

From *No: A Journal of the Arts*, #3 (2004): 191-204

**“The Saturated Language of Red”:
Maggie O’Sullivan and the Artist’s Book**

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Page design, typography, *lettrisme*, phonetic spelling, the use of nonce words, glyphs, paragrams-- these have always been central to Maggie O’Sullivan’s poetry. Such volumes as *Unofficial Word* (1988) and *In the House of the Shaman* (1993) have been linked to American language poetry, but O’Sullivan, who makes her home in Yorkshire, England, draws on Celtic myth and ritual and on medieval folk motifs rather than on contemporary pop and media imagery, as do her American counterparts. In recent years, moreover, her books have increasingly been conceived as artists’ books rather than as collections of individual poems. *Red Shifts* (1999) is a case in point, and two other recent books, not yet in print—*Waterfalls* and *Murmur: Tasks of Mourning*— display intricate interplay between the verbal and the visual, making use of elaborate collage material, (pen and ink drawing and watercolour on cartridge paper), impinging everywhere on the text itself.

Yet, because her derivation is from the poetry rather than the art world, one doesn’t find O’Sullivan’s name in studies like Johanna Drucker’s *The Century of Artist’s Books* or *Figuring the Word*, or in Renée and Judd Hubert’s *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists’ Books*—all three of these excellent volumes published by Steve Clay’s Granary Books.¹ Despite the current lip service paid to the “interdisciplinary,” poetry communities, it seems, even the experimental community of which O’Sullivan is a part, don’t interact with “art world” book artists such as Buzz Spector or Ed Ruscha, Annette Messenger or Susan King. Even Ian Hamilton Finlay, revered for his language art, is rarely included in discussions of contemporary poetry. It is a curious situation, given that artists’ books generally give equal time to word and image. In Johanna Drucker’s words, the “artist’s book” is one that, unlike the illustrated book which treats visual images as additives, figures that are potentially removable, the artist’s book “gives equal status to images, binding, typography, page-setting, folds, collages, and text” (*Century* 14).

By this definition, *Red Shifts*, written between 1997-99 and published in the new series of Etruscan "exhibition" publications in 2001, is surely an artist's book rather than, as would be usual, a long poetic sequence. Consider, for starters, what happens when a shorter poetic fragment—in this case a three-page text sent to Charles Bernstein, in response to his invitation to participate in an International Poetics Symposium for *boundary 2* is incorporated into *Red Shifts*.² According to O'Sullivan, "Three months after I had sent this text to Charles I had a phone call from Nicholas Johnson of Etruscan books offering me a commission to do a book work, to which I agreed. I decided to continue working on the three page *Red Shifts* text, deepening, developing my explorations of the spatial and textual terrains."³

Thus the line

breathing-in-breathing-out

is replaced in the book by two inverted V-shapes--"b-r-e-a-t-h-i-n-g / in" on the left, "b-r-e-a-t-h-i-n-g / out" on the right—printed out on what was evidently a dot-matrix printer that produced rough-edge letters, giving the book a more "primitive" look than the "normal" *boundary 2* version. This visual representation of, so to speak, taking a deep breath, is repeated two pages later, typography and layout underscoring the difficulty of breathing which is one of the central motifs of *Red Shifts*.

Or take the transformation of the concluding passage on page 210 of *boundary 2*. In *Red Shifts* (p. 10), the catalogue:

**suf—
thistle . . .
what . . .
twen—
dreamdery. . .**

is centered and followed by four blank spaces and then the centered lines:

**sure i sung all along the river for practise⁴
moon for all the blanket just**

The six-character space between "the" and "blanket," gives the moon a mysterious role: we are not sure what it is "for," but it is not merely "blanketed" by clouds or a "blanket" in the sky. In the poet's "dreamdery" —the coinage linking dream to medieval ballad refrain with its variants on "hey derry derry down"—the inscrutable moon is perhaps "for the misbegotten," more broadly for all the nameless beings—animal, vegetable, mineral—the

poet can imagine. "**Just**," in this context is ambiguous—is the blanket of the night "just" or "just a blanket" or does the passage continue on to the next page? We cannot tell but visually the single centered column above the white space and trapezoid shape below create a superb scene of "**dreamdery**" activity—an activity not as prominent in the original poetic fragment, where the space between the columnar passage and the couplet (originally a triplet, with the line "pennant flut," later excised, preceding it) is reduced as is the space between "**the**" and "**blanket.**" And although there is no period after "**blanket just**," the anthologized poem clearly "ends" at the bottom of this page. Indeed, on the facing page, we find a short prose narrative by Alexei Parshchikov that begins with the sentence, "If I'm to peddle stories, I'll strive to pick from my mind a tape that concerns one tender airhead freak, my classmate, whose name was Arichkin" (211).

The anthology arrangement, reasonably enough, has taken us alphabetically from O'Sullivan to Parshchikov. The juxtaposition of these two bardic poets—Anglo-Irish woman and Russian man—produces interesting semantic conjunctions, as do all the relationships in Bernstein's carefully chosen international anthology of experimental writing. But the fact remains that the sort of closure inevitable on the *boundary 2* page does not quite represent the ethos of what was to become *Red Shifts*. Indeed, in the case of the artist's book, the reader turns the page and is confronted by a startling image, of which more in a moment. For this poet, one surmises, bookwork made possible a textual heightening, not available in the traditional production of individual "contained" poems, whether in one's own collection or in anthologies.

How does O'Sullivan's bookmaking work? *Red Shifts* [see figures 1 and 2] is a square (6 x 6") booklet of fifty-two unnumbered pages, whose words and images are printed in red and black against a white ground. On its cover, a zigzag red path, etched against a white ground, and outlined in red, extends across from back to front. In the back, the zigzag path crosses the abstracted child-like image of what looks like a fish, whose round oversize eye stares at the viewer even as its skeleton is sketched in below. The spiky zigzag movement of the path, colored as if by a child who doesn't quite fill in all the outlines and makes smudges, continues on the inside cover, facing the title page, which bears a large red inkblot shape that calls to mind an octopus or perhaps a cartoon monster.

The title *Red Shifts* can be read in a variety of ways. Is “red” a noun, in which case it is the color that shifts, or a verb? If the latter, do the “red shifts” refer merely to “red” changes—changes in blood, for example, or to “shifty” designs, or does “shift” have the more specific dictionary meaning (see OED) of “displacement of rocks on a fault line,” or—again in the OED--“a change in the position of a spectral line representing a change of frequency, for example that caused by the Doppler Effect”? *Shift* is such a “shifty” word that it also denotes the computer key shift, here used to create the book we are looking at. Or the “change in hand position in order to play a different set of notes in a different register on a keyboard or string instrument.” And finally, *shift* can mean “the change in the pronunciation of a sound in the course of the development of the language,” as in the Great Vowel Shift.

This last meaning of *shift* may well be the most relevant in this visual-verbal narrative, whose consonants and vowels are always shifting and often coming back to their medieval, now obsolete values. But in any case the title, printed in lower-case italics, and on the title page, in childish handwriting, sets the stage for what appears to be an ominous event: we will watch the red make a shift or note the geology or frequency of those red shifts, their varying notes on the poet’s vocal instrument and their vocalic transformations. And further: the image of the Etruscan press logo—a red circle framed in black with a white cross in the middle—here suggests that the “red shifts” are somehow *Verboten*, off limits! One thinks of the Red Deeps, the secret meeting place of Maggie and Philip in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, the Red Deeps forbidden to the lovers once Maggie’s brother Tom found them there. But the circle of the Etruscan logo is “squared” by the booklet itself, thus setting the stage for the tension between square and circle that goes on throughout the book.

The sense of anticipation is reinforced by the first two pages of *Red Shifts* where a wavy outline at the left is juxtaposed to another version of the zig-zag path, this time in darker red—almost brown—with three peaks, bearing the words “throne / roam / awkward & slow / unable to stand / & bread / put out among the branches.” “Throne” is archaic for three, especially three children at birth or triplets. Is this a reference to the ballad of the “Three Ravens” (whose versions include one called “The Twa Corbies”)? In the ballad, the ravens have picked clean the bones of the mysteriously slain knight; they are predators not, say, sparrows for whom “bread” has been “put out among the branches.” Indeed, O’Sullivan’s roaming “throne,” who are “unable to stand” may well refer, not to the three ravens, but to their human prey. And, as in fairytale, the “path,” cut off at the end of the

page, where the line, now wavy, ends, gives a visual analogue to the mysterious “story” itself.

The human voice emerging from the “throne” now comes forward:

broke
breaking --raised arms –
cant hold my breath/ my breath
sobbing
savage
tonguesbled
sh - - - - -
hurrish - - -
--upped - up—up -up –
any bare syllable STARE –
incendings –
thresh – tilt /

“Broke” may refer back to the branches of the preceding page or to being “unable to stand,” but here the voice is more definitively that of a person, “broke / breaking—raised arms”—the poet herself, it seems, who can’t “hold my breath / my breath / sobbing.” We never find out what is wrong, but the coinages that follow, like “tonguesbled”—a bleeding tongue on the analogy of “nosebleed” or at least a tongue that has bled—leads to no more than the “sh” of the next line, the inability to find one’s voice. O’Sullivan’s sobbing, voiceless speaker reminds one of Mouth in Beckett’s *Not I* or perhaps Lil in Eliot’s *Waste Land*, for we now read “hurrish--- / -upped -up - up - up -” (“Hurry up please, it’s time!) even as “any bare syllable STARE” recalls the woman in Eliot’s “Game of Chess.” The rhyme of “bare” and “STARE” moreover, relates voicelessness to the fear of being seen and hence found out—this time a reference to his *Film*, where, in a play on Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*, the terrified narrator makes frantic attempts to escape the camera eye. The note of fear is underscored by the “incendings”—another coinage—foretelling some form of holocaust, an incendiary firestorm where one can only “thresh” and “tilt.”

As possible analogues for the “sobbing” voice, Nate Dorward has suggested Wordsworth’s *Solitary Reaper* or Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott*.⁵ But, for the moment, the sequential structure of the book holds such analogues in abeyance: on the recto facing the sobbing presence, we meet a new set of “characters” in the form of “**sheeny**” (glossy,

shiny) “**curlews**” and “**lapwings**,” whose fates are bound up with the poet’s, the “**tear of the wind**” (both “tear” as cut” and the “tear” of weeping) reducing them to “**black / feathers / blue**.” But feather soon gives way to “**hoove lost**”: horses, too, evidently, are the victims of “**ruptures crossing**,” of “**rent—parture—t’tide**,” of all that is “**sutured**” and “**detonates**,” causing those alive, whether human beings, animals, or birds, to have “**FLED**.”

What is happening in this scene? O’Sullivan’s narrative is never straightforward, but there are constants throughout, in this case, epitomized in the three-word line “**rent-parture—t’tide**.” Curlews and plovers are water birds; in the poet’s tale, the shore, with its “**waterflows**,” described here as “**buckled raved sheens**,” is the scene of that which has been “**rent**,” subjected to cutting (“**parture**”), perhaps by the “**tide**” itself. Rupture, tear of the wind, suture: we are witnessing the cataclysm associated with the mystery of the “red shifts.” Indeed, the death note (“**heavying & freezy sank—**,” p. 8, “**red / squawk / slaw / teared**”—p. 9) becomes steadily more oppressive--“**amber sag lornly**”—where “**lornly**” recalls the plaintive “forlorn” of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” The phrase leads up to the blank space, already discussed, on page 10 and the distancing of the woman’s song, “**sure I sung all along the river for practise**.”

On the verso of this page, we find a mysterious red, white, and black faceless figure, whose appearance recalls that of magician or Druid priestess, although the figure’s ribcage is exposed. This mysterious oversized figure is silhouetted against the familiar zigzags of the Red Shifts, but in the upper right there is a diagram of a maze and at bottom right, drawn in miniature scale, a house in black shadow next to a bare tree. Is the dark house the locus of “**dreamdery**”, the Druid emerging from the maze of the poet’s mind? Does she cast a spell over it? If we look at the recto across from the fairytale image, a clue is supplied, not only to the identity of the figure but also to O’Sullivan’s larger poetic narrative:

**i have found this red
is breathed
or reply,
water’s edge, ~~DECOMPOSITIONS~~
draw ing breath’s
broken fanging—
Nion, the Ash, this 3rd
letter of salvages
bridge & gut
aquacity staltic**

Here it will help to unpack some meanings. In Celtic legend, the Nion Ash tree, which grows beside water, symbolizes the power of the sea, as personified in the sea god Lir, one of the ruling divinities. Lir represented a mystical fusion of man and God through the medium or element of water. The Ash was also sacred to the trickster Gwydion as a tree of enchantment, from whose twigs he made his wands. In related legends, the staff of a witch's besom was made of ash as proof against drowning. To protect oneself from drowning in the sea, one would carve a piece of Ash wood into a solar cross and carry it on one's person. Ash leaves were placed in pillows for prophetic dreams and hung over doorposts to keep away evil influences and sorcery. Ash attracts lightning so one could harness the energy. Carrying the leaves was said to gain the love of the opposite sex. Representing the Third Moon, Ash was the emblem of water magic, being the Moon of Floods. And the runic alphabet formed itself of ash twigs.⁶

O'Sullivan has always drawn heavily on the myths and shamanic legends of the Irish tradition in which she was raised, and here the voiceless, breathless speaker draws sustenance from the Ash's "**aquacity staltic**"—its water magic, whose rhythms are those of the peristalsis of the digestive tract (hence, perhaps, the exposed rib cage in the verso image). The Ash's ability to attract lightning ("this red"), producing powerful "**DECOMPOSITIONS**" at the "**water's edge**," makes it the runic "**letter of salvages**." And we have already seen the poet singing "**all along the river for practise**" of a moon that may well be the Ash as Third Moon, the Moon of Floods that acts as "blanket" for the naked self.

From this point on, the narrative of O'Sullivan's poem *shifts* "redly" between magic chant, stemming from the extraordinary powers of the Ash tree, and the chaos and indifference of a "Nature, red in tooth and claw" as Tennyson characterized it in *In Memoriam*. On page 14, there is reference to the death of a loved one-- "**cant eat it cant eat it -----/ can't hold my breath/my breath / sobbing----- / -----sea's water**." A page later, this death reappears in the image of "**this tiniest skull**" and there are references to "**punctured crow**," "**eyes-uv bone**" and choking. The abstracted images of red human figures and black spidery shapes become more frequent: on page 22, for example, there are what look like red rubber stamp traces in orderly rows, between which we find the four words "**axe wind – thouznd feather**". One thinks of Gerontion's "gull against the wind," for the page contains no representational or even allusive forms. And when the text resumes, after another page of red and black tracery, this time over a field of grainy black diamond shapes, the text itself comes in for the first time as itself red!

The red text on p. 24 begins with the line "paddy.took.after.my grandmother's / people"—the first instance we have had of "ordinary" narrative, perhaps a story told by the poet's father about the family. References to "& feather the day" and "break cattle" follow. But realism never seems to be a serious option for O'Sullivan and page 2 is blank, containing only one line across the center:

roarr -----rua-----

where the morpheme "rua" may be the suffix of a mountain or volcano as in New Zealand's "Rotorua." After this line, in any case the text goes black again, the narrative continuing to deal with Irish farm life, its "driven dirt & ----- / & beast-glance / bellowing the roads used drive them the 10 or 12 miles." At the same time, earlier motifs come back to haunt the poet—"breathe breathe breathe breathe"—with many references to cutting, blemishes, and "hem-(mir) mohr (h)age," culminating in the psychic low point:

wept t'

at an angle

gob—drew- loop

--homeless--

'bandaged eyes the lightnin'

lip to ash

incised----

out of all-----

The amorphous black amoeba shape on the next page now sits on top of the red ones and the next two pages contain only the single word "winzdroppt-----" on the verso, the facing page displaying black veil inkblots over pink ground, with black diamond shapes and zigzag glyphs on the white ground below. The magic powers of the Ash tree seem to have given way to the **ash** of the dying fire, the "bandaged "eyes" of the "homeless" finding themselves "out of all."

From here on out, language becomes sparer. The white pages contain only a few words of broken text, and there is little typographical play. "The saturated language of red" (p. 36) is actually in sober black and the narrow veil shapes on p. 38 are, for the first time, brown, red, and violet, rather like rock formations seen from a distance. Beneath the visual image, we read the centered words "trembling / shiver of land," and the first line on page 39

announces "**sACRIFICE or bURIAL,**" with a focus on "this. **crep. Ant,**" with its play on "discrepant" as well as on the "**ant,**" seemingly made of "**crepe,**" juxtaposed to the "big faced / ,power of **beasts**" beneath it.

Page 40 bears the list:

1 pea) 1 ash) 1 ring) 1 tree)
sundered splash

where the prominent rhyme ("pea" "tree"; "ash"/ "splash") is heard as a kind of mantra, a black-over-red straight line down the middle of the page intersecting the four subsequent words:

easel wink marine ecstasy

The "marine ecstasy" may be the fruit of the ash tree, as reproduced on the poet-artist's "easel" in a "wink." The straight vertical line continues onto the next page, which bears only the words "whence the whispers" aligned at right angle to the page, along the vertical line. That line finally plays itself out on the third page of its existence, extending from the bottom of the page two-thirds of the way up. It is a bleak moment.

But not for long, for now on pages 45-46, the mode shifts to elaborate incantation, the words in black, spread across the page, surrounding the red outlines of rock or pebble shapes. "**3 pieces of a bell,**" "**3 drops of any drink,**" "**3 inches of earth,**" and "**3 shovelfuls**" on the verso are juxtaposed to "**7 eyes,**" "**7 iridescent tail feathers,**" "**7 moon sticks,**" and "**7 flight that is**" on the facing page. This witch's brew of sacred numbers introduces, for the first time in the poem, the bird of "**iridescent tail feathers**"—the peacock, who reappears on p. 47 in the lines "**reach of the peacock's / blistering blistering thresholds,**" isolated on an otherwise blank page. But the recipe on pp. 45-46, far from producing a magic elixir, once again leads to a further blank, to silence. The page that follows the busy red rocks ("Come in under the shadow of the red rock?") is again blank, with only the small units of "**foot-marked**" and "**owish—teries—aisles—**" and "**dimpled,**" all three phrases printed as diagonals in the bottom right. And another blank page follows, at whose bottom we read "**hare in the field / hare's build of it, flaught ist,**" with its play on "flutist." The poem concludes with a recurrence of "**b-r-e-a-t-h-i-n-g,**" this time printed as seven diagonals dispersed across the page, the letters becoming increasingly smaller, and the hyphens between letters disappearing after the third instance, ending with the 8-point font of "**breathing**". The facing page gives us the mirror image, but not quite matching, and the word "breathing" used seven times rather than eight, eliminating the first inverted V-shape "**b-r-e-a-t-h-I-n-g / in**" on the left. The concluding double-page watercolor contains a Miro-like red shape—animal? bird? or

vehicle?-- there being wheel and maze glyphs interspersed throughout and what looks like Cuneiform glyphs across the bottom of the page on a grayish-purplish background.

As a codex book, *Red Shifts* is inevitably read sequentially, and although the “narrative” never coheres into total intelligibility, the book’s tale seems to be one of calamity and suffering, moving toward the diminishing of “breath,” even as the Ash tree and peacock’s threshold suggest the possibility of resurrection, immortality. The final visual image is ambiguous in this regard. The movement of the animal or bird or fish is from right to left, the glyphs beneath the shape telling its story. Happy ending? We only know that the red has shifted, that the red shifts and red/black/grey glyphs cannot be tracked in “normal” speech. And so the book finally emerges as intentionally “illegible,” a book that can only be experienced, not fully translated into more coherent speech.

In a 1999 interview, O’Sullivan provides some pertinent background for the mode of *Red Shifts*:

My background undoubtedly has shaped who I am / how I am in the world / my work. My father and mother had little schooling and my father worked as a labourer in and out of work all his life. We were brought up on the edge, locked out, without any voice. As well as the materiality, the primacy of language, that most preoccupies me, in what can be done underneath, behind, with-in the multidimensionality that is language, my work is driven by the spoken, sounded or breathing voice. Particularly I have always been haunted by issues of VOICELESSNESS — inarticulacy —silence — soundlessness —breathlessness —how are soundings or voices that are other-than or invisible or dimmed or marginalised or excluded or without privilege, or locked out, made Unofficial, reduced by ascendant systems of centrality and closure, configured or Sounded or given form & potency: how can I body forth or configure sounds sounds, such tongues, such languages, such muteness, such multivocality, such error-- & tis is perhaps why the non-vocal in mark & the non-word in sound or language—make up much of the fabrics & structures of my own compositions.⁷

O’Sullivan’s words here recall Susan Howe, and indeed these two poets have much in common. But O’Sullivan’s language is more private than Howe’s or than Steve McCaffery’s—another poet whom she resembles so far as language play and deconstruction is concerned. To convey “The non-vocal in mark & the non-word in sound or language,” O’Sullivan increasingly turns to the wordless image, as she does in the visuals of *Red Shifts*. Together with her “mis-spelt, mis-heard, mis-read, compound” words, her contractions,

parts of words, word-clusters, and individual letters, O'Sullivan creates a dense field of force that literally mesmerizes the reader. Her aim, as she puts it in the same interview, citing Tom Leonard, is to oppose "the politics of dominant narrative language as would-be encloser of the world, language as colonizer," language that is "presumed 'invisible' to its referent" (91). This is no easy task and I must confess that even with the dictionary close at hand, and books on Irish mythology nearby, there are still many words and phrases in *Red Shifts* that remain obscure, as do the black-red-white images throughout.

And yet the "breath" and its cognate "breathe," along with "breathe in," "breathe out" organize the **red-wind-whisper-bird-shore** references so that each rereading yields new configurations of great beauty. The complex modulation of "red" is especially striking: we move from phrases like "i have found this red / is breathed" to the "red pulse & **cupptwig**" of the "house," where "**a strong hue does heavy deepen.**" Then, too, missing words play a central role in O'Sullivan's drama. Take the near-blank pages of "**sometimes she cries**" and "& sometimes she is / again" on pp. 31-32. The first phrase is placed in the center of an otherwise blank page. The second, in contrast, appears at the bottom right of the facing page:

**& sometimes she is
again"**

Is **what** again? Obviously there is something missing in the second quotation, most likely the word "**silent,**" whose six letters followed by a space would fill precisely the seven spaces from the left margin that precede "again." Sometimes she cries & sometimes she is silent again." Here the white space of the page embodies the "silence" that is not put in words in the text. It is a very bold and brilliant artistic move, demonstrating that the verbal can actually morph into the visual. But it takes many readings of *Red Shifts* and comparable O'Sullivan texts to discover these magic moments. The poet's manifold *shifts* must be *read* and re-read if their "red" is to be understood.

FOOTNOTES

¹Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995); Drucker, *Figuring the word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary, 1998); Renée Riese Hubert & Judd D. Hubert, *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists' Books* (Granary, 1999).

² Maggie O'Sullivan, "red shifts," *boundary 2*: "99 Poets/1999: An International Poetics Symposium," a special issue edited by Charles Bernstein, 26, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 208-210. This passage, beginning with the lines "black / feathers / blue" and concluding with "blanket just," reappears, in altered form, as (unnumbered pages 4-10 in the book.

³O'Sullivan, email to the author, 7 September 2003.

⁴ O'Sullivan purposely misspells certain words like "practice" (here "practise") so as to call attention to them and heighten their morphemes: in this case, the spelling relates a word like 'practise' to "expertise."

⁵Nate Dorward, review of Maggie O'Sullivan, *Red Shifts, The Gig*, 10, December 2001, p.

⁶This is a précis of various handbooks on tree symbolism and online dictionaries and source books of Irish mythology.

⁷ O'Sullivan, "Binary Myths 2: Correspondences with Poet-Editors," *Stride*, ed. Andy Brown (Exeter, 1999), p. 90.