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Neil Baldwin

neilbaldwin032@gmail.com

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Commentary

Seven Steps of Poesis

Neil Baldwin, PhD¹

Introduction

This text responds to a request from Ashwin Vaidya, co-editor of LASER, in the spirit of his journal's mission, "to explore links between science and art." I have published ten volumes of nonfiction – biography, history, essays and cultural studies – and two collections of poetry and translation over the past five decades. And I was founding director of The (virtual, interdisciplinary) Creative Research Center [1] at Montclair State University from 2010-2020. This is my first attempt to write systematically and analytically about the phases, stages and challenges of generating and structuring a full-length monograph, peering downward from a thirty-thousand foot point of view; free to observe through-lines, habits and trends, without referencing any of my books by name, observing self-imposed strictures of order in service to the completed written work. In other words – if, indeed, other words are required – this essay is informed by the collisions of imagination and rigor that characterize my refreshingly-acknowledged hypothesized view of science and my experiential view of art.

1 The Precursors

Fifteen years ago, before launching my recently-completed book project, I had been thinking about writing a biography of the imagination – a concept that captivated me since adolescence. How intriguing it would be to track back to the magical origins of that enriching component of the human condition, to antiquity and before, and to account for its morphing and development over centuries. Fortunately, for me - and others - I never got around to it; instead, I grew to appreciate my particular personal imagination as I grew older – my inexhaustible compulsion to come up with new and different ideas, in the classroom, in my family, among friends, in daily life and work. I liked delving into the archaeological site of my mind, pencil and notebook at hand, transcribing ruminations, mostly mornings, for as long as I felt as if there were something there. I hacked my way across a boundless field of head-high weeds toward

¹neilbaldwin032@gmail.com. Poet, biographer, and emeritus professor in the College of the Arts, Montclair State University, USA. Website: www.neilbaldwinbooks.com

an undefined destination, creating a path step by step, with what felt like strict intentionality. Notions that arose were duly accounted for, as if in a ledger, one by one. Kernels dropped into view when least expected (because there were no explicit expectations), and I circled and underlined them on the page without urgency or agenda... at least, not consciously. Eventually, at varying times depending upon the day, my mood, and/or my health, my imagination-machine would slow down of its own accord and I put my pencil aside until the next time.

2 The Idea

In retrospect, gazing at all of my books lined up on the shelf and recalling when and how each one was hatched, there came what we conventionally call an idea... as in, when people often ask me, "how do you know what you're going to write about next"... and, as in, "where do you get your ideas?" I emphasize that little word, "get," because, for me, the idea, when articulated, is not so much acquired from Nature at large as decided upon, in an epiphanic way, converging from a prior pattern of small streams running in parallel, within my handwritten discourse, that meld into view by virtue of repetitiveness over a period of weeks, months, or even years of continuous trust in the routine of setting-down words without trying, that would lead to an end that was The Beginning. Ongoing observations of quotidian people and events – the signs I elicited from the World – come about via my weeding out, making choices. In that regard, I re-emphasize: the idea has a jolt of decision at its core, because, contingent upon the idea for a book is the writer's understanding of and commitment to the ensuing long labor in solitude. When the idea is resolved, it brings with it my visual conceptualization of the situation/s and dramas in my current life, where and how, and with whom, I am working, how much attention must be paid to loved ones. I know, all too well, that my internal ecosystem when the idea is seized upon – the metabolic environment – will have a different, most likely diminished valence at the other end, with the fulfillment of the work.

3 The Omnivorous

The adjective doubles as a noun; it is what I – Neil Baldwin, author – become, once the idea is situated. How does my atomized self get reconfigured? First, I take possession of my work-ethic. In full flower, re-search emphasizes both syllables. I – ubiquitous – must see all, read all that has been written about my subject-choice, go everywhere, talk to/interview every contingent person, visit every repository, open every archival folder no matter how slender, investigate and substantiate every citation, no matter how arcane. I have to "contain multitudes," becoming a cornucopia with a gaping aperture. And this set of imperatives does not gestate; rather, it springs into existence right away, fully-formed, with an instant influence upon my lifestyle: I rise before the sun and read on into the darkness, consult train schedules, plan days and overnights

and long weekends, decline invitations, pack up books, update laptops, confirm that photography is permitted before entering the reading room or art gallery, be grateful for what is available in the library stacks, and likewise stoically accept what is not. In order to thrive and succeed, *The Omnivorous* must be dutifully fueled and toned. It requires naps, hydration, knowing when to amp up with coffee or wind down with herbal tea, when to stay still, unmoving, or get up and walk around. Its sustainability requires conscientious monitoring of capacity – when to keep seeking and when to stop for the day. It requires behavior modification, when to turn on or off, to stay with the conversation and listen, or leave the room and be quiet. *The Omnivorous* needs a brisk, long walk that encourages deep breathing and oxygenation just as it needs to be reassured it/you haven't been overextended by rushing through the documentation, in whatever form – analog or virtual, proximate or remote, intimate or abstract.

4 The Output

As the material out there in and from the World, the Book of Nature, is encountered, observed, absorbed and understood to the best of my authorial ability, and, as I am making my way, acknowledging what I have learned, I begin to notate. I generate foundational texts of various kinds, tentative and fragmentary at first, impressionistic, raw and jotted-down, produced without heed to being “well-written.” There will be, for example, yellow post-its stuck to the top of pages in books to mark a significant place; marginal pencil comments and self-alerts, reminding me to circle back and penetrate more deeply from surface to substrate (re-search, again) or observe a nascent trope that may turn out to be false as time goes by. These pages will be photographed, their images printed out and retained. Then there will be photocopies of pages from other books, referenced but not owned, and highlighted printouts of essays by other scholars that catch my attention and could be contributory to my overall scope. There will be hard-copy transcripts of interviews. There will be sorties and stabs at paragraphs not necessarily “for” the final book, put up on the screen in a different font to provide a (provisional) spatial image of what my words will look like much later on – the shape of content. There will be typed journalistic pages, as distinct from the by-hand journal, when I embark upon lengthy free-associative responses to prompts caused by something read or someone met. The typed journalistic entries run on, single-spaced, for as long and dense as need be. Many of them may never advance further, alas, never become revised or sharpened to find a home in the work itself, but I would never throw out or delete them. Because such discursive – not superfluous – outputs are vital to the book's tone (my voice); and stance.

5 The Distributed Structure

The structure invariably overlaps with the Output once accumulated documents of content achieve a critical mass obligating me to allocate them, i.e., deal them out, albeit temporarily, to sections in the story insofar as I have planned their locations. This placement-dynamic is intuitive. There is an outset, an introductory, beginning, ascent of the tale, peak time(s), denouement, conclusion (or conclusive). The need for basic structure has been previously met because there will have been a broadly-spaced, permeable outline emerging from The Idea. The outline branching out from the idea will take digital form, as temporarily-numbered “chapters” or word documents; however, more appealing to me, even in this third decade of the twenty-first century, are the racked-upright and labeled manila folders into which sheets and images of Output can be inserted from time to time. I try to distribute Outputs into these sequential structural holding-places as soon as the possibility of a placement feels right to me, with the tacit understanding that outputs will be moved around in response to the thickening of the story: for example, introducing a character or a place retroactively when it becomes evident that while I may have alighted upon them, or it, deeper into the research, in fact (this is, remember, nonfiction) their true entrance had been earlier. The Distributed ingredient of the Structure has become more preponderant as I write more books, have learned the errors of my ways, and cannot tolerate pre-emptiveness. It further occurs to me that the major reason Distributed Structure has become more fluid and useful on the micro level is the technology of word processing, which allows us to jump back and forth and up and down and seamlessly insert words and sentences and whole tranches of text: to build out from within. I have the basis for comparison with manual typewriting as it existed before keystroke inputting, when I learned how to touch-type sixty-five years ago and retain the muscle-memory of what it felt like to have to go back and cut and paste and white-out in a manuscript; which, circularly, helps explain while I still buy boxes of analog folders for the embodied aspect of The Distributed Structure.

6 The Real Writing

This is what I call the composition that occurs during the disposition of words explicitly and intentionally for the book in contradistinction to the other kinds of writing that take place in phases I-V above. When I am in my writing, that is what it feels like. I am slowed down. I am concentrated, lucid, settled in place, and calm and patient with myself, pleased by the succession of words, aware that I do not doubt what is happening between initiative-mind and travelling-fingertips. I have achieved familiarity with the material, lived with it, respect its freshness. I think linearly. I move from A to B to C, smiling from time to time as I affirm that poesis is my mode, language being made. I have conjured up the latent faith in my ability to master the tools with which to express myself. There is faith, furthermore, in the rhythm of sentences, varying lengths and duration and avoiding redundancy. I formulate thoughts with the correct

amount of imaginative assets allocated to each, because I don't want to get preemptively fatigued. When I am in this real writing I do not have or need a quota for each day. The only goal I pose when I begin the real writing is that I attain a point of contentment (the varied emphases upon the first two syllables is important – content and content) and also the conviction that I will set this writing aside with an open mind and heart, to return first thing the next morning, accepting revision, emendation, and, most importantly, trimming and excising.

7 The Publication

Finishing a book is a necessary illusion. Yes, there has to be a thing that is at hand, that can be held: Pages are gathered to convey legibility; it is, literally, bound. A story has been told and the reader expects that familiar arrival and presentation. The book is published, i.e., made public, available, accessible, commodified to stand on its own. But: I, the author, am in a different position than the reader for whom I have produced the thing (after having produced it for myself). When I regard the book, the farther away the publication date recedes, the less empathy I feel toward it. I start to reflect upon what is not in it that should have been. This improvisational train of thought takes on a life of its own with open-ended variants. I tell myself to pull back from the internal monologue. I admonish myself by remembering how every time I return to a museum to take another look at an alluringly favorite painting, itself bound within its frame, I see something that was not there before, to use a conventional phrase, likewise an illusion, because “what was not there before” is not a new brush stroke. It has been devised in the lacunae-averse laboratory of my mind.

References

- [1] The Creative Research Center, Montclair State University www.montclair.edu/creativeresearch.