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‘Dancing in the open’: the encounter with poetry and eruptions of the unknown

Abstract:

Poetry continues to be viewed in many quarters as granting direct and privileged access to the personal experiences of its authors, to the extent that when a poet says ‘I’ in their work many readers believe that the first-person pronoun refers directly to the poet. In the case of women poets, in particular, poems are often understood as representing a personal testimony. Yet, as poets have confirmed throughout history, poems sometimes arrive unbidden. A well-known example is Gerard Manley Hopkins’ statement that his ‘terrible sonnets’ arrived ‘like inspirations unbidden and against my will’ (cited in Harris 1982, xiii). The origins of such poems are often puzzling to their authors and sometimes treat issues that have not been consciously countenanced by the poet.

Carl Fehrman (1980, 160) notes that the concept of inspiration in the West derives from ‘a double tradition’ – from its use in the Bible where, for example, ‘the prophets are referred to as *Sancto Spiritu inspirati*’ and from the Platonic tradition. Plato (1996, 14) in the *Ion* characterised the inspired poet as ‘frenzied, his mind no longer in him’, conflating ideas of inspiration and madness. While only a minority of poems may be ‘inspired’ in this way, how confessional are such poems likely to be – and, indeed, how do such poems arrive at all? Following Freud, it is possible to argue that some poems are created when strong present feelings are connected with earlier, unconscious memories. Is the encounter with such poetry frequently unknowable – even to the poet – partly because it occurs in no-actual-place at no-actual-time? And is this one of the reasons why a great deal of poetry is persistently characterised as polysemously difficult, seeming to speak at many different levels at once and, in saying many things, never saying any one thing?

This paper discusses poems by Dickinson and Nabokov, among others, in the light of these issues and explores what the implications for the autobiographical reading of poetry might be for poems that are composted of the unconscious and never-really-known.

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1. Contemporary lyric poetry and confession

Despite the sophistication of much twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorising about the nature of poetry, we live in an age when poems are frequently read autobiographically, often being interpreted as a form of ‘confession’ or personal testament. When poets say ‘I’ in their poems many readers believe that they are referring more-or-less directly to themselves and their personal experiences – notwithstanding arguments, such as Timothy Clark’s, that ‘written composition ... retains even in its privacy a minimal quality of ritual: it is the crossing of a psychic threshold in which, say, the word “I” is no longer “myself” but a signifier in the space of composition’ (2000, 21).

Further, poems by women are more likely to be read autobiographically than poems by men. Carol Muske writes that the term ‘woman poet’

came to exist in the 1960s and 1970s as less a descriptive than an unconscious prescriptive ... The prototypical *woman poets* of the twentieth century are, of course, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich ... we know that each poet is going to have it out with history, as Rich has written of [Emily] Dickinson, ‘on her own premises’. (1997, 1; emphasis original)

Harriet Davidson observes that

The rise of confessional poetry in America with its much denounced shift in focus to the personal, embodied, ‘authentic’ voice coincides with the rise of feminism ... While the women’s liberation movement and its focus on ‘consciousness-raising’ clearly led many women to write poetry, the widely-read confessional poetry (... driven in the popular imagination by the sensational and tragic lives of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton) provided poetic models taken up in second-wave feminism. (2003, 161)

Judith Harris states that in good confessional poetry, ‘private suffering is connected with collective suffering, and the poems relate our contemporary concerns more profoundly than the poems of some reactionary movements’ (Harris 2001, 256). She adds that ‘This confession or testimony shares “truth” that cannot be ignored’ (257). In other words, Harris believes that the value of confessional poetry partly derives from its capacity to tell contemporary ‘truths’ in a way that other kinds of poetry cannot. She suggests that a significant part of the authority of contemporary lyric poetry resides in how well it enacts its claims to private confession and testimony.

Some confessional poets have encouraged critics to read their works in this way. Anne Sexton is a prime example. In asserting that she wrote about ‘what my parents were really like, the whole Gothic New England story’ (cited in Maio 2005, 88), she claimed that her poetry derived much of its value from its close connection to her personal circumstances. However, she also stated that she didn’t ‘adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed’ (cited in Maio 2005, 87) and that ‘I tend to lie a lot’ (Sexton 2000, xiii).

A contemporary confessional poet, the American Sharon Olds, writes poems that are sometimes so apparently self-revelatory, with titles such as ‘After 37 years my mother apologizes for my childhood’ (Olds 1993, 43), that it is no surprise that many readers

– some of them critically – see much of Olds’ poetry as constituting a form of poetic autobiography. For example, Muske, while praising Olds’ best work, asserts that the difference ‘between [Plath’s poem] “Daddy” and [Olds’ poem] “The Takers” is the difference between a poem and a testimony’ (1997, 17) – with the word ‘testimony’ in this context being pejorative.

No doubt some poetry is more-or-less straightforwardly confessional. For example, Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov frequently seem to speak plainly and directly in their work. However, the contemporary interest in writing confessional poetry has exacerbated a tendency to read lyric poems written by women – as well as many poems written by men – as confessional in tendency no matter when they were produced. I have discussed elsewhere (Hetherington 2011, 4-9) how contemporary readers and commentators often interpret poems by writers as diverse as Sappho and Emily Dickinson as autobiographical, notwithstanding the fact that they were highly sophisticated poets in periods when the idea of confessional poetry had little or no currency.

An example is Lyndall Gordon’s recent biography of Emily Dickinson in which she oversimplifies Dickinson’s work in asserting that her poetry is ‘often unintelligible, even if intensely confessional ... Confessional gestures in the many poems starting with ‘I’ or ‘My’ beckon us towards an unseen life. *He touched me* ... The intimacy is palpable. *I groped upon his breast* ...’ (94; emphasis original). The Dickinson poem from which Gordon draws her italicised phrases, ‘He touched me, so I live to know’ (1998, 374-75), powerfully conjures the sense of an intimate relationship between a poetic persona and someone whom the persona addresses. Yet the poem’s implied author remains in control and is rather detached, maintaining ‘an analytical and sometimes ironic distance from what she writes about’ (Hetherington 2012, 13). The poem is hardly a confessional work at all.

This begs a question: how should one understand lyric poetry that seems sincere but which makes what appear to be misleading autobiographical gestures; and how might one identify, however tentatively and incompletely, what such poetry is made of? In addressing these questions I will focus on poetry that, in whole or in part, is the result of what was once called ‘inspiration’ – that seems to arrive, as it were, from a place beyond the poet’s ken. While it’s probably true that only a minority of poems arrive in this way, they remain an important part of many poets’ encounters with their art.

2. The nameless hour and inspiration

In meditating on poetry and reverie, Gaston Bachelard quotes a passage from the nineteenth-century novel *Isis* by de L’Isle-Adam, in which he writes of his female protagonist:

The nameless hour, the eternal hour when children cease to look vaguely at the sky and the earth rang for her in her ninth year. From this moment on, what was dreaming confusedly in the eyes of this little girl took on a more fixed glint: one would have said she was feeling the meaning of herself while awakening in our shadows.
(Bachelard 1971, 103)

I will borrow the phrase ‘the nameless hour’ to characterise those elusive and perhaps finally unnameable ‘encounters’ or gestational moments when many lyric poems come into being, often unbidden by the poet; when, mysteriously, poems may seem to come from nowhere and address emotions and ideas that the poet did not know they had considered. Further, I will use the moment when ‘what was dreaming confusedly ... took on a more fixed glint’ as an analogy for the crystallisation of such poems out of the inchoate processes of their making.

The unbidden arrival of poems was once called inspiration. This is a concept that has a long and complicated history. Fehrman (1980, 160) notes that it derived in the West from ‘a double tradition’ – from the Platonic tradition and from its use in the Bible where, for example, in the Vulgate version ‘the prophets are referred to as *Sancto Spiritu inspirati*’. Further, the Biblical story of Pentecost recounts how people spoke ‘with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance’ (Acts, 2.4). In the *Ion* Plato comments that ‘a poet is ... unable to create until he becomes inspired and frenzied, his mind no longer in him’ (1996, 14).

Rothenberg says of creativity in general that it is ‘exalted and often mysterious’ (1979, 35) and Rothenberg and Hausman remind us that creativity was long associated with ‘the magical incantations and drawings of primitive man, the appearance of new forms in nature’ (1976, 3). In keeping with this influential idea of poetry as a kind of magical or supernatural invocation, poets of divergent kinds and temperaments have credited the Muse as their primary source of inspiration. Milton’s invocation to the ‘Heav’nly Muse’ (1974, 212) at the opening of *Paradise Lost*, however conventional it may be, is a famous example in the Christian era and Beardsley observes that the early ancient Greek poets ‘Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar ... attribut[ed] their ... feats to the intervention of the Muses’ (1976, 306). More recently, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote that his ‘terrible sonnets’ arrived ‘like inspirations unbidden and against my will’ (cited in Harris 1982, xiii).

The April 2011 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine* ‘polled Pulitzer prize winners, poet laureates and professors to get their thoughts on where poems come from’ (2011, 1). In the magazine’s published responses Paul Muldoon states that

The idea that poetry comes from beyond oneself is vital, as is the sense that one writes a poem in a condition that is often associated with a spiritual position, i.e., the condition of humility. One doesn’t know what one’s doing and is inspired ... (2011, 2)

Michael Ondaatje says, ‘There seem to be no deals you can make with poetry to entice it out of its lair. A poem, actually any writing, is always a private thing, and that is how I begin. It must have that secret source’ (2011, 2). Carol Muske-Dukes comments that

... lines of poetry come to you whenever they come. You could be waiting for the dentist and suddenly you’ll get an image or a line and you write it down. I write on the backs of envelopes, parking tickets – whatever I have at hand because you cannot lasso the muse. I really believe you can’t force a lot of this. Now, I passionately believe in revision, and that you have to try to write in a disciplined way as much as you can. But I do think there are moments that you suddenly get something, given to

you as a gift from the imagination, and you have to honor those moments as well.
(2011, 3)

On the basis of these remarks it is clear that the concepts of inspiration and a muse remain meaningful for poets. They use these ideas as a shorthand way of talking about a poetic process that to a considerable extent remains mysterious to them. Yet, unless one adopts particular religious beliefs that explain inspiration as the act of breathing in the influence of a god or gods, one must look for other origins for this phenomenon.

Beardsley offers a possible, if incomplete, explanation of inspiration when he outlines how creative works may be prompted, at least in part, by ‘incepts’ or stimuli that, even if originally only manifesting as a single word, phrase, or rhythm, seem to carry within them the genesis of a whole work of art (1976, 306). This is a fascinating idea but it does not answer the question of how such ‘incepts’ can apparently generate complete poems while sometimes leaving the author none the wiser about their source – poems that, to use Carol Muske-Dukes’s phrase, seem to arrive ‘as a gift’.

In his essay ‘The art of literature and commonsense’ Vladimir Nabokov characterises his experience of inspiration as

the past and the present *and* the future ... com[ing] together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner – who is already dancing in the open. (1982, 378)

Nabokov also addresses this idea in a poem called ‘The poem’, the last two stanzas of which assert that

... the poem that hurtles from heights unknown
—when you wait for the splash of the stone
deep below, and grope for your pen,
and then comes the shiver, and then—

in the tangle of sounds, the leopard of words,
the leaf-like insects, the eye-spotted birds
fuse and form a silent, intense,
mimetic pattern of perfect sense. (quoted in Morris 2010, 123)

Nabokov not only characterises the arrival of a poem in extreme terms as coming from ‘heights unknown’ to ‘splash ... deep below’ but suggests that the poet must ‘wait’ for the poem’s arrival. It has often been remarked that such waiting precedes the writing of poems; a condition that may indicate the kinds of creative forces at work in poetic composition.

Keats’s statement in a letter to his brother is probably the most famous description of such an experience – ‘*Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’

(1977, 43) – and Keats’s emphasis on the creative writer’s apparently passive state of mind has been echoed by other writers. For example, Kevin Brophy observes that

Studies of creativity refer often to periods of incubation, consolidation, a waiting for inspiration or insight ... These reports of discoveries, solutions or creative compositions often make the point that the arrival of a new idea can be sudden and complete, without apparent connection to previous conscious thoughts. (Brophy 2009, 40)

But what is this waiting indicative of and what is the nature of the writer’s encounter with those poems that arrive more-or-less complete?

3. The no-space and no-time of poetry

The ‘space of [poetic] composition’ as Timothy Clark calls it (2000, 21) – that place within the imagination where poets encounter their arriving poems – is, at least in metaphorical terms, a space without walls. Indeed, it is a space without any clearly defined form. As a result, it is almost impossible to describe or evoke without recourse to metaphorical language – and some of the metaphors that poets have used to describe or evoke the ‘place’ and ‘time’ of poetry are highly suggestive.

For example, Jean Tobin interviewed a variety of poets, including Carlos Cumpián, about their experience of poetic composition and creativity. Cumpián responded that

I see my mind as a field in that respect ... I’ve got to pick something out of that field that I can do something with. It’s an open space, an open place ...

Well, the dark is a time. The dark represents two things. It represents the wet earth, an earth that’s been wetted down is the dark earth ... it’s wet down from the coolness of, the sunlight of – it’s kind of like the sunlight of conscious expectation. You just go away from the sunlight of conscious expectation and let the dark work its work, do what it’s supposed to do. Things do get done in the dark. (Tobin 2004, 101-02)

More generally, Tobin observed that ‘Among the poets I interviewed, it was ... the sense of “timelessness” while working, which was most striking and appeared most often’ (157). She quotes Robert Pinsky’s remark that ‘When it’s best you don’t know. You don’t know anything about it. As Robert Lowell said, you look up and you see the windows have gotten dark’ (158). Muske confirms that ‘Poems ... occur outside of time, with such an altered sense of the temporal that experience is released from most of the conventional burdens of chronology’ (1997, 72).

In his essay ‘Creative writers and daydreaming’, Freud contended that in creative composition

A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfilment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory. (Freud 1985, 139)

The logic of Freud’s insight is that the daydreaming space of creative writing,

including of poetry, is a space where boundaries between past and present dissolve; and where aspects of the unconscious move into consciousness as they are connected to a current event or emotion. Freud wrote that the unconscious was characterised by ‘*exemption from mutual contradiction ... timelessness, and replacement of external by psychical reality*’ (1975, 187; emphasis original).

This is to say that, to the extent to which it imbibes aspects of returning unconscious material, the ‘space of [poetic] composition’ is, in one sense, a space without place – it is, like Cumpián’s ‘field’, metaphorical rather than real. It is also a place where, as Nabokov phrases it, ‘the past and the present *and* the future’ (1982, 378) do not exist as separate ideas because the moment of poetic creation equalises and subdues such distinctions in a fully immersive encounter with an arriving poem. The timeless unconscious, unsituated in any geography, imports its no-time and no-place into the poet’s encounter with previously unconscious material that has no relationship to the usual space-time experience of human beings.

If it can be argued that poems previously uncountenanced by their authors are frequently an eruption from the unconscious caused by the pressure of a ‘strong experience in the present’ (Freud 1985, 139) then this is not so different, metaphorically speaking, from a volcano releasing an outpouring of previously buried and pressurised magma – or, to use a phrase of Emily Dickinson’s, it is as if ‘a Vesuvian face / Had let its pleasure through –’ (Dickinson 1998, 722). The eruption of unconscious material employs the poet’s well-honed facility with language to release meanings that flow into a poem’s shape. Such an experience is likely to seem entirely unrehearsed to the poet – while simultaneously offering up a nearly complete work of art – because, until its arrival, the unconscious, ‘impervious to conscious probing’ (Carel 2006, 176), has kept its material entirely out of the poet’s sight. Even if the practised poet – dexterously, almost automatically – is able to shape the arriving verbal material into a satisfactory poetic form, such eruptions are often likely to seem ‘inspired and frenzied’, and the poet’s mind ‘no longer in him’ (Plato 1996, 14).

In Muske-Dukes’s phrase, the poet may also feel that they are being given a gift, even though they are really being employed, as it were, to give shape and explicit form to what has long since been substantially made in a place beyond their ken. This is, analogically, surely ‘the nameless ... the eternal hour’ (Bachelard 1971, 103) when ‘what was dreaming confusedly ... took on a more fixed glint’. And, metaphorically speaking, perhaps the unconscious may stand for the muse after all – a reimagined muse that belongs in Nabokov’s ‘deep below’ rather than in supernatural ‘heights unknown’ (Nabokov, quoted in Morris 2010, 123).

4. ‘A Clock stopped –’

If the experience of ‘wait[ing] for the splash of the stone’ (Nabokov, quoted in Morris 2010, 123) that often precedes poetic composition is a symptom of the transition from a sense of three-dimensional space and chronological time into a (no)-space that does not register such distinctions, a well-known poem by Emily Dickinson documents a related experience:

A Clock stopped –
Not the Mantel's –
Geneva's farthest skill
Cant put the puppet bowing –
That just now dangled still –

An awe came on the Trinket!
The Figures hunched – with pain –
Then quivered out of Decimals –
Into Degreeless Noon –

It will not stir for Doctor's –
This Pendulum of snow –
The Shopman importunes it –
While cool – concernless No –

Nods from the Gilded pointers –
Nods from the Seconds slim –
Decades of Arrogance between
The Dial life –
And Him – (Dickinson 1998, 278-79)

This is primarily a poem about an apparently personal existential crisis experienced by Dickinson in which, as Helen Vendler remarks, the poet finds 'metaphors for multiple aspects of dying and death' (2010, 89). It is also a poem in which Dickinson creates a profound sense of alienation from the daily space-time concerns of human beings. The stopping of the clock and the movement into 'Degreeless Noon' places the poem's persona in a metaphorical place that is a kind of death-in-life.

While such themes and tropes are fairly characteristic of Dickinson's work, especially the poems she wrote in the 1860s, this poem may well relate – implicitly – how much of her poetry was enabled by an unusually strong connection to her unconscious drives. One can only speculate whether 'A Clock stopped –' uprose convulsively into Dickinson's creative life, gifted to her at a period when a 'strong experience in the present' and memory joined to eject poetic material from her unconscious into consciousness. However, this is certainly possible given that the poem comes from a period when Dickinson wrote many hundreds of poems during an extraordinarily and explosively productive few years.

Certainly one can read Dickinson's poem as polysemously being partly about the act of its making and its unconscious origins. Phrases such as 'An awe came on the Trinket!', 'cool – concernless No –' and the almost impossibly abstract 'Pendulum of snow' suggest a place where the usual space-time experience of human beings has been obliterated. These phrases contribute to the poem's sense of deeply embedded, compressed energy; its unparaphraseability; and its connotative power. Additionally, in the first stanza the name Geneva is simultaneously suggestive of Calvin and his attempts to reform the Geneva church, the Geneva Bible and the clockmaking expertise of the Swiss. It is as if the poet's unconscious has, through this single word,

brought together ideas of time's cessation, personal death, the failure of belief, the image of someone hanged and a broken mantelpiece clock – among other associations.

Although meanings connected to the 'timeless' moment of poetic composition may be secondary to this poem's main preoccupations, the poem does seem to document its own arrival in its insistence on rendering an experience which is only able to be signified through the poet's capacity to speak symbolically and metaphorically – no actual clock could possibly carry the gravitas of this work of art.

5. Conclusion

If some poems are composed within the unconscious and to a significant extent made of unconscious material that is never fully knowable, this suggests that poetry is sometimes a form of seeing-beyond-the-seen – when, for example, a poem may arrive as if from nowhere and tell an author what they did not realise they knew. Sometimes such poems sound personal, and even confessional, either because they say 'I' or, as with Dickinson's 'A Clock stopped –', seem to speak of experiences of an intensely personal kind. Because of the contemporary tendency to read lyric poetry as personal and confessional, particularly poems by women, such works of art are often read as autobiographical statements.

Yet, if many poems are 'signifier[s] in the space of composition' (Clark 2000, 21) and have been to a significant extent authored by a poet's unconscious impulses and drives, then we should be wary about reading even apparently confessional poems straightforwardly. Poets are, in one sense, sometimes midwives to works of art that they may barely recognise; works of art that speak on behalf of a polysemous unconscious that troubles and vexes them. Their 'I' is nobody's self but is, rather, an encounter in the no-place and no-time of poetic composition that speaks only for the never-fully-known. The 'prisoner' may be 'dancing in the open' (Nabokov 1982, 378) but the poet is only just becoming acquainted with the tune and words they encounter.

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