

## Remarks on the Consequence of Sequence

Simon Smith

In the UK at least, the poetry culture is plagued by the 40-line (or less) lyric, which is designed for consumption and digestion by the poetry competition, a poetry easily rolled around the mouths of the judges. Straight-jacketing lyric poetry in this way, to this form of the short form, limits its reach and engagement with the poetry culture in particular and wider discussions or points of contact. The poem becomes cozy, easy to pigeonhole and dismiss – inconsequential. More dangerously it becomes cut off, locked into small occasions of 'experience,' an irrelevance. Writing a poem-sequence of whatever type or hybrid, can in itself be seen as a political act of simultaneous rejection and rebellion from this consumerist model.

Sequential poetry is antidote to the anecdote.

Sequential poetry might be defined as holding complex thought across and through a period of Time – impossible to achieve through the anecdotal lyric. For this reason alone, as antidote, it is imperative to write the poem sequence.

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The poem sequence should not be mistaken for the serial poem, a subset of the poem sequence, I'm thinking here of the San Francisco Renaissance, most specifically the books of Jack Spicer. Spicer's reaching out to define the serial poem in his second lecture tentatively outlines some of the characteristics of the subgenre. It is to be 'dictated,' derived from elsewhere, 'out there,' to fall into 'books' as the unit of composition, in the case of 'The Holy Grail' poems, seven poems to each 'book' in a series of seven 'books'. The 'books' are not themed but composed chronologically, without 'looking back' Orpheus-like, preferably without redrafting – the poem is to work through its own 'law'. All of these features are to be determined by the poem, or the course of the sequence of the poems in series, and, as far as possible, the poet is to follow this course, to 'listen' out for the poem and its signaled intent. This is far away from the intentionality of the lyrical anecdote, navigating areas of experience the singular lyric (for Spicer, these are 'one night stands') simply cannot contain or hold. Robert Duncan's 'Structure of Rime' from *The Opening of the Field*, and Robin Blaser's 'The Moth Poem' are other examples of this practice. In the case of Duncan's 'The Structure of Rime,' the series is used as a thread through the whole volume – a very different function to the use of the series in Spicer's 'books'.

The important thing in this practice is it has to be tricky – the poet has to be 'tricked into it' – to submit to the design the poem/poem sequence has on the poet, and her/his unconscious processes. (Again, the competition poem is an occasion where the poet has a design on the poem, often by using a traditional form). The

poet needs to have a kind of confidence in the poem, a covenant of trust perhaps, a kind of blindness, or ignorance, a denial of the poet's own processes, except for a sort of keenness of listening or hearing or attunement to what the poem/series wants to say or do. Then submit to it.

The poem has a design on you. It will hunt you down, and it will occur at great personal cost to the poet. Thus Spicer's 'my vocabulary did this to me.'

Definitions of the serial poem necessarily remain open-ended, undecided, vague even, without design.

This is part of the process of the using the 'I' and then losing it. And it cuts the ground from under poetry that ceaselessly returns to wrap itself around a personality' (see Blaser's essay, 'The Practice of Outside,' *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, pp. 271-72), and therefore at odds with the competition poem and its cultivation and celebration of the poet as personality or celebrity.

#### I AM NOT IN COMPETITION WITH OTHER POETS

The poem sequence refuses this form of exchange, because of its engagement with the World, and the space it creates for interaction. The points of reference are diverse, multiple, and diversify: they multiply, they don't shut down, they open out and away.

The two books of my own that arguably follow some kind of identifiable serial process are *Reverdy Road* (2003) and *Mercury* (2006). A major strand in each book is in dialogue with the poetry of Jack Spicer and the processes of the trickster, the precipitous forward direction of the poem series.

The trick is: don't look. Cheat.

Look down and you will fall, like the coyote in *Roadrunner*.

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The serial poem, as channeled through the San Francisco Renaissance is sketched out above. There are other types of poem sequences. Broadly:

Journal Poem: Paul Blackburn, Joanne Kyger

Long Poem: Bunting, Niedecker

Place Poetry: W.C. Williams, Sinclair, Allen Fisher, Roy Fisher

Epic: Pound, Zukofsky

Sonnet: Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer, Tim Atkins

Translations: Atkins, Hughes

These are the first things that come my mind. First thoughts. There are many others.

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The sequence: an expandable and collapsible string bag of a thing.

The sequence needs to teach you something you didn't know already, and is completely *useless*. It won't be of any use in writing the next poem (sequence).

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None of what I'm saying can be considered objective. It is partial, of this moment, shifting, contingent.

Nothing is final. Running away from, beyond understanding or comprehension.

Unfathomable.

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I see shapes.

They present as blanks, as templates. I can see the shape and scale of the poem sequence (or project), but not the details. Yet.

I have no sense of where this will lead, or which direction the sequence will take. Always slightly out of reach. Always.

Trusted. To be believed in. That crux, the unaccountable.

To find the poem sequence's direction (brought to account) means it has to be abandoned. The poem will lead you where you don't know. Trust the risk of the poem, across the ouija board of language.

But the poem will lead. Past shapes, through spaces, over landscapes. The poem is the map to the topography, extending out, across, out of sight.

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#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DO THIS?

The sequence starts out as a *procedure*: it is procedural as much as sequential.

The procedure can be spread over years – some procedures are not followed up, but remain incomplete.

This procedure is of no use to the next procedure. You start the next procedure with no knowledge. One form of composition does not inform the next. There is nothing to learn, there is nothing to be learnt from one procedure to the next.

The sequence is written in order to answer the question: 'What will happen if I do this?'

'Unfelt' – if I take a highly emotionally charged text – the love letters of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning – how can I drain the emotion from language by removing context?

<http://www.manifold.group.shef.ac.uk/issue11/SimonSmith11.html>

'Gravesend' – if I regularly take a train from Charing Cross to Chatham, and record, camera-like, everything that happens there and back without getting up from my seat, and name each poem after every station along the route . . . .

'11781 W. Sunset Boulevard' – if I fly from London Heathrow to L.A. International Airport to take care of a sick wife for two weeks, without a car or laptop or books and write a poem a day . . . . Repeat the procedure for the poems in *Day In Day Out* . . . .

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#### SEQUENCE AS PROCEDURE

The poem sequence is a mapping of the unconsciousness process, composition as process.

The sequence is a record of the playing out of that process – but it doesn't define sequence, only the specific, singular play out of that process. It is particular. Then find a new procedure, a new architecture. Harp on.

Sequence is a mapping of surface connection dragging the sea-bed to present as strands or pathways.

Each sequence contradicts (challenges at least) all the other sequences that have occurred before (or will occur after). The achievement of the sequence is to cancel out other sequences, crossings out.

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Out of the corner of my eye. Grit in the oyster.

Vibrating verbatim.

The innocence of watching a passing cloud, life support system.

To not know where I am going, or how to fill the blanks.

The countability of unaccountability.

You know I've said something that can't be trusted. I'm a lyre.

Call and respond.