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“Frosting” the Words: *Consciousness Dynamics of Plain-Speech Resonance Poetry*

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This paper analyzes a style of poetry that is much neglected in contemporary criticism. Until this moment, it hasn't even had a formal name. There isn't a *school* or formal category for it, even though it has many adherents. And perhaps not even this study of it will cause the name to stick. We'll call it *plain-speech resonance poetry*, because its word stock is the language and speech patterns of ordinary people and because it honors the artistry of word-sound as it enhances the delivery of poetry.

Plain-speech resonance poetry defies the boundaries of elevated language and content-obscure with which a dominant modern or post-modern poetry culture seeks to isolate itself. The plain-speech resonance poet is constrained by the need to emphasize resonant phrases from common parlance. This doesn't mean the message must be simple, only that it be communicated in commonly recognizable phrases. Meaning, beyond the brilliance of the image, is delivered by the familiar sound that the words make. That familiarity opens receptiveness in the listener/reader – accessibility.

Of course, the fact that phrases are “resonant” does not mean that they have to be spoken aloud or actually performed. It only means that they contain “the sound of sense” within their phrase structure. Words are “spoken” within the mind of the poet (“*His own "I" is haunted by the shadow of a "thou" which it can never exorcise.*”) as they are “heard” in plain-speech creation and then within the mind of the silent reader who recognizes them. (Ong, 1962, 51-52). The creation of a plain-speech resonant poem combines the imagined *I* and *thou* from the moment of conception. As Bakhtin described the process:

“The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver . . .” (Bakhtin 1981, 282)

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By contrast, creation of dominant-culture modern or post-modern poems seldom involve the active imagining of a *thou* or a nexus between reader/listener and poet..

In the United States, Plain Speech's primary adherent has been Robert Frost. His poetic progeny include other notables: William Stafford, Mary Oliver, Jane Kenyon, Lisel Mueller, and Ruth Stone, to name only a very few. Curiously, United States Poets Laureate have been predominantly of the Plain Speech School, including the current appointee Donald Hall, his immediate predecessor Ted Kooser, Billy Collins, Howard Nemerov, and Gwendolyn Brooks..

This paper will first very quickly set the poetic process within the general framework of consciousness. Then it will briefly trace Frost's critical reception when he 're-introduced' the concept of plain-speech poetry, what he called 'the sound of sense' to England with the publication of his first major collections just prior to the First World War. We shall evaluate what goes into the creation of poetry in general and plain speech poetry in particular. We'll finish by briefly testing plain-speech resonance poetry against general standards of poetic content.

Poetry and Consciousness

Poetry is a language depiction that can be appreciated here and now. Poetry by its vividness translates a displaced, speculated fantasy into experience that fills the present because of its beauty, the uniqueness of its insight, or its eccentricity. The fact that poetry is by its nature, delivered via language augments the social-emotional representation with temporal and spatial displacement markers that enable visitation of other times, other places, other people.

Most poetry is imagistic. The poet, C.K. Williamson describes poetic images as:

those mental pictures that exist aside from, or rather along with, but as it were behind the images received by sense. There is a kind of perception screen through which we process images that arrive from the world, and a screen behind it onto which the interior images are being projected. (Williamson, 1998, 3-4)

Poetry creates markers, signifier word images that enable us to freeze what would otherwise be a momentary visual perception, passing and gone, so that we can ponder it longer than otherwise would be possible in working memory.

If the poet has any unique capability beyond the ability to render a visual image in words, it is the ability to perceive more deeply – and then the ability to circle an image and capture it in greater complexity, so that others, listening or reading what the poet has created, can have the benefit of this slowed down deeper perception. From this come the emotional linkages that create the somatic markers. First the linkage with the poet's emotional connection and

then, through the mirror of the poet's mind, the transfer to the mind of the listener/reader. (Holloway 2007)

Poetry has always functioned as an *avant garde* for the territory plotted and flagged in the 1990's by the neurologist Antonio Damasio as the somatic marker mechanism, linking perception of visible and audible images with reactive emotional states that facilitate the formation of knowledge and understanding. (Damasio. 1994). The poet transfers visual, audio, tactile and other sense image into words on a page. The photographer takes a picture. The painter paints. The poet writes. The ordinary person perceives. The experience triggers and fixes an emotional reaction.

As will be seen, plain-speech resonance poetry implicates several added channels of consciousness into the process of a poem's formation.

Robert Frost

Frost came to England in the years before the First World War. He challenged the pomp and flower of the Edwardian poets, who, with their tortured syrup of words had made a caricature out of Romantic tradition. His first two books were published there, to mixed reviews. The traditional poetry community and even some of the *avant garde* poets of the time tried to ignore or dismiss him as a primitive. Defensively, he proclaimed his style to be "the sound of sense." It didn't seem like poetry to the proper British ear, but it *was* poetry, and it came soon to be appreciated as something fresh. In an early review, the British critic, Edward Thomas (later to become Frost's close friend, said of the poems in the first collection:

Mr. Frost has in fact gone back, as Whitman and Wordsworth went back, through the paraphernalia of poetry into poetry again. With a confidence like genius, he has trusted his conviction that a man will not easily write better than he speaks when some matter has touched him deeply. . . . The main result is a richly homely thing beyond the grasp of any power except poetry (quoted in Walsh 191).

Lascelles Abercrombie, in his review, observed:

he seems trying to capture and hold within metrical patterns the very tones of speech – the rise and fall, the stressed pauses and little hurries, of spoken language. (quoted in Walsh 171).

and

When poetry changes by development rather than by rebellion, it is likely to return on itself. . . . Poetry, in this book, seems determined once more, . . . to invigorate itself by utilizing the traits and necessities of common life, the habits of common speech, the minds and hearts of common folk (171-72)

These early poet-critics, along with Ezra Pound, were keenly aware that Frost was revitalizing poetic style, now nearly a hundred years ago. The style

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was as radical a departure from prevailing poetic norms then as it remains today. *Back, through the paraphernalia of poetry into poetry again.* . . . The difference is only in the *paraphernalia* that now glosses contemporary poetry. The constant has been the protective persistence of prevailing poetry cultures to eschew the accessibility of the poetry of plain speech.

The *Persona* of the Plain-speech resonance poet

Plain speech poetry approaches the task of poetry with humility. Pound and Dylan Thomas and e.e. cummings, et. al. approached poetry with a kind of ego-centered solipsism that forever stands them apart and elevates them to a lonely podium where the light shines only on them. The listeners, commanded by the poet's presence to give attention, sit silent in their seats and applaud when the breath runs out.

For a plain-speech resonance poet, the lights are always down, and the listeners circle around the poet. Indeed, even the arrogant Frost simulates humility in the *persona* he assumes as the narrator of his poems. And for this, the plain-speech resonance poets are instantly feared and rejected because they seem to be playing to the masses. Accessibility becomes a bad word – a false and un-trusted goal.

The difference between the plain-speech resonance poets and the rest of the modern movement is that the plain-speech poets have learned to identify with their reader/listeners and their narratives. Indeed, this identification becomes not only an element of their style but also a significant basis of the creativity that goes into the making of their poetry.

Resonance

Frost called his work “the sound of sense” and explained, in a letter to his friend John Bartlett in a 1913 letter, that it is “the abstract vitality of our speech.” The sentence sound, he often noted, “says more than the words.” It locks the language to the humans who say it, so that it travels from the poet's pen to the soul of the listener/reader. For Frost, as for all poets who utilize the speech patterns of ordinary communication to craft their poetry, it is not simply communication of image in rich poetic terms. Poetic style depends upon the way that word combinations actually sound when they are spoken. Utilizing as a literary device, the exact tone of meaning that comes from word combinations: “writing with your ear to the voice.” “Sound posturing,” he said in a 1915 interview for a Boston newspaper (Boston Evening Transcript, May 8, 1915), meaning, as the interviewer reported: “reproducing the exact tone of meaning in human speech in literary form.” His literary motto was that real artistic speech was only to be copied from life. “Sakes, it's only weather,” from *The Runaway*, with its final lines: *Whoever it is that leaves him out so late / When*

other creatures have gone to stall and bin / Ought to be told to come and take him in., and “Let them think twice,” from *Spring Pools* are very brief examples of Frost’s sound-of-sense posturing.

If we go back far enough, Frost said, *we will discover that the sound of sense existed before words, that something in the voice or vocal gesture made primitive man convey a meaning to his fellow before the race developed a more elaborate and concrete symbol of communication in language.* And this was so different from the rhetorical sound of words intended to be written in a book. Walter Ong, in his famous studies of primary and secondary orality, explores the reasons for this. (Ong 1988)

Accessibility: It should be apparent at this point that accessibility is simply a by-product of the plain-speech poetic approach, not a central goal. It is not a strategy to make the serious plain-speech resonance poet more popular and sell more books. Rather it is the inevitable result that occurs when plain-speech techniques are employed.

The Components of plain-speech resonance poetry

In a plain-speech resonance poem the poet first voices another part of the poet’s *persona*, an easy going part that wants to understand the subtle parts of the poet voice’s message. But this voicing, when it is working, is also accessing another part of the mind that many believe for good reason goes beyond the solitary brain of the poet and accesses more universal resonances that are shared with others.

Formation of the plain-speech poem requires a versatile imaginative effort that is in many ways significantly more complex than that which takes place within the mind of the solipsist poet. The solipsist poet only needs to tap the reflective dialogue with self. The plain-speech resonance poet, on the other hand, imagines the reader/listener and imagines the setting under which the poetic communication takes place. It is a populated imagination, not a solitary one. The plain-speech poet in the act of creation yearns for a sociable contact and is willing to pay the price of letting down protective guards.

The plain-speech poet does not posit an isolating separateness from her or his audience, one that requires a stage and footlights. Plain-speech poetry is not pontifical.

One task of the writer is to unify perceptions of what is to become a shared personal consciousness for the duration of the poetic experience. The plain-speech poet sets the stage and invites the reader/listener into it.

In fact, most poetry is read silently. It remains upon the page and has to come alive as if it were spontaneous discourse uttered privately within the reader’s active mind. The poet’s challenge is to stitch the words together

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cleverly and make them seem natural and spontaneous, even when they are contrived. This is the art of the plain-speech.

Nature in the plain-speech poem becomes a common meeting ground partly because there is a sacredness, for many, in the natural experience: sunsets and sunrises, clouds in the sky, trees, forest, etc. Nature themes that frequently come out also are an attempt to integrate the human vs nature duality.

Note also that the narrative form is preferred in plain-speech poetry. The narrative is, at least usually, about people, or at least a person or two, with whom the poet can identify and empathize. The poet gains energy from imagining the telling of the story, imagining the eager quiet eyes of the listeners, the telling of it to more people who will be genuinely interested in the plight of the narrative. And in the telling of the narrative, the poet is able to eliminate the duality of poet and object -- and, through identification, the duality of reader and object, i.e. the object of the narrative and its participating human characters. In entering into the telling of the story, the poet at least for the moments of the telling, is also able to eliminate the duality of the poet and listener, because, like a child being read a story by an adult, the two become one for the duration of their immersion into the tale.

By contrast, the *all-about-me* lyric poetry of the dominant poetry culture, the self-obsessed 'confessional' poems that seem to flourish in our psychoanalytic culture, define the poetry of solipsism. Post modern and stylized modern poetry thrive on duality that separates the poet from the readership. This exclusivity frames out anyone who is not conversant with the adopted rules of the form

The plain-speech resonance poet needs the reader listener or at least the perception of the reader listener and the common ground, as an enhancement to the creativity and imaginative energy that is being used to create the poem in the first place. Content has to become more outer-directed, more universal, to something on which the reader/listener has a common understanding, frame of reference.

This is the point at which differences in consciousness functions can be most notably discerned in the creation of plain-speech resonance poetry. *Theory-of-mind* functioning comes prominently into play. The term, popular in consciousness theory, is a somewhat fanciful way of saying that we are all capable of "theorizing" what must be going through the mind of another, or of others, as we think about what we should be thinking about and planning. . (Charlton. 2000) Without "theory of mind," character creation and fiction making beyond the subjective would be almost impossible. To the solipsist poet, the concept matters not at all

Here is where doors are opened to a special kind of alchemy. Once the duality between poet and reader is broken, not only in the actual delivery of the poem from one person, the poet, to another, the listener/reader, but also

originally in the mind of the poet as the poet shifts to accommodate this unity on which the art thrives, at this point comes the possibility that if we two are one then perhaps we link to a universal whole; perhaps together this experience of the plain-speech resonant poem can return the poet and the reader, by the story the poem shares, to a re-realization of the non-dual nature of the universe that poet and reader occupy. What the plain-speech poem may have done when it integrates the duality between poet and reader/listener, is effectuate an identification with a cosmic consciousness, what some refer to as Universal Mind. (Ornstein 1977,149)

Metamorphosis of plain-speech into poetry

What about standards of quality? How dangerous is it to say that plain speech can gain the level of a poetic art, when in fact it is based on rustic forms that make up the base of common communication? Now that we have established the dynamics of plain speech resonance communication, how are we to determine that it is poetry and not simply the plain speech that any ordinary non-poet is capable of accomplishing? It is important for our purposes, to attempt to derive a method for assaying the plain-speech resonance poem. Here are some parameters.

1) *Does it feel like poetry?* Partly this is a test for all poetry, and it begins with a complex and ineluctable subjective reaction. We know that when words flower, when they hover at precipices that cannot be crossed by obvious meanings, when in spite of this the poet's passion of the words leaps anyway into what Keats referred to as "negative capability," (that is, "*when a [person] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*" (from Keats' letter of 21 December 1817 to his brothers)) blundering on, confident s/he is finding something important, the key to things, coining metaphors because nothing else suffices and we are in uncharted territory, never looking back, never daunted. Escaping into allegory, the shape of image, the image as symbol – a marker for the *impasse* of the now-moment's quandary.

2) *Does it 'please'?* Samuel Johnson in an earlier age, observed that while the end of writing is to instruct, the end of poetry is "to instruct by pleasing." (Johnson, 1908. 16) Perhaps this is true, assuming that we broadly define the term "pleasing" so that it extends beyond the limited scope of making us happy.

Contemplation of something beautifully rendered triggers an elemental imaginative process. Words describing an image require the imagination to translate the effect into a mental picture.

3) *Does it uniquely present images?* Wei Tai said: "Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling." (Perkins 1987, 326) Poetry should present the poet's unique take on an image -- words that leave something of the poet

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inside them in a way that implants that part of the poet into the psyche of the reader/listener.

4) *Does it communicate something not quite graspable?* A good poem frequently presents a way of looking at or thinking about a corner of life that is momentarily mysterious, not quite graspable. The poet discloses the existence of a secret that hints that reader and poet, working together, might be able to figure out.

5) *Does it breathe a rhythm?* It isn't too old-fashioned to suggest that the line of a poem has to breathe – perhaps not in the constrained sense of formal meter, but it should have rhythm. Its heart has to beat if it is to come alive in the moment. If that doesn't happen, well then it doesn't quite rise from prose and become poetry. This is an especially sensitive litmus for plain-speech resonance poetry, because otherwise there is a chance that what we have is simply a form of plain speech and not poetry.

6) *Does it yield a sublimity?* Not every poem accomplishes a sublimity, a reaction of awe that goes beyond beauty (or terror) and projects the reader/listener in the direction of a sense of imaginative infinity. But when this happens, it is the ultimate arrival of poetry.

The sublime in a poem stems from an image or thought's gesture in the direction of the unimaginable, from containable beauty or order to a chaotic beyond that invites the imagination to have at it and range freely. The poetic image triggers in the mind the possibility of something more perfect – out even to the infinite expanses of perfection, and the emotion is a gasping adoration of the imagination's capacity. One cannot think too much, One must allow the emotion to take over, the emotion triggered by the image's imperfection, its inadequacy, and yet, its pointing in the direction of perfection. (Prager 2006, 101-06)

Perhaps, even, the sublime is in fact grounded, as Burke thought, in terror, the terror of never being able, despite the most magnificent beauty, ever to comprehend and contain the infinite of the imagination's possibilities. The sublime is achieved when the rational capacity of the imagination is overwhelmed, and steps aside to accommodate the pure passion of the emotion. And the possibility of not ever being able to perceive what the imagination knows and yet is incapable of rationally delivering in comprehensible form – yields the possibility of non-existence, the terror of death.

Beauty closes its door at the limit of understanding – the capacity of the conscious mind to comprehend and contain. Sublimity begins in the step beyond that limit. And yet, the leap into sublimity is nourished and stimulated by the contemplation of beauty. The beautiful is the stopping off place, before the leap into the sublime. But this is also the demarcation point for the imagination. After the imagination has translated a word depiction of image into a mental

conception, then is the possibility of a reach in the direction of the sublime. (Kaiser 2007)

And of course, there are minor sublimities that occur each time the power of a poem, or a line of a poem, or an image, suggests something *beyond* that releases the imagination to follow. And the emotion is one of lesser exaltation at the freedom of it, a giving of thanks for the independence of thought that the image or the words permit, a thankfulness of the innate capacity to exercise that freedom.

Back to Beginnings

In the final analysis, the concept of a plain-speech resonance poetry wasn't introduced by Frost at all. It wasn't even introduced by Wordsworth (See Wordsworth, 1800) or by Emerson, both of whom Frost credited. Plain-speech has always been the original antecedent of true poetry, and finds its beginning in all folk poetry. The unity forged between poet and listener/reader is thought to be at the heart of the poetic impulse. Keats, in a February 1818 letter to Mr. Taylor, wrote that poetry "should strike the reader as a wording of his [the reader's] own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance." Similarly, Italian poet, critic, and translator, Salvatore Quasimodo, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959, said: "Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader recognizes as his own."

Quasimodo, in his Nobel lecture, embellished his paramount concern for the perceived reader as part of the poet's active creative process: "At first, the reader appears to the poet in his solitude as an image with the face and the gestures of a childhood friend, perhaps of that more sensitive friend who is experienced in solitary readings . . ." (Quasimodo, 1959)

This notion forms the fuel that will drive the plain-speech engine. "Thou reader throbbest life and pride and love the same as I," said Walt Whitman. "You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me." (1855, 10)

"Perhaps the real matter of the human soul is poetry itself; perhaps it is in the community that is established between the speaking soul of the poet and the attending soul of the listener that our consciousness, our culture and our selves find their ways of being saved from the awful deaths we imagine and die, the awful ephemerality of our passage through eternity, and the awful disattendings to what we have of that passage." (Williamson 1998, 13)

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