THE NEW DEAF POETICS: VISIBLE POETRY

Jim Cohn

One wishes to be a poet, a painter, a something instinctively known to be supreme, a something of which the essence is sight in the broad sense, to include hearing, but the reality he would express in silence.

William Carlos Williams

Abstract.

Since the meeting of poets Allen Ginsberg and Robert Panara at the National Institute for the Deaf in 1984 a new Deaf poetics has emerged. The centrality of the image as the essence of poetry is the focus both of ASL poems and of the international poetry community. A series of performances by ASL poets and other activities linking poets have provided new data to support the universal, i.e. poetic, phase through which language operates.

Introduction.

Let us assume as poet William Carlos Williams did in "The Embodiment of Knowledge" (written 1928-30, published in 1974) that in any culture, any language, there will be one who "wishes to be a poet." The essence of this poet's work, we are told, "is sight ... but the reality he would express in silence. n Can there be any more fitting description of what one would expect from Deaf culture, from sign language poets? What more would one expect from deaf people's poetry than that it be visual, expressed in silence?
I do not believe it is coincidence that what deaf people DO with language is what hearing poets try to make their language do. The problem has been that there was no contact between deaf and hearing poets and therefore no proof of the relationship. No one had brought them together in such a way as to prove to deaf people, especially to the deaf poets, that their poetry and the poetry of the "new" American poets is connected, or that it could be connected if only the Deaf were allowed opportunity to engage in and develop their language as art -- "where language is itself primary and ideas (i.e. information) subservient to language' (Williams 1974:141). Now there appears evidence that such a connection has been made. One can say that there is a very clear relationship between the artistic purposes of deaf and hearing poets and that its basis is in the importance each gives, through their poetry, to the image.

It is my contention that one tradition of American poetry, founded by Whitman and continuing through Pound, Williams, and Ginsberg, makes the image central. In other schools one encounters a poetry bogged down in logopoeia: the dance of words, mental gymnastics, or in melopoeia: the music of words and prosody. These lesser schools of American poetry with their emphasis on abstraction will never attract the deaf poet directly. Too much is lost in translation, lost to senses of them that do not have hearing. The English language poetry of the Deaf using meter and rhyme seems imitative, unnatural, at best tied to some nostalgia for sound heard before deafness occurred, or tied to a traditional poetics buried in the past, not of the present. This imitative trend, observable in the most recent, perhaps only, anthology of Deaf poetry (The Silent Muse, 1960) seems to be a denial of the importance of American Sign Language (ASL), for its language is English. This trend seems an inhibition placed upon the very purpose of language; i.e. self reflection and the expression of one's mind.

Assuming that the reason a poet makes poems is, as Williams suggested, "to strike straight to the core of his inner self, n we know the deaf poet uses his or her language to do the same. Why must any poet do this? Because, Williams argues,

The conviction that fills the whole body of a man is nearer to him than all the books that have ever been written. And these other books ... they are part of the very oppressive, stupid, aimless, ignorant world which has driven him to shelter, to prison within himself, to defeat from which he must escape. HE must escape, weak, comparatively unlettered, by himself. Then, when he is whole and only then will the wisdom of the ages be decipherable.
From this major poet's perspective, then, we see the falling away of the past as the starting point of the poem. The past is only a mountain of "deaf words, cemeteries of words, which befog the mind. To renew one's sense of language, one's sense of self, the modern poet must literally see the images never before put into language. This emphasis on the image is found also in a new set of data abstracted from interviews with two deaf poets, which show how they perceive their own language.

We can find in the thinking of deaf poets the emergence of a "visible" poetics, visible in the sense that as with the new American poetics the clear precise image is central to the making of a poem. Furthermore, from current analysis of ASL (McDonald 1982), and from cross-cultural studies of poetics (Allen & Tallman 1973) we can begin to understand not only how gestural-visual and vocal-auditory languages similarly strive to convey in art a clear representation of the thing itself but also how the poetry of each language is necessary in order to complement that part of language that serves as a vehicle to science, religion, philosophy, politics, journalism, and the rest.

**Beat meets Deaf.**

On February first of 1984 internationally acclaimed poet Allen Ginsberg came to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, New York to meet deaf poet Robert Panara. Together they addressed the issue of poetry and deafness. During the course of the workshop they presented for students and faculty the following dialogue took place:

**GINSBERG:** There's a tendency to develop an international poetic style with rhythm and rhyme, but with harder and clearer pictures.

**PANARA:** For deaf people, signing poetry is like painting pictures in the air.

**GINSBERG:** Then a performance of poetry becomes ... another art form... The ambition of a good poet is to write something that is visually bright and clear. I help in translating my poems into other languages, and the only thing you can translate completely is a picture. You can't translate wit or rhyme. So that's the great test of poetic essence. It's fortunate that modern poetry is the closest verbal formulation to what might be useful for deaf people.

This brief exchange has historic implications for the Deaf because it validates the formulation of a sign language poetics that in itself is not isolated but is part of a developing
international poetic style based upon an awareness of the importance of the image. No other poet had ever expressed directly to deaf people that the poetry of sign language is a legitimate art form and could be founded on "the great test of poetic essence." In the context of cross-cultural exchanges between two distinct poetic traditions, it is clear that the bond linking modern American (and international) poetry and the "new" poetry of the Deaf is the image. The immediate significance of the meeting of Ginsberg and Panara was that they inspired a new generation of young deaf poets to begin a sign language poetry movement at NTID. The profundity of this movement cannot be entirely measured, but the purpose of this paper is to document its conception, growth, and emerging theoretical framework; i.e. poetics.

**The Bird's Brain Society.**

With support from deaf faculty members Robert Panara and Patrick Graybill and NTID Liberal Arts Chairperson Adele Friedman, I established a non-academic "underground" poetry project. Its goal was to encourage hearing-impaired students either as performers or members of the audience to identify themselves and interact in ways that would raise poetic consciousness and awareness that sign language is a viable medium of art. We began with a series of sign language poetry performances by deaf poets once a month in a well frequented campus bar. The name chosen for the series was "The Bird's Brain Society." It was proposed by Peter Cook, a deaf student at the Rochester Institute of Technology (parent institution of NTID), and refers to Ginsberg's famous poem "Bird Brain." I consider that choice, in and of itself, representative of a symbolic transmission of poetic knowledge and manner of thinking from Ginsberg, who for me embodies modern American poetry, to these young deaf poets.

The series began in October 1984, with subsequent performances in November and December. After that it was turned over to the poets themselves. Between sixty and eighty people attended each session, with an approximate 3-to-1 ratio of deaf to hearing. Each performance generated debate among the audience and performers as to the nature of Deaf poetry. This debate addressed questions of style, content, culture, documentation, and accessibility through language barriers that non-sign language users now face. Some of these issues were political: the poet has to decide how general or specific the audience is. Universality was the very heart of the issue.

My own involvement extended beyond the series itself; I wanted to relate The Bird's Brain...
Society to other poetry events in the Rochester area so that there could be a freer exchange of information and more possibility for further performances by deaf poets in the community. Information about schedules of events, workshops, magazines, and opportunity for performances are essential if negative stereotypes are to be broken and poetic awareness heightened among the deaf. The most troubling is the notion that poetry is English and not a universal in all languages and cultures. To deny the Deaf access to their own language as art, as the American educational system has done, has succeeded only in creating a negativism, a blindness toward language and art.

**A growing poetic awareness.**

On October 12, 1984, three days after the first performances by Peter Cook and Dennis Baszynski in the Bird's Brain Society, these young deaf poets and I videotaped a dialogue. It's purpose was to examine the nature of Deaf poetry as seen through their eyes and to find out if there was or was not a conscious use of sign language as an art form. From the dialogue a new wealth of information emerged that reveals a previously undocumented level of metalinguistic, and specifically poetic, awareness of sign language as an art form by the Deaf. The following abstracts selected from the dialogue reflect this consciousness as it clusters around key issues or themes. The abstracts are transcriptions of the poets' responses to my line of questioning.

**Visual poetry:**

Poetry is dependent on the visual.

Poetry itself is something visual.

This is really purely from the mind.

It's what you see.

A deaf poet's strength is in visual expression of the poem.

Pure Deaf poetry is possible to express through the visible body.

It's a decompression... an exact series of clear signs.

[It is] a less abstract level, a more concrete level.
Sign language:
Sign language does not require English.
Sign language can’t replace English.
It’s a different language.
It’s similar to martial arts: every movement means something.
We use our bodies, our hands, as a syllable.

Dreams:
Dreams occur in sign language, in ESP, in captions.

Beauty:
Beauty means describing something with good details, using my language, my signs, ASL, my body and actions, so that when someone looks at what I’m doing they understand immediately.

Love:
In sign language, it seems hard to describe love... to really hit an audience so hard that they cry.
I’d want to see a deaf audience cry.
I’ve never seen that happen.

Violence, Sex, and Religion:
[These] are cross-cultural issues I won’t have my poetry mannered.
I won’t wear a halo.
Rebellion: the breaking through complacency.

Universality:
I want to show something visually so that everyone could understand me, whether or not they were deaf.
I can tell you through my performance, my actions, what’s in my heart, my mind... that’s international, anyone will understand that.

Written poetry:
The paper is a moderator.
[SL poetry] is visual, but you can also put it down on paper.
I consider this transcription as a press secretary.
Writing poetry is only one way to interpret it; we realize that is not the only way.
We can take the words themselves and make our own pictures.
I change the (written) poem to make it my own.

Memory:
It’s possible to memorize because our bodies do the work.
The correct way: whenever you get a picture you put it down on paper; then throw out the original and memorize your transcription so that the gestures flow.
A picture will be remembered, regardless.

Implications: Essence of Poetry.
Since the visit of Allen Ginsberg to NTID and his reading of his poem "Birdbrain" to deaf students and faculty, I have witnessed the birth of a modern deaf poetry movement, the participants in which share a collective awareness that ASL itself contains aesthetic properties embodying universal elements or forms. What are these properties? Are they inherent to sign languages? What are their forms? And are these forms universal? It take the position that the "visual" poetry of the Deaf is the essence of the image made central by the international poetic community.

Language is used in many ways, serves many purposes. Williams argued that
Language is ... divided according to its use into two main phases. 1. That by which it is made secondary to the burden of ideas-information, what not -- for service to philosophy, science, journalism. And 2. where language is itself primary and ideas subservient to
language. This is the field of letters ... and the preeminence of poetry [is in this division. These two major uses of language complement each other -- or should in a well adjusted intelligence. (1974:141)

These two phases, no doubt, are possible at whatever point in the continuum (ASL, PSE, signed English) of manual communication a group of people interact. What Williams suggests in defense of poetry is that in poetry ideas must be "subservient to language." Given the monolingual and usually anti-visual education afforded them, Deaf people have been able to make only minimal use of language as primary -- in their own theater, so far as that has been available, and in "the street." Although the evidence that ASL is a language (Stokoe 1960) and not merely, like the manual alphabet,... another form of communication" (Davis & Silverman 1960:419) is a quarter century old, the acceptance of the poetic capabilities of ASL has not come, largely because of the language policies stated and hidden in education for the deaf.

If these poetic properties and capabilities were already apparent, this project would have been unnecessary. Deaf people would be making poems at the academic and "full-time" artistic levels; Deaf poets would have the central place they deserve, both intraculturally and cross-culturally, with respect to other poetic movements. You don't see American deaf poets going to China. There is no movement at the primary language level, not even nationally. The legitimacy of their sign language has not become a cultural fact for the Deaf, not even to the degree that their language variety has for Black American or other linguistic minorities.

Much of the failure of the hearing community to recognize the legitimacy of sign language and sign poetry centers in the problem of iconicity. Instead of debating whether sign languages are iconic we should ask the question what is the purpose of iconicity? Does it serve in the secondary or the primary phase of language as Williams distinguishes them? Is iconicity to be regarded as a simple vehicle for conveying meaning, ideas, or as the creative potential of the language?

Klima and Beluga (1979) have made a pioneering linguistic analysis of the function of iconicity in sign language; they find that the manual sign not only functions as a global whole but can and does derive great expressive force, directness, and clarity from representing what it stands for through indication of shape, movement, outline, or other
typical visual characteristic of an object. No matter how much signs mature and change (i.e. become arbitrary, conventional, or standardized), they retain some of this force - potentially always present, as the original force of words that the poet exploits. This iconicity, or likeness in the sign to the thing itself, is not a more or less accidental feature; it is a concomitant characteristic linking the signifying and the signified.

Later research indicates that iconicity in ASL follows established rules in a productive predicate classifier system, common to many spoken languages. This cross-linguistic evidence, with detailed reference to Navaho (McDonald 1985:254-259), has provided support for a more sympathetic view of iconicity as evolutionary core of lexicalization within a framework of verb-root patterning. What was once thought of as a non-linguistic feature of ASL -- the visual representation or mimetic -- in reality provides the basis for much of the nominalization and lexicalization (i.e. naming and making grammatically regular word classes) in today's sign languages (McDonald 1982). In other words, the purpose of iconicity is generative; it is the primary creative force of language itself.

Both Navaho in spoken and written form and ASL exhibit verb roots that distinguish the shape of an object, whether or not it is handled, or the direction of its movement or location. It is evident that ASL, as a language with a classifier system like that in many other languages pays great attention to consideration of the shape and other characteristics of objects in the world. Moreover, units that drive this system provide "skeleton" information about the configuration of the object and the agent of action. Previous research tended to miss this creative productive system of classifiers, not only because bottom-level meaning-bearing units had been analyzed only as they appeared in the unitary (citation-form, English-glossed) "frozen" sign, but also because the classifier system itself reflects a visual instead of an auditorially based consciousness -- to speakers or users of language for "ideas-information" - an alien consciousness. This "frozen" lexicon presupposed that a sign's formational elements (handshape, location, movement, etc.) were arbitrary, meaningless units equivalent to phonemes. But it is these "sub-sign" elements that McDonald finds to be the fundamental morphological units of ASL, upon which signs evolve and become standard. Below is a partial list from McDonald (1972) that shows this transformation:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Underlying form &amp; meaning</th>
<th>Surface form</th>
<th>Word</th>
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Handshape is undoubtedly a quick, vivid shorthand picture or image of a thing itself in nature, with features that convey what is necessary to suggest the meaning. This point cannot be stressed too much. The classifier system serves the aesthetic as well as the lexical use of ASL; therefore, the purpose of iconicity is essentially creative in the sense of making through language images that represent the natural world around.

Studies by Allen and Tallman (1973) further support the idea of creative potential in sign languages and do so from several cross-cultural perspectives. They note how Fenollosa (1936) discerned principles of writing that laid the theoretic and stylistic groundwork for 20th century American poetry and proposed that the iconoclastic nature of the Chinese written character, as form, implies the very element that distinguishes poetry from prose. Chinese notation, like the predicate classifier system found in ASL, is something more than arbitrary symbols; it is based upon a "shorthand" picture of the operations of nature according to Fenollosa. Even the sentence form, he argues, was forced upon primitive man by nature itself as a reflection of the temporal order in causation. What unites a subject and a predicate is a transference of power as we see in nature as a flash of lightning passing between two terms, a cloud and the earth. No natural process can be less than this, and poetry deals with the concrete in nature, not with "rows of separate particulars," for such rows do not exist. The value of poetry lies in keeping the language enriched and in direct relation with natural processes. This principle underlies all great American poets' thinking.

Ezra Pound, in his early essay "A Few Don'ts" (in Allen ~ Tallman), proposed the following principle of poetics: direct treatment of the "thing" itself. The belief that underlay this principle was that "the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object" The way a poet measures the natural object is through the making of images. Pound defined an image as that
which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. It is the presentation of such a complex instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

The foundation of modern American poetry is rooted in the centrality of the image.

The implications for Deaf poetry and for a "visible" poetics is clear from both a linguistic and a cross-cultural standpoint: sign language itself contains aesthetic properties -- e.g. the productive predicate classifier system -- that embody universal elements. These elements are visual, concrete images. The proof of sign language's validity not only as a language but as vital creative force lies in its close proximity to the natural image, to its ability to represent the thing itself. This alone, by Pound's definition, makes it the creative essence of poetry.

An additional link between the iconic in ASL and the image in English poetry, further proof that they operate on the same poetic principle, is found in Allen Ginsberg's "Notes for Howl and Other Poems" (1959):

I thought I wouldn't write a poem but just ... sum up my life -- something I wouldn't be able to show anybody .. shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen juke-box... (for Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image.

Twenty-five years later, when speaking to the deaf audience at NTID, Ginsberg reiterated the practical nature of visual imagery. He said, "The only thing you can translate completely is a picture... [The visual image is] the closest verbal formulation to what might be useful for deaf people" (on videotape in NTID archives). I take it he meant that if the poet sticks to an exact, clear image to present meaning the meaning will be accessible in all people's experience. Ultimately all language must be visible -- it must be seen in the mind's eye to be understood.

Visible poetry: A Distinct Art Form.

To summarize the trends found in American poetry and poetics, and to understand clearly how closely they articulate with a Deaf poetics of visible poetry, the following points have been established:

1. Direct treatment of the thing itself is the only way a clear, precise image may be produced
in a language.

2. The visible image is the only feature of language that can be translated completely across cultures.

3. Forms dependent on abstract notions of prosody or time will not translate successfully. 4. Forms dependent on concrete characteristics (e.g. classifier systems) will translate successfully.

5. The essence of poetry lies in its proximity to descriptions of natural processes.

Through its use of sign language, Deaf culture has guarded for centuries the essence of an emerging international art form, visible poetry. Although this is a newly articulated poetics, as this essay shows, with its fundamental nature, it already resembles a fully defined manifesto of a poetic movement. Visible poetry can be defined as poetry dependent on the visual for its creation and transmission. This is a purer connection than spoken language allows between mind and object or action perceived. It is what is seen put into a series of clear signs.

In the case of sign language, every move of the poet has a less abstract, a more concrete meaning, a meaning that can be international, i.e. translatable, because it is in close relation to the process of direct observation. This pictorializing, which is largely irrelevant in the information-idea phase of language, is at the core of any truly international poetry. It is this underlying deep commitment to form that makes sign language poetry so powerful. In the future as more deaf people recognize this potential in their own language, poets using ASL will take advantage of its high-energy imagery to express themselves on all subjects and issues of humanity.

**Note**

1. The translation of Deaf poetry into voice or print is important for making sign language poetry accessible in the diverse languages of the hearing world, but there are problems. A canon or corpus is needed; now we have only collections in videotape archives. Interpreters need knowledge and skill, and the performance-art interpreter of poetry must also be a translator; i.e. have knowledge of poetry itself, style, voice, traditions, etc. These matters, however, are beyond the scope of this paper.
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Pound, E.

Stokoe, W.

Williams, W.

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**REVIEW ARTICLE: SIGN LANGUAGE RESEARCH IS ALIVE AND WELL IN EUROPE**

William C. Stokoe