

"The Raggedness of Interacting Boundaries...": An Interview with Poet Thylas Moss

DS: How do you recognize students' unique talents and help them focus on those talents?

TM: "Talent" is something that I mistrust, so I don't think that I even recognize it. Recognizing something doubted may not be possible, but even if I do recognize something that would want me to call it talent, I would probably ignore it.

At this time, I'm more interested in trying to identify in student work those areas where the student is writing close to limitations and boundaries. Boundaries are compelling to me as being the location of interactions. Because boundaries can be weakest where they touch, they allow for increased possibilities, as that which touches interacts in unexpected ways. Ragged ways, too.

I like the patterns of raggedness, and I'm not afraid to show students why I enjoy raggedness so much. I prefer helping students focus on the raggedness of interacting boundaries in their poems by asking them questions and having them use a number of lenses that assist in the emergence of the visibility of various patterns present all along, but invisible to the student.

I like exposing the invisible without robbing the invisible of all of its invisibility.

DS: When do you know one of your poems is finished and/or suitable for publication? Please describe your process of revising your work.

TM: Not that a poem is finished, Dan, but a poem that exists in the circumstances of its moment without making too much fuss can be allowed to exist more openly in the world. It is important to me to write to the limits of my ability within the circumstances of a particular moment. I'm looking for ultra-precision of an idea in that moment, utilizing whatever is necessary for that precision. But because I am taking the idea to its limits, and because I understand (one of my limitations) that any particular idea exists simultaneously with other ideas at all scales, my idea itself having components that exist at all scales, the precision of whatever aspect(s) of the idea become(s) the focus of the poem is compromised --as it should be.

There will be raggedness within the precision, yet, ideally (an ideal of not looking as precisely, a more generalized viewing) precision denies raggedness. I am trying for impossible exactitude while simultaneously aware of my idea interacting with so much at the boundaries, and changing, even while I grasp a part of it that may no longer hold true for the parts not grasped or captured, the parts that continue to interact, to be dynamic outside my hold.

That part of an idea that I hold interacts with me; it is no longer whatever it was before being seized. That is fine. I accept this raggedness in existence, and my contribution to it. It would be true, for a while anyway, to say that each of my published poems is a study of the limits of precision at the limits of precision. --With the exception of poems in **Slave Moth**, a narrative in verse written to cause the likelihood of access by a wider, including younger, audience. The

narrator of those poems did not share my limits, so I deferred to the demands of her limits. There is still raggedness, but raggedness consistent with the circumstances of Varl.

I revise until the poem is at the limits of its idea. The music of the idea is important, too. The patterns of the language of limits can be hypnotic, guiding (as they interact with the demands of the idea) the choices I make that determine the spatial arrangement of the poem. The rhythm of the poems takes on a precise raggedness. When precision has been achieved within the factors that limit precision, I stop revising (until a later time when I may know more, the new knowledge imposing different limits).

In many ways, I prefer revising for the greater opportunities to grapple with the poem freed from the radiance of creation. From the poem's inception, I am an architect of idea. That matters most to me - idea - so in revision, I consider the idea again, looking to refine the connections, to make them tight enough that they're not likely to slip, yet I also want the connections to try to slip, the variance in the slippage of each connection creating the architecture of a coastline and the fabulous raggedness, almost endless raggedness, of a coastline at increasingly smaller (or closer) scales. I repair the architecture at each scale, within my limitations. What fun!

I didn't mention it, but a substantial part of the initial composing of a poem and a substantial part of the revising occur on the computer. Ideas don't tend to be generated on the computer; that is, the initial impulse to write a poem occurs somewhere else. There is a stimulus, connections form, and ways of revealing the idea behind the connections send me to the computer. The manipulation possible on the computer is superior to what I can accomplish on paper, and manipulation is fantastic. I am too much of a coward to attempt other kinds of manipulation, but manipulation of language - to reveal interactions among words - the attempt to find phrasing so precise it can mean only certain things --as if the layers ceased to exist and ceased to maintain interactions along the entirety of boundary which is the rugged ragged coastline, wholly fractal in nature --the very human need to think that there can be a single meaning? Oh to manipulate toward that is intriguing.

What power, though perhaps a useless one, as the power is but from a human perspective which is hardly the largest perspective that exists, not the size of perspective is the most significant quality of a perspective.

I hope that this makes sense. The explanation is as precise as I can make it right now. Whenever exactitude is accomplished, I suspect that a poem has not been taken all the way to the writer's limits. At the limits, I must grapple more with the meaning of the existence of whatever the subject of the poem is. Because that existence occurs in layers of simultaneity, the grappling, the meanings, the exactitude are all compromised, yet resonance occurs, resonance all the more profound for being so unlikely. I treasure resonance --for resonance is dynamic; it is the movement of thought and feeling converging, and it is indeed ascending motion as I perceive it, being limited to such perception. Resonance is the converged idea and feeling moving toward something beyond what they've become together though suspecting nothing is beyond the converged form but a lowering, yet the risk is taken. It must be taken, or there'd be no resonance.

DS: Your poems address an eclectic range of issues--race, gender, politics, and spirituality among them--but they maintain a distinctive level of intensity regardless of the subject. Have you always written this way? Do you need to find a proper mindset for writing what you need to write, or does it tend to come naturally? ?

TM: I have always written toward this way of writing that presently dominates. I am closer to the limits of this way of thinking and writing than I was. Once I arrive, another way of writing will develop, but for now, I am not at the limit. The eclecticism you mention comes out of the connections that ideas demand when approached precisely. Each poem has a single focus, but what is focused on is complex in pursuit of a precise rendering of an idea (or part of an idea). All these issues touch, converge, diverge, interact, and influence each other. To isolate something successfully, is to deprive it of meaning that the human can detect for that thing being taken out of a context in which it had meaning.

Meaning and ideas respond to relationships between things. Metaphor is an equation that seeks to force interaction, that brings together boundaries that ordinarily might not touch. Enough has not been done with the precise possibilities of metaphor as equation, that seeks to expose the truths that boundary interactions cause.

Dan, I lack a proper mindset. That is why precision is my goal. I have a mindset of awareness of simultaneous active zones of interactions visible differently through each lens used. I believe in using multiple lenses, though not at the same time, unless such use would reveal more precise understanding of what is being considered. Not that I trust understanding, but I am limited to believing that information I acquire becomes an understanding of something slightly larger than the thing would be without this translation of information (that can not be purely determined, so is ragged).

DS: What role do you think reading poetry aloud has today? Has that role changed significantly?

TM: The role of reading poetry aloud has changed for me, and I am pretty much limited to speaking confidently about how I interact with poetry aloud. In privacy, of course I read it aloud to myself, for the pure indulgence of releasing sound into the air and having it enter my ears externally, simultaneously with the internal mental whisper. In this way, there is always an echo. This is selfish pleasure, and the way that I want it.

I also have the computer read certain poems to me, in a male whisper, especially when I am too pleased with a poem, and fearful that my own voice might impose sonic qualities via shifts in inflection that are not implicit in the language. Having the poem enter my awareness from an external location allows me to experience it more as something not mine, though I simultaneously full well realize that anything that enters my awareness is mine.

However, I think that the question really wants me to consider reading aloud to an audience other than the author. When my younger son who is now twelve was eight, I read to him from the collected works of Octavio Paz each night in both English and Spanish. His ears wiggled as I did this. I imagined that his brain pulsated, well center locations in his brain, along with the wiggle. My introduction to poetry read to me was less grand. Full of obvious rhythms exaggerated by rhyme that readers felt obligated to emphasize. At the time, I liked that, and wanted to hear certain rhymes repeated often.

But I am not yet responding to the question as I should, am I Dan? But these responses address parts of the coastline of the question, and I encounter these parts of the coast on my way to the area to which I've been specifically invited.

Two days ago, so not quite today in one sense of today, I was in Kalamazoo, Michigan presenting poetry aloud. I suppose I should not mention this event because technically, I did not read the poetry aloud. Sometimes, what passes as a poetry reading is tremendously dull, not in any way dynamic although the ideas of the poem may be dynamic, and the writing of the poem may have been a dynamic process as well. Even poetry I adore, and my adoration of certain poems is well known through my having admitted in writing my desire to steal a certain poem; even poetry I adore may become difficult to appreciate in certain long programs in which poetry is presented aloud without enough consideration that the occasion of presenting poetry aloud, the poetry reading, is a performance. I feel an obligation to the audience to make the poetry as entertaining to hear as I was entertained by the visitation of the idea and the building of language into a form of that idea. My performance of the poem should, ideally (despite what ideal is), reveal the vitality of the idea. The urgency, unless there really is none.

The idea does not take shape in a simple smooth line. There are dips and rises. Overlooks and occlusions. Parts of idea slur and slide, become hazy, become so crystallized and sharp-edged along every face of the multi-faceted crystal, that grasping it is risky --because those edges can cut --yet the crystalline nature of those parts of the idea are irresistible for being crystalline. In presenting the poem, I want to expose the complexity of the pattern of thought that is the poem. The poem is documentation of the dynamic activity of the idea. So, reading the poem aloud requires that the voice engage in the acrobatics of thought. I rather enjoy this challenge, and it always takes me to my limitations if for other reason than the restriction of my vocal register. My voice goes only so high, so low. I should take advantage of using other voices, choruses in presenting my work, and I think right now that I am committed to this.

There was collaboration in the performance of my poetry in Kalamazoo two days ago, collaboration of a different kind. This son I mentioned was an essential part of the presentation. He is a composer and jazz pianist. He plays other instruments, and in other styles, but for the performance in Kalamazoo, he was the part of himself that is jazz composer/pianist.

Slave Moth (my son suggested this title to the publisher, by the way, who preferred it over my suggestion: **The Battle of Varlton**), among other things that are tributaries of the main idea, is about the irrepressibility of the need to express an identity, especially when there are circumstances that would want and perceive a need to repress it in someone else. So these needs interact, and there is much creativity in the zone of interaction which is necessarily also the zone of adjacent boundaries. The need for the slave-girl Varl who is literate to express identity she makes for herself is much stronger than my words. The words cannot possibly convey the intensity and immediacy of her experience. Language filters experience, so loses some of it. I'm not sure how much.

Anyway, more of the dimensions of idea can emerge through expressing the idea in other media. This spring, I collaborated with visual artists who presented a piece based on the book in the Ann Arbor Film Festival. We are now collaborating with a choreographer who interprets the ideas through movement of the body. That piece will be presented in the fall. Together, all these approaches to the ideas reveal more of the fullness of the idea, and certainly indicate

how much more there is to the ideas. The ideas are a complex system, only a small portion of which is ever made visible and examined.

There are greater possibilities for slur and slide in music, so my son and I presented a poetry concert. He plays original pieces shaped by what I say as introduction to the poem about to be sung and by audience response and by my singing as the piece progresses, and I sing the poem based on how the music, the circumstance shapes the words, repeating phrases that circumstance wants to emphasize, altering lines because slur and slide demands alterations that meet the patterns evolving in the music. This is highly improvised to emphasize the dynamic nature of the ideas and their vitality. The poem's existence is not static. I listen to the music in order to know how to shape the poem musically, and the pianist listens to the poem to know how to let the music evolve. Music and language shape each other. The performance differs much from the recordings we make in his basement studio. There a song becomes fixed (meaning permanent, but not only permanent), and subject to editing. There are multiple musical tracks on which Ansted's versatility as a musician are revealed, and multiple vocal tracks on which my range as a singer are revealed. There are more interactions and more boundaries in the studio, but the spontaneity of existence is denied there, as subsequent tracks must adhere to parameters of tracks already recorded. All tracks are heard simultaneously in the finished recording, but each was recorded separately, only the initial track recorded without being influenced by an existing track. The initial track is a controlling track.

A highlight for me was an audience request for me to sing the table of contents of **Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler**. I embarked upon this kind of presentation of poetry without really questioning whether or not I had talent for singing. I also did not ever ask myself whether or not I had talent for writing. I don't consider talent as the source of permission. The need to write, the need to sing, the need to express and explain and question and wonder and condemn and praise gives me permission.

Ansted and I have now recorded two CDs of my poetry with music. On the first CD, all of the poems aren't sung entirely. There is also rhythmic speaking, sometimes such speaking and singing within the same poem, depending on what the changing (or dynamic) interactions of idea and music demanded in the moment of the demand. On the second CD, which bears the same title as the Ann Arbor Film Festival piece, a title taken from the first line of the first poem (or chapter) in **Slave Moth**, most of the poems are sung entirely, and in two cases, in quite different form from what appears in the book.

The singing of poems happened at the University of Chicago a couple of years ago now. I have a neurological disorder that compromised the use of my hands a couple of years ago, and at that time, recognizing that I still had the need to express ideas, my son suggested that I could sing my poems to music he would compose for them, actually for me. I am biased, of course, but I felt that this was a gesture of generosity sufficiently extreme to also be profound. The idea was conceived in my fortunate disability. It was actually born in Chicago. When I was invited to read there, I requested a piano, and asked if my son could be part of both my reading and lecture. Initially, I read the poems rhythmically, but then someone in the audience requested that I read "Glory," a poem I seldom choose to read, having read it to an audience only once before, that occasion also because I honored request. This time, the piano happened to present to me irresistible possibilities for fulfillment of the intentions of the words, so that entire long poem was sung. It was a transforming experience for poet, musician, and audience. It was when we returned to Ann Arbor that Ansted and I immediately decided to record that first CD, **Poems Out Loud from *Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler***.

Previously, I had sung some of his poems for him; he's been composing and recording his music for a few years now, but the recording of my poetry is a more recent phenomenon.

DS: How does your work become different when you read it aloud? What do you look or listen for in an audience?

TM: I believe that my previous answer anticipated this question, but of course not entirely in this form. The poem when performed aloud assumes more of its identity. More of its existing dimensions are exposed. The audience becomes part of the poetry. We hear it and experience it together. Our feelings about this experience may, and probably should, differ, but they occur simultaneously.

I am also aware of the parts of the simultaneity that exist elsewhere, that have no involvement whatsoever with the poem being offered aloud, only the subtlest ripples of sound that peter out infinitely to reach (actually not reach) the other areas of simultaneity. I am not aware of the specifics of the parts that are elsewhere; I am limited to knowing only that there is that elsewhere, and that the influence of the performance of the poem on those parts may be nil at best, but the effects of nothing are just being studied, and I want to endow a performance with the maximum vitality that the words can convey to give them a better chance at ripples diminishing to nothing significantly, the nothing-ripple meeting the boundaries with a feeling, a hint, a subliminal event that feeds somehow the ripples that emanate from those places at the ends of the ripples from my poems aloud.

DS: How would you compare your early writing with your more recent writing? As American culture changes, do you see themes or points of view changing in your work?

TM: Certainly. I hope that I am aware of what occurs. If my work is not influenced by what occurs, how useful is it? How can it completely escape interacting with what shapes the moment in which the poem occurs? I make connections with the events that arise, and these connections become prominent when an event (which could be just something I see or hear or read almost anywhere --smells don't usually instigate poetry for me, though I make connections to scent sometimes) becomes an idea whose structure I find repeated in the connections, the convergences that then compel me to document what I have discovered.

So I must be alert to events large and small, sometimes simply archiving the event until

something triggers a connection. I must be hoping that the repetition of patterns and structures in systems of existence is indicative of meaning. I must really want that to be true.

Or else, I just like puzzles, to put them together, take them apart, put them together differently, the connections and convergences just coincidences. Does that have to be meaning? I suspect not. There may not be any, but I write as if there could be meaning, but many meanings, especially contradictory meanings when ideas are revisited and different connections that seem just as valid are made. A skeptic with faith in skepticism maybe.

DS: What general advice would you give poets about improving their writing or submitting their work for publication?

TM: Try for precision that hurts. The hurt may be the impossibility of it, but try for some kind of supreme accuracy that will necessarily take you to limits which are necessarily beyond anything already documented.

DS: What obstacles have you faced in teaching or getting published? How have you been able to overcome them?

TM: I go to those limits, and editors and publishers may not.

DS: What do you hope to see in the future of poetry?

TM: Limits, but not the same ones. A willingness to understand that testing the limits of poetry will not break poetry. The boundaries are incredibly elastic. Breakage is possible, but is nowhere near. Of a distance similar to the inevitable demise of the sun.

As dynamic existence goes about the practice of being dynamic, the systems of existence, including poetry, move with and should move within the larger dynamic system of existence. So poetry, no matter how satisfying it may seem, should not be static except for those times in which stopping the dynamic progression reveals something not accessible through dynamic progression though certain components of dynamic activity cannot be stopped other than the artificiality of ideal thoughts.

Still, so useful to try, profound failure sometimes produces such illumination that I don't need for anything else to be radiant. Better illumination, then. The illumination of what hasn't been illuminated in the ways that it will be illuminated. That is what I hope to see in the future of poetry. ?

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