SANTILLI

POETIC GESTURE

Myth, Wallace Stevens, and the Motions of Poetic Language

ROUTLE

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To Paul and Tom Santilli
for their patience and love
and to
Helen Requiero Elam and Sandra K. Ellston

To speak quietly at such a distance, to speak
And to be heard is to be large in space.

Wallace Stevens "Chocorua to its Neighbor"

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Preface

The idea for this book originated with two observations. The first is that people listen differently to poetry than to other forms of writing as if the very sound of poetic language signals a more intense iteration of something, something that exists only in the context of those words spoken precisely as intended. The second is that others respond not so much to what one might say as to one's style of speaking, an observation I have made gradually over many years of regarding my own father-in-law. A generous, engaging though reserved New Englander, a man of few words himself, he would create for a person, by the gestures of his speech, a context within which one always had a sense of being recognized and acknowledged. I am not speaking here of bodily gestures but rather of the gesture of the words themselves that would structure interaction in such a way as to include the other in what R.P.Blackmur calls "the orbit of the gesture."

Let me put it another way: if I offer you a gift, I have now changed everything by configuring the space between us, implicating you in my gesture. You may now openly accept the gift, you may hedge, you may reject it outright, you may show indifference. Whatever you do, however, will constitute a response to my initial offer. The idea for this book, then, was sparked by wondering about the nature of that sudden context, that "orbit," which engages us differently, which makes a demand and which establishes a certain style of relation between one person and another. Might it be that poetic language demands a different listening or hearing precisely due to this very sort of gesture that poetic language makes and has made from the first inklings of communal awareness?

We turn to each other by necessity, then, and to ourselves through the language of poems. As a species, writes Ian Tattersall in *Becoming Human*, "*Homo sapiens* presents a bewildering variety that is next to impossible to boil down to a neat account of anything we could describe as *the* human condition, unless we factor in such elements as language and symbolic

thought . . . (198). Language, he writes, enables us to ask "what if?" That is, it fosters symbolic thinking, creativity, imagination, those qualities of reflection which make artists and poets of us, enabling us to design a world other than and perhaps unlike the one in which we live. In other words, language fosters a certain autonomous inwardness. This inwardness is what we have in common with other humans in a long history, probably even with our earliest ancestors, who distinguished themselves by rendering their world in extraordinary and beautifully delicate paintings deep inside dark, dank caves in an age when their time would have been much better spent making tools, collecting food, hunting for game. What yearnings moved them to such an activity so unrelated to actual survival and to fundamental physical need—so useless, really, in those primitive times?

If we were able to gaze across the millenia directly into their eyes, what would we find there as they painted, as they grieved and buried their dead, as they looked with wonder into the sky? Might we recognize something like an origin for ourselves, unencumbered by time and space or by history and culture, some kinship to what we now see in each other as we paint or grieve or wonder? Might we not find there some version of the inwardness, the "inner eye" to which Tattersall refers, that sets our species apart, that leads us to be called *sapiens* or "wise" while, at the same time, making us acutely aware of the irony of our very name? Finally, what if we were to find there something of the one to whom Wallace Stevens refers in "Sombre Figuration," the one below, the "anti-logician," who "imagines and it is true," who was "born within us as a second self, / A self of parents who have never died, / Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips, / Their words and ours . . ."

What if? becomes the essential question of our inwardness. Yet poetry takes the question firmly and answers it, firmly, with an encompassing ambiguity: *As* if. Not only must we read "as if" as Steiner suggests in *Real Presences* (229), but this is the poem's own willful blindness, its secret postulation, its gestural demand. Regardless of what poems actually say, the language of poems and the music they make gesture in the direction of our inwardness and of what may be found there. In the midst of our grief, our rage, our astonishment, we resort to poetry because poetic language expresses some lasting, long-standing version of that inwardness that we humans wish to reach for, to acknowledge, to believe, to embrace, to hold dear, for ourselves and for each other, against disbelief and against oblivion. *What* if? *As* if. The deed already accomplished. The act already consummated, even as the words of the poem begin, precluding death itself, the dead already saved from disappearance.

In this way, poetry supports the disenfranchised, the unacknowledged, the marginalized. This is the reason that poetry works so well as a revolutionary device, as a subversive power, and why so many have been imprisoned simply for writing poetry, the famous and the not-so-famous. Irina Ratushinskaya, for example, who, after being imprisoned by the Soviet

Regime for being a poet, scratched poems into bars of soap until they could be memorized and ultimately smuggled out to be published by her husband and friends. Likewise, many are like the Balkan poet Goran Simic, whose poem "The Face of Sorrow" is discussed in Chapter Five, who remembers and mourns those who might otherwise have disappeared unwept and unsung. So what may be found in a poem? "It is difficult," writes Williams, "to get the news from poems" in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." What is this news? Certainly not merely a play of signs. Certainly something distanced from us, but surely not nothing. Something.

The question, ultimately, of what we find in a poem is the same question we ask when we wonder what we find in ourselves and in each other, when we ask such questions as who am I? and wherein lies my uniqueness? And when we ask of the other, as the speaker does in Stevens' *The Idea of Order at Key West:* "Whose spirit is this?" We in the modern world may express our doubts about the substance and stability of linguistic meaning as well as of human identity, but poetic language never expresses either doubt. It remains as oblivious to skepticism and to cynicism as it is even to death itself. The distance of meaning only increases both desire and belief. "The distancing," writes George Steiner, "is, then, charged with the pressures of a nearness out of reach, of a remembrance torn at the edges. It is this absent 'thereness,' in the death-camps, in the laying waste of a grimed planet, which is articulate in the master-texts of our age" (*Real Presences* 230). Steiner, of course, links meaning in a text with the question of God and what he calls "the density of God's absence." He speaks, ultimately, not only of what we find in ourselves and in texts, but also of what we find in our experience of the world, with which the experience of poetry is mutually generative, and he allows for Stevens' assertion that "after one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is the essence which takes its place as life's redemption." The poem reaches into the distance—of self, of world, of its own language—bending with its own version of linguistic desire under the weight of that density of absence, toward what is just beyond its reach, fully confident of the imminent gathering; indeed, the poem performs its gesture as though the gathering itself had already taken place.

This book is about the reaching, bending and gathering gestures of poems, gestures within poems and poems themselves, as gestures of a certain kind. It makes the argument that poetic language conveys meaning much the same way that spontaneous gestures convey meaning, arising inadvertantly beside the language we speak. Moreover, they express the silent, unreadable, deeper and older messages that we find inherent in mythical narratives, for example, Thetis' touch on the heel of Achilles or Athena springing fully clothed, fully armed from the mind of Zeus, as though these myths might be parables of the linguistic being of poetry, paradigms of the performative and primordial logic of poetic language. The book argues that there is a "body-knowledge" embedded in poetic language not unlike the knowledge embedded in the hands of a pianist. When

we are moved to speak the often unspeakable intensities of human feeling, we speak poetry precisely because it is within the silent gestural meaning of poetry wherein arises, inadvertantly beside the language of poetry, what we are really moved to say, what we humans have always been moved to say in such moments, prompted by our inwardness. In his novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* Hardy refers to Elizabeth-Jane's eyes, which, like Athena's, are those "whose gestures beamed with mind." I argue that poetic language has this kind of mind, a tacit mind of its own.

Drawing upon the poetry of Wallace Stevens, whose work provides examples of gestural richness and complexity, I argue that, in actuality, the drama of poetic gesture takes place in the transformative moment that just precedes the moment of speech, as the poem performs the symbolic expression of the elusive knowledge inherent in its own linguistic body. The gesture hearkens backward and downward toward an original impulse, toward a state in which the origin of language and the origin of myth are indistinguishable. Traces of this original state are still active as a tacit logos within the still silent poetic body, infusing and informing poems with the primordial logic of myth. As the motion of a poetic text compels the moment of transformation from meaning to speech, meaning recedes, becoming obscure and inaccessible insofar as it will not be severed from the inscrutability of its original state any more than a pianist might sever the knowledge of his hands from his hands. However, like the music the pianist makes, the poetic gesture bears an inarticulate, linguistic being of its own form which bridges with insistent sound, for the poem's moment, the distance between meaning and speech, between the reader and the "news" of poetry.

The first chapter, "Can Beauty hold a Plea?," is an exposition and explication that addresses the notion of poetic gesture, establishing a theoretical framework for the discussion. The chapter refers to the work of philosophical phenomenologists Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty and to Lacan. In addition, five books were exceptionally helpful. Bruno Snell's work, *The Discovery of Mind,* provided an important context for understanding the relation between body, mind and understanding in Homer. David McNeill's book on gesture, *Hand and Mind,* published in 1992, was a ground-breaking work at that time, addressing the very sort of gestures that I had been writing about. It became an invaluable resource for later chapters as I attempted to create a theoretical foundation for particular arguments about the performative aspects of poetic language. McNeill's book titled *Language and Gesture* is a collection of essays addressing various aspects of the subject presented in his first book. Derrida's *Memoires for Paul deMan,* provided the essential element of mourning as well as an arena within which to struggle with problems of meaning posed by deconstruction. From that book, I learned the essential lesson of what is at stake when one undermines the referential nature of language. Without *Memoires,* the arguments could not have been sound and, in the end, would not have

mattered anyway. Derrida's recent book, *The Work of Mourning,* might add a number of interesting new insights to the argument, especially the essay eulogizing Emmanuel Levinas. "Today," writes Derrida in that essay, "I draw from all this that our infinite sadness must shy away from everything in mourning that would turn toward nothingness . . ." (204). Much in these essays provokes thought about the nature and power of the gestures of language. Allan Grossman's *The Sighted Singer* provided a foundation for arguments about the authority of poetic speaking as well as a way to understand the force of myth and its communal modis operendi in relation to the preservation of individual uniqueness. And, of course, R.P.Blackmur's book, *Language as Gesture,* especially the essay by that title, was a primary source of inspiration for the thesis as well as for explicating and developing the idea itself throughout the book.

As for the other chapters, the meditations of Chapter Two attempt to create an entryway for engaging the unspecified, unsystematized and ambiguous nature of the gestures of poetic language. After much examination of many poems, two gestures seemed to predominate: the bend or lean and the gathering. The chapter explores these gestures, establishing a philosophical and literary framework within which we might think about gestures as conduits for poetic meaning. Subsequent chapters explore three important performative aspects of poetic gestures by first examining each in light of some aspect of Greek myth, and then by turning attention to the poetry of Stevens using the previous discussion as an illuminating principle by which to read—to see, to hear, to speak—the poems. The three aspects, each addressed in one of the final three chapters are these: the poem as a gesturing body; the distinction between gestures in a poem and the poem itself as a gesture; and finally, the gesture of the poem as a context wherein a demand for responsibility is enacted. In the end, the book attempts to establish that a poem creates a certain context, through its specialized configuration of language and sound, within which the poem's beloved might be preserved against disappearance.

As I wrote, the following passage, found midway through the project, was the most illuminating, reassuring and sustaining discovery of all. It appears in a book by Louis Dupre titled, *Metaphysics and Culture* in a passage about the body's symbolism, which, according to Dupre, creates a phenomenological and spiritual link between body and world, projecting upon the world its spiritual inwardness. For an example of what he means, Dupre turns attention to a moment in Joyce's story, "The Dead," in which Gabriel Conroy notices his wife, Gretta, upon the dark staircase landing as she listens to distant music from above. Conroy is stunned and silenced by the sight of her and desires to appropriate the form symbolically, to make the moment an aesthetic one, but he cannot. What, he thinks, might a woman on the stair listening to distant music be a symbol of? Meanwhile, a tenor sings in a room above, she listens, Conroy watches her listening, never knowing precisely what it means, sensing that it means everything.

"Here," writes Dupre, "a single gesture succeeds in expressing the entire depth and interiority of a person" and "the body appears what it has always been, a manifestation of spirit." And finally, Dupre writes, "Only when the mind grasps in the individual instance the reference to all others does it feel that it has reached the essence of the real." Let us assume that poetic language behaves as a body in this way, gesturing in Gretta's listening pose, leaning in the direction of a sound, as if in that sound, though distant, is everything we humans desire to know.

In the end, isn't this how we read poetry? We listen for the poem's listening to distant music as if what it hears means everything, within the "essence of the real," death deferred, beaming with mind.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Can Beauty Hold a Plea?

Toward a Theory of Poetic Gesture

> Even now, the centre of something else
> Merely by putting hand to brow.
>
> "Oak Leaves are Hands" Wallace Stevens

> Gesture, in language, is the outward and dramatic play of inward and imaged meaning. It is that play of meaningfulness among words which cannot be defined in the formulas in the dictionary, but which is defined in their use together; gesture is that meaningfulness which is moving, in every sense of that word: what moves the words and what moves us.
>
> "Language as Gesture" R. P. Blackmur

This study addresses the subject of gestures as linguistic and spiritual aspects of poetic language. It centers upon particular myths as they appear in Ancient Greek poetry and regards those as paradigmatic gestures by which to examine gestures in poetry. The purpose of this study is to develop a theory that will inform a gestural reading of the poems of Wallace Stevens. In the process, it seeks to find its way to some conclusions about poems themselves as gestures and about the poetic gesture in general.

This study will not be concerned with gestures which have specific meanings—a nod, a salute—but rather will focus on gestures which are spontaneous, which arise beside language but only in the presence of language, and which have non-specific meaning—a gathering arm, an inclining of the head—which can only be understood in speculative or conjectural ways, much like the gestures of dance. As a point of departure, I will make use of David McNeill's recent work on gesture, *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought.* His theme is that "language is more than words" (2) which is not necessarily new. McNeill, however, implies further, in a position close to that of Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer and the later philosophical phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (three philosophers upon whom my study relies most heavily), that there are those aspects of language which cannot be translated, which arise spontaneously from an obscure, unknowable origin, which McNeill refers to as "the growth point," and which exist not as speech but in a curious and active relation to speech that is both independent and integrated.

For a definition of gesture, McNeill borrows from a book on Indian dance and the art of the actor by Nandikesvara titled *The Mirror of Gesture.* This definition is both charming and appropriate for the purpose

of studying gestures in poems and poems as gestures. Nandikesvara writes that gesture is "the movement of whose body is the world, whose speech the sum of all language, whose jewels are the moon and stars—to that pure Siva I bow!" McNeill exhorts the reader of his book to follow the lead of this definition and bow to what he will "simply call 'gestures'" (6). I ask my reader kindly to do the same.

McNeill takes for his subject spontaneous gestures which appear as symbols, that is, gestures in which the hand moves, for example, and yet, in the gesture, "the hand is not the hand," but a symbol of something taking place simultaneously in speech. "The hand and its movement are symbolic," he writes. "They present thought in action" (1). Moreover, he writes: "The important thing about gestures is that they are not fixed. They are free and reveal the idiosyncratic imagery of thought." Yet gestures are not separate from discourse, but are an integral, integrated part of the discourse of speech. "Gestures," he writes further, "look upward into the discourse structure, as well as downward, into the thought structure" (2). In other words, the gesture is enacted at the juncture between thought and speech. What is more, as McNeill suggests, the boundary at which the gesture plays itself out is also the boundary between the idiosyncratic nature of the individual human being and the social spaces. Regarding the subject of discourses, this translates into a juncture between the inner workings of thought and the external workings of language, that is, "the socially regulated aspects that come from the conventions of language" (2). Thus, the gesture connects the privacy of thought or the signified with the external and public nature of words, of signifiers.

The power of the gesture, however, dwells in the realization that such spontaneous gestures as are the subject of McNeill's study cannot ever be fully translated into conventional language. "Each new gesture," writes McNeill, "is the breaking edge of an inner discourse that we but partially express to the world" (2). Part is revealed in the gesture itself; part remains forever inscrutable in the privacy of thought and in the privacy and complicity of the body from which that thought arose.

The word itself, "gesture," as McNeill points out, has undergone a diminishment of meaning over time. In modern usage, it most often expresses that which is unfulfilled, incomplete, trivial, a "gesture" in the direction of action as opposed to the action itself, an intention which lacks true desire, substance, and consequence. But the etymology of the word implies a different meaning. The word "gesture" suggests creation and gestation, from the Latin "gerere," which means "to carry" or "to bear." In contrast to the current and most common meaning of gesture, according to Hans Georg Gadamer, the gesture carries "substance" that reflects knowledge or belief which supports us but does not necessarily make its way to the light of reflective consciousness. Gadamer speaks of gesture as bearing inherent meaning: "What a gesture expresses is 'there' in the gesture itself" and

"reveals no inner meaning behind itself. The whole being of the gesture lies in what it says" (79).

He adds, though, that being both corporeal and spiritual at the same time, the gesture contains meaning that is substantive rather than subjective. It reveals the presence of meaning rather than the knowledge of meaning and so what is revealed by the gesture is not necessarily transparent. He gives for examples certain mythical paradigms: Antigone in a cave whose walls sink toward her in "a gesture that fuses man and world," Penthiselea and the gesture of being at once hunter and hunted, Iphigenia in a "massive gesture of submission to her sacrifice" (80). The simplicity of these "mighty gestures" exceeds the knowledge that we may possess of their meaning, which is so deeply embedded in the configuration itself that it may never come fully to the light of linguistic articulation. Rather, the gesture is symbolic, pointing to a meaning in itself which is fragmented and obscure to those who would "read" it. Gestures point to a world of meaning like masks, behind which there is nothing that can be known or recognized except what Gadamer calls "the interiority of rapt attention wholly absorbed in the enigma of our existence" (81).

Jacques Lacan speaks of gestures in a similarly abstract way when in the context of psychoanalysis he attempts to "track the subject down into the intimacy of his gestures" (13). However, in attempting to incorporate these "silent notes" into the psychoanalytic discourse, one encounters the danger of objectifying the subject, thus transforming what is fluid and mysterious into that which becomes static and transparent. This points to an essential aspect of the gesture: it is, by necessity, silent. It comes into being out of the vast silences just beyond, or behind, the impulse to speak, originating in the realm where language and desire are indistinguishable. Moreover, where the gesture originates, so too the identity of the subject originates. "The sigh of a momentary silence," says Lacan, can make up for "the whole lyrical development" (13). In other words, the abstract and hardly transparent gesture of a silence and a sigh can signify the whole of the analysand's past troubles and their innumerable causes. In this context, the spoken takes on value only as a tessera, that is, only as a link to a world of meaning to which the gesture alone has primary access.

The inchoate world of meaning to which gestures refer, or from which gestures arise, is the region of language before it is formed into words, the space beyond or behind language, the realm in which language still exists in a fullness of silence, a region already haunted by origins. Merleau-Ponty says that dreaming or mythology or poetic imagery are not "linked to their meaning by a relation of sign to significance" (*Phenomenology* 285). The meaning contained there "is not a notational meaning, but a direction of our existence." In other words, poetic images are connected to meaning through the motion of the gestures inherent in them. There comes upon us a sense of *where* or of *that towards which* our desire moves. He uses the