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But Seriously, Folks… A Few Words on Wit

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It is easy to go to extremes; hard to stand firm in the middle.

Ezra Pound

A central task of the past decade in American poetry has been the effort to establish the value of contemporary American poetry after the end of major conflict in the American poetry wars, the battles between camps variously defined as experimental/avant-garde/Language and mainstream/traditional/Formal. So far, this effort has taken the form of privileging the poetry of the middle space, poetry that seems to exist between the two camps, sharing while modulating their concerns, approaches, and techniques.

Such privileging is valid; in retrospect, the poetry wars dragged on for as long as they did because of problematic distinctions based on faulty rhetorical constructs, namely an oversimplified either-or maintained by an excluded middle and straw man arguments. Largely denying they had anything in common, each camp employed the other merely as a foil: of course poems should be open and anti-absorbent rather than (eww!) exude an air of inevitability! and of course poems should exude an air of inevitability rather than (eww!) be open and anti-absorbent! The middle space was meant to reinstate and reemphasize what so often was left out of the debateó or what in fact was admitted, though barely, in the caveats and concessions of each party.

But the middle space, as it has been theorized so far, is itself a highly problematic formulation, one that mostly repeats the problems it was meant to have solved. As it is conceived of by its central theoristsó among them: Alice Fulton and James Longenbachó the middle space at best is a messy amalgamation of the two camps, and, because it does not require that a poem be any sort of apotheosis, it even has been used to privilege poetic failureó and why not? As so many Language poems and New Formalist poems were failuresó why shouldnít the poems of the middle space be failures as well? Furthermore, though the middle space begins to at least seem like a good alternative to the poetry warsí problematic methods of judgment, with its cliquish assessment, if almost all poetry really exists in the middle, then privileging poems of the middle means privileging too much poetry, for suddenly, all poems workó any poem can be described and so seen to succeed as a poem of the middle.

However, such an assessment does not help to describe the experience of actually encountering poetry; such encounters show that there are major distinctions to be made in the middle space, that at least there are better and worse poems even in the middle space. One way to be sure of this is to admit wit into the conversation about the middle space.

Here, wit should be understood as naming not merely humor or cleverness but a particularly rare state in poetry, a state in which the expectations established in a poem are simultaneously fulfilled and surprised. While such a definition of wit precisely is the definition of Renaissance wit given by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (1968), wit has just as much to do with the supposedly serious sublime—originally defined by Longinus as a bold experiment in language that still requires that such experiment must fit an occasion or purposeó as it does with hilarious punch lines—those language acts that fit their set-ups even while leaping beyond them.

Representing a state of fitting surprise, wit is inherently critical. In the context of the American poetry wars, wit gives value to the middle that the poetry wars too easily excluded, and thus it shows in stark relief the faultiness of those warsí either-or. That is, while to some open poetry may be clearly superior to poetry that exudes inevitability, and vice versa, when wit is considered it is not immediately apparent that open and inevitable are the only options for poetry or that either open or inevitable necessarily is the best option; rather, wit seems a terrific, substantial mix of both opennessó or, surpriseó and inevitabilityó or, fit. Additionally, wit provides a substantial challenge to easy notions of poetic success offered by the middle space. Whereas the middle space allows for any idiosyncrasy, including failure, wit demands that a poem actually do, actually achieve, something rather amazing. Ultimately, wit reorients the poem to the reader, demanding that the poem really deliver.

In fact, if the participants and players in American poetry were to really recognize the power of wit, wit could transform our conceptions of what poetry is and who poets are; it could reshape our poetic practices and help to remake our institutions. The emphasis on wit in this Focus has already done this in a small way. This Focus is rare in poetry reviewing, which generally tends to offer much blanket positive assessment, much unqualified praise. According to the reviewers gathered here, wit is not the sole property of any one poet, of either David Lehman or James Cummins, either Gail Mazur or Sarah Arvio, either David Barber or Jennifer Michael Hecht; rather, as each reviewer points out in her/his own way, these poetsó all of whom could be referred to as poets of the middle spaceó create or possessó or do not create nor possessó wit in different ways to varying degrees at different times. While I trust that all of the reviewers included in this Focus would be judicious regardless of a particular Focus topic, Iím certain, too, that being asked to at least consider wit had a quickening effect, raising each reviewerís expectations, allowing and encouraging the reviewer to be both open to surprise and demanding of it.

Of course, even if wit were to become a popular topic of conversation in contemporary American poetry, little would change. Some of this recalcitrance would be a result of human error; friends, especially with so many poet-friends struggling to publish anything for a job or for tenure, will still publish the less-than-witty work of friends. But some of it would be the fault of wit itself, which is so difficult—and, so, as much as poets may want it, poets may also always try to find ways to run from it—and hard to pin downó all wonít actually agree exactly on whatís witty. But even if no great change occurs, wit at least will remain a significant—if, so far, largely neglected—corrective to both a particular conflict in American poetry and the faulty solution proposed for that conflict. And wit will remain a constant sign for the difficulty of real poetic accomplishment and the greatness of what really can be achieved in poetry, and a name for a rare effect in specific poems too easily lost in the endless speculation of middling cacophonies.

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