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The poetic beginning: *After speaking in tongues*

Take sound from air and human speech in acts of subtraction poetics and the leftover empty space is scant. We suck the pauses up, search for intervals, in need of non-existent desperate silence. The earth wobbles on its turn, still a little more inhabitable than the dry dust planets cracking with ice, little sub-worlds, far away, relatively speaking—and speaking they are.

The critical beginning: *Dimensions of current aesthetic-poetic expression*

What will happen if we no longer speak in tongues? Will our inner workings be subsumed by quantum poetic machinery performing mysterious entanglements in a modality that colonizes its operations through our efficient minds? Not sci-fi, but wi-sci-fi, as we become a pervasive penetrating genre vibrating us on its own frequency. Will we think aesthetic activity differently under those circumstances and conditions, if we even know we are inhabited by them?

How do we *think* a work into being now? Not think *about* a work, since that assumes the work is already extant, available as an object of critical attention. But think a work as in: make a meal, construct a building, or compose a piece. And what connection does that *thinking* have to the techno-media-material world we inhabit?

We can mark a point of departure at another historical extreme as well: *The Persians*, Aeschylus's fifth-century play, which I saw in performance this year. I was struck by it, watching the structure of Greek drama coming into being before our eyes, the creation of the chorus and its dialogue with the individual voice. Witnessing an atavistic moment, when an archetype of our dramatic imagination was being wrought, thought, as never before, within the structures and constraints of stage, audience, and performance conceptions.

Rather than approach this work, any work, only in terms of the mediated conditions of its production (its materials, media, structure), I suggest we consider the mediating conditions of conception (how it is thought). We should not just think about how technologies and media affect/drive/permit certain forms of expression, but how we internalize these possibilities in thinking the work we produce. What is a poetic text now? A word list and feed? A generative algorithm? A document of the state? A publicity stunt?

As a complement to the various aesthetics of new media, can we imagine the critical outlines of a mediating aesthetics? Aesthetics as an active force for generating

productive experience. Media specificity, media archaeology, and critical theories grounded in materiality—these focus (usefully) on artifacts, systems of production, and circumstances of/in the material world to read their formal and operational properties. But they don't account for the constitutive patterning, the ways technologies imprint conception as surely as literary forms. If the conception of a work is an individual oral performance in front of a live audience, it is thought differently than if imagined from the start as a sensor-triggered ambient experience across a series of public and private spaces. This is not determinism, but a reflection on the ways possibilities of conception are shaped. What do we think a work can be across a spectrum of considerations: the base-as-superstructure of matter, material, media, mode, modality and all their infrastructures and disciplines; the critical-social-historical dimensions of training and enculturation, the legacy discourses and the states of the fields; and immersion in the popular public commercial and consumable networks of information, navigation, and entertainment flows. And so on.

What I have just begun to sketch are particularities, historical and specific. But in a larger theoretical sense, I think aesthetic activity is generated between two poles—or axes—of possibility: *the structuring* and *the emergent* conditions of composition. These can be aligned with the diagrammatic and the stochastic. The diagrammatic refers to conventional encoding, the use of syntactic, graphical, legible, and habitual forms and formats as semantic. The diagrammatic is everything we know of forms and through forms and their structuring activity. The stochastic refers to the emergent transformations and formations of language—first as a primary semiosis, a sign system built on radiant immanence, through difference, and then in the arbitrary but living systems of signification and communication that work in collective and cognitive sociality. The stochastic includes what we don't know and can't know, only bring into being. Volumes are latent in the description of each of these, and in the space between them is infinitely generative, a space where the work of literature (and aesthetic activity) resides. Structuring and emergent processes exist in productive tension with each other. The diagrammatic is structural, the stochastic is processual (not procedural, not rule-bound, constraint-driven, or programmatic, not simply algorithmic, but non-linear—generating highly specific but unpredictable outcomes).

The history and theory of literature may be written between these poles. A history of forms—the diagrammatic—is an aspect of what we might term the ergonomic imagination, habituated to embodied modes of thinking, of transforming experience into forms of expression, expressed form. This is a process of imprint and transformation, of internalization within individuals/cultures and external change, marked by shifts of mode,

style, interpretation, by the communality of forms and the deviation from their norms. This is a history and critical engagement with embodiment in matter, in material conventions, in conceptions of composition and production, in habits and manners of reception. These features of the literary might, should, could be described diagrammatically—and yet, along the arc of their development, in the eddies and sidetracks, backwaters and mainstreams, the course of stochastic activity shows in every instantiation, every act of productive creative work. Some are better than others, some more interesting, some more engaging. The terms of aesthetic interest are not generated merely through the foundational principles of production, but through social/cultural receptors that take all the resonance and assonance, qualities associative and palliative, stimulating and soporific, and so forth into account. The productive engines are only the fundamental and general principles of production. The qualities are all in instantiation, the particular, the circumstantial, the specific and significantly embodied.

By invoking *the* diagrammatic and *the* stochastic we create reified abstractions that seem difficult to get hold of within a grounded practice or analytic critical approach. They are not, however, ontological categories like “being” and “nothingness,” that can’t be wrestled to the earth. They are tractable principles of poetic production. The diagrammatic is where writing practices reside—in the forms and informed production of work and its critical reception. Diagrammatic principles are not simply structural, but also, relational, describing all of the part to whole, entity to other, aspects of a work—not just in terms of what it *is* but what it *does*. The workings of a work are diagrammatic in their basic operations, their making of meaning across relations. Stochastic poetics is the force of change and specificity, the particularity that makes poetic acts distinct from other forms of discourse—or not, in accord with the temper of the times or across times.

But where does this leave us now? What is the moment of our moment? Where are we in cultural time with respect to a theory of aesthetic production? Can we engage these principles to see the practices of poetics, poiesis, within the conditions of our time?

Let’s turn our attention back to techno-engagement and aesthetics. We know the process of conception and production are linked, through the ergonomics of composition. So often overlooked, this constrains the imagination as surely as sonnet forms and apps, combinatoric and programmatic modes of thought. The ergonomics of poetic thought are present in the performance of sustained speaking, breathing, the breaking of a line, the un-utterable acts of duration and extension, the affordances internalized as moves, as strategies. I compose a composing algorithm. Parameters of the generative engine are creatively unleashed as protocols. Not new or news—but now a part of thinking, way to describe what we knew already, before. The techniques of prior proceduralists, long ago,

were recorded in Gabriel Peignot's 1842 compendium, *Amusements Philologiques*, an inventory of acrostics, magic squares, other complex strictures in the history of literary production. Frederic Forté, in the appendix of his recently published *Minute Operas* (issued in translation by Burning Deck), lists the "fixed forms" on which he drew for his tightly structured works: the bibina, quenina, cural sonnet, corpuscular poem, heterogram and limerick, rondel and renga and terza rima and so on. The list is long and still incomplete, as rule sets continue to be generated.

The point? All constraints are, simultaneously, openings and limits across the multiple modalities of composition/reception: textual, as just noted in the play of forms and rules, but also, graphical, tactile, and spatial features. To think visually/graphically about poetic forms we must have a vocabulary of features drawn from design—know how to mobilize the force of graphic variables to the service of textual composition: size, scale, shape, orientation, color, tone, and position—to which traditional set we add the features of animation: temporality, movement, direction, growth, rate of change and so on. In shifting from the GUI to the TUI, the tactile user interface, our readerly relation becomes more actively physical, not just a matter of fingers tucked into the file of pages, keeping track of multiple sites of reading, but also the link, click, pick activities that have developed into an interface of pinch, swipe, expand, zoom, dive, and meander. But distributed, spatially embedded, and mobile interfaces—the SPUI—now react to our tilt, turn, follow, and avoidance behaviors. Will we soon find ourselves dodging the drones of verse and keeping clear of the surveillance cameras that pump out their persistent couplets and repetitive refrains from Roomba robot bases while the muzak machines make the supermarket aisles into a raw conceptual terrain? Poetic license might become an act of physical aggression, spatial trespass, or requests for submission in the need for discipline of the wanton world, the potentiality of commercial apps, and modest means. What if isotope poems are let loose to fly? Under whose radar and what remit? Who returns the work to its point of origin or not, resets the poetentiality to start again—below the threshold we know the quantum entanglements work faster than the nano-bot processors who live on lost seconds and stolen time pressure, pumped on atmospheric hype and inorganic inputs, high on silicon, feeding from the differentials they can measure and trade in, like so many hot-shot day-brokers calculating the rise and fall of energy and their ability to take advantage of exchange. Whole clocks can be battered by the alteration of temperature across a day and a banking of thermal flow. Can the mediation of aesthetic production draw on these sources? Does it already? Is productive energy powered by flux and flow? W.C. Williams, writing long ago from with the subjective experience of polarities, said ride the energy when it is moving and when it

stops, do tasks. All media require work, editing in manuscript, proofing type-set script and shifting letters in the form with a tweezer, the surgical strike on language, or cutting and pasting or parsing the code to find the missing bracket, stroke, dot or sigh.

And the time of poetry, what/where is that? Not its timings, which are, again, diagrammatic, but its time and temporalities, which are stochastic, unpredictable, unfolding. Not its era, epoch, age, but its experiential dimension shrinking to a point of awareness that it *is*—a discourse of attention. The call of the protocol—to that attention. Traces left in the changes of a shared mind, the collective bargain of value assessment passes faster than judgment.

Now, only, from the mere stuff of matter we recall that Marshall McLuhan's famous formulation of verbi-voco-visual forms of mediation emerged from the technological context of the mid-20th century: television, radio, film, mass circulation magazines and print publishing industries. In our current moment, the expressive capacities of media offer other features—elaborated above, animation and motion, but also projection and overlay, holographic and nanoscopic possibilities. New technologies don't determine imaginative work, they are brought into being by such conjurings. Not surprisingly, from the mid-20th century onward the algorithmic, emergent, stochastic, and even quantum capacities of computing have or will become integral to experimental writing. If we ask how the semantics and syntax of such features are finding their way into the vocabulary of poetics, and whether and how these developments will structure works and their reception ahead, we answer our own question in advance by its formulation. We are shifting from just speaking in tongues to being spoken in code and produced in projective space. In a room of directional sensors and a corridor of triggered fragments, the subject positions of production and reception are altered.

We shift to the transient deracinated experiential spacetime, fragile, fleeting, precious, a permanent condition of inventing that already always immersive condition. New? No. But now the technicians, practitioners of the profane, ritualize the passage from one mode of production to the next, archaeologize it, and fetishize, as if matter and material were reifications to be read in their fixity rather than used for the triggering capacity to generate, anew, in each encounter. A work by pen by daylight by evening flame at the case in the stick in the hand through the fingers on a keyboard trained hands typing out chords dictated by the voice transcribed automatically replayed automata-ly as resistance lowers and the conceptual distinction between back-end programming and front-end display that space where work occurs the work of neurons, bodies, procedures gets characterized as literary, aesthetic, because it stands apart—from what?

Over the last few days we have heard, felt, witnessed, been immersed in theoretical propositions, extrapolated from the work of poet-practitioner-critics and synthesized from many multiple points of reference. Now, to finish, I offer a few speculative questions to those actively engaged in the field of experimental poetics. To what extent does deliberate attention to the changed technological capacities of production have to factor into one's work? How much are we and our processes internalized through the acculturation of daily business—I do my banking in the same movements I used to write, while the physical acts of chopping vegetables or brushing teeth are far from poetic composition. How, why, do, should we mark the change of the basic imaginative ergonomics, procedural parameters, processual capacities for aesthetic work? As we step into and back from frames of critical self-consciousness, work happens and in its working we can see, know, sense something about our times. The question, for the historically self-aware subject-poet-producer is not “How did we get here?” but instead, “Where is the here that we are?” What is the aesthetic work of our time(s)? What constitutes a *poetic* text in the textures of networked and cultural exchanges?

The poetic ending: *Histories and futures*

Poetics grows up domesticated, like a dog, its bark reverberating in a group, then on a stage, holding forth. With meter and metrics the art advances, structured from body breath and motion, the short bursts and the long holding, the exhalation and the inward draw, into the chest, into the stomach, feet, hands. The stomping effect of form on language is to make it perform like song. All that went on a long time, after all, and the somatic pleasures of verse account in some large part for its popularity, letting the tricks of staccato and accent roll around in the mouth and on the tongue. The meaning of verse is an effect but the metric of it is the sound fact. On it goes, into shape-forms, numbers of this and that circumscribed, proscribed, adhered to. Dance steps for the intellect. Perform accordingly. Alterations and exchanges. Forms also come in the luggage, hitch a ride on a trade route, get noticed at court, picked up off the street, overheard in the market, found in the back rooms, the bar rooms, the public square. The whole panoply of possibilities is populated by variant species of some things that are the same and some that are other. Human speech, human speaking, that prevails, even with the use of drums, guitars, the flutes and clarinets that take our breath away, even with all of these overarching them all is speech. Acts. Language. Synthesizer. The final transition to a light load on a heavy processor outputs as simulation. We don't mind, amused by the voice that is not ever ours. The machines should be allowed to talk, to us, for us, with us, their servile guiding tone, responsive to requests. Not a threat. Not even a hint or whisper of an intelligence

comes through. Nor should it. The sub sub level of production is in the offerings to use, in the new vocabulary of out-sourced sound files and types, the tones of inaudible and audible outputs take their place alongside the sighing springs and snapped elastic of an earlier era.

Gone the wooden slat slaps, the churn slurp, the creaking bridge and carriage wheels, the whip cut through the air, the chain pull and tackle pinch. Vanished the fire sparks and chimney wind, the grinder's wheel and water paddle. Absent the hooves on stones and cobble, the crier's noise, the vendor's cries, the hawker's call and drawbridge's rise in pitches and starts against the background of the water. Barely anymore the factory whistle or the church chimes' tolls the sound of cows the brush of water against their knees the goats' short bleat and lambs' forlorn call for their ewes. The texture of traffic, motors, apparatuses and operations layered into all that, putting hard edges into the softer meter of industrial verse. The terms of production became ones of conception and the mechanical operas with their brute battle against the sentimental sensations moved into the available real estate of the soundscape. We used these new techniques and measured our own humanity against them, with them, knowing ourselves to be immune, more or less, to the greater destructive forces of the times, maybe, except, and then saw the modernity that absorbed belief, took it over, ran with it, made the sheer drive towards some impossible pace of progress into a religion whose chants were increasingly not those of the breath the body the sigh. The role of accompaniment turned over into lead and result is not at the service of but subjection to a new regime, a discipline, a set of nodes and nodal modalities, mobilities, acuties. Not language of machines, not language in machines, not language coming into or out of machines, but the very takeover of soundnoise rhythms, produced how where, and so our self-adjusting ears adapt and produce alternate interiorities and external vibrations unlike the other sounds of prior utterance. A helicopter overhead beats with its wings and praises its own singing. The noise music and the sound forms all escape and make new waves into the world. Our transformation hardly matters and goes with little notice unspoken, unsung. The time of tongues is past.