Distorted Figures:
Mannerist Similes and the Body in David Shapiro's Poetry

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At the beginning of a long sequence in David Shapiro's book *After A Lost Original*, we encounter the following passage:

> There is the gate or the copy of a gate
> Blood outlines the gate, like a nude
> A pink flower like a tree emits sparks
> They gather into a yellow blue fragmentary flower
> In the other space, formed by flowers torn apart
> It bites the ground, like a blackened moon[1]

Only six lines into a postmodern poet's book, and we have already been confronted with 3 similes. Not only is the number remarkable; perhaps stranger is the fact that they are *similes* (rather than metaphors)—an archaic device few contemporary poets in the avant-garde have dared employ since Pound's development of imagism.

Indeed, the classic definition of simile is: a more overt form of metaphor which compares two things using the words "like" or "as." Most poets since modernism, if they employ metaphors at all, have done so using direct presentation of imagery rather than making the effort to include the "like" or "as" word that shows a speaker is doing the comparing. Similes function much like metaphors, the classic definition of which was developed by the literary critic I.A Richards in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Richards said that a metaphor consists of two terms: the tenor (the thing literally being talked about) and the vehicle (the thing it is being compared to). Tenor and vehicle in this definition share a "ground," a similarity which this comparison brings out.[2] In the commonly used example "Achilles is a lion in battle," the tenor would be Achilles and the vehicle would be the lion. The ground which connects the two would be the comparative ferocity with which they conduct themselves in battle. Note that this usage is preferable to a clumsy ordinary locution such as "Achilles was pretty intense and aggressive in the battle today" which doesn't seem to achieve the same impact as the previous metaphorical phrase. Metaphors lend language a vividness and intensity and allow us to express things that literal description cannot.

However, if we look closely at similes in the Shapiro excerpt just quoted, something strange begins to occur. What does the fact that "blood outlines the gate" (presumably the tenor) have in common with "a nude" (presumably the vehicle)? Furthermore, what does "a pink flower" have in common with a tree that "emits sparks," or a personified flower that "bites the ground" have in common with "a blackened moon"? These similes do not appear to share a "ground" which connects tenor and vehicle in the usual way. They may in some way have private meaning for the poet, or one may try to intuit a kind of surreal similarity by using a great deal of extrapolation, but by all accounts to a reader, as comparisons they are truly "groundless."

> The earth is under us
> Like cheap non-fading wallpaper[3]

What are we to make of these seemingly excessive and superfluous gestures, in which their areas of unlikeness seem to be larger than any potential area of likeness (if indeed the latter does exist). One way to look at them is as examples of mannerism. Shapiro developed an interest in John Ashbery's use of this strategy (as derived from Roussel) in his early study *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry*.

> Later Ashbery wittily employed another device of Roussel: the specious simile, "the kind that tells you less than you would know if the thing were stated flatly"(interview). In lieu of the organic and necessary simile, Ashbery learned from the French master an extravagance of connection that leads one nowhere, as in "as useless as a ski in a barge," though this example is perhaps still too suggestive. "As useless as a ski" would be Ashbery's paradigmatic revision (interview).[4]

Shapiro in this book emphasizes the fact that these types of devices act as "mannerist" elements in Ashbery's poetry, and the comparison helps illuminate what is so successful about their excessiveness.

> In its bizarre suavity, its unrealities, its sudden discontinuities, its constant theatricality, its inordinate fondness for framing devices, Mannerism no longer seems to be anything but our central precursor.[5]

There are certainly many similes in Shapiro's poetry which can be interpreted (and illuminated) using this framework. For example, the instances of this figure in Shapiro's early poetry, beginning with *The Page-Turner*, often display a proliferation of unnecessary or digressive information:

> The pulses we receive remain suspicious
> Like the hazardous decisions of a night after which we will
> see quite differently[6]

The royal "we" of the speaker here, in describing a heart tremor, attempts to expand his initial observation by comparing it to a bizarrely elaborate situation "the hazardous decisions of a night after which we will see quite differently," which digressively obfuscates the meaning of what he might be talking about, in a fashion not unlike John Ashbery's poetry. Rather than providing a comparison to something unlike the thing being talked about and thereby focusing meaning through a comparison of like and unlike qualities, here we are simply led into further abstractions. Reading similar tropes in Shapiro's recent poetry this way would not be inaccurate, either:

> Perhaps this voice never existed like a lake
> Perhaps this translation never existed like a gift my child draws[7]

These two digressive and confounding gestures make comparisons in which the terms, as before, do not seem to have any ground in common. One could conceivably repeat such gestures over and over, if this was their only consequence. Ashbery's simile "as useless as a ski" is so effective as a parody particularly because it displays the potentially folksy air of having been recycled from some vague American idiom, and this double-codes and thus defuses any potential pathos. Reproducibility of gesture is also an important resource for Shapiro, who has pursued his own romantically anti-romantic investigation of "the copy," but without Ashbery's emphasis on degraded language.

> One might call it tracing a hyacinth, or traces of a hyacinth.
> Like traces on a blackboard.
> Or tracing the window from a neoclassicism upon a blackboard.[8]

While this passage from Shapiro's poem "Venetian Blinds" appears to be an example of another superfluous simile, it already starts to resist this definition. The hyacinth and the blackboard both feel as if they are somehow real objects, with consequences. There is less humor or elaborate kidding around -- there seems to be on the contrary a serious insistence in these anaphoric repetitions.

As the movement of excess in art which appeared at the end of the Renaissance and charted the deterioration of neoclassical systems of perspective, mannerism can be a useful lens for examining Shapiro's own "belated" poetry. However, the Ashberyian take on this doesn't completely explain Shapiro's inordinate fondness for the simile in particular. One might ask, what do similes allow Shapiro to do that is unique to his own work? One answer might be that we need to look outside Ashbery's notion of the "specious simile" and possibly outside the understanding of Mannerism itself as a mostly decorative or ornamental movement. The mannerist similes that Shapiro employs in his poems are constitutive as well as decorative, functional as well as digressive. They signify not only through the pathos and humor with which they fail to fulfill the functional contract we expect of them, but also through a larger allegory about the body which persists throughout this poet's work.

In Shapiro's poetry, framing devices such as similes have consequences for the world of words they depict. Shapiro's poems create neither a linear narrative nor an original "scene" through a window but instead propose a preposterous exfoliation of poetic machinery which creates multiple points of interest. In "Rivulet Near the Truth," the speaker begins with a declaration about "sunken rocks," but then launches into a series of similes which derail the establishment of a consistent scene or context:

> Sunken rocks are sunless
> Like a fence in iniquity
> Or a hedge in oblivion
> Or sunshine at supper
> Like the Supreme Being in surgery
> Restrained by oscillating power
> Sweeping the dirty body
> Useless as if agreeable stuff

Like saccharine might look upon
Love's clean teeth[9]

The first three comparisons here make a kind of sense: they are talking about a row of partially-submerged objects (the "rivulet" of the title) and thus nodding to a theme of secrecy. As we progress further through these images however, the comparisons make less sense. One has to do a lot of work to attempt to figure out what "sunken rocks are sunless" might have in common with "sunshine at supper." The two things do not seem alike except perhaps as an ironic opposition, or an elaborate hidden connection.
And how are sunken rocks like "the Supreme Being in surgery / Restrained by oscillating power"? The potentially cosmological answer would appear to be partially submerged like the rocks themselves. By the time a reader reaches the latter image, having already passed through four comparisons, she might inquire: which is the real thing and which is the imaginary thing it's being compared to? Why all the framing and reframing in this poem? Shapiro's speaker expounds on these problems further

There are two kinds of sleep
Orthodox and paradoxical
During orthodox there are no dreams
But normal diplomatic relations
Like a sentence made up to include
The sleepers of the whole alphabet…[10]

Apparently waking, the world in which "normal diplomatic relations" might occur, is not an option, or has been collapsed into or confused with merely another kind of sleep. Indeed, in a world where similes and framing take center stage, the question of what is the original and what is the copy, what is sleeping and what is waking, become confused.

So these odd comparisons do affect and help structure the "world" of the poem: closer examination reveals them to be load-bearing structures. In contrast to the sense of ornament implied in Ashbery's theory of the "specious simile," Arnold Hauser points out that mannerism's turn away from a cohesive perspectival system creates a crisis of depiction in which the hierarchies of this space are disrupted:

> Mannerism begins by breaking up the Renaissance structure of space and the scene to be represented into separate, not merely externally separate but also inwardly differently organized, parts…Motifs which seem to be of only secondary significance for the real subject of the picture are often overbearingly prominent, whereas what is apparently the leading theme is devalued and suppressed.[11]

The type of phenomenon that Hauser describes finds its manifestation in Shapiro's poetry through both distortions of space and distortions of the body. One of the more dramatic symptoms of this sectioning-off of "realist" or "naturalist" space is the way in which Shapiro's speaker yokes together two disparate scenes through the use of a strategy I will refer to as "spatial metonymy." Such a use of the simile occurs in "An Exercise in Futility" in which the poet-speaker addresses a mentor:

You whom I had loved for years like a monumental door leading to
An exterior interior: to get to this door you climbed a tiny, tinny podium
And there two mirrors poured into reach other
In a maroon room covered up with dust of bricks and books[12]

The stiff and elaborate architectural diction here of "a monumental door leading to / an exterior interior" throws into stark relief the dramatic unlikeness between this scene and the potentially sentimental reminiscence "you whom I had loved for years," in the process diffusing any recognizable or naturalistic pathos. The indefiniteness of syntax and the use of the imperfect tense makes the comparison even stranger: what is being compared to the monumental door, "you," the action of having loved for years, or "I"? Unable to clearly parse this simile, a reader encounters it primarily as a segue device that connects two scenes and that renders both of them as a consequence equally real and dreamlike.

The scene of the monumental door, which in the terms of official metaphorical parlance would be the vehicle (the imagined thing that the tenor is compared to) here has become the reality of the rest of the poem, which takes place in the "room covered up with the dust bricks and books." Yet this is not just a situation in which the vehicle has been introduced before the tenor and a reversal has occurred, because the entire piece hinges around the relationship between this "I" and this "you," who are both very real. There's an additionally confounding blurring that occurs between you and I as a result of the simile, like the two mirrors pouring into each other. The common theme among these images seems to be a strange warping of space initiated by the door which leads to the paradoxical "exterior interior."

Such distortions are examples of the types of condensation and displacement that Freud says we find in dreams. Thomas Fink describes this spatial effect as "deterritorialization" via Deleuze and Guattari.[13] Another way to think of this juxtaposition is as "spatial metonymy," ways in which the poet might place two objects next to one another as a way of figuring a deeper relationship between them.[14] There is something like this latter notion in Lacan's discussion of metonymy as the functional term in a metaphor:

> The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain[15]

In this scheme what enlivens a figure is the "spark" that derives from spatial juxtaposition between one object and another, inviting a comparison in order to expose the "occulted" signifier or similarity between the two parts.) However, in a great deal of Shapiro's poetry, the partially-submerged nature of his figures and his extended personal allegories guarantee that a reader often comes away with the effect of a figure whose ground (or occulted signifier) has been effectively hidden from sight). Since the terms of his similes share no ground in the usual sense, this "spark" of sublimated metonymy as repressed term or Id has been dispersed throughout the whole figure, and thus the territory of the subconscious is strangely superimposed

over that of the real -- it's everywhere and nowhere. The resulting dramatic divergence creates a lively sense of dreamlike non-sequitor

> Now only adverbs
> mounting into a series with a sigh
> carried along then like India-ink bottles
> punctured by the subway into prayer[16]

> You are high and delegate authority
> Like a lake.
> The night dies like a ninny on the wall.[17]

In these situations, the emphasis for a reader is cast back onto the manipulation of the poem-dream's space via a principle of nextness, as the operative function of the speaker's desire. Although the nature of this desire in individual gestures remains mysterious, there is nevertheless an effort here to create a momentarily sincere emotion by rendering the usual pathos of such attempts at simile temporarily unrecognizable, or what Freud calls "unheimlich." Sometimes the juxtaposition evokes a kind of odd tenderness through the very strangeness and intimacy of its non-sequitor.

> Lightly you touch me
> Paper on which I write
> Problems have turned into snow at night
> Like a little car abandoned in the midst of vague terror

In "Stay Stay Stay Stay" Shapiro quotes a tender metaphor from Eluard (the personal significance of which is never quite explained) but which enacts this metonymic principle of desire: "You are standing on my eyelids / and my hair is in your hair."[18] The placement of bodies next to one another has consequences for the ordering of the poem-world through the medium of the speaker's voice which figures possibilities of both intimacy and pluralism in strange new ways.

But exterior space is not the only thing affected by this breakdown. Indeed, Hauser's sense of the dissolution of classical perspective also finds its manifestation for Shapiro in the symptom of distorted bodies, the body "turning and twisting, bending and writhing under the pressure of the mind,"[19] This passage from "The Counter-Example" finds the speaker-painter struggling with this very issue, in reference to his own efforts to imitate nature:

> You did not want to paint twisting life in red points
> But randomly following the paper, you twisted the lines

> Distorted as a man following a dolphin
> Struggling not to surface but diving to drown

In a drifting wet imperturbability[20]

Shapiro's abrupt transition here from a scene of painting on paper to a distorted figure following a dolphin is confounding in the richest ways. These statements yoke together two apparently unrelated scenes using a simile in combination with the tonal words "twisted" and "distorted." The image is encrusted with multiple metaphors: how is a man following a dolphin distorted, unless it's by the water which obscures his form as he dives into the depths, just as the specific content underlying this metaphor seems somehow submerged, just out of reach. Yet at other moments Shapiro's distorted bodies take on the quality of something more akin to Freud's polymorphous perverse, as in the following passages from "The Devil's Trill Sonata:"

There we are, like two crystals joined together
In a specific rational manner, twin city in full night
With set arias and binoculars adapted for use at the opera,
And you so silky stretched over and under me like a steel frame.[21]

Ophelia is some sort of fluid
The silk cloth is rubbed and she flows
Her comparatively small body wades into the stream
She has been rubbed off and migrates into the silk

You made a rough sketch of the swordplay
And the sword tilts
Hamlet drifts like water through the pipes
The earth is a magnet that can be switched on and off,
But where is that switch?[22]

Here the distortion of bodies creates an effect not unlike the previously-described uses of spatial metonymy. When bodies no longer obey the usual physical laws, they become oddly spatialized and take on characteristics not unlike those of landscape or architecture. The "stuff" of bodies and the "stuff" of nature becomes oddly intertwined.

This sense of the body as simultaneously inside, outside, and all around one here owes something to its strange quality of concretion via the medium of the speaker's voice, as a "wandering part of the body."[23] I derive this concept from Tenney Nathanson's influential study *Whitman's Presence*. In this book Nathanson evokes a strange, labile space in which the poet's voice acts as an "eternal float of solution" through its manipulation of various objects.

> Associated with the insides such exteriors sequester, this animating force is typically figured in Whitman's work as a flood that creates all individual forms from out of its ceaseless flowing… it results in the momentary dissolution of blocking surfaces and the ecstatic mingling of no-longer bounded forms.[24]

Employing Derrida's discussion of Husserl's phenomenal voice as "interiorized," Nathanson developes a trope of a ghostly body which owes something to this sense of interiority by means of its various manifestations in the trope of voice. But since Shapiro is a different kind of poet than Whitman, what I'm talking about has less to do with the poet's voice as ghostly manifestation to a present reader (figured through writing) than with the notion of an ambivalent relationship toward one's own body and toward nature, the sense of not feeling quite at home in one's body. Unlike Whitman, whose voice is synonymous with the creation of his presence in relation to a reader, there is a belated sense in Shapiro's poetry that his voice has somehow always been present, and the poet is instead using the trope in his word-magic manipulations primarily as a means of exploring now dreamlike, now real scenarios:

Therefore I'd like to propose a slightly different notion of interiority which is sometimes at odds with (but nevertheless sees itself in relation to) the physical body. Paul Schilder in his book *The Image and Appearance of the Body* proposes a "postural model of the body" which parallels the physical body but which nevertheless has its own autonomy:

> It is to the existence of these 'schemata' that we owe the power of projecting our recognition of posture, movement, and locality beyond the limits of our own bodies…Anything which participates in the conscious movement of our bodies is added to the model of ourselves and becomes part of these schemata: a woman's power of localization may extend to the feather in her hat.
>
> When a leg has been amputated, a phantom appears; the individual still feels his leg and has a vivid impression that it is still there. He may also forget about his loss and fall down. This phantom, this animated image of the leg, is the expression of the body schema.[25]

The impressions of interiority thus sometimes diverge from the external world, and an accurate mimesis of nature as such is neither particularly possible nor desirable, a fact of which Shapiro reminds us: "The lion's mane has successive rows of flames / In your missing hand you would have held the lion."[26]

This oblique and often conflicted relationship between interior and exterior body finds vivid articulation in Shapiro's poem "Afternoon with a Lion"

> Towards the lion and up to the lion:
> First you were too dazed to gaze into the lion,
> Around the lion and with the lion.
>
> Hand over hand you were getting into the lion,
> Sniffing palm trees and floating upon the lion
> Towards the lion and up to the lion.
>
> In the seventh frame you slipped above the lion
> Into the white sky beyond each lion,
> Around the lion and with the lion.

Now under the lion, smiling under the lion
It's a light green day edges toward the lion,
Towards the lion and up to the lion.

But how is one to get out of the lion,
One's hat and stick sticking out of the lion,
Around the lion and with the lion?

You ran away from the lion and away from the lion --
Amazed and apart, days away from the lion --
Towards the lion and up to the lion,
Around the lion and with the lion.[27]

Here the lion, like one of Shapiro's famous polysemous puns, stands for multiple things. As an actual creature it is not very convincing, because one cannot occupy the same space as a lion without being eaten. Instead the speaker here has a strange polymorphously embodied relationship to this creature: he is now inside it, now above it or next to it, but he cannot get away from it -- he is somehow attached. The lion here acts as a stand-in for both the physical body and for nature itself, and the speaker enacts in a humorously surreal way the relationship of interiority to this external body, which seems as foreign as a wild animal. It is worth noting that the speaker's attempt to flee the lion in the last stanza ("days away from the lion") is ultimately foiled by nothing less than the poetic form itself, the "traditions" of literature in which the poet works: the closing couplet of the villanelle demands a continued and perhaps eternal engagement with this "lion."

It is likewise not coincidental that similes, another such belated constraint of literary form, appear so frequently in Shapiro's poetry. Shapiro's mannerist similes, his "distorted figures," are precisely the site at which distortions of nature and of the body intersect. Mediating between interior and exterior through the multiplication of framing devices, they continually negotiate this boundary which has been rendered anxiously amorphous by the dissolution of classical perspective. We are confronted with such a passage near the end of "Rivulet Near the Truth:"

The vista out this window makes
A plea in a vague style
Pale as a Persian blind
Giggling like refined gold
Tempted to please like a pill: Look
The loophole is opening now
Looming like a looking glass
The thirsty soul examines
Itself and we each other

> As it is said you hug
> A belief as the playhouse is hidden[28]

Veering away from the exterior into a process of narrating interior perception itself, this passage depicts a frustrated version of a vista. Thomas Fink in his book *The Poetry of David Shapiro* points out that Shapiro's work continually looks for an outside "truth" of some kind but continually bumps up against the mediations of the self in language.[29] I would agree with this assessment, but would substitute the term "nature" for "truth" in my analysis of Shapiro's staged attempts at mimesis. This passage from "House (Blown Apart)" engages in a similar attempt:

> I can see the traces of old work
> Embedded in this page like your bed
> Within a bed. My old desire to live![30]

Here the traces of interiority in the form of memories or dreams ("old work") mingle with a background which has also been strangely interiorized: the page/bed. Not only does this scenario propose a paradoxical space in which waking both is and is not an option, but it proposes a strange mixing of interior and exterior experience.

These and other excerpts illustrate a continuing allegory throughout Shapiro's poetry of the body as exploded ("blown apart") and strewn across or mingled with the landscape beyond it. The word "like" in Shapiro's similes constitutes what remains of that body's boundary, both in terms of phenomenology and in terms of their own belated relation to literary tradition. As a wandering part of the body, voice represents the presence of a speaker, and here the word "like" similarly figures the presence of that speaker actively making comparisons and motivated in this enterprise by desire.

> The very expression 'figure of speech' implies that in metaphor, as in the other tropes or turns, discourse assumes the nature of a body by displaying forms and traits which usually characterize the human face, man's 'figure'; it is as though the tropes have to discourse a quasi-bodily externalization. By providing a kind of figurability to the message, the tropes make discourse appear.[31]

Ricoeur's view of metaphor as "quasi-bodily externalization" dramatizes the way in which Shapiro's similes act as extensions of interiority. In the interior body's perception of external nature, one can go up to that boundary, but it becomes unclear whether one actually reaches an unmediated experience. In fact, this is the real definition of mannerism as a constitutive crisis for representation: it is the imitation of culture rather than nature.

> But the artistic solution is always a derivative, a structure dependent in the final analysis on classicism, and originating in a cultural, not a natural experience, whether it is expressed in the form of a protest against classical art or seeks to preserve the formal achievements of this art.

> We are dealing here, in other words, with a completely self-conscious style, which bases its forms not so much on the particular object as on the art of the preceding epoch.[32]

While Shapiro would no doubt fall under the "protest against" part of Hauser's definition, there are nonetheless remnants of classicism in his poetry, in his actual subject matter (Socrates, the Erecthion, etc), in his use of inherited forms such as villanelles and iambic meter, and in "naked devices" used for framing likeness such as the simile. But it has all been radically altered and distorted by the (post)modern experience of interiority. This belated yet nonetheless revolutionary cultural work performs a "thinking through" in its dramatic and lively mimesis of attempting to extend outward.

Notes

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4. Shapiro, David. *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. 17.
5. Ibid, 5.
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7. Shapiro, David. *A Burning Interior.* New York: The Overlook Press, 2002. 68.
8. Shapiro, David. *To An Idea*. New York: The Overlook Press, 1983. 37.
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10. Ibid
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16. Shapiro, *The Page-Turner.* 44.
17. Shapiro, *After a Lost Original*. 16.
18. Shapiro, *Lateness*
19. Hauser, 96.
20. Shapiro, *To An Idea*. 23.
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25. Schilder, Paul. *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1978. 13.
26. Shapiro, *Lateness*
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Fink, 56.
30. Shapiro, *House (Blown Apart)*. 15.
31. Ricoeur, Paul. "The Metaphorical Process," *On Metaphor*. Ed. Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. 142.
32 Hauser, 91.

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