

AN INTERVIEW WITH NOAH ELI GORDON

Melissa McCrae

Melissa McCrae: This essay contains an extended meditation on the act of naming, as well as on a name's potential capital or use. And while you include the names of many famous figures — Simone Weil, Robert Lowell, Gertrude Stein — you also allow anonymity, referencing “the famous poet,” “the famous biographer,” or “the novelist known for . . .” at many points. How would you explain this play with obfuscation, especially when you also remind your reader of Emerson's identification of the poet as “the Namer?”

Noah Eli Gordon: There's a pretty simple explanation for this, one that's clear from even those few that you mention; those folks are all dead, gone, called back. It's more or less safe to say whatever one wants about them. For those still weaving their lives around our own — well, that could be trouble. It could also be something worse: gossip. Although I'll admit to my own deep interest in hearing it, I don't want my writing to devolve into slinging the stuff. There are anecdotes that need to carry whatever aura one would associate with things like a “famous poet” or “famous actor,” but in the end, it's irrelevant which famous poet or actor I'm talking about; at least I hope it is. Of course, this adds a little intrigue to the story, which is a good thing.

To call someone a “famous poet” is something of a joke anyway, an oxymoron for sure. “The famous poet” I mention is actually, thus far, about a dozen different people, some of whom aren't really all that famous in non-poetry circles. I like the way this allows for an echo, or chiming, throughout the work — the way it points with a flimsy arrow. It's not my intention to shoot anyone down. In fact, most of the book circles around moments of personal error, making it a sort of anti-memoir I suppose. When a different excerpt from *Dysgraphia* was published a few years ago in *Fence*, I got a voicemail from someone who recognized the players in one of these paragraphs: “I've never been called a famous poet before,” noted the person who left the message. I'm not sure that's entirely true, just as I'm not sure that my memory of some of these incidents is entirely accurate. I hope the anonymity helps to temper some of

this uncertainty.

MM: When you include the name of Anne Carson, it is to say that you believe she — in her 2000 collection, *Plainwater* — has written “a perfect sentence.” Do you carry any other favorite or formative sentences with you as you move through your day or write?

NEG: That Carson sentence struck me as so wonderful when I first encountered it that I wrote it down and for about a week tried to use its syntax as a model to write a sentence of my own. I failed over and over again. Then I thought, why bother trying to re-write the thing when I could just steal it. Or as they say these days, “re-purpose” it. When I encounter a sentence that slays me like that, I try and copy it down, try and learn from its torque. Then, I mostly forget the thing, forget who wrote the thing, forget why it occupied me so — all of it according to plan. I don’t want to collect stunning sentences; I want to unlock them, learn what I can, internalize it all, and move on. Do you know the book *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style* by Virginia Tufte? It’s an amazing compendium of rich and varied sentences with very little extraneous material. It’s an amazing book for anyone interested in the sentence, anyone interested in finding some models for expanding her default syntax.

MM: I am not familiar with Tufte’s collection, but suspect that it should sit on my bedside shelf. How is your relationship to the sentence different from your relationship to the line? Is it?

NEG: The sentence is pretty much my non-monogamous primary partner. The line’s more troubling; we’re still working through our issues. I love that bit where Jack Spicer writes: “Where we are is in a sentence.” It really prefigures the turn, decades later, toward a poetics of materiality and linguistic identity. I love it because it enacts how the sentence is at once an independent statement, request, command, or question extending from end stop to end stop — a grammatical construct, and then a judicial one, the authoritative decree, the punishment. Cross the line and you’re given the sentence. Spicer invites us to join him as much as he damns us to do so, as much as he simply points toward the frame suddenly around his now extended finger.

But the sentence, a sentence, always leads to something else, right? Even if that something is merely the next sentence — the realization that text and context collide into confinement, as one has to do the actual time once it's been handed out. Thus, in a sense, the paragraph emerges as the prison cell of writing. But let's not forget how Gertrude Stein liberated us when she wrote, "Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are." Here, we have the potential to embrace the conversion narrative, the awakening of consciousness not only to its own physical confinement but also to that of the prison of the self. So, if anything, I'd say my real allegiance is to the paragraph, and it's an allegiance that's stronger than any sort of need to categorize what it is I'm doing with my writing. Although they partake of the poem's tendency toward concision and in many ways mirror the structural underpinnings of the sonnet, what with their volta-like shifts, the paragraphs in *Dysgraphia* are not prose poems. At least, I don't think of them that way. I've been working on *Dysgraphia* for several years now, and have given a few readings from it where folks mentioned something afterwards about the "poems" I just read. "They're not poems," I told someone once. "They could be," was the reply, which I guess is true.

MM: To refer to the paragraph as "the prison cell of writing" might seem to argue for each paragraph's discrete life. And I find this fascinating, since I was struck by the fluid movement of your writing in this excerpt from *Dysgraphia*, despite the white space and asterisks that ostensibly separate one paragraph from another. While writing in this particular form, is the process to build and occupy the cell, even while also digging one or many tunnels?

NEG: I think the building and occupying come first, the digging later. I can't think of anything more daunting than if I were to sit with some blank pages and tell myself it's time to write a book; that'd be utterly debilitating. It's hard enough settling on the right syntax for whatever sentence I've found myself trying to trudge through. I love that character in Camus's *The Plague*, the one who writes over and over again the same sentence, here and there altering it just a little. That's the problem when the editing engine is operating in such a high gear — nothing's accomplished. It's a lot easier for me to go ahead and concentrate on a single moment — the way the light looked on some otherwise innocuous afternoon, something a bank

teller said in passing, you know, whatever those Proustian triggers might be — and to try and just be present with what's in front of me. Contrary to what folks who know my work might think, I'm a very slow writer. On a good day, I'll finish maybe two paragraphs; mostly, it's one. And it's important to me that each one works on its own, outside of whatever structure I impose later.

And yes, the structure is always an imposition. Or, I suppose I should say that the digging is done haphazardly, without access to blueprints, and in complete darkness, but a darkness that allows for intuitive maneuvering. Sometimes I make tiny plans. For example, I think several of the paragraphs in this essay come from a list of ten injuries I'd experienced. I made the list one afternoon, spent the next week and a half dropping a paragraph down for each of them. I never intended for that list to read as a single piece; instead, it was a way for me to generate material, and to concentrate on the specifics of each story. When I'm really there, really present with the paragraph, it'll signal all these other potential satellite stories. The key is to keep all of the different orbits active. I think Maggie Nelson's book *Bluets* does this masterfully, braiding together each of its main narrative threads with these almost figure eight-like digressions and meditations. Because I'm still writing it, I've got no idea how the structure of *Dysgraphia* will morph in the coming months, but I'm happy to hear that this excerpt at least felt fluid to you.

MM: In this essay, you allude to a fear that may follow many writers, especially young writers, as they work: "... what happens when we've told them all, when we run out of these stories...?" You have been incredibly productive over the past decade. Have you dealt with similar anxieties as a writer, even with the fear that you might be swallowed up in what you describe as the "chatter and babble of the adult world"?

NEG: Oh, we're all swallowed up in that chatter and babble, no? I was thinking about the voice of the grownups on the animated version of the cartoon *Peanuts*, how when they speak the audience hears only unintelligible noise, noise that signifies the primacy of childhood imagination, that it's irrelevant what the adults are saying. At some point, this irrelevancy takes over, and we're stuck in the noisy land of grownups. It's easy to just relax there: the internet,

movies, other people's books, the internet, backyard barbeques, bar-rooms, the internet. The paradox here is that in order to account for the noise, in order to somehow sculpt it into something approaching music, one has to tune it out, turn it off. That's the difficult part.

I don't think I'm going to run out of stories anytime soon. In fact, for *Dysgraphia*, I've been keeping a long list of shorthand notes for future paragraphs to write. Things like this:

Condom in the lunch room
Dave, the math teacher (method) FOIL: "ready, go"
Dinner and Clue w/ Danielle
Operation Spandex
"Grandpa, Pay the Man"
Bard's Tale Summer
One Newt
The Fox: "is it yours?"

On their own, these are pretty meaningless. They're prompts, things I'll use when trying to sit down and do the actual work of writing. Each stands in for a story I want to tell, but in the act of composition I try and grant some sort of anthropomorphized autonomy to the anecdotes themselves, try and let them take over, move how they want. I mentioned the paragraph's relationship to the sonnet. And here, I think of these lists as the potential octave; where they go when they take over, well, that's the sestet. The hard part, again, is just clearing the space, ducking the noise.

MM: Can you explain the larger project, *Dysgraphia*, of which this essay is a part?

Writing for me is always a struggle. Not just in the above-mentioned sense of having to jettison the world's distractions, but also on some innate, deeper level. I wasn't gifted with the best of educations early on, and spent several years of both elementary and high school more or less institutionalized due to behavioral problems. Eventually, I went on to a community college in Boston, where classes were, simply, a joke. I had one professor who would come into class, tell us the exact answers for the test he was going to give next week, talk about the weather and his kids for five minutes, and

then dismiss us. I took four classes with this guy. At the time, when I was nineteen, it was great; now, as a professor myself, I consider this man an enemy. Anyhow, after getting my AA degree, I transferred to UMass-Amherst, where I was really struggling. Grammar and spelling weren't things I'd ever grasped in a meaningful way, and although I had the desire then to articulate a response to all the wonderful things I was reading and learning, it was tremendously difficult to do so.

At some point, I was ready to drop out of school, to give up, when it was suggested that I take a series of tests for various learning disabilities. This is when I found out about dysgraphia. It's basically a neurological issue, a learning disability that manifests itself as a deficiency in one's writing, primarily in the act of graphing, of putting pen to paper and forming words. But there are numerous other elements to it as well, including difficulty with spelling and reading. For me, these difficulties were compounded by my own educational deficiencies. At the same time that I was starting to figure all of this out, I fell in love with poetry, with writing. So, at its core, *Dysgraphia* is an attempt to make sense of the condition and its impact on my life as a writer and an educator. The work basically circles around moments of awe at the discovery of the potential of expressive subjectivity, and then dread at the actual difficulties of inhabiting that expression. It's not *about* dysgraphia; instead, it uses the errors of dysgraphia as a metaphor for all of the cognitive conundrums of conceptual being: speech, perception, understanding, meaning, agency, sexuality, authority, etc. I suppose, if anything, it's about becoming a poet. Of course, the irony here is that I've become an essayist in order to write it.

MM: Do you feel that these struggles with language, then, were among the primary forces that compelled you to write?

NEG: No, not at all. If anything, the exact opposite is true. It's often mind-numbingly frustrating for me to deal with some of this stuff. There are times when I can't for the life of me remember how to spell a simple word, something like "obvious" or "forsaken." It can be so bad that I'm unable to come up with something close enough for Word or Google to autocorrect. When this happens, whatever it was I was writing about is just gone, over, and I've screeched to

a sudden stop, as though a deer's leapt out in front of me on the highway. Well, maybe it's not that dramatic, since I'm used to it by now, and have my own eccentric coping mechanisms in place. But it's still a struggle, a struggle that I imagine will always accompany the work. And I suppose that it's what compelled me to write *Dysgraphia* in particular, although not what compelled me to become a writer.

MM: So was becoming a writer ever a decision for you, a choice you understood yourself as having made?

NEG: Yes, absolutely. When I was about twenty, I remember sitting in my room one night, annoyed with something my housemates were up to, and a bit bored with whatever my other friends were doing. It was one of those evening where you just feel aimless, off-balance, agitated. There was something gnawing at me, but I didn't know what. Then, out of nowhere, a procession of sirens passed by my house. I mean there were fire trucks, police cars, a few ambulances, lots and lots of noise — sudden, alarming noise; then, nothing. It was dead silent for maybe a second or two before the sirens picked up again. This time they seemed to come from every direction, as though they were surrounding the house. But the pitch was off, all wobbly, a weird vibrato, like electronics trying to run on nearly-dead batteries. The sound wasn't coming from the sirens at all. It was an animal sound. It was every dog in the neighborhood at once attempting to imitate the noise. None of them could do it quite right, but damn were they going for it. It felt simultaneously sad and triumphant. It was the exact moment I decided to be a writer.