

Breaking the Narrative to Open Up the Poem

further notes on poetics following:

[Ottawater.com Issue Five, poetics statement](#)

[Seventeen Seconds, Ninth Issue: An Essay about Writing A Talk about Poetry or Thoughts on Play, the Other and Duende](#)

[Notes on the Sad Phoenician's Other Woman: Experiencing Robert Kroetsch's Poetry in a Fever](#)

Whenever I write narrative poetry, it feels like a jail, hemming me in with limits of fact, chronological order, semantic, surface meaning being foremost. When I write to tell a story, I write poorly. This is clearly a lack of skill on my part; however, when I am not trying to force myself into story mode, I often come up with more interesting, less linear, less cliché results.

Here are a few notions about my current poetics with notes from others...especially from the book "Side/Lines: a new Canadian poetics" edited by rob mclennan (Insomniac Press, 2002).

1. I would like to find a way to evoke associations in the reader.

I am drawn to surrealism, to collage, to the type of juxtaposition that comes from dreams, makes no literal sense but makes other inarticulatable senses: sense of the body, sense of the heart, sense of neurons firing deeply in the brain, limbic, caveman...

I am attempting to reach the ache that I feel, that has nothing to do with surface, but goes deeper. I believe in the power of the symbol and the archetype to reach the realm of the subconscious. I don't believe that poems that prefer surface meaning can do that. At least not for me. And I realize that critics tend to believe a poem should focus on surface meaning while including other techniques, such as imagery, sound play etc, but I don't always accept that. When asked what a poem was about in Grade 7, I answered, "the sound of bells."

I have attempted to evoke such associations with works, such as "Sessions from the Dreamhouse Aria," a long tampered with/cut up poem in 12 parts that works with the

colour white & the imagery of winter. It doesn't have a traditional narrative, a story with a beginning, middle and end. [Issue 3 of Seventeen Seconds includes an excerpt.](#)

I read from Sessions a number of years ago. One audience member came up to me afterwards and told me that the work made him start writing as he was listening to it. That was, to me, the highest possible compliment the work could have received. It did what I was trying to do, that is to evoke associations in the reader or listener and lead them to create something of their own. I feel that a poem where clarity of semantic meaning is the main goal is a closed form. It doesn't leave space for the imagination, which is my ultimate goal.

In her piece "Into the Ocean" in Side/Lines, Natalee Caple talks about the power of nonsense in poetry. "There is a strong correlation between the brain's response to nonsense and the final product of consciousness. Turing tests attempting to stimulate the human capacity to respond to unexpected or unintelligible information...Nonsense stimulates the brain to make sense."

The idea of unexpected or unintelligible information resonates for me. "The Heart has its Reasons, which Reason cannot understand," says Pascal. I think poetry cannot be ruled by reason, by logic. Often I don't know why I've insisted on a particular word or phrase or image or sound construction. If I try to figure it out, it ruins the poem. I can recognize that something's buzzing. And sometimes that has to be enough. I leave it to readers, who often find resonances in my work that I don't necessarily see. To control everything in a poem is to reduce its effect on the reader, I think.

2. I don't want to seem like I have all the answers. Because I don't.

I despise the idea of a poet as some kind of prophet. I've never bought into that and I certainly don't see myself that way. Death of the author, yeah, let's murder that motherfucker. Paradox: it's still the author. How do we deal with that.

One of these days I'll revisit French structuralism etc. I barely skimmed the surface of it when I was studying French literature, linguistics and translation. In the meantime, I'm stumbling along and I don't want my poetry or anything else I do to give the impression that I'm not stumbling. The difficulty is that if it's too stumbly, it will be unreadable. Working with that tension is part of the fun. Fred Wah has talked about the

creation of poetry being a kind of drunken tai chi. That's a great analogy. "Music at the Heart of Thinking" (Red Deer College Press, 1987): "Wait for the mind to stop for the writing to go ahead into the rush or the hand to hold the head's waiting..."

In an earlier paragraph on her essay in *Side/Lines*, Natalee Caplee writes "Poetry should disrupt the senses. It should be difficult to read a poem. It is easy to read advertising. It is easy to read propaganda. It should require different parts of your brain. to listen to, and to read poetry..."

I agree with this. David McGimpsey, in his essay, complains about the Forest Gumpization of poetry: "[...]the American (and by American I also mean Canadian) response to poetry is fairly uniform: the good people can't stand it. Now I have no illusions about or desire to reach these nay-sayers. [...]when did their Forrest Gump-loving asses mean anything to poets? [...]Why is it that nobody ever demands there be a people's trigonometry?"

My own fascination with poetry is its complexity, the way it can render simple things but do so in some complex way I don't necessarily understand with the analytical part of my brain, but the creative part gets it. "The allowance to say complex things, without any apology to the dumb-down demands of conventional media and commercial fiction is a rare gift in today's world." David McGimpsey.

3. I want to recreate the feelings I have from looking at abstract art and listening to jazz in poetry.

For some time now I have been trying to write a long poem called *ColourField* that is a response to abstract art, especially the work of Jack Bush and the Group of Eleven, and Mark Rothko, Québec's Automatistes, etc. What I get from these works is pure feeling. Nothing is imposed on me. How do I recreate that in poetry? Language is constraining in ways that music and art are not.

I like Jack Spicer's idea that the poet is mastered by words, rather than the other way around. The idea of being the scribe, the person that poetry is dictated to from some unearthly place, from Mars. "Instead of becoming a master of words, the poet is mastered by words, which turn mysteriously against those who use them." "The House

That Jack Built, The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer” (Weslayan University Press, 1998).

4. I want to write for kindred misfits.

And therefore I want to write misfit poems. Poems where the language isn’t perfect. Ambiguous poems. Awkward poems. Inappropriate poems. Poems that make me uncomfortable reading them. If you’d been to either of my readings in September (Venus Envy, Tree Reading Series), you would have heard embarrassing poems about my sex life, for example. Afterward members of the audience came up to me to thank me for saying things that normally aren’t said. These poems are more confessional than I normally write. They are also more narrative. Again, a struggle.

Part of this is also to write about alternatives to the white picket fence life where success means having a house, a car, matching dinnerware etc.

[A poem is not meant to be a pretty thing](#) – Nathalie Stephens (Nathanaël) in Side/Lines

5. I want my writing to be part of a continuum, a continued conversation with art, music, literature and other creative acts.

So I include references to such in my work. This means that readers may have to look up a few things if they wish to explore.

Again, it’s part of opening up the work rather than closing it. To me, every creative act is part of an ongoing conversation that stretches from the beginning of time to the end of time. Through art we achieve immortality. I include others in my writing for this reason.

Duende: to feel the presence of death at all times. To create knowing this presence is there. To take risks because of it. I’ve written a lot about this in the past. See my [Factory Reading Series talk published in Seventeen Seconds from the 9th issue](#).

I don’t believe that a poem is this isolated thing. Jack Spicer talks about this in a letter to Robin Blaser (My Vocabulary Did This To Me): “Things fit together. We knew that—it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a

consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone."

For Jack

Tell everyone to have guts
Do it yourself
Have guts until guts
Come through the margins
Clear and pure
Like love is.
The word changes
Grows obscure
Like someone
In the coldness of the scarey night air
Says—
Dad
I want your voice.

Jack Spicer, "Admonitions" (1957), republished in "my vocabulary did this to me (the Collected Poems of Jack Spicer)" (Weslayan University Press, 2008).

Conclusion

Some of the poets who opened my eyes to the type of writing that resonates for me, that includes fragments, that works against narrative, that recognizes the failure of language, that includes references to art, the classics, the body are Anne Carson, Sandra Ridley, Nathalie Stephens (Nathanaël), Robert Kroetsch, rob mclennan, Dennis Cooley, Oana Avasilichioaei, Christine McNair...for starters...).

Thanks

I'd like to thank my current workshop group: rob, Dawn, Rosemarie, Frances, Barbara and Claire for inciting this piece with their interesting questions, answers, thoughts during our workshop. The most important thing for any exploration of art to take place, in my opinion, is to question.