

The Body of Poetry

Annie Finch

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ESSAYS ON WOMEN, FORM,
AND THE POETIC SELF

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For WOM-PO

(Discussion of Women's Poetry listserv)



*with gratitude
for new ideas about poetry
and new ways of discussing them*

Preface

Louise Bogan wrote in 1949, “No woman should be shamefaced in attempting to give back to the world, through her work, a portion of its lost heart.” Sadly, despite generations of feminist change, many women (and men) are still embarrassed by the form and the feeling of the pre-Modernist women’s poetic tradition. This collection documents my recognition of my own identity as a “postmodern poetess” through redefinitions of key concepts of poetic tradition, form, and the poetic self and through the development of a new kind of formal poetics that I have called at various times radical formalism, tribal or root postmodernism, or a poetics of thealogy. Under whatever label, this collection, like my poems, aims to give back some of the world’s lost heart by reclaiming the body of poetry.

The essays in the book’s five sections are for the most part grouped thematically. The first section explores the intersection between poetics and the writing of poetry. The second section concerns my ideas of the importance of poetry’s physical presence, whether in incantation, translation, or musical collaboration. The third section addresses the building and finding of new poetic traditions, particularly where women’s poetics are concerned. The fourth section focuses on issues of poetic subjectivity and on the self, in both the poetic and the autobiographical sense of the word. And the fifth section deals with my ideas of the metrical code and metrical issues generally.

Contemporary literary culture presents numerous obstacles to a feminist, experimentally leaning poet who is drawn to patterning words. One is the common assumption that formal poetics implies reactionary politics. In my case, this has been untrue from the beginning: my parents, World War II pacifists and lovers of formal poetry, met at a lecture on Shakespeare by Auden, a poet whose political and aesthetic views aren’t reconciled easily

by contemporary standards. As a teenager, I loved e. e. cummings and especially treasured a 1938 edition of his *Collected Poems*, a gift to my mother the year it was published from her Aunt Jessie (Wallace Hughan), founder of the War Resisters League and twice Socialist candidate for the New York State legislature. Jessie had written on the flyleaf, in cummingsesque lineation, a note of admonition to the aspiring young poet, my mother: “if you / write / poems like / e. / e. / c., / you / won’ / t / get / n / o / more / bo / oks / from / me!” There was no connection between the form of Jessie’s own poems (tight ballad quatrains satirizing the war industry) and her political beliefs—as there was none for me as a young poet writing in form, then free verse, and then in form again.

Nonetheless, I have long intuited that my feminism and formalism were integrally related. I realized early that while my mother’s poems and those of the formal women poets she read—from Celia Thaxter to Millay—might nurture and inspire me more than the work of many male poets, they did not receive equally serious attention. In spite of the current neglect of, and prejudice against, the work of these writers, the rediscovery of a women’s poetic tradition has offered me a creative antidote to the ego-driven poetics of Romanticism. The more communal and accessible poetics of the “poetess” aesthetic may offer direction and models for those intent on writing poetry both formally resonant and engaged, and certainly for those looking for new models of the poetic self.

Several of these essays map the potentially overlapping territories of exploratory and formal poetics, another neglected area. Here I define formal poetry broadly to encompass strategies used in multicultural poetics and oral, folk, and ritual traditions. My definition of form also includes procedural and other poetic strategies based not in syntactic logic but in the physical presencing of words. I reject the widespread aesthetic prejudice that formal poetics implies a closed view of the world and a limited, functionalistic attitude toward language. In fact, exploratory poetics, with its recognition of the importance of language’s nonlinear qualities, usefully articulates my own experience of the nonrepresentational power of words in formal poetry.

For all the literary-historical, political, and aesthetic implications of this book as I have briefly described them above, its

overarching vision remains a spiritual one. Increasingly in the past few years I have realized that the threads of poetic inquiry I have felt impelled to follow—questions of prosody and form, feminism, poetic subjectivity, exploratory poetics, and the tradition of “poetess poetics”—are not as disparate as they used to seem. Each embodies a different aspect of a single poetic approach that is closely tied with my spiritual nature. I have tried to articulate my sense of this approach in the title essay.

I wrote each of these essays in part to encourage, inspire, or create a context for my own work as a poet. I hope that, just as these writings nourished my poems, they will also help to nurture a different kind of American poetics, one that will prove increasingly open to poetry’s sustaining, and sustainable, body.

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Dedication

The red canoe slaps forward slowly through muddy-gold water. I let my eyes idle down its side. Althea is almost asleep—I'll need to hold her the rest of the way home. All four of us are calmer as we turn, pushed deeper into our own thoughts by bending light and gathering shadow. I settle in. My eyes slip over the water. Over and down through the water; then it comes. The sounds fall into place with a thud. *Green*, I feel it like a door clicking open. *Green, after*. Here I am. *Green, after all*. Suddenly inhabited by her, it, them, me, the old new open feeling in my body. *Green, after all, is*—an open dark feeling this time, like the peaceful breath of a stone cellar. It's a real one. *The*—a sense of panic in my stomach—not now—the kids might talk—but it is relentless; *green, after all, is the touch*—there is no time for thoughts—*of the water*—each quick heavy word comes independently; it doesn't feel like they share a pace, perfect as their pace is—*after all*—without gaps, independent, heedless—*after all, violet is only its skin*—I waver a moment from the effort of hearing her—the canoe wavers a bit as we get into more open water—I see the mountains in the reddish light—a mosquito in my ear—yes, it's still there—here it comes again—*under the edge hangs—the tongue of the water*—the kids are talking—I'm afraid I'll forget the first of the earlier words now—as long as I don't have to talk. It's still coming, like the labor when I birthed Althea, so strong, there was nothing to do but get ready and let her come—*green is the color*—is there more, I wonder—*that I travel in*—then not sure for a moment—a little waver—it was a pattern so definite—I had better try—better put a line down and see—yes—more of it—I hold the next four lines too—make a face at them all please not to talk to me—Julian recognizes the symptoms by now—and Glen, wonderfully, understands—I am able to carry the brimming cup of words until we beach the canoe, come inside, write it down, say “thank you”; turn to them, say: “thank you.” Thank you.