

An Essay About Writing A Talk About Poetry
or
Thoughts on Play, the Other and Duende

by Amanda Earl

I have an idea in mind: the seven habits of highly playful poets...because play is the main thing that drives my interest in poetry and my own writing: play with sound, words, voices, images, the very idea of poetry itself. I love it when people respond to anything I write or publish with a question about whether it is poetry.

I make a list of possible works, concepts and characters to include: *The Qwerty Institute (Annual Report)* by Angela Szczepaniak (Book Thug, 2012), Erín Moure's heteronyms, Stephen Brockwell's Karikura, *The Bentleys* by Dennis Cooley, the collaborative performances of the work of Anne Carson.

But I begin with Robert Kroetsch's essay collection, *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Oxford University Press, 1989) Since 2008, Kroetsch's writing, particularly his poetry, has been my touchstone. The magic happened for me when I read his *Completed Field Notes* (The University of Alberta Press 2000), especially *The Sad Phoenician*, which was so playful and humorous. Full of word play. Then there was *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (The University of Alberta Press 2001). Once more, very playful, imaginative. In *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, Kroetsch invents two characters: Rita Kleinhart and Raymond with no last name. Much like Stephen Brockwell with his character, Karikura, Kroetsch's creation of characters allows him to enter the world via a different perspective.

"Rita Kleinhart was an admirer of snow. Snow, she remarks,
is the caress of impossible meanings. Snow is closure
without ending. Snow is the veil that lets us see the shape of the dream."
[excerpt from hornbook #43]

Raymond's writing in the book is much more matter of fact, but sometimes he's not sure whether he wrote some lines or she did. It's such a playful and intriguing way to play with the text.

The red couch in my apartment is covered with poetry books. The hot water tap in the kitchen is dripping, driving me batty. I adjust it, return to the couch.



Immerse myself in Kroetsch's essays again. I am moved by what Kroetsch refers to as "the encounter with the double who can be seen but cannot be imagined."

I think about changing my topic to the Other or the double. The concept of the Other has been discussed in philosophy, politics and literary theory. Writers such as Rimbaud, "Je est un autre/I is an other." Derrida and Simone de Beauvoir have discussed the concept of the other and othering at length, as a kind of alienation, another form of the self. To me it has those connotations but also contains the idea of the dream self or the darker self. I think of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde or Frankenstein's creature and Dr. Frankenstein. The Id to the Ego. Also the idea of the other of language, the symbols, the subconscious, the archetypes that we know only in the depths of dream or memory. I think of the other as beyond, and often elusive. I wrack my brains for poets who have written of such and for the moment come up empty, except perhaps for in Sandra Ridley's *Post-Apothecary* (Pedlar Press, 2011): the role of the dark in the book...the I, the she. "I thought I heard a girl's voice in the woods. I thought I heard a girl's voice in the woods." "Summon the body still moving at the edge of the road." and in her latest book "The Counting House (Book Thug, 2013) the darling is a kind of other, a doppelgänger.

I am drawn also to the realms of the dark, the duende as examined by Lorca in his 1933 essay, "Theory and Function of the Duende":

"The dark and quivering duende that I am talking about is a descendant of the merry daemon of Socrates, all marble and salt, who angrily scratched his master on the day he drank hemlock; a descendant also of Descartes' melancholy

daemon, small as a green almond, who, tired of lines and circles, went out along the canals to hear the drunken sailors sing." ¹ Federico Garcia Lorca, "Theory and Function of the Duende," in *Poetics of the New American Poetry*, (Grove Press, 1973) p. 92.

The tea I made an hour ago is clock cold. I have a tuna melt with sliced apples. I lied about the apples. Because it sounded good.

I'm listening to Erín Moure's talk with Stephen McLaughlin on [Jacket2's Into the Field Program](#).

I cannot overemphasize the pleasures of poetry podcasts. Hearing the poet read in her own words and talk about them is an inspiring experience. "Creak voice with bone/plough with a stone from the pyramids." Her voice is strong. She talks about translating a Romanian poet..."the grasses were trembling with a pale blue light..."

I reheat my tea while listening. "Can the hand ache for words, as the mouth does, for water?"

Erín mentions the dreaming one. Back to the other, the double, the doppelgänger. The interviewer asks about Elisa Sampedrin, one of several figures that Erín inhabits in her work. Elisa emerged in *Little Theatres* (House of Anansi Press, 2005) and has kept pestering Erín ever since.

I pull out E. Tracy Grinnell's *Helen : A Fugue* and come upon this epigraph from Euripedes' *Helen*: "A name can travel where a body can't" (Leslie Scalapino, E. Tracy Grinnell, BELLADONNA, 2008, the Elder Series, 1)

Elisa has her own bio, her own place. English is not her first language, which means she receives poetry differently; she often translates from a language she doesn't know into English. This leads to a conversation about Galician, a language Erín speaks and translates from. Translation is perhaps another way of inhabiting the other, of getting a source from outside.

In the [film about her book](#), *The Last Four Things* (Ahsahta Press, 2009), Kate Greenstreet says, "I was thinking about translation and the way that the underworld can be seen as the translation of the inner and vice versa."

From an early age, Erín enjoyed the playful aspects of language, especially those in nursery rhymes. She loved the sonorous play of "Ride a bay horse to Banbury Cross,"

had no idea what a bay horse was or where Banbury Cross was. Sound is to me the most important aspect of play in poetry. I too spent my childhood reading, listening to and reciting nursery rhymes, tongue twisters, odd little sayings.

When discussing the variety and volume of her work, Erin said, "I go where language takes me." Yes. Oh yes.

Stephen Brockwell's poems written in the voice of Karikura first appeared in the online precursor to *Maple Tree Literary Supplement, the Sentinel*, in 2006 and then in *The Real Made Up* (ECW Press, 2007) and most recently in *Complete Surprising Fragments of Improbable Books* (Mansfield Press, 2013). In an introduction to the latter, Stephen explains "Karikura has been for me a convincing poser Sherpa, guiding me through purposefully uncharted landscapes with which he only pretends to be familiar."

Karikura is a wry, common sense character who still maintains a certain degree of romanticism. The character allows for a different persona or voice in Stephen's work.

Karikura Gives Advice

I walked up to Karikura and asked,
 "Karikura, how can I write a poem
 that touches people's hearts?" Karikura said,
 "You cannot write a poem that touches people's hearts.
 People touch a poem with their fingers when
 they pick up a book. If it is not bad they
 might read it. If it is better, they might
 mumble one or two words to savour it.
 If it is good, maybe they will remember
 the days they first read it when they read it again.
 Perhaps they will recollect the taste
 of the apple they were eating that day,
 or they might remember
 the breath of the wind in their mothers' hair."

Stephen Brockwell, *The Real Made Up*

I have just returned from a fabulous reading by Phil Hall and Eduardo C. Corral at the Plan 99 Reading Series at the Manx Pub, where Phil mentioned Zbigniew Herbert and uncertain clarity. This makes me dig a little bit until I find references to Herbert's alter ego, Mr. Cogito, a kind of everyman who has to choose between good and evil. I think there is something of Mr. Cogito in Karikura.

[Mr. Cogito Meditates on Suffering](#)

The other can be sometimes similar to the speaker of the poem, an aspect of the speaker or her alter-ego.

I pull out my well-thumbed, dog-eared copy of Nathalie Stephens' *Je Nathanaël*, (BookThug, 2006) texts again to the other, becoming the other. Nathalie eventually becomes Nathanaël. Gender is fluid; genre is fluid. Erín continues to read poems in the background. I think I should always listen to poets reading their work as I'm going about my day. The lines move in and out; resonate.

"Every day I take your name into my mouth. I take it and give it away. I would like to inhabit it as you do. Know what it is to belong to no one. Not to exist. Or rather to exist infinitely. I tire of thinking the body differently of searching out the right word for what belongs neither to language nor to silence." Nathalie Stephens, *Je Nathanaël*.

A friend is making a birch bark canoe by herself. I imagine the scent. Is it something like cedar? At thirty, I entered a canoe for the first and only time. We paddled to the middle of the lake and floated there in the quiet. I was happy. At the same time, I was thinking about the water beneath me. To be tipped out and endlessly fall through the dark. The other. She is always there...the ghost. The presence of death. The light and the dark...a doubling.

In an essay entitled "Looking for Dragon Smoke," reproduced in *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Gary Geddes (Oxford University Press, 1996), Robert Bly talks about Lorca's concept of the duende:

"Duende involves a kind of elation when death is present in the room. It is associated with 'dark' sounds; and when a poet has duende inside him, he brushes past death with each step, and in that presence associates fast."

I have never felt this presence so keenly until my stay in ICU in November, 2009. I encountered several ghosts, one of whom was a looming dark figure I saw through gauze curtains. He held out his hand. He told me, "silence." I had a turning point. I rallied. I survived. But the dark is always there within my work. The other. An awareness of the proximity of death.

I return to Kroetsch. "Perhaps we tell a blurred story because the story is blurred." (p. 129, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*). A poet from a writing group tells me he looks for

clarity in a poem. I am excited about the possibilities of looking for clarity. I think about different possible aspects of a poem that can be clear or elusive: syntax, metaphor & imagery, form, diction, line breaks, punctuation, sound, meter...how can these various aspects be worked with to create clarity or ambiguity. [See "[Six Types of Clarity: Looking Beyond New Criticisms Ambiguities](#)" by D.H. Tracy in response to William Empson's "Seven Types of Ambiguity."]

Is part of the editing process knowing when to leave things clear or when to leave them murky? I think of Jerome Rothenberg's concept of a deep image:

"So there are really two things here, conceivable as two realities: 1) the empirical world of the naïve realists, etc (what Buber and the Hasidim call shell' or 'husk'), and 2) the hidden (floating) world, yet to be discovered or brought into being: the "kernel" or "sparks." The first world both hides and leads into the second, so as Buber says: "one cannot reach the kernel of the fruit except through the shell": i.e., the phenomenal world is to be read by us; the perceived image is the key to the buried image: and the deep image is at once husk and kernel, perception and vision, and the poem is the movement between them." Jerome Rothenberg, "Deep Image and Mode: An Exchange with Robert Creeley," in *Pre-faces and Other Writings*, New York, 1981, p. 57. as quoted in *Postmodern American Poetry, A Norton Anthology*, edited by Paul Hoover, W. W. Norton and Company, New York and London, 1994.

The concept of the deep image was later taken up by Robert Bly with a little help from Freud and Jung to highlight the associative powers of the mind. ["Deep Imagists: The Subconscious as Medium" Leslie Ullman]

In Grade Seven, when asked what a poem we were studying was about, I answered, "the sound of bells."

In the [eighth issue of 17 Seconds](#), Phil Hall reviews a review of Sue Goyette's book *Ocean* in *Maisonneuve Magazine* by Chad Campbell. Phil Hall says, "I recently overheard someone in a line-up telling his friend authoritatively what a dreadful poet Neruda was, what an embarrassment, how no one who is in their right mind reads old Pablo now. The *right mind* is the problem."

The Qwerty Institute, (annual report) by Angela Szczepaniak is, according to the back of the book blurb, "a collection of visual fictions." It is part of BookThug's Department of Narrative Studies, which I suppose means that it is not poetry, but I place it here because it is full of imaginative play and takes on the world of typography in a new and

innovative way. Letters are asked questions about life on Mars; there are chance encounters with a discarded toupée, children's birthday parties, a wondrous section entitled "the Qwerty Institute of Cosmetic Typographical Enhancement," typeface romances, the Maltese Aitch, a delightful riff on the Maltese Falcon: "Of all the Alphabetic Detective Agencies in the world, she had to strike into mine..." The work is witty, fanciful, corny and full of fun.

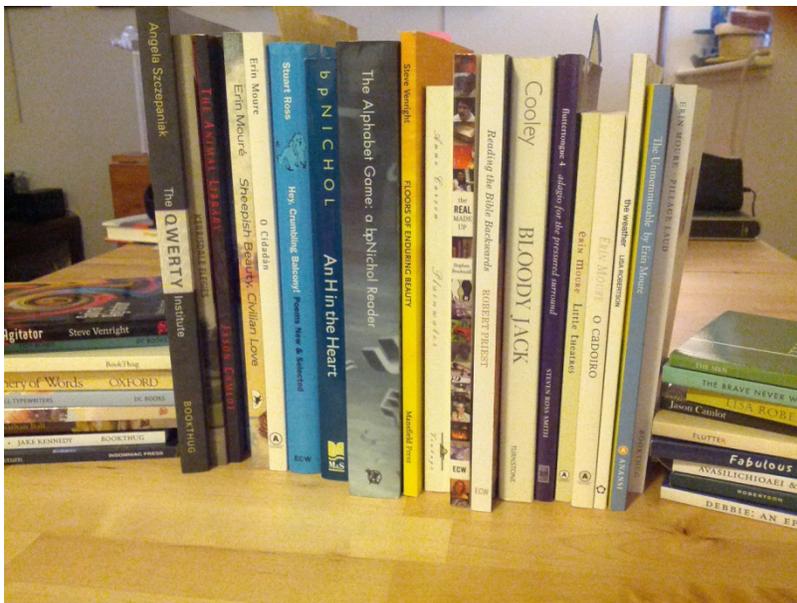
I flip to my copy of *The House That Jack Built, the Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer* (University Press of New England, 2000). Jack also talks about the other, in this case as a source of poetry with poets being just the ones dictated to. Perhaps the dictators are Martian or some deep id core within ourselves. I think this coincides nicely with Rothenberg's deep image concept. It's like when something catches your attention on the edge of sight. You look at it with your peripheral vision. It's a blur. There's something intriguing about the blur. You turn your head to meet it dead on and it's gone. My analytical mind is a hard task master but very dumb when it comes to metaphor and imagery. Nor can it get off on sound the way the creative side of my brain can.

Jack talks of Robin Blaser's poem suite, "The Moth Poem." I take a break to go over to PennSound and listen to [Robin's poem in his voice](#).

Jack said that when he heard Robin read "The Moth Poem," moths came into the room. What comes to a poem from the outside...I move back to my shelves, pull out *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser* (University of California Press, 2006) and read:

"[...]I'm haunted by a sense of the invisibility of everything that comes in to me...I believe there is a reality, which, given the leisure to live for it, is neither conceptual and imageless, but it is a kind of desire which leads me to write of that other, outside world...It is, I think, the purest storytelling to try to catch that light--and the difficulty of it, the loss of it is personal. ... To hold the image within the line by sound and heat is to have caught something that passed out there." (p.3)

Part of the act of playing, it seems to me, as opposed to arranging chairs in a room, is to be very attuned to the world, to serendipity. That's when duende occurs. How to somehow contain that duende without extinguishing it is another matter.



The pigeons are making their early morning circuit in the skies surrounding my apartment building. I've spent part of my time this morning stacking the books that I'm studying for this talk, moving them from the red couch to the dining room table. Thinking about books as sculptures. Books are hardy, durable, tangible and solid objects and contain but don't contain words, which

fly into the light, create heat, thought and spark the imagination. How does a poem balance both structure and imagination, one being immutable and the other ever changing?

In a recent issue of *Numéro Cinq* magazine, an online publication that is "a warm place on the cruel web," Robert Vivian offers us "[dervish essays](#):"

"They often whirl and spin by anaphora and other forms of repetition; They seem impatient with subjects per se as they assume a oneness with everything they touch upon; The prose energy is ramped up to poetry energy and they are breathless to communicate an essence; They court nonsensicality and are driven by a deep inward music; [...] they seem to want to embrace everything at once and are almost frantic to do so[...]"

This idea of being driven by a deep inward music is part of the idea of play and the other and the duende. It is the notion of being driven. Also the idea of courting nonsensicality is part of play. To spark the imagination it is often necessary to court nonsensicality, to let oneself be driven by the winds of whimsy. This attitude is contrary to the idea of clarity to me. I have trouble reconciling the two.

I read another manifestation of the other in a conversation between the late poet Leslie Scalapino and E. Tracy Grinnell. Tracy talks about ecstasy "--ekstasis---literally the state of standing outside oneself, or beside oneself." Lesley talks about "the two sides of the brain being at war," which, "become a form of scrutiny and war in the sense that one cannot be only 'inside one'--one is not one ever." (BELLADONNA 1-8, p. 56). The doubling once more, the ghost and the doppelgänger.

When I was in hospital in 2009, my short term memory was erased as part of a phenomenon known as ICU psychosis. I had to learn about what happened to me from stories told by Charles, my husband. To this day, when he describes the woman who lay in the big ICU bed, with wires attached and a tube down the throat, it sounds like he is describing another person. I can see her, lying there. I have left her behind. In some ways I have become two people: the me who is living now and perfectly healthy, and the stranger who lay dying on a hospital bed in ICU...The other, the ghost, the dopplegänger.

In September I took a Tree Reading Series workshop with Jenny Sampirisi on [hybrid texts](#). Jenny talked about works that do not fit into a specific genre. She gave us an exercise where we had to blend bits of outside sources: quotes and words from books with answers to questions she asked us. Describe your voice; explain what poetry is about without naming it; write three lines describing a figure we call a hybrid; describe the art in the room as if it is a creature [we were in the SAW Gallery in Ottawa].

The resulting work was full of compelling and unique imagery. Somehow all the pieces read had an interesting emotional resonance and repeated refrains that were quite unexpected. One of the reasons for the exercise was to help trick the subconscious into coming to the surface. This falls in line with the idea of the deep image. Such work, which workshop participants found quite different from their normal poetry, would likely not have come from trying to write with a specific idea in mind ahead of time.

Jenny talked about the creature, a hybrid, something "torn between bodies, languages, states of being, existence and non-existence." She cited Becket's *The Unnameable* and talked about how the creature can't be named, reminding me once more of the Kroetsch citation, "the encounter with the double who can be seen but not imagined." There is something un about the other. It is defined often by what it is not.

It is often portrayed in a poem as the distance between speaker of the poem and the body of the speaker, this othering feeling: "suppose I've a body a skeleton sexed/a touch away from intimate words and self-portrait." Nicole Brossard, *Museum of Bone and Water* (House of Anansi, 1999)

In *The Red Book* psychologist Carl Jung talks about the importance of returning to a state of play, a return to the unconscious playfulness and imagination one experienced in childhood. He spends time on the beach, making structures out of sand and stone.

How does an adult poet return to such a state of play? Poet, editor and publisher Stuart Ross offers poetry boot camps, workshops where he gives poets exercises to do that help return to this playful state. He held a boot camp in my living room a number of years ago. He asked us to close our eyes and then walked around the room crumpling up a sheet of paper. He asked us to describe the sound afterwards. He had us write lines in between another poet's lines of a poem. We wrote centos from lines from other poets. In the end, the lively and fun exercises produced several poems.

As I revise these pages, I am distracted by the wind's effect on the light, which is constantly changing and moving the shadows around. I try to take a photo of the silver in the sky, but it refuses to be captured.

"To help us seek the duende there is neither map nor discipline. All one knows is that it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, that it rejects all the sweet geometry one has learned, that it breaks with all styles, that it compels Goya, master of greys, silvers and of those pinks in the best English paintings to paint with his knees and with his fists horrible bitumen blacks; or that it leaves Mossen Cinto Verdaguer naked in the cold air of the Pyrenees; or that it takes Jorge Manrique to wait for death in the wilderness of Ocana; or that it dresses the delicate body of Rimbaud in an acrobat's green suit; or that it puts the eyes of a dead fish on Count Lautréamont in the early morning Boulevard." Lorca, *Theory and Function of the Duende*, pp 93-94

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