

**An Essay/ Review about Mark Doty's *The Art of Description: World into Word***  
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As a non-MFA poet, I learned the art from various books and one was Pound's *ABC of Reading*. Even at the age of twenty or so when I first picked the book up, I recognized that the author was cantankerous and opinionated but also acute. I read the book over and over and one thing I took from it was Pound's triad of phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia. Those terms mean, respectively, "throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination," "inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of the speech," and "inducing both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed." There are endless explications of how poetry happens but Pound's seemed a reasonably understandable one. There was something in the word *throwing* that spoke not only to the physicality of poetry but also the leap into the imaginative dark that made deep, intuitive sense to me. Similarly the insistence on sound, rhythm, and the associative nature of poetic language spoke to the essence of poetry.

Given my grounding in Pound's definitions, I was intrigued by Mark Doty's recent entry in the Graywolf Press *Art of* series on a couple of counts. The title of the book is *The Art of Description: World into Word* and right there I felt some resonance. The movement from world into word seemed to acknowledge the action Pound delineated in *phanopoeia*. I sensed too an engagement with perception and I wasn't wrong. In the early pages of his book, Doty acknowledges the importance of perception and includes the senses other than the visual. He recognizes the profound difficulty of the endeavor and he writes that "The need to translate experience into something resembling adequate language is the writer's blessing or the writer's disease, depending on your point of view."

That sentence seems fair enough—reality beggars language—but it also made me uneasy. I've spent decades writing poems and I've never felt, for better or worse, that I was translating experience. Poems swam into my head and I wrote them down and spent many hours revising

those initial specimens but I wasn't translating anything. What I was doing felt much closer to evocation or conjuring or taking down dictation from the ether that existed both inside and outside of me. I was trying to bring something to life. I was trafficking in a world of spirits. I was "throwing" something into words that moved me but that something was not necessarily based on an experience that I had. After all, a mere word can set off a poem, to say nothing of a dog barking or tree leaves thrashing in the wind. The kindling sparks are everywhere. And what I was creating—a poem—was very much something physical in its own right, something that had the three-dimensional presence of sculpture.

When, after reading Doty's book a few times, I went hunting in the *ABC of Reading*, I was struck by Pound's absence of interest in the notion of description. It's there but it's there in relation to the world of prose rather than poetry. He wrote that "It is said that Flaubert taught De Maupassant to write. When De Maupassant returned from a walk Flaubert would ask him to describe someone, say a concierge whom they would both pass in their next walk and to describe the person so that Flaubert would recognize, say, the concierge and not mistake her for some other concierge and not the one De Maupassant had described."

Whether the anecdote is apocryphal or not is irrelevant. What matters is that two prose writers were concerned with getting a certain reality into precise language. Pound, who liked to insist that the least poetry could do was to be as well written as prose, was respectful of prose's prerogatives and duties. He didn't downplay the importance of careful description. He didn't locate it in poetry either.

Though Doty's book does reference prose writers such as Woolf and Proust, it is focused on poetry. The second chapter of the book is devoted to a thorough and inspired reading of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Fish." (Doty's book is episodic rather than tightly argued and ends in an eighty or so page ABC of description, a nod perhaps to Pound, though he wasn't literal about it and Doty is.) The poem has been remarked upon before to put it mildly. It is a *tour de force* of—yes—description. It also has become a totem of sorts, as much as Pound's two-line

“In a Station of the Metro” (about which Doty writes) has become a totem of concise and haunting writing.

Doty devotes twenty apt pages to Bishop’s poem and they are enjoyable pages. They go a ways, I think, to explicating the issue of description and, intentionally or not, opening up various chasms that go along with the notion of poems describing anything. For “The Fish” is hardly a straightforward act of description. The slight but crucial narrative—catching the fish and then letting it go—is the ground for a conjure act of the first magnitude. Bishop describes like crazy. She is a wizard of precision. As readers we revel in the powers of her language. Yet the poem isn’t really a description. The poem is an evocation. The poem seeks to bring the fish to life in words, to articulate the miracle of its being. The poem is not a translation of something—the experience of catching a fish—into language. The poem is an event in its own strange and wonderful right.

I apologize if I seem to be splitting some poetical hair here. The fact that Mark Doty chose “The Fish” of all the poems in the world he might focus on seems of significance that extends beyond the remarkable powers of Elizabeth Bishop. The poem is a totem in part because it offers a sort of blessing to language. The terrible forces of circumstance that drive narrative and history, both large and small scale, are abolished in Bishop’s poem. She lets the fish go. It is as simple as that—after language comes freedom. It is a beautiful equation and we respond to it wholeheartedly. That we are all caught and mired in a welter of circumstances is beside the point. Free will exists and exigency is nil. Throwing the fish back is a testament to the sensibility that fuels her art. Appreciation, for once, does something.

If you had told me when I was young, that Elizabeth Bishop would come to be esteemed more than any poet of her era, I would have laughed. I would have agreed readily that a poem such as “The Fish” is a marvel of writing and that the action it describes is precious. But the fact is that the scope of poetry has changed since 1960. The public poems that Lowell wrote such as “For the Union Dead,” the psychomachia that John Berryman summoned up in “The Dream Songs,”

and the imaginative brio of Anne Sexton in her retellings of fairy tales, all these bear the weight of circumstantial history. They emanate from an era. Bishop, however, is dawdling in the eternity of rapt language. Thus the benediction that “The Fish” offers and that has come to seem of consummate importance is the benediction of language in its own right. The belief that Bishop’s poem has come to exemplify is that description (good verbs, use of all the senses, original perceptions, genuine attentiveness, showing not telling, etc.) is a sort of tap that can be turned on and what comes out is poetry. As the importance of subject matter has slowly drained out of much poetry, as the province of the self has expanded (more about the anecdotal “I” than the fish), as the playful perquisites of language have been hallooed, poetry has come to seem more and more a matter of pure writing. There has been in the United States over the course of the last half-century an aestheticization of poetry, resulting from a curious amalgam of workshop pragmatism and veneration for dazzling language. The snippets Doty uses in his book from Robert Hass, Frank O’Hara, and many other worthies make one feel how much poetry has become a spectator sport—“What an adjective combination! Wow, that verb blew me away.” We have a strong sense of the trees but the forest may have vanished.

Shakespeare, Milton, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, W.H. Auden, and Langston Hughes, to pull a few big names off the shelf, are not purely writing. The motive for the language does not lie in testifying to the powers of language. The motive is transformational. The motive lies in our being caught in the clutches of mortality and identity and seeking not a way out through language but a way further in. This is not to indict Bishop, or, for that matter, Doty. Societies change and what they esteem in poetry changes too. What tends to go without saying—that poetic language is cut from fine cloth—becomes something that gets said over and over again. If you told any of the above poets, or Bishop for that matter, that poetry is primarily an affair of artful description (which Doty’s title at the very least implies), they would shake their heads. However deft it may be, description is a matter of rendering. It has its rightful, crucial place in making us feel that the person before us on the prose page is this concierge rather than that concierge but it isn’t at the heart of poetry. What has motivated people for thousands of years is the hoodoo that lies within and behind the words. Poems are on emotional errands. Whatever

exactitude they exude is skewed by passion. That's what makes it poetry. John McPhee is a great describer but he isn't a poet.

What seems to me to be at stake here is how we view poetry. Doty writes of the “fundamentally useless, contemplative pleasure of poetry.” I'm a bit puzzled by this. I am one of those for whom poetry has been a lifesaver in more than one way. My contemplation has been active in the sense that in my late teens I glommed onto the spirit inherent in the words and the spirit told me things I desperately needed to know. I continue to read the likes of the aforementioned poets (and many bookshelves of others) because I can never get enough of what they are telling me, of what the words convey. This is a good deal more than any art of description. When, for instance, Doty includes Blake in his cadre of describers, I blanched. He writes that “The Sunflower” isn't conventionally descriptive. Indeed. Blake is, as much as anyone who has written poems in English, a transformer. He purveys the spiritual consequences of our mundane plights. Of course, he writes about the actual physicality of a sunflower but he also writes of the “sweet golden clime / Where the traveler's journey is done.” Is this description? Blake sought to bring down the terrible weight of what he called “natural religion,” that unhesitating acceptance of the physical world as an end in its own right. He left description in the dust and he knew he was doing that. A poem that sought to convey the textures of daily life such as Swift's “A Description of the Morning” (a poem Doty doesn't cite and that would have provided a natural historical context) was very far from his aim.

One of the poets Pound used to mock was Shelley—too much gaseous language. It wasn't fair but it was understandable. Doty cites Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind” and these lines: “until / Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow / Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill / (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air) / With living hues and odors plain and hill.” This is part vision and part tropes taken off the poetic shelf, which is to say, quintessential Shelley, but it makes one wonder how elastic the notion of description must be to include such lines. And in that regard Doty's book is a tribute to what interests him in poetry so that various matters—sonic texture, projection, even morality (which rates a sentence before being vetted as a refusal to

supply words)—can be gathered up in the arms of description. That’s all well and good but it answers the question as to why not many folks bother with poetry. Look, I have a “fundamentally useless, contemplative pleasure” for you. Not today, thank you. Poetry wanders off, beautifully murmuring to itself.