

Preface To Staggering Nomads And Black Flag Commandos:

The form of a poem reflects its writer. A simple truism perhaps, but how radically this law is kept! E.B. White wrote in *The Elements of Style*, “style is the writer.” Then how can any writer escape into a totally fictive space? Something in the very stuff of the universe prevents a lie. Always telling its secrets!

Sometimes a poem just appears in the mind - as though delivered to the wrong address. More normally, Life prepares a poet for specific works the way that figures of a fountain are crafted to shoot out water. (Sweet cherubs do not all make equal contributions.)

A detective might discern by pulse, blood pressure, and respiration whether a person is being truthful. They know by the body of the criminal that he has done some fishy thing, but the poet is a man who in his writing continually goes back to the scene of the crime in his lyric dreams. And not only crimes, but he returns to family, and grief, to his future, and to real or composite lovers. Here is a man who cannot shut up. This is a gossip who loves her story so much that she perfects it for herself.

Hidden in the words, in every formal choice of a poet, we find the writer's heart. Whitman's long lines make a vivid impression of his open and expansive heart. Yet formal choices as a rule are relatively invisible compared to the words in a poem. An example of the formal element is the dominant sound pattern, or vowel pattern if there is one. Another example is the way the form works in the culture, for instance the role of the haiku in haibun.

Part of the reason form works without being noticed is because we are taught to read the language and see the sights. One must be more astute to know the song of wind than the song one has heard a hundred times. Form is just as fresh as content and can spring forth with no effort. The agreement of form and content is another reason it receives less attention. This preface concerns the remarkable role of form and whether an awareness of sets of forms, in a poet or in oneself, can provide the freedom of self-determination.

A real life form is a pattern with functional power and recognizable effects. Examples of real life forms are divorce, the death of a child, or being home-schooled. Just as Wordsworth spoke of learning the underlying patterns of events in life, so reading broadly, for instance the letters of Civil War soldiers, can sometimes permit a person to gain understanding of the inner material and the life-course of that material through its various stages.

With the literary knowledge of forms one gains in prudence, but whether it translates into freedom we will question. Ecclesiastes tells us that in much wisdom is

grief, but that the advantage of wisdom is that by it we live.¹ So perhaps it is possible to learn how to live. The leaping dancer must return to earth. Still, in understanding the manner of the forms she works with, she may exercise more control.

Someone may be skeptical that form can really be a revelation of the being of the poet. Surely a long line is a long line; why should it have a personal relation to one person? Abstract art is full lines, but speaks by their texture, thickness, color, direction. It seems there is a language to everything, and as John Cheever said, writing is “our most intimate and acute means of communication.” I would agree and add that lyric poetry in particular captures our inmost self most ably.

Words are such an expressive medium that even universal techniques such as verticality or rhyme can have special use for an author or in a poem. A proper read would divulge such private terrain of the poet, chasms and all, that we would flip among secrets more than the spouse ever knew, more than we find in well-researched biographies. From the poet's line breaks, punctuation, sound, to the build of a poem, the whole structure speaks of dimensions of the poet such as his most essential impressions, his dialect, to whether or not he had a happy childhood or lonely Christmases. For example, not only have diligent scholars pieced together Pound's reading material for *The Cantos*, but in the lack of footnotes we detect his passion to immerse us in these texts as directly as he had been immersed.² That is one of Pound's forms, an implementation perhaps of the mystic, or Natural, form of footnotes.

The unwritten book is a predicament which often demands the writer go to the very source of herself to find the right symbols for the creative urges and ideas she has about her material. The author lifts the pen...and what does this accomplish? In *A Season In Hell*, Rimbaud seems to cry from the fundament of his being. If the narrator, full of hysteria and scorn, so sincerely declares that he is lost, can he hope at the end, or is such hope an easy contrivance, a mere escape hatch Rimbaud provides?

Rimbaud is an especially rough case I think. The criminal impulse seems to spring so native in the poet. The trouble began for him when, unprovoked, he sat Beauty on his knee and reviled her, or roughed her up. Here, the narrator recollects his childhood admiration for criminals.

“Still but a child, I admired the intractable convict on whom the prison doors are always closing; I sought out the inns and rooming houses he would have consecrated by his passing; *with his idea* I saw the blue sky, and the flowery labor of the country; in cities I sensed his fatality. He had more strength than a saint, more common sense than a traveler - and he, he alone! the witness of

1 Ecclesiastes 1:18, 7:12

2 Langdon Hammer, Open Yale Courses, Modern Poetry

his glory and his reason.”³

He hungered that way with no one to show him such a path. So is rebellion, (and against beauty!), an integral part of what binds him as a writer?

On the other hand, the missing criminal could be the symbolic man his mother could not hold, and therefore a powerful container for fantasies of his absent father. He is full of angst and rebellion, mockery, loathing, pride, and hurt. He is always roaming. What drove him to scour the world hoping to gain some good in trade with men he hated? However desperate, his effort required grown courage. It was perhaps the ideal in manly hardiness. After all, his father had also been to Africa, fighting in Algiers and receiving the Legion of Honour. In *A Season In Hell*, Rimbaud rejects effeminate verse. It may be that, for him, adulthood meant a non-poetic life, for the same reasons that his homosexual experience with Verlaine proved something of an aberration.

To buck up and make a home of this world; to find life though life is not granted you, may be the thematic form that Rimbaud arrives at to conclude *A Season In Hell*. This notion may be the vessel the young man needed to grow into a man who is, in effect, parented, though his true project may be to inhabit his father's life. For example, he connected to his father through the elder's translation of the Koran. The younger Rimbaud was fluent in Arabic and even taught Muslim boys Koranic lessons.

In *A Season In Hell*, he claims to have “invented the color of vowels.” I would like to say he was the first to spell himself. Rimbaud began at his blessed center, and lost it, falling to the center of his wretchedness. The root of a person must be capable of growing in many ways or we would not be free, would we? Or do we say the growth of the wood can be detected in the grain?

It fell on Rimbaud's mother to coerce the prodigy into needful shape for the world, (not into a deranged seer.) The rough mannered boy, socially unbearable to Verlaine's family, strips himself not just of the clothes of contemporary culture, he rejects even the cover God gave to Adam. Is he a flailing wretch of no importance, a clumsy fighter alone in the world? Or is he a prophet and seer, an inventor of synesthetic poems, an angel beyond morality, and creator of truth who will lead the world to spiritual revelation beyond the Gospel? He cannot decide, for the fundament of one's being causes a succession of potentialities to appear in the stage of the mind. He must somehow navigate between competing conceptions of himself and arrive at the conviction that reflects, if not his true self, at least his true will.

Rimbaud's relationship with aspiration was a defining part of him. Anne Frank may be a useful point of comparison. She is considered Holocaust literature and she did write about genocide, but that was not her real subject. She had a sensitive and joyous soul. She had a green thumb to turn angst and grief into happy blossom. Was she not

3 *A Season In Hell*, translated by Louise Varese

born for her diary and for her timeless work?

Anne Frank found the intimacy of herself through her diary, and many people also celebrate her for her spirit. She was free to connect to a higher spiritual peace and vision, and it seems largely because of her writing, she was able to live in a sensitive and wise and mature way. We might read her diary and think she was a graceful and charming girl, but perhaps without the diary her life would have truly devolved into misery before her family was discovered. She wrote without grand expectations, except of the prayerful kind, and so she made her pen like a spoon, lifting out the water from her family's sinking ship. Time and again the journalling carried her through difficult places.

The emotional palette of this book reflects a need to become aligned with God the way a nomad may seek alignment in the stars. But the poems mostly stand off kilter regarding their lasting peace. And these characters, both nomads and commandos, are too alone. Feeling out their condition, I have stood gazing up with them, wishing for the clouds to part. And if Rimbaud came around to hear what these members of my heart are singing and moaning, I hope that none would follow him.

Often these figures are those we call homeless, drug addicted, outcast, bent for a lover, mentally ill; they undergo domestic abuse, or work in the sex trade. That bright yet sloppy chaos of capitalist culture is no light by which to learn. Still, to me these poems are the normal beautiful feelings of individuals. They are tableaux of need. Or they are templates of prayer.

Tarkovsky may suggest that the artist has a role in deep engagement with a broken world. He has said,

“The artist exists because the world is not perfect. Art would be useless if the world were perfect as man wouldn't look for harmony but would simply live in it. Art is born out of an ill-designed world. This is the issue in 'Rublev': the search for harmonic relationships among men, between art and life, between time and history.”

For Tarkovsky, the artist seeks to establish a harmony which is not present in the world. My own viewpoint is that the artist does not necessarily confer a unique degree of harmony within the world on his art, but that the artist is motivated rather by his own special maladjustment to the world to struggle to some vista of the perfect coherence of reality. Consequently, the art he presents is a reconciled perception of the conflict in life in some new form.

I think of Anne Frank's diary as a strong affirmation of life. In spite of conflict, she had high hopes and visions. But she is typical of many writers since in a way we do not find relief with the people around us or we would not always be working it out in our dear diary. No, we live for the work. We even keep our own company, hide out, risk the displeasure of loved ones by writing about them, because writers find the practice to be worth their whole life.

These poems signify a salvific alignment with God, and sometimes invite the reader to find alignment on behalf of the character. Some of these characters are so maladjusted I may have had to butter them to slide them into place. Sometimes they speak happily of emotions which once had to be yanked violently from me like bad teeth. Beyond some awkwardness, or unfortunate anti-social behavior, is total social isolation - the extruded ward who complains as Job did, "am I a sea or a whale that you keep a watch over me?" (Job 7:12)

Once was severe maladjustment, or bad comportment. Even episodically as part of his process, a creative artist often has to bear with some rowdiness or desultory trouble before laying down order, before tucking in the settled thoughts of his composition. Writing has helped me to bring adjustment at least to text by *fine-tuning* it, *fiddling with it*, *bringing order* to the parts, *composing* the whole, getting it to *lay right*, making it *settle*, *tailoring* it to its purpose, and *doctoring* what is broken in the thought. Those expressions are synonyms for "adjust" and these are all things that artists do.

I think most would admit that John Berryman, for example, was not a world class poet, communicator, or titanic artist, at the beginning of his career. It took time for him to engage the disturbance and to grasp it. He could not overcome the dangerous side in his personality, not for lack of trying. Yet from tremendous inner conflict he managed to compose things of his psyche of wondrous depth. Of course, not every disturbed person is an artist. Perhaps the artist needs not only creativity but also a concern for the organic journey for its own sake for art to take them over. They must be on some inner task which yields truth, and they must also have a desire to record the result.

To an extent I consider uneasiness my high form. While I have never been comfortable in traditional high form, nor in a formal setting, practicing moving with a little rationality has helped me find some familiarity with form. As the paralytic finds great progress in beginning to move a toe, or feed himself his Cheerios, so for me to wiggle out a "thank you," or to finish a thought I enjoyed, has caused me to be like a normal man. I may always have a limp, but just to walk is a form of ambulation.

Almost every person has a beauty to their motion. Some, like me, cannot make out the rhythm, but even the guesswork waltz finds us making out at an irreducible center of the floor. Even though they may call me klutz, even though "the trip" keeps halting everything to disembark, there is the music flowing inside me too. Do not blame my arms and legs for my dance attack. Attach these limbs to Nijinsky and he would be a graceful cloud. Somewhere at my mandala's fundament things are cracked. Or is it merely shaken by some great rumble? Everything manifest accumulates and showers down. All the letters rain down.

For 7 years a dreary, and miserable, and anxious sickness known as paranoid schizophrenia afflicted me. And it was the disquiet of chaotic spirits which rained down then. The day I became a Christian the impact of my mental illness, its suffering at least,

effectively vanished. I have a few symptoms left, they are relatively mild and they are treatable. Things absent immediately returned: the ability to lead a normal life, handle my affairs, experience emotions in a normal way, read easily, and think and imagine much more easily. So I have schizo-affective disorder now, but more importantly I am a Christian. (I still embrace my Jewishness and a few poems here reflect that.) The grace of God delights me; I am happy to justify not only *that* God is, but *who* God is.

Whether of one in the leisure of disability, or under great pressure and distress, we can ask “with what forms does the soul express its fundamental self?” Even now, fragmentation and maladjustment inform my style. I don't think I will outgrow the appeal of fragmentation and a frenetic inventive pace in art. The attraction of a poet like Hart Crane or Gongora, the mad scope of Moby Dick, the untamable Henry Miller, seem to have as much natural beauty as the giants of classical Chinese poetry. “Too much” is something I like; and I love a God who has loved us too much to save Himself. His austere self-denial is part of His great love. In the “balance” is the ever upward calling.

Let's say someone hired a schizophrenic to write the next 150 installments of a series like the Babysitter's Club. Do you think he could ever do it? There is more; I know because they told me. So the multiplicity of characters in this book is a formal reflection of the fragmentation of my mind and experience as a schizophrenic.

Let me give a more interesting and concrete example of how form has worked in this volume. There have been times that like Rimbaud I too have felt ruined or on the verge of ruin. Once after committing a particularly heinous sin I suffered a kind of mystical vision of the negative type. It was about three days later, continuing in my simplicity, when I was overwhelmed in a feeling of raw and abysmal fear. Compelled to look into my bathroom mirror, I saw my pupils become yawning voids in the form of squares, or perhaps cubes. Aghast, I found what comfort I could in the heathen faith I had and lay in grisly slumber. I felt relieved as the dread passed - standing like a pillar above the abyss. It was years before I knew I was saved in Jesus Christ, years before I felt sure my soul was whole and intact.

This experience found its way, unintentionally, into the structure of my poetry. In two poems, “San Antonio Parkway,” and “The Tension,” there are paragraph-like blocks of text in approximate square shape, or cube shape, which I subconsciously decided were good to express the darkness in those lines. There the form does not seem to offer a cure of the nothingness, but simply bears witness to what is barren. In a treatment like this, the initial pattern recurs as a vivid remembrance, but now finds form in an artifact capable of inspection.

This phenomenon also shows that the form of the experience, and perhaps also knowledge pertaining to that experience, has been used to explain some other junction of thought and emotion. That is, the old form, the cube, is useful in a new cognitive application in building the edifice of the new construct, the new poem. It is used to

explain the puzzle of the poem despite the fact of its enduring inexplicability. Perhaps this is the nature of bedrock experiences.

While these abysmal cubes were used after being deposited in my soul, other forms are indwelling in a person's being in a much more inherent way. For me, a great number of my mental tendencies and some behaviors seem capable of being imaged as a pair of circles. When I first saw the image, at the age of 18, from a friend's Euclid homework, of one circle on the perimeter of another circle, I was fascinated. I had been trying to understand the being of God as a being of plenary exaltation, as One who triumphed over the Nothing. Hoping to penetrate some metaphysical koan by sheer imagination, I tried to erase all thought of created things from my mind. How did the One, Being, live despite the nothing?

These circles seemed a map to begin to picture this. They are without scale, of no size and of infinite size, full of dynamic tension, and slight enough to vanish in a wisp of the wind. They seemed a key to understand the presence of any one single thing, and any quality of that thing, for I was convinced that any finite thing or quality must be infinitely what it was in order to be.

As if in this sketch someone had plotted out a solution more basic and universal than sexual reproduction, it seemed intriguing and I asked if I could have it. The image seemed to show the way that being in its pure form, without any particulars or messiness of personality, finds radical life in its own structure, in the structure of one thing, and by two polarities suggesting all things as manifestation from this pure One.

This was in the year before becoming schizophrenic and I became fascinated with mystical dissolution in the One. I tried to discover the essence of phenomena like snow and light and joy as a basis of poems. I fell deeply for Rumi. I practiced meditation. I experienced dissolution in the One. I followed analytical arguments pursuing their extreme logical terminuses. Unable to stay sober when I needed to, I myself became fully dissolute. And in other senses I knew dissolution: the decomposition of my mind into fragments. And when my professors saw what happened in the end, my work with my beloved college came to an end. So there was, as far as I was concerned, a dissolution of the school's organized body. And when the committee supervising my progress dissolved, for practical purposes, I too was dismissed.

Such motivating circles. Despite however vast nothingness may be God always possesses integrity. He does not ever lose His unity. Staying connected to God's power, to His unity and eternity, which are represented in this image, (though I did not often think of the picture,) my Lord caused me to retain the breath of life.

But the behavior of dissolution is only part of the pattern's parentage of my story. The pattern, in seeming so beautiful to me, betrayed a pre-existing cognitive problem. Almost as though a child would respond only to his father's deep voice because he had a hearing problem, my desire for knowledge of the root essence of things was a

consequence of a cognitive deficit. At some point I began to try to know Truth, even for basic functional knowledge of the world, though it was all too hard for me. King Solomon had to tell God “I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in,” and he asked for wisdom to do his job. (1 Kings 3:7) I couldn't even find the door; my ignorance was inescapable. To come across these circles in my life has become the key to the diagnosis I give myself: myopia with ontological response. I had an “ontological response” since I showed no hope of mastering the facts of phenomena.

To be hopelessly dim is a kind of dislocation, but I will emphasize again, if these poems take you anywhere, it is largely through the fact that in dislocation is latent travel. I think we all have fundamental patterns that characterize our agency in the world. For instance Richard Feynman constantly tried to expose security flaws at the Manhattan Project by picking locks when he wasn't at work. Whether he was chasing women, or learning to play the bongos, or finding breakthroughs in physics, or teaching, his ruling principle, or arche, was to pick open any lock. A key and lock seems to be his pattern-parent, or geometric motivation.

This kind of trouble with understanding – Feynman must have wanted to find the things he didn't understand – may be integral to being an artist. The stereotype of the artist is of a liberal and libertine. But perhaps in the disorder and looseness of the artist is a kind of conservatism inasmuch as he seems resistant to full synchrony with the world and its pace. The artist must craft her work because the world does not turn her gears. I think it is true that artists usually have a passionate love of life. But I suspect that on the daily basis there is an incomprehension, a tardiness to conform, to what we all do.

The wax tablet of my mind is conservative toward the world then. It will not take a good impression for practical purposes; it is uncomprehending. Surely some artists function normally, and some are not especially maladjusted, but the many who are considered cranks or misanthropes or hyper-critical or hyper-sensitive or are alcoholic or always lose jobs or cannot leave a party or who are the great burning lovers of the world, these who are well represented among professional creative artists, they are really rubbing all the dead twigs of the world together to get a light. And the world has its wet match. For that is how our great artist reads the smooth move of Mr. Worldly Wiseman when he makes his gestures. Whether she holds back or goes on, the world does not know her way, and if it did, why would it be art? Let her conserve nothing else, she must conserve her mind, for by it she brings forth her light. Why do such strange people, always forming their iconoclastic opinions, care about the world's reaction? Is it not because the art presents the opportunity for them to become in sync with those around them, even if only by appreciation? Art also gives the artist an opportunity to give back to her world. Most real art is not one-sided judgment, but invites reaction, judgment and thought. Instead of cold material, the artist mediates it. So for instance, the properly developed short story lays out its content in a highly natural way. The practitioner of the

art form turns her fellow into a processor of artistry, a digester of it as she is.

I don't know if knowledge through art inevitably leads to more power of self-determination, but I do know that power is not necessarily a good, and that a person should seek the help of God in prayer at all times. Artists set powerful potions on the table. Often they have found elixirs which seem to them to have knocked out their demons, or at least to have quieted them for the time being. We should not be glad for every entertaining art. If we listen to multiple voices we may hear multiple falsehoods, and maybe we will also hear some truth. In Luke 8:18, Jesus says, "take care how you listen," because it is in listening we discover how to be blessed, and being blessed allows for a continuing stream of blessings.

Writing is amazing as being a nearly constant act of discovery. The writer does not need to be an artist or be especially creative or even know how to spell for this to work. Journalling may yet become its own branch of therapy. Technically, it is already in the infant stages of its professional status. Our written word helps clarify our ruling images, or geometric motivation. In journalling, we handle maps of such imagery, we navigate between the principles of our hearts. If our memories stand out in those maps, they may be buried treasure. These experiences float before us, ships on the ocean, until we return the 50th time, and all at once land is in sight.

On the cover of this volume is a picture of a man going to hospital. One reason I like this picture is that every time I go to hospital I am in a wheelbarrow. I think I would feel pretty terrible if I had to go in a fine prince's carriage. I would like to ask you to imagine this book as a wheelbarrow, and us: you, me, the people in the poems, as the people in the picture. Which of us is which? The Holy Spirit hides in the sickness. As a wise man fakes his death to be snuck from a city where he is hunted, so the Holy Ghost uses sickness to get inside us where He is needed. Perhaps there can be a sacrament of reading even bad poetry. I cannot see you for the sheet covering the patient, but we see it heals the heart to answer misery with work. I hope these poems bring you to a joyful work. May the Ghost that brought me here make you better.