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**Practising poetry: thinking form, emulation and formal invention**

Abstract:

This paper argues that poetry—as an example of a contemporary art practice—involves inventiveness at several registers deserving of articulation. Whereas established forms of practice stipulate in advance, to a certain degree, the form of the behaviour to be repeated *as* practice (the kata of martial arts, the words and rhythms of prayer, the technical gestures of archery), post-Enlightenment artistic practices can differ from and extend this aspect of practice, in one important respect. If practice generally is that peculiar constellation of ‘doing’ that invites the radically new and courts innovation, then in the case of art the practice is doubly engaged with invention, since—after an apprenticeship—it welcomes innovation at the level of *its own form*. This paper will unpack this claim, with the aim of clarifying for practitioners of any art form, but especially poetry, the two registers at which they can note the appearance and role of newness and the difficulties faced in practising. It then takes up the example of emulation, casting anew its place in an emerging poetic or artistic practice. Emulation can be understood simply as a way practitioners lean on the behavioural forms and examples set by their predecessors or peers, in moments when they are strengthening practising itself. A practice, then, is likely to involve both of these modes: practising within existing, fertile behavioural forms (such as emulation), and phases of more far-reaching invention of the forms of that artistic practice itself. These indeed are entangled, however, a precision regarding practice’s mechanisms, as well as an acknowledgement of emulation’s contribution, it will be argued, can assist makers, but particularly poets, to identify at what register their making might be hindered. Is it that they actually lack a basic set of behaviours via which to pursue their work, or are they facing the inherent difficulty of art, which welcomes the invention of new forms? By acknowledging that art is doubly difficult *as* practice, due to its involving both a mustering of the stamina *to* practice and also *invention* at the level of form, the poet-artist can work with both greater deftness and patience.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Creative Writing – Practice – Poetry – Emulation – Form – Newness – Deleuze –  
Ontology – Invention

## Introduction

We encounter the notion of practising in the realms of the arts, in so-called esoteric or spiritual spheres, in business, in science and politics, and in reference to everyday life. People in fact ‘practise’ all kinds of things: ballet, piano, gardening, archery, listening to music, baking, ceramics, management, golf, and so on. To practise an activity or modality tends to imply at the very least a sustained and more invested engagement with that kind of activity or set of behaviours than if we spoke only of someone ‘doing’ these same things, from time to time, or as one choice of activity or occupation among others.

A practitioner, we can argue, has a serious and somehow augmented relation with their chosen activity or set of behaviours, and this relation is often assumed to be long-standing and to display some consistency. The term ‘practising’ can be used loosely and in inconsistent ways, which for everyday purposes is unproblematic. In this paper, however, we will use the term precisely and in a narrower sense, in relation to the following assertions:

- Practising is a widespread, but seldom accounted for, very precise *mode* of doing.
- Practice, as it manifests across all of its modalities, would be that mode of doing that at once *courts* transformation or the truly new, as well as *cultivating* stability or steadiness. [1]

I have set out elsewhere the mechanics of this theory of practising, but what is most important for our argument here is relation of practising to newness and to formal structures (this may include, but is intended more broadly than as just poetry’s recognised forms). Practising *in any modality* always already involves a relation to the new or to the future. This, I maintain, is irrespective of whether the mode in question would be deemed a creative one by observers, or not. Cleaning the house, in other words, despite its being an apparently humble and quotidian set of behaviours, if raised to the power of what we are calling here ‘practising’ will be such that it courts newness, or future. The newness may not be such that the practitioner suddenly revolutionises the behaviours of cleaning (although they may), but rather that this engagement with cleaning-as-practice will affect the very subjectivity and ontological operations occurring in the context of practising. The practitioner may become new to themselves. They may cease certain intractable behaviours that have burdened them. They may solve—non-causally, but still not without relation to the fact of practising—entrenched problems in other parts of their lives. Practising, then, according to this line of argument, intervenes at an ontological level, and this intervention—this space-opened-up—is what invites what we can call newness, transformation, or the future.

Furthermore, in its pursuit of the new, practising does not primarily default to destructiveness as its effective mode of intervention. It may involve negations of a very nuanced kind, but not—technically speaking—destruction. [2] Noting, then, its non-relation with the face of negation that we call destruction, practising—as we defined it here—involves an inherently stabilising tendency. *That which in practice* stabilises, however, is harder to articulate, since it does not pertain to the ostensible subject of the making, or reinforce that ‘subject’s’ identity, necessarily. We will say more about this. As practice’s defining trait, the co-arising of newness and stability shows it to be strangely *dual*, a mode that non-intuitively marries contrary tendencies. This two-fold character is what sets practising’s ‘effect’ (although this isn’t quite the word) apart from

more pedestrian modes of operating and approaching problems. One of these is habit, which bears an important relation to practising that we will pursue below. As a result, if it is the exemplary mode which *also* invites accident, contingency, newness and enduring breaks with the status quo, practice constitutes a crucial field of inquiry for the arts generally, and arguably for any field concerned with our shared relation to the future.

In what follows, I will spend some time looking at habit's definition and relation to stability, before moving on to explore how practising departs from habit's register. This will involve talking about structured behaviours—what we can call form. We note that in the context of this paper's central theory, form initially refers to meta-level sets of actions broadly. In the context of discussing poetry and art, however, it also recalls more specific forms of making, their conventions, and traditions (consider the sonnet, the ode, the elegy, acrostics, the ballad, haiku, and so on). We will try to make it clear when each is at stake, while at the same time allowing for the resonance that obviously plays between them.

### Habit and practising

Practice is that stabilising mode which—as opposed to regular ways of doing—leaves an ontological window open for the accidental, for the contingent, for the precious 'mistake'. It is now necessary to add one further qualification to what practising is:

- Practising is that mode of doing which unfolds in parallel to habit (since it involves structured behaviours and repetition of those behaviours) but without coinciding with it.

Habit is that mode in which we integrate changes in order to foster continuity. It is suitable for making things stay the 'same' in the flux of modifications and differences that make up an existence. It is not, however, suitable as the portal to invention or transformation, or as the pathway—curiously—for losing so-called 'bad' habits. Habit, in other words, does not offer us a way out of its own register.

When we try to make change come while remaining within the logics of habit, we only end up coercing circumstances so as to inevitably fold them back into the status quo *as it was*. Whether equipped to think its mechanisms or not, artists of all kinds are familiar with this cul-de-sac in making. It is the space of much frustration and confusion, a space from which only a very nuanced and often unsayable sensibility and mode of operating will deliver us.

If we can acquire habits via the will, or by the application of strong intention, we cannot court the arrival of the truly new—or the pure form of the future—using these same approaches. Striving, or will, or mobilised effort of a pedestrian kind may help to establish the forms of doing that will become the future shapes of our practices; however in the knife's edge moment of practising, this timbre of approach is inappropriate and obstructive. We must strive *to* practice, in other words, without striving *in* practice.

The reasons for this are operational, or ontological, rather than a question of style or preference. If we approach things with a mis-inflected effort—through a forcing at a particular register, or wilfulness applied imprecisely—we ignore the closest mechanisms of both habit, and of what it doesn't court: the mode of time that is the future. The former is clearly described by the nineteenth-century philosophy,

Ravaisson, who writes, ‘An acquired habit is the consequence of a change ... Habit is thus a disposition relative to change, which is engendered in a being by the continuity or the repetition of this very same change’ (2008: 25).

Typical or ‘habitual’ modes of doing, then, after Ravaisson, always allow organisms to integrate as continuity the changes that they endure. Habit, as useful as it is, is necessarily a means for the mitigation of surprises. If habit helps us to cope with surprises—something we need for a large percentage of our lives—then practice, a space apart but inside our lives, courts these same surprises.

The doings that gain sufficient fluency to become habits (getting dressed while drinking a coffee, opening a locked front door while speaking on the phone) and about which we need think less and less are, in this way, perfectly suited to sustaining everyday life in aspects of its predictability and consistency. In the sea of flickering minutiae that constitutes our existences, habit provides the satin thread whereby we are able to negotiate this flux, leading sometimes to an ease and flow that Ravaisson associates with ‘grace’ (2008: 75).

abit also invariably includes the tendency to exacerbate its mechanism, leading also to illness, destruction or compulsion. Habit, as Malabou in the introduction to the 2008 edition of Ravaisson’s essay astutely identifies, recalls the *pharmakon*—that which at once poisons and heals (2008: xix). This leads us to acknowledge that, as well as habit’s capacity for smoothing our way in the world, it can enter our lives in less constructive or easy forms. We acquire so-called ‘bad’, destructive or simply uninteresting habits. These can be tenacious and baffling, resistant to direct or ‘conscious’ intervention and therefore confounding our usual logics of what actions make things change or become ‘different’. Applying force directly to so-called ‘bad’ habits, in other words, rarely leads to their dropping away.

But due to its close accompanying of aspects of habit’s operations, practice *does* cultivate habit’s stability. Without foregoing what habit permits—an ability to integrate changes—practising keeps the best of habit and raises it to the next power. In this way, practice indicates more the direction we might take when seeking to shed or lose habit’s more intractable and exacerbated aspects. In this way, we can see why habit and practice are often taken to be synonymous—since they do overlap, to a certain degree—but for rigour’s sake they must be understood as distinct modes. (A good example from poetry, then, involves the need to abstain from *cliché*. The latter is arguably another way to speak of our habits in language and perception.)

Practising overlaps with habit (our ease of expression more generally, say), but subverts and extends it in curious and often non-intuitive ways. As a mode, it involves habit’s same forms and repetitions, but re-enacts them with a reversed application of ‘intentionality’ or volition and a very singular mode of repetition. When we practise, we accompany habit for a distance and then go beyond it (or *beside* it), evading its more pernicious tendencies precisely by nuanced application of a non-natural effort.

In other words, practice does not ramify habit’s tendencies by struggling against them using force—this pulls them tighter—but rather it slips their workings by a subtraction of effort at a precise register of the doing. In practice, we contract or acquire (often intentionally) a form or bounded set of behaviours, and then we intentionally inhabit the repetitions of that form. (This upsets habit’s mode in which we tend to non-intentionally contract the form or action whose repetitions carry us into the *intentionless* rhythms of their logics.) In the operations of practice that go beyond habit, escaping its

score, we access a register where newness is courted and transformation is less and less *unlikely*. (This phrasing might seem strange, but I choose it to emphasise that practice still doesn't *make* the new arrive. It can only *court* it, that is, not-obstruct it, as an affirmative but not coercive stance.)

If habit pins down the vicissitudes of living, stitching continuities of time and selves, practice opens up this same consistency—which can become stale, tired, sedimented or even toxic—to the accidents and subsequent commitments they inspire, which then remake the world. This, I would argue, is valid for all forms of practice, whether that of the studios of Hollywood, the ateliers of the avant-garde, or the modest ministerings happening in the Aged Care facility of an anonymous rural town. People are practising everywhere, and very often know neither how to admit *that* they are, nor to name precisely *what* they are up to. In the realms of art (with artists being among those who use the term 'practice' more self-consciously), the question of practice is both the same and more complex. This paper aims to think through this particular difference: not so much a difference within the mechanisms of practice itself (between general practice and art practice), but rather that the repercussions of practising in art fold themselves back into one of the criterion of practice itself.

All practices—irrespective of modality and including so-called non-creative ones—have the special tendency to court innovation or the windows that allow it. In this way, practice of all kinds is always already related intimately to newness and the future, putting to work the very ontological mechanisms proper to the future as synthesis of time (see Deleuze 2004: 107ff). In the case of art, however—and especially at that moment in art where art becomes synonymous with the reinvention and renewal of its own forms and mechanisms—the presence of inventiveness and newness operates at this first level, *and* at a subsequent register. As engaged practitioners of various art forms, we could do well to articulate for ourselves firstly what these two registers are, and secondly how and when they are at play in our daily and lifelong practices. To be clear: *all* practice involves a particular inflection of a formal repetition. The latter is such that it is not inimical to newness and doesn't forego steadiness. This, of course, holds for artistic as well as general modes of practice, but in the case of so-called *creative* modalities, there is a second 'moment'. This would be when the 'newness' obtains as *invention*, that is when via practising there is *also* or additionally an unleashing of new forms (*of* that art form).

In what follows I will sketch out the two levels at which *form* operates for practice in fields committed to formal invention. Practising within *any* form, then, is an undertaking that already dances with a seldom recognised or accounted-for creativity. In the case of art, however, and of poetry specifically, that which might be produced as newness is thrilling since it might well be a *form* of that art itself. This will feed back into the creative practice, multiplying the *forms* that could be used as the base form for the practice. The shape of practising, then, in the case of so-called creative modes, is therefore itself made new. Practising in the arts involves both an initial fidelity or adherence to a chosen form (say, life drawing) as well as innovations at the level of form itself (say, experimental poetry). Avant-gardism usually involves emphasising this second role of form in practising, but it may or may not declare its engagement with, or focus on its dependence on, the former notion of form. Pound's (1934) exhortation *Make It New!* as the *cri de coeur* of a moment in modernism, in fact, affirms both levels: first, that the mechanics of making involve setting form ('it') to work, and second, that within the repetitions of the base form, the 'new' might arrive, emerging out of the strange, next-level repetition at the heart of serious practising.

## The criteria of practising and their relation to poetry

Let's turn first to form's role for the first criterion—or consistent aspect—of any modality of practising. This helps to frame more precisely how form operates at a subsequent register in so-called creative or artistic practices where inventiveness in relation to form itself is emphasised.

### *i ) Form (or set of bounded behaviours): the first criterion of practice*

Many of us who feel the impulse, fleeting or tenacious, to work in an artistic tradition or modality suspect the relevance of a basic form or way to approach day-to-day engagements with the practice. This does not mean a slavish adherence to the sonnet, say, but it might be seen at the level of a regular mode of a range of behaviours pertaining to the practice.

Depending on our personalities, we may or may not relish this notion of working within boundaries specified in advance and not of our own devising. Given that in this article, I am speaking specifically about art practice, we can state the role of form in the following way:

- For practice to begin at all, there must be a bounded set of actions, or a finite repertoire of doings, that constitute the basic 'form' of the chosen modality.

Taking the example of poetry, it could be that steady or voracious reading of poetry (and other genres), working to produce verses and lines within certain established forms, noticing the world and observing the workings of language and everyday cadences, or listening to music, could constitute a feasible set of actions that would suffice as a starting point of *form* for the practitioner of poetry. Form here, as mentioned, means *consistent behaviour*, and this obviously may include traditional poetic forms or formal constraints, but is not limited to them.

In order for practising to function, we need a set of behaviours that have been acquired—often intentionally—and which are consistent enough that they can be deemed to be able to repeat. In other words, I might slide into being a practitioner of poetry, when I regularly and repeatedly, over long periods of time, re-enact that set, admittedly fluid and shifting over time, of mostly bounded actions. The same thing could be said for someone who blogs each week or daily, or who prays each evening before sleep. This repetition coincides with a set of habitual actions. By habitual, echoing Ravaissou and others, we do not imply any necessarily negative inflection. Something in the set of behaviours constituting the form of the practice—and which may resemble closely a kind of *habitude*—will be consistent enough that we can identify a *continuity*. It is this identifiable continuity that makes this first stage of practising resemble certain contours proper to habit.

There will obviously be variations marking each instance of the repetition, and in fact, this variation is native to the habitual aspect of the behaviour, rather than to the practice aspect. Habit, if we recall above, is about making consistencies out of the flux of tiny variations or differences that constitute *how things are*. We go, then, *via* habit on the way *to* practice. Regular and repeated enacting of a set of behaviours will constitute habit in all the glory of its capacity for integrating change.

To reiterate, habits, as Ravaissou, and more recently Grosz (2013) have noted, are 'disposition[s] relative to change, which [are] engendered in a being by the continuity or the repetition of this very same change' (Ravaissou 2008: 25). Habit is the being's

response to changes—inevitable changes—arriving often (although not necessarily) from the ‘outside’. The habitual register nestled within practice involves a repetition relative to constant change, to relentless variation, but which has nothing to do with the radically new, or transformation *per se*. If this seems strange, please bear with me, as I link this criterion to the second.

*ii) Repetition: the second criterion of practice*

When practice is still at its habitual register (one that isn’t transcended once and for all; it is more a matter of arguably ‘flickering’ in and out of practice), the form and then our repeating of this form constitute the first two criteria of practising. We can summarise the second criterion thus:

- For practice to proceed, the acquired form or set of behaviours must be of a kind that *can be* repeated and *is* repeated. Repetition here will mark both: the set of behaviours more generally (one will play golf three times a week); and also the components of the form itself (one will repeatedly hit the ball, repeatedly walk, repeatedly lean down and take the ball from the hole within a single game of regular playing).

Repetition, then, in this second criterion, is at work at the global level of the modality and within it, as constituting aspects of the form itself. In other words, repetition is nested within repetitions. Many practices involve such sub-sets of repetitive actions, which are then repeated together to constitute the repetitive, ‘umbrella’ aspect of practising.

Let’s apply this to our stipulated form of poetry. For poetry to begin to be practised, it will involve the first two criteria: adherence to, and acquisition of, an identifiable *form*; and then *repetition* of this form. This form may be a form, *per se*, that we recognise as a form of poetry (the villanelle), or it may be a set of behaviours that contains our engagement with poetry. Aspiring poets may be less clear about this initial and necessary aspect of entering practice, or may feel ambivalent about it. The Pound of 1934 espouses a rigorous and far-reaching engagement with pre-existing forms and traditions: the ‘it’ of that same catch-cry. This might, and less by way of contrast, be considered alongside something like ceramics practice in the Japanese tradition. In the throwing of a tea bowl, there is the attempt to remain as close to that stipulated behavioural or gestural form as possible. In this way, innovation is not first and is not encouraged as an explicit intention. This is not in order to preclude innovation; in fact it is understood to be what—at a deeper register—lets it in.

On this point, ceramics practitioner and artist, Sophie Harle, comments:

through repetition and adherence to a form innovation is possible—or perhaps a good pot is possible. My teacher says you have to throw 1,000 pots before you throw one worth keeping. In pottery there’s a strong belief in the value of repetition and practice.[3]

It might not be unfair to say that so-called perceptions of an ‘Eastern’ approach to making tend to focus on this adherence to form, which might seem more silent on the topic of innovation. So-called ‘Western’ approaches to making would *seem* to emphasise innovation with a wariness of ‘staid’ over-fidelity to forms. I use the terms ‘perceive’ and ‘seem’ here to make clear that it is only a cursory encounter with either sides of this binary that produces the apparent slant. All traditions of making that are generative and sustained, I contend, *must* include both aspects. It may simply be that descriptions of what is happening can exaggerate one or the other aspect of what in fact must be going on. There must be form; there must be repetition—*if* inventiveness is

going to obtain at all. Without a formal aspect operating, inventiveness, at any register, but especially at a formal one, will be ontologically precluded (see Pont 2017).

As artists and practitioners, more generally, we need a steady, consistent form (that will resemble a habit but which doesn't collapse into habit per se) that we can then repeat with intention. This intention (however we understand that term) is what distinguishes practising from habit, marking the threshold between the former and modes of compulsion or routine. In both compulsive and routinised modes, intention doesn't operate in the way that is most conducive to the repetition-of-form tipping over into practice.

Ravaisson can help us here, with his close observation of habit's mechanisms and tendencies. He writes:

One becomes accustomed over time to the most violent poisons. In relation to chronic illnesses, medicines lose their power ... Movements or situations that initially are most difficult and tiring become over time the most convenient ... In the same way, the most unhealthy air and food become the very conditions of health. (2008: 63)

What Ravaisson is not leaving out of his precise (and also often optimistic) reading of habit is that those mechanisms that account for habit as 'the primordial law and the most general form of being, the tendency to persevere in the very actuality that constitutes being' (2008: 77), are by necessity the very same which lead to illness, perverse modes of repetition and even to the visceral death which inhabits us.

In order to recognise the imbrication of these modes with a more neutral mode of habit, I choose the terms 'routine' and 'compulsion', to gesture towards the momentum that tends towards the extremes of Ravaisson's scale. In the former, a behaviour has been taken up by the organism—us!—so thoroughly that the behaviour is able to repeat in the complete absence of an intention to do so. In the case of compulsion, by contrast but similarly, there is a seeming inability to cease the repetition of the behaviour and so, again, intention's role is absent or diffused.[4]

We can recall here that the first stage of practising involves the operation of two distinct criteria: i) a form (as set of behaviours) is required; and ii) this form is such that it can be repeated *intentionally*. The role of intention in the case of practice, as opposed to habit, is noteworthy since where habit can involve the unintentional contraction of a behavioural set, practice tends to involve the intentional acquisition of the form. Similarly, the repetition at play in habit tends to stretch all the way from automated routinised repetition to compulsive repetition. Practice, however, passing as it does via more intentional repetitions, pertains specifically to that narrower band which slips between routine and compulsion.

Practice is more likely to be a mode that flickers in and out of our activities, as they lurch at times between these two poles. We can account for this by dint of how fine and elusive the intentions of practising are. It is an art in itself to remain close to them.

We can stipulate, then, that there is an elusive region of habitual behaviour not inimical to, or available for, practice's mechanisms. Within this restricted field, it is possible for the quotidian equation of {Form + Repetition} to tip into another mode, or to be raised to another power. In the next section I look briefly at the final criteria for practice, before considering firstly the notion of emulation and then the imperative of formal (or second level) inventiveness that has marked artistic practice arguably from the Enlightenment onwards.[5]

## Transforming formations

Well, I would like to make,  
thinking some line still taut between me and them,  
poems direct as what the birds said,  
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,  
mysterious as the silence when the tailor  
would pause with his needle in the air.

Levertov 'Illustrious ancestors' (2002: 9)

So far we have been endeavouring to argue that it could be constructive and helpful for makers to have a basic grasp of the mechanisms involved in, and necessary for, practising. The latter is constituted by a constellation of operations that *do not* (ontologically speaking) preclude the newness that artists often so dearly seek. Otherwise put, there are lot of things we *do* that simply don't help. Many established practitioners know aspects of what helps and doesn't, but as hunch, as tricks of their trade, without being able to say it outside of anecdote. But 'doing' and 'practising' are related, while also quite distinct. Practising must be a form of doing, but it is another inflection of our usual modes of the former, and of effort itself.

The importance of the way in which effort is wielded pertains to the third criterion, which is relaxation. We will not unpack it extensively here, although we can begin by saying that without a form in which one can 'forget' oneself in order to 'remember' something else—to borrow the phrase of Phillips concerning the practice of psychoanalysis (see 2013: 106ff)—then raising the habit-mimicking mode of the first two criteria to the next power of practising is unlikely to happen.

### *iii) Relaxation*

Relaxation is a subtle and far-reaching aspect of practice. It constitutes the threshold at which practice departs from an intentional accompanying of habit and begins to operate more clearly in the climes of something quite other. Relaxation involves a deeper and more nuanced engagement with intentionality that operates by dint of an abstaining from any push for change, or to exceed the current conditions. Relaxation is that finely trained moment where striving drops away. As mentioned, one can strive *to* practice, but one does not—technically—strive *in* practice, or in that crucial phase of one's mode/activity when inventiveness might be possible. Striving, in such delicate moments, only complicates things ontologically and gets in the way of the mechanisms that court newness.

In relaxation, there is technically effort, but it is mobilised differently, in a deft way such that there is *only the effort of expending apt effort* (before even that sliver of effort drops away). In Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés [A Throw of the Dice]*, we get an amazing image that recalls this:

LE MAÎTRE

hors d'anciens calculs

où la manoeuvre avec l'âge oubliée

surgi

inférant	jadis il empoignait la barre
de cette conflagration	à ses pieds
	de l'horizon unanime
que se	prépare
	s'agite et mêle
	au poing qui l'étreindrait
comme on menace	un destin et les vents

[The master / outside of ancient calculations / where the manoeuvre lost with age / risen / implying that / formerly he grasped the helm / of this conflagration / of the unanimous horizon / at his feet / that prepares itself / becomes restless and merges / in the fist that would strangle it / the way one menaces / a destiny or the winds] (1914: np, my translation)

It is the word 'strangle' [*étreindre*] that is so evocative in this excerpt. A precise choice of words that is fairly unambiguous in the French—a strangling fist, a fist that would strangle—brings to mind the modes we can slide into during our practice, where our ardour to squeeze originality or newness from our *place* [*lieu*, see Mallarmé 1914] works to thwart our longing, our intention, but in our struggle to make we still do it.

Relaxation, as criterion, might speak to this moment, to that non-intuitive sensibility which bypasses a knee-jerk response for more pushing, more coercive, in order rather to find the tiny wormhole that opens onto Somewhere Else. Needless to say, the criterion of relaxation is so confounding for anyone accustomed to quotidian notions of 'how things get done' that many attempts at practising falter at this stage. Mallarmé's poem—as a work that addresses itself directly to the question of art's contingency, its source and operation—conjures this hydraulic within effort, with the image of our own clenched fists strangling out the newness that we would otherwise want to welcome.

The new (or even established) practitioner can't quite believe that an asymptotic reduction of extraneous effort is actually the pathway towards the radical transformation that they're seeking. As Mallarmé notes: the bitter prince might be adorned heroically but is contained by his 'small, virile reason' [*contenu / par sa petite raison virile*]. That it finally won't be possible to even claim with any rigour that the practitioner 'did' the action that courted the transformation, may have something to do with this.

Relaxation as criterion, therefore, cannot be fulfilled by dint of control. It is not repression. Efforts of repression, to speak more psychoanalytically, are always just that—*efforts*, even if unconscious. Energy bound up in striving (whether left to run or repressed) is unavailable for constellations that would invite the surprising, the accidental, the gracious. Relaxation cannot be achieved superficially; we cannot trick ontological operations. Our pedestrian approach to effort must fall away. This involves (as most of us know) years of training and application. (Relaxation is not another word for collapsing.) Sometimes, too, new practitioners can have chance encounters with its precursor, its avatar, what we sometimes call beginner's luck.

This strange hinge in the set of criteria of practising marks the point at which the conditions or context within which the newness might arrive has been established—those being: behavioural form/sets of actions *and* intentional repetition of that form. This context accounts to a large extent for the stability afforded to long-term practitioners. Stability, however, is not newness. Of course, it matters very much that

artists have stable forms in which to practise. Without these, practising can remain elusive, or indeed a kind of flabby conceit. It is the difference between someone placing more focus on *being a writer* (identity), rather than on *writing* consistently, seriously and over a long period (engagement).

This raises another contentious but curious aspect—that of the *thinning out* of identity that happens when practice is at its most robust and fluent. The stability that arises is *not* that of an identity becoming sedimented. It is more of a contextual stability—that is, the conditions for welcoming the new become steadier, more able to withstand what newness brings. Furthermore, serious practitioners may finally end up having less interest in their *selves*, as entities in which they could rigorously believe. (Others who admire them, on the other hand, may get fixated on concept of this artistic self.)

Of course, artists can also objectify themselves, which can become problematic for practising. I'd argue that in the moment of making, this self image, the agent herself, *does* and *must* drop in order for newness to obtain. On this point, Deleuze writes unambiguously:

the new, what is produced under the condition of default and by the intermediary of metamorphosis... causes neither the condition nor the agent to return: on the contrary it repudiates these and expels them with all its centrifugal force. It constitutes the autonomy of the product, the independence of the work. (2004: 113)

This flings us forward into aspects of the final criterion, which follows directly on from what relaxation abstains from stifling—a final, strange operation.

#### *iv) The final criterion*

The fourth criterion is the least penetrable in terms of what we could call typical, causal logics. It relies on the steady operation of the previous three: form/behavioural set; intentional (normal) repetition of that form; radical relaxation or minimisation of effort. It involves a very strange, indeed 'miraculous' kind of repetition—an *other* ilk of repetition—one which Deleuze fleshes out thoroughly in *Difference and Repetition* (2004). He notes, in an intriguing statement early in the work: 'To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to *something unique* which has no equal or equivalent' (2004: 1; emphasis added).

The final criterion can be called *Repeating repetition*, to distinguish it from the first repetition that coincides with repetitions of variation or difference. This *other* repetition admits of no excess. It is exact (not in the sense of perfect, because it has no model—it may be understood in relation to the pure simulacrum). It amounts to an addition of *nothing*, and in its strange atmospheres newness can enter, stabilise and become effective.[6] This is not the forum for a lengthy examination of this final aspect, however, we can say that it is where a Deleuzian ontology coincides with the lived experience of practitioners and with those moments of grace that are definite, real, although unable to be coerced according to pedestrian logics.

Let's now consider what we've explored here above, in light of the more practical issue of emulation, as an example of putting a behavioural form to use in a certain way, for the requirement of practising's first criterion. This, as may be becoming clear, operates aside from and logically prior to the question of formal invention per se.

## **Emulation in art practices**

Out of all this, the moment may come when the young writer feels he can make his emotions into poetry. He should begin, of course, by *imitating* the writers he likes. This is the way the writer becomes himself through losing himself—that strange way of double living ...

Borges ‘Who needs poets?’ (1971; emphasis added)

Art—with poetry as one mode of it—looks to benefit from a rigorous theory of practising, not least because it can clarify the two registers at which newness and invention, respectively, operate in it. All practice (artistic or quotidian) cultivates a context in which newness is more likely, or *at least* doesn’t preclude newness with obstructive modes. For art, however, there is the openings to newness that result from an adherence to form as a set of behaviours (which may also be a recognised poetic form), and then there is the newness *of forms*. Formal innovation, as such.

Put differently, a poet may both write a sonnet that hasn’t been written before—a new, discrete work—but might also, via adherence to the sonnet form, over decades, as their way of practising, inadvertently unleash a new poetic form that will be accessible for others who will then deploy that form in turn, as the basic shape of their own practising. (Derrida, in his work on invention in *Psyché—L’invention de l’autre*, confirms this from another angle. Among six criteria of the invention, he notes that the fourth is the invention’s iterability (1987: 16). For an invention to constitute something truly new, it must both have not have been foreseeable within the prior situation, but after invention it is such that it may be used by others. It can be mobilised—as a recognisable constellation, then—and set going independently of its inventor.)

This second register of newness is rare and elusive. Someone like Badiou, as I read him, would align it with events and truths (see Badiou 2007 and 2009). What becomes murky, often, for newer practitioners of artistic modalities bombarded with an emphasis on newness, is that it is not possible to *try* to work at this coalface, so to speak. One cannot try to invent directly. (One can, perhaps, arguably, *tend* the eventual site, as context—see Badiou 2007: 179.) Direct attempt would neglect the mechanisms of how invention operates at its quietest levels—as we’ve attempted to explicate earlier in this paper.

For an artist to work—to practise—they *have* to mobilise an existing form. Recall that this might be form *par excellence* (sonnet, haiku, Oulipo constraint, and so on), but it might also be more generally the shape of their behaviour pertaining to their chosen doing. If the artist doesn’t find this form as the basis for a practising, then that which might seem to be inventive will often be only a banal or presumptuous shifting around of existing pieces, or simply beginner’s luck, which they trail after fruitlessly when it evaporates. The activity, not having consistency, may fall apart or not ‘take’. Repetition in its usual mode won’t gather momentum, and the shift into repetition’s special register so important in practising won’t work. Nothing new *could* enter or obtain. Practising’s reliance on steady form *of some kind* does not constitute one possible doorway to making, but rather is a requirement of making’s ontology.

What this means, attitudinally, for poetic artists is that it is possible that their practice is not ‘working’ as they’d hope due to one of the vital, non-negotiable elements of practice not being in play, or not in play *enough*. This is a serious matter. I suspect that the prevalence of modes of self-harm, self-berating, extreme states of mind, and feelings of failure often stand in for something that—were it to operate—would involve

serious labour, but be also steadier and *defter*. My taking aim at these modes does not hinge on a kind of moral squeamishness, but rather involves a question of efficacy, or precise insight into process.

Monique Wittig, referencing Proust in her work *The Literary Workshop* (2007), has this to say about the writer's apprenticeship and a set of behaviours called 'copying':

Apprenticeship, in fact, and its relation to already existing works, comes not just from reading; it can also include *writing exercises* such as Proust's systematic *imitation of Flaubert* (see Genette), which is the equivalent of copying as a way to learn how to draw in the field of painting. It would be interesting to know if the case of Proust is atypical or if, on the contrary, copying is part of apprenticeship. (2007: 549; emphasis added)

What the four criteria reveal about practising is simply that certain operations *must* be there and happening, and these may manifest in a variety of ways. Form, as a set of available behaviours or procedures (not invention at the level of form itself), is the first one. It potentially offers poets or any kind of artist a realm in which they can begin to work, since artists also become artists because they love to do this work. It can be tormenting and frustrating not to know *how* to proceed.

In this case, terms like 'inspiration' or 'muse' may well also be a shorthand for some very tangible sets of behaviours and habitudes that poets or artists have distilled into (sometimes) productive personal mythologies that cross-fertilise with long-standing cultural beliefs and imaginaries. If encountering the 'muse' involves regular walks in the bush, it would seem to me that the form[ula] {regular walking + consistent location} has to be included in what feeds and enables inspiration.

By *form* we need to understand the *that-which-is-repeatable*. It may be an almost invisible, or nuanced behaviour; it may be entirely internal, unable to be viewed by a witness, and so on. It may also be explicit and align with recognisable traditions, such as the copying of others in one's lineage, in Wittig's example. The recent emphasis on the routines or rituals of artists rehearses something of this relevance, but can miss the point of what is going on. It's not that one should use a typewriter like Hemingway, but rather that one should mobilise, as he did, *a* chosen mode of consistency—the 'form' then being regular use of one piece of hardware. This, not the brand of typewriter, was arguably an aspect of what enabled his work to make accessible, to invite to *appear*, an arguably new form in prose fiction.

Emulation can be articulated for our purposes, then, as one way in which practitioners lean on the forms, sets of behaviours, of their predecessors or peers, in moments when they are strengthening practising itself (with the latter's inherent relation to newness, irrespective of the pursuit of formal innovation). Emulation (understood here in its widest sense) would then be a possible bread-and-butter aspect of the labour of being a practitioner. As one way to mobilise the formal criterion of practising, emulation is arguably a space of relief and regularity for the maker. This doesn't suggest that it should fold into habitual modes (although it sometimes, of course, will). Emulation is a way to begin and to continue. It creates a shape that encourages repetition to get going.

Far from being a move away from, or wary of, invention, emulation is then a reliable pathway towards it, among a suite of ways. It corresponds to and enables the first two criteria of practice: i) acquiring a stable form; ii) repeating this form intentionally. As mentioned, habit and practice dovetail in these first two criteria, with the fine distinction between them consisting of the intention operating in the latter.

Habit, when inflected through the criteria of practice, will be taken up *intentionally*, accompanied via repetition, then inflected with the addition of (technically) nothing, flipping typical repetition into its more miraculous mode (see Deleuze 2004: 3). With these cumulative, reinforcing aspects in play, the mode of practising obtains, and new forms *of that art form* may be a side-effect of practising (speaking in terms of causalities is not quite precise for this register).

In my own practices, I note that a preoccupation with form's *outcomes* tends to produce neither more expansive innovation nor much ease. Attempts to innovate, to come up with something new or to 'advance' in the practice, would seem rarely to lead directly to that outcome. And this is hardly news. Working instead with a constraint (also a kind of formal requirement), adhering to a pre-existing form, or making according to an identifiable and repeatable *way*, would seem not-to-preclude the surprising, the new, the inventive mistake, and so on.

The good news for poets, if we affirm what the criteria of practising make clear, is that having a form to work with is a prerequisite for sustainable, intensive making. And emulation might be one invaluable pathway via which a serious practice can pass. It might also, probably, pass through this point again and again. 'Emulation' here, then, might include ekphrasis, stylistic and voice imitations and play, intertextual engagements, collaborative games, along with an apprenticeship in the repertoire of established poetic forms, or outright copying as a warming up into writing. These are, and have always been, constraints (or obstructions) that have had the potential to intervene ontologically, to interrupt the *what-is* for the *what-next*. And this list is clearly not exhaustive.

Form, as a requirement or criterion of any kind of practising then, is the first moment of several that are crucial for the side effects of practice: namely the simultaneous arising of newness and stability. With regards to the latter, repetition of a consistent form will be what lends stability to the practitioner's endeavours—over time and in their rhythms. This stability is, as this paper implies, what can sometimes be missing for artists, who are pursuing their 'innovations' with insufficient ontological information. One reason for practising's 'strangeness' is how the stability it courts does not exclude transformation but rather reliably accompanies it.

## Conclusion

An understanding of the operations of practice—its four criteria—stands to serve artists well, offering guidance and solace to the newer practitioner of any form, including that of poetry. Practice, as we have argued, can be rigorously articulated in terms of its ontologies; and it proceeds in a precise and thinkable way. It involves a context stabilising, and then newness of all kinds being *not*-precluded from that set of conditions.

Informed by a theorising of practice at this level, we can acknowledge that art is doubly difficult *as* practice, due to its involving both a mustering of the stamina *to* practice and also and the (historically relatively more recent) artistic imperative of *invention* at the level of form. The latter, however, is not something the artist can go at directly; it should not be the shape necessarily of their preoccupation. Instead they can work with a deftness and patience afforded by a theory of practice, building intensity across time through the cultivation of an awareness of the importance of form (as sets of behaviours) for practising at all. By attending to this criterion (rather than to the



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