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Second Place Winner, Robert Penn Warren Essay Contest

“Where Inner and Outer Meet”: Dissociation and the Creative Process

All poems are accounts of experiences and emotions. The more acclaimed poems express complex feelings which make readers wonder how poets can capture and share them. To some people, appreciating a river would not elicit those emotions. However, Margaret Gibson connects to the river on a personal level. Her poem “Riverkeeper” is her attempt of recording her experience of appreciating the river. Gibson accomplishes this by dissociating from herself, so her difficult-to-convey emotions become a river of thoughts that can be shared.

Gibson describes her thoughts in the poem using physical objects, suggesting that her thoughts are intangible otherwise. For example, Gibson ponders on what blooming feels like to a lily. She suggests it “must feel / like a river’s brightening at daybreak” (25-26). She chooses not to describe what she is feeling but rather what the feelings remind her of. She sees her thoughts by “listening / to the river inside” (12-13). She “sink[s] into a stillness / where what can’t be said stirs beneath / currents of image and memory” (13-15). The phrase “stirs beneath currents” is reminiscent of the rushing water beneath the surface of a river. In this instance, the surface is Gibson’s tangible thoughts of “images and memory,” and the water beneath is abstract thoughts like emotions that “can’t be said.” By comparing her thoughts to a river, Gibson gives tangibility to them.

Furthermore, Gibson’s poem replicates the structure of a river, indicating that it is taken from her river of thoughts. The formatting creates the feeling that the reader is flowing through a river. First, the lack of stanzas creates a cohesive body. The body is shaped by the lines’ similar lengths, with most of them having ten syllables. This makes the poem look like a path similar to

a long straight of a river. Second, the reader is tossed down the poem by the twenty-five enjambments. These cause the reader to quickly move to the next line. Additionally, there are only seven periods in the thirty-five-line poem, and two of them are separated by ten lines. In order to take in the long sentences, the reader is rushed down the lines. Third, the ideas change suddenly, which enhances the allusion of being pushed by the currents. Gibson's replication of a river perpetuates her belief that she is the "Riverkeeper," where "inner / and outer meet" (1-2), meaning she experiences the river outside, converts it into inner thoughts, and expresses them through a poem.

The concept of Gibson's river of thoughts comes from her dissociation. Throughout the poem, Gibson shifts perspective from her mind to the outdoors. Rarely does she mention her body and what she's doing. The only information given about her physical state is that she is listening to the river outside her window (3-4). Yet, in her mind, she is seeing the river and its surroundings (5-12). Then, she sinks into the previously mentioned "stillness" where she looks at her thoughts (13-19). All of this indicates that Gibson has dissociated. According to the American Psychiatric Association,

Dissociation is a disconnection between a person's thoughts, memories, feelings, actions or sense of who he or she is. This is a normal process that everyone has experienced.

Examples of mild, common dissociation include daydreaming, highway hypnosis or "getting lost" in a book or movie, all of which involve "losing touch" with awareness of one's immediate surroundings. (Wang 1)

When listening to the river, Gibson disconnected herself from her body and became, in her mind, "that place where inner / and outer meet" (1-2). She began daydreaming of the sun on the water, the animals around it, and the tree leaning over it (5-12). Gibson describes her spirit not being in

her but “leaning out over the water” (10). Not only has she dissociated from her body, but she has from her thoughts and memories by seeing them as a river inside her. In doing this, she allows her river of thoughts and the physical river to connect. Gibson sees this as an example of the world being “truly all one” (22) and “seamless” (23). This further disconnects her from her surroundings, a process that is crucial to her creative process.

By dissociating, Gibson is able to write “what can’t be said” (14) by describing the scenery in her mind. The river is replicated by her poem through the poem’s structure and vivid imagery. Gibson illustrates that a way of explaining something is to explain how that something affects you. The details of what the river helps her see connect the reader to the river more than details of the river itself would. “Riverkeeper” allows the reader to dissociate with Gibson to experience the river in a more spiritual way—as she does.

Works Cited

- Gibson, Margaret. "Riverkeeper." *Poetry Daily*, 17 May 2018, <https://poems.com/poem/riverkeeper/>.
- Wang, Philip. "What Are Dissociative Disorders?" *American Psychiatric Association*, Aug. 2018, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/dissociative-disorders/what-are-dissociative-disorders>.