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Poetry Reloaded: revision as practice and art

Abstract:

When preparing previously published work for a new collection, poets are faced with a basic yet complicated choice: to leave things as they are or give them a makeover – small or large. As writers such as Wordsworth and Auden have famously demonstrated, there is often a temptation to tidy up, to avoid some newly-perceived awkwardness or repetition, and to clarify. It is relatively easy to find flaws, slight banalities or longeurs even in poems of real merit, but the risks of addressing these once poems have established their place in the world – sometimes with a loyal readership – are considerable. If making more radical ‘corrections’ in search of new power or purpose, then the stakes are raised even higher. The essential enigma or mystery of the original poem may begin to dissolve. How then do we recognise when the time for redrafting has passed? Are poets best advised to honour the integrity of previous work, rather than attempt to ‘improve’ it? Is a better plan to write a wholly new poem and let the other be? Two poets here reflect on the various merits of other poets’ ‘selective redrafting’.

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1. Wordsworth, Dickinson, Auden and revising poetry

There are famous examples of poets who have written and published significant poems but who have later had second or third thoughts about them and subsequently revised them. Such examples may be drawn from almost any century in which writers have produced and published different versions of poems; we are interested in English-language poems from the Romantic period until now. While the zeitgeist has changed more than once in that time, and while poets from different periods and different places have divergent pressures on them – and work in diverse social and political contexts – many of them, wherever and whenever they are situated, have continued to tinker with work they had once believed was ‘finished’.

Our paper examines some examples of the ways poets have revised their work rather than left it well alone. We do not try to suggest that the various poets we discuss are motivated in exactly the same way, or represent any kind of uniform cohort of creative producers. Quite the opposite. What is interesting is that very different poets from different times and places have approached the revision of their work with perhaps only one thing in common – they want to change what they said or the way in which they said it. This has been true of relatively obscure works – for example, nearly all of Emily Dickinson’s works were unknown by the public in her lifetime – as well as of famous anthologised pieces. The revision of famous works is sometimes contentious, because people are likely to have conflicting views about different versions of the revised poem – but one can ask the same question about the revision of all works, famous or obscure: were the changes a good idea?

In many cases the revisions of well-known works – or of works that subsequently became well-known – is met with ambivalence on the part of critics, who sometimes prefer earlier versions of works even when they believe they understand the logic behind the poet’s reconsideration. William Wordsworth and W.H. Auden are examples of poets who assiduously revised earlier work in successive versions or after its initial publication – and there are numerous others who have adopted similar practices. Auden and Wordsworth were convinced of the reasons for their revisions yet many people argue that, at least in some cases, it may have been preferable if they had left their works as they were.

Michal Baron writes of Wordsworth that ‘[h]is habits of revision before and after publication make problems for editors and readers and have given rise to strenuous critical debates about the ethics, aesthetics and politics of choosing one version of a poem ... rather than another’ (2014: xii). Jonathan Wordsworth who, overall, prefers Wordsworth’s 1805 version of *The Prelude* to his 1850 version, comments of the final version that ‘[r]evision is not to be dismissed as tinkering and it is not in itself the cause of the weakening of *The Prelude* ... [as he grows older] Wordsworth remains true to himself, remains creative, but becomes a less interesting person ... [who] also lives into less interesting times’ (1992: 38). In other words, for Jonathan Wordsworth, the poet who revised the work was let down as much by his changing circumstances as by anything else.

Whatever the ‘times’ inhabited by a poet, significant revision of this kind that produces multiple ‘authorised’ versions of works opens up critical questions and

doubts. While authors may often (though not always) prefer their most recent version of a poem, many critics and readers may wish to differ and, furthermore, in such a context, even authorial judgements about literary works may seem unreliable – or only reliable as long as the author does not change their mind. Further, any sustained and ongoing process of revising a work implies that however complete and ‘final’ a poem may look, there are always other versions and other possibilities for that poem waiting in the wings. In this light, every poem – and every other kind of work of art – may soon begin to seem to be just one more work-in-progress.

And, indeed, perhaps this is what all works of art and all poems are. The 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson appears to acknowledge the point by leaving some poems incomplete. Or, rather, she completes them after a fashion but does not indicate a final choice between variant phrases and words. Her poem ‘Death is the supple Suitor’ canvasses the following possibilities for its final lines: ‘And Kindred as divulgeless / As throngs of Down’; ‘And Pageants as impassive / As porcelain’; ‘And Kindred as responsive – / As porcelain’; ‘And Kindred as responsive – / As Clans of Down’ (Dickinson 1998: 1287-88). Mary Carney comments that these ‘variants multiply and overlap meanings’ (1996: 137) while Sharon Cameron argues that such variants may be understood ‘as constructions of identity ... [and] by the supposition that what is being developed by Dickinson in her maturity is a poetry that depends on variants which extend a single utterance’ (1992: 13-14). Carney adds that ‘contradictory variants destabilize interpretative efforts and bring the reader’s attention instead to Dickinson’s process of choosing words. The variants act as a means of integrating the process of creation into the reading of the poem. (1996: 137). Where such poems are concerned, editors of Dickinson become, in effect, co-authors of her works whenever they opt to make decisions that she declined to make in order to ‘finish’ her works.

In Wordsworth’s case, Susan Wolfson remarks that:

Wordsworth’s revision of forms yields a form of revision in *The Prelude* that, in effect, theorizes form as revision. If revision sustains the illusion of formal stability, it also persists in postponing that achievement as each review of the hoped-for ‘perfect view’ disrupts the possibility of closure. Revision is thus an endless opening of poetic form (2006: 108).

Revisions also often result from poets’ changing sense of themselves. Leon Waldoff comments that Wordsworth’s revisions reflect ‘the difficulties of trying to know and represent the self in the course of experiencing continual change and development over a lifetime’ (2001: 22) and Auden experienced something similar. In his 1944 foreword to his collected poems he, at least implicitly, gives some of the reasons why he revised as he did:

In the eyes of every author, I fancy, his past work falls into four classes. First, the pure rubbish which he regrets ever having conceived; second – for him the most painful – the good ideas which his incompetence or impatience prevented from coming to much ... third, the pieces he had nothing against except their lack of importance; these must inevitably form the bulk of any collection since, were he to

limit it to the fourth class alone, to those poems for which he is honestly grateful, his volume would be too depressingly slim (1976: 15).

When authors begin to critique their past work in this way – and many thoughtful poets entertain doubts of this kind at various stages of their writing careers – a possible set of temptations for an author is to expunge ‘the pure rubbish’, to resurrect at least some of ‘the good ideas’, and to make more important some of the pieces ‘he had nothing against’.

Auden attempted to do all of the above and, as happened with Auden, such self-assessments may easily go beyond the usual processes of revision, becoming an artist’s deep reconsideration of the literary or ethical value of certain of their works. Nevertheless, such broad issues do connect to many smaller acts of revision by emphasising the extent to which the revision of poems is frequently driven, at least in part, by judgments that are not simply about literary or aesthetic matters. Further, Auden’s example highlights how the assumptions behind revisionary activities may not always be fully understood by poets who are attempting to make their work new, or trying to recontextualise it, or deciding to expunge it. Auden certainly thought he knew what he was doing, but some critics would argue that he became distracted by issues extraneous to his main poetic gifts (see below).

Certainly it is doubtful whether poets always know which of their works are their best as they become older and at a greater distance, in both temporal and emotional terms, from many of them. And, even if they are able to judge correctly what the qualities of their works may be, are they always equipped to improve them? If their ideological convictions change, or their sense of what poetry does or may or should do alters, should they recast their earlier works in the light of new convictions and beliefs? Do they risk making a new work that has forgotten the feelings and ideas that drove the original composition?

Peter Firchow writes of Auden’s refusal to reprint his poem ‘Spain’, that ‘[t]wo years after the poem was published, Auden underwent a complete revulsion against all overtly ideological poetry’ (2002: 145) and adds ‘Auden’s revisions were hardly ever just poetical’ (145). He believed that he knew better as an older man than as a young and politically committed writer. Edward Mendelson comments of Auden’s preparation in 1965 of a new edition of his *Collected Shorter Poems* that he ‘prepared the book by rewriting many of his best-known poems and abridging or discarding others’ (475). Auden himself writes in the volume’s foreword that ‘Some poems ... I have thrown out because they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring’ (1964: 15). He claims that ‘I have never, consciously ... attempted to revise my former thoughts or feelings, only the language in which they were first expressed’ (16).

Katharine Coles comments on Auden’s changes of heart about another of his famous works:

One of ‘September 1, 1939’s’ most famous and problematic lines, in the version we know, invokes this collective and commands it: ‘We must love one another or die.’

For his *Collected Poems* in 1945, Auden yanked this entire stanza [containing the line]. Then he refused to let the poem be published at all. In 1957, he allowed it to

appear in *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse*, but he changed the famous line to 'We must love one another AND die.' He allowed the poem to be printed in 1964 in Penguin's anthology *Poetry of the Thirties*, with a disclaimer in which he declared the poem to be 'crap.'

What, to the reader, is the difference between the line he disavowed ... and why does the poem survive insistently, in spite of Auden, in the version that so troubled him? The difference in meaning is huge. The 'or' makes our collective survival *contingent* on what the poem calls 'universal love,' and in doing so suggests without promising that love might actually save us. The 'and' in version two makes us helpless not only against death but also against love: we can't help loving, but love will not save us (Coles 2015: 4-5).

Coles points to a problem for many readers with Auden's revisionary tendency – they simply prefer some of his earlier versions and believe that they say more interesting things. She writes that 'The existentialism of [Auden's] second alternative, which makes love as bleak as death, was, is, more *accurate* ... [but] *poetically* Auden's first choice was correct' (2015: 6). Notwithstanding this, Mendelson believes that '[m]ost of his revisions [for the 1965 volume] were improvements that no-one noticed' (2000: 477), giving the example of lines in 'A Summer Night', the first version of which reads 'The drowned voices of his parents rise / In unlamenting song' and the new version of which reads 'The drowned parental voices rise / In unlamenting song' (quoted in Mendelson 2000: 477).

These lines are perhaps an improvement, and do, as Mendelson suggests, possess 'more euphony' (2000: 477). However, Mendelson, in editing a *Selected Poems* of Auden writes in his introduction that 'an editor must make his own decision between the claims of errant history and those of timeless goodness' and that 'the claims of history are strong, as are the claims of readers who want the discarded poems and original versions' (2007: xxvi). As a result, he selects for his edition 'the texts of Auden's early editions and ... poems that he later rejected'. This is despite Mendelson's comments that Auden's revisions and rejections 'were guided by strong literary and ethical motives' and 'produced versions ... that were more coherent and complex than the originals' (xxvi).

2. Alan Gould and a long continuity

In considering such matters, we invited Alan Gould, who has revised a number of poems he published in his early books, to comment on his motives for doing so. He writes that he places 'no particular value in the idea that I should leave a poem as it first appears in order to preserve some ineffable spontaneity' and that 'my interest is to give my poems as much expressive power as my talent allows in the space of my lifetime' (2015: n.pag.). He states:

my hope is that I make improvement in the revisions I do. In rereading old work, too often I find a poem has not emerged sufficiently from its original inchoate intimation; it should have thought through with more thoroughgoing rigour. Too often it has had an original bombast still clinging to it like a birth sac ... [I want] the rigour of formal

craft, but also the community of that craft with my precursors in this art. To this degree, I think the business of revising poems tracks a movement of spirit, from the negligent egotism of one's first attempts to the sense of one's place in a long continuity of that larger thing – Poetry itself (2015: n.pag.).

The opening of the first version of one of Gould's revised poems, 'Homage to Joseph Conrad' demonstrates an early pithy engagement with Conrad's language:

Beyond all an eye, eloquent as the wrecking sea,
working an inclement speech to record the drowned
with entries of quiet catastrophe – untimely
strangers with their canny appeals to the lone
blemished conscience, a map of fine details
marking The Fidelities ... (Gould 1978: 41).

The revised version achieves is more balanced and measured, and more harmonious, but it is also less linguistically charged in its form of address:

Beyond the words here was an eye
To still the glitter on the sea,
Patience to twist from an English phrase
Just that finesse of light which found
How the solitaires were drowned (Gould 2003 :172).

It is not so much a question of which version is the better poem – although one of the authors of this paper prefers the first version, partly *because* it is less clarified and resolved, and more eddying, than the later version – but such revisions raise the general question as to why the poet wishes to erase, as it were, his earlier work for a later perspective. While Gould gives his reasons above, a doubt remains that there is sometimes something about earlier works that frequently trouble the more mature writer – and this may be the very quality of 'earliness'.

3. Paul Munden, John Foulcher, early and late

Paul Munden recently revised his work for *Analogue/Digital*, a volume of new and selected poems published in 2015 which included poems first published much earlier in anthologies. This included poems from Faber's Poetry Introduction series dating from the 1980s and '90s. The stated aim of that series was 'to publish a representative selection of work from all [contributors], so that each has the opportunity of making his or her voice clearly heard.' In choosing poems from *Poetry Introduction 7*, edited by Craig Raine, for re-publication 25 years later – the first time they had appeared in a solo volume – Munden weighed up the extent to which his subsequent poetic journey might be put to good use in revising the earlier work. The editor of his new and selected poems, Peter Sansom, urged him to make changes. Munden has commented that he believes that this process of revision clarified rather than undermined his 'voice':

In 'Skiffle', for instance, the end of the original version seemed both clumsy and extraneous to the poem's core purpose. At the time of writing it, I was over-

preoccupied with exploring a particular theme, the contrast between book and film. I therefore removed the penultimate stanza and the beginning of the next: 'Can you picture all this? / I lack the studio's big budget / to put it on celluloid / before your very eyes – / my word will have to do. / It's not much, I admit' (Munden 1990: 56) (Munden 2015b: n.pag.).

The revised poem pursues its simple theme more coherently:

Skiffle

The bass is a long piece of elastic
stretched on a broomstick.
An empty barrel of homebrew
doubles as a drum

and this is just the formal set.
You're free to join in
with an improvised maraca –
that handy jar of rice.

My baby daughter beats
not-quite-time with a wooden spoon
on a saucepan: I click a pen
against my teeth.

Sometimes, as now, words
are all there is; sometimes
the sound carries no further
than this room (Munden 2015a: 30).

Munden revised and tightened other early poems in similar ways and for similar reasons, usually reducing the number of lines and often, as a consequence, the number of stanzas. 'The Riverside Arms' is an example, a poem written initially within a climate change summit meeting and published within a subsequent manifesto. It offers an increasingly surreal series of vignettes about the regular flooding of a pub. The original ending involved four stanzas, including the explicit lines 'In the following century / new flood defences / tell a different tale'. In revising the poem, Munden finds greater concision:

In the following century
It's a different tale:
The barman dispenses

Neat measures of scotch
And vodka from the optics
While the electric pump

Drizzles beer to a thin line

that shows exactly where
Enough is enough (Munden 2015a: 39).

So-called 'free verse' often accommodates such adjustments with relative ease because there are no explicit constraints of metre or rhyme to contend with. However, Munden remarks that even poems written in 'free verse' are not always readily susceptible to revision:

So called 'free verse' also means freedom to invent structures of one's own, which can sometimes be as difficult to tinker with as a sonnet. An editor's suggestion, focusing on a particular word or phrase, can potentially disrupt the rhythms, form, and – crucially – the harmonics of the overall composition. Changing a single word therefore needs to be of utmost importance to justify risking such disruption, which may lead to considerable new work. And as Muldoon remarks, using an architectural metaphor, 'it's very hard – it's not impossible, but it's very hard – to go three flights down and start messing around with the foundation' (Muldoon 2004: n.pag.) (Munden 2015b: n.pag).

In revising his poem 'Obsession' Munden decided that the opening of the original made a problematic reference to its context, a sequence relating to Laurence Sterne and Shandy Hall, accompanied by photographs (Munden 2011). Cutting the opening words – 'It seems all decorum, but' – solved the problem and led to a further attempt to prune and balance the poem's other stanzas, compressing the whole. Turn the relevant page of *Analogue/Digital*, however, and the poem is extended, with the 'alphabet of girls' names' from line one of the poem articulated as a list of Atlantic hurricanes, with their dates (e.g. Katrina 2005).

This list formed part of an exhibition at Bank Street Arts, in Sheffield, where the playful notes at the end of the *Asterisk* book were unpacked as further visual accompaniments to the poems and photographs. There are then, two versions of the printed poem, neither of which is definitive. Each occupies a different space, and reaches out to make different connections, accordingly: the first to its accompanying image, the second to the analogue/digital theme of Munden's new and selected poems.

Such ongoing adaptation is evidenced in public readings where the poet may contextualise a poem with different remarks on different occasions, or choose to give different emphases to its parts. Seen in this light, a poem's seemingly fixed life on the page is only a stopping point rather than a terminus. Exhibitions and collaborations conducted with other artists further underline this sense of poetic flux, as does the manner in which classic literary texts (although not so often poems) are frequently adapted for film. Each new version of a text tends to relate strongly to the era in which it is made, and draws on new technologies.

Viewing alternative versions of poems in this light may be a way of inflecting and coming to terms with a poet's radical revisions of earlier work. Just as the use of 'superior' and more recent technology may result in an 'inferior' film, a poem may not benefit from revisions conducted by an older and more sophisticated author. Further, a new adaptation rarely entirely replaces what was done before. Instead it

adds to available ways of understanding the essential material. Paul Muldoon has said of poetic translation that ‘both original poem and poetic translation are manifestations of some ur-poem’ (Muldoon 2006: 195) and that statement may also be true of all versions of an author’s original work.

The point about the problematic nature of some revision is endorsed by John Foulcher who states his regret at revising early work for a 2008 volume of selected poems:

The revised poems existed in a kind of vacuum: who wrote these poems? While they dealt with certain experiences located in my personal history, they were super-imposed by a sensibility not in existence at the time of their writing. When they were published in their new form, they seemed drained and equivocal to me (Foulcher 2015: n.pag.).

Foulcher acknowledges that the revised versions were smoother and more accomplished, but says:

in collating a new selected poems, I decided to revert to the form each poem took at its initial publication. I’ve come to think that revision long after a poem’s inception denies the right of the poem to exist in its own temporal space. To impose another such space on the poem lends it a kind of duplicity which undermines the reasons for its existence. We may find ourselves with ‘better’ poems, but they lose authenticity; their eye isn’t on the clarifying function of the poem, but on ‘art’. Such poems, I think, lose their moral authority (Foulcher 2015: n.pag.).

Foulcher gives an example of a poem, ‘Innes Foulcher (1897-1984)’, where he deleted an image – ‘like milk bottles in a crate’ – and smoothed the poem by deleting the comma from the final line (which then read ‘opening in their voices’). Originally the poem’s final stanza read:

but, after the last prayers, five Fijians stood
and sang for her, all the island’s flowers
opening, in their voices.

Foulcher says of these revisions: ‘Smoother? More accomplished? Certainly. But less convincing’ (Foulcher 2015: n.pag.).

However, sometimes there may be no clear right or wrong where revisions are concerned. Munden’s ‘The Winchester Diver’ is a poem that appeared in *Quintet* (Staple First Editions 1993). It references William Walker, who in his deep-sea diving gear spent five years single-handedly underpinning Winchester Cathedral when it was found to be sinking into waterlogged ground. The original version concludes:

As he starts to tire, he jerks the lifeline
and lets a shot of air billow
around his midriff, forcing him up again
into a world almost as dim.

Twenty years later, Munden was faced by his editor’s resistance to the final line. Approaching it afresh, his amendment was significant: ‘forcing him up again / into the rush of light.’ (Munden 2015a: 22)

Nothing changes to what *happens* in the poem, but in terms of language, the two versions are in opposition (this chimes with Auden's comment, quoted earlier, about never changing *thoughts*, only *language*). In the first version the world into which the diver re-emerges is the grim post-war scenario in which he, like many others, would die of Spanish 'flu in 1918. The second version focuses instead on the physicality of the moment. If the change 'improves' the poem, in another sense it changes little – in both versions the emerging diver is confronted by a world that bewilders. It may be argued that the two versions stand in their own right, and together, provide a stereoscopic view of what Muldoon calls the 'ur-poem'.

With various versions of a poem in existence we may end up with a sense of the poem as unsettled, and even flawed. Do we think less of it by encountering its uncertainties and what might even be thought of as its author's artistic ditherings? Or, as with Dickinson's variants, do different versions of a poem provide us with the opportunity to gain insights into suggestive creative uncertainties? As Foulcher writes: 'All poems are flawed' (Foulcher 2015: n.pag.) in any case. He goes on to quote the poet Ben Lerner, writing in the *London Review of Books* (18 June 2015):

What if we dislike or despise or hate poems because they are – every single one of them – failures? The poet and critic Allen Grossman tell a story (there are many versions of the story) that goes like this: you're moved to write a poem because of some transcendent impulse to get beyond the human, the historical, the finite. But as soon as you move from that impulse to the actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms ... Writing about Hart Crane, Grossman develops his notion of a 'virtual poem' – what we might call poetry with a capital 'P', the abstract potentiality of the medium as felt by the poet when called on to write – and opposes it to the 'actual poem', which necessarily betrays the originary impulse (Foulcher, 2015: n.pag.).

Foulcher concludes: 'Given that no poem is perfect, I've come to think we should celebrate the poem's blemishes, which reflect the blemishes of its author's struggle with the finite world' (Foulcher 2015: n.pag.). But while Foulcher is suggesting that poems, once published, might be best left alone, another alternative is that multiple versions should be allowed to thrive as a way of acknowledging, and even celebrating a poem's divergent tendencies, possibilities and impulses. Such revisions would be uncompromised by any sense of finality, and may search out and examine a work's troubling flaws.

Of course, there are limits. As Muldoon says:

I mean, the fact is, whether or not one writes poems, we're all, as we age, getting duller and duller in most instances. One's brain functions less and less effectively. And that's not a matter of opinion, that's a matter of fact (Muldoon 2004: n.pag.).

Perhaps, when a poet has continued to produce alternative versions beyond the peak of his or her powers, then the late versions should be considered much as we do those early drafts before a poet reaches maturity; as with any draft, they help us gain a multi-dimensional view of the ur-poem and, indeed, the process of the poet's mind. But when should an author stop revising, and when are their powers in decline? When

is the quality of ‘earliness’ fresh and authentic, and when is it poetically deficient? Which reader – or writer – is fully qualified to say?

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