John Taggart

from Chicago Breakdown

Breakdown: an act of analysis and an act of improvisation, a cadenza. These are journal notes written in the wake of a new long poem *When The Saints* and in anticipation of what comes next, the poems that may follow that poem.

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To begin at the beginning, at the beginning of the end:

> The subject was roses the problem is memory
> in the end the problem is a song
> the problem a problema a problem to find
> to find as in to extract from
> extraction of a new song from what is in memory

Opposition of subject and problem, opposition of tenses. To have a subject is to have a poem, already to have a poem & perhaps to be had by a poem. To be subject to a poem, a poem's subject.

Subject = past tense, the past that may control the present. Certain words, the choice of certain words, certain words having been chosen. Certain words and their combinations. Having been chosen, these go on choosing themselves, themselves or their close relatives. Egyptian, dynastic, incestuous. The poem as pyramid text, book of the dead. What comes forth by day is the dead/not dead pharoah commanding his subjects.

Was that a real poem, or did you just make it up? Are you a real poet? Are you a real poet if you don't know your subject from the beginning? Are you a real poet if I—your reader, your audience—don't know your subject from the beginning? If I don't know "what you're trying to say" from the beginning? Real poet = dead poet. Conduct me, nymphs & muses nine, to the dead poets society. To Elysium, which is Egypt.

Problem = present tense.

To have a problem, as a poet, is to know you don't have a poem, to be without or before a poem. But a problem has value precisely as it involves a question. My question: memory, whether a song can be extracted from memory. And not just any song, a new song.

EP: "Hadst thou but song/As thou hast subjects known." Thou might have been able to get shut of that old time diction. King James diction.

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The problem is a problema, a problem to find, as opposed to a theoreme, a problem to prove.

Liddell & Scott: *problema*

> anything projecting a headland, promotory
> anything put before one; fence, barrier, screen
> shield
> a defense against a thing, fear or shame as a defense
> an excuse
> that which is proposed, a task

Memory is an excuse for not acknowledging the problem, for not attempting to solve the problem, for not beginning. For letting the problem be a fence or barrier. The memory of what we find fearful or shameful as an excuse not to begin. Freudian model: the problem is an unwillingness or inability to disclose fearful/shameful memories. More a motion than a model, the psychological motion, which is a retrograde motion, circular. Perhaps helpful for the poet who needs to enter that circle & who needs to break it, break out of it. Contra H. D: the walls had better fall. Otherwise, stuck in the mine-shaft, dark pyramid corridor, portcullis already down.

"The intelligent problem-solver tries first of all to understand the problem as fully and as clearly as he can. Yet understanding alone is not enough; he must concentrate upon the problem, he must desire earnestly to obtain its solution. If he cannot summon up real desire for solving the problem, he would do better to leave it alone. The open secret of real success is to throw your whole personality into your problem." Polya, *How To Solve It: A New Aspect of Mathematical Method.*

I suppose a poet can really desire to solve old fears and shames, but such a solution is meaningless—insofar as you are a poet—unless it is involved in a poem. The poet's solution is a poem. Of necessity it must be a new poem & your own. The open secret is to throw your whole personality—that walking defense system protecting precisely memory's fears & shames—away. Put your whole self in, put your whole self out of yourself, and shake it all about. & that's how you do the hokey-pokey.

You can't lose what you ain't never had (or remembered).

Where do new songs come from? From old songs, from cutting into, around, and cutting up old songs. Love's old sweet songs.

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The cutting can be complicated.

3 + 2: these are the steps of composition, the art of poetry. Two different, but complementary angles, a kind of asymmetrical mirror symmetry. Angles of clarification.

the three: (1) rough cut slab of words—how language comes to us; not the whole of it, not even the whole of what we call "our language," a single section or cross-section of that section.

(2) what remains from the cross-section, what we choose to remember from the language of others. Some of what's chosen in the poem: Sonny Til the Orioles, old pop standards ("I'll Be Seeing You"), the words of Trane's "Love Supreme" poem, Polya, not to forget myself, "The Rothko Chapel Poem." The chapel and child.

(3) cutting/the quotation/free from the quotation

This is as "free" as poetry gets. As free as Ornette's "Embraceable You," as free as Monk's "The Man I Love." Each cut is a choice. The composition of a poem is a series or sequence of choices. You pays your money and you takes your choice. The poem, the *consequence* of those choices. This is the

economy of poetry. A poem can be expensive, perhaps has to be ex pensive. The currency is attention, a progressive fineness of attention as it may be. Attention to what? To what you need: the next word which is always a word. The/a, a fineness of attention.

There are two.

(1) obedience to the grid
(2) disobedience so that each letter is cut free

This has to do with inscription, poetry as an art of inscription as practiced by the Greek gravestone poet Simonides, who is also credited with the invention of the art of memory.

I think highly of grids. Grids make space, and space causes provocation, i.e., the search for the next word. The grid promotes provocation and provides a frame for the resonance of the word so that the word may have weight/depth, an agent for the transmission of tone, a tone agent. Also, grids are a means of preventing space, space as a sea, from overwhelming us.

All art begins with grids. All artists long for grids. For poets the grid is the page. What, you might object, about Olson? By his own admission, Olson was a form-ridden cat. Bound by the grid of the page, in a way a reduced grid of the grid of the room which, as champion orator/rhetor, it was his job to fill up. To organize, to bring into articulation by his articulation. But it don't mean a thing unless the artist swings/goes "off-grid," forsakes and somehow goes off the power line of the grid, which otherwise captures & indeed becomes a prison house. Power house & prison house.

The letters of the words have to be cut on & within the grid, *and* they have to be cut free from the grid. You need a grid, then you don't.

To all the techniques for cutting free I would add one other, one that has always been with us but which is rarely to be found in "serious" poetry, i.e., jokes.

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Jokes as particular instruments of inscription, inscribing, cutting. What they cut: presumption of wholeness, completeness, the circle of self, the circle of the gathered group (circle of the wagons). Joke as B-movie warrior who breaks through the circle, cutting away the covering of a wagon with fierce thrusts only to find Grace Kelly giving birth within! He doesn't avert his face, he doesn't smash their skulls in. He's a joke warrior. He mildly inquires: what went wrong? Weren't you aware of the rhythm method?

Labor Day

Danger of jokes: that the possibility of rhythm (which is form) is reduced to the single crack-the-whip rhythm of the one-liner. Any monorhythm becomes intolerable, demonic. Joke warrior puts on clerical garb & informs Grace Kelly that, alas, she's going to hell. & where might that be she demurely asks. The mall. You & your child are doomed to walk eternally in the mall with Pachabel's Canon on the P.A. system.

I say "the solution is jokes," i.e., solution to the enslaving circle of memory. But if there are only jokes, then there is no memory, there is only the whip and its laceration. Album cover of Fontella Bass record, she's wielding a whip (bull whip). Her one hit: "Rescue Me." The only rescue that matters is self-rescue & that rescue is enacted by a cutting of the self so that the song may float free from the singer, the singer's self. The dance of song is always an abandoned dance. One abandons all notions of self, self-regard, of what is proper & of what is "propre." Abandons all notions of amor-propre. Proper armor. Abandons all of one's Armor-All. The point of a joke is pointed, and the joke's on oneself. This is useful, hygenic, but it's not enough. It's not song. Or: there must be something left after the cutting, and this is what Celan calls the singable remnant.

I am a rhythm method poet.

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Heidegger: "The song is sung, not after it has come to be, but rather: in the singing the song begins to be a song. The song's poet is the singer. Poetry is song."

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H's question: "why could the poet not renounce Saying, once he had learned renunciation?"

H's answer: "Because this renunciation is a genuine renunciation, not just a rejection of Saying, not a mere lapse into silence. As self-denial, renunciation remains Saying."

renounce
ME, from Old French *renoncer*, from L. *renuntiare*
prefix *re* = off, away, down, but also a degree of the scale, not to forget "a golden drop of sun"
nuntiare = to announce

So renounce becomes "play it again, Sam," the self denied in the playing of/with the scale. It = the circle of self (itself the result of cutting) which is cut & thus opened. And it = the song as the result of that singing/playing, floating on the open, the reopened open: "an air on air."

LZ: "fellow me airs." A rather better fellowship than Richard Wilbur's mass mailing invitation to become an associate member of the Nat. Academy of Poets. An invitation at a price. You pay for the right to associate with certified real national/American poets.   Ah, the privilege.

To be sure, I take my time renouncing (burning) roses. Pam tells me about fairy tale characters out of whose mouths, when they laugh, roses bloom. May be hope for me yet. If there are jokes, if there is hilarity and not only hilarity.

H. cites the Latin for songs, *laudes.* He makes the reading of song equivalent to singing. "Singing is the gathering of Saying in song." Indeed, song is most often a gathering of sayings. Can't lose what you ain't never had. But we only get new songs as more than clever remanipulations of the old sayings/the old songs if we cut them, renounce them, even if that means replaying/reannouncing them in the process. Or precisely by the process of replaying them.

You can't renounce what you haven't heard, perhaps memorized. You can't make a renouncement in advance. Poetry as new song takes time.

Instance of Trane & "My Favorite Things." No doubt H. would want to say that for all the replaying—it's a very long, complicated tune by the time Trane's done with it—one ends with "things." Yes, but those things are the sounds of the tune. Or, collectively, the tune. A new tune that kept on getting more and more new in his playing over the years.

Laudes also means praise. "Favorite Things" is a list song & a praise song. You only hurt the ones you love. The ones on your list, the ones in your little black book. You've written a book of poems; you've written a little black book.

& what does one love most? One's self, amor propre. Hurt that, cut that. But you'll have to have one, have made one, before you can begin. Can't lose what you ain't never had. Can't have a new song unless you've had—or been had by?—the old songs.

Songs we say we know by heart, songs & heart that must be broken—cut—if there is to be a new song. Please don't let it be "Achey-Breakey Heart"!

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What Charlie Parker, what bebop does: cuts the old tune down to the chord changes, works with the changes to make something new. From "Indiana" to "Donna Lee." A chord change is a move, a step. Bebop attempts new movement, typically a faster/more complicated movement, based on the old steps. Of course whether you're really getting anywhere is a good question. You're getting there faster, but the there is already there. Sounds like a circle to me. Bebop circle which stays back home in Indiana.

H: the poet can succeed "only when the poetic word resounds in the tone of the song." Forget succeed. The words to the hymn tune are "This is my story, this is my song." Not this is my success. Cancel "poetic." No such thing as the poetic word. The poet needs all the words, the whole thesaurus, if the right & necessary word, the next word, is to be found—usually not in the thesaurus list. A poet's success is the next word, finding the next word. And it's always an old word, which in the poet's composition is made—or allowed—to re-sound, sound again, but not the same/old sound. Word sound, like the wooden bars or strips of the xylophone. Wooden or stone xylophone. The resonance, new resonance, comes from the word being placed in new combinations of other words. And once a grid of sound has been established, a sound field, nothing newer than a word allowed to re-sound by itself: alone on its line, itself its line, relatively alone in page space, space of the sound field. And this, per Olson & Duncan, is the field which must be entered and opened, re-entered and reopened. Otherwise, just another "theme" park, just another sad old zoo.

And there is the resonance of a word taken away, "the sound of silence" which is anything but silent in the ear of the one who does the taking. The remnant is never only the remnant.