LUCK, MUSIC, RECEPTIVITY AND MADNESS
The Roles of the Arbitrary and the Image in Modern American Poetry

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In his essay “The Shabby and the Sublime,” Polish poet and essayist Adam Zagajewski writes of the poet whose aim might be “anything more general, than, say, the view from our own window (a cherry branch, and behind it the late afternoon’s cloudy sky)” – the poet who subsequently risks “being charged with arbitrariness” (25). To Zagajewski, “poets are especially sensitive to the charge of arbitrariness” (25). Their art, after all:

involves precision and concreteness; words are verified not, as Rudolf Carnap would have it, through empirical, quantifiable observations. They are verified through existential preparedness, through experience, through our own lives, through reflection and moments of illumination. But they are verified. (25)

Conversely, one might view arbitrariness – in multiple senses of the word – as equally close to the heart of modern poetry as anything. In his essay “Negative Capability and its Children,” Charles Simic suggests that modern conceptions of “self” are, to a large part, the “product of a critique of language which since the Romantics has undermined the old unity of word and object” (The Uncertain 84). Thus, any sense of “experience,” “reflection,” or “illumination” becomes highly problematic for the modern writer and his or her relationship to language. As a result, Simic turns to John Keats’ notion of Negative Capability – “that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries,
doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (qtd. in The Uncertain 84).

Subsequently, Simic attempts to “translate” or update these notions:

We can proceed with our “translation” of Keats. We can speak of Chance in place of his “uncertainty.” Is it with Keats that Chance, that major preoccupation of modern experimental poetics, enters aesthetics? [...] Dada and then surrealism made Chance famous, made it ontological, [...] [partly] to break the spell of our habitual literary expectations and to approach the condition of what has been called “free imagination.” (84)

To Simic, the arbitrary not only plays an aesthetic role in poetry but derives from a state of being – a post-Socratic existence, where “self-knowledge can never be complete” (The Uncertain 83). Commonly, we associate the word arbitrary with the random, with whim, and with chance. However, the original meaning primarily concerns “choice” and “discrimination” and derives from the Latin arbitrarius, meaning judge or witness (Webster’s). I like these dual meanings. When it comes to writing, it seems both are necessary. Beyond this, when it comes to language, the arbitrary is equally necessary. The very essence of semantics and definition builds upon strictly arbitrary distinctions.

As I write, I hear a steady patter of rain outside. It is mid-November, the sun just rising. My wife has awakened as of five minutes ago. Her footsteps upstairs suggest she is in the kitchen, pouring coffee. Every so often, the house creaks.

I am considering winter’s fast approach, squirrels scavenging beneath the English walnut, and my wife’s day. A dog barks in the distance.

Perhaps arbitrary observations, like these, do not belong in an academic paper. I’m aware of this because I’ve taught academic writing for over a decade. (Yet, I’ve
familiarized myself with the arbitrary for nearly half a century.) On the other hand, is there not overwhelming joy in the arbitrary – when a child puts his or her shoes on the wrong feet, or a wet dog leaps on to the couch? I’ve been considering William Carlos William’s “Poem” for a while now.

As the cat climbed over the top of the jamcloset first the right forefoot carefully then the hind stepped down into the pit of the empty flowerpot.

The poem retains a vast charm – this melding of line, movement and syntax so characteristic of Williams. However, my favorite detail concerns only three lines, beginning with the second line of the second stanza, the last line separated by a stanza break, “first the right / forefoot / carefully [.]” To some, the detail might seem completely arbitrary, and it is. Nonetheless, its content and syntax carry a certain rightness, a charm, and if I’m not mistaken, a sense of humor.

That chance and the random have played an increasing role in modern and post-modern aesthetics is fairly well documented, from the Dadaists and French surrealists to many modern-day poets. The idea has strange philosophical and psychological implications, most of which are too broad for this paper. Yet, it is fascinating to see how many have spoken and written about luck, chance and the arbitrary in contemporary
poetry. In particular, modern or so-called post-modern poetry seems to rely more-and-more on the image and equally modern notions of the image. Our technological society churns out images at a rapid pace. In a number of ways, we are smothered by our own images. As a result, it is no surprise that the image has become so important to contemporary poetry. However, the poetic image – the definition of which is quite hard to pin down – is much different than, say, the billboard image, or the image of Paris Hilton. We know this, but how?

In the mid-twentieth century, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard attempts to outline characteristics of “the image” and the poetic imagination as opposed to “the concept” and objective, scientific thought. His methods are, at first, psychoanalytical, derived from Jung, and later, phenomenological. Much more than fancy or entertainment, Bachelard suggests that the image rises directly from human consciousness and the center of being, in writer and reader, and is compressed and comprised not only of reality, but also, equally important, of our dreamed and imagined unrealities. He writes:

Imagination is not, as its etymology would suggest, the faculty of forming images of reality; it is rather the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which sing reality. [...] Here, in this commitment to the invisible, is the original poetry, the poetry that gives us our first taste for our inner destiny [...] [and] a feeling of youth or youthfulness by replenishing or faculty of wonderment. True poetry is a function of awakening. (On Poetic 15-16).
To Bachelard, the notions of “concept” and “image” – and likewise, “reason” and “imagination” – are antithetical. As such, the very act of objectively conceptualizing the image is self-defeating. One ends with a concept, the image disappears. Beyond this, Bachelard goes so far as to say that “Intellectual criticism of poetry will never lead to the center where poetic images are formed” (On Poetic 7). In short, Bachelard breaks from philosophical tradition – “the dialectics of reason, which juxtaposes contradictions in order to cover the entire range of possibilities” – to explore or to *intuit* “the dialectics of imagination, which would seize all that is real, and finds more reality in what is hidden than in what is visible” (On Poetic 10). In this light, according to Bachelard, the poetic image is much more than representational, the mere description of an object – as say a cat might be viewed as an object – but rather, the poetic image is a dynamic, polyphonic linguistic complex *that only exists when perceived*, “since one only receives the image *only* if one admires it” (On Poetic 7). This last statement deserves close rereading. The poetic image is subjective, but will only *open* to those who *open* to it. To Bachelard, the image is always partly material, organic, and purely human. Like a seed, it is generative.

*Most importantly*, Bachelard views the image as outside the poet’s control, as “independent of causality” (The Poetics xiii). To Bachelard, the poetic image only exists in the moment, at the “threshold of being” and consciousness (The Poetics xii), and is analogous “to this essential need for newness that characterizes the human psyche” (On Poetic 20). In The Poetics of Space, he writes:

> [T]his relation is not, properly speaking, a *causal* one. The poetic image is not subject to an inner thrust. It is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with
echoes. [...] It is referable to a direct ontology. [...] Very often, then, it is in the opposite of causality, that is, in reverberation [...] that I think we find the real measure of the being of a poetic image. (xxii)

To Bachelard, the image is language at its most polyphonic because it is polysemantic. The existence of the image not only invigorates the past (not vise-versa), but also reverberates through other images, and echoes through the double natures of self and other, the literal and metaphorical, realities and unrealities, awakenings and dreams. The poem, per se, evolves into a space where “written language creates its own universe” (On Poetic 27). As such, the writer does not necessarily control the image as much as the images control the writer – both remaining at the mercy of the muses.

And luck.

The Surrealist Movement and the Random

In the beginning of the 19th century, French mathematician, astronomer and physicist Pierre-Simon Laplace works out his Central Limit Theorem, often called the Law of Frequency of Errors – that states errors of measurement tend to be normally distributed. In short, Laplace helps define the importance of the random in statistical probability. Of the Law, mathematician Sir Francis Galton marvels that it “reigns with serenity and in complete self-effacement amidst the wildest confusion. [...] It is the supreme law of unreason.” (The Role). Slightly earlier, Charles Darwin’s theories concerning random selection revolutionize the way humans think about order and the world. Darwin’s theories suggest life forms experience over time a series of arbitrary, evolutionary, and adaptational changes – some successful, some not. Likewise, Sigmund
Freud’s notions of dreams and “free-association” as routes toward unveiling the unconscious mind – where the “irrational” reigns – revolutionize the way humans speak and think about themselves. Embraced or not, all these ideas suggest immense aspects of self, life and a universe that humankind – like Blanchard’s notion of the image – cannot control. In poetry, across Europe, traditional poetic values – the 18th century aesthetics of order and harmony and the content it produced – had increasingly destabilized, where the *poetry* in poetry was believed to reside.

Deeply influenced by Freud, in a journal article from the early 1920s, André Breton muses upon the future of writing:

> When will the arbitrary be granted the place it deserves in the formation of works and ideas? What touches us is generally less intentional than we believe. A happy formula, a sensational discovery, [...] [a]lmost nothing attains its goal, although here and there something overshoots it. [...] The utmost indifference is in order. [...] Everywhere I hear innocence praised and I observe that it is tolerated only in its passive form. This contradiction would suffice to make me skeptical. To condemn the subversive is to condemn everything that is not absolutely resigned.

(What is Surrealism? 3)

The passage gives us a sense of the initial dynamics that bring about the Surrealist movement. Revolutionary, reactionary, exploratory and irrational, Breton’s championing of the arbitrary remains, to this day, outrageous to read. And much like Bachelard, Breton would have imagination reign supreme in poetry, as opposed to reason and conceptual thinking. Often, perhaps *too* often, poets and critics view Breton and the
French Surrealism movement as “intellectual,” as opposed to “emotional” or “passionate,” as if intellect can be somehow detached from emotion. One has only to read twenty minutes of Breton’s prose to feel a young man’s blood pumping. When he is not being loud and ostentatious, Breton usually settles for the simply grandiose. Nevertheless, he writes, “When one ceases to feel, I am of the opinion one should keep quiet” (Manifesto 4). And one believes him. At the same time, the surrealist poem generally does make huge associational jumps, carrying impersonality and irrationality to their limits. As a result, it is easy to see how the lack-of-emotion charge comes about.

In the original Manifesto of Surrealism, Breton takes on the history of human thought, not a small task. At times, he sounds like a well-read, insolent and delusional schoolboy – at others, like an unruly, reproaching god.

His prose crackles.

Freud’s influence on the surrealist movement cannot be overstated. To Breton, who desires to free the literary imagination from conventions, Freud’s insistence on the relationship of the irrational world of dreams to lucid consciousness offers a path of unexplored possibility. In particular, Freud’s experiments with free association underlie Breton’s fascination with automatic writing, a fascination which he had inherited from the automatic writing of mediums. Historically, the practice of automatic writing has disturbed many a critic, and perhaps for good reason. The practice might suggest that anything that spills off a pen is of literary worth. However, the practice is only “automatic” to a point. Scholar Franklin Rosemont puts it this way:

Those critics who prattle about the ‘facile’ character of automatism, and who consider it an evasion of critical or literary responsibility [...] can
ponder a warning by Aragon in his *Treatise on Style* (1928): ‘If by following a surrealist method you write wretched stupidities, they remain wretched stupidities. And inexcusable.” The truth is that automatist research requires a ‘discipline’ [...] greater than that of any literary craftsman, [...] disinterestedness, a total honesty, a willingness to take risks, a disdain for easy literary byways and sly aesthetic solicitations.

(What is Surrealism? intro. 22-3)

One must recall that Breton and the surrealists were primarily writers – trained, well read and practiced in the literary conventions of their day. Necessarily, anything “automatic” would first be processed through a literary mind, and most of the experiments do show aspects of conventional rhetorical moves, syntax, arbitration and choice.

At the same time, the Surrealism movement seems geared to annihilate the traditional elitist order attributed the arts – the Romantic notion of the artist as one visited from “on high.” As such, Breton revels in the role of non-artist. “But we,” he writes in the Manifesto, “who have made no effort whatsoever to filter, who in our works have made ourselves into simple receptacles of so many echoes, modest recording instruments who are not mesmerized by the drawings we are making, perhaps we serve an even nobler cause” (24). This sentiment is perhaps the nexus of surrealism’s offensiveness, that the writer can be likened to a machine, a recording instrument. A half-century later, William S. Burroughs would claim the same thing, to the same critical response.

Politically, Surrealism was a proletariat movement, associated with communist movements across Europe. It is Breton’s wish that anybody can participate in surrealism; “your Surrealist activity” he calls it throughout the Manifesto. Yet, Surrealism’s madcap
humor placed it a little outside traditional communist concerns. In October 1948, in a catalogue for an exhibition, Breton would recall, “Absolute non-conformism and universal disrespect was the rule, and great good humor reigned (Exquisite).

The parlor game “Cadaver Exquis” or “Exquisite Corpse” develops as a method to experience the “elements of language attack[ing] each other in the most paradoxical manner possible” (Exquisite). It becomes another core element of the movement:

Exquisite Corpse: Game of folded paper played by several people, who compose a sentence or drawing without anyone seeing the preceding collaboration or collaborations. The now classic example, which gave the game its name, was drawn from the first sentence obtained this way: The exquisite / corpse / will drink / the new / wine. (Exquisite)

As another road to chance concurrence, Breton sees Exquisite Corpse as a breakthrough. He later writes, “Finally, with the Exquisite Corpse we had at our command an infallible way of holding the critical intellect in abeyance, and of fully liberating the mind’s metaphorical activity” (Exquisite). 5

Breton’s obsessions with automatic writing and chance concurrence seem propelled to expand our notions of the image and association and how the human mind constructs them. In the Manifesto of Surrealism, he refers to the initial practice as “spoken thought,” or “thought writing.” Association becomes the moment of illumination. Images freed of rational conventions shock the rational mind into submission to the imagination. Breton desires poetic imagery that encompasses “the Magnificent,” commonly associated with fairy tails and nursery rhymes.
He contends, “To reduce the imagination to a state of slavery [...] is to betray all sense of justice within oneself” (Manifesto).

At a central point in the text, Breton quotes Pierre Reverdy, “a man at least as boring as I”:

*The image is a pure creation of the mind.*

*It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.*

*The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be – the greater its emotional power and poetic reality...* *(Nord-Sud, March 1918) (Manifesto)*

As such, the surrealist relies on chance concurrences, the arbitrary workings of the mind in flight, to produce a “distant and true” juxtaposition of images. One of the most effective examples of this occurs in the collaboratively written *Ralentir Travaux*, written by Breton, Réné Char, and Paul Éluard, resulting in “one of the most distinctive books of the surrealist years, not quite like those of any one of its authors working separately” (9). The entire book was written in five days, each poem a product of, at least, two of the poets. The short, first poem of the book, “Branding Iron,” exemplifies Breton’s notion of the shocking, “marvelous” image:

**BRANDING IRON**

The glance that will cast about my shoulders  
Night’s undecipherable net  
Will be like a rain in eclipse  
Will fall slowly from its solar rim  
My arms about its neck (19)
Seventy-plus years later, the unexpected juxtapositions, the dissonances, retain the ability to stun the mind.

**Modern and “Post”- Modern Poetry**

Any definition of the qualities we commonly associate with the modern “free-verse” poem is bound to fail. Much of the contemporary language concerning such definition is metaphysical. For example, I want to agree with Kosrof Chantikian’s partial definition, from his introduction to *The Other Shore: 100 Poems of Rafael Alberti*. He suggests, “it is language face to face with itself, language which rips off the mask of chatter to find that *otherness* in the world – *You*” (xi). However, I suspect the definition is fairly useless for those who want to know what poetry is. Nonetheless, I do like the first phrase of the definition, which suggests that the poem is a self-contained unit, a singular language event, one that defines and exhausts its own terms. Content-wise, to go back to Keats, the modern poem is still usually “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” I would say, too, that contemporary poetry differentiates itself from prose in that, at its most lyrical, it is not rational discourse. Poetry suggests other, authentic ways of reading and thinking *through* the world, through holding the critical intellect in suspension. I wouldn’t call it non-rational or irrational discourse as much as “arrational.”

It is also beyond the scope of this paper to differentiate the U.S. poet from his or her world contemporaries. However, the ideological make-up of the U.S. poet must play a large role. In a sense, even the traditional poetic values inherited from England have
suffered a translation. Further, in the U.S., so-called free verse has become the poetry of the day. Even though this transition is also too broad to examine, it must be pointed out that the shift away from metered forms in this relatively new nation brings with it defining questions. Lacking metered forms, where does the *poetry* in poetry exist? What differentiates it from prose? Who makes these decisions?

Although – through painting and film – surrealism had a powerful initial effect in the U.S., it was not until the late ‘50s that a majority of American poets became aware of its poetic impact across Europe and South America, just as U.S. poets were beginning *en-masse* to shift away from metered verse, toward freer conceptions of the poetic line. Throughout the ‘60s, surrealism perhaps played its largest role in U.S. poetics. Many major poets were directly influenced (or indirectly influenced through translations of South American poetry).

Perhaps, though, it is best to simplify things (to “Make It New,” as Pound suggests), and not to overanalyze. Like a down-home version of Bachelard, William Stafford defines poetry in such a way:

> There are things, you know, human things, that depend on commitment; poetry is one of those things. If you analyze it away, it’s gone. It would be like boiling a watch to find out what makes it tick. If you let your thought play, turn things this way and that, be ready for liveliness, alternatives, new views, the possibility of another world – you are in the area of poetry. A poem is a serious joke, a truth that has learned *jujitsu*. (3)
William Stafford, Luck and Receptivity

To Stafford, poems “are luckily or stealthily related to a readiness within ourselves” (4). Throughout his writings on poetry, this notion of luck plays a large role. In Stafford’s case, though, as opposed to “pure” surrealism, luck is evenly emphasized with commitment – a dedication to writing, a “moral commitment” to the poem, and an allegiance to the unexplored possibilities of a poem-in-process – the “resonance between an individual’s situation and the *emerging* effects at the time of composition” (38). In the full sense of the word, Stafford sees the poet as arbitrator.

At the moment of composition, Stafford seeks to avoid all sense of intentionality, deliberateness, purposefulness – even proper manners and “good diction.” According to Stafford, “First, intention endangers creation,” and creation is “something other than putting together materials into the service of a preselected goal” (33). Intent suggests an agenda. And, of course, an agenda suggests some preconceived notion of “worldly success.” But to Stafford, it is of primary importance that those involved in creating “must be willing to fail” (18). Stafford’s ideas are stealthy and sly. They are simple. However, they demand much – a complete surrender to the poem in process, away from any sort of cultural or “real-world” intention or preconceived idea:

> If the writer knows the market and deliberately hits a trend, the result may be a negotiable piece of work – he may get it published – but it will lose that golden string of its internal consistency, and the result will not be an increment in art, but just a marketable product. (43)

Instead of intent, Stafford relies on wide-ranging receptivity, to “anything that occurs to me” (18). His compositional process depends on an openness to the moment, “or grace,
or luck, or – skill” (19). (Stafford hesitates to use the term “skill”) Although surrealism is not as direct of a “literary” influence on Stafford as Hardy, Tennyson or Frost, in a number of surprising ways, Stafford’s thought does resemble Breton. When Breton writes, “What touches us is generally less intentional than we believe” (3), Stafford replies:

Thoughts, statements, implications, are much more various, unaccountable, and free flowing than most intentional people would lead us to assume. [...] Set free, the mind discovers shortcuts and arabesques through and over and around all purposes. (29)

Likewise, Stafford is, at heart, a proletariat, whose writings suggest that anybody can experience the poetic process, to enlarge a life, and perhaps should. Beneath their respective writings, Breton and Stafford uphold a childlike fascination with language and its effects, an allegiance to the writer’s autonomy, away from aesthetic systems and regulations. The poet is one traveling through the dark.

Throughout his writings, Stafford continuously touches back on certain metaphors. He compares the process of writing to fishing, casting out and following a line, “for there is always a nibble” (Writing 17). Likewise, he associates the process to following “little thread[s]” (Writing 42-3), which he bases upon William Blake’s mysterious “golden string” in Blake’s “Jerusalem”:

I give you the end of a golden string,  
Only wind it into a ball,  
It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate  
Built in Jerusalem’s wall. (Writing 43)
Similarly, throughout his prose and poems, Stafford alludes to the mysterious, unknown qualities of life and of the poem as “the dark,” and “the wilderness.” Of his writing practice, Stafford describes getting up each morning and glancing out the window. “Often,” he reminds us, “it is dark out there” (17). This quality of the unknown – of life! – becomes a major theme. Often, it is a menacing presence. In “With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach,” Stafford gazes at the ocean: “Those waves raced far, and cold,” he reminds us (The Darkness 3).

Lacking intentional directions, Stafford must rely on acceptance, “a readiness to accept what emerges, what entices” (52). However, as Marvin Bell points out, who bases his observation on a Stafford quote, with Stafford, as opposed to the surrealists, one gets “the appearance of moral commitment” (qtd. in Old Snow 177-8). According to Bell, this is not didacticism. Not at all. Rather, as his poems unwind, as they fulfill their possibilities, one gets the feeling that things are at stake. Choices are being executed – a moral allegiance to the poem itself. Likewise, of Stafford, Robert Bly suggests:

[F]ollowing the thread is not a passive act. It actually means elaborate mental activity[. ...] The choices are how to follow the thread but not pull it, how to treat associating sounds, emphasize them or let them go, how much assertion is appropriate at each moment. Whether we stay close to the known voice or stretch toward a new voice, whether we come down on the side of aggression or quietism, rebellion or service[.]

(The Darkness viii)

Not only does the “appearance of moral commitment” differentiate Stafford from a “pure” surrealism, but Stafford also embraces tradition. He listens to the poems – the
“music” – as they develop. Many are written in metered forms, with rhyme – and, Bell points out, Stafford “knew meter backwards and forewords” (Old Snow 222). For instance, many overlook or forget that “Traveling through the Dark,” perhaps his most anthologized poem, is written in iambic pentameter.

At the same time, Stafford embraces the arbitrary, the new, the unknown, and the thread of chance concurrence. This is key to understanding Stafford’s writing process and the poems. With Stafford, one can see this in the often-startling line-by-line syntax, in the surprising juxtapositions of images and associations:

Lit Instructor

Day after day up there beating my wings
with all the softness truth requires
I feel them shrug whenever I pause:
they class my voice among tentative things,

And they credit fact, force, battering.
I dance my way toward the family of knowing,
embracing stray error as a long-lost boy
and bringing him home with my fluttering.

Every quick feather asserts a just claim;
it bites like a saw into white pine.
I communicate right; but explain to the dean—
well, Right has a long and intricate name.

And the saying of it is a lonely thing. (The Darkness xxii)

Primarily, the poem is composed four four-line stanzas followed by a single ultimate line. The lines consist of four stresses, although a few contain five. It is rhymed, with an ABBA -CDDC -EFFE -F rhyme scheme, yet not dependent on exact rhyme. Stafford uses some gorgeous off rhymes. For example, “requires” and “pause” just seem natural
to my ear, not forced. Strangely, in the end, the poem seems quite reminiscent of sonnet form. A ghost. We could call it an Oregon Sonnet.

Thematically, the poem seems very representative of Stafford’s life and thought. We could say the poem concerns the contrary forces at work when “teaching” literature – “beating my wings / with all the softness truth requires.” In lines five and six, Stafford reminds us about agendas and intent – the “fact, force, battering” of those seeking certain truths – which may not lead directly to “the family of knowing.” Mostly, though, I would like to focus on the first two lines of the third stanza: “Every quick feather asserts a just claim; / it bites like a saw into white pine.” By themselves, connected by a semi-colon, the juxtaposition of these two lines is every bit as radical as “pure” surrealism. (Condensed even further, the image bespeaks a “quick feather” that “bites like a saw.”)

However, within the context of the poem – the bird-like “beating wings” of the first line, the “fluttering” of the eighth line and the phrases concerning violence and force throughout the poem – these two lines seem inevitable. Further, the violence of the second line here might even “logically” contradict Stafford’s earlier claims of the “softness,” “tentative[ness],” and “dance” that the “truth requires.” However, this contrast serves as an extension and deepening of the poem’s inner-logic. It is dazzling – pure poetry, and its ultimate line, heartbreaking (The Darkness xxii). Concerning the dynamics of these two central lines, though, we can return to Pierre Reverdy, “The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be – the greater its emotional power and poetic reality” (qtd. in Manifesto)

Through his attention to the process of composition, through the poem’s terms of development, Stafford strives for that linguistic “wilderness” – that “darkness” which, in
Breton’s words, might hold “the critical intellect in abeyance.” On one hand, the poet seeks to involve himself in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” On the other, however, Stafford might just call it luck.

**Richard Hugo: Music, Subject and Sub-Subject**

Like Stafford, Richard Hugo should not be confused with a surrealist. However, his conceptual framework of poetry also largely relies on allowing the mind to make arbitrary linguistic decisions. With forcefulness like no other, Hugo often makes the arbitrary sound like Poetic Law. “Make sure;” he advises students, “each sentence is at least four words longer or shorter than the one before it” (*Triggering* 40).

In *The Triggering Town*, Hugo conceives of the poem as having, at least, two subjects – the initial or “triggering” subject and the real or generated subject of the poem. To Hugo, the foundation of the poem, though, is music:

> When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes, though you may not be aware of it. One is that all music must conform to truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music. If you believe the first, you are making your job very difficult, and [...] limiting the writing of poems to something done only by the very witty and clever. [...] If the second attitude is right, then I still have a job. (3)

Where Stafford’s method insists on openness, receptivity and acceptance, Hugo focuses on receptiveness to the sound qualities of language and of the line – the audio and the oral – as a trigger, or lyrical launch, toward the poetic. Again and again, Hugo touches back on this:
When I was a young poet I set an arbitrary rule that when I made a sound I felt was strong, a sound I liked specially, I’d make a similar sound three to eight syllables later. Of course, it would often be a slant rhyme. Why three to eight? Don’t ask. You have to be silly to write poems at all. (10) Given enough time to ponder Hugo’s thought and poetry at large, one senses that Hugo’s freewheeling emphasis on the audio, the oral and sound patterning is not new at all. It is primitive. Likewise, we know Breton considered this route. In his initial instructions for automatic writing, found in Manifesto of Surrealism, Breton suggests, through sound, ways of battling the urge to stop and ponder:

Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur. If silence threatens to settle in [sic] if you should ever happen to make a mistake [...] due to carelessness – break off without hesitation with an overly clear line. Following a word, the origin of which seems suspicious to you, place any letter whatsoever, the letter “l” for example, always the letter “l,” and bring the arbitrary back by making this letter the first of the following word. (26)

Like Stafford, Hugo seeks a poetry that transcends the mind’s critical/rational impulses. The beginning poet, according to Hugo, often carries the “impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has already conceived to be the truth” (The Triggering 4). To Hugo, the poet needs a “streak of arrogance” to battle the compulsions of “logic, good sense, [and] narrative development” (The Triggering 5). In this light, he likewise warns the would-be poet of reliance upon “certain words that seem necessitated by grammar to make things clear but dilute the drama of the statement” (The
Triggering 40). For the most part, these are transitional phrases and conjunctions, those stalwarts of prose composition – “words of temporality, causality, and opposition, [which] often indicate a momentary lack of faith in the imagination” (The Triggering 40). Instead, Hugo would have the poet focus on “rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together (The Triggering 5). The early, often overlooked poem “Trout” typifies Hugo’s allegiance to sound:

Trout

Quick and yet he moves like silt.
I envy dreams that see his curving silver in the weeds. When stiff as snags he blends with certain stones.

I wedge hard water to validate his skin—
call it chrome, say red is on
his side like apples in a fog, gold
gills. Swirls always looked one way until he carved the water into many kinds of current with his nerve-edged nose.

And I have stared at steelhead teeth
to know him, savage his sea-run growth,
to drug his facts, catalog his fins
with wings and arms, to bleach the black back of the first I saw and frame the cries that sent him snaking to oblivions of cress. (Making Certain 3)

Maybe I shouldn’t, but I love this poem. It is never anthologized. Here, the rhythms seem typical of Hugo, hard monosyllabic stresses throughout the poem – emphasized through the many dentals, the d’s and t’s, and the hard k sounds. As I’ve written elsewhere, Hugo’s poems always thud like an old bear across the page, past the outhouse, off toward the woods. His attention to sound, though, overtakes the semantics and
syntax, which I find charming. I’ve often asked students about the meaning of the phrases:

I wedge hard water to validate his skin—
call it chrome, say red is on
his side like apples in a fog, gold
gills.

Just how does one “wedge hard water”? And having done that, how can this wedging of water “validate his skin”?

Of course, there is no answer. Thankfully, the poet doesn’t offer one. Only image. However, a surprising amount of students suspect they know exactly what he means. At the same time, I’ve never pointed out that the poet immediately breaks one of his cardinal rules, three words into the poem, with a term of “opposition.” Yet, if we examine the line closely – “Quick and yet he moves like silt.” – we can tell the sound of the poem already overrides any arbitrary rules. Following the hard-stressed k’s of “Quick” with the single-syllable “yet” echoes the sense of the line, which soon moves into the slower o of “moves” and the l’s “like silt” – slowing the rhythm.

In a recent essay, Merle Brown outlines the practice of “poetic listening.” Brown credits the initial opaqueness of much modern poetry to a type of double-voicedness, in that every poem “comes to its reader as twice-told” (11). Brown explains:

The poet always listens to himself as part of the expressive act that is his poem, and that listening becomes an essential part of the completed poem. It is never fused into the expressiveness of the act of the poem’s making, but continues to be in dramatic relationship with that expressiveness. (11)
We can sense this idea of “poetic listening” and the “twice-told” nature of the poem in Hugo’s “Trout.”

As for chance and the arbitrary, like Stafford, Hugo emphasizes faith and luck. In The Triggering Town, he relates the following anecdote:

Once a spectator said, after Jack Nicklaus had chipped a shot in from a sand trap, “That’s pretty lucky.” Nicklaus is supposed to have replied, “Right. Bit I notice the more I practice the luckier I get.” If you write often, perhaps every day, you will stay in shape and will be better able to receive those good poems, which are finally a matter of luck, and get them down. (17)

“In the world of imagination,” Hugo tells us, “all things belong. If you take that on faith, you may be foolish, but foolish like a trout” (5).

The Arbitrary, Madness and Poetic Listening

In the eighteenth century, physics told us that the planetary systems seemed just that, systematic and orderly – systems. Neat. However, with the advent of statistical probability and, eventually, quantum physics, our perspective of nature began to change.

In 1812, in his “Théorie Analytique des Probabilités,” physicist Pierre-Simon Laplace writes of probability, “It is remarkable that a science which began with the consideration of games of chance should have become the most important object of human knowledge.” That so-called “western” poetics, likewise, begins a major shift around this time is, of course, not coincidental.
Anybody who has written for a sustained amount of time can testify to the role of luck in writing – that stray, obsessive thought that enters the writer’s head in conversation or driving a car. Some of our best poems just happen, with very little effort. I’ve heard many reports of this and have experienced it. Some writers look to arbitrary occurrence as a form of determinism or Jungian synchronicity. In her essay “On Looking,” the poet Lia Purpura suggests this:

A path through thinking is clearing. Stay with me. Events will fit themselves to themselves. Stitch along and proceed. [...] What about this: these moments of recurrence / concurrence are not messages fluttering toward, bearing secrets, but stories in which we are part of the telling. [...] But sitting down to this work, this work, too, seems unlikely: that particulars mingle, particulars assert, conspire, assemble. That what I didn’t know I knew was somewhere … waters be gathered, waters bring forth … and how, what seems in the end like intention, arrives only piecemeal. (26-7)

On one hand, this type of synchronistic determinism that Purpura edges about obviously suggests the writerly “faith” of Stafford and Hugo – Purpura’s brand of poetic listening. On the other, she proposes a metaphysic that many “rational” minds might question. Of synchronicity, Peter Brugger of the Department of Neurology, University Hospital, Zurich, writes, “The propensity to see connections between seemingly unrelated objects or ideas most closely links psychosis to creativity … apophenia and creativity may even be seen as two sides of the same coin” (Apophenia). Likewise, Charles Simic warns, “Beware of synchronicity – ‘the meaningful coincidence of an external event with an
inner motive.’ That way madness lies” (Wonderful 93). Throughout history, skeptics have pointed to the relationship between madness and creativity.

It is not coincidence that Breton found great interest in madness, as have, for that matter, many poets, Hugo included. In the Manifesto on Surrealism, although Breton tends to romanticize the “freedom” of the mad, he directs his comments toward the social milieu. He writes, “We all know, in fact, that the insane owe their incarceration to a tiny number of legally reprehensible acts, and that, were it not for these acts their freedom (or what we see as their freedom) would not be threatened” (Manifesto). Though his argument seems lacking in complexity and ethical considerations, its validity holds nonetheless.

Likewise, one feels that Simic – a stalwart rationalist, yet heavily indebted to Breton and the surrealists – although he decries the “madness” of synchronicity, gives madness a fair shake and a decent definition. “Anyway,” he says in an interview,” the world is cruel, humankind is probably insane” (The Uncertain 75). In another interview, he slants it this way:

I have the feeling that most [young poets] are playing it safe. ... As the options come together, a very safe sort of poem results. ... [Rimbaud] uses the word cultivate. How important that is. Cultivating your own obsession, your own madness. ... The important thing is that solitude, almost monastic solitude, and obsession. “Madness” I throw around in a large way, but it means your own sense of reality, your own sense of yourself existing in this world. (The Uncertain 45)
Bachelard, perhaps, summarizes this process, this madness, best. “The word is a prophecy,” he writes. “The imagination is thus a psychological world beyond” (On Poetic 23). In his movement away from conceptual reasoning toward poetic imagination – both of which accordingly make humankind whole—Bachelard’s notions not only seem to reverberate through Breton, Stafford, and Hugo, but many more as well:

For one who knows written reverie, who knows how to live, to live fully, as the pen flows, reality is so far away! What one meant to say is so quickly supplanted by what one finds oneself writing, that we realize written language creates its own universe. A universe of sentences arranges itself on the blank page, in an organization of images which often follow different laws, but which always observe the great laws of the imaginary. (On Poetic 27)

That the poet might ignore riches or worldly success or even, alas, family, to communicate with the moon, to a tree, an onion, a special pair of socks, or death (through a fly) – to make his or her unrealities real – seems, well, beyond insane. It seems right. Right?
NOTES

1 The original title of this paper was composed through methods of chance concurrence. I had friends email me their favorite words, words they thought should go into the title. I then took the liberty to arrange them. Though the title does have its charm – “Just One Matter: Fecal Buttocks and the Alluvial Blunderbuss” -- I came to believe it not academic enough ... that I perhaps needed new friends.

2 The meaning has gradually descended to “capricious” and “despotic.”

3 Italics mine.

4 Likewise, the underlying principles of automatic writing relate closely, if not exactly, to those that support Peter Elbow’s modern-day notions of “freewriting.”

5 Italics mine.

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Works Cited


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