

WRITING AT THE POINT OF TRAUMATIC NEED

by Geoffrey Sirc

I've been reading some data from an experimental program underway at Temple University, under the direction of Dr. Alfred Bové, a telemedicine program for the early detection and treatment of acute COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). COPD patients with a history of prior hospitalization were recruited into this program and asked to report daily their respiratory symptoms and peak flow using either phone or internet. Specially trained nurses were on hand, constantly monitoring the reports. 90% of the patients in the test group report in every day, an unheard-of figure in this kind of study. The patients, it's estimated, should have been dead four times already. One patient reported he'd been hospitalized twenty times before he entered the program but had been hospital-free since.

I'm interested in the data because of my interest in short texts generated through the use of contemporary technology, particularly as they allow traces of the American vernacular.¹ I was particularly interested to see these texts, ordinary people writing under such extraordinary circumstances, the vernacular under pressure, put in high relief.

So, death comes staring you in the face, and you write a certain way. What is it? First, the obvious, what one might call the ordinary or practical content:

I am not feeling good at all, glad I have appointment tommorrow, coughing alot up at night and have pain in both lungs in back, and can not sleep to long at night, these are signs that something is going on in lungs

headache slept w/oxygen on last night (sat)took cough med from prev illness. did you mention symbiocort to dr or should we call him?

Understandably, chronic pain occasionally gives way to everything from stoic resignation to malaise and doubt:

still breathing a little hard iv been blowing a lot out of my nose this morning plus i cant take the pain med it made me sick i threw up 3 times its a bummer because me and my wife had reseveration in ac for the weekend its our anniversary of 40 years on

I was recently informed by my daughter who works for doctors that there is a test for AAP dificiency. I want to know if I was tested for this, and if not, why?

Overall, though, there's a pleasantness of tone I find almost heart-breaking:

Difficult walking 10ft. before experiencing S.O.B. Have a great day!

hey, got stuck at auto garage. little late today. feel good. you dont want to hear me sing. have a nice weekend.

To be that chipper when doom is breathing down your neck (and breathing so much better than you can) is, to me, inspiring. Such pleasantries often give way to a kind of self-deprecating gallows humor:

feel good. neighbor accused me of being full of hot air. told him ,i wish.

feel fine. down shore. wishing you were here. see how long i can hold my breathe underwater. oops, not too long! oh well!

feel fine. so we goin to have a dunkin for apples contest for halloween? first one to get an apple or pass out wins?

How to read trauma like this – ordinary people living through intensely affecting circumstances, using the American vernacular to chronicle their dilemma? In the past few years, I’ve also been looking at the American popular lyric as another form of vernacular under pressure, in this case pressured by artifice into art. As I read over the Temple patients’ texts, I realized this sort of writing wasn’t foreign at all; in fact, I’d been listening to it for years, in the songs of America’s most profound trauma-rhetor, Bob Dylan, a writer for whom, ultimately, it’s doom alone that counts, whose bottom-line concern is how or whether we find shelter from the storm. Especially relevant, I felt, was the writing of Dylan immediately following his near-death accident. The Dylan of *There must be some way out of here, I can’t get no relief*. Life as expecting pain; every lyric a blues lyric, a lament. You say you’ve suffered much? In that, you’re not so unique, unfortunately. Nothing is better, nothing is best; take care of yourself and get plenty of rest, for at some point, trauma-change will come. For Dylan, it was the morning of July 29, 1966, taking a spin on his new Triumph 650 Bonneville, on a hill in Woodstock, riding straight into the sun’s glare. He looked up, was blinded, and panicked. Stomping on the brake locked his wheel, and he went flying (Heylin 266-267).

A common response to pain and trauma, according to Margaret Jacob, a UCLA historian studying children living with chronic pain, is to construct a new narrative: “pain beats out its temporality as surely as does the heart. Its debilitating effects measure life’s passage while compelling [the sufferer] to invent a new self-narrative about past and future.” This is the entire content and method of Dylan’s composition post-crash, constructing an alternative imaginary. He’s the writer down in the flood, after the levee’s crashed, expecting rain, seeking shelter; it’s the very essence of the trauma-text (which, I would argue, is the condition of contemporary textuality).

To appreciate the traumatic *bona fides* of the *Basement Tapes*,² look at Dylan’s mental and physical state pre-recording: In the two years preceding the Spring 1967 recordings, Dylan’s life had become maximized stress, a whirlwind of too much touring, drug abuse, exhaustion, sleeplessness, poor health, and media frenzy. He has the galleys for *Tarantula* due at Macmillan, but leaves them untouched; he

loathes the book and doesn't want to fulfill his contract: he can no longer relate to its author (Heylin 265). He has videotape for a TV special also overdue. And he's facing a 64-date concert tour set up by a manager about whom he was beginning to have serious doubts. Given the volatile pressures in his life at the time, the crash seems to occur with a kind of explosive logic. Not only that, but the fact that it came 2 months after his last concert, the 1966 date at the Royal Albert Hall, at which he was scathingly booed. "Judas!" someone memorably yelled. The animosity was such that friends warned Dylan to stop touring with his electric group, fearing he'd be shot. *Blonde on Blonde* enters the U.S. charts one day after the motorcycle crash, on July 30, 1966.

Writing as status updates from the trauma-zone involves writing centered around lived, daily reality; Riley sums up the *Basement Tapes* lyrics as "domestic-philosophic riddles" (159). Indeed, these lyrics stand as Dylan's most thorough investigation of vernacular rhetoric. The anecdotal colloquialism results in "yarns about domestic strife, half-remembered escapades, and lofty farces" (Riley 157), like, say, going scuba diving with COPD. Critic Tim Riley describes the tone of the *Basement Tapes* as "prerock antique" (158). His commentary on the songs reinforces the notion, advanced by that UCLA historian's Pain Project, that response to trauma involves a re-imagined narrative :

Dylan's wilder capers celebrated the exuberance of the open road, the joy of casting off ties with the past and the prescribed values that government or society might place on a person. But by re-creating an imagined past, a fantasy of how things might have been if Hollywood's westerns had rock 'n' roll soundtracks, Dylan and the Band created a sound that affirmed a yearning for stability that flows from rootlessness. In doing so, they created an imaginary past for rock while everybody else was chasing an empty psychedelic future. (158)

Dylan, post-crash, post-exhaustion, crafts a new narrative, in form as well as content, abandoning both the Beat style of *Highway 61 Revisited* and the psychedelic obscurantism of *Blonde on Blonde*, moving the place and time of his compositional space to, in Riley's words, "a nineteenth-century mining town," deadpan banalities spoken by "average people caught up in extraordinary moments" (164), "who see life as a series of disconnected perplexities, grab hold of pleasure where they can find it, and submit themselves to the fate of the land," "seeking cover from the hapless, open-ended world around them through song" (159). Dylan's compositional exigency similar to the Temple writers.

To sketch a philosophically-charged portrait of domesticity involves a very definite ecology of writing: an aesthetic of the quotidian. *As I went out one morning to breathe the air* – bottom-line textuality: we breathe, we move, we write. One of the essential elements of style for trauma-writing is, no surprise, a focus on the climate

through which we move, a state of perpetual weather-consciousness. Not just for its obvious effect on a COPD patient's health:

h2o is running off the windows.....VERY hard to breathe.

But just a climate-consciousness in general:

Spring is where???

Hi, I don't know if you are getting all this rain & wind, but it is terrible. Try to have a good day.

In Dylan, 'expecting rain' is the default climate. Like a Temple writer, he sketches the weather in quick strokes: *clouds so swift, rain won't lift, gate won't close, railings froze*. A terse, minimal style is essential; this is writing on the run. *The fewer words you have to waste on this, the sooner you can go*. It's a flat, deadpan-style vernacular, but strangled, ratified, to the point where, as Christopher Ricks notes, "It feels like a parody of a way of lifelessness" (128).

Sometimes (hopefully often), we're upbeat, playful: *I pulled out for San Anton', I never felt so good . . . Gonna save my money and rip it up*. This is Temple-talk:

feel good. gonna go scuba diving later, whatya think?

So there's this giddy, upbeat rhetoric: *You ain't goin' nowhere?* That's a comforting thought for the chronically ill, a highly palliative apothegm. But too often, it's doubt and blues, *tears of rage, tears of grief*. So many of the post-crash songs reek with the negative: "Too Much of Nothing," "Nothing Was Delivered," "I'm Not There." As with the Temple writers, there's a terse, stoic style, using the fewest words, especially, for the most unimaginable:

temp is 102.7 Im scared

crash on the levee, water overflowing.

One big difference, it might be argued, between the Temple writing and Dylan's *Basement Tapes* lyrics is audience. Those Big Pink songs weren't supposed to be heard by anyone. Tim Riley appreciates the irony in that, noting how Dylan "made some of the best music of his career when he was certain his audience was not listening" (169). The Temple writers, of course, depend on one specific reader, the nurse who will comprehend and, if needed, respond appropriately. But of course Dylan had an audience in mind, even if it was simply the vague addressee of any blues lament. You know the blues, of course: You've been led to expect a normal human existence, and instead it's "shabby, barren" (Jones 61). And so you craft something, alone, because what was new about the blues was that it was solo (Jones

66), something “intensely personal,” a chronicle of one’s “trials and successes on the earth” (Jones 66). And the language you use is the American vernacular, of course, because you want to be heard. That’s the essence of the blues as trauma-writing. According to LeRoi Jones,

While the work song or shout had only a few English words, or was composed of Africanized English words or some patois-like language that seemed more a separate language than an attempt at mastering English, early blues had already moved toward pure American lyrics (with the intent that the song be understood by other Americans). (63)

Please don’t dismiss my case seems the ur-subtext of every serious communiqué. Or maybe, better, *help me in my weakness*. And the patient/nurse dyad as primal rhetorical scene. What we get in reply to our most beseeching inquiries is sometimes no more than a kind of textual mirror or echo from our audience, who proves only a go-between: *If your mem’ry serves you well/You’ll remember you’re the one/That called on me to call on them/To get you your favors done*.

Since the blues stems from pain, the context for so much trauma-writing is life-as-drug-management:

busy lately, increased prenidone to 10 mg. from 5mg. to help. will drop back to 5 over next couple of days.okie-dokie?

By July ’66, Dylan had become dependent on heavy self-medication (Heylin 248-249): “It takes a lot of medicine to keep up this pace,” he admitted at the time (qtd in Heylin 248). This continued during the *Basement Tapes* sessions, where “the daily regime invariably commenced with a communal joint, or three,” and on one specific track, “Dylan can be heard clearing his throat, not of catarrh but in that telltale way that bespeaks a quick snort of speed or coke that has gone a little too far down the nasal passage” (Heylin 277). So Dylan in the basement, still mixing up the medicine.

No surprise a critic like Riley finds in the lyrical style of the *Basement Tapes* a nineteenth-century flavor. Early in his career, when Dylan felt he “needed to slow [his] mind down if [he] was going to be a composer with anything to say,” he turned to text: “I couldn’t exactly put into words what I was looking for, but I began searching in principle for it. . . . I started reading articles in newspapers on microfilm from 1855 to about 1865 to see what daily life was like. I wasn’t so much interested in the issues as intrigued by the language and rhetoric of the times” (84). One thing we know about writing of that era, humor played a large part. Constance Rourke’s classic study of early American humor shows how comedy is the inevitable response of one transplanted into a new land, especially if one comes “forced and unwilling” (86), as, say, those in trauma do. “Humor bears the closest relation to emotion” (20), Rourke writes; it appears in “people who required resilience as a prime trait” (86). The comic, then, as a key valence in the texts of trauma.

feel good. hey, just got letter about new cardiothoracic surgeon. why would he want a picture? going on e-harmony?

what's the word on a swine flu vaccine for transplant people. and dont tell me we'll get one when pigs fly.lol

I find the Temple-writers admirable, of course, and I celebrate their continued existence. Especially, it's when their writing is most consciously crafted that I'm most interested, when their writing most approaches the Dylanesque vernacular, the *Basement Tapes'* depiction of the *hoi polloi* down in the flood. A realization, perhaps, that text, even when it's the daily jottings of varying levels of emergency, has a poetic potential, that the application of just a bit of rhetorical *device* can result in something interesting. When a writer is encouraged to develop an idiolect.

I have to believe this because I believe in writing, in the craft of writing, and its impact, and its ability to create an imaginary. A belief in writing as anodyne, even. The seeds of writing's possibility, as every American regionalist shows, are richly rooted in the vernacular. At some point, we need to concentrate on the descriptive, poetic force of writing, not just its illocutionary, conventionally utilitarian aspect. Every person a writer! to paraphrase Joseph Beuys. Or, in the almost-words of Carl Andre, All writing all the time. What gets to be a real turn-off for me on Facebook, Twitter, and other similar small-size text spaces, is the casual approach to style in the writing in so many posts. Too much of nothing, not enough writing as if your life depended on it. No matter the degree of urgency or banality, interesting text should be a compulsion. "Whoever has thought strongly or felt strongly has innovated in his language," Leo Spitzer reminds us. In his textual search through Civil War era texts, looking for a grammar and syntax with which to write trauma, Dylan discovered what Greil Marcus calls "an unimaginable form of speech – a once-common, now unknown tongue" (xv). And there's our assignment – teasing the unknown out of the once-common. There's no reason why demotic, populist composition can't always strive to be interesting. Mary Louise Pratt has already demystified the false dichotomy between poetic and practical discourse, the notion that there is some verbal production, called ordinary language, which has a communicative function, versus some different set of utterances, called *poetic*, which can be considered art.

It's worth dwelling on Pratt's late-seventies work for a bit. Her claim is depressingly devastating:

Throughout the exhaustive literature this century has produced on metrics, rhythm, syllabification, metaphor, rhyme, and parallelism of every kind, the role these devices do play in real utterances outside literature was never seriously examined or recognized. Likewise, throughout the brilliant body of Formalist scholarship on prose fiction, nary a scholar seriously poses the question of whether or to what extent devices like palpableness of form,

estrangement, foregrounding, and laying bare of devices do exist outside literature. Not a single reference can be found to the myriad types of narrative utterances which make up the formidable part of everyone's day-to-day verbal behavior. Examples from literature are virtually never accompanied by data from extraliterary discourse. (5)

To prove the non-existent boundary between ordinary, communicative language and the poetic, Pratt revisits William Labov's sociolinguistic research. Labov found in the so-called 'natural narratives' of ordinary peoples' anecdotes the same sort of narrative devices used to 'strange' language into the literary. And just what sort of personal experience anecdotes did Labov use for his research? Trauma-narratives, of course: the so-called 'Danger of Death' question, in which the interviewer asks the respondent, "Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed, where you said to yourself -'*This is it*'"? (Pratt 40). Sometimes I think trauma is all we ever write, especially as pain, loss, and doom mount in our lives. In fact, the very definition of an aesthetic object for Viktor Shklovsky - an object "created by means of techniques designed to 'emphasize the emotional effect of an expression'" (qtd in Pratt 68) - turns out to describe the trauma-text. Certainly we find attention to rhetorical figures in the Temple writers. There's apposition:

today when I did my peak flow I went to 510!!! an early Christmas present, never did that good, I had to look twice to make sure I read it right!

still not smoking, day seven today! nice birthday gift to myself!

Repetition:

Something is brewing here, I coughed all night, and my chest is a bit sore , same as last, I know it did not go away, right now I am just waiting it out, but there is something going on here, I will go back on Toby because something is brewing

And hyperbole:

sorry, a few minutes late. was busy blowing up all the balloons for a party this evening. lol

So I'm not claiming, for example,

Peak flow a little better, all else the same. Vitals good

isn't poetry. I'm just saying that

2nd day with predisone, third day of withdrawal, first day w/o a cigarette, things are looking up!

is less rote, more interesting writing. Important, too, maybe, is the importance of regular practice, syncing one's compositional habit with what Jacob called the heartbeat-like measure of pain. Dylan went over to Big Pink every day at 1 PM, and he and the Band laid down tracks; the Temple writers check in textually every morning. Auto-reportage, then, not as mindless narcissistic fluff, as critics of social media rail, but as essential quotidian genre.

I feel good today. Yesterday afternoon I went to Shop-Rite and walked all through the store I felt pretty good.

Yesterday, I played a short run of golf, my knee is still tricky, but after I got started, my breathing was better, at first I was short of breath, then it got better as I went along, it is the first time since April, I was out, I felt better

Trauma necessitates change. The post-crash was Dylan's fulcrum: "The turning point was back in Woodstock," he claimed. "A little after the accident. Sitting around one night under a full moon, I looked out into the bleak woods and I said, 'Something's gotta change'" (Heylin 271). There's a challenge here in the trauma-response's neo-narrative. The Temple study shows the need for a re-imagined American vernacular; Dylan shows the possibility. This paper concerns the aesthetic potential of popular writing, when artfully devised, even slightly, to limn and record a personal imaginary, even in – maybe especially in – the face of death. Let me close, then, by predicting your future: you'll be micro-texting your health, your being, everyday; composing short, pithy statements about doom and death. Writing as diaristic chronicle, because daily life is symptomatic, evidentiary, one more key vital-sign. Your very life will hang in the balance of your status updates. 'Dear Landlord' letters about a bad world, or 'Dear Nurse' messages about bad health. The context for your composition: a heavy burden, and dreams beyond control. Your concern: peak flow. And when you do write, I urge as much care as possible to the style, the craft, the lyricism. I'd like you to give it all you've got to give, naturally, but it doesn't have to be ornate or obscure – just a few short lines, 'stranged' a bit with some rhetorical figure or device, like, say, rhyme. Maybe something on the order of: *My trip has been a pleasant one, and my time it isn't long, and I still do not know, what it was that I've done wrong.* For then, when you awake in anger, alone and terrified, at least there will be that, the art.

NOTES

1. Short messaging is, of course, ubiquitous on Twitter and other internet-based systems; but telemedicine participants are often 'underserved subjects,' thus text messaging by cell phone is a predominant mode of communication.
2. Lyrics in italics are from Bob Dylan and The Band's album *The Basement Tapes* (Columbia Records, 1975).

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