

The Question of Form, Continued: The Outside

In the afterword of the spring 2014 issue of *Windfall* we discussed the role of invented form in our era when free verse has become the unstated practice for most writers of poetry. We associated free verse with the last hundred years of culture based on fossil fuel, now beginning a slow decline. We set aside traditional forms, such as sonnets, and turned to the basics—lines and stanzas—as a source of renewal of the practice of form in poetry of the Pacific Northwest. The question of form is really a subset of a larger question: “What does it mean to write poetry?” And it is this question that we will entertain here, putting form into context along the way.

We need to do a little time-travel back to ancient Greece, the time of Homer and the subsequent Pre-Socratic philosophers (so designated because they flourished in widely-scattered cities and towns of Greece in eras previous to Socrates in Athens, who through Plato redirected Western thought). Of special interest among the Pre-Socratics, Parmenides (540 or 515 BCE—?) lived in the Greek town of Elea (today Velia) in southern Italy across from Sicily. For us poets, the most interesting thing about Parmenides is that his only known writing turns out to have been a poem, of which we have fragments amounting to about 160 lines (out of a likely 300-500). The prologue of the poem, about thirty lines, is the story of how Parmenides, a young seeker after truth, was swept up in a chariot drawn by mares and led by maidens to where day and night meet. The Daughters of the Sun are leaving the House of Night. Parmenides is taken before a goddess, otherwise unnamed. She looks at him, takes his hand, and says she will show him the way of truth, and then she will disclose what humans *think* is the truth. In Parmenides’ poem the Way of Truth is that which does not change and has no beginning or end. Parmenides, like other Pre-Socratics, was writing about Being.

After Parmenides, Plato translated Being into the world of ideal forms, remote from the sensory cave in which we dwell. In the generation after Plato, Aristotle, who lived a couple of hundred years after Parmenides, still assumed Being in something of the old Pre-Socratic way, without denying the reality of change. In his 1954 essay "The Question Concerning Technology" Heidegger reminds us that Aristotle cites four causes behind any kind of change or motion, including production. These causes are: The matter, the form, the agent, and the end purpose. If we take the example of a sculptor, the traditional interpretation of the four causes would go like this: The matter would be the marble or other material, the form would be the shape the sculpture takes, the agent would be the sculptor, and the end purpose would be the reason for the statue, such as honoring an important person in the community.

Philosopher and Heidegger translator Richard Rojcewicz says, "Our contemporary understanding of causality basically amounts to this: A cause is what, by its own agency, produces an effect." That is, we would consider that the sculptor is the sole agent that produces the sculpture, and the work itself we would call the sculptor's own "creation." In modern terminology, such a single cause is termed "the efficient cause." Today we would not consider the material, the form, or the purpose of a work of art as causes in the same sense as the "efficient cause" of the agent.

According to Heidegger, Aristotle and the Pre-Socratic Greeks such as Parmenides and Heraclitus understood "cause" quite differently. To them, all four causes contributed equally to production. And the causes themselves were not causes in the modern sense of "having an effect," but were considered more like "sources." That is, in the case of the sculptor, the marble material, the form the sculptor would release from the marble, the final purpose of the piece, and the sculptor herself all contributed in equal measure to the outcome. The sculptor's role was more like that of a midwife in relation to giving birth. Indeed, all four causes in the Greek sense have one thing in common: They all abet the production of the work, and abetting is much different from control of production, as we might envision a sculptor's role today.

This great difference between abetting rather than causing is what Heidegger terms the history of Being, which has two phases. In the first phase among the Pre-Socratic Greeks, Being made itself much more directly available. However, it wasn't an effortless revelation. Rojcewicz explains:

Humans do not receive the selfoffering of the gods the way softened wax receives the impress of a stamp. Humans make an active contribution to the disclosure of the meaning of Being. Humans co-constitute that disclosure and are co-responsible for it. Humans are therefore called upon to exercise all their disclosive powers; humans must be sensitive, thoughtful, creative, resolute. There is no disclosure of truth without a human contribution, and the genuineness of the disclosure depends to some necessary extent upon that contribution. In



*Head of Athena
from Olympia,
c. 490 BCE. Terracotta.*

other words, truth, the goddess, may take the thinker by the hand, but the thinker must actually be a thinker, must actively attempt to disclose the truth, must, as it were, reach out a hand toward the truth for the goddess to take up.

Under the normal circumstances of life, Being remains largely concealed from our eyes. However, in the work of art Being would look “disclosively” at artisans, and artisans would look disclosively back, thereby unconcealing or revealing Being. A sculpture of a god or goddess, which today comes to us bone-white or grey with empty eyes, in its original manifestation would have been vividly painted, including its eyes. That is, the purpose of the statue of a god was to look at us.

The statue was an avatar of Being looking disclosively at us, fully unconcealed. The sculptor, the marble, the form, and the purpose all combined equally in abetting the production of the statue, and none of



*Head of Kroisos kouros
from Anavyssos,
c. 530 BCE. Marble.*

these was more important than the others in this process.

It's useful to note that the sculptor or craftsman was not Aristotle's paradigm example of cause as abetting. He deployed other examples. First was the counselor, such as a father, whose role is to abet the emergence of a son, which requires care, encouragement, and counsel—in short, nurture. The father does not impose growth, but only prepares or abets it. Aristotle's second example is the farmer who sows his field. The seed grows on its own initiative, while the farmer merely provides the right conditions for the seed to grow. Aristotle's third example is doctors, who in Aristotle's day did not cause health by their own agency—rather the doctor merely prescribed the right conditions for health to reassert itself. Nature heals, and the doctor is the midwife to health. The fourth example from Aristotle is to ask what caused the war. His answer is “the abduction.” He must have been thinking of the Homeric epics, wherein Paris abducted Helen, which led to the Trojan War. However, the abduction itself did not cause the war; rather it roused or stirred up the parties, who then could choose whether or not to go to war. The abduction thus abetted war, rather than serving as efficient cause. Consider the many pretexts for war in our era: Gulf of Tonkin, 9/11, ISIS beheadings.

Aristotle mentioned the craftsman as only a general example. The example of the sculptor, so suited to later assumptions of the sole efficient cause of art, achieved special resonance with a figure like Michelangelo. Ironically, Michelangelo himself famously credited the marble with having as much to say about the statue as he did, and that he was merely “releasing” the form from the marble. Of course, the end purpose in terms of the demands of Pope Julius II had something to do with Michelangelo's production as well. In short, the artist in Michelangelo was more of an abettor than an efficient cause.

The second phase of the history of Being began shortly after the death of Aristotle, when cause began to be interpreted in terms of cause and effect, with man as the efficient cause, which accelerated under the Romans and by the Middle Ages was fully established and prevails to this day. Over the intervening centuries, Being has withdrawn

itself from us, compared to the easier access to it enjoyed by the Pre-Socratic Greeks. In the seventeenth century Descartes established the human-centered principle of modernity: "I think, therefore I am." As the emphasis has shifted to exclusive human control, Being has become obscure. Modern technology has become our way of imposing our will upon the world. The essence of modern technology is not the manifold machines that we make, but a way of seeing that regards the world as disposable. Nature and all other beings exist to be used by us, at our disposal. The ancient technology of a waterwheel used the river, but did not disturb its flow; the modern technology of a dam changes the river entirely and turns its flow and its water into disposable commodities. Not only nature, but human beings are regarded as disposable workers and consumers. Technology, in its essence of seeing the world as disposable, has replaced the gods with their disclosive seeing. Technology has become our way to access Being, but Being reveals itself only briefly before retreating once again into concealment behind a multiplying multiplicity of manufactured things.

While all of modern humanity lives within the essence of technology, Heidegger finds an exception to its spell: the artist. In modern terms, art is interpreted and appreciated aesthetically, that is, for the pleasure it gives and the honor it does to human beings. Aesthetics is simply another form of disposability, in which art is appreciated in much the same way as any other technological achievement, like beautiful cars or ever more versatile iPhones. We relate to art in terms of our radical subjectivity. We see art as an experience, or sometimes, "art for art's sake."

By contrast, the ancient Greeks did not understand their experience in terms of its effect on a subject, and they did not think in terms of "lived experience," nor of art as way of extending individual experience. The original Greek attitude was "art for the sake of what it means to be." For them, art was not just another cultural creation, but the exclusively preeminent one. In philosophical terms, for the ancient Greeks, art was ontological, rather than aesthetic. Art is truth, as Heidegger translates the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, to mean "unconcealing."

Art is the unconcealing of Being. Suddenly, in a work of sculpture, the god is looking at you. No aesthetics are involved, but rather Being is unconcealed. We may then turn away from the work of art, we may go on with daily life and forget the encounter, but during that encounter we were looking at the work of art, and the work of art looked at us. Being was acknowledged and respected. Being shines. For the ancient Greeks, shining was the sign of Being, as we read in the *Iliad*, wherein the adjective “shining” appears on nearly every page, usually with the advent of some hero in armor.

For Heidegger, the preeminent art of all the arts is poetry. Poetry is that disclosive looking which holds sway in all the arts. The preeminence of poetry derives from the fact that it occurs in language, and the meaning of Being is primarily conveyed in language, because language has ascendancy over our thinking. As Rojcewicz puts it, “The poets have a special relationship to the Muses; that means the poets are inspired to convey to us the self-disclosure of the divine, the meaning of Being in general, the essence of things as a whole.” All the other arts depend on poetry, because poetry is the closest of the arts to language, and language is the carrier of Being. Poetry essentially makes the other arts possible.

Returning to Aristotle and his four sources of *poiesis*, or bringing forth, how might we consider those four sources in terms of poetry? Certainly we can assume that the *agent* is the poet, though the poet is seen as a midwife, an abettor of poems, one who encourages the emergence of the poem (as opposed to the common view today of the poet as the sole efficient cause of the poem). What, then, would constitute the *material* of the poem? From Heidegger’s point of view, language would be the obvious candidate. In Aristotle’s terms, we must remember that the material of the poem has an equal say with the poet in the outcome, as most poets have experienced.

Likewise, the *form* of the poem has an equal say. The form of the poem is a point of contention for us, because free verse assumes that form simply follows content and has no say of its own. A poet who uses traditional forms such as sonnets has experience with the form

demanding a greater role in the poem. The poet who devises her own form likewise submits to the contingencies that form requires. However, we might also cite as form the various techniques by which a poem is constructed: lines, stanzas, imagery, figurative language (simile and metaphor), sound, rhythm, and symbol.

Lastly, we have Aristotle's fourth source, the *final purpose* of the poem. Unless one is writing an occasional poem, a rare occurrence for most poets today—and difficult to do, because the demands of it lie outside the poet's personal expression—most poems today are not written to any specific occasion. Billy Collins, asked to write an occasional poem commemorating a school's anniversary celebration, instead wrote a poem about the difficulty of writing an occasional poem. We have to be reminded that writing poems in previous eras was sometimes done on commission, as among early Irish poets, or to address a special circumstance, like Spenser's "Epithalamion." Someone had to pay for Michelangelo's blocks of marble, and Mozart hardly ever wrote a piece of music without some commission in mind or some favored orchestra, instrumentalist, or child-pupil of wealthy patrons. Today, unless we are thinking of a specific audience, such as a local community, we entertain the expectations of the audience only secondarily to our efforts at personal expression. Perhaps in the future we will give community more voice in a work of poetry, when poetry becomes local, rather than "national." Corvallis poet Charles Goodrich says he would like to write only poems that people in Corvallis would appreciate, which is a way of asserting the final purpose of poem. In Aristotle's terms, the poet is acknowledging that the final purpose, in this case community, has a say in bringing forth poems.

Heidegger maintains that we as poets, even under technological modernity, still have the most responsibility of anyone in making a clearing wherein Being can be disclosed or unconcealed. Since Being reveals itself to us of its own accord, in order for poets to recover the self-disclosure of Being, we can do only two things: contemplate and wait. That may not sound like much, but contemplating and waiting are essential, because they prepare us to receive Being. One must practice

one's art and wait with all one's might, as it were, and keep raising one's expectations (rather than "lowering one's standards").

What three of Aristotle's causes—the matter, the form and the final purpose—have in common is that they come from outside the poet. That is, they have a say in the process of the poem, which emerges independently of the poet.

Are there any poets in the modern era who have allowed themselves to become the instruments or abettors of poetry, receiving the poem from the outside? California poet Robinson Jeffers, for one, considered that poetry had to come from non-human sources, and his work privileged animals, birds, and even rocks above human interests—for which he received a certain amount of opprobrium from his human readers.

However, one of the most radical contemporary poets in regards to assuming that poetry comes from outside the poet seems to have been another California poet, Jack Spicer. Spicer believed that the origin of poems was unknown, and that unknown sources used the poet to transmit poems. Spicer came up with several metaphors for these unknown sources, such as a radio transmitter, with the poet serving as the radio, in spite of much static. "We are crystal sets at best," he said, and the static was the personal stuff that the poet had failed to clear out so that the poem could come through. Sometimes it would be a four-hour struggle of the poet trying to write a poem before an actual poem would tap the poet on the shoulder and start to come through. Another metaphor was Green Martians, who might as well have been dictating in Martian for all the poet understood the poems, though it was the poet's (and audience's) duty to try to understand. Yet another metaphor was ghosts, which were not the spirits of dead people, but "Lowghosts" (*Logos*), spooks who sent messages (Spicer revered puns as more basic to language than metaphor). All of these metaphors were Spicer's way of talking about X, the unknown source of poems. In fact, almost all of Spicer's poetry is *about* poetry, the practice of taking dictation from the outside. Here is a poem from Spicer's late book *Language*:

SPORTING LIFE

The trouble with comparing a poet with a radio is that
radios don't develop scar-tissue. The tubes burn
out, or with a transistor, which most souls are, the
battery or diagram burns out replaceable or not
replaceable, but not like that punchdrunk fighter
in the bar. The Poet

Takes too many messages. The right to the ear that floored
him in New Jersey. The right to say that he stood
six rounds with a champion.

Then they sell beer or go on sporting commissions, or, if
the scar tissue is too heavy, demonstrate in a bar
where the invisible champions might not have hit
him. Too many of them.

The poet is a radio. The poet is a liar. The poet is a
counterpunching radio.

And those messages (God would not damn them) do not
even know they are champions.

Here the sources test the limits of the metaphor that the poet is a radio—i.e., the poet, unlike a radio, is human in a further metaphor, the poet as punchdrunk fighter. We learn the toll in physical terms that being a conveyor of messages will take on the poet, who hears too many messages. The messages, meanwhile, are indifferent to how they read to humans. That is, the poem is agnostic on what poems do for either the poet or the audience. As Spicer said in his first Vancouver lecture in 1965:

I can't remember any good advice that I've gotten from one of my poems that helped me be any happier or any better or sleep with any more people or get any more money or anything else. Poems are pretty useless for anything like that. The advice that they give is just not interested. It's like somebody treating you fairly abstractly. At least I've never had any experience with a poem that I wrote that was really interested in my welfare, namely what I want, my happiness, or anything else.

It's usually been the opposite way. They've kicked me in the teeth a few times, but they've never really helped me much.

A poem treating us "fairly abstractly" seems uncannily akin to the way an ancient Greek statue of a god was looking at humans disclosively. That is, poems taken in this light carry messages that are not intended to be interpreted, but apprehended. They are intended to be received, and to receive our attention to them. We witness unconcealed Being, and then it closes up again. Spicer said the poem "may have some Nielsen ratings of its own somewhere," but we have no final way of knowing what those messages mean, because they represent Being in its totality, not only our human being. Spicer never used the word "Being," but preferred to say "the unknown."

Spicer's metaphor for the contents of a poet's mind and memory was "the furniture in the room." The poet's personal experiences, together with all that she has read or heard about, provide materials that the incoming messages can put to use. The result may or may not make sense. Nonsense, such as "Sable arrested a fine comb," was a favorite motif of Spicer's, because the messages weren't necessarily immediately available to poet or audience. Hence, part of his furniture in the room included Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, as well as mythology and lore from the Renaissance (e.g., grail legend), and his studies in linguistics at UC Berkeley. Spicer thought too much education was problematical, because it tended to give the poet the illusion that the poet was in control of the poem. On the other hand, education could provide some handy furniture for the ghosts to move around.

The outside may be indifferent, but the poet isn't. When Aristotle's material, form, and final purpose have a say in bringing forth the poem, the poet has to work extra hard to be a midwife to the poem. Heidegger's advice of contemplation and active waiting comes into play here. Being comes to the poet.

Waiting for a poem would seem to run counter to much of the advice that poets receive these days, such as writing every day, after the manner of William Stafford. Over his lifetime, Stafford is said to have produced twenty thousand poems, most of which remain unpublished. Waiting

for poems would necessarily mean a much reduced output. After a reading, Carl Adamschick was asked about his practice in writing poems and when he actually wrote them. He said, "Whenever they come to me." Maybe receiving one poem at a time is worth the wait. Workshops and prompts would appear to be irrelevant to this process, not to mention classes in writing beyond what can be gleaned about basic techniques (i.e., materials) in an introductory course. Reading and sorting the furniture in the room would seem to be the main conditions of waiting, as well as having experiences and engaging with basic human life. When the poet receives a poem from the outside, he will know it by how it seems beyond his expectations, how the poem seems to be looking at him. Maybe we need a workshop in waiting!

Leading the way back to Being would appear to be an enormous task for poetry in its role as the preeminent art. Having been abandoned as a philosophical consideration after Parmenides, Being fell into neglect, or was simply taken for granted. Twenty-five centuries later, Being, as that which makes beings possible, is almost too obvious to be seen or evoked without a new use of language. We have to find ways of letting Being come to us. Heidegger recommends silence and contemplation.

When we started *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place* twelve years ago, we were hoping to encourage poets to write about something outside of themselves. "Place" seemed to be useful in this regard, because of its ambiguity of urban and rural, built and natural, human and nonhuman. We discouraged metaphorical extensions of place, while encouraging the evocation of actual named places in the Pacific Northwest. This seemed about as far as we could go in arousing (a form of abetting) a poetry of the outside—as Spicer once said, "like a cheering section at a particularly exciting football game." We couldn't have established a magazine called "A Journal of the Poetry of Being," since we were not seeking abstract philosophical poems, nor "A Journal of Poetry of the Outside," since we were not seeking poems about outdoor adventures (!). Still, some kind of poetry, some new forms of it that step beyond the conventional, is what our dwelling on earth requires, a poetry that looks through the manifold beings to encounter Being. What is that poetry?

We must find it, lest Being, like our dwelling on earth altogether, recede from us beyond recall. Pray that it tap you on the shoulder and come through. You will know it when it does.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

Works Referred To:

Robin Blaser, editor. *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975. Out of print in 2014. Spicer's sense of poems coming from the outside, and that they come in serial form, really began to fully develop in his last five books, all written in the last eight years of his life. In either this collection by Blaser or in Gizzi and Killian's collection, check the following texts:

After Lorca (1957)

Heads of the Town up to the Aether (1960-61)

The Holy Grail (1962)

Language (1964)

Book of Magazine Verse (posthumous, 1966)

John Boardman. *Pre-Classical: From Crete to Archaic Greece*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1967. 120-21.

Robert Bringhurst. *Everywhere Being Is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009. Bringhurst includes a lyrical translation of Parmenides in this book, as well as a summation of everything we know about Parmenides and his context outside of his poem. David Gallop's translation of Parmenides is more school-bookish, but probably closer to the original, as well as including the original Greek. There are voluminous studies weighing every word in the fragments of Parmenides, who wrote in Homeric hexameters "about very un-Homeric things," as Bringhurst says. Ambiguity and uncertainty are rife in a language that old. If interested in pursuing Parmenides to that degree (especially with a knowledge of some Greek), try these:

A. H. Coxon. *The Fragments of Parmenides*. 1986. Revised and expanded edition. Edited by Richard McKirahan. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2009.

- Alexander P. D. Mourelatos. *The Route of Parmenides*. 1970. Revised and expanded edition. Edited by Gregory Vlastos. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2008.
- Billy Collins. "Poem on the Three Hundredth Anniversary of the Trinity School." *Horoscopes for the Dead*. New York: Random House, 2011. 45-46.
- David Gallop, translator. *Parmenides of Elea: Fragments, a Text and Translation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Peter Gizzi, editor. *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998. Spicer's essential commentaries on dictation can be found in the first Vancouver lecture, and on serial poems in the second Vancouver lecture.
- Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, editors. *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Martin Heidegger. "The Question Concerning Technology." *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row, 1977. 3-35. Approaching Heidegger texts, the reader should first read this 1954 essay. It's about thirty-three pages long. Heidegger is not an easy read, but with a pencil along and reading slowly, a lot can be gleaned from his dense prose. Then the reader should read *The Gods and Technology* by Richard Rojcewicz.
- Richard Rojcewicz. *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. This 231-page volume brilliantly unpacks Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology," together with reevaluation of William Lovitt's choices as a translator, and an illuminating explanation of Heidegger's German terminology. Rojcewicz expands our understanding of Heidegger for the reader who has little German and not much philosophy.