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# Reliquaries and a Poetic Sensibility

Robert E. Rinehart<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Reliquaries are forms for remembrance, but they are also enactments, processes of just that remembering. In this piece, through five exemplar poems, I examine “reliquary” as noun and “reliquary” as verb.

## Keywords

new methods and methodologies, methodologies, investigative poetry, methods of inquiry, writing as method of inquiry

Brenda's Reliquary<sup>1</sup>  
in Galesberg, Illinois:  
site of Carl Sandburg's birthplace

Give me a simple stack-framed house,  
the white clapboard sparse & direct.  
Don't assume my complexity,  
take me back to green trees, picket  
fences, green gables, rockers on the porch,  
neighbors, & barbeques that matter.

Your relics recollect the good times.  
Momentary lapses vanish, sanded  
away, the raised nap forgotten.  
Whitewash plain as the nose  
spread across your Swedish face: honest  
for none of these complex situations: & yet.

Collective memory is false. Where, for instance,  
lives the heated silence, the damping  
to reconfigure your stubborn will. Where is  
the knotty affair, now long forgotten?  
Sanded away, gnarly roughness, like knuckles  
gone bad, once functional. Where joy replaced  
pain, like weeds choked  
out by the colored tulips gaily  
parading outside the museum-house:  
that statuary glares in the steamy afternoon.

Oh: but where oh  
where rests the memory  
of hands held, your great love unspoken

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& secret, a glance, a touch: where  
lives your past, your real inner past?

\*\*\*\*

### The Cenotaph<sup>2</sup>

It's not knocking about through the flying tracers  
heart beating in rhythm to the echoing hits on trees  
time slowing like a hashish movie, stretching out—  
the bullets inconsequential.

It's not the flames scorching  
your eyebrows to wretched hyphens, the timbers  
falling 'round you, your oxygen the only umbilicus  
to life, to the pint that sits on Haley's counter-top,  
like a wet circle of foam pulling you back.

These Iwo Jima moments, these jarhead  
nostalgias don't capture time & its reach:  
for anyone will tell you it's more about stepping  
forward, day after day, lonely & uncomplaining,

pulling from the guts to test against unrelenting  
boredom, gathering the vague storms of loneliness  
to your breast, coaching yourself to hold onto the dream,  
to make the play, to trust that the future will occur.

Anyone will tell you. But you have to listen.

\*\*\*\*

On hearing Diane Wakoski read  
at California State University, San Bernardino<sup>3</sup>

### I

What a relief to see normal  
thongs hearing you read;  
perhaps not: the wild-haired  
woman, silvery hair, behind  
me reading audibly from Norton's  
a frustrated PhD candidate  
thrusting his spectacles up  
one more notch, loudly  
noticing, "Some of them  
have undoubtedly been coerced here."

Knowledge is bribery, but I've come  
of my own free will, twice published,  
separate from the others, pin-striped,  
I wear no coat, though outside it's still  
quite cold.

## II

Your fingers dipped into peanut butter jars, or trembling while chasing Kunitz's scavengings round a Safeway ("how mundane," you seem to say, and pull it off), praying secularly for a pumpkin to set, capturing shiny smooth, exotic loquats, devouring them, juice, skin, and flesh at once.

## III

And you share them. Leaving,  
I settle, shivering, into my Toyota pickup, drive slowly past the bleached car park, the quiet hawking electricity of 7-Elevens, the shiny smooth, exotic Strategic Air Command units of Norton:

I pull next to a ripening orange grove,  
see some primal tension in it all,  
throw back my fool head, and laugh  
till I cry.

(previously published in *Negative Capability X(1)*, Rinehart, 1990)

\*\*\*\*

Diving practice: Fresno, 1937

For Sammy Lee

They stopped the plunge  
up tight as three hundred  
bronzed under the sun;  
(while football doubles piled on,  
even before Manzanar)  
split vision, not even  
*mirages* of drink,  
hard shade almost  
scuttled from itself.

The waters, reptilian, ran cool  
as wet sand—or melting cubes  
the iced drinks wasted.

Sign, wondrous and white,  
delicately banal, a denial  
to the Korean baby  
who contaminated the sweetness  
with his yellowed legs, stalks  
of fat straws, ecrued waters,  
now emptied, sucking, drained  
because of his innocence.

\*\*\*\*

On Reading Ray Carver's Poems<sup>4</sup>

Such a feeling, to inhabit your life . . .  
like intruding.

But surely you were giving  
more than a recipe for death;  
it seemed the only portion you lacked  
(or maybe took for granted,  
as natural as smoking)  
was that one sure self-knowledge:  
immortality.

It's a reason to go on.  
It compels me to send the alimony,  
to go through the workday alone.

In one sense, a *reliquary* is a type of shrine, a container that holds sacred objects. Though related to the *relic*—which is a “souvenir of the dead which is the mere material remains of what had possessed human significance” (Stewart, 1993, p. 140)—a reliquary is a repository for dear objects of desire. A reliquary holds a place of memory, not simply a form of materiality, for its possessor. What is dear to one person may not be dear to another: One example is the baseball reliquary, where sacred memorabilia take on totemic qualities (cf., Malcolm, 2011). But the “reliquary” is not simply this noun, this holder of celebrated objects of desire: “Reliquary” can be a process, a feeling, an active presence, an act itself. As reliquary slides from sacred object to embodiment, it takes on an agency that mere objects cannot.

As an example, Leslie Arnovick (2006) has written about medieval English oral speech as a performance, as “nothing less than the power of the poet. As it demonstrates expressive creativity, speech echoes the poetic act” (Arnovick, 2006, p. 10). Thus, the speaker (whose agency is then transferred to the writer: the oral speech/dialogue transposed to the written word) himself or herself becomes a performative act, an embodied and willful act in which the speaker “exercises agency”:

*The utterance of a performative embodies its speaker's instrumentality.* For example, *promises* represent their speaker's intention, as do curses and directives. Performative acts such as these do more than express intention, however; through them a speaker exercises agency. (Arnovick, 2006, p. 10, italics in original)

Thus, the reliquary that houses these performative acts, these acts of agency, serves as a synecdoche for the performance itself. It is in the very act of crying out, of writing to

the past, that the writer both demonstrates and enacts a sacred trust in the objects she or he has crafted. The simple act of “reliquarying” enables this sacred object to come to embody the oral or written language as performative. Essentially, these forms of a noun/verb amalgamation create a space for the interstitial gerund form that dances between object and process.

The ethnographic project(s) have both worshiped and criticized their own material and processual reliquaries. Somewhat different than a sacred canon, a reliquary of ethnographic objects—like any individual's sacred box—is simultaneously individualistic and emblematic of a larger group worship of sacred objects. Thus, object reliquaries might include pedagogical items/texts that insist on a breadth of knowledge of the classics in one's field or simply an acquaintance with the “important” sacred individuals in one's area. (Of course, this creation of hierarchies reflects historical, memorial, and nostalgic effects as well as a variety of politicized stratifications that justify one's epistemological stance.)

Reliquaries might contain an eclectic mix, the patterns emerging only after hard arduous study. In a Māori worldview, the interesting blend of individual and societal saliences—in effect, of the universal singular—works to form both recognizable and idiosyncratic types of reliquaries (cf. Coleridge, 1817/1973; Denzin, 1989; Mills, 1959):

The reliquary can serve for the wholeness of “spirit, action and metaphor”:

The fusion of creative practice, ritual action and ceremonial presence in weaving Maori cloaks, *kakahu*, typifies a cultural attitude in which the sacred and the secular are inseparable. (MacAulay & Te Waru-Rewiri, 1997, p. 195)

The first cloak—the beginning effort at weaving—is traditionally given to an elder family member, or buried in the ground (given back to “Papatuanuku, the earth [who reclaims her ‘own’]”) much like the placenta is sometimes buried (MacAulay & Te Waru-Rewiri, 1997, p. 196). This infuses the ground with a deeper connection to the *whanau*, or family. Further,

The spirit of the piece, the history of the weaving’s source, its resultant lineage, and the apparent tracings of descent and ownership, contribute to the idea of the woven cloaks as reliquaries—not primarily objects of devotion but containers of the relics of time, cultural survivals, aesthetic decisions, past use and former contexts. This is the notion behind the cloaks as treasures, *taonga*, as sacred and collective history. (MacAulay & Te Waru-Rewiri, 1997, p. 196)

The woven *kakahu* serve as living objects, imbued with a spirit and life force.

In the following poetic speech acts, I call out to the reader to engage with the reliquary in terms of its “objectness” as a noun, but also in terms of its active movement that serves to sanctify these objects, to recognize their calls for reflection, for slowness in the way Kundera (1996) celebrates it, for noticing. These speech acts offer exemplars of what I have begun to call “the poetic sensibility” (Rinehart, 2010). In an age where instrumentality is privileged,<sup>5</sup> the contemporary subject must re-acquaint herself or himself with the meander, the connection with imbricated pasts, the collective—and allow our human cultural reliquaries voice: We must learn from our pasts.

And we do it by means of this bricolage, this joining together of different nouns (e.g., “. . . as a maker of quilts, or, as in filmmaking, a person who assembles images into montages . . .”; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4) but also the merging of sensibilities: The bricolage, like the reliquary, serves as site for action, a site for the verbing of the objects within. The sense of movement, of the crafting of the object—not simply the object itself—is alive both in the Māori *kakahu* and in, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) put it, other forms. They write,

Montage and pentimento, like jazz, which is improvisation, create the sense that images, sounds, and understandings are blending together, overlapping, forming a composite, a new creation. (p. 4)

These forms—montage from film, pentimento in painting, improvisation from jazz, and so on—all correspond with the reliquary, as they are processual, developing, changing right before our eyes.

Hal Foster (1985) makes an interesting point when he discusses the early surrealists’ use of a bricolage that “politicized rather than aestheticized the primitivist-imperialist connection” (p. 200) in terms of its disruptive potential:

they prized in the tribal object not its *raisonnable* form but its *bricolé* heterogeneity, not its mediatory possibilities but its transgressive value. In short, the primitive appeared less as a solution to western aesthetic problems than as a disruption of western solutions. Rather than seek to master the primitive—or, alternatively, to fetishize its difference into opposition or identity—these primitivists welcomed “the unclassified, unsought Other.” (p. 200, quote from Clifford, 1981, p. 564)

Of course, Foster (1985) eschews the dualistic nature of this simplistic western binary as it is posed. He points out that “the other might appropriate the forms of the modern capitalist west and fragment them with indigenous ones in a reflexive, critical montage of synthetic contradictions” (p. 201). Further reducing the romance of the imagined reliquary as object—and perhaps unconsciously carving out space for a new indigenous bricolage of reliquary as an embodied action filled with “poetic sensibility”—Foster continues,

*Bricolage* remains a strategic practice, for just as the concept of myth demystifies “natural” modes of expression and “neutral” uses of other-cultural forms, so too the device of *bricolage* deconstructs such notions as a modern-tribal “affinity” or modernist “universality” and such constructs as a fixed primitive “essence” or a stable western “identity.” (p. 202)

As we embrace the concepts of what a reliquary *is*, what a reliquary *does*, it moves us as scholars, as readers, as writers, to celebrate the other. In honoring past humans who have lived on our planet, we honor present relationships with nature, with each other, with the processes that make life a dynamic process, not simply a noun-thing.

The poems are meant to celebrate people as verbs, people’s lived lives. They are about poets with a sensitivity to form, writers who are attuned to the music and harmony of life, athletes whose command of their body shapes their own worldview. These poems note the disjunctures of lived lives (Wakoski’s loquats, Carver’s worldview, Sandburg’s knotty affair, Lee’s chagrin at American racism)—they are meant as poems that notice key bits, but not totalities, of these lives. Just as Renfrew (2006) notes the apprehension of artistic Cycladic sculpture as art forms—situating them and others within revered reliquaries of art—so too have the creations of these notables become a part of my own personal canon. But note well that the “poetic sensibility” brought to bear on these public figures is just as artificial (i.e., cut through with artifice) as the cenotaphs in one poem: empty of substance while standing in for a myriad of emotions, remembrances, memories.

Our writing is a placeholder of partialities for the wholeness and intricate fabric of life itself. We can no more “know” Sandburg’s true relationship to Brenda Ueland than we can know our own motives for some of the decisions we make in our own lives. Furthermore, to ask the primary mover within a lived life may sometimes approximate closer

knowledge, but the indefinable “poetic sensibility”—an openness to form, to possibilities, to process, and to others—only can *approach* a more intimate understanding of others.

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### Notes

1. Carl Sandburg was an American poet, born in 1878, died in 1967. Brenda Ueland was an American journalist and writer, born in 1891, died in 1985.
2. A cenotaph is an empty (usually mass) grave, often signifying unknown (and often unimaginable) deaths.
3. Diane Wakoski is an American poet, born in 1937.
4. Raymond Carver was an American short story writer and poet, born in 1938, died in 1988.
5. See, for example, the wide range of discourse regarding instrumental forms of pedagogy (e.g., Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Tinning, 1992), the military (e.g., Bamford, 2005; Chomsky, 1999; Harvey, 2007), business (e.g., Gough, 2002), conflict resolution (e.g., Lipschutz, 1998; Roy, 2004), where a capitalist rhetoric of progress and improvement (cf. Sutton-Smith, 2001) serves as an invisible default discourse.

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