

Typo-Grapho-Poeisis or Some of How Some Poems Get Made  
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Letters, words, lines with breaks and indents, organized into stanzas or verse—the format features of a traditional poem are so strictly coded that they are recognizable across a room. Long before the text is legible, the thing is identifiable as a poem. The fact that format distinguishes the form and has for so long across many media is an argument against any kind of techno determinism in the shaping of poetry through the mere prose of production. If we can shape our words to organize themselves in sequence, break a line and let it hang suspended, connected simultaneously to the others to which it speaks across the space of the page and do this in stone carving, or fine handwriting, set in type, or calligraphed in manuscript, pounded out on a typewriter or pasted up from cut out letters recycling the day's news – then how can we imagine in any way that the shape of form is linked to media and materials of production?

But even if the technologies of media are not deterministic, every medium has its affordances and capacities. These shape the way we write, physically, literally. But only at the radical edges of tradition, among the avant-garde or experimental poets, do the possibilities of media become part of the language of *poeisis*, of making. Then production challenges our idea of poetry on formal, material grounds as well as conceptual ones.

Very literally the affordances of media are more frequently constrained by the concept of a conventional poetic form rather than the other way around. Only at rare moments do the capacities of media become seductive enough to overcome the deeply imprinted habits of thought attached to the shape of poetic verse. Whether we encounter scattered, twisted, overprinted lines and letters or well-ordered sequences of lines observing the decorum of tradition, we are seeing the articulation of media in the service of production. These possibilities, exploited or left latent, are integral to conception and composition. But the articulation of media and the shape of composition are not isomorphic and each has the capacity to push against the other.

We have precious little language in our critical vocabulary for discussing the relation of media affordances and the shape of poetic expression. What would a descriptive language of the technics of production add to our understanding of *poeisis*? How would an understanding of the technical and formal conventions of the graphic means of production in which we experience written poetry shape our understanding of what a poem is and can be? Do the expressive limitations and/or affordances of various

graphic means inform the aesthetic qualities of a work through features of its actual production? These questions have been left largely unexamined in the history of poetic criticism, which focuses on structure at the semantic, metric, level, or the procedural and conceptual, and takes the physical appearance of the work on its material substrate as a give or at mere expression of the already thought rather than a source of conception.

If production and reproduction are the after effect of composition, a mere service to the already made poem, then to what extent might the imagination that arises from production inform the act of poetic making? Usually, though not always, composition and production/reproduction are separate acts, with a gap of time and other factors like editing and refinement intervening. Live blog poetics, tweet works and such, are current examples of the non-inter-mediated condition of media production where there is almost no pause between composition and exposure or publication. Hit “post” or “send” and fresh made work appears in public view. But most production is a re-mediation of poetry, and the acts of violence or sublime transformations it may perform on a text are mainly noted when the effects are extreme.

Of course all media are social forms. No human expression escapes the web of associated tangles in which its situated-ness speaks of the moments and histories of production and reception, conditions of use, expectations of form, formality, decorum. Indeed, we might speak of the politesse of poetic production in another era by contrast to the disregard for rules of restraint in our own, and through that theme explore the social mores and habits of polite discourses and poetic practice as a form of sociality. Each way of working is a way of being in the world and among others.

But acts of production are often solitary exercises, networked though they are to the conditions of access to equipment or techniques, and in the individual act a whole embodied technics of moves and motions, bodily economies and mental skills, professional exercises and proprietary knowledge come into play. What does it cost to make a poem? And how is its making then essential to its being? Or not. Those gentle tendrils of verse carved into the tombstone of some lost angel bespeak the attitudes and disposition of a time gone, recollected in kitsch and sadness. We do not write many poems on the grave markers of our dead any more, unless they warrant a memorial large enough for civic scale. The graphic forms of official poetry are inscribed according to their own painfully banal generalizations and exaggeratedly elevated aspiration. Each act of production is also about sites and sights, lines and views, access and positions, a set of enunciative acts that situated the viewer reader within a network of speech act relations. But that is another topic. Though related and essential to note at the very least, within the

discussion of production and media, this enunciative system of language's material dimensions is not the center of this discussion.

The focus, instead, is *some of how some poems get made*. To what extent might knowledge of the affordances of media actually change the approach to composition and to the critical discourse of analysis of poetics? Each mode of production has its choreography, set of moves for the body to perform. Production is balletic, physical, a dance of rhythmic motions, checks and starts, with eyes and hands ruled by various materials and relations among them. Each has its own mark-making to surface relationship – relief printing doesn't allow for enjambment of letters because two pieces of lead cannot occupy the same space in our physical universe. Spatial illusions can be drawn as can shifts of scale, but the introduction of anamorphic distortion and curved space produces entirely different effects when a piece of film is warped, twisted, and re-photographed. Style features have different degrees of consistency in different media – letterpress type is far more stable as a transmitter of font styles than handwriting. But the affectivity index is much lower in letterpress. These contrasts allographic and autographic marks have been noted before, by Nelson Goodman and others, but their relation to poetic production has been limited to contrasts of manuscript and print, rather than put into dialogue with the basic notion of how we understand what a poem is in relation to its graphical forms and expressions. And finally, every medium has a failure liability index – the cost associated with making a mistake. Other graphical elements might be teased into our critical vocabulary, but at the very least, this list will make a start. Choreography, mark to surface relationships, capacity for spatial or other illusion, style consistency and affective inflection, and failure liability, these, comically exaggerated in such a set of terms whose exaggerated nomenclature is meant as a gesture of over-compensation for its long absence, join the very basic elements of lineation possibilities and latent formalities as the framework for our critical discussion.

To begin, then, we will go through a set of descriptive exercises to sense the pattern of production, understand what is involved in actually making a poem letter by letter. This is what I am referring to as the calisthenic aspect of production.

For instance, start with stone carving. Take this stance: feet comfortably apart, balance on the balls of the feet, bending over the surface. First, take a piece of brown paper on which to sketch the layout. Lay it out flat,. The paper is large and the broad gesture of your arms is required. Now you have to line the paper first, lay out a grid, sketch a few of the letters in advance. Now draw the letters with brush and ink. Redraw. Copy. Cut and paste. Get the design finalized and then transferred to thin paper so they can be transferred to the stone. Now brush them out again on the stone. Now pick up your

chisel in one hand, hammer in the other. Angle the chisel against the stone. Tap tap tap. Angle in the other direction. Tap tap tap. Finish off the serifs. Tip tap. And again. And again. And again. The duration of carving is measured in angled strokes, sculpted into surface as dimensional form.

The tendencies of carving are suited to large scale forms and straight lines, no miniature letters, no flowing curves or easy flourishes, using serifs to catch the eye on the sculpted forms, finish the letters. Stone carving is low on the spontaneity index. Keeping the chisel trained, angles regular, even. The lines march with formality, regularity, embodying authority, civic, official, formal in address and view.

Manuscripts are made sitting down, (after the skinning, stretching, tanning, scraping and trimming of the hides), with rule and knife and pen in hand. First prick the manuscript to introduce the interlinear spaces, regularize the writing events. Then rule the page in accord with the principles of proportion that structure the work. Mix gall and gum and lampblack or carbon and water. Cut the quill and split the nib. Dip and stroke, holding the pen at just the right angle to keep the up and down strokes smooth. Dip again. Stroke. Write to the end of the line in even letters, if you can, making the forms conform to each other in style, weight, stroke thickness and curve. Cut the length of the line through abbreviations and contractions, calculating from the end of the line back into the writing as you are writing. Hand cramps, back aches, fingers smear with ink and one's eyes squint into the dim light. Copying what? Another text or else, the pecia section, borrowed one piece at a time, or else read aloud and listened to in the process of writing letter by letter, word by word. The time of writing becomes linked to the time of listening to speech. We'll leave aside for the moment the illumination and rubrication, the slow painting with tempera or attachment of gold leaf after patterns in view or recollected or invented.

The tendencies are to changes of tension and shape, as in knitting, a result of the hand's character and disposition, the challenge is to keep the unruly muscles disciplined so that the arm and hand move each time through the same rotations orbits and motions. Graphic affordances high on drawing and expressivity, the ability to capture motion and emotion, change size and scale, put interlinear commentary into the page. The shape of commentary weaves and wraps, dialogue tangles, embeds, enframes and wanders. Can overlay, intertwine, interlace and interlineate.

Metal type is cut first on punches, struck in matrices, cast, cleaned, finished, distributed into cases. We start here, with the task of seeking out each letter, there, find it in its habitual spot, then reach, select, put it into the stick. Now the next, living perhaps all the way across the drawer, reach, select, check, place it in the stick. Line by line,

finished at the end with blank spacers, carefully justified, then separated from the next with a lead, and finally, set into a form with other lines, made up to create the page, tied around with twine and placed in a press. Hand inked with leather balls. Paper placed in the tympan, bed sent under along the tracks, handle pulled, platen into contact, released, form rolled back, tympan raised, page peeled off the sticky form.

Type's tendencies? Towards rigid order, quadrature is the ruling principle, straight lines and sequences, no straying from the form. Square on square within regulatory geometries. Nothing in the technicality prevents diagonals, mixed font sizes, other games of typography, but none of this comes into play until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the industry is pressured from other media and their advantages and capacities. But with the Maurus and the altar, other challenges. One of the easy graphic properties of letterpress is symmetry, because it can be achieved through mechanistic physical means. Symmetry in letter carving is highly challenging, requiring drawing to measure and carving to fit. Balancing lead in a stick with spacing material is an act in sympathy with the type. Putting diagonals of any kind into the handset forms messes with the spacing, cuts across lines, creates impossibilities for the lock up essential to the printing process. Characters have a one to one relation between their form and surface, no two letters can occupy the same physical space at the same time. Have to do a second strike to overprint. Letterpress is finite. Run out of "f's" and try to express relations of derivation in English. It is almost impossible without "of" or "from" and so we come right up against the physical limits of language

Engraving, the writing master's publishing means, requires first elaborate training of the hand. Sit straight, pen paused, wear the right clothes, have the right paper finished and sized so that the ink does not spider, the nib does not catch. No calendared paper until Baskerville who sends the sheets through and smooths the surfaces. Ink has to last as long as a gesture, control of the nib pressure makes all the difference to the smooth curve of the stroke. Once drawn, then transferred to the plate to be cut in reverse with the burin on plates cut, polished, and finished in advance. Printed with ink pressed into the lines, intaglio, then wiped on the surface and printed with pressure that pulls the ink from the plate.

The tendencies of the pen are to change the weight of lines, respond to pressure, let the lines wander. Keeping letters consistent in size, shape, weight so they look like repeated forms, even and regular, is the challenge.

Lithographic freedom brings the ease of drawing with a crayon on a surface, wax and grease on limestone go wherever the eye's imagination wishes. Whatever can be

drawn can be reproduced. In the first century, in reverse, though transfer papers make a big difference to the industry and artist's imagination.

Its tendencies follow fancy. The drawing hand is least successful in imitation of other forms, where the freedom is at odds with regularity. Overlay, decoration, animation of lively elements and motifs, unlimited.

For poets, other media come into play: the typewriter's alignments and non-variable spacing difficult to replicate in letterpress with its letter by letter widths. The difficulties of translation or migration into a new medium introduce new constraints. We could call this the coefficient of re-mediation. From manuscript to print, from manuscript to type, from typewritten manuscript to letterpress, or photo, each has its own ways of setting letter to letter relations within lines, achieving justification through mechanical, physical means or by calculation and computation. The graphic life of text is regulated by these procedures and protocols, not by design.

Phototype has a flexible material support, the paper and or film output can be curled, rolled, bent, and rephotographed to create spatial illusion and anamorphic or other distortion. Such spatial illusions – such as the flow of letters on a ribbon or banner held aloft or used as a frame – are part of the language of engraving and lithography, but no illusion of space gets produced in letterpress, with its rigid regulations of scale and dimension.

Press type provided the means to compose freely, letting letters walk all over the page and each other and overlap, mix fonts and styles without any constraint except the number of sheets one had access to or could afford. But when letters ran out, were used up, then they were gone, and so the finiteness of letters on a sheet meant counting first, as it does in letterpress, to be sure before starting that the text did not have to be reworked.

In typewriting, letters never run out, but ribbons lose their ink, or dry up, or get out of alignment. Typewriter alignment was tedious, reinserting paper into the cartridge through a set of different moves takes patience, keeping the paper from getting caught in the mechanism when fed at extreme angles. A limit to how much range there is in the feed.

Collage cut ups of typed sheets or printed ones make a pattern with pre-existing patterns of letters and lines. Broken letters, scratchy pen-lines, ransom note typography, collage has its own recognizable style elements, its disjunctions and glaring juxtapositions.

Handwriting that is non-calligraphic but quasi-mechanistic allows for freedom but stops short of the polish of print. Not informal, but unformalized, though often highly structured and subject to significant discipline and regulatory effect. Laying out the

circular grid, keeping the angle of letters, slant of diagonals, shape of counters consistent around the configured shape. How many hours? By contrast, the obsessive line scribbles are a mere record of their time, the amount of time registers directly in their making. How long to make these works? As long as it takes to play out that length of line. Not much labor hidden in that process, while the blank spaces of letterpress absorb hunk periods of time, and the counting out of letters to align a typewritten work remains invisible, unaccounted for in the final appearance. One of the simplest looking works here, the variations in four parts by dieter rot, are a masterwork of controlled design effacing signs of making, which could not, I think, have been mechanical or photomechanical at the time of their production, but had to have had their orientations hand done.

With IBM film based ribbons the ink was dark and bore no trace of the weave of the ribbon, but ran out quickly and was expensive to replace. Changing fonts required purchase of another “element” the ratchet toothed ball that clicked into place with a spring loaded lever.

Printer cartridges run out also, but the complexities of computer generated type reside in the way screen fonts for display communicate with printer fonts and formats through true type and other specifications. The challenge of preserving format features across mobile and distributed platforms that strip away graphic character pose a new host of difficulties in reconciling affordances and tendencies. Not just how long to make it, but how long will it stay made? Keep its form and format intact? Software programs and page design languages contain an inventory of special effects to stretch and compress, curve or scatter, meander or organize text. Type can be produced as pixels or vector graphics, as shapes or strokes, and then manipulated and processed as readily as any other information stored as a digital file. Production capabilities are not constrained by the medium’s graphic language, but have to be mediated through the interface and not the haptic, tactile grasp of hand to tool. Meta-mediation takes over, and with it, a very different choreography of body, eye, and gesture.

Finally, we can touch at least for a moment on the pathologies: make a mistake stone carving and the solutions are completely conspicuous, no capacity for alteration, the medium’s changes are permanent, the trace holds, no repairs. Manuscript mistakes can be scraped off, changing the thickness of the vellum, leaving some palimpsestic trace, or not, but creating a different surface texture. Mistakes in letterpress, reworked by picking out the letters, substituting, readjusting the spacing, sometimes reflowing a whole paragraph or page. In engraving? Some room to rub out, re-burnish, if the cuts are not too deep, fix a scratch but not a major groove or gouge. Litho? Have to refinish the surface? Registration? Each color added adds to the liabilities of a mistake and heightens the cost

of error, shrinking the edition size as corrected proofs are eliminated. Correcting a paper plate? Make a new one? A metal plate for offset? The same. Photo film? Reset the line, recut into the camera ready boards. Cutting letter by letter into lines. Rework rubber stamps? Start again with a new page. Rework an ink drawing? Re-ink a pencil drawing? Take up press type? Leaves a mess. And now, a different problem, no trace of mistakes. Vanishing trace of labor, effort, and skill into new conceptions of letters deployed as protocols, system embedded fonts. But the drawing capacities, handwriting, letterforms within the strict requirements of Bezier curves, another matter. Draw or render on a screen using the tools of mouse or tablet mediation, but the change of fonts, reformatting, restyling, select and click. Now the animation of flash and three-D simulation, adds volume and the illusion of form. Full return from various surfaces and their singularities and possibilities to the volumetric physicality only now in simulacral space these objects can pass through each other, possessed of properties of transparency, porousness, motion that were impossible in physical space.

To what extent, then, do the affordances of various media (their technological disposition and character) become the basis of poetic conventions? Form, shape, graphical expression have certain possibilities in some media more than others. Changing the size of a letter in handwriting, to give a very basic example, is a completely different task than resizing metal type. The relative ease of the first is countered by the near impossibility of the second. Metal type has restrictions that have become encoded into poetic form, but lineation and the ordered sequence of one statement after another have come to seem like givens, the natural form of poetry. Visual and sound poetry that take advantage of graphical, spatial, and temporal dimensions of another order cannot be reconciled to the scored page based on the typographic regularity of letterpress and its mimetic descendants. Why can't a poem be meandering, curved, spatial, disorganized? Of course, poems have been all of these things, as anomalies and exceptions, as "visual" or "concrete" works stigmatized by that characterization as other, different, distinct. Exposing the production process changes all visible poems into graphic objects.

What are the fatigue factors in production? Carving strains the muscles, back and neck, manuscript writing cramps eyes, letterpress makes the forearm ache from the weight of the stick, eyes strain from drawing and the engraver's hand cramps from carving, the tedium of making up the forms, of gridding out the sheets, of keeping things straight or of going to all the trouble of drawing the letters as images. Which do you die of faster? Hazards: of slipping with the chisel, cutting, manuscripts toxic pigments, lead is poison, engraving tools through the skin, lithography breathing the acid fumes of the etch, solvents for cleanup, photo-processes and the developer and excema leading to

infection, sepsis; press type the effects of banality and development of callouses on the third finger (death from boredom); fewer hazards to individuals in later technology of computers and letterforms, paper plate lithography, or offset technique.

In summary, then, the point I'm making is to create a language for critical analysis of production as a feature of poetic composition, to understand the ways in which the making of some poems and the thinking of what poems are linked at a level of conception usually left unanalyzed and undescribed. But *poesis* is typo-graphic and graphic, physical, choreographic, calisthenic, and material in ways that constraint what we think can be thought of as poetics, but need not, if the language to describe these matters is put forth as a way to invigorate our understanding. I hope this sketchy suggestive overview has at least opened the door to that investigation.

We think poetic form according to conventions not wedded to specific media, but imposed upon them, and then, at inspired moments, see in a means of production a whole new set of possibilities for poetic composition, conception.

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