

# Lissa Wolsak's *Squeezed Light*: *Collected Poems 1994-2005*: A Defence of Being



*Hank Lazer*

What follows is not a review of Wolsak's *Collected Poems*<sup>1</sup> but a set of examples toward a method of reading the poems with the kind of slowness and depth that they provoke and deserve. I have selected a set of inter-related passages, and, while they point to a central element in her thinking, I also believe that there are a nearly infinite set of such possible readings and explorations available to readers of *Squeezed Light*. I intend this reading as the pointing of a way, not as a definitive thematic statement. My reading, in this instance, points toward a few brief passages concerning being. All of the passages occur in a late section of *Squeezed Light*, in "A Defence of Being, Second Ana" (one of two Wolsak compositions bearing the general title "A Defence of Being").

What is it about *being* that needs defending? It would seem that it shouldn't need defending at all; that it just *is*; that it has dominion. Does *being* also wish to be noticed?

Awing us in

the open place

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<sup>1</sup>I have written a more traditional review for *Rain Taxi*.

which inflects

being as in union or rapture (189)

It doesn't really need defending, but by defending *being* we enter into a different, more intense awareness of it. By being *being's* partisan, one might actually develop a facility for *feeling* being.

Would it be too odd to suggest that reading in this manner—reading that is not required, has no fixed activity or outcome in mind, a reading that is simply allured by Wolsak's poetry—is itself a mode for developing a feeling for being? Such reading partakes of an experiential or phenomenological pedagogy. One such wormhole toward a feeling for being—which would be the sum total of any defense ever needed for being: a *savoring* sense of being, and thus a defense of the *value* of being—is etymological reading. So that in the passage quoted above, as we are checking into “inflection” (as in “the open place/ which inflects/ being”) we might begin our residence in the word by considering a shift in voice, a modulation of pitch, and then think that inflection is the means by which grammatical difference is enacted—tone, tense, person, aspect, mood, gender, number—though we still have not arrived at a middle English sense of the word, as *in* + *flectere* to bend, and thus “to turn from a direct line or course.” Is the poem not an instance of inflection: in and by means of language a turning away from one kind of certain saying to a more exploratory bending toward. Such reading is a kind of tropism, as a reader leans into the poem, leaning toward that feeling for being, which may, as Wolsak's poem suggests, be “the open place,” wherein we feel inflection itself occurring, which, apparently, in awe, in “awing us in,” must be akin (“as in union or rapture”) to what *being* is.

Yes, indeed, Heidegger picked a great pair: *being* and *time*. His writing made us intensely aware of a kind of gap in western philosophical thinking: our presumption that we knew what we meant by these two vexing terms. Post-Heidegger, it is nearly impossible to think about *being* without also thinking about *time*. Thus in Wolsak's poem

then . . . ought each of

the said things intrude upon us now?

being scient is of  
 minute moment  
 loom-shuttles still (189)

Do I need to say the same thing all over again about *time* that I just claimed about the pedagogical dimension of Wolsak's poetry with regard to *being*? How the poem and its slowly considered etymologies enact and encourage that feel for *time*? As a reader we become scient or scientist of that being-opened looming of time and its minute durations. Scient as "knowing," as from Latin *sciens*. As also prescient, a kind of foreknowing. We see the lines, in the varied indentations, a kind of loom-shuttle on the page. And the reader looms over the page. And thus our experience or feel for *time*, by means of the peculiar duration of reading (and its minute moments of transport), is illuminated, is, by the welcomed intrusion of said things (and written things), turned into a knowing.

Wolsak's spacing of words on the page becomes a kind of loom-shuttle, an array that invites the kind of slow reading (analogous to slow cooking, and slow eating) that invites a dwelling with the word, which is a locale that we too often read (and speed) through. That residence in and on and with the word, I am arguing, is analogous to the kind of thinking or feeling of *being* and *time* that is the "defensive" or provocative action central to Wolsak's poetry.

Continuing my sampling of the "Second Ana" of "A Defence of Being," I find Wolsak asking

whose bis-  
 muthous chain of  
 globes are we ten-  
 anting? (194)

Wolsak is a poet who savors the individual, odd word. In the case of "bismuthous," if we begin with the somewhat tautological sense—"of

or containing trivalent bismuth”—we’ve only begun to get a sense of what sort of loom-shuttle site we have found in and with *bismuthous* (and its syncopated sound due to the accent on the first syllable). As we track the word by means of a medical dictionary, we begin to learn of an element (with a germanic etymology meaning “white mass”) that is a key element used to produce many salts and in the manufacture of pharmaceutical products (often used to treat diarrhea, nausea, and indigestion). (One such product is Pepto Bismol.) Bismuth is atomic number 83, symbol Bi, often described as “a reddish, crystalline, trivalent metallic element.” Most interestingly, as in bismuth subsalicylate, as in Pepto Bismol, its mechanism of action is described as “unknown.” It is also used as a suppressant of lupus erythematosus.

The page/passage which includes the four lines I have quoted begins, “If we say . . . *deep sea*,” and I believe that the reading I have just provided is simply one of a nearly infinite number of similar experiences if one dives down and into the word/moments provided throughout Wolsak’s poetry. The words become a chain of globes (as in the molecular models one sees in any chemistry textbook), and indeed they are places we are “tenanting,” or, more precisely, “ten-/ anting,” as the carefully placed syllables crawl from one line, hyphenated, to the next. This experience of the word opening up onto a complexity of association and definition and use is analogous to our learning to invoke a similar ethical opening up of the elements of *being* and *time*. That is perhaps how one defends these (and other elements): by teaching and learning an ethics of slow, heuristic residency.

A few pages later—“later” being both a location in time and a locale—we come upon

Beyond . . . on a convex . . .

attinent squeezed light,

what-is touches what-is (201)

For many years, I have thought of reading (particularly of the kind of poetry that Wolsak writes) as an instance of *qi gong*, of being in channeled proximity to energy patterns (as Olson had suggested in

his invocation of “field”), as a kind of transferred-being-proximate experience of the healing or energizing power of words (which, we often refer to as “being touching”). “Attingent” turns out to be an archaic word meaning “touching; in contact,” and the poem, particularly of the variety that we often refer to as “experimental,” thus constitutes a kind of laboratory, a site where “what-is touches what-is.” But what of that term “squeezed light,” which, of all the possible terms and idiosyncratic words constitutes the title for Wolsak’s *Collected Poems*? Her book has an extraordinarily engaging, smart introduction written by George Quasha with Charles Stein, and they observe,

Even the title of this collection, *Squeezed Light*, compacts in two words various meaning possibilities and has polyvalent force. A technical term from physics, “squeezed light” requires fairly advanced math to understand fully, but in the raw, so to speak, it’s richly suggestive. On the important scientific applications of the concept, one website starts out: “Can light be squeezed? In fact it is the *quantum noise* of light that can be squeezed. Such *squeezed light* (a squeezed state of light) is a special form of light that is researched in the field of quantum optics.” (xxii)

Thus Wolsak’s book, from its initiating title, suggests its residency with science—with, as we’ve seen, the *scient* or knowing arts—and suggests its kinship with research and with “a special form of light.”

In the passages I have been reading in this essay, I have deliberately focused on a key strand of Wolsak’s thinking: an attentional (attingent?) beam that illuminates *being*. The ethical nature of her writing—a kind of ethics of poetic composition—becomes most apparent when the reader begins to realize just how many passages of her poems open up to such reading, dwelling, conjecturing, and etymological diving. As one is schooled in such a mode of reading (which, I believe, is virtually identical to the mode of writing that makes such poems), we become schooled in an essential grasp for what we are as creatures suspended in the solutions of *being* and *time*.