

Interview with Geoff Bouvier

Front Porch: In an interview with *Mipoesias*, you say, “a sentence is basically an incredible cultural architecture, like a stamp of understanding or currency, along with so much else.” This is so intriguing, given that the country we live in is more willing to listen to prose than verse. In the sphere of poetry, how do you see this relationship evolving in America?

Geoff Bouvier: Our culture has been built by the language of information. We live in a grammar of direct exchange—that kind of sentence, those kinds of words. You’re reading it right now: language intended to confer information like so much currency. This kind of prosaic language strives, in most ways, to be nothing more than a clear—almost transparent—commodity.

But poetry is, by definition, non information-driven. But just because it isn’t driven by information, that doesn’t mean that a poem has no responsibility. There should be nothing arbitrary in poems. Nothing. Poems with arbitrary elements are as bad as poems with notes: if your poem needs notes to supplement it, then it isn’t finished yet. If your poem has unconsidered elements in it, then you need to go back and consider them.

So, I want to see more prose virtues from American poets. Not more information-driven, more narrative-based, or more prosaic poetry; in fact, just the opposite. But how can our poetry subvert information and narrative and the prosaic “I” without using their own tools against them?

Which is to say, I don’t want all poems to become prose poems, not at all, but I want poets to study what prose has to teach them. And as for prose poets, I’d like to see them exploring and understanding the paragraph, not just the sentence. What is a paragraph? How do sentences hang together if they share no topics? Far too many prose poems nowadays are just jumbles of topic-less sentencing.

In the end, the most beautiful and scariest thing about prose is that it is perfectible. Its rules and variables can be studied and learned and refined. So why aren’t poets perfecting their prose, even as they delve into poetry?

On a similar note, one thing that purposeful, informative, prosaic language remembers is that each piece of writing has a purpose. And this is something that poetry is beginning to forget. I’ve read where some of our greatest poets—John Ashbery and Donald Revell—have written that poems are indeterminate quantities of poetry. They tell us that poetry is like a river running alongside us always, and we dip into it when we’re in tune or lucky. They tell us poems are instances of this tuneful, lucky dipping.

They may be more or less right about poetry, but poems must be more than that. A poem has definite edges. It begins and ends. As such, within its parameters, its responsibility is to respect both its fleeting poetry and its definite parameters. And the poetry changes its character because of those parameters. Think of water. Water changes its properties, and even its name, when it changes containers. Cloud, raindrop, lake, river, ocean. Different boundaries, same water.

FP: You’ve cited great sentence makers, such as Kafka and Joyce, as being large influences in how you view the sentence. Do you read any poets who you feel provide interesting examinations of the sentence?

GB: Ashbery is a very good sentence maker. His polyvocality is often lauded, but I like the polychromaticism of his sentences. No two really sound the same. He knows so many rhythmic patterns, and he makes them all relate.

Kay Ryan is a poet who seems to have a wonderful sense of what a poem is and what sentences are and how poetic form and sentence form can create tension and release tension by their interactions with each other.

And you could probably learn just about everything from Anne Carson, including how to write good, strong sentences of varying lengths and tones.

On the other side of the coin, a few terrific poets do strike me as being particularly poor sentence writers. James Tate’s recent work is vital and valuable and has been an important influence on me in many ways, but he just doesn’t write very dynamic sentences. For example—and I got this idea from something Robert Frost once said—you should go ahead and have someone read a bunch of later Tate poems to you through a closed door. They’ll all sound exactly alike. The tone, the cadences, the sentence lengths. Poem after poem.

FP: In the vehicle of prose, rhythm is generally fashioned within the limits of punctuation. Can you discuss your approach to punctuation and how it may evolve over your editing process?

GB: There is no such thing as punctuation in spoken language. Of course the commas and sentences and dashes are implied, but they don't actually exist. So, punctuation is an attempt to transpose spoken pauses into written language. What a beautiful concept. As such, the punctuation, to me, becomes almost as rich a content as the content of the words themselves.

And, because I'm an obsessive editor—it often takes me years of reworking to feel like a piece is finished—I'll fuss over punctuation all the time. Sometimes I'm trying to reenact a line break in the middle of a sentence. Sometimes I'm trying to make the cadence more natural. Sometimes I'm trying to bury an overt rhyme, or offset a slant one. And sometimes I will recognize a convention of punctuation, and try to put it into question. In some sentences, I may come to think that the colon or dashes or ellipses need to play a starring role. Sometimes, in the totality of enactment that a poem is, the very words themselves must come apart, and then how do you show that, except through punctuation?

FP: Your essay “Toward a More Rigorous Text,” from *Octopus Magazine*, discusses a “visual prose.” That is, the apparent arbitrariness of prose text line endings (on the visual page) is actually a determining factor in how the text is read. Just as there is visual space at the end of a lineated line of poetry, the same is true for a justified block of prose. Can you talk about the line break's effect in lineated poetry, and how that may or may not factor into your poems built with prose?

GB: Sometimes, when I write—and also when I'm just sitting around thinking, actually—the words will come in bursts. And sometimes, they arrive in strings. Sometimes, I'll have a coherent, sentence-shaped succession of feelings or thoughts. And sometimes, my mind seems limited to nothing more than single words. I might go whole hours unable to drift into reveries longer than a phrase or two. And other days, I can hold a subject in my mind like a giant geometric presence and essay through it as though it were a solid construct. As a poet, making poems, I do like to respect those word-bursts and word-strings. I often write them down exactly as they come: long line, short line, single word, full sentence, etc. And if those bursts and strings start to lock into some kind of coherent meter-making, then I really begin to put a poem together.

But, the thing is, now I no longer accept a poem as “finished” until it carries its argument over into prose. That translation is essential. The stringy bursts are still there (especially to a sensitive reader), but now they're buried in normative sentences. And the punctuation's there, among other reasons, to help keep the meters intact.

As such, I do like the half-arbitrariness of the line breaks that appear when I make a block of poetic prose. I like that the breaks are there, and that my over-attentiveness to form has raised my own awareness of them, but I like also that the prose format has divested me of any real control over which words are enjambed, and which ones aren't. As such, sometimes I will let the line breaks influence my editing; for example, perhaps I won't add or take away a word in mid-line because of what it does to the shape of the prose box. I like very much having some pieces that have exactly x-amount of paragraphs, with each paragraph being exactly x-amount of lines in length. It's almost like I'm making new poetic forms sometimes, like strict prose sonnets, for example, where no prose rules are broken, and all the sonnet rules are more or less present, too.

FP: In the case of prose poetry in electronic journals, the right margin is more likely to stay where the author put it, as opposed to being altered to fit the printed page. Do you feel that any electronic or print venues are doing anything to help this problem, or will it always be an issue of cost effectiveness?

GB: All I know is, when I published my early chapbook, *Everybody Had a Hat*, with White Eagle Coffee Store Press, I made those poor folks tear their hair out trying to make my prose look right. I started to think that my noble pursuit of a rigorous text became too petty in the practice. But, ever since, I've been pleased how much editors have seemed to try to work to respect what it is that I'm doing.

Copper Canyon did a commendable job with *Living Room*, but if I'm ever lucky enough to publish a subsequent edition of that book, it'll have slightly different line breaks throughout.

And as for online publications, they do seem to have less of a problem making my writings look how they're supposed to look.

FP: Your work has been published widely in both print and electronic journals. Print is more tangible, but electronic may provide a wider readership. What advantages and disadvantages does each one have, in your mind?

GB: The thing about publishing on the internet is that I continue to edit my work even after it's published. So there may be pieces of mine floating around in online journals that will appear in my books in different forms. That's exciting to me, but also scary, having my process laid bare like that. If I have an old version of a piece in a print journal somewhere, you've got to figure that it would be pretty hard to find. But not so with the online journal: it's right there for everyone to see.

FP: With more and more MFA programs being established across the country, more criticism has followed. Also, there seems to be somewhat of a line between non-academic poetics and academic poetics. With this in mind, what do you think the MFA program has done for the overall poetic community?

GB: Let me just start off by saying that I came through an MFA program and had a great experience with it. This fact either qualifies me to levy some criticism, or it implicates me along with everyone else.

My feeling is that these programs are making a vast, vibrant, and energetic middle ground of poetry, but they're also contributing to our overall tone deafness. So many of us are hearing and sounding the same. And so few of us are truly possessed.

Scan through some of our more prominent poetry journals and you'll notice a preponderance of short, simple sentences. And then, every so often, a breathless run-on sentence or two. It's boring, frankly, and it all sounds alike. It's as though poets today may well be sensitive and imaginative and daring, but they never learned how to write.

Perhaps one thing every MFA program needs, and very few seem to have, is a tenured grammar specialist, drilling the next Joyces and Kafkas in nouns and modifiers.

And, in almost perfect opposition to this staid and fusty educational idea, I say you can't really be taught how to be possessed; you either invite the ghosts and daemons and they arrive, or they find you and you can't fight them off, or they're just not there. For 98% of what gets published today, the ghosts and daemons are just not there.

What we end up with instead are an awful lot of competent poems that have no nothingness in them. No haunting. Instead, we have a lot of great poetic careers, and not much great poetry.

And I do attribute this to all the teaching and learning going on in MFA programs, and to the fact that the current arbiters of poetic taste are teachers and learners from MFA programs.

Perhaps what MFA programs should offer—instead of a supportive community and constructive critique—is an enforced loneliness. A semester of total isolation. No technology, no comfort, a vow of silence, no human touch. That's a great way to court ghosts.

And as I write that, I realize I may be arriving at a conclusion: our poetry is no longer lonely enough. It hasn't gone away and come out the other side and re-arrived at this world with another world all over it. A poetry that has made this lonely journey turns to colloquial phrasing and prose rules not as loose gimmicks or for humorous effects, but as a desperate means to find living people again.

(For an example of what I mean about the difference between haunted poetry and not-so-haunted poetry, see the first two books of Wallace Stevens and Jeff Clark. *Harmonium* and *The Little Door Slides Back* are deeply haunted. *Parts of a World* and *Music and Suicide* are too aware of their audiences and have learned too much about their own strangeness.)

FP: Your first book, *Living Room*, was met with much critical praise. How has the making of your new manuscript, *Glass Harmonica*, been different from the first?

GB: I answered this question rather fully in an interview I did for a short-lived online journal called Dead Horse Review. That interview is now only available through my own website, geoffbouvier.com.

But I do like how I responded in that interview, so, if you don't mind, I'll quote it here:

The majority of *Living Room* displays clearly plotted situations, usually domestic, or at least societal, and the movement in the book is a motion of seeking and guiding. I think *Living Room* seeks, through subversion, to guide to higher common ground. Maybe I could say, *Living Room* starts with plots and tries to make each one ready for music, while *Glass Harmonica*'s music goes out seeking plots. The first book tells little tales that coalesce around single conceits, and the second has multiple conceits re-coalescing.

By and large, *Living Room* was written with a strong sense of subject matter, a sense of "aboutness" from which I'd inch away, away, away. And *Glass Harmonica* began from various blanks, and tried to see what subjects loomed or shot into view. Even my writing process changed from book to book. For the first one, I'd generally sit down and ruminate on an idea and hammer out saliences right there in the moment. For the next I wrote lines, phrases, paragraphs, sentences, single words, who knows? And later I'd begin to develop the connections and see what grew, always editing and adding and taking away material, with the thought in mind of trying to make meaning, and to make it as clear as possible.

But still, in both books, and in everything I've been working on since, I've fully respected the periods and paragraphs and capitals of the prose box, and playfully respected the grammatical rules of the English language. So all the work looks the same on the page. That's one constant. I also strive to define discernible situations or consistent ideas or coherent states of mind; to embody expressive and/or mimetic rhythms and syntax; and to entertain suggestive imagery and significant word-play.

—interview conducted by Trey Moody via email on February 23, 2008