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## Immediate Memories: (Nostalgic) Time and (Immediate) Loss in the Poetry of David Shapiro

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“Repetitions to be sharpened...  
 (“Falling Upwards”)

“By this point, one needs something calm and real as  
the unabridged Oxford English Dictionary.”  
 (“An Example of Work”)

To call David Shapiro a poet of the surreal, of collage, of the erotic, of endless transition, of formless form, of *fin-de-siecle* regret is to touch upon the variety of poetic techniques he has explored in eight books of poetry published between 1965 and 1994.<sup>1</sup> All of these descriptions are accurate. However, they omit a distinguishing (and heroic) aspect of Shapiro's work: for over thirty years, he has refused to write poetry which organizes the real into a clean and neat poetic. Eschewing the comforts of order, he has engaged in a process of rediscovering the objects of poetry through a verbal and graphic confrontation with past time and present language. This process marks Shapiro's poetry as distinctive from his New York precursors Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch, as well as from the concerns of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, and Ron Sillman.<sup>2</sup> Within the space of Shapiro's poems, we meet uncanny images and our attention is called to the surface of words, while the “depth” of narrative or confession is exposed as illusion. Yet, and perhaps paradoxically, memory, the past, and history are always already present in the surface of Shapiro's poems: in “House (Blown Apart)” he acknowledges “the traces of old work / Embedded in this page, like your bed / Within a bed. My old desire to live!” Six of Shapiro's poems [“Poetry Without Fear” (1969), “The Carburetor at Venice” (1971), “Music Written to Order” (1977), “Falling Upwards” (1983), “After a Lost Original”

(1994), and “Sentences” (1994)] exemplify his range and trace over and over the problems of memory, without settling into a comfortable solution, and how it returns to that “old desire to live” in, with, and through poetry.

While the surface of words, their sensations rather than their significance, is important in Shapiro’s work, he brings a different sensibility to a project which at first resembles both the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers’ attempts to “repossess the sign” and the nonreferential or antireferential works of John Ashbery.<sup>3</sup> Shapiro’s poems, especially his earlier works, create verbal collages and playfully surreal images in a process similar to Ashbery’s experiments with language, as Thomas Fink has pointed out (*The Poetry of David Shapiro* 38-44). However, even in works from the late 1960s, Shapiro constantly makes the reader aware that language is trying to provide access to someone’s memories, to the past. That is, for Shapiro, language and poetry always attempt to refer the reader to something even if they are not successful. It is the attempt at reference and the acknowledgment of the inevitable loss that occurs when this attempt is made that distinguishes Shapiro’s works; in “Sentences,” a poem that we will consider in more detail later, he writes, “The reader loses his way richly, but it is not certain that the reader loses” (*After a Lost Original* 31). While Fink has shown how Shapiro’s “close attention to . . . persistent, purposeful, and various challenges to the protocols of textual understanding” contributes to critical theory’s “discussion of the problematics of reading” (14), we can extend this thesis to show how Shapiro’s consideration of the reader distinguishes his emphasis on the surface of language and his resistance to the closure of meaning from other poets’ similar moves. Shapiro’s poems use the present (the reader’s interaction with the words on the page) to recall the past, creating immediate memories. Shapiro’s writing is thus distinctive from a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet such as Bruce Andrews who wants “to explore the underpinnings of innovative literary work in the present tense” (vii). For Shapiro, the exploration of innovative literary work is not his task (as a writer) but rather a reader’s task. As a poet, as a writer, as an artist working in language, Shapiro has made the heroic decision both to acknowledge the reader’s role and to point out that the effectiveness of that role, a reader’s potential success, is always already lost in the obscurity of memory.

When one reads Shapiro’s poems it is as if one is beginning a crossword puzzle in which all the clues point toward verbs written in the past perfect. His early poems in *January* and *Poems from Deal* often present difficult, surreal images. Beginning “Poetry Without Fear” he writes,

A bee flies out for a meal  
 providing its own plate  
 These children who booed me so often  
 Collapse at the gate. (*Poems from Deal* 58)

What strikes one first is the absurdity of a bee providing its own plate. Not only is the bee's action apparently absurd, but we then wonder, what about those children? Are their actions equally absurd? If so, is their "boo[ing]" or their "collaps[ing]" absurd? What is Shapiro suggesting, if he is suggesting anything, by making this parallel between the children and the bee? Writing "On Realism in Art," Roman Jakobson reminds us that "in order to show an object, it is necessary to deform the shape it used to have; it must be tinted, just as slides to be viewed under the microscope are tinted. You color your object in an original way and think that it has become more palpable, *clearer*, more real" (26). "Poetry Without Fear" engages in a similar project of trying to present a clear, palpable, and real object through a process similar to what the Russian Formalists would have described as "de-familiarization." But more is happening here than the representation of strange, surreal images or the reworking of a trace of early twentieth-century techniques. There is a visual and aural play within these lines. Think grammar: "A bee flies out for a meal, providing its own plate. These children who booed me so often collapse at the gate." Two sentences: brief and clear. Each sentence takes two lines to complete. With the five-space indentation of the second and third lines, Shapiro creates a certain geometrical elegance. Writing about Denise Levertov's "Merritt Parkway," Shapiro calls attention to the visual elements of poetry: "The luxury of such a poem is its close positioning, its geometrical congruence, in the device of traffic and the poetic cadences in which this poem makes its shape felt."<sup>4</sup> Shapiro also plays with the grammatical structure of sound. Linguists discuss phonemes as the basic unit of meaningful sound; they see the aural field as a space in which the speaker intends to produce meaning. As a poet with an incredibly acute ear, Shapiro provides us with meaningful units of sound — phonemes — and links these into grammatically acceptable and recognizable patterns — sentences. Yet despite this apparent movement toward linguistic meaning, the opening stanza complicates a linear equation between meaningful sound (phoneme or grammatical sentence) and understandable sound (in the sense of poetic theme). Sounds may have meaning ("A bee flies out for a meal"), but the image Shapiro produces here prevents the reader from easily comprehending the sounds' meaning. In fact, the following phrase, "providing its own plate," makes the bee's image absurd and cartoon-like. Despite its initial absurdity, however, there is a certain accuracy and truth in the sentence: bees do provide their own plates

because they don't use anything for a plate. The initial distance and then the subtle connections between truth and absurdity in the poem's language send us on a hunt for meaning. But later in the poem, Shapiro writes "words do not speak" and "in my opinion the words cannot be blended." Although Shapiro is speaking specifically of the words "gate" and "latch," one could read this statement about the impossibility of blending words as a larger part of his aesthetic. Shapiro's poems engage in an attempt to take us back to the surface of signs — to the visual and to the aural components of language.

Shapiro's emphasis on surface fascinates; he traces words over and over until from within his effort to foreground the material of linguistic signs, a narrative (of sorts) emerges. Action, for Shapiro, comes not from characters but from words. In a later work, "A Note About the Author," this theme of poetic action as wordy comes into a tighter focus: Shapiro subtitles the poem "Or 'Not Writing a Novel'" (*After a Lost Original* 38). Shapiro's poetry, then, reminds us that it acts in the material of words, in the surface of words. It denies the illusion of depth found in novelistic narrative in order to reach the real. His recovery of the rich surface of language comes from "the gate and the latch," from the speaker's attempt to understand and "blend" words into a work of art — an act which the speaker acknowledges as futile — "in my opinion the words cannot be blended." "Poetry Without Fear" plays with "a latch with two senses." For Shapiro, words are latches with two *senses* — not two *meanings*; words are perceptions; words are sight and sound. One could argue that an alternative reading holds here; one could say when Shapiro writes "senses" he means for us to search for the poem's "meaning." But it seems to me that meaning for Shapiro is an echo, a trace, a figment, something old and outdated that we may long for but have lost. A reader's search for meaning in a Shapiro poem resembles the vagaries of memory. The reader moves toward a locus of revelation, a point of truth; yet, like the process of memory, meaning slips away, becomes sensational and distorted.

The theme of loss occurs with more and more intensity in Shapiro's later poems; in some ways, the joy of revolution, of throwing off the past, becomes complicated — one rebels successfully against authority (paternal, societal) and then one wonders, did I really need to do that? Perhaps there was something to what they said. Doubt and anxiety return. To abandon an early talent, to abandon what parents desire for you, say, as in Shapiro's case, to abandon music for poetry, is a haunting choice: "Put the music back to the beginning. / Write that down, the impossible. / If the music turns off you'll have to / reinstate it" (*ALO* 50). A break with parental desire is a revolt as is a poet's refusal to satisfy the reader's desires for poetry to have a hidden but discoverable meaning.

To deny the depth of meaning and narrative, and to insist on the surface of words, the sensation of words, is a move that goes back through American letters from Ashbery to at least Gertrude Stein. Shapiro's works extend this tradition of refusing meaning and reposing the surface, the sensations of language in a way that distinguishes him from other late twentieth-century American writers. In the introduction to their 1984 collection, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein have written, "Our project, if it can be summarized at all, has involved exploring the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (and are) realized — revealed — produced in writing" (7). In contrast, Shapiro's poetry is not about revelation or the production of meaning; rather it is about loss and memory, those fleeting traces of the past inscribed imperfectly in words. Near the end of "House (Blown Apart)," Shapiro reminds us:

If students visit for signs  
 Or signatures we would discuss traces.  
     We would examine each other for doubts.  
 Old work we might parody as an homage  
 Losing after all the very idea of parody.  
 Traces of this morning's work are embedded in this page.  
 (*House (Blown Apart)*)

Shapiro's work and the concept of the trace has clear connections with Derridian ideas. However, in Shapiro's work the concept of a trace, a line going over and perhaps changing, redirecting what has been gone over in the past, needs to be considered in connection with the visual arts — an area that looms large for many New York poets (e.g., O'Hara and Ashbery). In one of his works of art criticism, *Jasper Johns Drawings*, Shapiro has written that "each mark of Johns is a disagreement, a contradistinction, a modification of the mood" (11). In Shapiro's own work a trace is made on the flat surface of language; in good Derridian fashion it denies the transcendental signified, but it also suggests "a modification of the mood," a change in the direction of the poem. While the surface for painters is tactile and textured, the surface of Shapiro's work is graphic and aural: language exists on the page, but it also exists out there in sound or in the reader's memory of sounds as she reads over the page silently. His poetry moves the reader toward a careful consideration of, and reflection on, the intersections between sound and sight, between the graphic and aural. And in this negotiated space, among the surfaces of words, a reader may discover that the satisfactions of poetry come from the senses not the meanings of the words. In poetry, words are more than their semantic definitions; they are sounds, they are sensations of lips, tongue, and teeth. But this is nothing new; Auden told us long ago that poetry was a mouth.<sup>5</sup> What

Shapiro adds is an insistence that the sense, the surface, the mouthing of poetry satisfies us when it reminds us of the past.

Satisfaction, however, is not a persistent quality in Shapiro's work. Rather the more frequent move is the prolonging of desire as a replacement for the consummation of desire; that is, as Shapiro complicates the sense of verbal and visual signs, he replaces complacency with anxiety. In "The Carburetor at Venice" (*A Man Holding an Acoustic Panel* 60), Shapiro uses the surrealist technique of combining machinery and love. Both the machine ("the carburetor") and love ("Venice") exist within a cultural matrix, but these two images do not mix easily. Their juxtaposition invites trouble. Throughout the poem the speaker alternates between two modes of speech — a man describing a mechanical failure — "I have had an accident. I cannot see. / I have broken my glasses and I've missed my train" — and a lover wooing the beloved — "I like you very much. Do you like me?" The nearness of these images to one another produces a brilliant confusion: "I need an interpreter. Here is my key. / Ouch! Stop! How long will it take? Please use novocaine." The first line contains a sense of a man trying to relate to machine as well as a man trying to relate to a woman. Underlying both readings is a sense of pain: "Ouch! Stop!" Yet this pain is not the pain of Anne Sexton ["Woman, / weaving a web over your own, / a thin and tangled poison. / Scorpio, / bad spider — / die!" from "Menstruation at Forty" (*Selected Poems* 96-97)], but is rather comical. "Ouch! Stop!" is the expression of a comic-book character. While the expression of pain is presented as comical, the expression of desire is parodied: "I like you very much. Do you like me? / Remove your clothes." Shapiro saves his poetry from being a mere reduction to life's simple absurdities by inserting an image which expands beyond comic dimensions: "Open your mouth and lie / Like an interesting city under an airplane." The image of a plane resonates with Denise Levertov's affirmation of poetry's "condition of . . . viability" in "An Admonition":

Life is no less complex and mysterious than it has always been. That we dwell in enormous cities, and invent and use astonishing machinery, does not simplify it, but continually reveals the dissolution of limit after limit to physical possibility. Our still tentative awareness of the great gulfs of the unconscious, in constant transformation like the marvelous cloudscapes one sees from a jet plane, must surely lead to awe, not to supposed simplicity. Therefore if our poetry is to seek truth — and it must, for that is a condition of its viability, breath to its lungs — then it cannot confine itself to what you, the editors of *things*, in your prospectus, have called *direct statement*, but must allow for all the dazzle, shadow, bafflement, leaps of conjecture, prayer and dream-substance of that quest. (*Poetics of the New American Poetry* 308-309)

Indeed “an interesting city under an airplane” also echoes within Shapiro’s art criticism: while discussing Jasper Johns’ drawings, Shapiro writes that “technology divides us from the consequences of our perception: what we see outside the airplane window, for example, has no real bearing on our passage to a continent whose language we may not comprehend” (*Jasper Johns Drawings* 12). Our relationship to machines, to technology, then affects our perceptions not only in a comedic fashion but also in the arena of language: “Open your mouth and lie.” In “The Carburetor at Venice,” a poem that, at times, borders on the banal, Shapiro achieves a balance between the cliché and the striking. He presents the reader with a verbal present, a final stanza that is both uncanny and cliché: “A silver brain. / I have had an accident. I cannot see. / I like you very much. Do you like me?”

More important than the replacement of desire with anxiety is the development of echoes in “The Carburetor in Venice.” Shapiro begins a project of returning to words from other poems he has written. The line “Can you draw me a little map of the road I’m on?” recalls his poem “Imago Mundi” from earlier in the collection. Not only does Shapiro develop echoes within this collection, but he also recalls earlier works as in “The Destruction of the Bulwarks at Deal” sending the reader back to his second collection *Poems from Deal*. One could compare Shapiro’s fascination with certain words (Deal, snow, violin, son) with Jasper Johns’ recurrent use of targets, flags, and numerals. In an introduction to Johns’ drawings, Shapiro writes, “we may say that Johns begins his own examination by means of signs of worldliness: the target, flag, numeral. Johns, like Proust, has forced us to think about lost time, as in his ‘devices’ that present us with process as just another sign. Johns goes over and over the object, say the lightbulb, to rid himself of objectivism and subjectivism and to search for truth” (15). The proximity of “lost time” and “search for truth” in Shapiro’s analysis of Johns’ work is an important clue to understanding Shapiro’s own aesthetic. Johns’ “go[ing] over and over the object” is much like Shapiro’s call for “repetitions to be sharpened” (*To an Idea* 11). The return to memory, to “lost time,” in order to “search for truth” occupies a central place in Shapiro’s work from the late ’70s through the ’90s. In fact, Shapiro’s (obsessive) development of time as the locus of truth and loss distinguishes his poetry from “earlier” New York poets such as Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch.

Time and the eclipse of time develop into recurrent issues in Shapiro’s poems — the passage of time is one of Shapiro’s “objects,” one of the things he keeps going over and over. In 1977, in his book *Lateness*, he begins the poem “Music Written to Order” with the following stanza:

Now and then, now and then, now and then  
Now-ness and then-ness  
And between now and then  
You hear the sound of a projector  
And revisit your ancient home, your new home of late.

The repetition of the sounds “now” and “then” underscores the verbal construction of time and memory, and highlights the visual and aural fields that make up the space of memory. Memory exists somewhere between “now-ness and then-ness.” Error also exists within the convergence of these fields. In fact, in “Music Written to Order” Shapiro may be suggesting that memory is made up of elaborate and elegant errors. We, as readers, do not know how to use the poem’s device of memory. We are listening to “a projector” rather than watching the images it reproduces. Memory, “Music Written to Order” suggests, conflates sight and sound into a kaleidoscopic cacophony. However, “Music Written to Order” is not primarily about the failure of memory to bridge the distance between sight and sound, past and present, now and then; rather, the poem is an observation of the complexity of memory. The poem does not claim the ability to forget completely nor to remember completely; instead, it creates a double movement: back to “revisit your ancient home” and forward to “your new home of late.”

Shapiro’s poems in *Lateness*, especially “Music Written to Order,” insist that searching for truth in memory does not lead to satisfaction. In a moment that borders on narrative, he tells us, “you find only the gardener’s sun has survived.” The double pun sun/son is tripled here because of the narrative suggestions. You are disappointed that it is “only” the gardener’s son who “has survived” (and not the master of the house? and not the gardener’s daughter?). It is unclear who else “you” hoped had survived, but it is certain that you had desired more. You wanted someone else, a more impressive and radically different Other; you found only the same, only the mirror — the Self is Other, the Other Self. Yet the double phonetic unit sun/son has a single graphic representation — sun — with a particular meaning — a big, bright ball in the sky. How can you be disappointed that the sun survived? Isn’t the sun the source of a garden’s life (along with water and soil)? Shouldn’t you be happy that the sun survives (even if the daughter, master, whoever) doesn’t? Yet, and here is the triple agent in this game of meaning, the sun is returned to background status, it is “only” “detail” in the beautiful pastoral landscape invoked by the poem’s reference to a garden, to Love, and to Psyche.

Shapiro’s language games — the confusion between the sounds and the sights of language — lead to longing, not fulfillment: “A white breast on a white nipple would make a nice sculpture. / But you would want more milk. / You would want

Mother back.” Poetic language returns to the estrangement of the uncanny — the breast “on” the nipple inverts the expected image. And white on white seems an exaggeration to absurdity. Yet, the reference here is not to the natural breast, but to Classic sculpture in which white nipples on white breasts represent the “natural.” Immediately following this complex play on the tradition of art — making a link between twentieth-century revolt and Classical aesthetics — Shapiro presents a line that is profoundly nostalgic and personal: “You would want Mother back.” For all the dangers of reading poetry as “vulgar biography,” Shapiro is inviting us to read this line (as well as this poem, this book?) in light of his life. *Lateness* is dedicated “To my father and in memory of my mother.” Here then is nostalgia with a personal intensity within a poem that evokes language games and surreal imagery. One could say that Shapiro’s aesthetic is one of surface play, not meaningful depth, and yet within “Music Written to Order” is an honesty of emotion. “Go[ing] over and over” a moment of time from different poetic angles, Shapiro denies the dichotomy between surface (false sense) and depth (true meaning). The son’s desire to have “Mother back” occurs within the same field as the poet’s desire to “writ[e] daily squibs to the dead” and occupies the same field as “insects forag[ing] at random....” The personal emotion here is very different from the emotions of confessional poets such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. In *The Poetry of David Shapiro*, Fink describes this relationship to the personal as Shapiro’s instance that “sentimentality has no opportunity to prevent the implication of deep feeling from reaching us” (36). The biographical reference is a detail among details, not a fetish around which the poem’s meaning revolves. Biography informs. It is a sense among other senses; it is a sound, a surface, a part of the round which is playing in this “Music Written to Order.” Some knowledge of Shapiro’s biography is open to any reader in the dedication. But the poem does not invite, in fact it resists, a reading as pure biography.

His emotion is a product of memory, yet memory does not provide us with a pure essence, with a “key” to the poem. We cannot hold “snow in the strictest sense.” When we grasp a memory in this way, we discover that the real is mixed in “a fiction”; the snow we try to grasp clings not to our hands but “twin[es itself] up a rainspout, a wire, or a chain link fence.” The random details of life intrude; they make memory into art, art into memory. Shapiro’s theater of memory, like the Mourner’s Kaddish, benefits from repetition. To say Kaddish is to look at the ink in the prayer book, to hear and to pronounce the music of the syllables as you remember the dead. “Music Written to Order” conflates the surreal, the poetic, the personal, the musical; “Every door you closed I have opened.” In tracing over

memories from private and public perspectives, Shapiro's poem returns "reality more strong than the traitor's arm."

Memory and loss occur again in Shapiro's poem "Falling Upwards." Here words become sounds as well as semantic units; or more correctly, it is a poem in which sensation and narrative coexist. It begins with a beautiful and sad (and biographical) story:

A certain violinist had a beautiful violin  
But before he had had time to play her long and listen  
To her tones as such, he was compelled to renounce music  
And sell her, and go on a far journey, and leave his violin  
in the hands of the violin case. (*To an Idea* 11)

As this image recedes into the reader's consciousness, the music begins:

What was there to do? It is said You cannot live life in  
quarter tones.  
What was there to do? It is said you cannot live your life  
in silence.  
What was there to do? It is said....

And the music — as poetry concerned with the immediate — continues to play, taking a theme, a trope, "What was there to do?" and introducing a variety, a difference. In the end, the poem ends as it began, with a sentence that is part of a story: "What was there to do? It is said the violin was a swan, / seized the boy, falling upwards to some height above the earth." A mystical and surreal ending, perhaps.

"Falling Upwards" is this and more because at a moment earlier in the poem, someone has ordered "repetitions to be sharpened." And what is this story, this poem, if not a repetition of the thousand-and-one fairy tales we heard as children? The tales were beautiful untrue things, yet here in this immediate memory, here in the background of this immediate memory for the reader, the writer has left a trace of himself — for as a child David Shapiro was a prodigy with a violin. As readers we may love the poem, we may love it as a work of art — a beautiful untrue thing — but we must remember that it exists not only for our experience but also for the writer. "Falling Upwards" is an act of language which makes the experience of reading both immediate and dependent upon abstraction, dependent upon memory. Its form may be Shapiro's expression of loss and its words may call us to take part in the immediate experience of the poem, but "Falling Upwards" exists in time and knows it exists in time. Reading "Falling Upwards" is like sleeping. In "Rivulets near the Truth," Shapiro writes, "There are two kinds of sleep / orthodox and paradoxical"; there are two ways of reading "Falling Upwards": as

memory and as immediate experience. “Falling Upwards” reminds us that poetry and art can give us access to the real not through experience but through memory. By going over and over a moment of past time, we can see that moment, that decision, that object in its plurality.

While Shapiro explores the complexities of memory, his poems also address a fundamental paradox involved in both art and memory: in order to remember you may not be experiencing what you are remembering. To sharpen a repetition, to search for truth in lost time, or to come to an understanding requires reflection, requires either a stripping away or a manipulation of visual or poetic conventions. The act of memory makes the original experience “doubtful.” In his latest book, *After a Lost Original*, Shapiro continues to focus on this problem:

When the translation and the original meet  
The doubtful original and the strong mistranslation  
The original feels lost like a triple pun  
And the translation cries, Without me you are lost. (11)

But to be valuable, memory or art must “astonish,” must strike us, must, as Jakobson reminds us, “deform the principles of composition as advocated by the Academy. . . . We must resort to metaphor, allusion, or allegory if we wish a more expressive term. It will sound more impressive, it will be *more striking*” (21). Shapiro’s poetry does not rely on its surrealist images to strike us: “Letters written on clouds, snakes on curtains and naked devices / Frighten them no longer.” Although they are stunning moments, they do not carry the poem. They are part of a technique to get at memory, to trace an object’s surface, to make us see “the visible” — what Barbara Guest describes “as in the past / subsisting in a layered zone / refuses to dangle / oaths on marsh field / whitened or planned / memorial distance” (13). Shapiro’s poetry astonishes us by its insistence that it occupies the space between “now and then,” the space between “the original and the translation.” This spatial and temporal opening bears a distinct resemblance to what Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* called “groundless ground.” Paradoxically, Shapiro’s poems are fields of loss which enable us to see not everything but at least “rivulets of the truth.”

In this contradiction, in this space which is not space, Shapiro creates immediate memories. Shapiro’s relationship with the immediate is one that involves our sense of knowing the poem or the object of the poem — in short, the object “memory” takes us away from the immediate poem, the immediate letters on the page, the immediate sounds issuing from our lips. As poetic object, memory takes us toward past time. And yet at the same moment, Shapiro initializes the basic units of language (visual and aural), places them within a sort of cave where one

works to understand not only the moment of writing but also the moment of reading. Many late twentieth-century poets have written about the process of writing. Shapiro's poems do that and more — they self-consciously comment on the process of reading. "Like a boy confused with a butterfly's dream / But you are my dream now, after all / If I don't think of you, you disappear." In their origins, these poems are hyper-aware of the reader. One could say that Shapiro's poems imagine their participation in an act of communication, and as such are self-conscious artifacts. However, Shapiro's writing is not concerned with undermining poetry, with affirming a philosophy that argues for the disappearance of man. Rather he returns us to the experience of reading, "knowing coldly a need for guerdons, guardians."

To escape from an endlessly closed loop, to escape from the fugue of universal poetic thought, Shapiro turns to the abstraction of memory. In "A Fragment of Relief" he writes, "It doesn't matter but it does" (*To an Idea* 22). The "it" he speaks of is something like the ability of language to convey an immediate experience. He ends the poem by despairing of the broad, transcendent desert: "I could not carve it out of the American desert." Instead he turns, "therefore / [and] cut[s] it out of white business paper." What a perfect moment for a New York poet. We are too far away to touch the desert. A "desert" is not real; it cannot be immediate for us New Yorkers. Rather, it is a place of blankness, a word with Biblical connotations, or at best, a memory of a trip to the Southwest. But "white business paper" is with us daily. If we desire "A Fragment of Relief" we would be best advised to "cut it out of white business paper" rather than to daydream of the desert. Rather than trying to find it in the "relief of doctors in the form of a shrine," turn to "Your name / Almost all other names battered / Late work, unique." Of course, "your name" is an abstraction, yet "your name" cannot be universal. Say your name to someone who speaks only Mandarin, and it is meaningless. But say it to yourself, and it connotes a whole life, an entire identity. Shapiro teaches us that the unique must be sculpted from the immediate.

Shapiro's writing is a double agent: it moves the reader to focus through repetition on the immediate words of his poems, and it creates a terrible (and often elegant) nostalgia. In "Sentences" (*After a Lost Original* 31), Shapiro makes the reader work to understand the surface, the sense of his words, but the signs he uses invoke that terrible nostalgia. "Time is brutal," he writes, "but I do not believe time is brutal." Here, at this paradox between fact — "time is brutal" — and belief — "I do not believe time is brutal" — we find Shapiro hinting that the immediate, the very experience the reader is currently having, is dependent on time past and time future. Shapiro writes, "Time depends on future sentences:

What I find hard to believe.” “Sentences” may cause the reader to discover words again, the subtle marks revealed by tracing over and over a visual and aural sign. “Sentences” may be an immediate experience for the reader, may make us rediscover the real, but the writer cannot be certain. Only the reader of the poem may experience it as an immediate. That experience is not certain, is not inscribed at the moment of writing but occurs later, “depends on future sentences.” Shapiro expands this ambiguity, this uncertainty, to include his readers. He does not know how they will experience his poems. He can hope that it is immediate, that it is a “rich” experience; but even when his poems succeed, their accomplishment results from a loss: “The reader loses his way richly, but it is not certain that the reader loses. / Nevertheless, you found your way about, though I do not know you.” The only certainty in “Sentences” is that if the reader reads the last line of the poem, someone will confess, “I do not know you.” The poet speaking to the reader? The reader speaking to the poet? The poet speaking to the poem? The poem speaking to the poet? The reader speaking to the poem? The poem speaking to the reader? I do not know.

Although it may “rain . . . softly on the tip of my tongue,” it is “not now” raining on the poet’s tongue. The act of writing has taken place well before the act of reading, and if a Shapiro poem is to create an immediate memory, it requires language to become a witty double agent. Shapiro reminds us that the complex and the abstract can be provided for, can lead the way to the paradoxical immediacy of memory. We must read Shapiro’s poems carefully not for salvation, not “to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” as T.S. Eliot wrote; instead, we must read Shapiro’s poems to return to the sharp edge of writing — a moment of panic and laughter, a moment when we don’t understand, but we do. Shapiro’s poetry may let us reclaim the experience of reading; we may remember “something as calm and real” as our own relationship with poetry. Shapiro’s poems make sense. They return us to poetry’s visual and verbal components, and by insisting that we look at the surface of language, they remind us of the luxury that poetry and memory provide. But Shapiro will not let us grow comfortable, satisfied with aesthetic pleasure. Richness and luxury contain their own horrors which converge in the present (and persistent) loss contained within writing’s distance from experience, within the space between “now and then.” Shapiro imagines that in a lost essay Walter Benjamin wrote, “I was born into a rich, perhaps too-rich and too comfortable existence in Berlin. Each time my family saw soot in the air we wanted to move to another vacation spot. Poetry today withholds too much. What does it withhold. At any rate, eclecticism, Prokofiev . . .” He entwines the act of recovery, the pleasure of memory, with the immediacy, the terribleness of

loss. Shapiro writes, “Scholem said, There was nothing like being alone with Walter Benjamin. *It made one want to read.* The source of that remark is also lost.” Of course, Gershon Scholem and Walter Benjamin are lost to us; their writings are present in libraries and bookstores, but they are memories now. The figure of Benjamin hangs over, behind, within *After a Lost Original*. We are told, “some of his lost short stories appear in this volume.” What can this statement be but a lie, the action of a traitor, or a double agent? But lies, like language, can be a way back to the real. Trace the word “lost” over and over again and we approach the dead, those whom we need to remember. For Shapiro, memories are “beloved / like etymology.” But to remember is also to question:

What are questions now?  
 Are the dead permitted: to  
 sing? Is he serious?  
 Are the dead permitted  
 to return and sing? (*ALO* 36)

Shapiro’s poetry makes memory elegant and terrible; his uncanny images, his ability to play between the graphic and acoustic surfaces of words, his obsession with the space between “now and then” remind us that the real plurality of language is a blank, a loss, a nostalgic longing for the past and a hand outstretched toward the future. At certain moments, one would like to think that poetry is beautiful in-and-of-itself, that the pleasures of poetry are in the sounds of the words, that the joys and sorrows of poetry are in the action of reading, and maybe this is the case. But David Shapiro’s poems insist that aesthetic pleasure is not a purely transcendental function; real poetry is neither an absolute presence nor an absolute absence. It exists between the immediate present and the lost past. One of the pleasures of reading Shapiro’s poetry is the discovery of a futile and paradoxical desire for “anything” but (or beyond) the immediate — a desire for memory, a desire to live. In the end, Shapiro’s poems are familiar because they remind me of grammar; they remind me of a riddle told in the past (perfect) tense.<sup>6</sup> ❀

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *January* (1965), *Poems from Deal* (1969), *A Man Holding an Acoustic Panel* (1971), *The Page-Turner* (1973), *Lateness* (1977), *To an Idea* (1983), *House (Blown Apart)* (1988), and *After a Lost Original* (1994). In his book-length study of Shapiro’s poetry, Thomas Fink notes that a wide variety of poets, literary critics, and book reviewers have acknowledged Shapiro’s poetry, including Jack Kerouac, Kay Boyle, Jerome McGann, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Harold Bloom, and Philip Lopate (Fink 14). However, there has been very little extended, academic, critical analysis of

Shapiro's work. In some sense then, Shapiro remains a poet's poet, his work relatively neglected in poetry courses and critical journals compared with the space dedicated to discussions of either earlier New York poets or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets.

<sup>2</sup> I have tried to avoid using the term "New York School" as a description of O'Hara, Ashbery, Koch, and others because in the introduction to *An Anthology of New York Poets*, which Shapiro edited with Ron Padgett in 1970, they try to distance these poets (and themselves) from the confining idea of belonging to a single "school." The problem of reducing a complex group of poets to a single school also exists when discussing L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. Borrowing from Padgett and Shapiro, I would suggest that New York poets or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers share a "fulcrum," a point they use "to get as much leverage as possible in literature." Whether poets share a "fulcrum" that is a place — New York — or a method of writing seems less important than its potential usefulness as a concept to draw on when writing about poetry. Still, one should remember that the lines between, among, around these groupings of poets are not absolutes.

<sup>3</sup> Discussing the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, Jerome McGann has pointed that they "are involved with writing projects which fracture the surface regularities of the written text which interrupt conventional reading processes" (207). He says that "their reviews and critical comments on poetry display little concern with 'interpretation'; rather, they elucidate as it were the behavior, the manners, the way of life that various kinds of writing perform and live" (209).

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro cites the following lines from Levertov's poem:

And the people — ourselves  
 the humans from inside the  
 cars, apparent  
 only at gasoline stops  
 unsure,  
 eyeing each other  
  
 drinking coffee hastily at the  
 slot machines & hurry  
 back to the cars  
 vanish  
 into them forever, to  
 keep moving —

<sup>5</sup> See W. H. Auden's often quoted and often anthologized "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

<sup>6</sup> I don't know why or how, but Shapiro's poems remind me of a cantor's voice, heard but not heard fully. His grandfather (Berele Chagy) was a cantor, but that alone does not explain it. It is as if one is in the children's service of a synagogue, and down the hall or upstairs, between the men's mumbled prayers, the hazzain's voice floats in a

minor key. As a child you hear longing, but not complete longing, unsure incomplete, fragments that seem beautiful and sad, but you're not certain of their sadness. As a child in synagogue, it is as if you want to say, "It is raining on the town, but I don't believe the town exists." When the child matures, his mind wanders back to that time, to that space of memory, and he tries to recapture the faith, the belief that existed there before him, outside in that other room, but he cannot reach it, instead all he remembers is the words, the sounds drifting in fragments toward him — it is this that Shapiro's poetry reminds me of, the beauty of nostalgia, but also the loss. In the title of his latest book, *After a Lost Original*, this moment becomes solid for a second and then flickers along the screen of nerves, along our memory of language, and then it too vanishes. Revelation is found in the repetition of prayer, but one is never certain if one is saying the words quite right. One will try to follow the fathers, but their voices are lost, distilled in the morning air as the vision of an Arabian ghost, shimmering, flickering at the edge of memory, not sight, not geometry, but sound — the notes of a violin, the notes of a voice.

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