

Codas



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JONATHAN SKINNER

Quickly: The Slow Poem

I had been following the Slow Poetry posts on Dale’s blog for awhile, but still had little idea what he was getting at, specifically, with the word “slow.” I understood that he wanted to give a name to his poetic opposition—Slow Poetry, as opposed, presumably, to the speedy compositions of the Flarf set, to the surface-games-without-end of “language” writing and its scions, to the cuisinart verse of the “creative writing” schools. (And so there was a sense in which I read “Slow Poetry” as a way to avoid saying “Deep Poetry.”)

At the same time, the mode of this conversation confused me: what did it mean to argue

for “slow poetry” in the fast-and-dirty medium of the weblog? Could a branding war be waged on anything but the terms of the trendsetters? What was this self-styled Coleridge doing on Grub Street anyways? I couldn’t figure it out.

Still, I read on. Crude oil had recently spiked to \$150/ barrel, the subprime bubble had burst, with a “fiscal crisis” that was finally enveloping the world’s attention, and America was about to elect its first nonwhite President (the silver lining). Things felt on edge, to say the least—they still do.

When it comes to crisis, I’ve never found much to console me in the self-absorbed ironies of the Flarfists or the conceptual poets (however else I may on occasion be fascinated by the work). One might say that the horrors of our time percolate throughout the surfaces of such poetry, so I suppose it is something for the record. At its best, there can be a political situationism (born out of the work’s method, a permissive lack of situation) that helps to sharply focus the attention. But Dale’s Cassandra-like pronouncements felt more in key with the day’s news.

And here was someone thinking about poetry as an alternative to the shit, if not part of an eventual way out of the shit-hole. Certainly, there is something to be said for poetry rubbing our noses in the shit-hole, but what is that for, if it doesn’t ultimately help the flower? Slow Poetry seemed to be concerned with some kind of flowering. Life seems too fast for arguments about poetry, these days, but I gave it my attention.

Still, what was “slow” doing here? Not long before the election, I took a walk in the woods. And then I went for a short drive. And then I wrote the following poem:

The Quickening

tree frog peeps
autumn rain clouds
the urgent signals
make the world long

filigree of crickets
at the storm’s edge
I can hear you
but I don’t see you

trees launch clouds
new clouds
with the old clouds
in their branches

the sea has reached in
as moss greens bones
on this death bed

at a bend in the river's

tides, what cycles
deep in the woods
are rocked when moons
catch on the Earth

locking your horns
you momentarily tapped
a strength of roots
caught in the out-tide

the skull faces a river
flowing two ways
into grassy low spots
where the water hides

reaching their hyphae
through the wet leaves
four kinds of mushrooms
sprout edible fruit

sulfur shelf orange
with yellow chicken lips
woody puff balls cling
to the wood they eat

chanterelles' fleshy
apricot erupts from roots
as hen of the woods
ruffle their oaken feathers

every plane multiplies
the pushing and pulling
into four directions
through bark and skin

weathering it, reptiles
revel in the wet road
a turtle freezes, passes
underneath the car

can we see the quickening
without hearing it
put a foot to ground
lay cheekbone to puddle

the kick in the legs
that clatters the tortoise
across asphalt toward
its watery confines

Is this a work of Slow Poetics? I didn't write the poem slowly—no, it came quickly, at the end of an uncommonly warm, wet October day. And it ends suddenly. But it did emerge from a long process of attention, rooted in place, noticing and feeling the kinds of things that are noticed and felt away from the weblog, from Google and from the flashy chatter of our communicating universe.

However much it may have been a product of that universe and of the electoral season, the poem undoubtedly feeds on a warm urgency that precedes the onset of the first, leaf-shredding rains.

Why wouldn't the woods solicit the democratic overthrow of one of the most brutal, destructive regimes of recent times? Why wouldn't creatures, drawn to what the moisture brings, be out bingeing at their pores?

The ecology of this place, even twenty miles from the sea, is tidal—a quiet fact that governs considerably more than what meets the eye. It is the ground tone from which anything quickens.

Meditating on the skeleton of a deer that died in view of the tidal river, or foraging for October's late-fruiting mushrooms, or shepherding a tortoise off the road, constitute so many recursive stitches in an ongoing approach to that tone. To eat those mushrooms is to make a further stitch. And then to write the poem. Or perhaps to write the poem and then fry the mushrooms—no matter.

None of this makes "The Quickening" great, and I doubt it succeeds in the mission of Slow Poetics. (The ultimate Slow Poetics might have to dispense with the poem altogether.) But it's an approximation. And this I would take to be the sense of Slow Poetry—poetry as approximation: "the state of being near, proximity." (The OED also tells us that it is "communication of a disease by contact.") To draw near, approach. The poem as part of this slow courtship with the unforeseen. One that risks dissolution.

It measures, but not overmuch. The pleasure of late work in great poets is the attained measure, where the overmuch comes earned. No one should wish for such a fate.

In the meantime, even when drafted quickly, the Slow Poem comes as a stitch in a long seam of approximations. To digest the Slow Poem is to travel around that seam. It takes awhile.

Emily Dickinson wrote Slow Poems—it was first with a class of third graders that I teased honey from her "marrow of the hill" ("Buccaneers of Buzz"). Likewise, reading a

Lorine Niedecker poem lands one in very specific corners of the compost library, including the place of their composition: “Black Hawk held: In reason/ land cannot be sold.” (Slow Poetry approves of the decision to keep Niedecker’s archives in Fort Atkinson.) To “get” her Slow Poems, one has to travel their seams. It’s a long ways around. Cole Swensen’s *Ours* unveils its seams slowly, a *pas de deux* of poetry and gardens. And what Le Nôtre’s gardens shadow, approximately:

A garden is always seen
from an extreme angle.
This is because we are not very tall
compared to the world.

Le Nôtre’s (“our”) designs work with an extreme angle, where proportion is anamorphic and the art demands at least two different perspectives in three or more dimensions (“the world”) and a geometry for measuring across the seam. (The seam appears to be some sense of the infinite.) How many dimensions does the poem add? At least one dimension is experiential. It takes some time to follow the account.

But Slow Poetry need not be long. The nine-line sound poem, that takes a week to pull from field guides, and longer outside, only to instantly announce itself to readers of the field, is also Slow Poetry:

Black-and-white Warbler

scrapes on Lima
pointer’s down
on insect toes
flicks zebra barks
for juicies, icies
eye sees icy heat
sees large gun-
metal orca cleans
up shady shades

Mere stitches in an ancient seam threading continents and languages, the park outside and the human in here.

It might take years for those unfamiliar with the Black-and-white warbler to recognize this poem. (If they care, Slow Poetry has to do with extending interest beyond one’s kind, and probably relies on a modicum of curiosity.) Google will tell you that the bird’s song is “a series of very high, two-syllable phrases, resembling the sound of a squeaky wheel: ‘wee-see-wee-see-wee-see.’” But “gun-/metal orca,” “pointer’s down,” “Zebra barks?” I wager that a bit of looking and listening in your local woods, in the month of May, might provide a “quicker” way into the seams of this poem.

I suppose that whatever Slow Poetry might offer, for better or for worse, can be found in

the differences between "Black-and-white Warbler" (whose time of composition, if not comprehension, probably includes the hours spent in the park craning one's neck, and cocking one's ears, at some very restless birds) and a fifty-two line "possible bird design" poem whose time of composition the author estimated, "including searching, choosing, editing, and re-editing, at about one hour" (Nada Gordon, "Possible Bird Strike," and associated discussion, in the comment box to the Possum Ego blog).

Take out your pencils. Begin.
Write parameter passing syntax proposal for a possible BIRD.
Clearly we have a wealth of possible bird constellations.

Nada's poem draws together a "constellation" of "possible birds" from the hits or "strikes" of a Google search "written" by "parameter passing syntax." Several species are named ("a possible Half-collared Kingfisher, possible Grey-headed Bush-shrike") but nothing in the pattern of the piece leads one further into the world of possible birds. In fact, the second stanza of the poem dispels any illusion that the "possible birds" might be something other than decoys:

What is a possible bird? Probably a
standard bird that is average in size,
has a standard neutral sort of coloring,

and has the usual shape of a bird.

Certainly, "Black-and-white Warbler" and "Possible Bird Strike" are as alike as apples and oranges, as warblers and Roseate spoonbills, rendering meaningless any further formal comparison. Nada's poem probably means to play off the "confirmed" sightings of the bird expert ("A possible bird design is more difficult to discern than the others") to revel in the data clouds of "possible birds" that such expertise marginalizes.

But the topical reference to the downing of an airliner by "possible bird strike," a plane the pilot was miraculously able to land in the Hudson River saving all aboard—an incident celebrated endlessly in the media with zero discussion of the welfare of birds—seems to underscore some concern for (actual) possible birds. Nada and I probably agree about the twisted ecology involved in the phrase "possible bird strike" and about the sick animal politics of the "miracle on the Hudson" (January 2009). At the same time, our approaches to dealing with the sickness in poetry appear to diverge widely.

The instance of the poem itself, in *Slow Poetry*, is like the fruit that appears suddenly after rain, in the right kind of weather—its mycelial body has been underground, threading its way through the soil for months, years. This patient work of decomposition is the ground tone, against which an act of propagation quickens, blossoms and vanishes. A flickering in the time-lapse.

The same poet who popularized that metaphor decades ago also spoke of the poetics of a certain flavor that lurks at the bottom of a deep, calm pool. *Slow Poetry* might be the

waging of deep image by other means, but it shouldn't be limited to depth poetics.

In the same spirit of literal-mindedness, I got to thinking about Slow Food. I read in Michael Pollan's *Eater's Manifesto*: "Refining grains extends their shelf life . . . and makes them easier to digest by removing the fiber that ordinarily slows the release of their sugars."

Pollan details a host of technological "advances" in American "food" production driven by the fact that "there is something in us that loves a refined carbohydrate, and that something is the human brain." Our diet's "mainlining of glucose" shortens the nutrient's path to the brain. It is addictive, and it makes us write too much. There is no fiber in our food, to slow the path into blood and organs.

And what, I wonder, is the "extended shelf life" of this poetry? No matter how deep you go into the archives of *American Poetry Review*, the poetry tastes pretty much the same. In the other corner, the post-consumer poetics of Flarf means hours parked in front of a computer—a poetics of bringing the world to the brain, rather than taking one's brain to the world? (I'm sure all poetics involve both actions, but Slow Poetry probably aims for some kind of balance here.)

One might think that, since the poems are so quickly composed, they require less screen time—but such work seems to require hours spent trawling the blogosphere to promote or defend its poetics. The poems are merely occasions for the real work of community, we are told. But how diverse is that community: how far beyond their own kind do these poems reach?

Slow Poetry is about the slowed pathway, eating more leaves, less seeds. It is about diversity and simplicity. Slow Poetry is about writing at the table and breaking our poems out in company. It is unrefined. (In this respect, at least, even Flarf might be Slow Poetry.) Especially in this time perched at what feels like a momentous edge, I want to draw closer to those tidal places, I want to quicken, within hearing of more than my own species.

ROBERT BERTHOLF

“The Vocabulary of Taste: Carlo Petrini and the Poetics of Slow Poetry”

The story of Carlo Petrini’s protest against the building of a McDonald’s Restaurant in the Piazza di Spagna, near the Spanish Steps in Rome, 1986, and the establishment three years later of the Slow Food Movement has become a familiar topic in the contemporary conversation about food, recipes, and the cultural politics of eating and drinking. He offered bowls of penna to challenge burgers and fries; the franchise is still there, however, feeding the thousands in Rome. His essay about the movement was published as *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, tr. William McCuaig and now with a “Foreword” by Alice Walker, in 2001. The book has become an icon of sorts, and other books and essays (without a full accounting here)¹ have followed and chronicled the growth of the movement into a visible international organization, sustained by a single idea of going “slow” or, as the “Slow Food Manifesto” (1989) has it : “Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food.” “Developing taste rather than demeaning it,” the Manifesto continues, will turn people away from the speed of contemporary life and return the acts of eating and drinking to a convivial communion engaged in and enjoying living.

If the Slow Food Movement were a poetics and not cultural politics, it would claim its sources in John Dewey’s ideas of natural and philosophical oecology, the action-field painting of Jackson Pollock, and Charles Olson’s essay “Projective Verse.” Olson was most concerned about open field composition, in which the parts of the poem achieved form by realizing the energy of the content. As Robert Creeley wrote in the poem: “Form is never more than the extension of content.” The poet was a participant in the field of action where the poem took place in the same way that Pollock was part of the action of the painting as he dripped layer after layer of paint on the canvas on the floor. From its beginning the Slow Food Movement recognized the importance of a local environment with its biodiversity, interrelationships of tastes, and traditions of eating together in groups. Knowing the material culture of the food and wine was as important as knowing the means of production and the environmental heritage of a place. People knew where to shop for quality products and where to eat with pleasure. “Slow Food sets out to save and resuscitate individual gastronomic legacies everywhere”(17). A group celebrating one geographic region was called a *convivium*, a group of people all considered inside the activities of growing and eating food convivially within the naturally set boundaries of cultivation and cuisine. Educating others about the lore and wisdom and supporting research into the food of

¹ Carlo Petrini has published three additional studies in USA: *Slow Food Revolution: A New Culture for Eating and Living* (2006); *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should be Good, Clean, and Fair* (2007); and *Slow Food: Collected Thoughts on Taste, Tradition, and the Honest Pleasures of Food* (2009), a collection of essays from *Slow Food* magazine.

one environment, with all forces of culture and politics surrounding the learning and research, made the movement energetic and, in fact, pleasurable. It would be easy enough to draw comparisons with the companies of poets publishing in the same small magazines like *Origin*, *The Black Mountain Review*, *Caterpillar*, *This*, *First Intensity*, and *Golden Handcuffs Review*. A group of people with a common cause is about the same writing poetry or eating carefully prepared food.

As the Movement spread outside Italy to Europe, America, and to the world—approaching 500,000 followers—the adversary remained the same. Speed, the speed of living, traveling, and now the speed of transmitting digital information on very small receivers, all instigate “environmental and existential degradation” (25). Speed replaced a meal with friends into gobbling fast foods, uniformity, without concern for primary taste, replaced individual preparation. The TV dinner was only the beginning of the assault on quality and taste (which quickly became advertising slogans drained of significance). Agri-business replaced the individual farm, feedlots the grazing lands, genetically engineered foods home grown produce. The abuses are legion from sewage to irrigate spinach, lettuce, and red peppers, child labor and disease at packing plants, peanut butter with infections. Speed and the huge volume of food, and then the massive transportation system required to distribute the food to growing populations, all conspired with soaring profits to defeat taste and make conformity public virtues.

In the story Carlo Petrini tells, the Movement created “an Ark of Taste” (90) against the new flood, produced a plan of *presidia*, protection for unique products in a given territory, and dedicated itself to cultivation and education in small environments. It cultivates small units of organization in many countries and joins them with the desire “to acquire the vocabulary of flavor, learning the established one when it has already been codified, as in the case of wine and to a certain extent cheese” (77).

In its simplest formulation the movement is built on the assumption of a habitation, local in geography or imaginary in its outer dimensions—in the sense that a territory in one country purchases the products of a territory in another country. The common ground is taste and quality not fashion or consumer trends. People choose to live within a territory in a human community honoring the old ways of eating and drinking, of finding out how produce is grown and how the cheese and wine are made, particularly the factors that make them distinctive from the products in another territory. Living then becomes a projection of the forces antique and modern active in the territory, an outgoing participation in community with other people with like-minded plans. If Robert Duncan can say poetry is an event in language, then a slow food community can say that a meal is in active event in food and wine. A field event in which the people at the table participate from the inside and do not gather significance from an outside agency. In this case, an outside agency would be a franchise, a boxed lunch, a frozen meal from a distribution company. Slow eating centers attention on the primary acts of production, preparation and participation. Fast food would be something like academic poetry or the worst organization of Language Poetry, a means of determination imposed from outside the area of the participants. In such cases the fulfillment of an ideology or theory of composition/presentation would become the fast food lane, uniform in its demands and restrictive not inclusive in its favors.

Slow also means going slowly, reading slowly. There is a break between each of the short sections of Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” just as there is a break, a pause for contemplation and assimilation after each of the numbered sections of his “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” George Oppen left spaces between words in his poems, and he meant the space or gap to be an integral part of the rhythmic structure, and so the whole

meaning of the poem. William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore had used the configuration of the poem on the page as a way of slowing down the reading, and of forcing attention to the beginning or endings of a line, or of sharpening attention to an image or series of images. When Robert Duncan read his poem aloud he became an orchestra director counting out the rhythms, pausing for spaces, generating the rhythms of the poems from his voicing or not voicing words and spaces. The rows of words at the beginning and ending of “The Fire: Passages 13” is actually the largest example but there are smaller examples throughout his poetry. In *Ground Work: Before the War* he writes that he has dealt with caesuras and silences in the poems; “Silences themselves as phrases, units in the measure, charged with meaning.”

John Taggart has written about Oppen’s use of gaps/spacing and developed his own means of slowing the reading of his poems down with intricate series of verbal repetitions. The poems in the book *Peace on Earth* have the most sophisticated use of repetitions. In “A Note & Acknowledgments” at the conclusion of his recent book of poems. *There Are Birds*, he tells his audience to read the poems aloud:

You will occasionally come upon internal space gaps of varying proportions (varying durations of silence). Please do not ignore them. They provide time for rest, for an image to assume depth and definition, for reflection. They are not so much “holes” as cadenced parts of the whole that is each poem.

Taggart has made slow reading a part of his poetics, and he has also cultivated his own Woodland Garden with plants and trees native to his geography in Cumberland County, PA. His ideas about the vocabulary of taste move far beyond organic farming and community markets, beyond the fashion and trendy ways of the consumer to a concern for the relationship of the food produced and consumed within a territory and a community of people carefully choosing quality over uniformity. Moving slowly in cooking or reading is founded in the same commitment to the particulars of living, of allowing the “genuine,” as Marianne Moore would say, to emerge from everyday acts of attention. Going slow even generates a poetics of taste.