

Found Poems and Creative Editing

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the creation of found poetry, especially ‘pure’ found poetry is more an act of creative editing than creative writing. Using some practice-based research from a ‘pure’ found poem in my poetry collection Whatsname Street, published by Smokestack Books in 2021, I discuss how dealing with making a poem from another text is an act of creative editing in that it usually aims to keep something coherent and whole about the original text whilst changing it in some form. In the case of the poem under discussion, the changes consider the text’s intentions and they are also acts of translation.

THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS DEFINES FOUND POEMS IN THIS way:

Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage, found poetry is often made from newspaper articles, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, or even other poems.

(“Found Poem”)

It is not that act of collaging, which is so clearly a visual form of creative editing, that troubles me, and I have been as prolific a user of collage in my poetry as most other contemporary poets. My difficulty lies more with what the glossary entry for “Found Poem” refers to as “pure” found poems:

A pure found poem consists exclusively of outside texts: the words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions. Decisions of form, such as where to break a line, are left to the poet.

(“Found Poem”)

Is that choice, the decision of “form”, of “where to break a line”, enough to be able to claim authorship? It certainly would not be enough if presented as academic writing. There is always, lurking below the surface, a small

child me, who is holding her hand out and saying “I made that”, but privately bristling with shame because she knows she found it on the floor and is a big fat liar.

My poem *The Crimes of Mrs Williamson* (ROBINSON 2021, 65) was “found” in a letter held in the archives of the Church of England (see Fig. 1). The CoE’s business managers, the Church Commissioners, were the builders and former landlords of the housing estate I live on. The estate’s history is explored in *Whatsname Street* (2021). The letter was written on behalf of all the tenants in one block — with the exception of the people they were complaining about. Written on behalf of the occupants of five flats against the occupants of one flat — a married couple — the Williamsons. By “on behalf of”, I mean one woman wrote the letter and everyone else affected by the Williamsons’s behavior signed it with their names and addresses in the manner of a petition (CC79639/2/1921).

The letter starts formally “Dear Sirs”; it is being addressed to the Church Commissioners and their Chief Surveyor rather than the housing manager. The situation had gone on for too long with no resolution to make informing the housing manager useful. They were “going above her head”. The letter is six pages long and maintains a controlled tone through the first page or so, and it is clear that the writer has a grasp of the rules of grammar and an awareness of the kind of syntax appropriate for the task. As the letter begins to detail the things that the Williamsons have done to offend their neighbors, the writing becomes more emotional and the syntax begins to break down. This is where, for me, the letter becomes interesting.

There are moments when the tense shifts: “she spit on my houseflannel, spat on my vegetables” (CC79639/2/1921). There are inappropriate full stops peppered throughout this section. While the capital letters, to indicate the start of sentences, remain grammatically correct, the full stops are all over the place. But when I read the letter out loud for the first time, I realized that they were all in places of dramatic tension where you would pause if you were saying this out loud. It is almost as if it is punctuated for performance.

The letter was written in 1921. From the time they were built in 1903 until the early 1960s, the flats were tenements with no bathrooms, toilets, or kitchens. All of the flats were either two or three-room tenements. Each landing had two small closets. In one was a shared toilet, consisting solely of a modern flushing lavatory. In the other was a shared sink which provided water for all cleaning, cooking, and self-care tasks. Therefore, much of what we would consider “private” activities were conducted in the

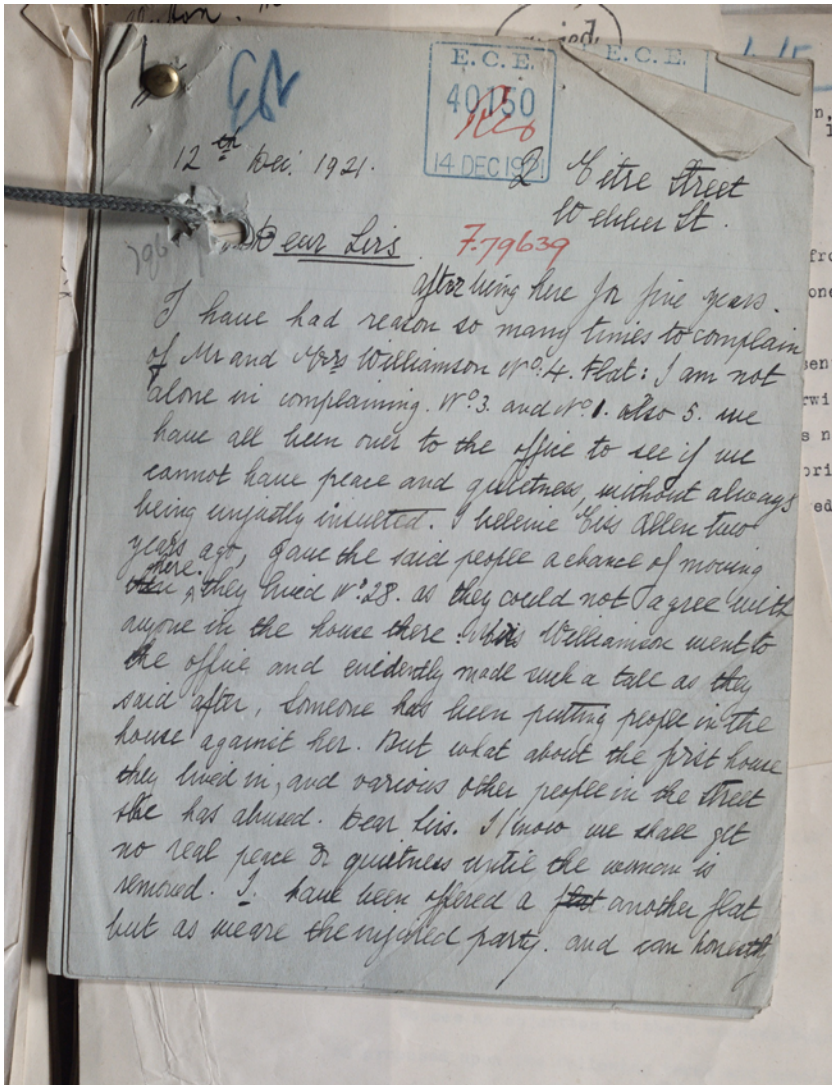


Figure 1. London, Church of England Record Centre, CC79639/2/1921.

semi-public sphere of the shared staircase and this could lead as frequently to moments of conflict as it could to close neighborly relationships.

In beginning to think about my relationship with “pure” found poetry, I discovered that pure found poems are frequently used as qualitative research in sociological case studies (see PATRICK 2016). In this kind of

work, the poem will be a “pure” found poem in that only the text of the interviewee can be used, while the interviewer’s words are cut out. So, the interviewer is editing the interviewee to highlight a point of heightened meaning. While I understand why a social sciences researcher is constantly striving to find better methods of qualitative research, I am troubled by the interviewees’ lack of ownership. Their narratives are the subject of the research and the work a researcher does in editing an interview script into a found poem can often alter it substantially. This can work if there has been no misunderstanding between the researcher and case study subject, but it would not take much in the way of culture clash to skew that qualitative finding in a way that could render it misleading or even redundant. In a preliminary, day-long trawl of the British Library’s collection of theses and journal articles, the only work I could find problematizing this practice in social sciences was from a researcher who is both poet and sociologist and whose article was arguing that such poems are by and large not very good poetry. They did not consider whether such poems present a compromised representation of the narrative (PIIRTO 2002). Even if we, the readers, are supposed to understand the poem as a personal response to the interviewee’s text, as is argued by Piirto, it is still intended to stand in as a form of qualitative and therefore objective text rather than a creative act of editing or writing.

The potential for “missing the point” was something I had considered in my own practice, although I had not known about this social science research method at the time I had “written” my poem. I had considered this problem because I have also worked for a long time with oral history — both as a discipline, a historiography, and as material for poetry. The ethics at play in oral history might form a large part of my discomfort with pure found poetry; who has ownership or authorship of these words, who has the right to interpret them? With oral history, an edit must be made if only so that the reader does not have to plough through an hour or more of interview transcript or recordings, fraught with hesitation and repetition, which, while they do add meaning, are best made available to those who want that level of purity. All the poems in *Whatsname Street* that used other people’s memories or stories had had ethical considerations applied to their writing. And, although this letter was from a different kind of source, I wanted to stay true to the intentions of its author(s).

The aim of my research for *Whatsname Street* was to see if poetry could work as a vehicle for history. Therefore, all my sources had to be verified and referenced. The letter — my “pure” found poem — is from an archive

and therefore verifiable. In some ways the production of the poems was not that different from a prose history. There is a moment in an historian's work cycle when they kick off their shoes and imagine the past. It is part of the process of contextualizing their research for themselves. It is just that when they are writing up their work, they "sit on" that aspect of their thinking. Nothing that cannot be verified can be properly discussed. This was a challenge for me. Poetry is often said to "happen" when "facts" are left behind. That letter, being so publicly verifiable, meant that the facts (the existence of the letter, the syntax of it, the complaint being made, the named individuals) could not be left behind. The event of the poem had to be from the letter's text as it was the only route to the truth of the poem's moment.

Natalie Zemon Davis, in her book *Fiction in the Archives*, has argued that fiction is not the opposite of fact in any case. She points out that fiction comes from the root "fingere", which is about "the crafting of a narrative" (1987, 3), not its lack of factualness — something that may well have been more obvious to the early modern French cultural landscape she is exploring than it would be to us today. She considers the work of pardon writers, people who wrote letters explaining the mitigating factors of those found guilty of capital crimes in sixteenth-century France. The pardon writers were professionals in that they were paid to write. They were writing letters to the King on behalf of people who were often illiterate themselves to explain what had happened in their cases. The letters are written in the first person — as if from the appellant themselves. That aspect of narrative, of being constructed by the teller to suit their own interests, is present, but that does not make it not true. These are also acts of creative editing in that the story is being told to the pardon writer by the appellant and they might alter the text slightly to give it appropriate syntax. After all, as professionals, they might well be judged on their success rate as well as the quality of their letters. For the letter I was using, Mrs. Cretton, the letter's writer, modified the voice of the letter to make it formal and respectful (for the most part) in order to appeal to the people who had power over her and her neighbors' situation. I wanted to allow myself the right to edit it further not just because I was turning it into a poem but because I wanted to demonstrate something to the reader that I had discovered in the letter. My edit of the letter was more of an act of translation than determining authorial intentionality.

The key difference between how I treated the letter for this poem and the way I would have done if I had been writing a history was in the shaping of the text. The selection of which parts I would quote was for the

purpose of giving voice to the author(s) of the letter, of highlighting emotion, of allowing their sense of “flow” to show itself. That would probably not have been the element highlighted in a history essay, except perhaps as an example of historic emotion in the relationships between neighbors in social housing tenements, and such quotations would have been minimal rather than a whole paragraph of text. The shaping of the text as a found poem was another key difference in approach. In an episode of radio program *The Poetry Parlour*, Tamar Yoseloff has described poetry as “shaped text” and compared the act of poem-making to sculpting (2018), and I fully agree with her. The decisions I made in my edit of the text became the poem. So, despite not having fictionalized any of the text, I have presented it in a new shape.

So, the act of editing this letter was my poetic practice, my craft. Partly it involved my choice of selection from the larger text as explained above. Essentially, I wanted to show the reader that moment when the writing breaks down and, in so doing, reveals other aspects of the writer(s)’ true emotions. The formal choice I made was to leave it as it was, in other words it is a prose poem. Largely, I chose this form because the letter has no linear sequence to its narrative, no beginning, middle, or end. It is a list of complaints that could continue, that probably “feel” circular in their occurrence to the writer(s) in that many of them are not one-off events — *they chop wood on the landing, early morning [. . .] She stamps hard, throws heavy articles about the room [. . .] the dirt swept under her neighbours door [. . .]* (CC79639/2/1921). Only a few are specific one-off complaints — *Told the old lady she wanted a penny rattle and was only here to keep the passage clean* (CC79639/2/1921).

Another thing that interested me about the syntax of this part of the letter is that it has a sense of the spoken. As noted above, the letter begins as a piece of relatively formal writing: *Dear Sirs* (CC79639/2/1921). However, when we come to the part of the letter I used for the poem, you can almost hear the voice(s) of the complainants. So, part of what I was doing in creating the poem was an act of translation. Translating from handwritten to typed text, which made the inappropriate full stops seem stranger and more “wrong”, and at the same time also translating from written to spoken — from the letter to dramatic dialogue.

Obviously, given that this work has been published in a book, there is an irony at play here. One of the editing tasks I did apply to this found text was to re-write it as if spoken in a local North Lambeth accent. The letter is written in 1921, and not by people with a distinct dialect, merely an accent. However, they are angry, which would make their diction quite fast

and energetic. The London glottal stop would, I would argue, be a strong feature of the vocal delivery of this letter.

When I first started to consider how working-class London speech (my speech) was presented in text, I was particularly disturbed by how London glottal stops are usually shown in literature — using an apostrophe to indicate the *t* is missing or “dropped”. This is inaccurate as the stop is pronounced — always — in London speech. It is a subtle sound, so when I started to look at other languages that feature the glottal stop and that have punctuation for it, such as Hawaiian or Arabic, using those punctuation marks did not seem appropriate because both those glottal stops are far more pronounced. So, I devised my own mark based on a combination of an HTML sign and a stylized version of the Arabic Aliph, which along with a Hamza forms the Arabic glottal stop. This is the symbol I chose |. *The dir| swept under ‘er neybu| door* (ROBINSON 2021, 65). It is appropriate, in my opinion, to choose to drop the *h* in *her* and write it as *‘er*, as that is unpronounced. Similarly, the *t* is fully pronounced in *swept* because it is followed by a word beginning with a vowel. These are some of the editing choices I made with this “pure” found text in order to enact the translation of it from letter to a dramatic monologue. Here is the poem:

The Crimes of Mrs Williamson

She spi| on my ‘ouse flannel, spa| on my vegtibbles: block| the copper flu with payper: greased the WC pan when it was ‘er turn to clean. The WC ‘as two mops beyind the door. a grea| lump ov motor tyre on the door. boxes ov wood. so we canno| empty our bucke|s. the mats are shook on the landin and they chop wood on the landin, early mornin, the dir| swept under ‘er neybu| door.

She stamps ‘ard, throws ‘eavy articles abaat the room. early mornin’ racin’ up and daan, slammin’ the doors and making a row: when asked to keep quie|, shouts owt: “gettinsyd you dirty forinner” then spa| in our face - said they ‘adbeen waiting for this. Insul|ed us. by saying I was on’y a chorus girl on’y earning free paand. She doesn’| ‘ave to earn ‘er living: but when at 28, she worked on munitions. She lef’ at 5.30 and made enough noyz to wake everywunup. told several peepull in the street she bought flaas for Miss Way when she was ill when she nevvver went near tha| fla|. Told the old laydee she wan|ed a penny ra||le and she woz on’y ‘ere to keep the passage clean.

(ROBINSON 2021, 65)

To conclude: it is through this act of mediating the text, this act of translating and editing, that the tenants’ letter comes further away from its

point of origin as a letter of complaint and becomes changed to a dramatic and slightly circular narrative. What I hope remains is the passion and anger that simmers below the surface of the original and the glimpse of a small community united by geographical and social concerns and its daily internal conflict and accordance.

I think, on balance, that working with “pure” found poetry is an act of creative editing in that to “play” with someone else’s words carries with it ethical considerations best thought of as acts of either intentionality or translation. It is worked and created by the poet/writer/editor but the words did not spring from the mind of that person — they are other. They were found and edited accordingly with all their potential to be drawn on.

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