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'We do not know exactly what we are going to say until we have said it': interview data on how poems are made

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ABSTRACT

My paper reflects on an archive of in-depth interviews I and my colleagues have recorded with Anglophone poets, from a variety of countries, North and South. In particular, I reflect on responses to a question that split that field into two opposing camps. It concerned the function of spontaneity in poetic composition. The majority of poets interviewed said yes, often quite enthusiastically, to Auden's proposition that when we 'genuinely speak' we are unaware of what we are about to say; many also seemed happy to affirm his implication that this is a key source of poetic value. Those who rejected these ideas were often passionate on the matter as well.

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1. The question

About half way through the interview, I would quote Auden:

When we genuinely speak we do not have the words ready to do our bidding, we have to find them. And we do not know exactly what we are going to say until we have said it, and we say and hear something new that has never been said or heard before. (1968, 105)

I would then ask the poet how the quote sat with him or her. In particular, how did Auden's comments on speech and spontaneity relate to their experience of composing?

2. The split

The majority of the 75 poets we interviewed over 2013–2015 – some two-thirds by my reckoning of the archive – were well-disposed to the quote. I am referring to interviews conducted in the course of an international research project funded through the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects scheme.¹ I will start by citing some of those positive responses, focusing mainly on interviews I personally undertook.

Maxine Chernoff said she thought Auden had 'expressed perfectly what I think about my own process: why I like to write, and how I write.' We were in her office at San Francisco State:

For me writing is very much a discovery process, in a way a performance of questions like 'What am I thinking about right now? What's there? Where am I going with this today?' I have no idea when I sit down. (M. Chernoff, interview with P. Magee, November 2014).

'It's like going into a dream world', Noelle Kocot told me, in New Jersey. 'I don't try to do anything when I write, at all. I come to it with a complete beginner's mind' (N. Kocot, interview with P. Magee, 13 July 2013). Relating the quote to 'my own experience of writing: that journey, that search, that coming through', Kevin Young, on the Emory campus in Atlanta, told me that

It is very much, as he says, like we do not have words ready to do our bidding. There is a way in which, even in the poem, you are wrestling with that silence, that inability to speak, or the difficulty of doing so. (K. Young, interview with P. Magee, 20 July 2014).

For Don Paterson, whom my colleague Kevin Brophy interviewed in St Andrews, Scotland, Auden's words were 'right' because they outlined the very experience one wants for one's reader: 'the goal is to shock the reader into a brief state of wakefulness. You can only do that by doing the same thing to yourself.' A poem, he continued 'is almost a documentary record of an epiphany that has taken place in the course of its own making.' It cannot, as such, be planned:

If you have your revelation a week before and then try to write it up, you are already lost. It will be a bad poem. If you have a good idea for a poem, it isn't. You have to come to the page with nothing, an urge to speak – as Auden says – without really knowing why. (D. Paterson, interview with K. Brophy, 2 July 2013).

To reiterate: some two-thirds of the 75 poets whom I and my colleagues interviewed over 2013–2015 registered specific or general approval of Auden's two-fold position that we find out what we are going to say after we have said it, and that this act of speaking without prior planning is a key source of poetic value.

One might think we are in a position to theorise how contemporary poems are made, on the basis of the above comments. But at this point we have to account for the fact that roughly a third of the poets rejected Auden's words, often quite vehemently. The notion of originality was a prime target here. For Kenneth Goldsmith, 'There's nothing that we can say that hasn't been said before, and we're fooling ourselves if we believe there is.' Auden 'should have known better', Goldsmith told me, 'That's an ignorant quote. It's a real romantic quote. It bothers me.' In response to my further question as to whether spontaneity did not in some way feature in his practice, Goldsmith shot back, 'I write emails. That's about it. That's the most spontaneous I get. "Meet me for lunch at 11:30."' (K. Goldsmith, interview with P. Magee, 6 July 2013).

Goldsmith is the author (2011) of *Uncreative Writing: Managing Literature in the Digital Age*. His concept-based, process-oriented work (e.g. *The Weather* [2005], a bald transcript of 365 days of WINS radio weather reports from 21 December 2002 to 20 December 2003, focussed on NYC but includes, as the radio station's own reports did, conditions in Baghdad during the initial invasion of Iraq) puts him at a variance to most of the poets interviewed. That fact might seem to diminish the representativeness of his response. But C. D. Wright had similar issues with Auden's words: 'It sounds like the hubris of someone painfully young who puts oversized stock in originality' (C. D. Wright, interview with P. Magee, 20 July 2013).

I proceeded to ask Wright whether there might not still be value in the quote, if we put aside its reference to originality. What about the link it draws between composing poetry and the daily experience of not knowing what you are going to say until you have said it? Wright replied that an unexpected compositional find 'is an ultra-sweet moment'. But she immediately added: 'For spontaneity, much preparation. You have to be there and for adults it does not show up often enough.' I asked her, a little later in the interview, whether it was always 'a matter of going back to things multiple times to try and get the right words? Does it ever just come at one time?' Wright replied, 'Very little arrives at one time, in one breath, in one circumstance, in one place' (C. D. Wright, interview with P. Magee, 20 July 2013).

(Actually, Wright did not even make this last comment at the interview. It was a retrospective addition to the text of our discussion, one that arose around the third or fourth re-draft, some 18 months later. The fact that no one reading the interview when it was published late last year in *American Poetry Review* [Wright 2015] would be any the wiser as to this discontinuity in its genesis is pertinent to the issue I am trying to unpack here.)

But let me give some context: I was interviewing Wright in Petaluma, a little to the north of San Francisco. I did so in my role as a chief investigator on *Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case-study in Poetry*, the international research project mentioned above. Kevin Brophy, Jen Webb and I were the project's chief investigators. We performed all the interviews. Michael A. R. Biggs contributed to the conceptual design of the project, as a participant investigator, while Sandra Burr, now sadly deceased, and Monica Carroll contributed to the analysis of the data. Our strategy involved hour-long interviews with poets in a variety of Anglophone countries, North and South (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, the UK and the USA). We asked the 75 poets a set of questions about their relationships with publishers, critics, audiences and fellow poets. We also asked about their experiences of education. A second set of questions shifted from institutions as normally defined to whatever might contour the judgements poets themselves make in the acts of composing and then editing up their writing. The Auden quote ('What do you think about the following quote? It comes from Auden's T. S. Eliot lectures ...') came at the start of this second tranche of questions. As for the poets we put these questions to, roughly 10 were as celebrated as Paterson (T. S. Eliot Prize 1997 and 2003, Geoffrey Faber Prize 1997, Whitbread Poetry Award 2003, Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry 2010) and Wright (the 2004 MacArthur Fellowship, the 2009 Griffin Poetry Prize, the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award). The others were less so, to varying degrees. The important thing was that all were sufficiently integrated into national and international systems of judgement (prizes, anthologies and other forms of public approbation) for their responses to offer some insight into the practices that go to make up the contemporary poetry most likely to be remembered.

Any such phrasing needs qualification, of course. The institutions of judgement which I have just referred to focus upon, and thereby select for our attention, poets who are producing lines 'for the page', as people say, in contrast to those producing poetry 'for the stage' (performance poetry, slam, rhyming) or 'the screen' (e-poetry, graphic poetry). Further, the poets we talked to were largely, though not exclusively, writers of free verse lyric. Many of these doubled as writers of prose poetry, or shorter metrical forms like the sonnet. Only a few wrote exclusively in the three/four or five beat measures that up till the late nineteenth century almost totalled the field. The preponderance of

free verse lyric poets is again by dint of the fact that theirs is the sort of poetry such prizes and anthologies most recognise, in the present conjuncture.

It is also worth adding by way of context – in this case less as an admission of limitation than a pointer to the study's value – that to study contemporary poetic composition as a collective phenomenon is not very common. Consider Joel Brouwer's decade-old praise of C. D. Wright for an insight into why, Wright, Brouwer (2008) wrote in the *New York Times*, is a poet who 'belongs to a school of exactly one'. The quote underlines our tendency to treat valued poem and poet as eccentric to the field we nonetheless classify them in. Auden's contemporary and critic, Jarrell (1980), put it this way, some 50 years prior to Brouwer: 'the good in poetry is always a white blackbird, an abnormal and unlikely excellence' (222).

The fact that poets and poetry readers value the 'white blackbird' seems closely related to the stark absence of synoptic studies of their compositional practices. Take the specific question driving this book: what are poets doing in the moment of composing? Is it something like talking to oneself? It is not easy to find a comprehensive answer to such a question. But there are certainly individual answers. In fact, one can find numerous authorial statements on how poems are composed, in books, essays and interviews: e.g. the 114 titles in Michigan's *Poets on Poetry* series, the interviews gathered over many decades by *The Paris Review* and now curated at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/name/>, anthologies of authorial statements on practice like W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis' *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (2000), as well as in the numerous essays by poets on the composition of specific poems, starting with Edgar Allan Poe's beguiling essay on the composition of 'The Raven' (1967, 480–92) – Jarrell (1999) produced one of these too, on how he composed and edited up 'The Woman at the Washington Zoo' (89–97). There are many, many authorial statements on what composition involves, and a substantial amount of commentary on such poetic self-reports too, in biographies, in monographs and in journal articles. Jonathan Bate's *Ted Hughes, an Unauthorised Life* (2015) is a recent instance. But one is hard pressed to find analyses that attempt to take the measure of this literature of self-report in any synoptic fashion, so as to consider what is common and what idiosyncratic in poets' statements on how they write. (Carl Fehrman's *Poetic Composition: Inspiration or Craft* [1980], published in Swedish in 1974, stands out in this regard. Hansen's [1982] survey of the first volumes in the Michigan series is also insightful; see also Blake [1990]. Interestingly, Fehrman finds the same pattern in studies of poets' drafts: many treatments of individual poet's manuscripts, and almost no synoptic accounts of patterns across the field. Sullivan [2013] provides one in her masterly *The Work of Revision*, though she too notes the rarity of her endeavour, underlining that the 'astonishingly rich material' published in facsimile editions of major works in the 1960s and 1970s has led to surprisingly little recuperative work [56]. More on her project below).

Useful as it would be to provide a survey of the 'poets on poetry' literatures I have just mentioned, it was not the intention of our research. We wanted, rather, to generate our own interviews, on questions of our devising. Among the reasons for this was the way it would allow us to target inquiries towards matters of real (as opposed to clique-based) disagreement, on the grounds that communities best reveal their workings in such fractures.

The pointer to a dissensus of that order in this matter of compositional immediacy came from a nationally-based pilot study I conducted some years earlier. It was clear from the 14 interviews I recorded over 2007–2008 that Australian poets were divided

on anything smacking of William Wordsworth's description of composition as 'spontaneous overflow' (1968, 22). Mal McKimmie, for instance, responded to one of my inquiries

I think that the problem with that question is the danger of stereotypes about the poet being a sort of shamanic medium, who receives poetry from the other side. As in Yeats' automatic writings. I am a great sceptic of that. (M. McKimmie, interview with P. Magee, 18 January 2007)

On the other hand, many of the poets interviewed at that time indicated that premeditation was constitutively excluded from their compositional practice. So Claire Gaskin told me that reading and analysis certainly informed her poetry, but not at the point of composition. She would never go into that process with a specific topic in mind: 'It's more like, I'll write and then I'll read it and discover what it's about' (C. Gaskin, interview with P. Magee, 20 January 2007). What is more, a number of the poets made clear that for them the very core of the poem, whatever later additions might come, would be produced in such a sitting (see the analyses of this material in Magee 2008, 2009).

A key reason, then, for asking the 75 Anglophone poets in our 2013–2015 interviews to respond to the Auden quote was to see if a similar division would be observed outside of Australia. The fact that Auden is hard to place in any particular aesthetic tradition (avant-garde, lyric or formalist?), politics (Christian or Marxist?) or even nationality (English or American?) made his words a good vehicle for such an inquiry. The division was indeed replicated with, as I have indicated, roughly two-thirds of those interviewed assuming positions on the quote closer to Gaskin's than to McKimmie's. The question of unpremeditated, in-the-moment, composition split the field yet again, this time internationally.

I now want to work out why.

3. Not a fast writer

As the interview progressed, the reasons for C. D. Wright's stance on the quote became more and more clear. The improvisational tenor of Auden's comments on 'genuine speech' simply do not answer to her practice, which is revisionary, and iterative:

PM: Can I ask how fast you write? Does it feel like a rapid process?

CDW: Not a fast writer.

PM: Is it line-by-line then?

CDW: It's a construction, a building project, laborious, sometimes tedious. Initially, of course, terrifying. You have to talk yourself through massive doubt and be bold enough to put a whole garage of lousy words down.

(C. D. Wright, interview with P. Magee, 20 July 2013)

The need for Wright to engage in some sort of free-flow writing was clear from her response to a question as to whether she tended to hold critical faculties at bay during the initial moments of composition – or did it feel she was composing and critiquing at the same time? 'Both at once', she replied, adding, 'The biggest inhibition about writing is self-censoring on the front-end.' But even if this response is taken to indicate some allegiance to the significance of that initial writing, it would be hard to ignore the evaluation in what Wright said next: 'That's the usual struggle. Just to let myself get it down. Then I can go after the art' (C. D. Wright, interview with P. Magee, 20 July 2013).

A further, vivid indication that for Wright the art comes subsequent to a first writing, through multiple acts of revision, arose during our discussion of her 1998 work, *Deepstep Come Shining*, which she described as ‘a joyous writing experience’ and ‘The most fun I have had writing. By far.’ How so, I asked. Wright told me that her friend and frequent collaborator, the photographer Deborah Luster, had proposed they ‘take a road trip, and do something related to dreams of the blind’, driving out to visit outsider artists in the northern parts of South Carolina and Georgia. Luster did not, ironically enough, end up developing any of her images. But Wright emerged from the trip with a ‘frog-fat notebook’ and proceeded to spend a month writing it up at the Virginia Center for Creative Arts:

Studios were in an old dairy barn. Very funky—I had a junked couch, a desk, and a chair. I was still using a typewriter then, my ultra-heavy, trusty IBM. And I had a white wall on which to mount my poem. I stared at it every day, like the painters in the Center were doing. I worked on it in an expressly visual way. It is my outsider painting, untrained, unfettered. (C. D. Wright, interview with P. Magee, 20 July 2013)

At this point I asked Wright if, when composing such work, it feels like ‘you are actually seeing the things you are describing?’ She responded a little obliquely, in terms of her field trips: ‘The words for seeing things can come later. But I make the notes on the spot.’ Hence that notebook, ‘frog-fat’. The distance of the writing it contained from the work Wright produced at the Center and later ended up publishing was apparent in the exchange that followed.

PM: So the perception is not necessarily there in the initial writing?

CDW: True.

PM: It is more that you have a description of –

CDW: –a description of a description I have yet to describe.

(C. D. Wright, interview with P. Magee, 20 July 2013)

Wright is also now, sadly, deceased.

So is C. K. Williams.

I interviewed him in Manhattan in 2013, a week after speaking to Wright.

For Williams, the poem really arrives at the end of the writing-up process. His immediate response to the quote was that Auden is ‘right on, when he says you don’t really know what you’re going to say until you say it.’ Williams added: ‘He’s so brilliant. His is the most brilliant mind about poetry there ever was’ (C. K. Williams, interview with P. Magee, 25 July 2013).

But Williams proceeded to query why speaking off the top of one’s head would necessarily result in something the world had not ‘heard one way or another before’:

PM: The idea of something that has never been said or heard before – do you see that as a possibility?

CKW: Every poem is something that’s never been seen or heard before. That doesn’t mean that the meaning of it, or the music of it, to continue our two themes, haven’t been heard before. But the poem, of course, didn’t exist until then, so it’s new, even if it’s a terrible poem. He seems to imply that it won’t be a terrible poem.

PM: The quotation does start, 'When we genuinely speak', so it does seem to imply that.
 CKW: Am I genuinely speaking to you now? I think I am. But according to that definition I'd need to say something new. I don't know if I've said anything new. Despite my admiration for Auden, I don't find it a very fruitful quote.

(C. K. Williams, interview with P. Magee, [25 July 2013](#))

Actually, these comments were not entirely surprising, given some of the things Williams had said earlier in the interview, on being asked about his education. 'Such as it is', he responded wryly. Williams had nonetheless mentioned as a high point having spent weeks in the Romantics scholar Morse Peckham's class studying the first 15 lines of *Endymion*. For Williams this training in 'very detailed, syllable-by-syllable reading was terrifically useful, and remains so.' At which point he added, 'Of course that's how you write poems: syllable-by-syllable.'

I found this surprising. Many of the poets I had interviewed, I replied, had described experiences of writing first drafts quite rapidly, certainly too fast to be composing syllable-by-syllable. They would of course engage in lengthy revisions later. In fact, I could not imagine a poem put together by syllable and I particularly could not imagine the tensile cadences of Williams's very long lines coming about that way.

Williams:

I would say too that at least parts of the first versions of my poems are often written fast. The first versions of the whole poem, though, are usually written quite slowly and quite jaggedly. But ultimately when the poem can be called finished, the judgment always comes down to the level of the syllable. And no matter how you get started, it's how you finish that's important. And the music ultimately lies in the syllable, doesn't it? Not to accept that would be like imagining Beethoven could write without taking all the notes into account. (C. K. Williams, interview with P. Magee, [25 July 2013](#))

In his case, as in Wright's, it would seem truer to say that inspiration comes not at the start so much as the end of the compositional process, in each finishing touch.

4. Dwelling with silence

Having told me that the matters Auden touched upon were 'very much at the heart of my practice as a writer', G. C. Waldrep, who is based in rural Pennsylvania, added that he never knew, entering 'the compositional space', just what he was about to write. Nor would he have a sense of 'more than a line or two ahead.'

I don't know where it's going and that's part of the fun of it, that kind of tightrope walk in the composition. That's a form of pleasure for me, to write and not know where it's going. (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, [9 July 2013](#))

What is more, Waldrep was happy to allow that what emerged in that unpremeditated process might amount to something 'that has never been said or heard before.' The fact that after '5000 years of written literature, and maybe 800 years of something recognisable as English', it is 'still possible to create something new within language' was to him both 'improbable and moving' (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, [9 July 2013](#)).

He did, however, have a rather different reservation about the quote, one that will assume increasing significance as my analysis proceeds. It was to do with that word ‘genuinely’:

I have to take into account a thing that’s strange for me, but true. I know which poems I wrote in a white hot heat of inspiration and passion. I know which poems of mine were written for close friends, would-be lovers, God. But you, as my reader, don’t. I know also which poems were written as exercises, the poems where I came in after trimming the hedges with the thought ‘I have two hours to kill’. (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, 9 July 2013).

Usually, Waldrep continued, the result of such time-killing exercises would be ‘garbage’. But this was not always the case. At times, a real poem would emerge. The crucial point is that in such cases no reader would be any the wiser as to whether the poem’s production was passionately-felt, and in that sense genuine, or not.

I’m talking about an uncanny space, where close friends tell me which poems from my books they respond to. They’re almost never the ones that I feel deeply invested in. Sometimes it happens. But often, it’s a poem that I recognise intellectually as a good poem, only I wrote it not out of inspiration, not out of an emotional connection. (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, 9 July 2013)

Waldrep had little investment in composing the poem; yet somehow a friend would think it ‘just pregnant with emotion and meaning, with genuineness, authenticity’ (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, 9 July 2013). The matter is, indeed, uncanny.

The other point of differentiation that emerged from Waldrep’s discourse, though he did not specifically flag this as a critique of the Auden quote, was to do with revision. For although Waldrep told me that he never approaches composing with a topic in mind (‘I don’t sit down to write “about” anything, ever’) and ‘I write all my poems in one sitting’, he immediately qualified, ‘I mean the first drafts.’ The editing of those drafts might take him ‘anywhere from a week to 10 years’ (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, 9 July 2013). This turned out to be quite a common scenario, one to which I will return. But it is worth adding that it was all the same clear that for Waldrep the essence of the poem emerged in those initial moments of composition, during that ‘tight-rope walk’ in which one does ‘not know where it’s going’.

This altitudinous metaphor seems curiously related to Waldrep’s description elsewhere in the interview of the way poems present themselves to us as readers. ‘The poetic voice hangs in a kind of space that is, for want of a better word, silence’ (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, 9 July 2013).

Walking alone through a densely forested hill-path, a few hours after the interview there in rural Pennsylvania, led me to think that poetry’s relation to nature probably lies in the way nature too seems to inhabit ‘a kind of space that is, for want of a better word, silence’.

5. Geological moments

I turn to another poet who found value in the Auden quote. Speaking to me in Sydney, Brook Emery noted that T. S. Eliot had said something similar to Auden. So had E. M. Forster. In Eliot’s version, the poet

does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in the effort to say it he is not concerned with making other people understand anything. He is not concerned, at this stage, with other people at all; only with finding the right words or, anyhow, the least wrong words. (1957, 98)

Emery proceeded to describe what he wants from poetry as a reader.

The poems that I dislike – that is probably too strong a word – the poems that do not always work for me, are poems where I can see the superstructure, or the under-structure, of an idea. The poem feels to me like an imposed illustration of that idea. Such poems do not work, they are too pat [...] But with good poems, the texture of the words, the rhythm of the words and whatever images that come up, carry the thought. (B. Emery, interview with P. Magee, 25 October 2014)

Emery's point was that one of the ways to avoid that disappointing lag between a thought and its expression is to discover your topic in the moment.

So is it important, I asked, to be 'not quite sure what you are doing in that instant?' Emery replied, 'Yeah, often I am not. I would rather be a bit unsure. Sometimes I am not even quite sure whether I am just making notes, or writing a poem' (B. Emery, interview with P. Magee, 25 October 2014).

This comment led Emery to a fascinating aside, concerning what it is 'to have an idea' for a poem. It is worth recalling at this point the trap Don Paterson described: 'If you have a good idea for a poem, it isn't'. The way Emery describes the matter is in fact consonant with that ban on pre-meditation: 'I might have "an idea"; but it is more like a half a line that has got me going – I am not sure where I am going, or how it is going to conclude' (B. Emery, interview with P. Magee, 25 October 2014).

I found this description illuminating. It helped me to recognise a thread running through many of the interviews. Paul Hoover, whom I interviewed at San Francisco State University in 2014, put it this way: 'Writing begins with an intuition and just a few words, such as the phrase I read today in Pessoa: "a good sadness"'. 'Intuition', he added, 'guides all the way to the end and the words lean this way and that.' I was particularly struck by the aphorism Hoover then advanced: 'It's not what we know, but what we know and guess' (P. Hoover, interview with P. Magee, 14 November 2014). Again, this sense of a thought that is grappling with the contingencies of the moment, and making the poem – or at least its first draft – up with whatever the language has to offer at that point in time. Key in both Emery and Hoover's responses is that the 'idea for a poem' is really a phrase sparking more phrases, that may well itself end up in the poem. What it is not is a prospective synopsis of the whole.

Waldrep described something very similar, in mentioning that 'usually for me the nub of the poem is language, a piece of language that I've either come up with, or overheard, or misread.' He analogised his practice of writing to having 'a sweater with a sticky, string thread to it'; it is a matter of 'getting a hold of that little thread of language, and then hopefully drawing it out in ways I don't expect' (G. C. Waldrep, interview with P. Magee, 9 July 2013). Emery's observation on what it is to have 'an idea for a poem' brings to mind a comment Maxine Chernoff made to me as well. I am referring to her statement that she found the sort of writing journals where you note down good ideas and potential lines 'counter-productive'. She explained this as follows: 'Once I have written something down in any form, it seems I cannot use it again' (M Chernoff, interview with P. Magee,

17 November 2014). Her point is, it seems to me, two-fold: firstly, her poems are composed at one sitting; secondly, her first thought on the matter of a poem is actually from the poem – it is not a summary statement about, or even a gesture towards that work, but some actual phrase in it.

We are a long way here from Wright's reference to a note in the field as 'a description of a description I have yet to describe.'

As for the sort of effect Emery seeks in this fashion to generate, he was rather like Paterson in proposing that the epiphanic circumstances of the poem's production have a mirror-effect on us as we read it: 'The reader is carried in the same way that the poet was. He or she thinks, "Yes, it has to go this way, yes." But it is not predictable.' A little later Emery referred to readers 'having the same perceptions and the same physical feelings, as the poet, almost' (B. Emery, interview with P. Magee, 25 October 2014). Allow me to underline that 'almost'.

Rae Armantrout's interview is interesting to cite at this juncture. Her immediate response to Auden's words was sceptical: 'it is optimistic to think that we can say something that has never been heard or said before. I hope it happens to me! But it is a big claim.' And she used exactly the same word as C. D. Wright to characterise the final words ('that has never been said or heard before') of the quote: 'I think the ending has a bit of hubris to it.' So what led her, all the same, to say that she agreed 'with the general spirit of Auden's words'? (R. Armantrout, interview with P. Magee, 11 November 2014).

We had been discussing – this is in San Diego, with a cactus garden just outside – the fact that poetry demands attention to read it. I asked if 'paying attention' was key to Armantrout's compositional process as well.

I do not want to just talk about myself on this. I think it is true of pretty much all the poetry that interests me: you can see that the writer is thinking about what he or she just said, and responding to it.

When I start writing, I do not really know where I am going. I start with a general feeling, sometimes it is just curiosity or puzzlement. Sometimes I have a tone in my head. But I do not know where I am going. I get a few lines down and then I start to hear what the lines are saying, or what the lines are doing, and I start to riff off that. Sometimes I will start arguing with what I have just said. I am not always arguing. But that *is* a way of paying attention. I do think that if you are only paying attention to some kind of intent, and are not paying attention to the words you are writing as you write them, then you are going to end up doing something that is not very lively. That is how I feel. (R. Armantrout, interview with P. Magee, 11 November 2014)

Armantrout's stress on the literally dialogic dimension of poetry is quite distinct to Emery's concern with ideas that perform their meaning in the very texture of the poem. The two do, nonetheless, report some common practices. For instance, Armantrout indicates that she frequently creates her poems by binding separately composed – and initially distinct – writings into the one piece. At other times it is a matter of waiting:

Sometimes I write something and I know it is not finished, but I do not know what it needs. I know the sort of thing I want to go there, but the actual thing has not made itself manifest yet. I almost have to wait to see it, or hear it. I have to just be open to it and when it arrives I will recognise it and think, 'Oh, you go there.' (R. Armantrout, interview with P. Magee, 11 November 2014)

As for Emery, he would also often find himself merging separately composed pieces, or recognising that ‘the obsessions that have been building up for months in them’ were more or less shared, and would speak well to each other if corralled into the one poem. He too might come to a standstill for a while:

You get this far along a line and suddenly there is nothing more: ‘I’ve hit a wall here, there’s nothing coming.’ What follows might come weeks later. (B. Emery, interview with P. Magee, 25 October 2014).

This is the context in which we have to understand the ‘almost’ I flagged above (Emery’s comment on readers ‘having the same perceptions and the same physical feelings, as the poet, almost’). It transpires that Emery actually finds the manner in which a poem is written and the way it is read quite distinct. But his point is not, with Waldrep, that readers can find intensity in poems he himself has produced without much personal investment. Here we come back to C. D. Wright’s interview, the in fact numerous lines she retrospectively added to our dialogue during editing, lines that will seem to our readers like they were uttered at the time. This observation applies, of course, to almost any interview. Emery has a similar discrepancy between compositional and reading experiences in mind. It is to do with the amount of time it takes each respective party to experience the poem. The words one reads in 10 creative minutes of mirroring another’s supple and immediate-seeming mind, might have taken the poet 10 whole years to generate, at intervals.

In sum, both Emery and Armantrout characterise composition as an attentiveness to the contingencies of the moment; yet they also both describe it as at times spanned out over multiple separate occasions. Nor were they alone in these regards.

How are we to explain this picture of intermittent immediacy? One way might be to think of waiting for the next compositional instalment as part of the performative intensity and openness of the writing, another way of ‘paying attention’ as you compose. We might thereby suggest, in terms of our quote, that while Auden *seems* to be talking about a writing that starts and finishes at one sitting, on the analogy with conversation itself, we could just as well read his ‘we do not have the words ready to do our bidding, we have to find them’ as referring to a lengthier process. Why should that process of finding not stretch over some months, or even years? Who is to say how long a genuine statement takes to say itself? How long, for that matter, is a moment? In geology – I imagine Auden would have liked this – the word can stand for ‘an interval of time ... throughout which a particular faunal or floral assemblage existed’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2009, n.p.). Why not imagine a moment of genuine speaking as similarly momentary? It takes an epoch to say it well.

6. In common

It transpires that not a few of the poets, whom I blithely chalked up in the two-thirds pro-Auden, were positive towards the quote because they were interpreting Auden’s ‘we have to find them’ to refer to a time well beyond the immediate sitting. (For a vivid instance, albeit in relation to a different question, see Jen Webb’s interview with Ian Wedde [2012]).

But even those who took Auden to have something more like real-time speech in mind indicated extensive post-compositional revision. We have just seen this to be the case with Brook Emery, and Rae Armantrout, respectively. But I also quoted G. C. Waldrep (‘That’s a

form of pleasure for me, to write and not know where it's going'). stating that the revisions to his unpremeditated compositions might take him anywhere up to 10 years. Whereas Don Paterson, who appeared in the first section of this article describing poetry as 'almost a documentary record of an epiphany that has taken place in the course of its own making', by the same token reported that to start with he would be 'a year on any poem' before publishing it – 'And it would go through ninety or a hundred drafts'. And though he writes 'a lot more quickly these days', post-compositional revision is clearly part of that process, as indicated by the wonderful metaphor he advanced for what it is to get a line you are trying to revise down:

You are listening to the line, turning things very slowly to one degree here or there, left or right, and all of a sudden you hear a click and the whole line just goes clear, it opens up and you're into the safe. (D. Paterson, interview with K. Brophy, 2 July 2013)

Almost everyone, in sum, reported engaging in time-consuming, retrospective revision.

7. Corroboration

I do not have the space here to unpack a full theory of the differences or for that matter the convergences mapped above. What I will do instead is set forth an I think instructive comparison, based on manuscript evidence. A recourse to comparative, textual evidence may also act to forestall a likely criticism of my approach to this point. The criticism would be this: how can you be sure that what people say in a formal interview about themselves is at all a true picture of their practices?

Corroboration of poets' reports on how they write is difficult to supply, for the obvious reason that we cannot really observe poets composing – or at least not in any persuasively replicable way. But there are other forms of evidence, some of it quite suggestive. Take, for instance, this matter of historical corroboration. We can look at manuscripts. What we find in doing so is that when Keats claimed 'if Poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all' (Letter of 27 February 1818 to John Taylor, Keats 1966, 46), his claim was far less a matter of romantic rhetoric than we, who equate 'literary value' with "'revisedness'" (Sullivan 2013, 55) tend to assume. Keats was, Sullivan (2013) writes in her recent *The Work of Revision*, a poet 'who, at least within certain bounds, practised what he preached' (30). Reading into the various scholars Sullivan cites to make the case, and the manuscript sources they cite in turn, one sees just how minimally Keats revised prior to handing his compositions over to friends to copy and see through publication – in textual scholar and Keats editor Jack Stillinger's words, 'manuscript after manuscript shows him getting *most* of the words right the first time' (1992, 309). In other words, there is in Keats's case some documentary corroboration for the possibility that minimally revised work be genuinely good, in fact, genius.

In assessing claims to immediate compositional practice it is worth keeping George Gordon Byron's example in mind as well. In *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (1996), Zachary Leader points to the extraordinary rapidity and unrevisedness of Byron's work, facts clear from both letters and manuscripts. Byron's claim that the 1272 lines of his 1814 poem *Lara* were composed in just four weeks 'while undressing after balls and masquerades' (qtd in Leader 1996, 78) would scarcely be believable, were it not clear from the evidence that it was indeed composed in one month. We can also say, on the basis

of textual, epistolary and other evidence, that Canto I of *Don Juan*, the most revised Canto of the 17, took a mere four months. 'With later cantos', Leader comments, 'time of composition is measured in weeks or days' (105). The 111 eight-line stanzas of Canto XIII were, for instance, written in a week (79). Byron's comment to his publisher John Murray, 'When I once take pen in hand – I *must* say what comes uppermost', seems to have genuine truth in it (Byron, Letter to John Murray, 18 November 1820, qtd in Manning 1992, 210).

Sullivan (2013) detects a material substrate to these practices as well. The previously high cost of paper, to cite the most striking instance, meant that prior to the twentieth century, 'writers were more likely to content themselves with one draft' (23). A related issue concerned the cost of correcting printed copy: in the nineteenth century it was rare for authors to see any proofs at all, and in the UK case, required a trip to London (36). The invention of linotype in 1886 made it much easier to action changes on copy, with the result that the whole sequence of galley proofs, revised proofs and page proofs became potential sites for revision (38). An agglomerating, multiply-drafted text like *Finnegans Wake* would simply not have been possible without these material changes, as its relatively anodyne first drafts reveal (Crispi, Slote, and Van Hulle 2007, 12). In such ways, Sullivan attacks a key problem in prevailing discussions of revision:

Both those who advocate revision and those who denigrate it tend to assume that it works in the same way for all writers at all points of time, regardless of medium. (8)

Her historicising book, on the other hand, points to the fact that there have been times in history when the composition of verbal artworks in verse has been much more akin, both in its image and in the practices that generate it, to the registration of a form of live performance. It shows such a culture of poetic composition to be possible.

But even more to my task of making sense of the split depicted above, Sullivan's work, and Leader's and Stillinger's in turn, underline that there have been great variations in these regards between individual authors, though they be in epochal terms each other's' exact contemporaries. We see this when we compare Coleridge's or Shelley's painstaking revisional practices (see Fehrman 1980, 12–13, for an example of the latter) with Keats's, or Byron's. Why should contemporary practices be any more homogenous? Why expect Wright to write the same way as Paterson?

We also find, looking back on this historical record, variations within one and the same author.

In 'literary historical terms the Wordsworth remembered', Leader reminds us, 'is the Wordsworth of "spontaneous overflow." But, Leader continues, the poet had as much to say about "labour", "judgement," "finish," "poetical pains"' (24). 'Wordsworth wrote his poems over and over in a process that with some works went on for decades before publication', Stillinger (1991) adds, pointing out that *Peter Bell* was not published until 21 years after first completion; that *The Prelude* did not go to press till 45 years after the (many think complete) 1805 version, with changes to nearly half of the lines (74), while *Guilt and Sorrow* underwent a full 48 years of post-compositional changes before making it into print (72). We might see Wordsworth's case thus as corroboration for the numerous poets cited above who were pro-Auden in relation to unpremeditated and immediate composition and yet reported lengthy processes of revision as well.

We might – were it not that Wordsworth’s ‘spontaneous overflow’ phrase has I think more than any other statement of Romantic poetics borne the brunt of that strange phenomenon Paul de Man noted back in 1967:

whenever romantic attitudes are implicitly or explicitly under discussion, a certain heightening of tone takes place, an increase of polemic tension develops, as if something of immediate concern to all were at stake. (1993, 3)

It has to be said that the word ‘spontaneous’ does not, at the current conjuncture, overly help this state of affairs, with its evocation of ‘mediumistic writing’. The Surrealists have a part in this too. We can easily misread Wordsworth’s reference to ‘spontaneous overflow’ to be indicating, with Bréton, that the way to find a poem is to attain

the most passive or receptive state of mind possible [...] Write quickly with no preconceived subject, so quickly that you retain nothing and are not tempted to reread. (André Breton, qtd in Boice and Meyers 1986, 480)

Actually, when we put Wordsworth’s phrase back in the context of its very own sentence, we find nothing like this trust in immediacy *per se*:

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: **and though this be true**, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. (1968, 22, my bold)

Wordsworth is stressing the deeply conscious prior thinking necessary for an unpremeditated composition to be of any value. As such, the idea is not that far from C. D. Wright’s ‘For spontaneity, much preparation’, cited above. To pay heed to Wordsworth’s concurrent theme of ‘emotion recollected’ (1968, 43) is to realise that he has nothing like Bréton’s passive and unretaining scribe, in mind. You have to be there, alert in body and mind. In fact, Wordsworth’s reference to ‘spontaneous overflow’ is not all that different to the discussion of what it is to have learnt a role, in Constantine Stanislavski’s famous text *An Actor Prepares* (1980). Only by ‘living a part’ in slowly accreting research and rehearsal can one get to the point where the role will happen on stage, getting it right consciously first, ‘because that will best prepare the way for the blossoming of the subconscious, which is inspiration’ (14). That ‘blossoming’ is, of course, for Stanislavski the aim of the process, and for all the preparation it involves cannot, n.b., be premeditated at all. Wordsworth is describing method acting.

Note

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