

Floyd Skloot

Out of Time: Reflections on the Long Poem

Poets make long poems to contain what they have learned and to set the parts of their knowledge in order.

—Donald Hall, “Text as Test”

On the morning of December 7, 1988, I woke up sick in a hotel room across the street from The White House. I’ve been sick ever since — five years now. Probably The White House, which Ronald Reagan was about to leave for George Bush, had nothing to do with it.

At the time I thought I had a flu to the fifth power. It also occurred to me that I might be changing species because I could smell the odors of everyone who had ever stayed in that hotel room, could hear the snow that would begin falling later that day, and could taste in the room’s air a spice I had never heard of or tasted before, something I believed was called *frumiac*. At the age of forty-one, having run my fastest marathon three months earlier, training to win a second age-group ribbon back home in the Oregon Road Runners Club 10K championships, I knew perfectly well what to do: ignore how I felt and work a little harder. Go out and run a couple laps around the Mall. Except I could not lift back the bedcovers, which had become so heavy that I suddenly understood I’d been transported overnight to the surface of Mars.

It would be six months before I could read something more complex than *People Magazine*, a year before I could write anything coherent again, two years before I could sit erect in an auditorium long enough to hear a symphony, three years before I could walk for thirty minutes at a time. I still can’t do math reliably, or spell as I once spelled, or get through a day without a long sleep and several periods of complete inactivity.

I was in there the whole time; I was experiencing and sensing and feeling — eventually even thinking — but all I could do was store things up. It was a kind of enforced accumulation of knowing, and when I began to write again, a few minutes a day on a good day, it no longer seemed possible to write as I had written before.

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In the fall of 1915, without money to support the continuation of her New York art studies, Georgia O'Keeffe impulsively agreed to teach at Columbia College in South Carolina. I like to imagine the scene. This was the year Margaret Sanger was jailed for writing the first book on birth control; the nation's idea of femininity had a lot to do with Theda Bara and those feline, titillating moves known as vamping which she first revealed in the 1915 film *A Fool There Was*. At the time, Columbia College, just outside the state capital, was essentially a Methodist-operated finishing school. Georgia O'Keeffe was twenty-eight, unknown, had not yet exhibited her work in public. But she was already a radical artist, a highly independent woman, in turmoil about her art, her relationships, and her sexuality. She was just beginning to paint flowers in the characteristic O'Keeffe manner, and earlier that year was stirred by having read *Women as World Builders*, a popular study of feminism by Floyd Dell which affirmed her own feelings that "the woman who finds her work will find her love."

Of course O'Keeffe felt terribly out of place and alienated at Columbia College. Columbia was not unlike Amarillo, Texas, where she had hidden herself for two years beginning in 1912, or New Mexico, where she spent most of her life after 1929 — isolated, remote, almost outside of time. Which was just what she needed in order to achieve major advances in her work. She wrote from South Carolina to her friend Anita Pollitzer back in New York, saying she was uncovering "things in my head that are not like what anyone has taught me — shapes and ideas so near to me — so natural to my way of being."

During the Thanksgiving holiday in 1915, O'Keeffe was visited at Columbia by Arthur Macmahon. The two had met and grown close the summer before in Virginia, where the O'Keeffes had a rooming house in Charlottesville and where she could attend summer school at the university. In his 1992 biography *O'Keeffe: The Life of an American Legend*, Jeffrey Hogrefe, who apparently knows every detail about the

sexual encounters in her life, reveals that O'Keeffe and Macmahon were lovers for the first time during this visit. Shortly after Macmahon left she had a breakthrough in her work. "She had found her talent: an ability to interpret psycho-sexual landscape in a way with which millions of other people could identify." Hogrefe says that O'Keeffe "recorded her impressions as a clairvoyant receives messages from the other world. The act was as spontaneous as it was frightening: there on the paper was her soul in a horrific mass of lines and forms." Coming into her true subject matter and form in these 1915 drawings, O'Keeffe wrote to Poltizer: "Did you ever have something to say and feel as if the whole side of the wall wouldn't be big enough to say it on?"

This episode moves me deeply. You never know where your breakthrough is going to come from, or what will make it necessary for you to work on a much larger scale than before. But I've come to believe it has much to do with isolation and removal, with a break from time and from customary life. Like living in the hinterlands, like the sudden incursion of passion, chronic illness certainly provides such a break, a place where you are lost out of time, where your life is interrupted and you are turned inward deeply.

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Doctors think the original viral infection that I had in Washington, D.C., an infection which probably targeted my brain, triggered an immune system cascade that my brain has never been able to turn off. Since the end of 1988, my immune system has been in overdrive, the way an immune system acts when a person is fighting off a virus, even though that original virus may no longer be active in my body. So I am constantly spilling toxic material into my own bloodstream, polluting the environment of my self like a sabotaged industrial plant. At the same time, certain immune system cells — my natural killer cells — are weakened and less effective. Old viruses that were dormant in me for years have been reactivated and my system teems with them. Scientists at their benches in a Maryland laboratory grow them in cultures, using them for research into the causes of the disease.

There are lesions on my brain, anatomical holes visible as white dots in Magnetic Resonance Imaging pictures, and it's difficult not to see these as lesions in my *self*. My balance, my long- and short-term memory, abstract reasoning, concentration, coordination are shot. I've trained

myself to look away from people periodically when I talk to them because their physical responses cause me to forget what I'm saying. I don't drive. Recently I watched a muscle-toning videotape with my wife, Beverly, trying to mimic the minimal exercises being shown — we're not talking frantic aerobics here — listening to instructions offered over light background music while a half dozen figures facing me on the screen twisted and flexed in the direction opposite to the one being suggested by the leader. I was unable to move, though Beverly floated through the routine without a hitch. I will put newspapers in the refrigerator instead of the recycling sack and will walk smack into walls I can see in front of my eyes. The pupils of my eyes don't dilate and contract properly, so being in bright light is painful. The *flight or fight* response is screwed up; my body handles any kind of stress inappropriately, failing to release the right level of hormones along its pituitary-adrenal axis. Seeing a tense movie can make my lymph nodes swell and my hips ache. My autonomic nervous system is affected, which means among other things that I have trouble regulating body temperature, remembering to breathe, digesting.

In conversation, and in the initial stages of composition when I write, I often cannot locate words that are in my vocabulary. Consequently there are either lengthy pauses while I search for a word or I become a walking encyclopedia of malapropisms, given to calling "curtains" "windshields" and Christmas "stocking stuffers" "pot stickers." I say I'll broadcast the oat bran cereal instead of microwave it, or validate the film instead of develop it. Close, but wrong, as though my brain had been hotwired by Norm Crosby. "Cross the bristle" might be one of my typical requests over the dinner table.

This is not the way I used to be.

As a writer, I've been changed utterly by illness. On my best days, I can work for two hours, total. It can take six months to produce what once took a week. Though I've used my computer and WordPerfect software for a decade, there's no telling what I may do when I reach for the function keys, which adds a new wrinkle to the idea of venturing into the unknown with one's writing. I can no longer approach my material — a poem, an essay, a story, certainly nothing as ambitious as a novel — with a meaningful overview. Instead, I must work from bits and pieces, first finding *whether* and then finding *how* things I'm working with fit together. Composition has become much more a matter of patience, of waiting and yielding the will. It's as though the very impulse to write has altered and, in many ways, the idea of what a poem is has

changed. While there is still the desire to capture moments of intense emotion, to explore a specific memory or sensation, there is more often the realization that I need to keep the poem open, that more is contained within what I might perceive as the moment. I keep hearing a sentence from Ezra Pound's *Canto II* echoing and falling back over itself: "I have seen what I have seen." It has come to mean for me more than simply "I've witnessed a lot." It also means "I have examined the things I witnessed and learned from them."

Finding form for a piece of work has become an obsession because I can no longer justify having assumptions about how things cohere. Though some of my poems may still rhyme or have traditional structure, and some may tell a story, there are often fractures within that structure and the shapes feel very fluid to me, inclusive rather than exclusive. The idea of resonant conclusions, of wrapping up, is growing more strange to me. I like to let the process of composition go on a little longer, to add things, to reroute. In some ways, I don't recognize my writing any more. I am reminded of how it felt, during the one week in the past twenty-four years that I had my beard shaved off, not to recognize the reflection I saw in windows and mirrors as I passed by.

Perhaps even more significant has been the way illness has changed my relationship to time. For the last five years, I have lived out of time almost entirely. Especially in the early years of my illness, it was nothing for me to sleep all day and be awake all night. The only reason it mattered for me to know what time or what day it was was if I had a doctor's appointment, or if someone was coming to visit over his or her lunch hour. Because I am disabled and cannot work, my days and weeks have a shape that does not adhere to the traditional work day or week. I cannot ignore how my body feels, or my level of exhaustion, and so might nap twice a day — at ten and again at two — for two hours at a time. As Kathy Charmaz points out in her book *Good Days Bad Days: The Self in Chronic Illness and Time*, "If someone does not improve, things look and feel quite differently. The slowing of time continues. Chronology blurs."

Strangely enough, I've come to see my disjunction with the traditional concept of time as liberating and vital to what little writing I can do. I've also come to see it as a metaphor for the mindset that permits the writing of long poems. Charmaz notes that "Losing the regularity of clock-time can allow for greater depth of thought." This is more than a fancy way of putting the old cliché that illness gives you a chance to reassess your priorities. Charmaz reports the case of a chronically ill

patient for whom “being immersed in a stretched-out duration of illness had permitted her unexpected spiritual discovery and development” and concludes that “as illness continues, most people lose ways of shaping and giving meaning to their days.” The same idea is raised by Dr. Oliver Sacks in his remarkable book, *Without a Leg to Stand On*, which concerns his experience of becoming a patient after sustaining a severe leg injury: “I have since had a deeper sense of the horror and wonder which lurk behind life and which are concealed, as it were, behind the usual surface of health.”

I’m not saying that you have to be sick to write a long poem, though the thought did occur to me ten pages into one poem I wrote about a group of young hikers lost during a storm on Oregon’s Mt. Hood. Without wanting to overstate the case, I’d like to suggest that when poets turn away from the traditional, timebound, short lyric toward the longer dramatic or narrative poem, something similar goes on with respect to time, to discovery, to ways of shaping and giving meaning to experience. New ways of shaping and giving meaning to material develop. Things open up which are concealed behind the usual surface of the shorter poem.

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Valery said that poetry is to prose as dancing is to walking. Before getting sick, I might have used this analogy to further suggest that the long poem is to the lyric as a marathon is to a sprint.

In the marathon, as I recall, you don’t simply find a comfortable pace and settle into it for the duration. The race is filled with discrete challenges you must plan for and adjust to — changes in terrain, changes in wind direction or intensity, the buildup of heat, the problem of taking nourishment or the moment of remarkable discomfort when your body stops burning carbohydrates and switches to burning fats. The graph of effort does not map evenly; the marathon’s rhythm is not steady. As a 26.2 mile race, it may have a beginning, middle (at 13.1 miles) and end structurally, but it has another rhythm entirely within that structure. It’s quite common to hear runners say the middle of a marathon occurs at the twentieth mile. I remember the marathon as a very inclusive event in which a runner monitors everything that’s going on inside and out. Except perhaps for the elite runner or the runner on a mission, the successful marathon occurs outside time, in a dimension where to finish well you heed the requirements of your whole system — body and mind

— despite time. A sprint, however, is a sustained explosion of effort. To be successful, it will be sustained at the maximum level possible from start to finish. Focused and exclusive, ignoring everything extraneous to the moment, it is all about time, about forgetting the body and controlling the mind long enough to finish fast.

Since getting sick, I would make a different analogy, one that now feels a bit more accurate. The long poem is to the lyric as lengthy illnesses such as Multiple Sclerosis, Lupus, Rheumatoid Arthritis or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome are to the flu. Lengthy illness isolates people, turns them inward, makes them reconsider identity. As Kathy Charmaz suggests in her writings about the self in chronic illness and time, “ill people wonder where illness will take them and ask who they can be during their odyssey.” Illness not only gives them the context but eventually demands that they do such wondering. I’m glad she used the word *odyssey* because that sense of extended journey is important to understanding the illness experience as well as the ways in which it approximates the experience of writing a long poem. It’s also the title of a fine long poem itself.

Illness conflates time. The past with its memories and the future with its altered imaginings mingle with present sensations and experience to create the sort of gumbo that is both the heart of wonder and the perfect culture in which a long poem can grow.

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In 1969 and 1970, when I was twenty-two, I studied with the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella. He had begun teaching at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale four years earlier. I moved there from New York, arriving in the fall, that time of year Kinsella later described in a memorable stanza:

The lake water lifted a little and fell
doped and dreamy in the late heat.
The air at lung temperature — like the end of the world:
a butterfly panted with dull scarlet wings
on the mud by the reeds, the tracks
of small animals softening along the edge,
a child’s foot-prints, out too far . . .

I should have been prepared for strangeness.

Kinsella's reputation had been built on tight, elegant lyrics such as "Another September," "Fifth Sunday After Easter," "The Secret Garden," or that harrowing twelve-line thriller of mist and loss called "Tara." He wrote short, self-focused poems that were above all orderly and accomplished, often exquisite ("April's sweet hand in the margins betrayed / Her character in late cursive daffodils; / A gauche mark, but beautiful: a maid."). They showed a poet stark naked in the glen of his suffering and I loved them. Although one poem, "Baggot Street Deserta," stretched for eighty lines — a rigorously focused, late night meditation on the act of writing — virtually everything else was compact and bursting with what the critic Calvin Bedient has called "subdued but unrelenting power."

The marvelous anthology piece "Mirror in February" was my favorite Kinsella poem, with its vivid first stanza showing the poet doing just what I thought a poet ought to do, look at himself:

The day dawns with scent of must and rain,
Of opened soil, dark trees, dry bedroom air.
Under the fading lamp, half dressed — my brain
Idling on some compulsive fantasy —
I towel my shaven lip and stop, and stare,
Riveted by a dark exhausted eye,
A dry downturning mouth.

I wanted to write like this, which is why I went to study with him. But Kinsella didn't want to write like this. Not any more.

He had just published a collection in America called *Nightwalker and Other Poems*, which included both the 400-line title poem and the 225-line "Phoenix Park," along with a 161-line poem called "The Shoals Returning," a 134-line poem called "A Country Walk," and "Downstream," which was only 83 lines long. I was out of the country when this book appeared and didn't know it existed. Almost nothing rhymed anymore. Most of the poems were less *arranged*, more open. They were interior to the point of being almost subterranean, yet they included more of the outside world than ever before. Even "Phoenix Park," with its rigidly controlled eleven-syllable lines and five-line stanzas, was bulky with external matters, weird associational leaps, departures both literal and figurative. Things welled up and demanded to be included in poems that would have ruled them out before. History, politics, literary reference. The poems teemed.

I didn't know what hit me. When I met with him, we would talk about such poems as D.H. Lawrence's "Autumn at Taos," Robert Creeley's "The Finger" or Austin Clarke's "Ancient Lights" and Kinsella would praise them in ways that suggested he actually liked such works. Man, not only didn't they rhyme, they weren't tight; they *leaked*.

Kinsella was moving toward a poetry in which, he has said, nothing should come between the poet and his material, between the things perceived and the perceiving self. No inherited forms, no imposed structure, no real endings or beginnings. "I have never seen," Kinsella said in a 1986 interview with John F. Deane, editor of Dublin's Dedalus Press, "why a poem need end absolutely with its final line. It can lie in wait, with the dynamics available." I heard him say something similar in 1969 and thought, Maybe it's not too late to transfer. I'm glad I stayed.

Those ten- and fifteen-page poems Kinsella wrote at mid-career were to look like short ones compared with the book-length sequences such as *Notes from the Land of the Dead* and *One*, or twenty-five- and thirty-page poems like *St. Catherine's Clock* and *A Technical Supplement* that he was to write over the next quarter century. Like Ezra Pound, Kinsella has in many ways been writing one long, ongoing poem since 1965 or so, an exploration of "how the whole thing works."

Kinsella was forty-one when I met him, the same age I was when I got sick. He was in self-imposed exile after a twenty-year civil service career in Ireland's Ministry of Finance, living outside the framework of his entire previous adult life, and clearly on a journey. He was turning his back on everything that had brought his work acclaim. He was rejecting the imposition or order. Instead, as he later said, "I believe the significant work begins in eliciting order from actuality." He also has commented that "It is out of ourselves and our wills that the chaos came, and out of ourselves that some order will have to be constructed." For Kinsella, this meant abandoning such traditional ordering devices as meter and rhyme, then narrative, eventually even rejecting beginnings and endings. Everything came from within; nothing was imposed between the poet and his material. Sitting at his desk, pen in hand: "The key, though I hardly knew it, / already in my fist. / Falling. Mind darkening. / Toward a ring of mouths. / Flushed. / Time, distance, / meaning nothing. / No matter."

It must also be noted that this was 1969-70, a time of great turmoil and tearing down of existing structures. Kinsella was hardly the only poet born in the late Twenties, coming to full maturity in the late Sixties,

who rejected traditional forms and turned inward. But he was virtually the only one to turn almost exclusively to the long poem for his exploration of all he knows, all he is, all he comes from.

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In his essay "The Poetic Principle," Edgar Allan Poe declared, "I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase 'a long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms."

Poe believed that it was impossible to write a long poem. As he said in another essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," he thought that any composition masquerading as a long poem was in truth "merely a succession of brief ones," a string of intense poetical effects held together by prose — by narrative or meditation or characterization — even if the prose happened to look like poetry. *Paradise Lost*? "At least one half prose."

His logic was clear enough: Poe thought that a poem was a poem "only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul." Since through physical necessity intense excitements are always brief, he felt it was literally impossible to sustain such writing for long.

Poor guy. Of course, we in the late twentieth century know that intense excitement can be sustained for great lengths of time. The Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner Richard Rhodes recently published a book called *Making Love: An Erotic Odyssey*, in which he devotes an entire chapter to research on extending sexual orgasm ("would you believe four hours?"). It is fun to imagine how Poe, who wrote "Annabel Lee" about "this maiden there lived with no other thought / Than to love and be loved by me," would react to four-hour orgasms. We also know about the endorphin high brought on by long distance running, a level of pleasure that can sustain an exhausted marathoner through an hour or more of performance. Or consider meditation. Certainly one purpose of meditation is to extend the intense moments of stillness, those initially brief flashes which eventually can be made to last for great periods of time. According to Sogyal Rinpoche in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, "you will discover for yourself that there is a gap between each thought. When the past thought is past,

and the future thought not yet arisen, you will always find a gap in which the *Rigpa*, the nature of mind, is revealed. So the work of meditation is to allow thoughts to slow down, to make that gap become more and more apparent."

It might be simple to dismiss Poe's contention that a long poem is a contradiction in terms by saying that his definition of a poem is too limited. Or to say that if a long poem doesn't sustain a high level of excitement, so what? Why must we bring the critical criteria by which we judge short poems to bear on long ones? But I also think Poe's notion of the boundaries of intense excitement is suspect. At any rate, his point is essentially structural — he believes the connective tissue holding together a long poem's more highly charged moments dissipate that charge. It is not clear why they cannot work as well to intensify each subsequent charge, building the poem to an overall greater level of power the way some lovers vary their rhythm or use other techniques to delay climax. Or why the connective components of a long poem cannot offer a different kind of quickening, like an *Adagio* in a symphony.

Perhaps Poe's opinions were colored by his personal situation — the wretched childhood, his parents' and wife's early deaths, his health, his failures and penury and grief — which was hardly conducive to sustained work. Perhaps it was colored by his peculiar blend of romantic nihilism. At any rate, he wrote only fifty poems or so, devoting most of his literary energies to money-making stories or journalistic efforts, and neither his material nor his approach to it invited the kind of breadth that justifies a longer poem.

However, not only is the long poem possible, I believe it is unavoidable for certain material or certain frames of mind. It was clearly impossible for Ezra Pound, who believed he knew everything and saw how everything connected, to consider writing shorter poems once he found himself at work on his *Cantos*. To understand the long poem as merely a succession of intense poetical effects is to misunderstand the impulse to gather and make sense of the world that distinguishes such work from its shorter, more lyrical kin.

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In conclusion, I would like to consider two pieces composed by Franz Schubert. In 1817, when Schubert was twenty, he composed *Die Forelle*.

This small song was based on a poem about a trout swimming in a clear stream, written by Christian Daniel Schubart. The trout, whimsical and capricious (“launische”), is able to avoid being caught until the fisherman bewilders him by muddying the water.

Schubert entirely omitted the poem’s conclusion, a stern moral which warned young women to avoid the seducer with his fishing rod (“Verführer mit der Angel”). Instead, he concluded his song simply with the catching of the trout. He was after charm and whimsy, not moral lessons. And the song’s brief format was not intended to extend consideration beyond the moment between fish and angler; there was no room in it for the author and his commentary.

Two years later Schubert used his trout song in the fourth movement of his brilliant Piano Quintet in A, also known as “The Trout Quintet.” Here his original whimsical tune is used as the subject of a seven-and-a-half-minute set of variations that is itself part of a much longer whole. The old theme and its new variations, which are at the heart of Schubert’s Quintet, led him to produce an extended piece that not only captures the original’s melodious radiance and warmth, but enriches it vastly. Now there is room for more than the encounter between fish and angler. In the amplitude of a longer work, there is sweetness, to be sure, loving duets in the strings, gently flowing passages for the piano, frolicsome melodies. But there is also moroseness, hectic interludes, sudden shifts in character that shatter the calm. There is danger, a sense of the way caprice doesn’t only suggest whimsy but also suggests the arbitrary power of the unknown, perhaps of a capricious God, though the music’s delightfulness always seems to assert itself again.

I love both *Die Forelle* and the Piano Quintet in A. I listen to both, in different moods, and return to both for enrichment. Of course, I can appreciate the argument that music can do what poetry cannot, can accommodate the longer work in ways that poetry does not. But I don’t buy it.

The long poem thrives today, despite the critical commonplace that says it is in trouble. Perhaps in our fragmented, alienated world, it must thrive for us to find connections, to assert order. My poetry library here in my small writing room — even after having moved three times since 1990, even after The Great Book Giveaway of 1991 — is packed with

contemporary long poems in journals, individual collections and anthologies. Ai, John Ashbery, Neal Bowers, Carolyn Forché, Dana Gioia, Patricia Goedicke, Albert Goldbarth, Jorie Graham, Donald Hall, Seamus Heaney, Lynda Hull, Mark Jarman, Thomas Kinsella, Kenneth Koch, J.D. McClatchy, Robert McDowell, Gary Miranda, John Montague, Robert Pinsky, Dave Smith, Charles Wright. Even Floyd Skloot.