

The Southport School

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Poethics: taking responsibility for unknowability

Abstract:

Is creativity a way to take control of chaos? In creating, the artist takes a chance on an uncertain outcome: a risk for something important, a need to express a view of the chaos of life, to make sense of the nonsensical. Considering how real life muddies the logic of ethical analysis, any attempt at recreating reality must take responsibility for reality's unknowability. For my own métier, writing poethically involves no longer imposing anything of my own complex reality upon the characters, but allowing them to exist in the circumstances in which they are found.

Biographical note:

Currently working on my PhD in creativity and on year thirteen as an Senior English teacher at The Southport School on the Gold Coast. A background in film making and as a chef on private yachts has enhanced a lifelong engagement with creativity in all forms.

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Joan Retallack's *The Poethical Wager* (2003) suggests that 'great creations' result from using 'robustly nuanced reasonableness ... engaging positively with otherness and unintelligibility' (Retallack 2003: 22), thus enabling artistic creation to be freed from the need to control. Creating poethically, as Retallack describes, embraces the complex realities of an existence whose only surety is that nothing is sure—a reality that acknowledges the part chance takes in any outcome.

Writing poethically must therefore acknowledge that 'real' is not an uncontested attribute, and reality is about individual conception. This ideal must also be tempered by a consideration of the one unchanging element, human nature.

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything (Stein 1926: 4).

The word 'poethics' at first glance might seem to spring simply from a mixing of 'poetics' and 'ethics'. Joan Retallack coined the word and writes of how the fusion through the 'Aitch' (h) creates something more than both 'poetics' and 'ethics' previously encompassed. In a cyber conversation with friend Quinta Slef on what exactly 'poethics' means, she explained:

A poetics can only take you so far without an h. If you're to embrace this complex life on earth, if you can no longer pretend that all things are fundamentally simple or elegant, a poetics thickened by an h launches an exploration of art's significance as, not just about, a form of living in the real world (Retallack 2003: 26).

For my own narrative writing, poethical considerations have led to the need for less words. Writing without forcing the characters towards any fixed outcome seems to allow the story to unfold as a result of actions and reactions. Previously it often felt for me as though I were trying to force a square peg into a round hole by writing a character that simply wouldn't do what they were supposed to do to allow me to get to my desired outcome. Letting go of expectations about an outcome allowed the characters to flourish into real people with real reactions to real situations. The most important outcome was a happier writer.

What Retallack says appears to be true: I feel the stirrings of poethics are enhancing my levels of pleasure in the quest to express, even though I have not yet fully let go of the need to expect a plot or character outcome. Retallack has assured that giving up the apparent simplicity of conventional compositional form does not necessarily lead to anarchy. She writes about listening to a performance of one of John Cage's radical musical works:

What was being heard that night was indeed what ideology, with its myths of simplicity, usually conceals—that complexity, perhaps even chaos (and I'm referring here to the current image of chaos as pattern-bounded unpredictability), is not only with us, but it may be—if we can accept and work with it rather than against it—a source of energy for optimism (Retallack 2003: 203).

My process of writing more *poethically* began even before I knew the word existed. I wasn't satisfied that I was expressing myself clearly enough. I felt I had a nice range of words in my repertoire and I wasn't afraid to make some up or borrow from other languages if need be. It turned out that structure was my problem; I always seemed to lack it. Perhaps I should have seen a pattern in my own life, or realized that my negative perspective on 'lack of structure'—or even the role chance plays in structure—was holding back my progress. However, it took a concerted study of writing which embraces chaos (especially the work of Gertrude Stein)

for me to see my breakthrough path. I began to understand the responsibility a writer has in creating an honest reflection that acknowledges the large part chaos plays in every single moment.

It was around this time that I began to feel less like giving specific details, or denotation, to the words I wrote, and to take more time with the spaces between. Categorization as way of explanation began to seem like a shabby attempt at a true representation of anything. Stein struck a chord for me when she wrote in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1926) of her process in creating *Tender Buttons* (1914). The fragmented and seemingly chaotic pieces she produced there:

were the beginning ... of mixing the outside with the inside. Hitherto she had been concerned with seriousness and the inside of things, in these studies she began to describe the inside as seen from the outside (Stein 1966: 170).

This new process helped me to create what I felt was a more realistic representation of the emotions I was looking to illustrate. Adherence to traditional plot logic was replaced by a belief in compositional logic. Stein describes the effect of this evolution on composition:

This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen (Stein 1926: 1).

Names and specific locations were the first things that had to go in my free fall into the comforting embrace of chaos. Specificity built, pre-existing images of whatever I was trying to express were abandoned and suddenly I would lose control of where the words were going:

Thick finger tap, taps on thigh.

Blink.

Shiny clean methylated white tiles block the sunset, but he still stares.

Blink.

Sun sets, slowly.

Staring.

Water boils slowly.

Blink.

Finger taps.

Finger tap, taps, tap.

Water boils.

Sun sets.

Minutes boil water.

Water boils.

Man sucks oxygen into empty lungs, seconds, minutes, sucking breaths, lungs filling.

Blink (Presto 2015).

The realisation that not knowing every big detail of what was going on, allowing the little details to unwrap the story, was much more interesting to write and always surprising. This element of surprise is delightful when measured beside the frustration of the editing and re-editing that is required to coerce all the details into making a conclusion fit. And I found that writing this way seemed more authentic, more honest to me: I was writing the real, not imposing a foreign framework on it.

Writing, up to now, has for me been an expression of a sense, a deeper understanding, a feeling. If the image of that sense is compromised by allowing what 'I know' into the analysis, then it becomes difficult to reach the feeling of completeness that occurs with the realization that my thoughts have become totally crystallized into words. Stereotypes I had tried to avoid drifted away when I became an observer of the absurdity instead of master and commander. However, poethics demands more. I no longer felt I could impose thoughts on the characters in front of me. How could I be so bold? I was not them, I had not experienced their lives, cultures, languages, métiers. I did not know them.

So, what words do you chose if you don't know anything but a feeling? I just let the questions answer themselves and the scene unfold. This becomes obvious in the difference between when I have *written* something, and when it has *written itself*. The latter is much more chaotic and realistic every time.

The office was very bright and cold.

It was necessary for what they did there.

Most of the day it was warmer near the window where her work space was located. She would often pause from her work to look out at the world going by. Sometimes it was hard to tell if the people on the street were really there, or reflections of those moving in the office around her.

Almost every day she would sit and eat her lunch at her desk and gaze out the window. One day a man came right up to the window looking very closely at his own reflection. She put her face up next to his on the glass. He turned his head from side to side checking his teeth, then walked away (Presto 2015).

The difference may not be obvious to the reader, but it is more about the technique of letting events unfold in the writing process, rather than directing them. This produces notably fewer streams of character consciousness that reveal the characters' emotions, drives, needs, etc in a narrative, however I feel the result is actually much more emotive and more personal.

Once I had decided on this technique, attempting to go backwards and turn my pre-poetical pieces around into the new style did not feel as successful. Sometimes the lack of success was because the imposition of an unknown outcome upon a known outcome was impossible to achieve: it was a paradox. How could I un-know what happens to this character? That would change it into a new story. In fact, everything about the concept of imposition was opposed to what I was attempting.

In writing more effectively poethically, I felt the result was more eloquent and was decidedly more minimal on word count. It simply took fewer words to draw a picture this way. In some parts of my creative work I know I was less able to shrug off my expectation of an outcome, but mainly I felt I had grasped the tail of an idea and was intrigued by a familiar style that

was emerging: minimal use of words for maximum impact. I had seen this before ... in Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* (1994):

Mickey's ghost walks

in this tropical rain

she swings in the fig trees

her voice

glistens green and wet

she's growing dark

she's wearing a monkey's mask (Porter 2000: 256).

Porter's poetry paints a picture and ultimately the vision of the 'inside as seen from the outside' as described by Stein (1966: 170). The characters are drawn through colour and shape with edges just blurred enough to allow the verse novel to become personal to the reader. Illustrations are created in the reader's mind without dictating a time or a space and word choices make the story accessible to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Every word adds to the discovery of meaning.

In her fragment titled 'Book', from *Tender Buttons*, Stein's words gather momentum in a similar way to Porter's. Both write with a focus on the meaning of individual words in relationship to a surrounding group as opposed to the sentence or paragraph:

Book was there, it was there. Book was there. Stop it, stop it, it was a cleaner, a wet cleaner and it was not where it was wet, it was not high, it was directly placed back, not back again, back it was returned, it was needless, it put a bank. A bank when, a bank care.

Suppose a man a realistic expression of resolute reliability suggests pleasing itself white all white and no head does that mean soap. It does not so. It means kind wavers and little chance to beside beside rest. A plain.

Suppose ear rings, that is one way to breed, breed that. Oh chance to say, oh nice old pole. Next best and nearest pillar. Chest not valuable, be papered.

Cover up cover up the two with a little piece of string and hope rose and green, green (Stein & Congdon 2013: 62).

Stein shows what she 'sees' through close observation using a free associative form. *Tender Buttons* is written as though she has observed the very molecules of her subjects and the viewing is so close as to obscure the image. She is not instructing the reader, but describing exactly what she 'sees' as only she can see it. Like the other fragments in *Tender Buttons*, 'Book' is a description of one particular moment involving a book through Stein's mind's eye, and the writing depicts that moment and all that is conjured by the situation in which a book finds itself in her viewing. All this is given from Stein's perspective, without imposing

boundaries upon the reader's imagination. Her written 'portraits' of objects and people explain not the subject, but the subject's relationship with what is going on in that moment.

Learning to write poethically began for me as an exercise in observation for my own writing. After reading Stein, I began to understand just how broad the term 'observation' could be. For my own writing, this has meant no longer dictating the story to the characters, but allowing the characters to exist in the time and space in which they are found. I write down what I 'see', not limited by what I 'know'. I write the atoms or molecules of the scene, as Stein does, without worrying about the 'big' picture. I found that if I hold no expectation for the sequence of events that follow and allow scenes to unfold 'naturally', then they are more realistic. Writing this way feels less judgmental and more empathetic; more observational, less invasive. However, it seems ridiculous even to consider that poethical writing is possible; how can a writer be so deeply immersed in their writing that they remove themselves from it?

Retallack suggests one persists because '[i]t will change your sense of the relation of your language to "the mess"':

Your poethical work begins when you no longer wish to shape materials (words, visual elements, sounds) into legitimate progeny of your own poetics. When you are released from filling in the delimiting forms. . . . If you persist, the patterns in your work may become more flexible, permeable, conversational, exploratory (Retallack 2003: 38).

Stein's *Tender Buttons* smears the portrait of the tender moments she has with the subjects of her writing, so the 'portraits' of her memories are no longer recognizable as the subject given in the title. She has clearly been released from the need for 'filling in the delimiting forms'. In fact, the reader continues to read what appears to be a collection of random words under headings, barely punctuated, and it becomes not the words or their order that are important but the feeling the reader is left with.

Stein's novel, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, is actually about Gertrude herself seen through the eyes of Alice, her lifetime companion. It is constantly surprising to find how flatteringly 'Alice' writes of Gertrude's talent. While clearly the most ambitious self-advertising campaign written by an author in her time, the book is also an astute observation of the creative world Stein lived in in 1920s Paris, as well as an insight into reading *Tender Buttons*. When Stein writes of herself in the same way she writes of the painters of the time, one can imagine where creative writing could have been now if her writing ambitions had taken off in a bigger way. Convention of the time had trouble digesting Picasso, yet now his standing in the art world is undisputed. Stein's influence remains more often theoretical rather than practical. Stein and Picasso employ similar techniques in their individual *métier*. They were close friends during their creative years and they created each other's portraits; one in words, one in oils. Both were toying with perceptions in art. They no longer wanted to create the obvious. Emotion towards the subject became part of the portrait.

Stein's writing takes on the challenge of expressing the chaos: embracing the random swerving from idea to idea that Retallack says is a requirement in any poethical creating. It requires letting go of expectations, free falling and remembering to feel the words as individuals as well as collectively. It is writing as art, as opposed to writing purely as direct communication. It takes up the emotions and takes responsibility for the unknowability of complex realities. Stein's total lack of convention combined with a study of life that removes what is obvious, leaves the reader in awe of the self-confidence required to believe

conventional comprehension does not matter in representations of reality. If reality is nothing else, it is certainly incomprehensibly unpredictable:

Anyone she is kissing is one she is kissing then, not kissing again and again, not kissing and kissing, anyone she is kissing is one she kissed then, is one she did kiss then, one she kissed some then.

Anyone she is kissing is one needing something then, needing kissing, needing anything just then, needing some kissing then. Anyone she is kissing is one having been kissed then, having been kissed some then she was the one who was kissing that one some then. Anyone she was kissing was one who might have been needing something then, needing anything then, needing kissing then, needing a little kissing then, needing any kissing then, needing something then, needing kissing then (Stein 2007: 108).

Taking up the poethical wager in my own writing requires that I show what is seen by me in the way that I see it, without relying on others' styles to do so.

Virginia Woolf describes what we are all really looking for when we participate in art, either through viewing it or creating it: to experience the chaos. Retallack uses the character from Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931), Bernard, as an example of Woolf's desperation to get away from conventional form.

How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down with all their feet on the ground! ... I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use. Broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on a pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably ... what delights me then is the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. Great clouds always changing, and movement; something sulfurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost ... (Woolf 2014: 171).

Clearly Woolf tempered 'the indifference and the fury' she longs for here with the elegance and nuanced style of her own writing, but it is instructive to be given insight into the volcanic forces underlying her work. Joan Retallack suggests that using robustly nuanced reasonableness for complete freedom from control by engaging positively with otherness and unintelligibility 'is precisely why intuition and imagination are so important to a reasoned agency' (Retallack 2003: 23).

The challenge in my own writing is to impose nothing upon the characters, nor to let my own reactions colour the portraits, the structures. To write in the random way that life unfolds, without neat conclusions or logical narrative structure. To trace the molecules of whirling life. This can be the only true portrait of a time, a portrait that doesn't depend on fads or fashions for explanation, but one that engages with the fact of reality's unknowability, that can be picked up and read from any point, in any order and still feel real, a representation of complex realities, as seen by an honest observer. Lives are not stories with logical outcomes, but mad scrambles to take charge of deaths we can't really own and to get what we need in the meantime without really knowing what that is—as the game's rules change, as the goalposts move.

Naturally one does not know how it happened until it is well over beginning happening (Stein 1926: 1).

Taking responsibility for unknowability is also found in literature concerning matters of law, or ‘poethics’ (defined in a different way from Retallack). Richard H. Weisberg, in a separate coining of the term *poethics*, writes about the need for more ‘poethical’ behaviour in lawyers. In *Poethics, and Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (1992) Weisberg states:

Poethics in its attention to legal communication and to the plight of those who are “other”, seeks to revitalize the ethical component of the law ... it aspires to a unique scrutiny of legal reasoning and indeed the lawyer’s inner self ... (Weisberg 1992: 46).

Weisberg explains that reading literature assists lawyers in thinking more ethically about the individuals they deal with in the courts, bringing dimensionality to an individual’s perspective on humanity. He believes that it is vital to ethical practices of law to fully include the circumstances of the individual in the courtroom: the ungraspability (‘Unbegreiflichkeit’) of how each individual has ended up in court and the sequence of events that led to this particular court case.

In Chapter One of his book, titled ‘Poethics: towards a Literary Jurisprudence’, Weisberg explains what ‘poethics’ means in this context:

Literature provides unique insights into the underpinnings of law and that stories and poems stand as sources of law, richer and certainly more accessible than those in legal philosophy that have dominated jurisprudence for many years (Weisberg 1992: 3).

Weisberg uses many examples of classic literature to illustrate his point, and focuses on the responsibility storytellers have in blowing away idealism from the eyes of those in search of ‘real’ justice from chaos:

all too often the advocacy of mainstream values seems to carry with it the destruction of exogenous, nonconformist values (Weisberg 1992: 41).

In a discussion on the law’s treatment of the outsider, he explains this complex reality by using the examples of lawyers who were unable to save their innocent clients in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. There are also the lessons to be learned from such cases as *The Merchant of Venice*, and Portia’s use of ‘the complex reality of the crime and the prejudices of the jury or judge’ (Weisberg 1992: 41).

Although no one wants to see Shylock get his pound of flesh, the complex reality of it all is the anti-Semitic culture of Venice at the time as well as the negative attitude towards the profession of usurer. Add to this the fact that Portia would not even have had the opportunity to use this anti-Semitic feeling to save her husband’s best friend if anyone had known she was actually a woman. For Weisberg, this is reason enough for the justification of literature’s inclusion in the study of law because stories such as these cause lawyers to reach conclusions regarding human understanding, more than just justice. Retallack says:

Because it seems that what is most meaningful to our complex species will never make complete rational sense, will always defy paraphrase and description, may be wonderful and frightening at the same time, that is, approach paradox, genres that depend upon principles of identity, sequential narration, noncontradiction can only be of limited help. They’re just not generous or improbable enough to encompass a complex realist perspective (2003: 4).

In the work of Retallack and Weisberg, the worlds of literature and law collide in a way that benefits both, as well as—potentially—humanity, if the principles are applied beyond

creativity and law. Retallack sets the challenge for creativity to reflect the complexity of multiple realities, and Weisberg proves there is a need for writing that brings dimensionality to an individual's perspective on humanity.

The Poethical vision yielded by [his selection of] texts is especially important today when law seems to be moving away from its humane roots and toward a variety of formalisms. Taken collectively, I believe they teach us about at least four basic elements of the law otherwise either ignored, unstressed, or misperceived in traditional approaches to jurisprudence...

1. How a lawyer communicates....
3. How a lawyer treats people....
5. How a lawyer reasons....
7. How a lawyer feels (Weisberg 1992: 350).

Weisberg emphasizes that the urgency to create in a poethical manner could not be greater than now, when the chaos of reality upstages anything the imagination could possibly conjure. Retallack says:

Truth is stranger than fiction because fiction has to make sense ... it all has to make internally consistent, persuasive sense (Retallack 2003: 42).

So the responsibility for expressing this unknowability lies firmly with the creators of art forms. This is especially so now that Weisberg tells us that the very foundations of our laws may actually depend upon literature to teach the complexity of multiple realities.

In an essay about Retallack's *The Poethical Wager*, Gerald Bruns agrees that there is something to be gained by being more open when creating with words: that nothing is meaningless, it's all about how much attention we are prepared to pay. He suggests that 'Retallack herself prefers the concept of swerving, the sudden zig or zag of rogue atoms to which Epicurus gave the term "clinamen"' (Bruns 2005). Bruns explains this necessary attention is about inviting the unexpected, and being open to seeing it:

The idea is to appropriate Stein's gift of attention to the singular, trivial, oblivious, seemingly random and meaningless detail. Attention is the central ethical concept of Retallack ... an aesthetic she tries to capture with the phrase "complex realism," which like all realisms is made possible by a concentration on the differences embedded in indifferent, disposable materials (Bruns 2005).

From here it must be decided if there is even any point in defining something whose very definition may well be a paradox, that Retallack's whole point is that no clear definition of what 'poethics' means is actually the point:

This is the question of poethics—what we make of events as we use language in the present, how we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood (Retallack 2003: 9).

This then serves as a basis on which to begin deeper discussion on a definition of what 'poethics' might actually mean to the individual, to the writer, to the culture. It may be that trying to define the edges of what 'poethics' means is, by its very nature, not poethical. History reveals ruptures in the rhizome that have produced lines of flight from convention, forms that have accommodated the mess for artists in their times:

A rhizome may be broken or shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines ... there is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome, these lines always tie back to one another (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 9).

My idea of writing without reference to what was expected ties me back to writers who sought similarly to escape convention in order to get closer to a more authentic representation of their chaotic world. I found that my own special sort of writing linked me to others who had already been where I knew I needed to go.

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