

# An Interview with Elizabeth Willis<sup>1</sup>

## Preface: Writing the Music of Thought

In a review of Elizabeth Willis's *Turneresque*, Lisa Smith writes:

Despite the tension between what we do and what is done to us, and all the blurry possibilities that this entails, Willis celebrates personal effort—a sort of Foucauldian self-fashioning with a paint brush in one hand and a movie camera in the other—throughout the text, showing that a universe which seems separate and in constant movement away from us provides another window through which to observe (Smith para 4).

This notion of simultaneously self-fashioning with a paintbrush and a movie camera is an apt description of much of Willis's work. She seems always in two places, two thoughts at once, drawing out what we know, then capturing what we do not or cannot know; sketching what we perceive, then illustrating what we think we perceive. She seems to embrace abstraction while also rejecting it. She critiques sincerity and somehow glorifies it at the same time. In all these efforts, however, she is in some ways, writing the music of thought. Willis's work is captivating because it seems to do so much at once. She is at the vanguard in this new trajectory of American poets I hesitate to call New Brutalism. The term, "New Brutalists," was appropriated from Ashbery, and points toward a group of writers from the San Francisco Bay Area who, though fascinated with the processes of thought and imagination and how these impact the relation between reality and the 'self' via language, are equally interested in distorting and amplifying our understanding of human experience. (It is this distortion, and their concern with the tragic aspects of the human condition, that makes them 'brutalists.')

Although some of the writers being included under this term might resist the label—and, as many other critics and reviewers have noted, a label such as this often amounts to nothing more than a marketing strategy—I would argue that it actually does describe an exciting new trajectory in contemporary American poetics. Like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets before them, the New Brutalists exhibit an inherent suspicion in the way language filters our perception of reality and, therefore, a keen interest in the materiality of language. Yet, they depart significantly from the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E project as they are interested in signifying various aspects of emotion, reality, and experience, and obsessed with representing our cultural milieu in a way that seems more impressionistic than abstract. What binds these poets together is a desire to dismantle standard perceptions of reality and blur the boundary between imagination and reality, conscious and unconscious, thought and perception. Willis casts language as an object in and of itself, while also questioning how language evokes an object or image and the way it supposedly produces meaning. That is, she calls attention to and disrupts standard signification, but she does not abandon it

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<sup>1</sup> This preface and interview were first published as part of the dissertation, *The Impossible Picnic* by Mark Tursi for the University of Denver's Department of English in 2005.

entirely. This intense interest in the materiality of language, coupled with an elegant and imagistic lexis, is as provocative as it is complex.

Willis is the author of three books of poetry: *The Human Abstract* (Penguin, 1995) was selected for the National Poetry Series; *Turneresque* (Burning Deck, 2003) was recently reprinted; and, *Second Law*, a booklength poem, was published by Avenue B in 1993. Her essays have appeared in *American Poet*, *How2*, *Sagetrieb*, *Textual Practice*, and *Xcp: Cross-cultural Poetics*. She received her PhD in 1994 from the Program in Poetics at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Her dissertation, titled *Facing the Deep: Pre-Raphaelite Vision and Apocalypse*, draws from both the visual art and poetry of the period, and traces, according to Willis, “the crisis of industrial-age subjectivity through the Pre-Raphaelite tactics of distraction, interruption, and ventriloquism” (Personal 1). In addition, she has received fellowships from the California Arts Council, the Walter N. Thayer Foundation, and the Howard Foundation, and has held residencies in poetry at Brown University, the Naropa Institute, University of Denver, and Mills College. Currently she teaches at Wesleyan University.<sup>2</sup>

**Mark Tursi:** You have suggested that “the language of progress tyrannizes poetry” and that the crisis of naming and labeling various movements in poetry after L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is “an impoverishment of literary criticism,” and does not reflect the actual practice of poetry today. You also suggest that poetry is thriving in spite of the lack of ready labels. What is alive and well in poetry today? Why do you think many current writers resist labels? Or, is it the poetry itself that resists ready-made labeling? And, in a related question: what characteristics do you see your poetry exhibiting that might connect you to other writers? How do you see your work fitting in the literary tradition and within the contemporary poetry arena?

**Elizabeth Willis:** I guess I was trying to get at Harold Bloom’s Oedipal reading of literature and the “anxiety of influence,” the concept that we have to kill our predecessors in order to become ourselves. I think this vision is largely a convenience of criticism rather than of poetry itself. It may have worked to some extent as a way of reading modernism’s push to distance itself from nineteenth-century excesses. But I can’t recall Shelley and Keats attacking Wordsworth or Coleridge or Blake so much as building on the ground they cleared. Even Pound’s statement about making it “new” has more to do with reviving and recasting the past, keeping the art alive, than with claiming an entirely new ground for himself. I think the political and cultural and aesthetic changes going on around us demand that aesthetic form change in tandem with changes in context. I don’t think anyone needs to get killed off for that to happen. In fact, I think there’s something

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<sup>2</sup> Willis has published a new collection of poetry since this interview: *Meteoric Flowers*, Wesleyan University Press, 2006. From the book jacket, Susan Howe writes the following: “Elizabeth Willis is an exceptional poet, one of the most outstanding of her generation, and *Meteoric Flowers* is her most compelling book to date. Here the spare lyric intensity of her earlier collections has widened into a cutting-edge poetry of prose. Drawing from her work on the Pre-Raphaelite movement and Erasmus Darwin, her poetry has a sense of mystery and respect for the past that is unique.” You can also find a review of this book in the “Reviews and Essays” section of this issue.

inherently dishonest about this model of aesthetic production. I'm not a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet but I'm affected by the fact that LANGUAGE poetry is part of the world I live in and part of the tradition of poetry that I continue to read. At the same time, I don't think that makes me a post-LANGUAGE poet. Post-anything suggests a need to neutralize one's predecessors, which doesn't make any sense to me. If I were going to put my energy into neutralizing something, I'd want to choose something more corrupt and more powerful than a school of poetry.

To turn poetics into a battle for the new is to buy into the continental drift toward commodification and consumption. I like reading current poetry but nothing makes me want to crawl under a rock more than a new anthology of new poetry written by new poets. It might as well be kitchen cleaner.

American poetry seems torn in fact between a desire for the kind of labeling likely to admit one into the marketplace and the maverick resistance to labeling of any kind. I think the resistance of labeling among "younger" poets, a group I still think of myself as part of, is at least partially a resistance to a marketplace that isn't going to do much for them anyway. I like the playful sense of labeling among some of the poets who came out of the MFA program at Mills in the past few years and who refer to themselves as the "new brutalists." I see it as an acknowledgment that they connect themselves with iconoclastic modernism, that they like the idea of sounding slightly scary because no one thinks of poetry as scary and so there's an element of silliness and irony in their moniker, and that they're the children not of economic privilege or of ivy-league pedigrees but of concrete institutional buildings. At least that's one of the ways I see them. Or maybe as someone who came from off-center myself, that's what I imagine for them, or how I see my own history reflected. The fact is, they're simply a group of people who met at a particular time and place and read more or less similar canons. The "new coast" was that way; decentered, amalgamated, public, "oblique." But both these labels have functioned in limited ways, to refer to a particular circumstance. Maybe that's the best use of labels, to give us a shorthand for referring to a historical moment and seeing individual artists within a particular social and cultural context rather than trying to imagine they all have the same party platform. I prefer thinking of poetry in terms of affinities rather than strict aesthetic boundaries.

**Tursi:** In regard to the 'flexibility' and 'asymmetry' of lyric form that you see being exhibited by poets like Lisa Jarnot, Lisa Robertson, Peter Gizzi, Theresa Cha and Mark McMorris you state that "We could, it seems, go anywhere from here." What are some of the places you see poetry going in the near future?

**Willis:** I think poetry continues to develop as a forum for political critique in varying degrees of directness and subtlety. And the fact that it can do so while performing some of the other functions of art is a consistent source of astonishment and pleasure for me. I love the way Lisa Jarnot uses the repetition of ancient Greek forms or the way Lisa Robertson uses the eclogue—there's a formal sophistication there, but it's the farthest thing from the "new formalism." It seems to me wild, literally—and yet it is tamed and contained. In Peter's and Mark's work I see a similar kind of ambition. Their work is so often driven by the pressure of contemporary political reality and the way in which the poem must expand to accommodate and redirect that pressure. I'm not talking about

poetry-about-the-war; I'm talking about an awareness of ongoing embattlement, and an understanding that to ignore this embattlement would be a deception. What I mean by flexibility is that none of these poets is merely ironic in their approach, nor are they reductive or prescriptive. What makes poetry truly "new" is its flexibility. Not the slavish adherence to form, not the bending to it but the bending of it.

**Tursi:** As a related question, one perhaps that emerges from preconceived (sometimes erroneous) ideas about the lyric, I'm interested in your thoughts about the tension between objectivity and sincerity in your own work and in contemporary poetics in general. When describing Lorine Neidecker's work you suggest that "The combination of these two terms (objectivity and sincerity) meant giving up the romanticism inherent in high modernism—particularly its positioning of the subjective self within the poem—without becoming too detached from the subject per se as a vehicle for human content. The poem instead could be viewed as a product of collectivity, a fossil-like record of the pressures of the culture that shape the individual rather than an investment in the mythology of the poet's ability to legislate the culture." You also suggest that objectivism may be a more significant break from Modernism than previously argued. I wonder where you see your own poetry in this lineage – esp. in regard to objectivism. Also, there seems something "radically Romanticist" about the employment (or manifestation) of 'sincerity' in poetry (especially when considered beside irony). Do you find this use of sincerity problematic, or is sincerity making a comeback in a poetic landscape currently strewn with irony?

**Willis:** Hmm, where did I say that? Neidecker is a poet whose work I've been thinking about for a long time. One of the things I respond to strongly in her poetry is the way it plays with literary and cultural biases. Where it appears to be homespun in its content, it is often formally at its most complex and impacted. I see the objectivists generally as positioning art and labor within the same plane of experience—and Neidecker's poems are probably the most explicit in representing this vision. The emphasis is less on an economy of individual genius (the kind of thing Bob Perelman discusses as integral to Modernism in *The Trouble with Genius*) than on the cultural, communal context of intellectual labor. It's an economy of conversation and quotation, and seems to me closer to postmodernism in its placing of art among the everyday. It's gone past both the optimism and devastation of Modernism—the machine is no longer a vehicle of hope or of destruction but a fact of one's existence. There's a particular kind of realism at work, and yet it's not what is typically thought of as literary realism. Its presentation seems real, rather than realist.

I'm never quite sure what to do with "sincerity" as a term since to most people it seems to imply something too-easy and unconsidered. It calls up the flourishing script of the greeting card department. Do you think it's possible to rescue it? At this point, I guess I think of art more in terms of necessity—something that suggests its usefulness—rather than sincerity, which seems too caught up in the psyche of the artist. I'm much more interested in art as a vehicle for knowledge and exploration than in art as entertainment, so in that I suppose I'm terminally sincere.

**Tursi:** “Terminal sincerity”! Sounds like a fretful condition. Maybe a dose of John Ashbery and a little shot of James Tate and you’ll be out of bed in no time. But, really, in your work, I think you have established a sort of balance between being deeply ironic on one hand, and being deeply (I want to find a different word than sincere, since as you suggest it does seem to imply Hallmark; e.g. earnest and heartfelt) . . . certainly I wouldn’t want to accuse you of that. Perhaps resolute or genuine – though these carry some problematic baggage as well. However, I do think that sincerity has made a come back in a sense, but it is a sincerity imbedded and imbued with a deep suspicion. In your own work for example, esp. *Turneresque*, you create a balancing act between different Turners (J. M. W. and Ted), different time periods, aesthetic sensibilities, values, etc. or in your own language “Threading a life / of levered paradox.” “Book of Matthew,” for example, is extremely ‘real’ and serious and profound. And, I mean this with the most positive connotations. Then, immediately following in the next poem, “My Fellow Americans” the tone shift is significant, which creates a wonderful contrast:

Preferring an arch to a peak,  
a pear to understanding  
I think I live  
to clink among the clams  
forgetting the edge of my twin  
Everything eventually falls into  
the opposite of water

This does have a seriousness about it, but the playfulness and musicality of the language is what stands out most to me. Or, perhaps the most significant contrast of all is between the sections “Modern Painters” and “Turneresque.” The range and the tonal contrasts are immense. The mediums too – on several levels (painting vs. film, verse vs. prose, Turner vs. Turner) – point toward an even deeper contrast with language – one of meaningfulness, transparency, and resonance and one of surface, obliquity and abstraction. And, I don’t mean to suggest they are mutually exclusive either. Sometimes this leaves the reader, comfortably and uncomfortably, “Lost in a room of hermetic fireplaces” as you suggest in “After Baudelaire.” I’m digressing a bit, but my question involves the extent to which this balance and tension is an intentional impulse to place the reader in that “room.” In other words, to what extent does your work, especially in the examples I cite, consciously engage in a mode that encourages a sort of limbo between these realms: surface and depth, imagined and actual, understanding and uncertainty, concrete and abstract, playful and serious? Is one preferable to another? And, to complicate this on one more level, you also seem keenly interested in the tension surrounding “what we do and what is done to us.” This becomes amazingly intense and complex when contrasting varying cultural milieus and time periods – as you’ve done in *Turneresque*. How is this tension ‘tweaked out’ through language, and what is at stake ultimately with all these seemingly incongruous differences? Are you attempting to reconcile them, point them out, criticize them, or celebrate them?

**Willis:** I like your comments about the way *Turneresque* works. So, in response to your question, yes, I was trying to balance all those tonal qualities you describe. In fact, I think on both macro and micro levels, the book moves dialectically. I mean, it’s true of

the way one section is almost the inverse of another section in terms of its tone or its drive. And its true for poems within sections. And it's even a quality within individual lines. For me that's what keeps the poem in play, not fully resolved. I was drawn to the effect of bringing together words not just from different fields but from different tonal and temporal registers.

Part of what I love about Turner's work is its disruption of the ground in a painting. He destabilizes landscape painting by capturing the shifting surface of a seascape in a way that seems literally to be in motion, with the painting seeming to lurch forward to envelope you. The light in his paintings can be precise and palpable and abstract all at once. The Pre-Raphaelites are also great destabilizers in other ways, most importantly perhaps in their shifting of the attention in their paintings from center to margin. I've been interested for a long time in the way that Pre-Raphaelite art relates to early motion pictures—and then when I started watching films more seriously, I got interested in the ways the medium is constantly rethinking itself. So the movement from 19th to 20th-century versions of the sublime is partly a joke and partly a kind of internal argument or thread within the book.

And this internal argument is also tied to the question you raise about the question of agency in the poems, what we do and what is done to us. I'm fascinated by the tension between individual voice and the cultural forces that exert such various pressures on it. I do think there's something like the spirit of an age that voices us, as we voice it, that shapes us even as we resist it. It's part of the currency art trades in, part of the medium. I don't think there's any way to really know exactly how much is ours and how much is a product of (or a reprocessing and critique of) the culture we live in.

I wouldn't say I'm trying to reconcile these tensions so much as simply to put them into play, show where they overlap and comment on each other. So, there are implicit critiques of commercial culture but that's mediated by the pleasure of products, just as pleasure is mediated and compromised by the things that it excludes, the injustice around it, the fact that it can't be universal. Any time there's a tonal element like critique or celebration in a poem, it brings with it a formal problem. The baldest expression of joy, for instance, will not register as joy for the reader; there's poetic work attached to the process. The same with, say, political critique. You may be driven to push a specific message, but the conversion into poetry will involve aesthetic pleasures that in this context may seem decadent.

The fireplace you mention in the Baudelaire poem is meant to be both comforting and disconcerting; it's a fire that's placed before us but that, being "hermetic," is not fully available. It makes mental heat rather than bodily heat. Same with the Rimbaud poem; it begins with a kind of joke, but its overall tone and motive are sincere as hell, just as Rimbaud himself can be flippant and tragic in quick succession.

**Tursi:** I would say that you possess this same capability, i.e. "flippant and tragic in quick succession," but certainly in different ways than Rimbaud. But, there is also another kind of dichotomy or polarity in your work that you somehow reconfigure so that it isn't a polarity anymore. This tension, it seems to me, is abstraction on one hand and, well, what Creeley calls "individual history" on the other. This is evident in *Turnersque*, but perhaps more so in *The Human Abstract*. It seems you're not trying to reconcile the tension here either, as much, perhaps, as just putting it into play and letting it happen.

But, you've taken Pound's famous dictum "go in fear of abstraction" and tossed it out the window, or at least turned it upside down: "Innocence shags experience and I'll never grow. / Experience catches the dove, and I'm lost." The 'human abstract,' at least in part, is "the wrestle of naming / in all our passage." How do you approach abstraction, if not in fear? That sounds a bit funny asking it in this way – but I think you know what I mean. That is, if you were forced to (and I'm forcing!) to construct a dictum like Pound's about abstraction, what would it be? And, I just want to add to that question a bit, since I think I'm asking a sort of weird incongruity. To what extent is abstraction connected to musicality in language and perhaps even to beauty? Here are the kinds of lines that inspire this last question:

Though my heat were a pear tree  
threaded with fire  
Lion you leapt through me  
like fineness in the boundary gene (5)

Who am I to stop this flowing  
Least of all that home mile  
Sinking in the real  
I dreamed there was a further island  
Perhaps (how I thought you)  
to salt that harness with pleasure (7)

Property is a form of hearing  
The spider listens with her leg  
Desire is a form of fastening  
They were right to steal everything  
We hadn't seen it (71)

As dear as a dragonfly  
Safe in captivity  
The brightness of law

A wreck of its own making

Good light can be found at any altitude (72)

This love is a deer crying in a gentleman

How small is the thought  
of the apparent picture

a cabinet with wrong and wonder (76)

**Willis:** I'm not sure I know exactly what Pound meant when he denigrated abstraction, but I assume it's similar to what Stevens meant when he embraced it. Something like a poetry of mind rather than body, the metaphysical rather than the physical. In that sense, I am probably guilty of being drawn to the music of thought more than to, say, the syntax of physical description, but in a good poem, I think the two are often inseparable. I never fully subscribed to Pound's program, but it's true that as I came into poetry I had gradually taken on ("absorbed" is more like it) a lot of those Poundian ideals, particularly the imperative to "condense," which, if you think about it, tends to move a poem toward the elemental, if not the abstract. I liked the idea of poetry as a kind of shorthand where something essential about human experience could be expressed without necessarily engaging an overarching narrative or confessional frame. What I think I gained through that pressure to condense was an interest in juxtaposition and the way the metaphorical tendencies of language can be brought out without quite engaging in the conventions of metaphor.

In the passage that opens the poem you mention, I'm taking Blake's terms and moving almost syllogistically between concept and realization, or we could say between abstract and concrete. If "innocence shags experience," we've got two abstractions behaving very concretely and in various ways defying their conventional limits. Given this blinding power of duality, what can the concrete "I" (both as subject and as the abstract "I" of "Innocence") do but refuse the seemingly inevitable movement from one state to the other? "I'll never grow." Likewise, experience masters the iconography of innocence, the dove, but instead of emerging into sure knowledge and locatedness, we're opening into a mapless place: "I'm lost." I don't so much want the lines to work as assertions followed by illustrations but to initiate a process by which they can complicate and overturn each other. I think Blake was absolutely aware of these terms as traps and so much of his work seems devoted to thinking his way out of various kinds of linguistic binds. For me, that sensation of complication and layered meaning is accurate on an ontological level; it's very concretely what it's like to be alive.

A similar thing happens later in the poem with the sequence "Property is a form of hearing / The spider listens with her leg," etc. It's hard for me to say what's going on in an individual line in that poem because there are so many threads holding each line in place. In this case there's "I spun my web" on the previous page, which sounds like a conventional reading of the writer as Arachne, mythic weaver of stories, etc., but that line is preceded by "What I have is an accident," which would seem to contradict the notion of a master-teller--or we might say that what appears retrospectively as "design" is, in the

act of composition, experienced as accident. Then of course the action is reprised later as listening, and thus as a process of receiving rather than broadcasting. That connects in turn with "That is the function of real legs" on the following page, suggesting I think that while the metaphor may have been useful in suggesting that writing involves a different kind of listening, now it has broken down, with spider and writer now marked by difference. And there's a turn toward human action; we don't really listen with our legs, we use them to move on. That's followed up on the next page with something falling from its "sled / from its leg / from its web," which suggests to me a kind of Romantic quest like the Arctic chase scene in *Frankenstein* and also suggests that these three terms (sled, leg, web) are sonic equivalents and substitutions; something is falling from the structure of this sound and I want to hear it fall in that repetition, not with a thud or a bling but the muted short e as if one has fallen from a snowglobe into a sentence about it, from the world onto the page. So, for me there are fragments of very concrete narratives behind the lines and very concrete sensations within them, but then I see the concrete and the abstract not as different worlds but as coexisting even within the same scene, one overlaid on the other or repeatedly intercepting the other with the rhyme of additional possible readings, links, histories.

When I was teaching the other day someone mentioned the Frost poem "Stopping by Woods," which gets treated as an absolutely concrete poem, both in the world it describes and in the message it conveys. But for some reason what I heard suddenly was the "yellow wood" and I thought how gestural, modern, and almost abstract that yellow is. I mean it's not an aspen grove in October tinged with gold but just a "yellow wood"--it's just the framing of the poem that makes it seem more clearly drawn. Or think of a poem like Laura Riding's "Dear Possible," which sounds abstract but is, I think, strongly embodied, absolutely concrete in its human location. I think that's closer to the sense of abstraction I would embrace, meaning in this case that the poem's terms remain open, filled with syntactical longing. The unstable relation between possibility and impossibility is palpable and immediate though it is achieved largely by the poet's insistence on the ungrammatical "Possible," which in this poem is at once more concrete and less foreclosed than a word like "Possibility." What I'm trying to say is that whether we perceive something as abstract or concrete has as much to do with its placement in a poem as it does with the diction itself, and I wouldn't want to privilege one over the other. I'll see if I can turn that into a dictum.

**Tursi:** I'm really interested in what you mean by "the music of thought." You say something similar in *How2* ([http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v1\\_2\\_1999/current/new-writing/willis.html](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/v1_2_1999/current/new-writing/willis.html)): "I became fascinated by the ways in which lines arranged themselves around a focal point--generally grounded in sound and the underlying affiliations between words rather than events." The "music of thought"—the way you mean it—is clearly different than simply the sonic devices of a poem (e.g. alliteration, assonance, rhyme, rhythm, etc.). In these "Eight Untitled Sonnets," each one seems to foreground the sonic quality of the language as the event itself, and each word and subsequent association is a sort of singularity that seems to exist on a different plane. Gilles Deleuze uses singularity in a very visceral way; i.e. the patterns and behavior of bodies existing and acting (and perhaps dissolving). Ultimately, he talks about the self in the same way – each act as a (self) defining activity;

e.g. singularity. Maybe we're a new person with each new event that is created by its own internal music? I mean these poems seem to enact that:

To live in someone  
else's music  
(the musician not the composer is free)  
a divine contention  
like the damp carpet  
of liquored olivia trees  
(something my favorite you  
would say)  
finding in a hollow day  
a winter keeper  
a paper woman  
caught in the torrent  
not quite falling

[ . . . ]

Unable to hire oneself  
for labor or to know  
the green, braided thing  
someone sees  
inside you  
forgetting your grasp  
or "words"  
in a paper understanding  
a paper flap of happy self  
your dream above your head  
like comic weather

There's this lack of an identity, yet there is an identity being created, especially if the words carry their own identity and then another separate identity with a linebreak or a shift in meaning or another level of ambiguity or another kind of rhythmic mode. Is language the same as thought? If so, is poetry always "the music of thought"? And, I'm also intrigued by this idea that these poems (or any poems) lack *intentionality*. You write: "I can't say that I even intended to write these; that is, they're not *propositional* in any way." Is intention really the same as proposition? In other words, how do you write in a way that consciously resists intention? It seems almost oxymoronic (i.e. unconscious intention). Is following the music of language, per se, the opposite of intention?

**Willis:** What I meant about those poems is that I didn't intend for them to take a specific form and I wasn't using any formal constraints or Oulipian strategies to make them—no syllable-counting, no project to overhaul the sonnet in a specific way. But I like the compression of sonnets and the way they often seem intensely private and public at the same time—intimate to the extent of almost feeling overheard, yet very much performing

their own rhetoric for an audience. These poems struck me as working in that register, though they have little formal connection to the sonnet. I like the idea of working with a set of formal constraints, but I'm always more interested in the way form evolves on its own. I feel that way about essays, too. I enjoy them most when there's a sense of the form and content developing simultaneously, and of the writer seeming present with the reader in the unfolding of what's said.

Maybe it's similar to the way there's a sense of direction at work in a musical composition. It has to do with allowing something to play itself out. There's control and virtuosity and intention but there are places that virtuosity and the strongest or "best" intentions can't take you, and that's where the whole process of poetic production starts to get interesting. Jack Clarke used to have a magazine called *intent* that was based, I think, in the same principle—not slavishly following an intention but having the seriousness and direction and potentiality of "intent."

Poetic form interests me partly in terms of what it suggests about human consciousness—the fact that humans produce these flexible, durable, often beautiful units of meaning, that literary form is part of what we produce as a species. I love Wittgenstein's questioning of the limits of the human by looking at what we as a species generally agree on—like the height of a doorway. It's driven by a proprioceptive sense of where we are physically, but literary form is also driven by proportion and an intuitive sense of what "works." In the middle of a poem, I'm often caught in some version of that question—why this word and not that? does breaking the line here shift the meaning too far in one direction?—but it's a question you can only write your way out of. You make what seems to be a very small choice and it can make the poem irritating or cloying or, in some mysterious way, satisfying.

I would agree with what you say about identity being created at each step of a poem—though I wouldn't say we begin with a lack of identity. I don't think identity is entirely made of language, but poems are to some extent language acts in which identity is tried. Identity is tried out and tested through them. Lyric poems in particular seem to me to carry—even more than other literary forms—the voice of the person reading them as well as the voice of the person who wrote them. The pronouns tend to be open, not rigidly tied to the author's own circumstances, so they lend themselves to a certain kind of reflection between reader, writer, and text. In the poems you quote here, there is a repeated marking of things being worked out in the poem, on paper, in ways that reflect or comment on a reality off the page.

**Tursi:** There seems to be a significant rift today between writers who have been influenced by theory, philosophy and other 'intellectual' thought, and writers who tend to reject this kind of thinking (deconstruction, post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc.). Perhaps the division is artificial, but it exists nonetheless. Also, I think this division is quite different from what was happening in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between the so-called academic formalists on one hand and the Beats on the other. And then, there is, of course, the New York School and Language, which are in some ways movements reacting to various reactions regarding academic formalism. But today, there seems to be a growing schism amongst poets who absorb and celebrate the indeterminacy and uncertainty brought about (at least in part) by postmodernism, and writers who reject it. Perhaps it's not really a gap between academic and non-academic poets, as much as it is a

divide within the academy itself. David Barbiero explores something similar in his essay “Avant-Garde without Agonism?” where he claims there is more openness to a “plurality of influences” within the avant-garde today than ever before. Even so, it seems to me there exists agonism or even antagonism that is quite significant in the avant-garde and within the poetry community, especially in terms of postmodern sensibilities. What do you make of this schism? And, perhaps more importantly, I’m wondering to what extent scholarly and intellectual interests have guided your own work? Do your poems emerge from your philosophy, poetics, and intellectual thought or vice versa? Maybe what I’m getting at, ultimately, is this: how do poems happen for you?

**Willis:** Well, you’re right that what is happening within the poetry community is dramatically different from what was happening at mid-century. All the terms have changed. In relation to the academy, that’s partly due to the Second World War and the G.I. Bill—a very different scenario from the war in Iraq, including the fact that wounded reservists now have to rely on their own health insurance and that public funding for the arts and education has bottomed out, but that’s just the beginning. What strikes me equally, though, is the way this rift you describe recurs. I don’t just mean the tension between art and the academy but the sense of being at the brink of social and aesthetic dissolution. I’ve been reading a lot of William Morris’s essays and letters over the past few years, and it’s amazing how utterly contemporary they seem in terms of their political vision and their reading of contemporary aesthetics. He thought he was witnessing the end of culture and that art was merely repeating itself, that it had already been completely bought out by capital—and at the same time he was active in fighting for political change and for better working conditions for artists as well as day laborers. He’s a fascinating figure. I think we’re seeing the decadence and decay of the American empire just as he was seeing the end of the British empire. The terms are a little different, but we know we’re on the same road to unsustainability.

I mean that in terms of this country’s military and environmental actions but also in terms of developments like the Patriot Act. As private citizens we’re all producing texts—emails, phone calls, etc—that the federal government may at any time decide it is in their interests to read. But there aren’t enough personnel to read them. Sometimes I feel that way about poetry—there’s so much being produced, but I wonder how much of it is getting read in any serious way.

I think the rift you describe is partly an extension of the long-term erosion of grant funding and the continued cutbacks in the poetry lists of both commercial and small presses, such that both the official poetry culture and the avant-garde are both experiencing a loss of ground, which only reinforces the kind of class and aesthetic divisions that have always been there. Meanwhile Samizdat Publications appear and disappear and it’s all very lively but at the same time disconcerting. Somewhere in this disputed territory is the academy, which looks menacing and authoritative and career-making to some artists and inconsequential to others. It’s like the character in the melodrama that you know you’re supposed to hate. But really I think the issue of being inside or outside the academy is completely different from the issue of being avant-garde or conservative aesthetically. Universities have employed, and for extended periods of time, poets as diverse as Alan Tate and Susan Howe, or Marilyn Hacker and Robert Creeley, and I don’t think their aesthetics are any more sympathetic to each other’s

because they share, in some sense, a profession. Same with more recent additions to the Academy like Lyn Hejinian and Eileen Myles.

There's a similar reverse-effect for poets like Lorine Niedecker. Why should it seem strange that she wrote as she did in a small town, working for an hourly wage? That in itself presumes that poetry is a decadent art reserved for the few—but as I think the concentration of Niedecker's work shows, poetry is composed within everyday life, no matter what floods in around it. In many ways, Niedecker is a deeply bookish, intellectual poet. Does that make her work academic?

Same with the mythology around the Beats. People forget they mostly met in and around Columbia University. Of course the academy was different then, but so was rent in New York! The range of options between homelessness and full-time employment was a lot wider than it is now. If you're a poet who wants to get by on part-time employment now, you're more likely to be able to do it in Cleveland—or Black Hawk Island—than Manhattan. And that's a major difference too since we're accustomed to a canon that is essentially the product of bi-coastal urban culture. We love to occasionally discover and celebrate the “outsider artist,” but we tend not to trust or even recognize it unless it fits a certain pattern of expectations.

When it comes to prizes and commercial publication, I think class continues to be far more of an issue than a poet's relation to the academy. When it comes to the work itself, I think you have to be careful about making choices that are too easy, no matter what you're doing for a living. I'm not sure if any of this answers your question. I have a feeling part of what you're getting at is that as American culture generally has gotten more conservative, there are pockets within the academy that might seem almost havens for the avant-garde—but maybe that's only because the academic world tends to change more slowly than the commercial world, so it takes longer to recognize and name what's going on there.

When you ask about the source of a poem, that brings up different things entirely. I honestly don't know where poems—or where my poems—come from. It's like trying to imagine the beginning of the universe. An egg? A word? A bang? A void? It's something language does, and we see the evidence that it has happened. Sometimes it starts with a visual or auditory pun of some sort—or with a seemingly random thought that mutates and develops as it knocks around my head. A lot of the poems in *Turneresque* look like responses or visual equivalents to specific works of literature, film, or painting, and to a significant extent, they are, but that's only part of how they're made and what they're doing, and sometimes the relation to the source is fairly oblique. (As a kind of banal example, “The Young Blake” developed after our neighbors had a baby who they named Blake, and since I'd studied Blake for years, I was thinking of how names interact with things—they change each other—and I loved imagining that an eccentric, visionary poet might be watching Teletubbies next door. But the poem isn't really “about” that either—for me it's more about the strangeness of poetic reception and the way that thought occurs on several calendars at the same time. It—and we—evolve with what can seem like geologic slowness and yet that very evolution leads us to ironize the monolithic self-importance that that vision can lead to: “sandstone understanding, rock time in general, whatever.” We're always waking up to mundane concerns—food, transportation, etc.—rather than a visionary calling. And Blake seems to catalyze the relation between those two forces more than just about any other poet I've read.)

Still, to circle back to your original question, I like poetry to have a certain rigor, a primary quality, no matter what its aesthetic stance. A discovery about Adorno isn't inherently more or less interesting than a discovery about how to fix a toilet. I tend to like art that develops from curiosity. Or maybe I like my own work best when it is curious and investigatory in the way it develops. But, yes, I guess I'd say I'm put off less by a project that may seem overly intellectual to others than by the tidal wave of anti-intellectualism we're experiencing culturally, where I often sense that lurking just behind it is a hatred and suspicion for social change as well as for the arts.

**Tursi:** I love your ideas about "making a discovery" that conflates Adorno and fixing a toilet. I'm not being facetious . . . it's a wonderful way to put poetry, theory, philosophy, and quotidian reality on the same plane of immanence, which is where they belong in many ways.

**Willis:** Exactly. I don't mean it as a slight at all. We needed to consult a plumber recently and when he called to say he'd solved the problem, he said the answer had come to him in the middle of the night. I trust that completely. I mean, there's a mechanics to it, but it takes something beyond that. The field of discourse seems less important than the quality of the thought.

**Tursi:** And, you were absolutely right in seeing through my underlying and, perhaps, somewhat unconscious concern in the last question; i.e. that American culture and the arts are becoming increasingly conservative. You have an uncanny ability to find the necessary kernel, the matrix (to use a word that has perhaps become too Baudrillardian) between what we perceive and what we think we perceive. One of the things I admire about your work is your ability to undermine and subvert cultural codes and overdetermined human experience by relishing and luxuriating in them in some way. But, I'm realizing now that we seem to have skipped right into the heart of complexity, which has been wonderful. But, how about a few questions that may be easier (hopefully) to unravel? You've mentioned the difficulty in pinning down the source of a poem, but maybe you can address your writing process a bit. How do you revise, rewrite, etc.?

**Willis:** Each project I work on develops differently. I mostly work in series of some sort, in groups of related poems that become something like serial poems, though they're not arranged in, say, a chronological sequence. Sometimes I'll write a whole poem all at once but that's fairly unusual. Mostly it's a constellation of different elements, sometimes written with big gaps (like days or even weeks) in between. I reread these pieces to figure out what they belong with, what other ideas they're related to, how one thought answers or complicates another. So writing and rewriting are continuous and almost simultaneous. Often I get the momentum and feeling of a poem before all the pieces are there and then it's a matter of finding the piece that fits the place I've made for it. I reread and circle around it and try out changes in punctuation and that sort of thing. When I revise it's often to satisfy something about the sound of it—more often than it would be a gesture of fulfilling the content. I'm more drawn to the formal and sound elements of a poem—and sometimes in getting it to sound right, there will be a complication or opening up of the

content rather than the more traditional closure of content, and I welcome that. It keeps me from thinking of the poem as a soapbox in the wilderness.

**Tursi:** You've spoken a bit about your influences – e.g. Lorine Neidecker and William Blake obviously, but I'm wondering whom else you turn to for inspiration or ideas and who has had a significant impact on your work.

**Willis:** The first poets I read were Dickinson, Eliot, Duncan, and H.D., so they had an impact on the way my work developed early on. Susan Howe's work has had an enormous effect on my sense of the possibilities for what poetry could do. I turn to poets like Ashbery, Guest, Creeley, Rich, and Blaser to follow the ways their work continues to evolve. I could go through a list of my immediate peers and what I admire in their work, but it would be a long litany that I would have to keep adding to. And then I live with a poet, so influence is one of the complicating facts of daily life. As much as I can recognize my own voice and way of thinking, there's something collective about the process that I have to acknowledge. However intense and mostly private the making of poetry is, it's also part of an ongoing dialogue for which no one can fully take credit. Maybe the deepest influences are the ones that are most transparent and that we're least aware of. In that sense, my work has been deeply influenced by the transition from the typewriter to the computer.

Once you start thinking about it, it seems more difficult to pinpoint something that's not an influence in some way. When I was doing graduate work in poetics and I was immersed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century poetry and painting, I thought of my own poetry as something very separate from my critical work—but then they sort of re-emerged together in the writing of *Turneresque*. My most recent work was inspired to some degree by Erasmus Darwin and the way his poems incorporate different fields of information—botany, mythology, thermodynamics, sex, language, aesthetics, natural disasters. I wanted to find a form that could accommodate that kind of turbulence. I mean, I'm affected by painting and film but also by junk mail and the junk language of current politics, the fact that we're constantly being sold something. Unless you're living in a media-free zone, it's all part of the soundtrack of cultural production that you have to contend with. If you want to make something that doesn't fit a ready template—or even if you just want to make up your own mind about something—moving through the day requires repeated acts of resistance. The challenge is to find a form that gets you through it.

**Tursi:** You've taught creative writing in various institutions: Mills, Naropa, and Wesleyan. What's the best piece of advice you give to emerging writers?

**Willis:** Honestly, I try to avoid giving specific advice because I'd hate to mess up someone's trajectory by imposing my own worldview on it. Like "hey, you told me to move to Cleveland and it was a terrible idea." I guess I'd say the most important thing is to trust what you have and what you know and to let the work lead you, even if it means going against whatever advice you're getting, here or elsewhere. I think it's important to know that there's no right way to do it. It seems more important to be able to adapt to the way the terms keep changing--not just the terms of the art but the terms of how you

conduct your life. In general, I'd say: read more, read widely. Don't be in a hurry. And don't expect to "arrive"; you gain more by staying focused on the process.