Reaching Q

An Interview with Fanny Howe

Daniel Kane

Since 1998, WriteNet Coordinator Daniel Kane has conducted a bimonthly series of interviews called "Poets on Poetry." The series, which is a special feature of the Teachers & Writers website (www.twc.org), has included conversations with Bernadette Mayer, John Ashbery, Marjorie Welish, Robert Pinsky, and John Yau. Though Kane approaches each interview from a distinctly different vantage, the conversations are united by his interest in the intersection between a writer's poetics and potential strategies for adapting those poetics into a teaching method.

In Kane's latest interview, poet and novelist Fanny Howe discusses the nature of titles, the peripatetic poem, and the "perilous point" from which her favorite authors write. —the Editors

[Untitled]

Creation was the end that preceded means

Rain streamed on evergreens and ferns
in a larger darkness
than anyone could witness

A boy emerged from a cocoon
crying I have no right to be here!

Temperate gales blew from the jets
at Heathrow
where a baby was yelling so wide
you could see the typhus in his throat
You could also see a tall waterfall
and call it spigot because your eyes

(grapes on the palms of a saint's hands)

incorporated and diminished images
into little packages

—*Fanny Howe*

Photograph by Jennifer Sexsion, 2001/nonstock

Daniel Kane: Individual poems in your recent *Selected Poems* are untitled, though you do have titles for groups of poems. This makes me think of your work as "serial poetry." How would you define a serial poem in your own terms? And, what does a poem gain by lacking a title?

Fanny Howe: The term "serial poem" has always seemed artificial to me, although I know what you mean by it. The fact is, I don't even like "modernism" or "material text" or any term that tries to surround an action that is simultaneously trying to be free. So this leads directly to my problem with titles, because (to me) they put a lid on the loneliness of the poem. And they influence the way it is read.... Freedom at any cost!

Because titles come after the composition of the poem, they are not usually part of its eruption. They have a kind of leaden quality, unless they are like song titles that are lifted from inside the song itself, or are muted mood messages, and are not music, the way titles are also words. I tend to scribble down the messages as they come in, and then elucidate and organize them into a cluster based on the time zone surrounding their arrival. I think of them as days more than anything else, days in the ancient sense of an act or a feeling that begins and completes itself. How many times the sun rises and sets in that kind of day is of no importance. All that matters is knowing when it ended, and, more mysteriously, when it began.

DK: I found the poems represented under the title *Q* particularly moving and interesting. They strike me as a narrative of travel—from one physical location to another, from one political awareness to another, and from one emotional condition to another. Did you write this series during a particularly peripatetic period in your life?

FH: *Q* was written in an intense period of uprootedness that was a more exaggerated version of the one I had experienced for twenty years, and longer. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I can't get settled. It is deeply unpleasant, especially because my family isn't traveling with me anymore. *Q* was part of the two-year period I spent working in London, seven years ago. I had to travel by train, constantly, as part of the job, and stay in dismal B & B's in the outskirts of small cities. Trains made me happy by contrast, and even now I feel most at rest in motion.

DK: I'm interested in the lack of punctuation in your poems. The openendedness such a lack evokes seems particularly suited to the travel narrative. In "Creation," you write:

> Rain streamed on evergreen and ferns
> in a larger darkness
> than anyone could witness
>
> A boy emerged from a cocoon
> crying I have no right to be here!

How conscious are you of how the various elisions affect the comprehension of the narrative?

FH: Regarding the lack of punctuation inside the poem, I think for me poems are sentences, which may be why they are getting shorter. I love a complete sentence, and all that it contains in the way of balance and aspiration. I love prose sentences. But a whole poem of mine is a sentence composed of sound-lines (bars), each line being the equivalent of a complex word. Each sound-line floats in tandem with the next one. Each one is a word. The group of sound-lines or words forms a sort of sentence which is a poem.

A few words create together one word, and that word is on a line, and the next line consists of another long word made up of words. Then the poem is composed of both many and few words. The lines themselves demonstrate their separateness and, at the same time, the gravitational pull in relation to each other.

Prose only differs to the extent that the lines jump on each other, left to right, instead of falling down from an upwards position. The jumping to the side

saves paper (time and space), but it also indicates another thought process—one with a goal. It's the difference between taking a walk and sitting still. Prose has just as much poetry in it as a poem does. It's just in a rush to get somewhere and bears more guilt, always trying to justify itself.

DK: What are the advantages of writing lines as "the equivalent of a complex word"?

FH: Such an approach offers a kind of cubist, or three-dimensional, look at language. By stacking the independent clauses and keeping them as free as possible from the chaining effect of the next lines, the words create an optical illusion of depth and clamor. The line stands alone, and in tandem, and in space.

DK: In the poem we've been discussing, you write "your eyes // (grapes on the palms of a saint's hands) // incorporated and diminished images / into little packages." Are you critiquing the role of the image in poetry?

FH: No, I was literally thinking of the way sight works—by glimpse and association—and the saint who blinded herself rather than get married held her eyes on the palms of her hands like an offering of grapes. Her eyes, usually the containers of images, became two things preceding images.

DK: Who was this saint? Is she a model for your own independent poetics?

FH: St. Lucy of Syracuse refused to marry a man who then was infuriated when she gave all her dowry away to the poor. He had her arrested, but her body was so inert she couldn't be moved. She is represented, often, with the balls of her eyes in a dish or in her hands. I don't really know if she did it to herself, or if someone else blinded her. The story tends towards her self-blinding. This bold and agonizing action against authority—an act of pure resistance—*does* seem wonderful to me because it concerns an individual who is punished for having visions and vatic energies and who can't help herself from expressing them. I am on the side of the poets who write from that perilous point: John Wieners, Alice Notley, Bernadette Mayer, Will Alexander. It may be generational. It seems old-fashioned.

DK: I like it that you're old-fashioned! Romanticism lives! The "grapes on the palms of a saint's hands" is certainly a surprising image. It is a kind of oracular intervention into a poem about daily-ness. The saint reminds me of the lyric's place in mystical and religious history. Do you conceive of your role as poet in such magical terms?

FH: Orpheus is everywhere. So is religion as an Orphic presence. Maybe it isn't necessary to think in terms of the lyric. What I do every day comes from one impulse, whether it's writing or washing—to convert, to be wholehearted, happy, brave, faithful, without a doubt. Contradiction has gotten me the closest to this experience. Nothing works *and* everything works. Creation was the end that preceded means. I think we may have everything backwards, literally *everything!* And eyes are the evidence.

DK: You mentioned Cubism in the context of your writing. How has the work of Gertrude Stein influenced your poetics?

FH: This question leads to the matter of lineage, which has been tackled recently and eloquently by Leslie Scalapino. I think she and I may share a doubt about placing work in relation to a literary work before it, partly because there is no such thing as before, if you really think about it. And also because the preservation of hierarchies seems to accompany any discussion of lineage. We see the containment of "literature" in a corral, segregated from all the other milieus in which we develop.

DK: In spite of your hesitation with respect to lineage, I'm going to insist that you tell us who you'd like to see yourself in company with and which poets most influenced you when you were growing up?

FH: Well, first there was Shakespeare. Then there was Keats. And then there was a little anthology, *World Poetry* by Oscar Williams. I went mad for Chinese, Russian, and French poetry in translation. I went to a school that taught Latin for years and, of course, fussing with the *Aeneid* was a great thing. But I think it was studying French in high school, reading Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine that really tipped me over. A poetry of translation, that was my original joy. Even Shakespearean was a kind of language in translation.

And so I believe that teaching by listening—without being asked to analyze lines for meaning but just being asked to hear the music of languages half-understood—is a great way to get comfortable with poetry. About 20 years ago I came across a book called *The Ghazals of Ghalib* in which several different poets translate the same poems from the same original "rough" translation. Each poet came up with a wholly separate interpretation and approach to each poem. But it was the ghazal as a way of thinking and living that really moved me. John Wieners has always been a liberating poet for me, as well.

DK: You mentioned that you rarely teach poetry. Is that a matter of choice, or do you have strong opinions about the teaching of poetry writing?

FH: I am glad I haven't been a poetry teacher often, although it wasn't a choice. I was hired at UC San Diego as a fiction writer, and it is fiction that I have taught for the past 12 years. While fiction is more demanding, in terms of the time spent on the line editing, it is pretty hardy and resilient and can take a lot of talk about it. I think poetry is less easy to take apart and put back together whole. Also, teaching itself takes its toll on writing. I really don't want to get tired of poetry, ever, or cynical about it, even at its most unformed student stage. I have become less interested in the problems of fiction, the longer I have taught it. This could have happened with poetry, but thankfully didn't.

DK: If a teacher asked you for advice on teaching the poem of yours that begins "Creation was the end that preceded means," how would you respond?

FH: I would talk about it in relation to the poems in the series called "Introduction to the World," because there the subjects of evolution and bounded time are explored a little more explicitly. When I wrote "Creation," I was reading liberation theology, which proposes a beginning and an end to the natural world, and one in which the economy of labor and spirit are inseparable.

If one thinks of the natural world as offering unlimited means for human survival, one can choose to see evolution as endlessly occurring in an open field, and all matter given to those who are the best at exploiting its uses. Alternatively, one can envision a limited opportunity, one in which the living and the dead are involved in a single inseparable struggle, mutually responsible for each other, and with the only freedom being one of spirit or of mind.

In "Creation," I wanted to take the latter position, as if to say that although the story is finished, it includes all time (ferns, planes, and people who suffered). This means we have a responsibility to the past and the future, which are neither past nor future. I would read the images as a series of signs that fell out of the first line, images of events that have a moment of freedom before they are captured and become offerings.