Craft: A Memoir

Tony Trigilio

Chapter One Series
Tony Trigilio’s *Craft: A Memoir* is an uncommon and entirely compelling exploration of influences, how what we read and where we place our attention determines the writing we produce. From meditation and mindfulness to the metaphysical and mysterious, Trigilio’s clear and helpful advice for writers rightly encourages us to cast our vision “both wide and deep.” Not your usual craft guide, but something even better.

—DINTY W. MOORE

When Trigilio tells you his poetry often takes place in the abandoned televangelist theme park of his childhood, take him at his word. Beginners reading this book with a sense of what Trigilio calls “obstinacy” will see a path to shape all of their passions toward creating art. The presiding spirits—it’s fair to call them that—are his fellow writer Mitch, and Trigilio’s cranky, half-feral cat Shimmy. (Mitch taught Tony to take himself seriously, and Shimmy had “untamed” opinions about Donald Rumsfeld and Glenn Beck.) Trigilio addresses both beginners and veterans, all of whom are always trying to incorporate “what I’m thinking about right now” into crafted writing. One overarching purpose of *Craft: A Memoir* is to communicate how he learned to internalize the outer world through wedding documentary impulse to his private inner landscape, and equally the contrary—to externalize his otherwise isolate inner world, manifested in poetry. Because Mitch and Shimmy are accompanied here by Tony’s deceased parents, this is a book of the dead about how to make your writing live. You can’t read it without wanting to start writing your own. MFA students, asked what they want more of in programs I’ve been associated with, always say craft; regardless of genre, here’s a new book for them.

—DIANA HUME GEORGE

With horror, I learned from Tony Trigilio’s *Craft: A Memoir* that Audubon shot and killed all the birds he’d depicted in his paintings! I don’t know if I can forgive Trigilio for that bit of too-much-information, even though he says he was horrified, too. But I highlight that element that obnoxiously lingers like Disney’s “It’s A Small World” tune because it’s a detail that’s relevant for one of the most important ways to be
a good poet: reading widely. (And Trigilio passed on the Audubon revelation from his own reading habits.) There are many “craft” lessons for this art of poetry which contains many paths. Trigilio’s way includes knowing not only what one is supposed to know but also what he calls “arcane.” By delivering his ideas convincingly, and with his own life as proof, he makes this book a worthwhile read.

—EILEEN R. TABIOS

In *Craft: A Memoir*, Tony Trigilio provides an inside look into his progression as a poet—from a “middling, utilitarian, rust-belt” childhood to an accomplished professor of creative writing. With side steps into journalism and music, Trigilio’s true north remains poetry. He learns about craft and persistence from his teachers (Ms. Omark—4th grade) and his college profs and his grad school roommate Mitch Evich whose rigorous routine allows him to finish his novel. Trigilio continues to practice discipline and time-management alongside his wife Liz, also a writer. He meditates and keeps a journal. As he chronicles his own projects—from pop culture to history—Trigilio gives us a behind-the-desk view of one of our most celebrated American poets. A fascinating read.

—DENISE DUHAMEL
CRAFT: A MEMOIR
ALSO BY TONY TRIGILIO

POETRY

Proof Something Happened
Ghosts of the Upper Floor
Inside the Walls of My Own House
The Complete Dark Shadows (of My Childhood), Book 1
White Noise
Historic Diary
With the Memory, Which is Enormous
Make a Joke and I Will Sigh and You Will Laugh and I Will Cry
The Lama’s English Lessons

CRITICISM

Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics
“Strange Prophecies Anew”

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Dispatches from the Body Politic:
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For Mitch Evich
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Passing Through Our Brief Moment in Time

Poetic language is the only kind of discourse that helps me untangle what is strange, weird, and sublime in my everyday lived experience. Poetry forces me to pay attention. It requires me to slow down my emotional and intellectual attention spans and listen to what the unknown world is telling me. But I also write from deep anxiety that some part of my environment might go unrepresented unless shaped into language.

The relationship between anxiety and speech was an inescapable part of my childhood. I was fortunate to grow up in a household and extended family where two different languages were spoken—English and Italian. I was exposed at any early age to the way language can fail to convey anything. What’s more, my mother suffered from a severe hearing disorder, a malady that runs in our entire family, and we all took for granted that no matter how earnestly we try to communicate, our words inevitably leave gaps in understanding. Instead, each effort to try to represent a feeling, idea, or experience in language became something of a dare. As much as we distrusted language in my family, we just as fervently believed in it. We didn’t need to read Wallace Stevens to know that words are “necessary fictions.”

Language was and is our ticket into community. In my family, narrative was what kept us thriving. As a child, I was riveted by the
colloquial oral histories my mother and father told over dinner—stories of how their first-generation immigrant families navigated the bizarre ways of this new country and how their otherness frustrated them. My impulse for narrative comes from my family’s stories. But poetic narrative encompasses more than just plot-based storytelling that builds toward cleanly structured epiphanies. Poetic narrative is cross-cut with associational, often interfering images and phrases, and by counterpoint rhythms and voicings that interrupt the trajectory of the standard narrative arc. This dance between narrative linearity and flash-cut interruption is what makes the most opaque or elusive experiences speakable.

Like many poets, my first experience with this kind of discourse occurred in sacred texts, where the representation of extrasensory phenomena depends on the figurative language of poetry. Consider Ezekiel: the more you try to describe the flaming chariot you see in the sky, its wheel rims full of eyes, the stranger and more unfamiliar—and more poetic—your language becomes.

My first secular poetry obsession was Dylan Thomas, whose work taught me that poems express what can’t be contained by the limited logic of everyday language. Like the religious texts of my Catholic childhood, Thomas’s work induced a feeling of vertigo that, paradoxically, also helped me see the world more clearly—that encouraged me to pay attention to the ineffable landscapes beneath the surface of things. I couldn’t take vision for granted anymore. Seeing was a matter of urgency.

“Begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father,” we recited from the Nicene Creed each week in Catholic mass, describing the mystery of the incarnation—a line that I couldn’t stop saying out loud when I was younger, even though it bewildered me to no end. Its regular rhythm clashed with its sinewy semantics, which heightened the difficulty of imagining the god-made-flesh we were celebrating in church every Sunday. Eventually, I decided that this line from the
Nicene Creed was the only appropriate verse to follow the opening lines of Thomas’s “Altarwise by Owl-Light,” one of the favorite poems of my youth (possibly because it was absolutely inscrutable to me):

“Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house / The gentleman lay graveward with his furies / Begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.”

I was thrilled by my earliest exposure to religious texts, but poetry was special because it was secular. Thomas’s difficult, mystical poems weren’t trying to persuade me to be a good Catholic, which would’ve been a futile effort, anyway. I converted to Buddhism a quarter-century ago, a religion with its own tradition of voicing what seems beyond language (but without the metaphysical doom and gloom of original sin).

Music was the bridge between religious language and poetry for me. The lyrics in songs like “Eleanor Rigby” and “Nowhere Man,” especially, offered a vocabulary to describe the solitary nature of being human, a difficult feeling I was just starting to experience, and one that I barely understood. These songs suggested, as religious texts did, that a luminosity can be found inside those intensified moments of feeling when we are alone with ourselves.

You see, I grew up in a middling, utilitarian, rust-belt city, Erie, Pennsylvania. It was not the kind of place where you could find a lot of artistic role models. I was grateful for those rare moments when an adult asked me what I was writing and actually wanted to hear my answer. The first to do this was my fourth-grade writing teacher, Ms. Omark. She convinced me that I could write autobiographical material that other people might want to read. I composed my first serious poem in 1974, age eight, an anxiety-ridden response to my abject fear of tornadoes. We didn’t have a basement. I wrote about my terror that we had nowhere to hide if a tornado touched down in our neighborhood. Ms. Omark liked the poem so much that she asked me to rewrite it on poster board and taped it to the front of her desk.
Later, in my first undergraduate poetry workshop at Kent State University, I began to take poetry seriously. We had little space in our family to cultivate the arts. But here I was, in a college-level classroom with twelve students who wanted to write poetry. Our instructor, Mac Hassler, guided us with formal and informal writing prompts, and he also taught us how to keep a regular journal and then to incorporate our journaling into finished poems that could have a shape and voice all their own. This pedagogy is a foundation for the creative writing courses I teach now at Columbia College Chicago. Back then, it was a revelation that the four walls of the classroom could be an environment for intimate life-writing.

Poetry, then, came to me foremost as a personal thing: an art form that documents our emotions as they collide with the outside world. Poetry revealed itself as the artistic practice best suited for exploring the mysterious emotional narrative arc of my life. I was drawn to poetry because it gives me access to the vulnerable, the strange, the unsayable in what otherwise seems ordinary.

A poem is a document of an ordinary person making discoveries about the self and the world while passing through a brief moment in time. This spirit is at the core of a documentary collection like my book *Proof Something Happened*, and it’s also crucial to my autobiographical work. In an immediate, ongoing way, this aesthetic serves as the conceptual blueprint for my multivolume experiment in poetic memoir, *The Complete* Dark Shadows (*of My Childhood*), published by BlazeVOX [books]. As part of my research for this series of books, I’m re-watching every episode of the old 1960s gothic soap opera, *Dark Shadows*, which I saw every afternoon with my mother when I was a small child. Back then, sitting in front of the television with her on the sagging, gray couch in our living room, I became obsessed with the show’s main character, a two-centuries-old vampire named Barnabas Collins. I was afflicted with constant nightmares about him, and I went so far as to hunch my shoulders at night, thinking this would
prevent him from biting my neck when I slept. (Evidently, it worked: when I checked the mirror every morning, I was relieved to find no vampire puncture wounds.) For this project, I write one sentence in response to each Dark Shadows episode, then shape these sentences into poetry, prose, and hybrid forms, using each sentence as a trigger for autobiographical explorations.

The most recent book, Ghosts of the Upper Floor, the third installment in the series, was published in 2019. I’m in the process of drafting Book 4. The show ran for 1,225 episodes, which means I’ll need several more volumes to finish the project. Proust had his madeleine; I have my vampire.

It’s difficult, but necessary, to pay attention closely enough to make art that documents an ordinary life, whether I’m rendering my life or that of a person in a documentary poetry collection. Seeing clearly, casting my vision both wide and deep, requires conscious effort. Ever since childhood, I’ve turned to poetry to imagine a language for vision. I want to read and write poems that teach me to see. “The eye altering,” as William Blake writes, “alters all.”