This Is Just to Say: Toward a Poetics of Discovery

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About the Work:

The process of poetic composition shares properties of complex systems, and of endeavors in other arts and domains, including science and technology. Through a Poetics of Discovery, we can understand poetic composition as an organizational process that encourages us to suspend or transcend habitual pathways to a prematurely narrowed range of outcomes. A brief discussion through poetics and systems principles presents tools, strategies, and approaches to compositional challenges; these can be extended to numerous areas of inquiry and enterprise.

Keywords: poetry, poetics, design, composition, art, systems, problem-solving, complexity, process, organizational process, strategy, embodied knowledge

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that in poetry, as in life, "so much depends"[1] upon our biases. Conscious and unconscious choices shape the ways we organize ourselves and our endeavors. One of my favorite essays on poetry explores how bias functions in the writing process; specifically, the biases posed by our intentions to arrive at desired outcomes. This type of bias occurs in many of our daily actions, and limits the scope of our options.

In his 1939 essay "The Figure a Poem Makes,"[2] poet Robert Frost urges us to recognize the paradoxical relationship between intention and receptivity, and to learn ways to navigate that relationship. He implores us to use systems principles: to listen to our material, cultivate attentiveness, and incorporate observations of our unfolding work into our ongoing process of making. He speaks in the context and terminology of poetry, yet he addresses challenges common to much of human enterprise.[3] He argues explicitly for awareness of the ruse of agenda, the nurturing of observational skills, familiarity with structural convention, and honing one's ability to leap between disparate contexts. He argues implicitly for deliberate means of staying present in process, to preclude mannered constructions and predictable results. When he says, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader," he makes a compelling case for the rewards of such practices. In short, that we can, and should, organize our process of writing—our thinking and actions—to foster delight, surprise, and wisdom, even if merely "a momentary stay against confusion."

Banish Air from Air

Frost tells us much about *why* we should disrupt our intentions, but far less about *how*. The only direct instructions he gives are to proceed in small increments (to work line by line), and to listen to our data (material) and our developing creation as we facilitate its arrival as the figure it (the poem) makes. Let's examine some aspects of the *how*.

What do we consider when organizing a creative process, such as the process of composition? Can we allow flexible pathways from impulse to outcome? What helps us avoid prematurely narrowing our options for discovery?

Navigating intention and receptivity is crucial to the creation of art, as well as the creation of technology, agreements between institutions, and many kinds of projects, activities, and social or personal undertakings. Poetry provides an especially sharp lens for examining this navigation. As an art with easily observed formal constraints, poetry has inherent organizational advantages, while it elicits awareness of what each poet must develop on their own in order to make poems that engage and surprise themselves and their readers.

Whether as learned bard or gifted child

the process of writing poetry, like other types of design and composition, involves a lot of organizational work and problem-solving. The poet surfaces connections; considers patterns, assemblages, and transitions; evaluates taxonomical consistency; and assesses each word's possible nuances and echoes. All this, while remaining open to sensory detail, lyricism, and

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[1] "So much depends" is the first line of William Carlos Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," from *The Collected Poems: Volume I 1909-1939* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991), which also contains the poem "This Is Just to Say," whose title is used in the title of this essay.

[2] Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," from *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1939).

[3] Within modern Euro-centric cultures. Less linear modalities can be found in other cultures and/or eras.

musicality. The work proceeds on a fluctuating mix of instinct, conscious decision-making, persistence, and luck.

From a systems perspective, poems themselves comprise concrete characteristics, abstractions, interdependencies, discrete elements, and emergent effects. The poet moves frequently, if not always fluidly, between these categories while making decisions that are the iterative process of composition. Throughout, they listen for pleasing fit and fruitful deviation; they weigh meanings and aesthetic sympathies and curious, nonlinear associations.

Guides for this complex process can be found within artistic practice in general, and deep within language itself.

From the bottom of a pool, fixed stars

can govern, or assist, compositional choices. That is, if a poet proceeds with a set of external rules or guide rails, they might arrive at discoveries outside of their habits' predictable products. Poetry's formal constraints (rhyme, meter, fixed forms like the sonnet) are built-in guide rails that encourage and sustain an exploratory mode. These pattern interrupters and systems tools are part of what we typically call "craft." They tend to derail habitual preferences throughout the compositional process, and help the poet suspend or let go of desired outcomes (a breed of "agenda"), such as a particular emotional effect, metaphorical construction, argument, revelation, or narrative closure. Of equal importance, the tools of craft act like brakes, to slow a rush into well-known routes, and invite a listening, observational mode that fosters receptivity to new information.

Poets may select from the rules of language, as well as from sound patterns, and fixed or received poetic forms (villanelle, ghazal, blank verse, etc.). They can listen for the wisdom and body-knowledge inherent in physical words and rhythmic modulations (prosodic, melodic, visual, tonal, etc.). They might even experiment outside of their aesthetic preferences. I often explore via syllabics and fixed forms, which press me to find phrases I would not have considered otherwise; unexpected meanings and linkages then open to understandings, pathways, and landing places I could not have foreseen from the confines of my initial intention. Experimentation with pairings reveals especially powerful effects, such as what arises from either mismatch or harmony. A well-known example of the former is Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," in which divergence between rhythmic structure (light-hearted waltz) and narrative (household violence) intensifies the narrative and creates tonal complexity.

Sail through this to that

and sometimes the course will be swift. I regularly encounter obstacles, deep dives that take me elsewhere, a perplexing stuck-ness, or all of the above—lasting anywhere from hours to years. Knowing something about where we are assists in finding an appropriate organizing strategy, tool, or principle. The area of concern indicates, although not always directly, what is most needed. In my experience, these fall into a few loose categories.[4]

Perhaps I need a framework or internal structure, like a skeleton upon which to build (sestina, anyone?). Maybe a container is required: an outer shell or exoskeleton, within which to build (a thematic or occasional prompt?). I might want a conduit for re-entry into a poem. In that case, a shift in orientation (change of tense, person, setting, or rhetorical category) allows me

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[4] I've cast these in organizational terms and with a retrospective, rather than prescriptive, lens.

to find a new route into the work-in-progress. Lastly, I might seek a catalyst to help a nascent poem crystalize or coalesce.

I see the challenge of crystallization or coalescence as indicating the need for an organizing principle. One could be within easy reach, like an extended metaphor (conceit), a fixed poetic form, a rhetorical category or other mode (persona, list, epistolary, elegy, etc.), or any combination of these. Another tactic is simply to borrow what is needed, using another writer's poem as a model, or even finding a model from an entirely different domain. The model acts as a scaffold, from which to learn and gain momentum, after which point the poet may retain, revise, or disengage the model.

There is redundancy, overlap, and flexibility between these resources. A fixed poetic form can function as an internal framework, an external container, and/or a means of staying in discovery mode. The pattern interrupters provided by craft (lineation, rhyme scheme, figurative devices) also serve as catalysts. Added to the larger scope of what enters the process of poetry—especially sensory imagination—we have considerable means to discover the figure a poem makes. However we arrive, the poem, like an organism, is itself an organization, one that reflects the patterns and processes within it.

Topography displays no favorites

In life, as in poetry, we can start anywhere to expand possibilities. Ply our favorite tools in new ways, on new materials. Experiment within and outside of our strengths and preferences (and scan our body of work to surface those strengths and preferences). Give ourselves assignments, from teachers present, past, or imagined, and from varied disciplines.

Working in a mode of discovery is something for which we've likely had little instruction, mentoring, or even permission. But we have tools, strategies, processes, and models. In the art of poetry, as in most kinds of learning, our progress will be cyclical and dynamic. We're all set, until we're not. Yet each time we land in the not-set, unsettled, unsettling places, we are different. Our work is different. It takes up from the previous arc of learning and making. It unfolds by surprise, bringing us and the world along with it.

Acknowledgements

References

"Banish Air from Air" is the first line of Emily Dickinson's poem "Banish Air from Air (963)" from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

"Whether as learned bard or gifted child" is line 3 of Robert Graves' poem "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" from *The Complete Poems* (Penguin Classic, 2003).

"From the bottom of a pool, fixed stars" is the penultimate line of Sylvia Plath's poem "Words" from *Collected Poems* (HarperCollins 2018).

"Sail through this to that" is the final line of Lucille Clifton's poem "Blessing the Boats" from
  Quilting: Poems 1987-1990 (Boa Editions, 2001).

"Topography displays no favorites" is from the penultimate line of Elizabeth Bishop's poem
  "The Map" from *The Complete Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).