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The Transcendent Art of Transformation: Vivian Shipley's *The Poet*

The concept of transformation is becoming central to contemporary political discourse in the U.S. given recent debates about the rights of transgender persons and the turmoil of the Presidential primaries that many hope will transform both major political parties for the better. It would make sense, then, that this concept would become a topic of concern in the literary production of our finest writers. Just last year, Vivian Shipley contributed a stunning poetic work dedicated to the art of transformation: *The Poet*, published by Louisiana Literature Press.

This collection of poems examines the many different roles of the poet and holds many surprises for readers familiar with Shipley's often autobiographical approach, as she plays with reader expectations, sometimes invoking personal experience and other times relying on research to construct her speaker's identity and perspective. Turning the pages of *The Poet* is like turning the pieces of a kaleidoscope, new and beautiful configurations of shapes appear before your eyes.

This is not to say that the collection is completely devoid of Shipley's autobiographic writing. One might actually posit that at the heart of this collection is an experience Shipley had in her youth that sparked an identity crisis. She writes about this event in "No Crown for the Poet": although she successfully won the vote for Homecoming Queen, the runner-up was mistakenly crowned instead. Shipley has written about this event elsewhere in her oeuvre, along with her subsequent loss of faith in various institutions, but by embedding the narrative in this collection, she imbues the identity mishap with new meaning. Like the situation of the Homecoming mix-up, in the world of *The Poet* no identity is stable, fixed, or guaranteed. In fact, Shipley makes the point that trying on many different personas is the quintessential task of any writer. Therefore, this formative incident from her youth becomes less tragic and more emblematic of a playful way of being. Shipley goes so far as to open up a space of forgiveness for all of those involved in the Homecoming Queen scandal: she gracefully admits, "I would have run even if I'd / known the consequences" (ll. 60-61). By the end of this poem, she seems to suggest that ultimately what emerges from the story is an understanding of how the writer and reader are linked by the act of writing, which is symbolized

in terms of the newspaper reports on the mistaken crowning: writer and reader are connected through playful shifts in identity, through an empathy that can only be felt when each one tries to imagine what life is like for someone else, what understandable motive may have been behind the person responsible for the mix-up. Embracing the idea that the world of writing is a productive, creative space, where we learn to walk in someone else's shoes, Shipley concludes that "[i]t would have been a shame to miss / all those headlines" (ll. 61-62). She goes on to re-imagine her response at the time, wishing that she'd taken the pages of poetry she'd used for padding in her bra and shredded them to create confetti to throw into the air: "fling them on the turf . . . to confetti your own parade" (l. 65). Poetry, in this sense, becomes both literally and figuratively the celebration of rewriting ourselves through the liberating lens of varied experience.

One of Shipley's starkest poems in *The Poet* offers a methodology for reading the theme of transformation throughout the entire work. "After the First Snow, the Poet Visits Manhattan" narrates how the landscape of New York City is transformed by the season's first snow fall: "the fire hydrant" has become "a statue of frost," a parked car becomes "a tank with gun turrets removed or an elephant kneeling for a master to mount," shrubs are "shrouded pilgrims" (ll. 1; 8-10; 13-14). Sidewalks become a blank canvas which an artist, like the poet, can mark; unlike other moments, now they are free of "muck, stench, gut of dog, or crevice for dropping of horse / rot" (ll. 25-26). This transformation has purified them and readied their forms for the artistic process.

Through these explorations of transformation and their centrality to art, Shipley lays bare the social construction of identity. The poem "After the First Snow . . ." reveals to us that in the world of *The Poet*, the essence of a thing is dependent on the interpretation we give to it. Shipley writes, "there is only beauty, shapes / that might be tin cans, the *Post* tied in bales, a dog, garbage / bags or a woman in a red plaid coat curled as if asleep" (ll. 36-38). In these lines there is no way to know what objects wait under the snow, no way even to distinguish human from animal. This poetic moment reflects the creative process, which involves rendering in sharp images the indistinct, hulking forms of the human emotional experience. In the passage, the blanket of snow equalizes everything, an elegiac sentiment normally associated in poetry with death, "the great equalizer." But of course, vast expanses of snow, à la Frost's "Stopping By Woods," can also function as symbols for the eternity of death. The important take-away from Shipley's construction of the poem is that transformation is not an inherent quality of the landscape itself, but, Wallace Stevens-like, is a quality that belongs to the speaker's way of seeing the world, as "snow makes visible

shapes you wouldn't normally see" (ll. 7-8). These shapes only exist for the observer who "must have a mind of winter." In *The Poet*, the figure of the artist herself dons various roles like parts in a play, but it's not just the poet who transforms in this collection. Transformation is an integral part of the way she sees the world around her, as a space where objects and people are capable of, and empowered by, the hybridity and multiplicity of existence.

Immensely important is that the shapeshifting of identity that takes place in *The Poet* is that the figure of the artist is not limited to roles traditionally held by women. She is Olympic hammer thrower Harold Connolly, Buster Keaton in *Hard Luck*, a farmer, a fisherman, a house renovator, an eater of Big Macs, a hitchhiker, and a hiker of the Inca Trail. In this way, Shipley produces an inherently feminist work, where gender is trickster-like and fluid, profoundly democratic. The democratic spirit of the collection, however, does not only involve gender, but like that of Walt Whitman's poetry, is achieved through both gender-bending and the chorus of voices contained between the book's covers. In this collection, one of the greatest accomplishments of Shipley's skilled craft is the transformation of linguistic register from poem to poem. In each poem, the speaker uses the language of the persona the poet takes on. For instance, the dominatrix talks about diapered submissives, the surfer chick talks about puka shells and longboards, the sports players talk about home run records and pick-and-rolls, while the bootlegger sings a stanza from the Prohibition favorite *The Kentucky Moonshiner*. The collection's multivocality is epic in scope, the way a work would have to be to represent a diverse cross-section of the American public from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The chorus of voices Shipley's collection catalogues is not limited to the different roles the poet actively plays, but also involves significant intertextuality with the work of other poets, invoking their voices and/or key elements of their work. After all, one of significant identity traits of a working poet is the relationship she maintains with the history of the genre. While Shipley references Emily Dickinson, James Merrill, T.S Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, and others, one of her poems in the collection that invokes Frost demonstrates how this intertextuality participates in the theme of transformation as well.

Harkening back to colonial American poet Anne Bradstreet, who sarcastically protests in her poem "Prologue" that, compared to male poets, her poetic skill is "simple" and "unrefined," while at the same time that she writes a critique of the male-dominated poetry world in iambic pentameter with three pairs of alternating end-rhyme in each stanza, Vivian Shipley similarly proclaims in "Is the Poet *Walling In or Walling Out*?" that she "will

never be a Robert Frost" (l. 14). And yet, her poem goes on to make the same masterful turns that Frost's "Mending Wall" does, but through Shipley's unique approach to making a wall a symbol of freedom.

There are three important shifts in Shipley's poem "Is the Poet *Walling In or Walling Out*?" In the third stanza, she contrasts her work with that of Frost, explaining that the job of the poet is to care about people, their skills and histories. This section of the poem offers a meditation on what we do when we write and how our art gathers material to it, how it finds material in the lives of the people whose paths cross ours. Contrary to Frost's speaker and his neighbor, she and her neighbor get along fine, thanks to her art: "my neighbor is my friend because he takes / me and my poetry seriously" (ll. 15-16). By the fourth stanza, Shipley has moved from an *ars poetica* moment into the realm of metaphor by finding a Connecticut-specific method to do what Frost does in "Mending Wall," which is turn the work of building walls into a meditation on freedom, a reflection on how to bring people together rather than how to keep them separated from one another. Here, she accomplishes that by citing that the foundation of the Statue of Liberty uses the same granite as the wall her neighbor is rebuilding. In fact, her neighbor's grandfather helped to collect it. It's in this stanza that she maintains one of the playful elements of Frost's "Mending Wall," which is a reference to the poet's last name. In "Mending Wall" one of the things that "doesn't love a wall, that wants it down" is the "frozen-ground-swell" (ll. 35-36; 2). In other words, nature's frost helps to dismantle the stones by contracting them so that they fall out of the wall, but this is also the poet's last name in a poem where the speaker objects to the barrier between people that the wall represents. Frost writes himself into the poem as one of the things that "doesn't love a wall" (l. 1). But he would, indeed, love Shipley's wall, as it brings her together with her neighbor and becomes a symbol for freedom, for the acceptance of "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." The last shift in the poem occurs in the final stanza, where Shipley enters the realm of autobiography, connecting the work of her neighbor and his grandfather with the work of her father and her own poetry writing, tying together every major concept in the poem. While her neighbor "watch[es] red tailed hawks float," her father used to "gaze skyward, appearing / to measure Howe Valley fields out of his reach" (ll. 35-36; 38-39). And just like the neighbor and his grandfather, both of whom work with granite stones, she speculates that maybe her "father was a poet looking / for stones" (ll. 40-41). With this line, she connects the symbolic freedom of the wall with the act of writing poetry—a family legacy that, for Shipley, involves imaginative transformations. Ultimately, the stone work here in this poem does the same thing as making art—that is, as in the case of Shipley's speaker and her neighbor, it brings

people together. In “Is the Poet *Walling In or Walling Out*?,” Shipley finds a way to resolve the conundrum of Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall,” how to poetically craft a wall that brings people together. She achieves this through acts of transformation and by maintaining a focus on the activities of the working class, staying true with the latter to the techniques of both Frost and Whitman.

There are so many varied interpretations on the theme of transformation in Shipley’s book *The Poet*, including the changes ushered in by pregnancy and motherhood, the struggles of someone who left the South for the Northeast and assimilated to its different culture, as well as the challenges of aging. The latter is addressed in the poem “Eating Cake in the Frick with Rembrandt and the Poet,” which explores how our bodies transform in ways that make us seem unfamiliar to ourselves. However, in the end, Shipley reminds us that transformation requires a playfulness. To do it properly, once must be fully engaged and rooted in the life of the senses: “still I’m in no rush to leave my body,” she assures us, “at least not / until I blow out candles and lick the last red rose on my cake” (ll. 34-35).

As one of Shipley’s latest collections (along with *Perennial*, both out in 2015), *The Poet* does groundbreaking work in the way its content syncs with issues of transformation as they manifest in our current political situation. Ever relevant, her book represents a new direction for Shipley’s work that responds to the new direction of the world. In her poems, Shipley advocates for an identity politics that undoes binary constructions by sketching out a complex identity politics focused on the liberatory and artistic merit of an eternal process of becoming.