

5b~Jackson Mac Low to Kristin Prevallet.¹**“the terminology”**

Dear Kristin

Manuel Brito's publication, *20 Forties* is a sampler selected by random digit operations from the whole series of 154 Forties poems (written 1990-95, except for subsequent revisions), although none of them was written by methods involving either chance operations or any deterministic method.

As you state, the poems themselves were written by a method that I often refer to as “gathering” word, phrases, etc., from my inner and outer environments. Gathering for the “Forties” was a partly “liminal” process on the threshold between what the Freudians and others refer to as the Conscious and the Unconscious. But once I had the first draft of a poem by this process, the writing involved making a great many minute and less-minute adjustments. And in any case, things brought in from the inner and outer environments were brought in by various kinds of selection, some more or less “deliberate” (although most quite improvisatory). Revisions were usually quite deliberate. These included many changes in the hyphenated word compounds, emphases, and especially the “caesural spaces,” etc. Gathering is a very fluid method of composition. Decisions made in this area of the mind are not fully conscious but they *are* decisions.

In other words, I did not just jot words down and then compose poems from those words, “fitting” them into my 40s fuzzy verse form. I composed the lines of the poems *as* I gathered words and also phrases and some sentences from my mind and from words, etc., that I saw or heard as I wrote the first drafts of these poems. They were composed *in* that fuzzy verse form.

The terminology has not always seemed adequate – to myself, included – for understanding what I do and how I do it. Until around 1990, I made the mistake for many years of thinking that deterministic methods were kinds of systematic chance operations. I called them that in prefaces and other writings. What these two kinds of writingways – systematic chance operations and deterministic methods – have in common is that their results are for the most part unpredictable (although one can know what the word population of the source is). Because of this unpredictability and the concomitant “nonintentionality” of the “raw outputs,” I mistakenly thought deterministic methods were kinds of chance operations. On the other hand, “deterministic” is not at all a term to *substitute* for “chance operations” – it is a name for an essentially different kind of method. Chance operations are different from deterministic text-selection methods in that the results or outputs of chance operations are necessarily always different. The outputs of deterministic text-selection methods will always be the same if the writer uses the same method correctly with the same seed and source texts.

The “gathering” method is neither systematic chance operations nor deterministic text-selection. The terminology seems at times imprecise (e.g., to convey the relationship of the “gathering” process to the resultant stanzaic form – “gathering” does not fit “content” to “form” like water in a glass) partly because my ways of writing and other artmaking have constantly changed, as have my thoughts about artmaking.

A chronology of various methods that I have employed in writing poems:

I often made poems and musical works and plays by systematic chance operations of several kinds from late 1954 to spring 1960.

From spring 1960 till November 1989, I frequently (but not at all exclusively) employed writing methods I now call deterministic reading-through text-selection methods. There are two main groups of such methods. The first is acrostic text selection (spring 1960 to January 1963) in which the poems “spell out” “seed texts” by means of a sequence of words or other linguistic units having the letters of the seed text at their beginnings. Main examples: the poems in *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (written May-October 1960) and in *Asymmetries 1-260* (written October-December 1960²).

In January 1963 I devised and first employed my second group of deterministic methods: “diastic reading-through text-selection.” The raw outputs of these methods comprise sequences of words or other linguistics units – drawn from source texts as they are read through by authors or Computers – that have the letters of seed texts in positions corresponding to those they occupy in the seed texts. “Gods by tops” could diastically spell out “gyp” if one successively found those three words as one read through a source text. Among the books made by diastic methods are *The Pronouns*; *The Virginia Woolf Poems* (written 1976-

77); *Words and Ends from Ez* (written 1981-83); the last 12 of the 42 Merzgedichte in *Memoriam Kurt Schwitters*³ (written 1987-89); and *Barnesbook* (1989).

“Stein,” a 161-poem sequence derived from many works of Gertrude Stein was begun in April 1998 (but like the Forties subject to subsequent revision) and was more or less completed on Christmas 2000. Its composition involved diastic text selection and constrained revision of the raw output of the diastic method. All lexical morphemes were retained but affixes, etc., were freely changed or inserted as were “helping words” (not only structure word – prepositions, conjunctions, etc. – but also pronouns and forms of “to be” and some adverbs). Word order was also changed, etc. In making the “Stein” poems, I used deterministic methods and deliberate or liminal composition in tandem.

Since around 1980, I have sometimes utilized deterministic methods and sometimes more nearly improvisatory ones. Both the more methodically written poems and the more improvisatorily written ones often make use of verse forms, usually, especially from 1990 on, of my own devising. Additionally, I never “reject” any of my methods. For instance, in making Steinpoems I often used chance operation, usually numerical, to determine source and seed texts from Stein works. These became the materials from which I made the final Steinpoems. Number sequences, especially the so-called Lucas sequence, developed by the French mathematician Edouard Lucas just before 1880 and published that year, often determined the forms of the poems.

The first 30 “Merzgedichte” were composed by a unique numerical chance-operational method that drew words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from very large “glossaries” that had been gathered by “impulse chance” from books about Schwitters (including words and titles by him). The “name” of each glossary item was a three-digit number.

Beginning with the last 12 “Merzgedichte,” I’ve used computer programs by Charles O. Hartman (a professor at Connecticut College who is also a poet, critic, and programmer) to do the work of reading through the source texts to diastically selected words (I still don’t have a program that can diastically select phrases, other sentence sections, or complete sentences).

“154 Forties,” then, were written neither chance-operationally nor deterministically (neither acrostically nor diastically). This is also the case with *Twenties: 100 Poems* (written 1989-90).

The *Twenties* poems are another example of how critical terminology seems inadequate to a description of both how they were made and what they do. These poems include short spaces within the lines indicating caesurae – pauses or phoneme prolongations – of a few different lengths. Most of my revisions were of these spaces. I rarely revised words, though I avoided repetitions of words. When I found them, I substituted similar-sounding words. Sometimes I inserted acute accents to clarify stresses. As I say in the preface:

It’s because of the revisions of caesurae and certain words, and because many of the poems were written very slowly or even at separated times that I have hesitated to use the term improvisation. Edited protracted improvisation might be accurate though awkward. Yet even this mightn’t do, because most of the poems were written in a state of intense concentration, akin to meditation, which is not usually connoted by improvisation.

The above is equally a characterization of what I’ve since called “gathering” when speaking of the way I wrote the Forties.

Also, in the latter I have introduced many neologicistic hyphenated compound words, some to be spoken a little more rapidly than other words, some slowed up. The latter are indicated by a space on each side of the hyphen. In addition, I include many more acute accents to clarify stresses, especially within compound words (which often include several words).

As I mistakenly used to do, I called the diastic method that I used to make the poem “Marines Defend Burning of Village,” “a kind of chance operations.” When people see the word “chance,” they think “anything goes.” This 1965 poem is an example of how one can use so-called nonintentional methods (in this case one of my deterministic reading-through text-selection methods) to make an overtly political/didactic poem. It is an interesting example of how an impersonally written poem can function as a strong political work. Because of the fragmentation and repetitions of sentences and sentence fragments in the poem, the horror of the bland description in the NYTimes is borne in on the readers/hearers. All that was required was to choose the news story and “send it through” a noncomputer-automated diastic method that selected sentences and fragments of sentences running from diastic words to punctuation marks. In

making this poem, the source text was the whole news story and the verbal part of the title was the seed text.

It has been borne in on me that the last half-century of my artmaking has been the "site" of a dialectic between making and letting be. Even when I worked with an actually "aleatory" text-selection process, i.e., one utilizing die tosses, as was the case with my "5 biblical poems" (written 12/30/54-1/27/55). I determined a form for each of the poems by means of multiple tosses of a single die: a number of stanzas, each comprising a specific number of lines which were made up of numbers of "events" that were either words drawn from a copy of the Jewish Publication Society's translation of the Hebrew Scriptures or silences equal in audible length to any word the reader may say to herself. The number of stanzas in each poem is equal to the number of lines in each stanza. I have no special attachment to either "testament" of the Jewish or Christian Bible, but having a little copy of JPS translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which I've been told is more accurate than other translations, I laboriously made these poems by multiple throws of a single die in my kitchen on Avenue C, between 9th and 10th Streets, over that New Year's weekend and during most of the rest of January 1955. (The 5th biblical poem comprises three parts drawn from the same portions of the Scriptures and all having the same stanza form in their 9 stanzas. They are to be spoken simultaneously. Those events that are silences [a die toss determined whether an event was to be a word or a silence] make it possible to hear the various parts in the holes of the auditory texture.) 5bp is in some ways typical (in very general ways) of what I've done during the last 50 years: making decisions to let certain processes determine major aspects of an artwork including its form.

I've not really taken in your project yet. So far it seems (in some general ways) like a video that Anne Tardos made of various sites in our neighborhood, in most of which various activities were occurring, which was one of two components of Anne's performance piece. In the piece the video is screened and I speak fragments of a large number of Forties poems that I strew on a large table and pick and read from by impulse.⁵ Probably, when I get to really reading your description of your video, I'll find it is quite different from Anne's. (Incidentally, New Wilderness Audiographics (Charlie Morrow) published in 1982 a cassette of several of Anne's sound pieces that she entitled "Gatherings.")

Been having trouble with my Hopkins series. GMH's language is not at all as amenable to the kinds of processes and revisions I employed in writing the Stein series, of which (as I've said) my finishing the 161st poem (among mostly longish and a few shortish poems and a few very long and very short poems) signaled the end last Christmas (altho all the poems are subject to mostly minor changes). The Hopkins group was preceded by some poems whose words were drawn from a poem by Keats and one from a collaborative work by Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop.

I'm sorry that my ongoing work has prevented me from a fuller engagement with your letter. I am getting "154 Forties," with Anne Tardos's tremendous help, into a PageMaker file that will be better able to represent the series to presses. I've been working on it for eleven years. It's high time the whole of it appeared as a book.

jml

Endnotes

¹ Due to time constraints and other project commitments, Jackson Mac Low asked that his response to Kristin Prevallet's open letter be collated and edited from emails concerning her open letter that he sent, over several weeks, to Kristin and Louis Cabri.

² The other numbered asymmetries, of which there are altogether ~500, were written mainly in early 1961.

³ The other Merzgedichte were made by a complex chance-operational system involving the glossary facility of Microsoft Word and random-digit triplets from the RAND table *A Million Random Digits and 100,000 Normal Deviates*.

⁴ This poem turns out to be scrambled in the 3rd issue of Jerry Rothenberg's and David Antin's magazine *Some/Thing* (1965) – an issue targeted against the US war against the Vietnamese. (Its cover – by Andy Warhol – is a pseudo pane of stamps, perforations and mucilage and all – the stamps say “BOMB HANOI.”) I just discovered that someone, probably a typesetter, misplaced some of the poem's strophes.

⁵ It was screened and performed first in 1996 as a part of a concert of works by us organized by the DownTown Ensemble at the Greenwich House Music School in NY and then as a part of readings I did at the Fondation Royaumont in Asnières, north of Paris (where a group of French poets and translators had translated 5 of my Forties poems), with and at the Maison des Ecrivains in Paris, in an artists' studio near Bordeaux, and in Marseilles. In 3 of them Bernard Heidsieck (and in one, Juliette Valéry, one of the translators and the companion of the poet Emmanuel Hocquard, another of the main translators) read the Royaumont translations, which were later much revised after I read the first Royaumont translations.