Albert Goldbarth on defying genre

March 29, 2017 - Albert Goldbarth is the only poet to ever receive the National Book Critics Circle award two times. He is also a fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Memorial foundation. He has published over 30 books of poetry and essays. His most recent book of essays, *The Adventures of Form and Content*, was published earlier this year by Graywolf Press.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2534 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration, Independence.

You're considered a poet first and foremost, but much of your work defies genre. Do you think writers are generally too hung up on thinking about genre?

I've been thinking about this a lot lately for a few reasons. One, it's the general topic of this AWP panel I'm going to have to be on in just another week and two, because we're shorthanded here at WSU I'm teaching actually a graduate fiction workshop at the moment for the first time. In a certain sense, those kinds of categories that you have named: fiction, memoir, essay, poetry, lyric essay, creative nonfiction, short story… they're not all that important to me, really. Those categories seem to me to have to do more with academia and how you *teach* a book. Those categories have to do with the book distribution system, how books get shelved in bookstores or libraries, how teachers handle them, or how my publisher has to typify the book in a catalog.

I don't care about any of that. What matters to me is the kind of implicit invisible contract between one writer and one reader, having to do with pleasure and power of the written word. And so long as the pleasure and power is there on both sides of that contract—me writing it, somebody reading it—I don't care what they call it. They can call it franks and beans so far as I'm concerned. I want it to be a moment of pleasure and power for the reader and the writer in a kind of one-on-one relationship.

I think that's true for me as a kind of general principle, which means I don't have to waste time thinking about taxonomy. Instead I'm just getting at the love of literature itself, which probably is evident in my work because I have long poems, I have book-length poems that sometimes include narrative (and that have at least a tease of a thread of a short story or interwoven characters going through it and may include dialogue). My poems may include quotes from factual resource material or invented factual resource material. Those long poems exist along with the 12 million or so brief lyric poems I've done as well, as well as in what some people would call essays, which is really just to say, "paragraphed" writing. In those essays there are often little leaks of the poetic, moments of the fantastical, and rhapsodic language that I think would be at home in one my own lineated poems.

So, it does seem to be that there is a kind of osmotic membrane that exists between poetry and prose that doesn't bother me at all. I understand that a paragraph is not a simply collection of lines with a ragged right hand margin—but the membrane is permeable from each side to the other. And I think that that's good.

Here's a specific example: a couple of years ago I sent a bunch of poems out for consideration to *The Georgia Review*, and one of them was a piece in paragraph form. I thought of it still as a kind of poem, maybe four or five pages long. So I included it with maybe a dozen or so other pieces that were purely lineated; they looked like poems on the page. *The Georgia Review* came back to me and said, "We are going to accept these pieces, including this one piece that we will publish as a short story, not as a poem." I was okay with that. I was just happy they took it. I'm assuming that for the most part people who read poetry on those pages also read prose, people reading prose, I assume, occasionally take a look at the poetry. Again, it could've been franks and beans. I don't care. They published it.

About a year later, without thinking much about it at all, I included that piece in my then-current book of poems from Graywolf Press, a book called *Selfish*. So, this "paragraphed" writing, which had appeared as a short story in another publication, is now in a book of poems. Graywolf accepted it. They didn't raise an eyebrow. After the book of poems came out, the piece was solicited for a collection of short stories that a sturdy little Midwest publisher recently did, called something like "New Stories from the Midwest." So, this one piece has been in print three times: first as a short story, then in a book of poems, then in an anthology of short stories. All of that within the space of a year and a half.

Again, I don't care. What I care about is that someone reads it. And that I get contributor's copies. I don't know if that's such an illuminating response, but it's really about the only response I can muster. It certainly doesn't seem to be my job, or any writer's job, to have to think about taxonomy, the classification of the piece. The content of your writing should dictate the form. When you write something, you should allow it to take it's own shape, to let it become what it seems to want to be.

Years ago I asked a publisher to consider resurrecting what I think is a beautiful phrase, a lovely category: *belles lettres*. Beautiful letters. That used to be a not uncommon way of referring to a certain kind of gorgeously written but uncategorizable piece of prose. And, I wish it would come back for pieces of writing like mine. I think it's much more frank and much more pretty.

You often write expansive poems that are full of factual ephemera. One would assume your work requires research, but you don't use the internet or own a computer. How does that part of the process work for you when you're making these fact-filled poems/essays?

It's funny to me because more and more I run into people who just don't understand that you can know things or sound smart or have this information *without* the internet. And then I say to them, especially if I'm talking to someone relatively young who really may not have thought about it, that you have to realize that this god of yours—the internet—the alpha and omega, the end-all and be-all that owns all of the hours of your day, and your shopping, and your sex life, and your research, and your work, and your child-rearing, and all of your social communication… that internet was invented *without* an internet. It's true! It's absolutely verifiably true. I certainly never felt the lack of that. And my day is still perfectly happily, usually overfilled, sometimes frustratingly, without being able to access anything on a screen.

There's no one answer I can really give you about my research or writing practice because there's no practice. That would be true to everything I've written during of my relatively long life. That's the kind of question I can only answer really on a poem-by-poem or essay-by-essay basis. I can think of a few that I've written, both poems and fiction, for which I've done substantial amounts of research in things called libraries. If you were to take a kind of God's eye view of my life, it would be filled with thousands and thousands of little scraps of paper. They would just look like clutter to anybody else and sometimes look like clutter to me, filled with notes I've taken which probably have piqued my interest or seemed viable for a poem or an essay. They're scattered all over the house; in the pockets of all of my clothes; they're slipped into books; they're on napkins; they're on receipts. They're on burger wrappers.

It's also true that I have a lot of pieces—which I would never want to identify specifically—that probably seem as if they have been heavily researched for which I simply invented details as necessary. And that takes us back to the idea that a piece of writing that is called an essay must ethically be factual. Can you write something that is called an essay, for lack of a better term, that still contains moments of invention? I think so.

It sounds like your process hasn't changed much over the years.

No, I don't think so. I only teach a few courses now and I don't have kids. Except for my collecting, I don't have lots of hobbies. It's not as if I spent a good portion of the year on a ski slope or anything. I've always just left myself open. I mean, my head is just like an antenna swiveling around open to what might be the next piece of writing to come to me.

I've done long poems and I've done hundred-page poems and I've done things that call themselves essays that feel more like poems when you read them. I've done this one thing that was published as a novel. I've written lots of different kinds of stuff and the most honest answer is, there's no one way I go about it, no one time of day; certainly no one kind of pencil or pen I use. I am just open to it and when it comes I try to be true to receiving it.

Also, it's true that I'm just not interested in process. If I could bring Keats back to life, I'd love to spend a day with him talking shit, but I don't think I'd ever care to ask him when or how or why he writes, or what time of day; whether he uses an ink pen or a quill. All of that just seems to me to be beside the point. Instead of chasing after some magic formula of *how* you write, simply put that energy into actually writing. You learn by doing it.

Here’s an anecdote I’ve always liked about the artist Albrecht Dürer, one of the other great Alberts in the world. Somewhere he meets a young artist who says, “Ah, I admire you so much and the way you work with light and shadow. I try to do it but I just can’t capture it myself. Can you show me the tools and brushes you use when you do it?” Albrecht Dürer says, “Okay, I’ll meet you tomorrow in front of the cathedral.” So they meet up and the young guy is very expectant; he’s going to get the answer that’s going to solve it all for him. When Dürer turns up with this case of brushes and tools and the guy looks into it, there is a profound look of perplexity and disappointment that washes over his face. He says, “I already have those tools.” And Dürer goes, “Ahh.”

It’s a very nice little anecdote that reminds you, it’s the talent involved, not the materials. It’s not whether the pencil is number two or number three, and it’s not whether you’re waking up 5 a.m. or first going to sleep at 5 a.m. The real magic of creating resides in the “Ahh!”

I just reread Joan Didion’s *The White Album* about two weeks ago. It’s an extraordinary book in every possible way, particularly the title essay. It really does exactly what it wants to do; it nails down an entire decade just perfectly. The writing is spot-on, the sensibility is spot-on; there’s a kind of courage and honesty behind it. It’s an amazing book.

There’s a 17th-century writer named Margaret Cavendish. She did both poetry and prose. It is probably not a name on everybody’s list but she’s an amazing, eccentric proto-feminist, though I doubt that she’d think of herself that way, whose mind is just honeycombed and cavernous and brilliant. Everybody should read Margaret Cavendish, that’s what I say.

Everybody should also read William Gass’ *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*. It’s wonderful, wonderful prose. It’s a book of prose that I would defend as a book-length poem. It’s that kind of lushly confected prose writing. I want you to read it this weekend.

Just last week I returned to Bernard Cooper’s first book, *Maps to Anywhere*. It’s a lovely book and I just taught the first essay out of it, “By Any Other Name,” which is a kind of gorgeous paean to language, specifically in terms of the perils and pleasures of naming things. It’s the perfect writer’s essay, or bit of memoir. I mean, if you’re going to be a writer you’re going to have to love the nuts and bolts of language.

What Painting Is by James Elkins. In this book, Elkins, an art critic, asks: What is a painter? What does a painter care about? I know many writers for whom this also resonates. He discusses how the painter doesn’t care about the landscape. The painter doesn’t care about the portrait of Mary with Jesus in her arms and he doesn’t care about the bowl of fruit on the table. He cares about the paint. That’s why he’s a painter. He wants to go home at night with paint that he can’t get out from under his fingernails. He wants to fall into bed next to somebody still smelling of paint and turpentine. He wants the feel of it. He wants to smell of it. He wants the way it looks. That’s what a painter is. All the other stuff is just the excuse to use the paint. The armature. The philosophy. The idea that comes later. Anything involved with the medium itself: paint. Which of course would be words for us writers.

In this book he takes a well-known painting by a well-known painter, Monet lets say, and he breaks them down into individual square inches that he blows up to full page size so they all look sort of like Jackson Pollocks. We’re not looking at the Virgin’s nose, of the naked lass’s body, or the Pope’s golden robes. Instead, you’re looking at one square inch in which you can see whether this was a painter who might lovingly trail a single hair of a paintbrush down that inch of canvas the way somebody would trail a tongue along the neck. Or if this was a painter who quickly dabbed, making little hit-miss jabs of paint into the surface. He talks about painters in terms of these square inch artifacts.

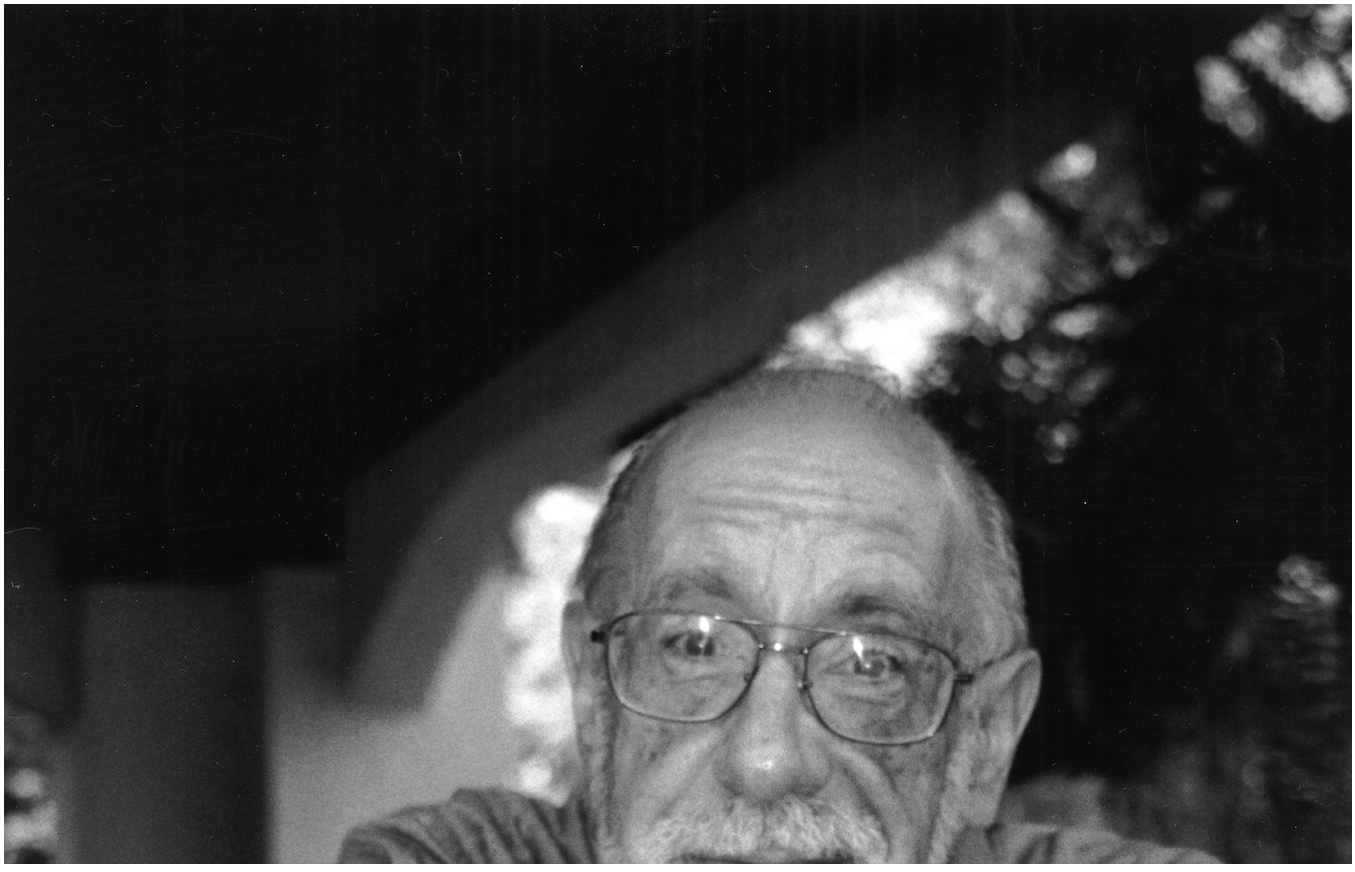
And it’s a beautiful way of looking at painting. It’s nothing to do with the history of a certain battle that was being painted. There’s nothing on the role of women in 18th-century peasant France. It’s nothing about art history or theory. It is just really what painters care about inch by inch by inch, in little squares the size of squares on a checkerboard. It’s a lovely book on its own but it’s absolutely true about one possible best approach to understanding and loving writing. When you take the aesthetics of this book on painting and apply them word by word to writing, you can see how syllables are like those little square inches. And you can have a deeper understanding of the process and power of writing by coming to understand it’s small, almost subatomic particles.

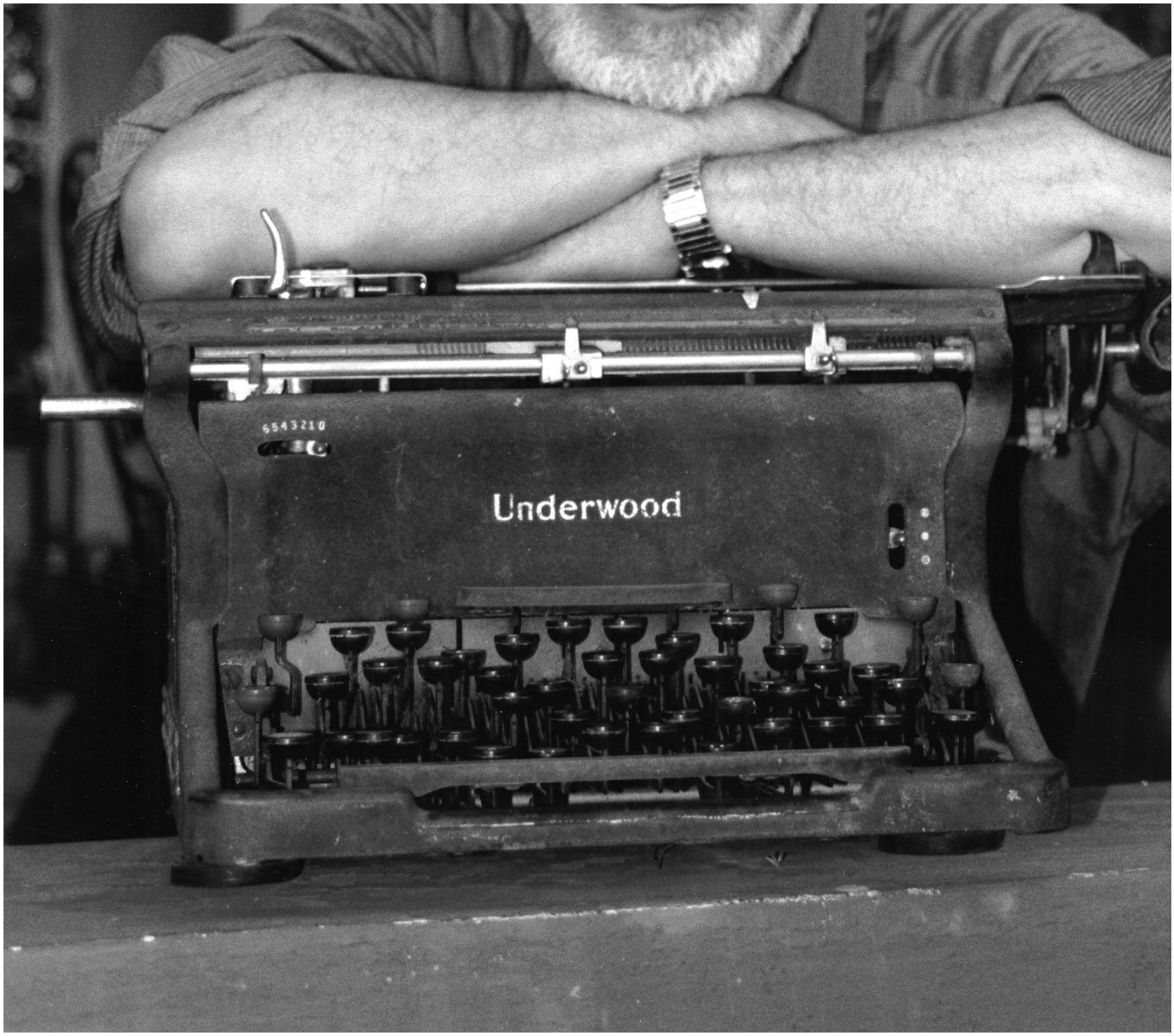
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Fact

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