

TONGUE'S NEEDLE

By
H. Patrick Glumm

Beard of Bees
Chicago
Number 19
August, 2004

Preface

Give over the wheel,
if you ain't drivin'
the buggy.

—Charles Olson

The gnoetry program “responsible” for this text is powerful; I am tempted to say, a powerful weapon, for it is unquestionably double-sided. I put “responsible” in quotation marks when thinking about gnoetry not to preserve intentionality for the author — little exists in authored poetry anyway — but because gnoetry does not take over the burden of responsibility that is authorship so much as threaten the meaning of the term altogether.

Eliminating responsibility as a category for describing the creative act is one of the things that sets the gnoetry program apart from other text production software. For gnoetry, as I understand it, shifts some portion of the responsibility of composition back upon the author(s) of the text(s) from which it draws. The need for parenthetical plurality here helps to suggest how gnoetry does this. A gnoetic text is composed of the labor of several authors. What you get when you generate new text is not just the labor of Jon and Eric, who wrote and conceived of the program, nor just of them and yourself, the present “author,” nor just of them and yourself and the “original” authors of the books from which you are generating work, but of ALL of these AND of all of the authors who influenced the writers of the source text and the qualities of your own, later text. It is difficult to describe this because we tend to think of non-authorial text as “random,” but gnoetry is far from this — and that’s before you intervene.

Jon and Eric could explain this using the rhetoric of algorithms and all that. They explain it well, but it’s like hearing Frankenstein’s opinion about the monster — full of technical details that don’t matter when the thing’s composing its memoirs in your woodshed.

Instead, gnoetry becomes animate by allowing history in. In other words, it substitutes history for the soul. It does not replace the soul with immediacy, but with what has gone before. It is soulless (hence double-edged) in a big way. The numbers inside the machine do this. I don’t know exactly how — but as a poet I recognize the results. Which is to say: when “I” was writing this, “I” was listening to what the texts that have come before me — the whole history of world literature but with a few texts foremost — what the texts that come before me have to say.

Jon and Eric have yet to feed their monster any Michel Foucault, have yet to sew that particular brain into their machine's convict skull. But Foucault articulates something that was very much in my mind when "I" wrote *Tongue's Needle*. Foucault says in *Discipline and Punish* that he is writing a history of the soul. He is writing a history of disciplining the body, but he brilliantly recognizes that the modern subject is disciplined and punished in spirit instead. Reform, as practiced by the modern state, does not involve knee-capping. They must, in fact, do all they can to keep secret their torture. To keep their our tortures secret. Not so gnoetry.

On the contrary, this discipline in particular is the soul that gnoetry eliminates. That is why gnoetry works better with some source texts than with others. The machine does not eliminate from discourse the ethereal future self ranted about by priests, but the disciplined soul, that inside self that exists outside history. Only punishment forces us outside history. Gnoetry slices away at this punished self, while doing remarkably little damage to the self that gives us soul in the other sense. Gnoetry does little damage (not none, but not much) to the soul that comes out of history, the soul that emerges from the rhythms and words of the delta blues or from Edith Wharton's prose or Roy DeCarava's photographs or Robert Motherwell's paintings or the rhythms and words of Patti Smith or Iggy Pop. Or that can be observed in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Gwendolyn Brooks, or Charles Olson. Sophisticated, sweating & breathing, exclaiming & loving SOUL. Gnoetry does not eliminate this product of the historical sense the way other writing programs (such as acrostics or Microsoft Word) do.

To put pressure on this, to expose it, one of the texts I used was *The Brothers Karamazov*. As always with Dostoyevsky, trouble with the soul comes to the fore. Dostoyevsky constantly puts disciplined and undisciplined souls into conversation. He puts them into rented rooms, pretends to close the door, lets them hash it out.

Look for Dostoyevsky, then, when you read the gnoetry that follows. The introductory gnoem begins with Olson. Olson wrote:

In cold hell, in thicket, how
abstract (as high mind, as not lust, as love is) how
strong (as strut or wing, as polytope, as things are
constellated) how
strung, how cold. . .

And gnoetry answered:

Sometimes the brambles
formed chains and tried to fathom.

The brambles (note it!) rather than the body caught in them. The brambles were for Olson Melvillian, and for Melville, Dostoyevsky. And after that it is mostly Dostoyevsky:

If they would merely
succeed in making a great
rent in one spot and rigid

The officers looked
towards the door and let them,
with tears.

... We
split the apartment.

These lines listen to our world with the Russian master's ear. And once you catch such moments watch for even fresher ones, like

... I am
green in the direction of
the money and instructions.

Here gnoetry builds on Dostoyevsky, just as Pound built on Flaubert. Money in the U.S.A. tends to be green. And to be "green" in "instructions" means in modern English to not understand the direction you are headed in. Money is often involved in this. This is the sort of poetic truth gnoetry offers.

Such gnoetic truth is possible in the modern age because, as Pound (who materializes in the phrase "his motto was undisturbed") argued, the modern novelists have given us poets the space in which to breath.

Dostoyevsky, then, prepared the way for the gnoetry that follows. Get the big picture by letting him in. And while your at it, let yourself into gnoetry by recognizing all the ghosts that haunt these lines. As "the" author I'm sure I know only half of them. But nowhere is it written that the author need be as knowledgeable as the reader or his machine.

Sometimes the brambles
formed chains & tried to fathom.
If they would merely
succeed in making a great
rent in one spot & rigid.

He could hear the men
scampered in insane fever
of haste, but then the
wretched little clock hissed out
5. The voice of pure form.

The officers looked
towards the door & let them,
with tears. I have said,
a strange night to you with the
valor of vulgarity.

At the request of
my design. His tongue must say
I may kiss your hand,
the words now, the hero of
the full power of the day.

Allow me to have
guessed the truth. He showed a lack
of success, I am
green in the direction of
the money & instructions.

His tongue lay dead, &
formed chains & tried oftener
to exaggerate
the plight of the battery
with a boy, & utterly.

We can refuse to
be too widely read. He was
still a minute. They
must be most an hour, &
his motto was undisturbed.

His province was to
this tune. Upon my legs give
me this: now I seem
to come myself: you see
I give them to distraction.

Neither in the mere
matter of light the men were
better, of playing
upon words. His tongue must have
been enabled to myself.

The men contract one
disease or the history
of phantasm. We
split the apartment. They must
have her frocks & temperament.

Having threaded his
needle. I had arrived at
their trial. A thin
horseshoe beard, sat up; the old
fellow as badly cut up.

Twice 2 makes 4. I
mean him who had seen life, it
looks sideways at her.
I have seen how safe & well
built. I've an englishwoman.

He said, go on? Then
why have you gone out. A hot
sun had never been
born at all times, & then strode
away. I saw none of it.

Each bone of his most
intense excitement. His voice
was gentle as a
spectator. As he came here
he sprang from the family.

But he was left for
us! Those pictures of himself
with the tattered man
at the times held together,
& held it decisively.

They had exchanged good
night, I hinted intentions
were so, yeh know there
was found carefully sheathed with
copper. The windows were on.

What an hour, but
it was now. They would hit the
wrong man who, in the
speeches that went from the mud,
& a hoarse laugh & stamping.

An air of stern, hard
& muffled out the still heights
of air before him
& the rising moon, after
rushing asunder, escaped.

Over to the stout
ropes with which they had been as
was the tattered man,
though it is more to be a
kind of vanity. My best.

He rested his case.
The body of the breath of
relief & gathered
itself into a guffaw.
There is but 1 another.

Badgered by dreams, &
presently he began in
a wood. The youth was
quite alone. The now lifting
swirling mist, comprehending.

H. PATRICK GLUMM is the author of several book-length poems, including *Bounty of the Earth*, *Snap It Off*, *Roach*, *You're Broke*, and *Kar Port*. For the past ten years he has lived up and down the Great Lakes with various acquaintances and two Great Danes.

Beard of Bees books are produced on GNU/Linux systems, using only Free Software.

Copyright © 2004 Beard of Bees Press
Chicago, IL

www.beardofbees.com