

Toward Process Poetics: Balancing Novelty and the Cantus Firmus

by April D. Fallon and George W. Shields

I. Process Aesthetics

Contemporary process philosophy, as developed in the tradition of the seminal, systematic works of Alfred North Whitehead and his most important intellectual “descendant” Charles Hartshorne, is emerging as a major intellectual movement within the postmodern landscape with growing international influence. Self-styled as “constructive postmodernism” by such leading neo-Whiteheadian theoreticians as Frederick Ferré and David Ray Griffin, process thought situates itself as receptive to the postmodern deconstruction of modern philosophy (in the line of Descartes to Kant), as standing in the American pragmatic tradition of James and Peirce, and as inherently fond of interdisciplinarity, but without attachments to the stark anti-realism, relativism, and the anti-metaphysical posture of deconstruction. Its claim to pragmatic value rests in good measure on its claim to do much intellectual work by virtue of its applicability to the illumination of a wide swath of human inquiry and endeavor. This includes the development of a social-relational worldview that aims at integrating philosophy and the natural sciences with aesthetic, ethical, political, and religious values. While aesthetic theory has always played a fundamental role in process thinking—in fact, process philosophers hold that aesthetic categories/concepts pertaining to “experiencing well” have ultimacy, because all acting and thinking finally refers to qualities of experience—it has only been recently that process aesthetics has been applied to the interpretation of literature, and especially poetry, in a focused and sustained way (Doud 16-31; Valencia 49-76). It is our intention here to extend this interpretation to the work of at least two poets. The following are some major principles of the process aesthetic that will be applied to the poetry of E.E. Cummings and Lorine Niedecker.

The Principle of Unity-in-Diversity or Balanced Contrast

A necessary condition for significant aesthetic value resides in a balance or *via media* between two ultimate polar contrasts such as “unity and variety,” or “order and disorder,” or “novelty and sameness.” This principle can be applied to experience in general, inclusive of sensory experiences ranging from eating or tasting to auditory and visual artistic creation and appreciation. Some quick examples might help illu-

minate the principle. Rarely do people enjoy eating pure brine or salt or pure sugar or extremely sweet icing, yet the combination of salt and sweetness (or some other contrast) is found palatable. Too much differentiation of content engenders distasteful reactions as found in, for instance, the very limited appeal that Sun Ra's form of chaotic experimental jazz has for most people, especially if played extensively. On the other hand, extreme regularity or sameness of content is oppressively monotonous. Relentless repetition of sensory data is the principle behind Chinese water torture, and also explains the familiar psychological phenomenon of being "tired" of an activity (a state which is infrequently physiological).

The process position is that this principle of balanced contrast is explanatory of the behavior of organisms in general. While contextualized by neural capacities and specific environments, the principle can and has been applied effectively to empirical studies of animal behavior, in particular oscines (or song birds), by Charles Hartshorne in his impressive treatise in ornithology entitled *Born to Sing*. Formulating what is termed the Monotony Threshold Principle, Hartshorne conjectured that, if process aesthetics is basically correct, then we should find song birds behaving in certain predictable ways depending on the size of their neural systems. Thus, birds with large neural systems will have large song repertoires and will, in general, use song variation more often than pauses in order to avoid monotony, while birds with smaller neural capacities will have smaller repertoires and will more often use pauses than song variation in order to avoid monotony. This Principle has been quantified for various categories of oscines and has been found by independent researchers such as Kroodsma to be roughly confirmed in field observations (Skutch).

The aesthetic principle of the search for balanced contrast can be understood on both social-historical and individual levels. The history of artistic expression with its pressure for change, experimentation, and creation of new genres is illuminated by a process aesthetic, since, for it, novelty is imperative. Thus, even chaotic jazz may well appear on the scene primarily as a reaction to stale, highly structured patterns underlying improvisation; moreover, fusion of artistic patterns as a method of introducing novelty (jazz-rock and metal rap, for instance) is to be expected on a process theory. The same imperative for novelty can also help explain movements within individual artistic careers.

The Principle of Balanced Contrast taken as unity-in-diversity must be augmented by the dimension of "profundity vs. superficiality"

Mere harmony of contrasts is not *sufficient* for great aesthetic value. A vocal trio's three part harmony at the introduction of a barber shop song is in so far beautiful, but it is superficial in relation to a complete aria sung by a well-trained, full choir. On the other hand, a bird song may not be trivial for a bird although an aria would be hopelessly profound. Aesthetic value is thus four-dimensional and framed around boundaries of the hopelessly monotonous, hopelessly chaotic, hopelessly superficial and hopelessly profound. These dimensions are to be contextualized by sensory capaciousness (Hartshorne *Creative Synthesis* 305).

Poetics as Conceptual Reversion and Lure of Feeling

Having painted this general aesthetic picture, it can be applied to a more specific process interpretation of artistic expression, the poem in particular. Following Donald Sherburne's masterful *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic* and Robert Valenza's recent important

essay on “Aesthetic Priority,” we could say that, for process theory, artistic creativity, including poetics, is grounded in the ontological structure of processes of becoming à la Whitehead’s analysis, most specifically that aspect of concreteness that Whitehead deems “conceptual reversion.” Whitehead defines conceptual reversion in the following way: As a result of conceptual reversion

the proximate novelties are conceptually felt. This is the process by which the subsequent enrichment of subjective forms, both in qualitative pattern, and in intensity through contrast, is made possible by the positive conceptual prehension of relevant alternatives . . . [Conceptual reversion] is the category by which novelty enters the world; so that even amid stability there is never undifferentiated endurance. (381)

Poets and other artists act as conceptual reversionists in the large. They grasp a set of related potentials and prevent them from “falling back into the immanence or embodiment” of physical feelings (Sherburne 168), thus raising them to an iconic status that can channel new experience. A poem then is a “propositional feeling” in Whitehead’s specific sense—a synthesis of physical and conceptual feeling—which acts as a lure for subsequent feeling. It lifts out contrasted potentials from felt sensory experience in such a way that the poem transcends the ink and paper or other concrete embodiment and opens the way for new feelings. The *contrasted* potentialities are crucial and give the poem its essential *dissociative* quality. Consider the following example taken from *A Knight’s Tale*. The fictive character of Geoffrey Chaucer could have said in a quite literal and discursive mode: “Sir Oreck is superior to the other jousting candidates in the arts of war.” Instead, he waxes poetic and says of Sir Oreck: “We are privileged to walk in the garden of his turbulence.” Now, “garden” and “turbulence” are surely dissociative, but in context they are not absurdly incongruent. In the context of a jousting match, “turbulence” signifies power and “garden” signifies the fruit of victory. Their juxtaposition thus gives a novel “feel” to the scenario, a touch humorous, a touch sublime. To achieve this “feel,” poets must evoke stark contrasts that are *somehow* related.

II. A Brief Demonstration of a Poetics of Process

Poetry from many different time periods and literary movements could be used to illustrate a poetics of process, or a poetics that strikes the balance between novelty and sameness, so as to create aesthetic value and avoid the annoyance of too much complexity and the tedium of too much sameness. Even more poetry could be used to illustrate a failure to achieve this balance. Gertrude Stein’s book of prose poetry, *Tender Buttons*, has too much differentiation for all but the most adventurous reader, while the poetry of William McGonagall, proclaimed the world’s worst poet on the University of Michigan’s website dedicated to bad poetry, has too much sameness for most readers; the poetry is plodding and predictable. It can be argued that there is a place for the exceptionally complex or differentiated—whose practitioners are usually termed “a musician’s musician” or a “poet’s poet”—in that other artists of a genre will have a greater craving for novelty and complexity than the average person. Apparently, there is also a place for considerable sameness in mass-market collectibles and pop art.

However, two poets who exemplify a Poetics of Process, and who have influenced the formulation of this poetic, are E.E. Cummings and Lorine Niedecker. Both Cummings and Niedecker were firm in their belief that the poet’s job was to innovate, or create novelty, yet somehow remain within the bounds of recognizable poetry. Both

Cummings and Niedecker achieve balance between novelty and unity, profundity and superficiality, and conceptual reversion through their linguistic inventions and language use, and through the exceptional originality of their use of metaphor. Both Cummings and Niedecker alter words and their usage, creating startling new contexts for words, and sometimes creating new usage from word roots. However, the most striking demonstration of how Cummings and Niedecker achieve balanced contrast is through their use of contrast and metaphor. Whitehead's "conceptual reversion" is similar in some respects to the notion of "discordia concors," termed by Samuel Johnson in *Lives of the Poets* to describe the metaphysical poets' use of language and metaphors of startling contrast, which he describes as "a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" in which "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises" (24-25).

The *Norton* introduction to Cummings notes that his poetry is "distinguished by clever formal innovation" through experimentation with "punctuation, line breaks, hyphenation, fragmentary lines" (1478). The major distinguishing characteristics of Cummings' poetry are his syntactical experimentation and his attention to the visual content of the poems as an integral component of the poem's theme. Cummings viewed creativity as something that simply could not be adequately explained, but was best represented and understood (or as Cummings preferred, *felt*) by experiencing the creative work on its own terms, similar in some significant ways to Wallace Stevens' "Supreme Fiction." Additionally, Cummings's concept of creativity is that it is dynamic and fluid and cannot be held within the confines of safety or decency, not something static enough to *know* or master in such a way that it could be communicated through so banal a form as an essay (*nonlectures* 3).

It is Cummings' experimentation with language and with form that distinguishes him from all poets preceding him as well as from his contemporaries, and also demonstrates the Poetics of Process notion of a balance of novelty and unity. Cummings's linguistic and visual experimentation enabled him to create surreal and synaesthetic images, to achieve multiple meanings from words, phrases, and poetic lines, and to express content through methods usually limited to visual art that all come to bear on the meaning of the poem, and must all be addressed in order to gain the fullest sense of the poem. Different poems highlight different aspects of these experiments, and some Cummings poems read similarly to other linear lyric poems; however, in some of Cummings's most successful and daring poems, he achieves a kind of syntactical web or mosaic of meaning, as opposed to a narrative or grammatical line, that is conveyed through both the content and the arrangement of the words, and that can even sustain paradox, much as haiku does in its original Japanese characters that more closely ally image and meaning. The closest that most of the other high modernist poets can come to such expressions is the pastiche or collage, both of which are still usually presented in an essentially linear syntax, and achieve their multiplicity of meanings mostly through theme.

The sonnet, "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls," which is often anthologized, is in many ways a fairly straightforward poem, yet couched within the sonnet form are Cummings's less conventional images and syntactical tinkering:

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
 are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds
 (also, with the church's protestant blessings
 daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)
 they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,

are invariably interested in so many things—
 at the present writing one still finds
 delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?
 perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy
 scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D
 . . . the Cambridge ladies do not care, above
 Cambridge if sometimes in its box of
 sky lavender and cornerless, the
 moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy (*Poems* 70)

Images such as “furnished souls” and “comfortable minds” are fresh and still accessible, whereas the images “unbeautiful,” “unscented shapeless spirited,” and “permanent faces” are a bit more suggestive and abstract in their meaning. Together the images create the picture of the very active but creatively dead Cambridge ladies and their daughters, which is expressed more plainly in lines like “they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead./ are invariably interested in so many things—.” Syntactically, the language is mostly straightforward, with the exception of the phrase, “delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?/ perhaps,” which mimics the chatty speech Cummings envisions for them.

The imagery and the syntax both become more unusual in the final lines of the poem in the image of the moon. Instead of bringing closure, the last three lines catapult the poem out of the Cambridge ladies’ sitting room and into the sky. The image of the moon is surreal and enigmatic, comic and paradoxical. The cornerless box of “sky lavender” the moon inhabits presents the paradox of the moon’s restriction within boundless space. The image of the moon rattling “like a fragment of angry candy” adds many layers of meaning in one phrase: it suggests the moon is angry, that the moon can rattle, that the moon looks like a piece of candy, and only a fragment of candy at that, and that a fragment of candy can be angry. These implied assertions create an image with many facets, and a very different world from the mundane world of the Cambridge ladies. Even though the poem is a sonnet—a form the Cambridge ladies most assuredly would have regarded with respect—the magical, vibrant, almost comic-dangerous world of the moon in the last lines of this sonnet is beyond the realm of the Cambridge ladies and their education, social standing, and morality. These same contrasts also demonstrate the qualities of balance between novelty and unity in its use of the sonnet form paired with startling imagery, the balance between superficiality and profundity in its satire and social commentary on the Cambridge ladies, and conceptual reversion in its ability to elicit fresh emotions from the contrast of the Cambridge ladies and the angry candy moon.

Another poem that makes use of space and punctuation to create a web or mosaic of meaning, in this case the seemingly paradoxical senses of confinement and emptiness, is the poem “dim”:

dim
 i
 nu
 tiv

e this park is e
 mpty(everyb
 ody’s elsewher
 e except me 6 e

nglish sparrow
s) a
utum & t
he rai

n
th
e

raintherain (Poems 696)

The poem makes the word diminutive embody its meaning by breaking it into the small chunks of “dim” “i” “un” “tive,” and by keeping the letters lower-case. Also, within the word is Cummings’ now famous (or infamous) lower-case “I” which achieves a double meaning, at once functioning as a component of the word diminutive, and also creating the phrase “dim i,” which further shades the tone of the poem and suggests the mood of the speaker. The placement of the word diminutive so strikes the reader that the unlikely phrase that follows it, “this park is empty,” almost slips by unnoticed; however, the juxtaposition of the sense of smallness of the park with its emptiness introduces the complexity of feeling the poem depicts.

The emptiness of the park is conveyed in several ways. By leaving the initial “E” of the word emptiness to hang in the white space of the page enacts the absence the word denotes. There is also a visual and tonal echoing of the emptiness by the solitary lower-case “Es” flanking “this park is” in the first line of the second stanza. Next, by putting any reference to living things in parentheses sets any consideration of presence as separate. The contents of the parentheses further shape and color the sense of emptiness. By slicing the word “everybody’s” into “everyb” and “ody’s” symbolically disembodies the “everybody,” and hacking off the final “e” of “elsewhere” and dropping it to the next line further demonstrates that the people referenced are not there. To compound the sense that the speaker is isolated, the poem separates the references to the others from the speaker with line breaks. The small scattering of six sparrows who are the speaker’s only companions, is represented by the relative smallness of the numeral 6 in comparison to the already small word “six,” and by the scattering of the name “english sparrows” across three lines and a stanza break.

The juxtaposition of the commentary about the park’s small size and its emptiness with the observation of “autumn and the rain the rain the rain,” functions much like a haiku in the relationship between the natural image and the speaker’s perspective on it. Again, the placement of words and word parts suggests the increasing season and rain storm, with the first use of the phrase “the rain” dropping across three lines and a stanza break, and building to one line jammed with “raintherain” without spaces between the words. His use of the visual component of the poem as an additional mode of expression also demonstrates a balance between novelty and unity. The imagery of the scene contrasted with the feelings evoked also demonstrates a balance between superficiality and profundity in the mundanity of the scene versus the intensity of emotion conveyed. The emotions elicited from the imagery also demonstrate conceptual reversion, in that fresh emotions are evoked from the normally mundane scene of an empty park in the rain.

The attention Cummings gave to the visual component of his poetry seems natural since he was also a painter. While he never achieved prominence as a visual artist, his knowledge of visual composition comes through in his poetry. His poems depict their

themes through not only the content of their words, but also through its presentation on the page. The visual aspect of the poems present complex, and at times, paradoxical themes that reflect the complex and variable nature of existence, like all other great poetry does. His poetry illustrates a thorough aesthetic consideration of the visual associations and spatial component of text in direct relation to the content of its language. The tools he employed to achieve this synthesis include: the proximity and placement of words and word parts on the page in relation to each other and in relation to the movement of the poem as a whole, the use of typographic symbols, capitalization, and punctuation (or lack thereof), and the use of white space. The uniqueness of his poetry, and his ability to incorporate visual and spatial expression into a normally linear language exemplify the balance of contrasts necessary to Poetics of Process.

The paradoxical balance between the apparent simplicity of Niedecker's poems with their underlying ambiguities is one shining example of the Poetics of Process notion of a balance between novelty and unity. Even though a reader knows there is more to the poem than what appears on the surface, there is so little to grasp onto in Niedecker's poetry in regard to the volume of language and linguistic and syntactical cues that the value of her work can be difficult to explain. Peter Quartermain addresses this issue in "Reading Niedecker," pointing out that the very qualities which make Niedecker's poetry unique and profound simultaneously make the value of her poetry easy to misconstrue. He notes that "the air of lucidity is deceptive" in Niedecker's poetry because it is easy to discount the risks she takes because the poems appear to be very simple, or as Quartermain puts it, "Niedecker's poems are so extremely difficult to talk about not simply because paraphrase seems impossible, but because there seems to be no *need* of any" (220).

One example of Niedecker's deceptive lucidity is "*To my small / electric pump:*"

To sense
and sound
this world

look to
your sniffer
valve

take oil
and hum (197)

At first read, this poem appears to be a very straightforward musing on the workings of a simple machine, not unlike William Carlos Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow." But like Williams' poem, Niedecker's short poem on her electric pump is anything but simple. Niedecker's minimalist style serves to condense meaning, to squeeze the maximum possibilities out of each word through word choice, placement, and context within in the poem. The poem, like many of Niedecker's, offers multiple interpretations, interpretations that both coexist as elaboration on each other and demolish each other. On the one hand, the poem can be seen as the speaker addressing the pump directly in the imperative; the poet is giving a directive to the pump as to its function and purpose. The pump's marching orders from the world are to do what it was made to do: pump a liquid. The poem can also be seen as a directive to a poet or any artist to likewise, do what he/she was made to do: create.

The poem's lack of punctuation and the ambiguous syntax also offer additional interpretive possibilities. The first stanza, on its own, suggests a statement in itself about

not so clean and spare, or as Niedecker puts it, “free/ with less/ and clean.” Again, the poem’s apparent simplicity and lucidity belie the boldness of her experimentation. The poem appears to be discussing a water pump, but it is also clearly discussing Niedecker’s aesthetic principles, all in a very short, plain-language poem, juxtaposed with a striking image. This contrast dramatically highlights the notion of a balance between superficiality and profundity, as well as a balance between novelty and unity. The poem’s striking imagery against its plain language also depicts conceptual reversion in its contrasted potentialities and the fresh emotions such a contrast creates.

III. Conclusion

This essay is by no means a thorough explanation of process aesthetics, nor does it offer exhaustive explications of the poems discussed. What this essay offers is an introduction to process aesthetics and its application to the aesthetic principles of poetry. Much of poetry and poetry criticism of the last fifty years has been influenced by the relativism and anti-metaphysical posture of the deconstructionalist philosophy. In literature, and in poetry in particular, the influence of deconstructionalist theory has fueled a great deal of poetry and criticism with a focus on solipsistic and even nihilistic approaches to life and art, which leads ultimately to a creative dead end. Process aesthetics, on the other hand, offers a more inclusive and productive theoretical grounding for both artistic creation and critical consideration of poetry, a constructive postmodern poetics, than what much of current poetics and literary theory espouse.

Works Cited

- Baym, Nina, et al, eds. “E. E. Cummings.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Vol. 2, 4th ed. New York: Norton, 1994. 1448-49.
- Cummings, Edward Estlin. *Complete Poems: 1913-1962*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968.
- . “dim.” 696.
- . “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls.” 70.
- . *i: six nonlectures*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.
- Doud, Robert. “A Whiteheadian Interpretation of Baudelaire’s Poetry,” *Process Studies* 31.2 (Fall-Winter 2002): 16-31.
- Hartshorne, Charles. *Born to Sing: Interpretation and World Survey of Bird Song*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971.
- . *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*. LaSalle: Open Court, 1970.
- Niedecker, Lorine. *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*. Jenny Penberthy, Ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002.
- . “To my pres- /sure pump.” 201.
- . “To my small / electric pump.” 197.
- Quatermain, Peter. “Reading Niedecker.” Penberthy *Woman and Poet* 219-228.
- Sherburne, Donald. *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1961.
- Shields, George W. *Process and Analysis: W. H. and The Analytic Tradition*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2003.
- Skutch, Alexander. “Bird Song and Philosophy” in *The Philosophy of Charles Hartshorne*, Lewis Hahn, Ed. LaSalle: Open Court, 1991, 65-76.
- Velenza, Robert J. “Aesthetic Priority in Science and Religion,” *Process Studies* 31.1 (Spring -Summer 2002): 49-76.
- Whitehead, A. N. *Process and Reality*, Revised Edition, D. R. Griffin and D. Sherburne, Eds. New York: MacMillan, 1978.