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Poetry Forms

December 15, 2015

Making Poetry of Sense: Communication, Learning, and Intelligence as Arts

This past summer, I was lucky enough to land two jobs: one was assisting at O Cinema, and the other was teaching literacy skills at a learning center for young students. I was also without a working laptop. This, on top of having to handwrite notes for each instruction session, meant that I would have to develop a much closer relationship to handwriting on paper. It also meant time for reflection.

While manning the usually empty lobby of O Cinema’s Miami Shores venue, I found that my uncomfortable wood stool was at such an uncomfortable height and angle (the lobby was on an upward slope) from the countertop, it made the already awkward task of using a pencil basically impossible. It was a familiar tension. I’d met it years earlier in that same wrist, while I was studying jazz guitar.

At some point in my music studies, I found that I was unable to perform a satisfying tremolo (the fast, fluttery repetition of a single note) with the technique I’d started out with. I had to relearn how to position my right hand and how to hold the plectrum. The loss (or rearrangement) of muscle memory meant sacrificing the majority of my comfortable repertoire—the hard break before resetting a bone.

“In Western education the habit of immobilizing the wrist by setting it down while writing has crept in, and then directing the pen with movements of the ten or so
finger-joints involved. I would never be able to master the stroke in this manner and I have yet to see someone who could.” - Gerrit Noordzij, The Stroke

When I taught guitar, technique was a huge part of what I taught students. It is the lifespring of tone; without the body interacting with an instrument, there is no music.

And there on the countertop in front of me was my moleskine, blank. No music. I couldn’t reproduce the shapes I saw in my head. It occurred to me then that someone somewhere has decided we should ignore the “tone” of the written letter, or that its role is insignificant. How terrible and sad.

“It is no exaggeration to say that the school teacher only allows bad handwriting, because he or she regards good handwriting as ‘drawn’ instead of ‘written.’ The differentiation protects the point of view. Without it the school teacher would have to test his exemplars against good writing, and this confrontation would be fatal. Now he can serenely face good handwriting, because that belongs to a different subject on the other side of the partition.” - Gerrit Noordzij, The Stroke

It’s important to emphasize that there were certainly shapes I wanted to see, and that they were there in my head. At the learning center, we taught a method for reading comprehension that focused heavily on visualization. Embarrassingly, before becoming trained and practiced in this skill, I had not been using my imagination to visualize very much at all. The ability probably died away as an unsustainable vestige once I was required to read much more than my schedule could realistically allow. I could read fast, but it also meant my mind’s eye was fast shut.

The practice was arduous and slow, but once that bone reset, my love of reading (and probably reading comprehension, too) grew dramatically. My love of imagination, too, and of all
the things it could summon from nothing. A similar improvement in my penmanship after
applying techniques I learned from guitar got me eager to learn what other bones bear breaking.
At present, my concern is with the way I’ve learned to categorize poetry and the arts.

The summer before that, I tried to make a video game.

It was a basic text-based Java game, like the ones I used to play before computers had
desktops; but it turns out that even those were inventions of outstanding complexity. The task
became impossible once I wanted to incorporate sound/pitch into the gameplay.

It’s a funny thing to learn a programming language with the intention of creating a text
parser; it means using one language to speak another. Figuring out how to make a machine
unpack the meaning of a sentence is the task of computational linguistics, and learning about it
means learning about Noam Chomsky.

I’ll leave his monolith unturned except to say that he’s responsible for the theory of
Universal Grammar. It proposes that all grammars share a set of innate common properties called
substantive universals, and Leonard Bernstein makes use of this principle in his Norton Lectures
at Harvard when he tries to define music as a language with its own grammar.

The lectures are illuminating and beautifully performed, but I am convinced that the
premise is unsound. It requires that music have developed outside of spoken language, which is
not the case at all—music is a fundamental property of language, and they are in constant
conversation. See jazz trumpeters who mime speech with plungers, or Frank Zappa’s role in the
proliferation of “Valley Speak.”

In fact, it’s unclear whether music or speech came first. The music of speech is very
literally its tone, in the same way that lettering gives tone to text. The tonal languages are many,
but even in Western speech, we derive huge quantities of information from the melody of a spoken phrase.

As it turns out, generations of musical programmers have iteratively devised a scheme for understanding that information: music theory. Weirdly, though, this scheme has been almost exclusively associated with art (music) and only very rarely with communication (speech). It is no exaggeration to say that so much tonal information is slipping unparsed by our conscious minds—which could explain why nobody seems to be talking about it.

**WHITHER POETRY?**

It is in poetry where these technologies of music, space, time, and body most obviously collide and collude and converge and converse. The mess becomes more obvious with avant-garde and postmodern poetry, where traditional parameters are replaced with whatever isn’t, and attempts to define or categorize are aggressively challenged. It happens, then, that in the education of poetry, we are faced with the same problem as the school teacher observing handwriting; how can we be responsible for all the things it involves? At what point does it become drawing? Or song? And how equipped are we to move between these partitions?

So, the task becomes to define how we parse poetry. Ezra Pound, one of the great poetic programmers, proposes a useful paradigm with his three kinds of poetry: melopoeia (music and its emotional effects), phanopoeia (image), and logopoeia (language). He defines these in terms of translation—only phanopoeia translates easily between poetries of different languages.

Without scrutiny, this does the job of naming the things we receive upon unpacking a poem. But what about the translation of a concrete poem? Does its shape bear translation? Does the *paper*? Complexities of medium elude this paradigm. This may be reflective of a broader
scheme, which sees the information inside the poem as more important than the shape of its artifact—the written word as more important than the handwriting (or the hand writing).

“The medium is the message” is a handy phrase coined by communications theorist Marshall McLuhan, and it directs us to see the packaging/shape of a message as containing non-negligible amounts of information and communicative potential. If poetry is a message, what is its medium? What is the handwriting of poetry, and what does it communicate? What bones must we break?

**WHENCE POETRY?**

In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, developmental psychologist Howard Gardner proposes a set of modalities or intelligences, of which we all possess some combination, with eight requirements for each: they must be isolated in the brain, have a place in evolutionary history, contain core operations, show developmental progression, have savants, be supported by statistical data, and have potential for encoding.

The intelligences he outlines: musical -rhythmic, -harmonic; visual-spatial; verbal-linguistic; logical-mathematical; bodily-kinesthetic; interpersonal and intrapersonal; and naturalistic. If we tilt the definition of “intelligence” to coincide more closely with “literacy,” then I propose that this set can be modified to identify the most fundamental channels for the encoding/decoding of human messages. For our purposes, we don’t need to be as stringent with the requirements, but we must make the assumption that emotional information—or information for which we do not have an easy equivalent in language—can still fit working models of communication. I further propose that poetry—and any art—and any communication—can be most effectively classified by measuring the relationships between these protocols.
**Harmonic:** The production of human speech requires manipulation of sound, which we perceive as noise and pitch. I make the distinction between this and rhythm for two reasons: first, it is possible to be harmonically gifted and rhythmically inept; second, I believe the nature of rhythm is such that it exists outside of sound or space, but rather as the effect of our perception of mathematical relationships.

“The word consists of forms, white and black, which constitute a rhythmic unit. If the rhythm is weak, the word is poorly formed; if the rhythm is absent, there is no word, even if the letters are scattered across the paper in the proper sequence.

In everyday spoken language rhythm means regularity in intervals of time. The intervals are not really equal in size and the same in form, but equal in value, equivalent. Rhythm in writing is not a temporal structure but a spatial matter—the intervals have length, but also breadth.” - Gerrit Noordzij, *The Stroke*

**Chromatic:** The properties of color (hue, saturation, shade) and the contrasts between them are what allow us to see the shapes of things. Most of one’s visual perception is derived from this, and most of what we perceive is done visually—that maybe explains why discussion of this literacy can become a gaping blind spot.

**Linguistic:** I would define this literacy as the act of conceptual tagging—the active linking (grammar) of structures in the mind to each other and meaning. For instance, linking the shapes in the word “cat” to the three phonemes in the word “cat” to the idea of the word “cat” to the idea of a cat is a linguistic process.

**Mathematical:** This mode of encoding is concerned with the rational (numerical) relationships between structures, and deals with the perception of patterns, rhythms, and textures.
The mathematical literacy has been superficially addressed in aesthetic philosophy (golden ratio, fibonacci sequence, truth as beauty via processing fluency), and plays a larger role in music of the 20th century, but feels like an especially taboo partition to cross from the arts.

**Kinesthetic:** For all the attention artful human motion gets from academic institutions, there is little said about movement in relation to meaning except in the context of sales, acting, or dance. Still, the simple act of reading this line of text requires movement of the eye and a particular posture, so I don’t believe the activation of kinesthetic literacy to be negligible—reading from a page, for instance, uses the body in a different way than projected light on a wall. Additionally, the production of certain phonemes over others is an athletic endeavor on a much smaller scale, as is tapping your foot to music.

I would append an **olfactory** literacy, and encourage that the field be explored by outsiders with scented markers. This and **touch**, however, involve development less clearly, so I would, for now, safely house them in the literacy of the body.

**THE WHOLE PICTURE**

If we take these protocols as fundamental and indivisible, we can start to see how the decoding of even a very basic message or artifact can involve many literacies—and that we decode many messages simultaneously. Although this model seeks to simplify the ways we partition human expression, it does encourage an unwieldy kind of holistic analysis. Surely, we must prioritize one literacy over another in a given instance; can’t we agree that the handwriting less important than the word?

*Oh, my luve’s like a red, red rose* is not nearly as important as its handwriting if it’s scrawled in blood across a ceiling. If you can forgive the extreme example, I mean to illustrate
that only the literacies themselves are indivisible; in the context of a more complete structure, they interact in ways that inform each other and create a larger, heterogeneous meaning—regardless of how salient or dominant any one protocol appears.

I first learned about gestalt psychology in my work teaching literacy skills. A common deficiency in comprehension is an inability to widen one’s scope of perception/memory to hold a larger structure; a single sentence can change the meaning of a paragraph, but if one’s scope of perception is too narrow to include the relationship between the sentence and paragraph, then the larger meaning might be lost, or at least inaccurate.

Applied to this model, narrowness pertains to low literacy in any or many of the fundamental protocols; an inability to read a paper’s handwriting, for instance, brutally punishes the resolution of its gestalt. An inability to measure the harmonic contours used to read that paper punishes it similarly—and although I have rarely seen that deficiency addressed directly, a reliable tell that a student is not picturing what they are reading is that they speak it in a rhythmically unnatural monotone—they are too focused on other literacies to see the whole picture.

“You can’t know anything more about any single poem of mine by knowing me than you can know by reading the poem. But you can know something more from hearing my voice. If you’ve only ever seen the poems on the page, and then you hear me read one, that’ll open up something. I never thought Allen Ginsberg was a very good poet until I heard him read. His poems looked messy, sloppy—I was coming up in a tradition when still things looked tighter—and I wanted to change and be new as well, but of course, I thought, ‘well, this guy is so wordy, there are so many words.’ And then I heard
Allen read. And then I suddenly recognized; this is the bard. This is the great breath—voice—lifted.” - Ted Berrigan, from the film *Poetry in Motion*

In dealing with larger structures that involve multiple literacies—even just a written word—it might help to consider them as *marks*. I borrow this term from the field of visual art, which seems comfortable teaching the idea that a single brush stroke—or mark—can communicate a lot of information. I propose that marks, or the forms we perceive as gestalt, can vary in resolution depending on the degree of literacies activated. This allows us to look at curators and sample-based artists as communicators as well—with marks (completed works of art, or segments from those works) of very high resolution.

**WAIT, SO—WHITHER POETRY?**

Were this the introduction to a larger work, I could envision it in three parts; the first would be concerned with exploring each literacy in greater detail; the second with the application of gestalt psychology to the combination of literacies, marks, and traditions; and the third with analysis of existing liminal works toward the end of dissolving unnecessary partitions between literacies. Because it is not, I will end with a link to a TED Talk by composer Mark Applebaum.

[Mark Applebaum: The mad scientist of music](https://www.ted.com/talks/mark_applebaum_the_mad_scientist_of_music)
STILL LIFE WITH SAND

green glass upright shines
out the sands of seashores un
-derfooted—o grass
or
pine needles? dk blacky stringy things

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-alias and sandals and chancletas and sneakers and

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The author of this encourages you to calibrate your using the lines of below as a guide, which optimize reader perspective and:

Trump says

drain the swamp

Miami says

everybody wade

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some words can ape a monk
trick thousands of monk eyes into
innocently desecrating 140 chambers

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MY MOM asks if I should take a cooking class?
I say —MAYBE —curious you should say so
she says FELIPE is —working at a kitchen
—en un hotel de *alta categoria*

and I ask ¿what does that mean?
and she says ¿*high class*?
and I ask ¿do you mean *high money*?
and she says ¿what’s the difference?

I say ¡the difference between class and money
is the difference between CLINTON and TRUMP!

she says —but neither of them has too much class
—and both of them has too much money :p

I WONDER whether glibness runs like ink or hunger or slow cut/gut through the FAMILY like a nail quick
friends,
the new president has demanded
loyalty— like all others who demand
loyalty— but do not be terrified
or inspired to negotiate:

The U.S. Flag code states
that, “the flag, when it is in
such condition that it is no
longer a fitting emblem
for display, should be destroyed
in a dignified way, preferably

burning.”
Process Note

In two words, I would call my approach to writing poetry “mindful dissociation.” To engage with my creativity, or to do the emotional work of processing my inner material, or to sustain interest in repetition for long enough to practice skill, involves distancing myself from reality. Sometimes I find treasures to bring back with me, but it’s always hidden deep in mountains of psychic clutter, and always costly/rewarding in unaccountable ways.

Much of my work has felt like practice or preparation. I think this amateurism is important in keeping me open to the future growth that awaits every serious artist at every stage in their career. At the same time, it also fails me often, which makes an outside perspective necessary to judge the successes from the lesser successes. My writerly self-image’s dependence on external judgement has been the most frustrating part of this process.
Annotated Bibliography

I was encouraged by this collection to explore my own language more deeply, and to let magical realism tease more vivid worlds from my imagination.

These poems are adventurous, impressive, moving, and witty, which helped to set the high benchmark for what effects I was looking for from my own writing.

Limoli’s work was intensely and personally revealing. Reading and hearing him share his own life so openly was inspiring, and helped me let my own inner world enter my writing less fearfully.

This book was a great example of how to weave several themes, obsessions, loves, and languages to create a rich textile of meaning.

Rankine’s ability to patiently and poetically render dire injustice makes it seem more possible to positively impact the world through writing. It’s helpful to know and see that poetry is still an incredibly important vehicle for change in the world.

This work of criticism helped me understand the transformative and essential role of poetry in my life and in society.