin, chased and probably murdered by Nazis, as having been "insane" and situates the belated Jewish poet Shapiro "in" the context of the *Shoah*, writing "after" this "original" tragedy and lamenting his inability to achieve a classical theological / philosophical / aesthetic equilibrium:

I did not mount Mt. Parnassus  
Nor could I walk Philosopher's Walk  
    It was too high (*altus*—also reversed)  
    Or too late (or—not yet)  
I took your way  
But halfway there (oh Germany it was insane)  
    Wanted my own. . . .

We are the sculptors now, making our own doors  
The words remain, but the gods are gone for good

The idea remains, but the words are gone like gods.

Negative theology seems to reign, and contemporary artists must rely on their own makeshift poetics in light of grand traditional resources' disappearance, as well as the separation of "words" and "ideas." The sequence, however, evokes benefits accruing from such losses. Following the mention of "father and son" traveling "together to the margins of a cloud" at the end of the first section (in relation to "original" and "translation"), the part entitled "To My Son" tropes on an Oedipal reversal that mocks patriarchal authority's "originality." Further, the tender, post-Yeatsian "Prayer for My Son" not only recognizes the

father's status as the son's obstacle and tells the boy to "forget the paternal maternal scowl," but his paternal advice comprises an anti-authoritarian rejection of coercive rhetorical uses of origins and the Bloomian literary theory of anxious Oedipal rivalry as he argues for tolerant critical pluralism:

With a low opinion of mad monist mind  
That calls false coherence a good  
And forgets every color  
In the manifold wind  
Though anxiety cannot be driven hence  
Learn the pleasure  
Of poetic radiance  
Each artist in each other artist delighting  
Opposed to the combat  
Of the self-affrighting.

In a forthcoming article, Joanna Fuhrman identifies the confluence of didacticism and anti-dogmatic questioning in Shapiro's poetry; this passage exemplifies that important tendency. In such work, a sense of linguistic/philosophical inquiry, a democratic openness to possibility, and a liberating concept of love/family coalesce. Much of David Shapiro's "poetic radiance" begins here.