

From:

Writing the Australian Crawl

Wm. Stafford U of Michigan 1978

The Practice of Composing in Language

Composing in language is done by feel, rather than by rule. Yes, many critics, and many writers too, will discuss the process and often settle for statements that identify pattern results; but back of summary statements there hovers a whole ocean of tentatives in the consciousness of the writer.

Anything we say or anything we write comes to us sequentially with a host of moving, bobbing opportunities. The practice of writing involves a readiness to accept what emerges, what entices. The sound of words and phrases, the associations of those sounds and syllables in words, the emerging trajectory of thought and feeling, that background of conditioning wrought by earlier writers, the individual bite, or whine, or snarl, or whatever, of the local family dialect—all of these and no doubt many others—influence the results. A writer coasts into action with willing involvement, always ready for something to happen that may be a first time, not a repetition of something already accomplished.

Ready for adventure, the writer waits, in the presence of the impending language: many things happen. The encounter with the language is too individual to be

From *Agenda*.

typed, helpfully, as “English” or “American”—the writer’s own voice, the voice of his family, the voice of the neighborhood—those successively larger areas of relation bear on the feeling at the moment of composition; but large influences, national tendencies, or tendencies of a period in literature have much less significance than do close, local nudges from day-to-day life. Rhythm of speech will suggest enhancements of rhythm; some degree of symmetry—or pleasing asymmetry—will influence how the words go on the page. Each line will be a venturing forward from the left margin toward the right, with options for breaks or for continuity contending for recognition. The farther toward the right margin the line gets, the more crucial the passing of each option—and the length of proximate lines will also be influencing the writer.

Placement—the end of a line, for instance—makes a difference, but sometimes the difference is small; even if no pause, or little pause, occurs, the forward feeling of the poem will sustain a syncopation. Similarly, the close of a verse paragraph or stanza will invite its own cluster of options—definite closing, hovering motion leading to the next stanza, or possibly even a felt leap without a pause. But even to violate a usual pause is one kind of experience. The writer will be working in the presence of all sound effects. There is no escape from such effects, in either direction—toward a pattern that appears to limit choices, or away from a pattern that seems to neglect sounds. They are there; they make a difference.

But to live your writing life by assuming that certain “norms” have been established and thereby made operative for any writer—such a stance reverses the actual: writers recognize opportunities; if a group or a tradition recognizes certain opportunities and makes

that recognition into a "norm," the range of options is not changed. Anyone may come along and move into composing the language by means of hints and hunches that occur to an individual. All of our friends have norms and other habits; but the part of an artist is to make any present action the occasion for emergence from present potentials. Norms are for talking about art; opportunities are for artists. And back of any "norm" is speech; how talk goes will live—whether neglected by intent or not.

Any break at a line, any caesura, any surfacing of natural syllable intonation—these are all a total of language-feel that the writer orchestrates according to what comes along in the act of composing. There is no syncopation impossible; the total effect in the experience of the writer at the moment is totally in command.

So, everything makes a difference: a word at the end or beginning of a line is different from a word elsewhere in the line; any syllable that customarily gets slurred in speech carries at least the ghost of that slurring into the most formal context; any emergency in the throat is an event in the poem. To change anything—the length of a line, the sequence of pronunciation of syllables by reversing words—anything—will influence the feel of the language.

In such an ocean of mutual influences, the trajectory of acceptance for certain practices—pentameter, the vogue of it, for instance—will vary in steepness and significance. Pentameter will not come or go away just at the whim of a writer, who may do lines by fives or not by fives, but continues to engage with readers who will put the pentameter overlay onto anything heard, or will shy from that overlay. And rhyme—no one can escape similar sounds, or make hearers accept patterns

beyond their hearing readiness. One who composes in language moves in the presence of sound, more or less similar sounds; moves in the presence of speech sequences; breathes with a set of muscles that will clutter or enhance the ever-varying physical presence of language effects.

One who composes in language confronts opportunity too varied for fixed rules, or for violation of rules: from the emergency of the encounter emerges the new realization, the now poem.