At Home in the Stranger's House: Poetic Revision and Spiritual Practice

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I am a poet and I am a scholar, but I almost never wear both hats at once. However, when invited to consider the topic of "poetry and spirituality," I decided to write (as a scholar) about my writing (as a poet). Immediately, I hit a wall: who is that poet, Angela Sorby?

I resorted to searching my own name in the LION humanities index and found that my work is cataloged as "American poetry—confessional." This was discomfiting: I thought it would be easy to write about "poetry and spirituality" because I've always felt that the process of writing poetry takes place in a register akin to, if not identical with, the sacred. Indeed, that's partly why I've been careful to separate creative work from scholarly work.

But if my poetry is in fact confessional, then do I simply—in the words of Walt Whitman—celebrate myself when I write creatively? After all, narcissism is a known occupational hazard among creative writers, and nothing exemplifies the impulse more than self-searches in a database. When M.L. Rosenthal coined the term "confessional"—in a 1959 review of Robert Lowell's Life Studies—he was not referring to a small booth in a Catholic cathedral. On the contrary, he was describing, rather unflatteringly, a profoundly secular moment in twentieth-century American poetry, in which semi-professional analysands like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton turned therapy sessions into art.¹

The Protestant tradition surely contributed to the introspective mode in Lowell and Sexton, but even as a Unitarian (and inheritor of that tradition) I am not ready to assert that therapy and spirituality are the same bird. So what, if anything, makes the act of writing a secular lyric poem spiritual?

The more I consider my own poetic practice and that of my more august peers (Mary Oliver, Sharon Olds), the more I think that most lyric poetry is a repudiation of the confessional mode. It dramatizes, rather, what Virginia Woolf called the voyage out; that is, the difficult and—I would argue—spiritual work of abandoning fixed ideas about the world, about language, and about the self. Moreover, for me at least, the real spiritual work of poetry-writing occurs, not in the first flash of inspiration, but in the hard labor of revision. My revision process involves at least three acts, which I will call secular spiritual exercises: 1) the act of temporarily withdrawing from the world; 2) the act of transforming the poem’s speaker from “myself” into another; and 3) the act of crossing over, from one world (consciousness) into another (form). In this essay, then, I will draw on three of my own poems that underwent significant technical revision to explore the extent to which poetic revision is—or can be—spiritual.

WITHDRAWAL

For St. Ignatius, the guiding light of my home university, spiritual exercises “have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment.” I cannot claim, of course, that as a non-theistic Unitarian I share St. Ignatius’s precise goals, which are tied to his religious faith. However, the problem of inordinate attachment is central to the practice of revising poetry—a practice which demands a series of decisions. In my experience, good first drafts—indeed all first drafts—are passionate representations of deeply personal experiences. Most of my poems begin as diary notes—and most of them stay that way. As personal writings (confessional in the truest sense), they are embedded in, on the one hand, the conventional thought-processes and languages of academia and parenting; and, on the other, in the unintelligible ramblings of dreaming and free

association. All of these discourses can spark inordinate attachment: the poet feels that she owns, and indeed can control, the experience. This is fine, and even necessary, at the draft stage, but it can be deadly to the process of revision.

To begin revising, it is necessary to withdraw from the worlds that tether us to habitual forms of language and thought—especially if these habits lead to a sense of control. In my case, the world that defines me most fully is that of the academy. It might seem paradoxical that a poet with a PhD in literary criticism would need to withdraw from one of the few American institutional spaces—the English Department—that actually values verse-making. And certainly, I do not want to reinforce the silly and pernicious mindset that pits creative writers against scholars. However, the work of scholarship is fundamentally institutional and social. Scholars can teach and converse because we share terms—hegemony, power relations—derived from specific theorists whose political and aesthetic assumptions inform our reading. But a revisionary process which demands—as Adrienne Rich reminds us—literal “re-vision” is endangered by the very terms, theories, and assumptions that are so useful to scholars. When I am working on a poem, I absolutely never think about where it will be published, whether it will advance my career, or how it might be read by others. This is not some sort of romantic purity-of-the-artist pose; it is simply a pragmatic necessity.

What is wrong with control? As a professional scholar and educator, part of my job is to draw conclusions and to be (or at least implicitly claim to be) right. But the process of revising a poem requires the abdication of rightness, both in the literal sense of truthfulness and in the moral sense of righteousness. Li-Young Lee equates revising to “a process of archaeology, of retrieving the poem beneath the poem,” and I like this metaphor because it suggests that the poem—once drafted—is not a set of right or wrong ideas but an artifact. The artifact does not have a truth, it has a shape. To find that shape requires concentration and humility: the poet cannot have a premature “inordinate attachment” to the draft, nor can she have an investment in the poem’s institutional success beyond the page.


Mental withdrawal from the professional world is also imperative because, to revise my poems, I need to draw on my experience, not my knowledge, of predecessor poets. The world of scholarship rewards intellectual mastery, but to be a poet influenced by other poets is, in some sense, the opposite of mastery: it entails a willingness to be possessed or enchanted by the language of others. My own perennial touchstone is the sublime Wallace Stevens. Stevens is a poet whose poems often baffle me and whose personal attitudes (racist, sexist, anti-Semitic) I abhor. I don't study him as a scholar or teach him in my classes. And yet, poet to poet, he enchants me with his music, his images, and his perfect strangeness, and when I am revising, he joggles my mind out of its habitual groove, which is exactly what's necessary. As I revise a poem, just as when I read Wallace Stevens for pleasure, I can't think too hard about what it means. I am concerned, instead, with making the images work, trimming the language to give it force, and intuitively unpacking the connotations of a particular concrete experience.

One poem from my book *Bird Skin Coat* engages very directly with the themes I have been analyzing: the necessary withdrawal from academic discourse, the importance of eschewing the urge to mastery, and the redeeming power of Wallace Stevens.

This poem, called "Flyover State," was tricky to finish and revise because I thought, at first, that I needed to keep returning to the image of Madame Blavatsky, whose life story interested me intellectually. I got the first stanza down, and then I was stuck:

Madame Blavatsky, the fraudulent
founder of modern theosophy,
prevaricated blithely, claiming
Jesus reached the Himalayas.
He didn't suffer altitude sickness.
Ascent (she said) was in his blood.
He came down holier
than he went up.5

The more I added to this initial image—details about Jesus, details about Blavatsky—the drier the poem felt, as if it were a performance of knowledge rather than an investigation of truth. Also, I found I was judging Blavatsky—too harshly, especially given my own struggle for spiritual balance. I needed to detach.

The poem sat for two years, unfinished but not forgotten. To extend Li-Young Lee’s archaeological metaphor, it had to stay in the ground for awhile, until the larger context for my fascination with Blavatsky could emerge: the image was really about my discomfort with graduate school and its over-emphasis on the intellect. I returned to the poem and found myself describing my roommate’s substance abuse and the tall spires of the University of Chicago. Without asserting too much deliberate control, I was making connections that are now clear to me: both the heroin and the spires represented, like Blavatsky, false Gods. The atmosphere of an elite university is particularly conducive to feelings of arrogance and pride, and I think even secular poetry can and should strip away the self-delusions that generate such pride—although, had I allowed myself to think in such ethical terms as I was revising, I would have ruined the poem.

The hardest part of “Flyover State” was the ending, because a good ending must close the poem without slamming it shut. There must be an ending, but not a summary, a scholarly interpretation, or a punchline. Again I turned to my perennial office-mate, Wallace Stevens, whose “Sunday Morning” (a great meditation on belief and doubt) ends:

> And, in the isolation of the sky,  
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make  
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,  
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

As I read these lines as a poet (which means I was under no obligation to understand them), I pictured real pigeons, not symbols, and then suddenly I remembered: one of my favorite things about my graduate school neighborhood was the poorly-run drugstore nearby, where they sold birds. This gave me the ending I needed. The final version reads:

> Flyover State  
> Madame Blavatsky, the fraudulent  
> founder of modern theosophy,  
> prevaricated blithely, claiming  
> Jesus reached the Himalayas.  
> He didn’t suffer altitude sickness.

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Ascent (she said) was in his blood.
He came down holier
than he went up.

In 1994
when my Sanskritist flatmate
shot up, he went to Blavatsky's peaks—
not the real Himalayas but the fakes
painted on fin de siècle screens. Our kitchen
smelled of barf and needle-bleach,
so after dark I'd walk outside
down Greenwood Avenue
under lushly brainy blooming trees.
My Doc Martens stamped
ahead of me. My empty shoulder hurt
where its book bag should be.

And always,

flying low, like a raven:
my half-done dissertation.
The university's spires flared,
lit by lights meant to scare
black teenagers. Its mock-Oxford
turrets acted older than they were.
If I walked all the way to the quad,
my key-card would admit me.

So instead I looped
around 52nd to Woolworth's,
where the cashiers, Ruth and Rotunda,
let half-price parakeets fly
free among the shoppers.
Woolworth’s was the opposite
of history, its liquids and plastics

on the verge of being swept
into some stranger's future
suitcase, shower, tragedy—who could say?

Blavatsky was right: truth mattered less
and less every day, and the discount
parakeets, green with scabby claws,

moved downward to darkness
behind racks of inexplicably
gigantic white bras. Who could fill
such cups? Is there no God but God?\(^7\)

I suspect that Woolworth’s attracted my imagination because it was
anonymous: no dissertation, no roommate, no intellectual pretense or
pressure, no public self. This also defines the necessary space of revi­sion. To write well, and sometimes just to be well, it is useful to with­
draw from the worlds that define us and attend, instead, to the shape
of a specific artifact.

**RETRIEVE FROM THE SELF**

In 1862, Emily Dickinson wrote to T.W. Higginson, “When I state
myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a
supposed person.”\(^8\) Dickinson does not mean to insist that her poems
are dramatic monologues; instead, she is eloquently pinpointing the
ideal subject-position of the lyric poet, which might be formulated
paradoxically as *me not me*. To revise a poem is to engage in the diffi­
cult, almost surgical process of removing the autobiographical self, bit
by bit, and replacing her with something more flexible.

Surgical removal is challenging because, as I’ve mentioned, I draw
most of my poems from a diary, and diaries are often true confessions
mired in narrowly autobiographical concerns. For instance, I’ve long
had a love/hate relationship with Mary Oliver, so at one point I wrote
in my journal:

Too much wonder turns you into Mary Oliver.
Still, in my spare time,
I hike the Olympic Mountains of my mind,
which is easier on the knees
than actual hiking
but harder than dreaming,
since it reminds me that I am far from childhood,
and far, even, from young-adulthood,
“in a dark wood,” in the middle of my life,
like Dante, only Unitarian and therefore stripped
of all faiths equally.

\(^7\) Sorby, “Flyover State,” 47-48.

\(^8\) Emily Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1862, in Thomas
UP, 1986) 412.
Too much wonder softens the spine.
Instead, the wood is scrub pines planted
around a nun cemetery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin,
where I moved for a job
and now stay stuck like a tongue
on a frozen pole:
pull away and skin comes off.

This is not a poem at all. Rather, it is a series of free associations revolving around an autobiographical or confessional "I" who is, frankly, too much myself.

It took many drafts to turn this fragment into a proper poem, but the first thing I had to jettison was the poem's original impetus: Mary Oliver. My ambivalence towards Oliver is relevant to me, but it was not relevant to the poem unless I wanted the poem to be about me. Next I had to grasp—on an intuitive level—what the poem was in fact about. The key image, I found, was: "in a dark wood, like Dante, only Unitarian." What does spirituality mean—what does it have to offer—in the context of a non-doctrinal religious tradition? I've always suspected that there is something faintly disingenuous about the notion of being "spiritual, not religious," and yet, if one is not religious, must one be simply materialistic?

In a later version of the poem, the woman in the wood is me not me. I do not, in real life, own pugs, and the phalanges in my feet never give me trouble. Instead, through the process of revision I generated a supposed person who is—I hope—larger and more flexible than myself. She can channel, not my own feelings, but rather the larger question of how religion and spirituality might be linked.

Flatland

At 46 I climb
the Cascade Mountains of my mind,
which is easier on the knees
than physical climbing,
but harder than dreaming,

since every step reminds me
I'm far from childhood,
far from the State of Washington,
"in a dark wood," in mid-life,
like Dante, only Unitarian,
and therefore stripped of all faiths equally

as I walk two pugs
through a nun cemetery
behind the boarded-up
Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

The nuns recuse themselves:
they don't care whose sacred
text was right,

and I'm edging closer
to their neutrality,
which is a hum in the trees,
mingled with crickets,
but firm enough to ease
all opinions, even righteous ones,
off like a habit shed.

The Virgin bows her head:
she's plastic, presiding
in a blue molded gown
over a shrine strewn with flowers.
She'll never biodegrade—
she's eternal as a juice box straw,
which makes me thirsty

for what she can't give me:
salvation, that abstraction
that flooded my limbs
in eighth grade
when I converted, briefly,
to a Christianity
that promised to carry
the girls' cross country team to victory.
We stood in a circle, praying
so fervently the field rose,
though the team lost State.

Now we're close
to sea level—
Mary, the dead nuns, and me,  
and my phalanges are collapsing  
into crooked bouquets,  
so when paleontologists  
dig up my bones, they’ll wonder,  
what was the ritual?  
Who were the priestesses?  
Where was their grove?  
I want to leave them a note:  
walk the dogs.  
Let the oracles keep their secrets.9

As the poem suggests, it is a spiritual practice, of sorts, to “ease all opinions, even righteous ones, off like a habit shed.” This also happens to be a prerequisite to successful revision. My own self can be quite cynical about the “spiritual-not-religious” feint, and indeed this is why I’ve always viewed Mary Oliver with a jaded eye. But the “I” in “Flatland” is more open-minded that I am; this allows her to give way to the mysterious more-than-materiality of pugs, crickets, bones, and secrets.

I admire poets—Elizabeth Bishop, for one—who make the material world speak so vividly that their consciousness disappears into it. In one of Bishop’s most famous poems, “In the Waiting Room,” she suddenly realizes that she is herself: “I felt: you are an I, you are an Elizabeth, you are one of them.”10 Oddly, though, the poem is not about “an Elizabeth.” It is about the way that language makes a voice that feels alien to the speaker: who is that poet, Elizabeth Bishop? When Bishop says, “[Y]ou are an I,” she is reproducing the distance between the internal self and the way the self operates in the space of the poem. This is, I think, another way that revision can be spiritual: as the self is reshaped, it belongs less fully to the individual writer and more fully to something larger, which might be called “the waiting room” or “language” or “history” or even “God.”


CROSSING INTO FORM

Revision can also be spiritual when it attends to questions of form. Although I write mostly free verse, I care about the ear as well as the eye, and always revise with rhythm and rhyme in mind. Part of the poem's form is also its closure: I have a weakness for full end-rhymes, a vice that stems from my devotion to W. H. Auden, who does them so well. Too often, I half-convince myself a poem is over because it sounds over. Such was the case with "A is for Air," that began (and almost ended) with the first stanza and "fearless Jane" whose "face was plain." The trouble here was that the poem registered as a complaint. It was still too close to my own inordinate attachments to find its own shape apart from me.

Again like an archaeologist, I took a break from the dig and let the poem sit. Then, when I came back to it months later, I realized that the poem was too closed-in on itself at the end. This was related to its ongoing over-absorption in my private autobiographical issues. Yes, I hated elementary school, but who cares? Such a topic is not a poem but a confession. "A is for Air" needed, not just a new stanza, but a second, numbered part to take it in a new direction. The final version reads:

A is for Air

i.
Dismantle the desks.
Melt the monkey bars.
Rip the clock off the wall.
Augment the drinking fountain with fake marble cupids and replace
childhood with something easier,
say, lilacs afloat in their own scent,

and then,

then I can go back to Fernwood School
with my daughter and explain
that school is impossible
but worth the pain
because you learn an alphabet that settles
into marvels, into fearless Jane
Eyre whose childhood was miserable,
and whose face was plain.

ii.
Except my daughter is beautiful,
and she hates long novels,
and she's adopted from a country
with so many intimate Gods
that when I watch her I wonder
whose supernatural hands
are guiding her—
but of course it's just me,
bringing her a lilac
in a coke-bottle vase,
which she accepts,
because she wants to be polite,
as she steps gracefully over her Ps and Qs
into her lace-up flying leather
miraculous
cheerleading shoes.¹¹

I do happen to have a daughter who resembles this beautiful cheerleader, but they are not the same person. Rather, the girl in the poem is a "supposed child" meant to help readers picture the closeness and distance that defines many mother-daughter relationships. As the daughter puts on her shoes, is she flying away from the mother? As I reread this poem, I am afraid she is—and if I had not made a leap, from autobiographical journaling into the lyric form, I probably would have been afraid to finish this poem. I do not want my daughter to fly away in real life, but I needed to let that other girl—the girl in the poem—go. I needed to let the poem cross over, from the formlessness of lived experience into the form (and discipline) of poetic language.

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The work of revision is almost absurdly time-consuming. It requires a withdrawal from the world, an attention to forces beyond the self, and a careful engagement with the form of the text. Poems can't be forced: the writer must make each change carefully, because even small

¹¹ Sorby, "A is for Air," in The Sleeve Waves, 48-49.
alterations will affect (and sometimes ruin) the whole. It is slow work, like making dollhouse furniture—except, unlike dollhouse furniture, it's not salable on eBay. It's hard to explain, then, why poetry is worth the hundreds of hours invested, except to cite the process itself, which offers what might be called a retreat in daily life that is not necessarily religious but is always, at its best, spiritual.