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Alfred A. Poulin Jr.

*The College at Brockport*

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I'll read my poem "Leaving the Atocha Station":

The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness
And pulling us out of there experiencing it
he meanwhile... And the fried bats they sell there
dropping from sticks, so that the menace of your prayer folds...
Other people... flash
the garden are you boning
and defunct covering... Blind dog expressed royalties...
comfort of your perfect tar grams nuclear world bank tulip
Favorable to near the night pin
loading formaldehyde. the table torn from you
Suddenly and we are close
Mouthing the root when you think

generator homes enjoy leered

The worn stool blazing pigeons from the roof
driving tractor to squash

Leaving the Atocha Station steel
infected bumps the screws
everywhere wells
abolished top ill-lit

scarecrow falls Time, progress and good sense
strike of shopkeepers dark blood
no forest you can name drunk scrolls
the completely new Italian hair...

Baby... ice falling off the port

The centennial Before we can
old eat
members with their chins

so high up rats
relaxing the cruel discussion
suds the painted corners
white most aerial
garment crow

and when the region took us back

the person left us like birds

it was fuzz on the passing light
over disgusted heads, far into amnesiac
permanent house depot amounts he can
decrepit mayor... exalting flea

for that we turn around
experiencing it is not to go into
the epileptic prank forcing bar
to borrow out onto tide-exposed fells
over her morsel, she chasing you
and the revenge he'd get
establishing the vultural over
rural area cough protection
murdering quintet. Air pollution terminal
the clean fart genital enthusiastic toe prink album serious evening flames
the lake over your hold personality
lightened... roar
You are freed
including barrels
head of the swan forestry
the night and stars fork
That is, he said
and rushing under the hoops of
equations probable
absolute mush the right
entity chain store sewer opened their books
The flood dragged you
I coughed to the window
last month: juice, earlier
like the slacks to be declining
the peaches more
fist
sprung expecting the cattle
false loam imports
next time around

"Leaving the Atocha Station" raises the obvious question about your work. Richard Howard has said of The Tennis Court Oath that it reaches a pitch of distraction and leaves any consecutive or linear reading of your poems out of the question. Others have said the same thing, that you always seem to be talking about something specific, but that we never know quite what it is. And Paul Carroll has said of this poem in particular: "I feel annoyed. The poem makes me feel stupid." What is it about your poetry that produces these reactions in readers?

I don't really understand about "difficulty" or about "understanding" poetry. It seems to me that the poetry is what's there and there are no hidden meanings or references to other things beyond what most of us know. I like very much Richard Howard's remark that "it reaches a pitch of distraction," because I think that's probably what I was trying to do, at least in that particular poem. Although it's hard for me to remember what I was trying to do when I was writing a specific poem, I was probably trying to get rid of something, which having done, I no longer needed to be concerned with. But having read that poem, which I haven't re-read in quite a long time, I guess I was wondering, too, what I was trying to do.
That poem was written after my first trip to Spain; the Atocha Station is a railway station in Madrid. My poems aren't usually about my experiences, because I don't find my experiences very interesting as a rule. When they are about them, they are so in a very oblique, marginal way. It was really nothing for me to be leaving this particular railway station. It meant nothing to me at the time except that I was in a strange city going somewhere. But it strikes me that the dislocated, incoherent fragments of images which make up the movement of the poem are probably like the experience you get from a train pulling out of a station of no particular significance. The dirt, the noises, the sliding away seem to be a movement in the poem. The poem was probably trying to express that, not for itself but as an epitome of something experienced; I think that is what my poems are about. I mean it doesn't particularly matter about the experience; the movement of experiencing is what I'm trying to get down. Does that make it any clearer?

Yes, I suppose. The poem, then, is simply about the experience of leaving a particular station. Is this common among the rest of your poems? The fact of the poem being its own experience?

Most of my poems are about the experience of experience. As I said before, the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me. I believe this is the way in which it happens with most people. I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long. We're sitting here, presumably having a nice discussion
about somebody's poetry, and yet the occasion is something else also. First of all, I'm in a strange place with lots of lights whose meaning I don't quite understand, and I'm talking about a poem I wrote years ago and which no longer means very much to me. I have a feeling that everything is slipping away from me as I'm trying to talk about it—a feeling I have most of the time, in fact—and I think I was probably trying to call attention to this same feeling in "Leaving the Atocha Station" and in other poems as well. Not because of any intrinsic importance the feeling might have, but because I feel that somebody should call attention to this. Maybe once it's called attention to we can think about something else, which is what I'd like to do.

Everyone speaks about the difficulty of your poetry and it seems to me that any discussion of your work must center around what is, or what seems to be, the core of your poem, of your poetry, of your work.

I don't know what that core is. Maybe it would help if you explained exactly what you mean by "difficulty."

The difficulty of language, for one, of syntax. Reading one of your poems, one is not prepared for the kinds of juxtapositions that occur in many of the poems.

I don't think one is prepared for juxtapositions in general, is one? And yet one is constantly being faced with them. The conditions I mentioned before are all juxtapositions which I wasn't prepared for when I came into this studio today. I'd like to talk about this type of experience in the poetry. It's something that's very ordinary;
it's basic to what happens to us when we get up in the morning. And as far as understanding goes, is there really anything to understand? I think that's a question that my poems are more or less asking throughout: What's there? Is there anything there? If there isn't, or if there is, the poem will be whatever it means to the reader.

All poetry is written, I think, with this understanding in mind because the poet can advance only a little way out of the poem to push the reader in one direction or another towards an understanding of it. But what the poet can do really isn't very much. What the poem is going to be determined by the reader. I guess my poems are a kind of simplification of this problem, one which has always affected poets. The poem is not really in their hands: it's in someone else's. I'm calling attention to this, perhaps, with the hope that eventually there might be some other way out of the problem. Perhaps a poet someday might be able to write a poem of which he would know the meaning in the mind of whoever came along and read it.

I don't find that my poems are obscure. I think they're something else, not quite what we mean when we say "obscure" or "hard to understand" or "difficult." I find almost everything obscure, including the title of Mr. Carroll's essay on my poem. That title, "If Only He Had Left From the Finland Station," baffles me, but then, as I say, most things do. Why should it have been the Finland Station, which has a precise historical meaning and one which my poem wasn't aiming at at all? Could you tell me?
No, I don't know why he asked why you should be leaving from Finland. Maybe one of the ways of coming back to this question is to enter the whole area that David Shapiro calls the melancholy subject of poetic influence. When did you begin writing poetry?

When I was about 15. I was in high school and had received a prize in a *Time* current events contest which was conducted in our high school. I didn't know very much about current events, but apparently I was good enough at guessing so that I won the quiz and was awarded an anthology of modern American poetry. I had never really thought very much about poetry till that time. I thought that I would like to be a painter and in fact I used to take painting classes just a few miles from here at the art museum in Rochester. For some reason that anthology of poetry made me feel competitive in a way that I had never felt when looking at pictures. Maybe because I knew I was never going to be a very good painter anyway. But it seemed to me that this form offered me a lot of possibilities that would be unavailable to me if I was just painting one thing. A picture is a picture--it's what's there--whereas poetry is what's there and also is everything that isn't there.

In what way?

Well, the words suggest other words, the thoughts other thoughts, and when one starts to think about it the whole thing expands out of the frame in a way that a painting can't once it's pinned down and drawn and painted. I guess that is because the poem is not a visual thing, but something that's going on in one's head, coming in contact with
all kinds of other things, remembered experiences, words that one heard used in a different context than that in which they're occurring in the poem. It was for me the freest form, offering most possibilities to use anything that I'd encountered, that moment.

Were there any people that you were reading at that time?

All the modern poets, particularly when I began to know my way around in them. My favorites were W.H. Auden--his earlier poems--Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams. I would say, in a general way, the less formal poets, those whose poems didn't tie them to a particular program or to the essay-type subject that you get in lesser poetry.

What was it about Wallace Stevens that interested you particularly?

I guess it was the poem sort of becoming the poem around the writer's experience, and of Stevens' of trying to hem it in, define it, and put it all together in a way which didn't seem to matter so much. What mattered were the hazards and accidents that crackled all around while the poem was taking shape and which offered vistas that I think anyone is seized by in reading Wallace Stevens.

How important is the visual imagery in Stevens, the very sharp, very bright visual imagery that you get? You had an early interest in being a painter.

I really don't think of Stevens in that way. I suppose you could say that there are very sharp bright visual images, but that's not something I associate with him when I think about his poetry. When I decided I
wasn't interested in painting. I realized at that moment that the visual element didn't matter for me very much. I suppose there are sharp visual images in my poetry, but they're included as just one item in the lists of things that go into a poem. They don't matter for me very much, and I'm not really conscious of seeing when I'm writing. I'm conscious of hearing, and that is something worlds away, as far as I'm concerned.

Are you saying that your poems are written to be heard?

Well, to be heard when you read them, yes. I don't mean that they're written to be read aloud, in fact I myself don't particularly enjoy listening to poetry. I have to see the poem, the way it looks on the page, the way the letters are shaped, the way the lines are. That's all very important; it triggers the mental, invisible image of the poem. Sometimes I enjoy listening to poetry being read just because of the incompleteness of the experience. I wander in and out of my own thoughts while I'm listening to a poem. I wonder if I remembered to buy soap, or whether I've missed an important appointment. Then I come back into the poem and stay there for a while, then wander out again. This is an interesting experience in a way, but I don't think it's what the poem is all about. To get at that I have to be alone with the poem, reading it, silently.

A number of critics say you have been influenced by the French symbolists. Do you identify that kind of influence?

Not really. I'm often pegged as a French offshoot because I lived in France for a long time, but I don't feel that French poetry has been terribly important to my own. A lot of it was read after I'd been
living there for quite a while, because I didn't really know the
language when I first went to France. I couldn't read Rimbaut, for
instance, until rather late in my poetry-writing career, or I
probably would have been influenced by him. I'm sure I would have
felt that this was something in my direction. But it wasn't
something that came first.
In general, even my particular favorites among French poets, such
as Raymond Roussel, don't seem to have any very close relation in
my own work. French is too mathematical a language. You can't be
left with any remainders as you can when you're writing in English.
There's a very strict accounting that has to be drawn up. In fact,
even the surrealist poets are very strict despite what they may have
thought. The automatic writing which was supposed to be the well-
spring of surrealist poetry doesn't seem very automatic to me, es-
pecially since it all makes beautiful sense, grammatically and
imaginatively. The idea of surrealism is an important one for just
about everybody today merely because it implies a freedom. But the
actual poetry itself has not influenced me very much.

What kind of freedom does surrealism imply to you?

The possibility of using your dreams, your average thoughts, things
you overhear people saying in the street--anything that comes into
your mind--as a raw material for poetry. But I don't think this is
exactly what surrealist literature itself is all about. It's a pro-
gram, and I'm very much against any kind of program.

So you would disagree also with the critics who would refer to the
Dadaist influence in your work?

Yes, although I think that the whole notion of Dadaist literature is inexact. It was supposed to do away with literature, but it has ended up becoming literature itself, and Dadaists are classics today. My own poetry faces this problem. The poem that I've just read, for instance was a sort of throw-away when I was writing it. I didn't really know what I was doing, but now it's been printed in a book and I'm reading it for video tape and we are discussing it here as though it were some sort of document. That was the last thing that ever entered my mind when I was writing it.

Does that have some relationship with the resemblances between your work and collage painting or action painting?

Before I answer that, there was something that I meant to say in connection with Dada: I've never intended my own poems to be any kind of demolition of poetry. I think poetry is very important and that if you demolish it you're going to have to come up with something else that will replace poetry for all of us, and that thing is probably going to be poetry. What I want to do, really, is to stretch poetry rather than to level it, to make it more inclusive and different. I think poetry has to be a new experience. The only way that one can write is by trying to discover something new.

And yet one of your critics has said that your poetry is marked by your love and hatred of words and your love and hatred of the experience of communication.
Who was that?

Stephen Koch.

Well, sure, why not? Isn't that true of all of us? We want to communicate and we hate the idea of being forced to. I think it's something that should be noticed.

Can we get back, then, to that central question of what it is you're communicating? My feeling is that in the middle of the difficulty of your poetry there is a very personal element, disguised by this difficulty.

Is that all? I don't quite see what you mean by a very personal element.

Paul Carroll, for example, calls you a sphinx of contemporary poetry. He says that in reading you there's no sense of the man and no sense of feeling. And yet, when I read the poetry I feel there is a personal core that is attempting to come through the syntax and the juxtapositions.

As I told you before, I don't write very much of my experiences except in a way of afterthoughts. For instance, the fact that I actually was in the Atocha Station is not a crucial concern to me or for that poem.

Then what is the crucial concern in your poem?

These are not autobiographical poems, they're not confessional poems. Not only because I don't feel terribly interested by my own experiences
and feelings—I already know all about them—but because I don't think that they'll be of much help to a reader. They're very specific things that happened to me and which don't have any particular exemplary quality. What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes. Something which a reader could dip into and maybe get something out of without knowing anything about me, my history, or sex life, or whatever. The reputation that my poetry has as being something terribly private and difficult to get at is not at all what I hoped for. I'm hoping that maybe someday people will see it this way, as trying to become the openest possible form, something in which anybody can see reflected his own private experiences without them having to be defined or set up for him.

This is going to be a somewhat difficult question.

The others were relatively easy?

If you were to teach your poetry, how would you do it?

I've never done it, but I suppose that the only way to do it would be to go at a particular poem, as we did just now. It seems to be helpful to people to know what was in the poet's mind when he was writing the poem, which is okay. Let's pick a particular poem. I can explain in a lot of cases what thoughts I had that made me write a certain phrase or line. Although I don't think this is important to experiencing the poem, it does seem to help people, give them something to pick up on, hang on to. One can try that for a certain amount of time just
to get the student or reader in the habit of making his own deductions from what's written on the page, which is the didactic purpose, I guess, behind my poetry. But not to come up with a particular solution or equation at the end of the poem. The possibilities should remain as broad as possible.

Would a familiarity with action painters and collages be useful?

These are examples of poetry, or art, which makes itself up as it goes along, which is the subject of any one of my poems—the poem creating itself. The process of writing poetry becomes the poem. This was radically demonstrated by action painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, who set out not knowing where they were going, in a sensible trance, as it were, and created works of art which are themselves the histories of their own coming into being. There was no poetry like this when I began writing. Poetry seemed to be a formal, rational, sensitive way of saying something about some particular thing rather than being an open form. So I say, once again, that I think the relation of my poetry to painting and to modern art, just because I was involved with that kind of art, is perhaps exaggerated. I'm felt to be a flinger of words in the same way that Pollock is considered to be an artist who throws paint without knowing or caring where it is going to land. This view is incorrect in his case, too. But it was that spirit rather than the results of the painting on the wall which was of use to me. It was the experimental, open quality.

In a recent interview, or quasi-interview, Kenneth Koch talks about
much the same kind of feeling. Your work and the work of Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara has been often talked about as a school—the New York School. Do you see any affinity between your work and O'Hara's and Koch's?

Some, yes. But the New York School label was a way of lumping us all together just because we happened to be living in New York for various practical reasons. The differences are greater than the similarities among our work, but what was probably of interest to all of us and the reason that we became friends and therefore were thought of as a "school" was just the experimental quality in what each of us was doing, even though our experiments produced widely different results in each case.

What are the similarities, besides the experimental?

I can think mainly of differences. I think that Frank O'Hara's life was the subject of his poetry in a way that mine isn't. Although many of his poems are about things that happened to him, people that he knew, events he experienced, these were a kind of springboard for getting into something wider, more poetic. Kenneth Koch is at the opposite extreme, I think, because his work is involved much more deeply with just words, which are the end result he's after. Really words, rather than a transcending of them, which is what I have always felt I had to do. I might stand halfway between these two, because I don't feel that words are the end of thought and yet I don't feel that experience has to be transformed by words.
One thing that strikes me in terms of the difference, and what I was driving at a while ago, is what you say in "The Skaters," that there is this "bitter impression of absence," a fundamental absence in the middle of these poems. I would add this: a "peculiar absence," and by peculiar I mean, in your poetry, a lingering sense of loss. Do you agree with that?

Possibly. I would say that a sense of loss is probably there, but also I would say that it's no more important in my poetry than the sense of presence. Much of my poetry comes out of memories of childhood, the feeling of some lost world that can't be recovered. At the same time, I think the present daily world which I happen to be in is what's writing the poem, what's dealing with these experiences of loss. And in fact, if you went ahead to the next line after the one that you just read from "The Skaters," you would find that it says, "Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves presence, but still"--period. That's a typical example, I guess, of my trying to cover my tracks and have it as many ways as possible without committing myself, which I'm very loath to do.

A clear sense of the past does seem to occur in your prose poems, specifically in the book entitled Three Poems. What drew you to writing a prose poem, or to writing three long ones that constitute a book?

The fact that I hadn't done it before. I'm always trying to think of something new to do. In fact I had, a long time ago, written a short prose poem which is in Some Trees. I never did anything about that for a long time afterward because I'd always felt that prose
poetry, at least the prose poetry of Rimbaud or Baudelaire, has a poignant, literary quality just from being prose. I can't quite explain what I mean by that but it seemed to me somewhat artificial, and I guess that's why I didn't go on with it at that time.

In Europe, I found myself getting into the prose which is in The Tennis Court Oath, but, there again, that was a kind of accident because I was using collage materials at a moment when I was rather undecided about what I wanted to do. I would throw in some found objects in pieces of prose just because they happened to be in the newspaper or a magazine that I was using as a pump-priming device while I was writing. So that was not exactly prose poetry. In The Double Dream of Spring there is a prose poem, and there are some other poems which have prose in them. I suppose that without thinking about it I was getting to the point where I was going to try and write prose poetry that would avoid the literary, self-conscious aspect which I don't find appealing generally in prose poetry.

At the same time, the poems in The Double Dream of Spring, which preceded Three Poems, had gotten to a tightness and strictness that bothered me, and I began to feel I'd have to start moving in some other direction because I had become too narrow, even though I liked those poems. And the wonderful thing about writing prose, or so it seemed to me at the time, was that you do away with the lines of poetry. I retained verse passages in the first of the three prose poems, but they are rather peculiar verse. I was hammering away at verse there too, because those are extremely flat lines; they're really like prose arranged in lines of verse. And the tyranny of the
line--where you're going to break it--is something that always bothers me enormously. It's like those painters who are very worried about the "edge" of the painting, something I never can understand when I hear painters talk about it. So what's the big deal about the edge?

Probably my concern for line-breaks is incomprehensible, too, but it's always a major problem. If you break the line in a particular way so that the next part of it arrives at a certain point at the beginning of the line, it can very easily be crucial to the poem; it can make or break the poetic expression. Eventually one gets very impatient about it. This dissolving of the poem, or putting it in a solution throughout the whole page, so that there are some pages in that book where there are no paragraphs or breaks of any kind, was a sudden release for me, one which I found very stimulating.

What is at the core of your Three Poems?

That's a very hard question. Does anybody know what's at the core of their work? I think probably looking for a core is the core.

Do you think that Three Poems is the closest statement of poetics that you've written so far?

What particular passage are you thinking of?

I wasn't thinking of a specific passage. I was thinking of the book as a whole. You've talked about your poems being about the poems, about the poetic process. Three Poems struck me as being the clearest tackling of that particular process, and therefore more of a statement of poetics than the other poems.
That could be. Just the fact that they're so long gets you into a whole new way of writing, I think. It's not something that can be written at one sitting, which is the way I think anybody would prefer to write poetry, to be able to get up from one's desk and say, "Well, that's done, that's a poem." In this case, I'm not able to write for very extended periods of time. It makes my head hurt. I would be able to write just a couple of pages at a time. I would be left with an overwhelming anxiety, not knowing whether I was ever going to be able to finish this thing or what on earth I was going to put in it. I think this was probably good for the poem because it gained dimension just from having been written over a long period of time, a dimension like that of a diary, for instance, which in a way those poems are. They are works being written by a writer who is in a different frame of mind each time he sits down to write. The poem draws a fuller picture of the poet's head than one which is written all at once and is therefore only two-dimensional.

We only have a few minutes. Would you end by reading Three Poems?

I'll read from the end of "The New Spirit," the first of the three:

He thought he had never seen anything quite so beautiful as that crystallization into a mountain of statistics; out of the rapid movement to and fro that abraded individual personalities into a channel of possibilities, remote from each other and even remoter from the eye that tried to contain them: out of that river of humanity comprised of individuals each no better
than he should be and doubtless more solicitous of his own personal welfare than of the general good, a tonal quality detached itself that partook of the motley intense hues of the whole gathering but yet remained itself, firm and all-inclusive, scrupulously fixed equidistant between earth and heaven, as far above the tallest point on the earth's surface as it was beneath the lowest outcropping of cumulus in the cornflower-blue empyrean. Thus everything and everybody were included after all, and any thought that might ever be entertained about them; the irritating drawbacks each possessed along with certain good qualities were dissolved in the enthusiasm of the whole, yet individuality was not lost for all that, but persisted in the definition of the urge to proceed higher and further as well as in the counter-urge to amalgamate into the broadest and widest kind of uniform continuum. The effect was as magnificent as it was unexpected, not even beyond his wildest dreams since he had never had any, content as he had been to let the process reason itself out. "You born today," he could not resist murmuring although there was no one within earshot, "a life of incredulity and magnanimity opens out around you, incredulity at the greatness of your designs and magnanimity that turns back to support these projects as they flag and fail, as inevitably happens. But draw comfort meanwhile from the fact that the planets have congregated to haruspicate at your birth; they can no longer disentangle themselves but are fixed over you, showering down material and immaterial advantages on whoever has the patience to remain immobile for a while, mindless of the efforts of his coevals to better themselves at the expense of humankind in general." Nothing appeared to
give ear to these rantings and again light sank quickly into the low-lying mountains on the horizon like water into pumice stone, as night again erected with exact brilliance the very configurations he had been invoking, so that it might have seemed a sardonic construction put upon his words to anyone who had been there to notice. But the whole of mankind lay stupefied in dreams of toil and drudgery; their miserable condition offered no chance to glimpse how things were proceeding, no inkling that the fatal hour of liberation was advancing swiftly with measured and silent steps.