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Vision and Process in John Wieners’s “Music”

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## “The Rhythm and Longing of the Soul”: Vision and Process in John Wieners’s “Music”

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### 「魂のリズムと憧れ」： ジョン・ウィーナーズの「音楽」におけるビジョンとプロセス

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#### Abstract

Musical rhythms, harmonies, and bittersweet melodies strongly influenced the voice of John Wieners. Within his poetry, music and verse are one. Poetry fuses the human condition with the artifice of language, and Wieners was fascinated by the process whereby words transform into art. His poem, “Music,” intertwines careful contemplation about verse with an experiential view of the universe and emerges as a treatise on the craft of poetry. Through a close reading of “Music” along with an examination of other verse and personal journals, this paper explores Wieners’s understanding of the poetic process, and how via mindfulness, reflection, and dedication to the craft, he harnesses the universal flow of energy to artfully craft language that communicates the rhythm of the soul. Cognizant of the past, mindful of life’s mysteries, faithful to the craft, and ever-hopeful, the poem lyrically voices the human experience, encapsulating the boundless triumphs and tragedies that are born of the poetic imagination.

#### 要 旨

音楽のリズム、ハーモニー、ほろ苦いメロディーがジョン・ウィーナーズの詩の声に強く影響を与えた。彼の詩の中で、音楽と詩は一つなのだ。詩は人間状況と言語の芸術を融合させるものであるが、ウィーナーズは言葉が芸術に変わるプロセスに魅了された。「音楽」たる彼の詩は、詩についての注意深い熟考と宇宙の体験的な見方を絡み合わせ、詩の技術に関する論考として登場する。この論文では「音楽」を読み解くことにより、他の詩や個人の日記なども援用しつつ、ウィーナーの詩的なプロセスの理解と、マインドフルネス、自省、詩作への献身を通じて、魂のリズムを伝える言語を巧みに作り出すために、彼が普遍的なエネルギーの流れをどのように活用しているのかを探る。過去を認識し、人生の謎に気を配り、詩作のクラフトに忠実で、常に希望に満ちたこの詩は、詩的な想像力から生まれる無限の勝利と悲劇を一体とし、人間の経験を叙情的に表現するのだ。

## I. The Human Condition and the Artifice of Language

As a young boy John Wieners was captivated by celebrity culture and Hollywood dames, but music was the charm that most influenced his poetic voice. Big band, swing, and jazz radio broadcasts moved him by day and cabaret ballads lullabied him at night. He stared endlessly at album covers imagining the lives of the faces that graced them while absorbing the toe-tapping rhythms and passionate, lonely laments that fed his soul. Songstresses spoke to him; he identified with them. He first fell in love with the likes of Judy Garland, but it was Billie Holiday that remained closest to his heart until the end. "Billie Holiday was the story / of my whole life & still is" ("Contemplation" 134).<sup>1</sup> As his circle widened outside of Boston, nights spent in New York and San Francisco's smoky, booze-soaked clubs listening to the blues and bop altered his consciousness, the music penetrating the depths of his being. Within Wieners, music and verse are one. The rhythms, harmonies, and bittersweet melodies of chanteuses can all be found in his voice. The sensitive grief of the blues and improvisational jazz's frenzied beats mingle in his lines; one moment speeding over dizzying hallucinatory peaks, decelerating to elegiac crawls the next, and ultimately moderating the tempo in hopes of tweaking the brain and touching the soul. Poetry is music. Music is poetic. The bard's role is that of composer, conductor, and musician.

When I first began thinking about Wieners's "Music" (126-127), I was reminded of the scene in Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* in which students beginning the school year read "Understanding Poetry," the preface to their Literature anthology. The essay's author suggests that to fully appreciate verse, in addition to familiarity with poetic devices – such as rhyme and meter – a poem's greatness can be determined by plotting its perfection and importance on a Cartesian graph and measuring it; the larger the total area, the greater the poem. The teacher, Mr. Keating, rejects the notion, calling it "excrement," and over the course of the year instructs the students that poetry's capacity to captivate the reader via compelling themes, a passionate voice, and a rhythmic flow of language far outweighs literary criticism and academic analysis. In reality, great poetry is usually not difficult to recognize. Even those unfamiliar with the minutiae of poetic mechanics realize the value of verse that quickens the heartbeat with joy, fills the soul with profound sorrow, incites flaming rage, or prompts deep contemplation. Poetry encourages meaning-making in our

brains and inspires open-minded thinking. Great poetry does all of these and much more. It explores what it means to be human, opens our hearts and minds, connects us with others, and elevates the human experience.

There is no shortage of emotional exploration in the poetry of John Wieners. His work plumbs the depths of despair, loss, and desire, and soars triumphantly, exploring beauty in the mundane, passionate relationships, and the possibilities of existence. Much of his work delves into the realm of mind and spirit, prompting profound introspection about the loneliness of the poet and the craft of poetry, which fosters boundless empathy. Poetry fuses the human condition with the artifice of language, and Wieners was fascinated by the process whereby words transform into art. His poem, "Music," intertwines careful contemplation about verse with an experiential view of the universe and emerges as a treatise on the craft of poetry. Through a close reading of "Music" along with an examination of other verse and personal journals, this paper explores John Wieners's understanding of poetics. My commentary examines his understanding of the poetic process, and how via inspiration, mindfulness, reflection, and dedication to the craft, he harnesses the universal flow of energy to artfully craft language that communicates the rhythm of the soul.

## II. "What is Poetry?"

Contributing to views offered by legions of poets and academics, "Music" is Wieners's stab at examining the essence of verse. Before proceeding, however, some context is instructive. In "Poetic Opacity," Prinz and Mandelbaum argue the distinctive mark of the poetic is its nature of being opaque (65). Their notion of opacity entails four components. First, poetry challenges the reader to discern meaning; it often contains obscure vocabulary and unordinary word ordering that sacrifices transparency for the essence of the language itself. Next, poetry concerns itself with presentation; "poets are interested in ways of expressing things, not just in what gets expressed" (Prinz and Mandelbaum 71). The third mark of verse, aesthetic opacity, pertains to word placement. Since the creative process shapes a poem's features – such as line breaks and stanzas – aesthetic choices by the poet are an integral part of the formula. While these three components of opacity are critical to poetry, they may also occur in prose and other texts. Prinz and

Mandelbaum simply label the most crucial feature “poetic opacity,” noting, “poetry is characteristically a form of writing in which words are intended to be noticed as objects unto themselves ... an integral constituent in their own right. Words are a veil through which content is delivered” (71-72). Technique distinguishes this component. Rhyme, meter, enjambment, wordplay, and other tactics create rhythm. Metaphor and uncommon imagery enhance meaning. Colorful poetic devices “force readers to pay more attention than they ordinarily would to words and word arrangements” (Prinz and Mandelbaum 75). A poem operates on more than one level; both form and content require attention. The very definition of being poetic, they argue, entails poetic opacity.

The canon of Wieners is strewn with meditations about the poet’s purpose, inspiration, and the writing process. By the winter of 1955, just after turning twenty-one, he had determined the path his life was to follow.

I doubt until I sit down here that I should continue with poetry, and then my hope begins to be cleared by thinking on this paper. Already there is the warm beginning of thought that this is what gives meaning to life. This is why I might be here. ... I am here to fill a spiritual reservoir from which the future writers of the world might slate their thirst, i.e. if I myself become a writer and keep to the discipline, avoid the easy escapes. (*Stars Seen in Person* 23-24)

Ultimately, maintaining such discipline would prove no easy feat, but the journey provided countless opportunities to ponder the minutiae of verse. Consider these two early journal entries in which Wieners contemplates from whence inspiration comes. Starting with the self, he extends the precept to all humanity. As poetry inherently and spontaneously proceeds from one’s own life and circumstances, each speaker’s poetics uniquely reflect her time, place, and experiences.

All I am interested in is charting the progress of my own soul. And my poetics consists of marking down how each action unrolls.

Without my will. It moves. So that each man has his own poetic. (*707 Scott Street* 18)

The poem progresses of my own life, and pulls

[me

along with it. When man cannot write in a

[place

he leaves that place. I do now write myself out but renew myself daily. I am in accord with the word of my time. (*707 Scott Street* 49)

Still, despite such conviction he wrestled with the process, especially early in his career. "A Poem for Painters" (9-14) from the 1958 *The Hotel Wentley Poems*, includes lines such as "I am showered by the scent / of the finished line" and "Pushed on by the incompleteness / of what goes before me / I hesitate before this paper / scratching for the right words," addressing not only the young bard's struggle with and dedication to the craft, but the satisfaction derived from it (lines 35-36, 47-50). Undoubtedly, considerable time was invested in formulating the role of the poet and what he believed his verse should be. Maintaining the Whitmanesque ideal that that poetry flows from everyday experience, he was decidedly certain that it need not aspire to lofty levels nor be anything more than what it addresses (*707 Scott Street* 44). Simply put, poetry exists, and it is free to be anything it wishes. And while Wieners devoted volumes to the mundane, he will never be accused of avoiding the fundamental questions of art and existence. Wieners, in many respects, was a true meta-poet because his work never strays very far from the idea that poetry does not merely meditate on life, but simultaneously on the craft itself.

### III. Old Feelings and Old Meanings

In the early 1970s, Wieners encapsulated his understanding of the art in the 30-line "Music" (126-27). My analysis, for the sake of clarity, will proceed stanza by stanza, even though Wieners meanders and intertwines his thoughts throughout. Presumably, the dedication "For Gerrit" refers to the poet and publisher, Gerrit Lansing, who first met Wieners in 1956. Subsequently, the two solidified a friendship in the early sixties while working on Lansing's literary journal, *SET*. The poem opens with the central question it seeks to answer and embarks upon an explanation.

What is poetry? an image  
in the mirror;  
reflection from a broadside  
pinned to the wall,  
penned by a friend,  
from where old feelings  
old meanings arise;  
relief from pain; the diligence of work. (lines 1-8)

Following the question, the stanza consists of four dependent clauses separated by semicolons. The initial focal point, a mirror, calls to mind Aristotelian mimesis; the notion that art imitates nature and life. Whether or not Wieners intended to provoke this particular discussion is open to dispute, nonetheless, the seed is sown at the outset, providing fruit for debate. This paper, however, will not jump down that rabbit hole. Instead, let us focus on the more tangible aspects of a looking glass. A mirror depicts the essential nature of things because it reflects only those objects that are physically real. Therefore, the mirror suggests poetry's inherent truth. In addition, since one looking at a mirror often sees herself at first glance, Wieners establishes that poetry flows from the self; verse proceeds from personal experience.

Attention shifts to the protagonist's immediate surroundings in the second clause; specifically, to the reflection of friend's poem hanging on the wall, prompting a cascade of memories. For Wieners, past experiences, especially those preserved in the heart, are essential components of verse. Everyone has special keepsakes that remind her of faces and places from the past. Likewise, the act of penning poetry has the power to reawaken yesteryear and, in a sense, one can relive bygone days. Akin to a photo or a cherished trinket, the poem "penned by a friend" transports the protagonist to another dimension where the highs and lows of the past are resurrected. In a particularly insightful late September 1965 journal entry entitled "The New World," to which I will periodically refer, Wieners opines that precious memories, while rare and fleeting, sustain life: "All the trying / moments of life are paid for by the few, / precious images that return" (*Stars Seen in Person* 115). Poetry not only recaptures the past, it can reanimate it as well; as the ravages of time and age distort memory, recollections take on added significance. Long-dormant emotions triggered by the broadside render it more than simply an object on the wall; it becomes a wormhole through time and space. The repetition of "old" juxtaposed with "arise" in line 8 strikes the reader as curious. Of course, it can simply refer to memories. However, considering that the passage of time often leads to new insight about the past, one might interpret the second "old" as wordplay meaning "new significance arises from old meanings." Such an interpretation connects seamlessly with the third clause: "relief from pain."

The life of John Wieners involved a great number of tragedies. His work chronicles personal suffering spanning from childhood and extending into lifelong struggles with poverty, relationships, mental health, and addiction. The young poet

explicitly connects poetry with pain in two July 1959 journal passages. The entry from the 21<sup>st</sup> understands poetry as a corollary of affliction, "There is no pain in this so I know it is not a poem," while the second, penned six days later, questions the notion, "Does the poem proceed out of pain" (*707 Scott Street* 51, 69). The poet addresses the question in "The Acts of Youth" and extends it to the entire realm of artistic creation:

Do not think of the future; there is none.  
But the formula all great art is made of.

Pain and suffering. Give me the strength  
to bear it, to enter those places where the  
great animals are caged. And we can live  
at peace by their side. (57, lines 31-36)

The train of thought started in line 32 carries successfully across the gap into the next stanza, thereby visually emphasizing the importance of "pain and suffering." Capitalization also helps. What follows is a plea for strength to harmoniously dwell among affliction. Rather than demoralizing the poet, there lies a tacit admission that pain has value; it can fuel aesthetic vision. These three examples demonstrate that Wieners wrestled with the complexity of inspiration. Eventually, he came to accept that the poetic process itself, which often prompts a return to the past, can be therapeutic. By the time he wrote "The New World" six years later, the poet embraces previous experiences: "The glorious moments of the past, which are / few and far between; the dross falls away, / the agony of living is worth it" (*Stars Seen in Person* 115). From misery, suffering, and unfortunate experiences, knowledge can be derived. Understanding pain, one's own and the inherent melancholy of the human condition, opens his heart and mind, enabling him to see underlying truth, beauty, and the simple wonder of the world. Aided by empathy the poet not only coexists with the "great animals," he explores and learns from the mysteries of existence. Just as knowledge and time heal, poetry helps Wieners cope with and alleviate despair. Abruptly, the line transitions to the stanza's fourth response to the initial query – hard work – which I will address below in more detail.

The stanza's mechanics merit close attention because Wieners is a master of form. The language paints clear pictures with precise word economy. In addition to the opening line, the second and third dependent clauses are aligned along the left



margin, giving optic structure to the stanza. Lines 4-7, all part of the second clause, cascade gently to the right encouraging only slight pauses, thus keeping the line of thought intact, as opposed to the hard stops necessitated by the semicolons. More striking, and present throughout his canon, is the lyricism. Rhyme is employed sparingly, but effectively. The line “penned by a friend” conveys warmth and comfort. Half rhyme – “feelings,” “meanings” and “broadside,” “arise” – elegantly ties together the stanza’s four clauses. Repetition of the consonant “p” can be found not only in the first and last lines, but mid-stanza as well. Rhythmically pleasing, the lines roll effortlessly off the tongue, especially the metrically identical fourth and fifth. However, the caesura in the final line decelerates the pace, thus segregating the third and fourth components of verse and prompting added consideration. Reciting the stanza aloud provides an additional answer to the initial question; poetry is composed of sounds and techniques that enhance meaning. Wieners not only explains poetry with words, but with style, rhythm, and melody.

#### IV. “Four Sides to Every Thing”

The cinquain that follows continues to explore the essence of verse.

Mysterious words upon a page in adolescence;

listening to poets read. What is poetry?

Breath, competence, success

or simply Eros.

“Four sides to every thing.” (lines 9-13)

Delving even further into the past, the protagonist recalls early encounters with verse. Poetry’s enigmatic nature captivates the adolescent; rather than discouraging him, the art’s opacity sparks curiosity and entices him. Wieners is enchanted by the world of mysteries and the unknown. For along with suffering, mysterious realms shape the poetic soul; they are where poets are free to imagine, dream, and explore. In the prose-poem, “The Lanterns Along the Wall” (181-184), Wieners discloses to one of Robert Creeley’s classes, “Poetry is the most magical of all the arts” (181). Certainly, that magic includes the mystical dimensions which poets inhabit. The flashback extends into the following line. Diverging from the other literary arts, poetry, in optimal situations, engages the senses in two manners: optically – presentation on the page and aesthetic lexicon – and aurally. As the fictional Mr.

Keating insists, in order to truly transfix the listener, the music of poetry must touch the soul. Verse that does not often falls short. After attending an unsatisfying recital by a local poet in late March 1955, Wieners notes in his journal, "Poetry is bringing itself back to the ears of the 'people', is being made more precise. The bunk of it can be sifted out by having it read aloud" (*Stars Seen in Person* 83). Conceivably, experiences such as this helped shape his lyric voice. Expressive sound abounds in Wieners's work, and I will touch on the second stanza's sonority in the next paragraph. Moving forward, "What is poetry?" appears for a second time, and in this instance we can almost visualize the young protagonist posing the question. Once again, the poem responds.

The stanza's voice changes; the four ensuing components of verse are not offered by a teen, but a seasoned veteran. Inspiration for the first, breath, can be traced to Charles Olson.<sup>2</sup> In a February 3, 1955 journal entry Wieners contemplates Olson's breath-line technique, what his Boston contemporary Steve Jonas dubbed "mind-music" (*Stars Seen in Person* 44). Over time Wieners reworked Olson's notion of line and breath and developed his own rhythm. Rather than adhering to strict breath-line length, the Boston poet divides lines and stanzas based on "units of meaning" (Von Hallberg 114). "Music's" second stanza is a case in point. The first line-and-a-half address the protagonist's youthful intrigue with composition and sonority, while the latter half of the second line bridges the past and present by simultaneously voicing the young protagonist's uncertainty and returning to the poem's original query. These two lines are the stanza's longest: fourteen and twelve beats, respectively. Lines 11-13, comprised of six, five, and six beats, are short and to the point. Line 11 proposes three additional components of poetry, while the following line challenges them, countering with one of pure emotion – "Eros" – thus meriting its own line. The stanza's final line, riffing on Rousseau, conveys the multidimensional nature of verse. Textually, the stanza's third and fifth lines are indented, the fifth radically, forcing the reader to pause briefly before the third line's academic answers and the last line's allusion. Wieners adjusts his line length according to textual spatiality, meaning, as well as breath. Breath is imbued with another meaning too: inspiration. The mid-sixties poem "II Alone" (79), which boasts of the protagonist's newfound confidence, explicitly mentions divine inspiration, "...the breath of gods // does not desert, but looms large / as a dream" (lines 6-8).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps elusive in his younger years, the maturing poet taps into creative energy more easily than in the past.

Regardless of its exact meaning, and I subscribe to a broad interpretation, breath's preeminent position in the line signifies the weight that Wieners places on it before addressing work ethic.

Although not as prolific as some of his contemporaries, no one can accuse John Wieners of sloth in his early years; he toiled with composition because it is what the job of poet demands and what he was born to do.<sup>4</sup> The second word in line 11, "competence," echoes line 8's "diligence of work." Talking about his time at Black Mountain College in an interview with Robert Von Hallberg, Wieners says a lot of effort was put into developing his skills, "I learned from sitting before labor, a labor of words, a labor of worth, a labor of wit" (114). He espoused these lessons throughout life, though temptation and tests of the will were not uncommon. Written on bleak day in late September 1965, a journal passage pleads for self-command and the restoration of focus that had been zapped by drug use and the consequences of institutional shock therapy.

... I lack the concentration  
yet I will learn. I lack the discipline.  
Still I will learn it. Give me the means  
to find these things and make them  
a daily part of my life. I need them, if I am  
to continue to grow. (*Stars Seen in Person* 114)

Ever-hopeful, Wieners persevered. An untitled, six-line poem from the early 1970s corroborates devotion to the craft: "For me it is more in waiting, writing and waiting / for the proper moment" (*Selected Poems* 254, lines 5-6). He forwent steady employment, often to his financial detriment, opting instead for the time necessary for creative endeavors. Reflecting on some of the leaner days, "Charity Balls" (180) includes the line, "It's a question of acquiring a mastery of tone," indicating that the years of subsisting on pizza and working odd jobs had paid off because the experiences afforded him time to concentrate on writing (line 5). The poem concludes, "But I knew if I worked hard I'd eventually make it" (line 17). In addition to diligence, the protagonist suggests that a positive attitude and self-confidence are essential components of realizing "success": line 11's third reply to the query. But, what exactly does "success" mean? It exists as an ambiguous and fluid ideal, meaning different things to different people. We all strive for success, but there is no guarantee of achieving it, no matter how hard one toils. "Supplication" (105),

a prayer to poetry, opens, "O poetry, visit this house often, / imbue my life with success" (lines 1-2). As an on-again, off-again Catholic, Wieners may believe that success and inspiration are God-given gifts, although there is no mention of the Creator in the previously-cited invocation. While juxtaposition of "competence" and "success" in "Music" hints that hard work naturally culminates in personal satisfaction, one suspects that divine forces factor into the equation at some point. On a technical level, feminine rhyme links the two words with line 8's "diligence," thereby reemphasizing effort and linking the stanzas. A strong work ethic is as important as artistry in the creative process.

Injecting "Eros" into the discussion seemingly undercuts the serious nature of the previous line, yet raw emotion propels creativity. When it comes to sources of inspiration, love is unrivaled. Throughout human history countless tomes have been fueled by erotic desire and amorous devotion. The work of Wieners is no exception; his canon is strewn with romantic odes that range from sweet and lovely to downright lewd. The realm of poetry is a place in which the creator is generally free from the shackles of social conventions, and a strength of Wieners is the insistence on confronting subject matter often at odds with established norms. Undoubtedly, graphic depictions of gay sexuality negatively impacted his career, especially during the early years, nonetheless, Wieners candidly expresses his innermost desires. He flippantly described his theory of poetics as "try[ing] to write the most embarrassing thing I can think of" (Foye, 15). Kidding aside, the unfiltered sensuality propelling some of his work spans his career. In "Hunger" (*Cultural Affairs* 112), the protagonist acknowledges that sexual longing and unrequited love are driving forces of humanity, and thus, must be addressed in poetry.

Poets should know these things; they're the basic condition of men,  
what drives them on, to unhappy homes, constant adventuring,  
the simple love between two friends of like profession.  
Oh, God, deliver him to my thrusting arms, they bend and break  
from single greed and selfishness. (lines 11-15)

Poetry encompasses all aspects of the human experience; nothing should be withheld. The search for love, anticipation of disappointment, heartbreak, and raw sexuality permeate the Wieners canon. He does not shy away from any of it. He notes in the letter to Creeley's class that the "white magic" of poetry is a manner of approaching "the prime force of love... not in the sense of kindness or patience, but

sometimes trespassed sensual energy” (184). “Music’s” twelfth line celebrates such energy, a force so volatile and vital to the creative process that it merits its own succinct line.

The allusion to Rousseau in the stanza’s final line suggests poetry as being multifaceted, encompassing all aspects of the human experience. It acknowledges that idyllic poetry usually does not reflect daily realities, certainly not those of Wieners, hence drugs, mental instability, and immodesty share space with spiritual devotions and lofty ambitions. Yet, wit, inherent truth, and literary technique, often operating on more than one level, unify the disparate influences and ultimately speak to readers. The allusion compels us to think about poetry’s myriad meanings. As in the previous stanza, sound binds together the cinquain’s many different elements. Conspicuous “s” consonance exists in all five lines. Short “e” assonance sprightly creates rhythm and propels the poem. Internal rhyme – the “ing” in lines 10 and 13 as well as the repeated “ence” mentioned above – provides added melodious cadence. Once again, poetry’s musical wordplay is the unwritten answer to the poem’s central question.

## V. The Doing and the Flowing

The poem’s latter half adopts a more mysterious, opaque tone that provides a glimpse inside the creator’s mind. Images and ideas cascade into one another, gelling into a coherent whole that resists division into fragments. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity I will do so in my analysis. The third stanza – the poem’s longest – is composed of nine lines, although its train of thought runs into the following tercet and subsequent quatrain.

The increase in electricity causes lights to flow.  
Is it only light, or heat,  
words ordered in a row.  
Men or gods. I’ll never know  
or try to know  
more than the doing,  
the flowing  
rain upon the roof. That one hears,  
and reveres

inside, away from the cold  
within the house  
where the heat

reminds one of what it is to be like  
out in the cold  
rushing over the field  
mad, (lines 14-29)

Lines 14-16 appear rather straightforward. While Olson viewed the poem as a transfer of energy from the poet to the reader, "Music's" imagery illustrates the composition process before the final product is presented to her. The electrical current analogy suggests inspiration; creativity is likened to "electricity" which activates "lights" – analogous to ideas and language – that "flow." Creative energies spark a chain reaction. Accordingly, the sprightly, short "i" assonance quickens the line's pace. However, the following two lines question, without proper punctuation, if the poetic process is merely a flow of ideas and language by introducing an additional image: "heat."

Unquestionably, heat conjures up images of erotic passion, yet Wieners also employs the image as a metaphor for the poem-making process. In the previously cited February 24, 1955 journal entry, he writes, "Already there is the warm beginning of thought that this is what gives meaning to life" (*Stars Seen in Person* 24). He increases the temperature four years later equating composition with alchemy: "a process which produces pure gold" (707 *Scott Street* 51). In another instance, the poetic process nourishes the protagonist of "II Alone" (79), who declares, "Sustained by poetry, fed anew / by its fires" (lines 1-2). Just as a blaze feeds, however, it can also become an out of control inferno. "The New World" journal entry cautions about one of the occupational hazards that accompanies the creative process:

... It is a never  
quenching flame, that can burn you out  
and take all you have, and still ask for  
more, plead for more quickly. It can  
take every emotion you lavish on an object and exhaust it  
so quickly that you fall dying on the  
roadside; bed so quickly, you murmur,

only to rise again the next morning to  
feed it again. To feed on you; feed on it.  
That is the only answer. Be impartial,  
cold to everything and it dies quickly.  
But be cold and you die quickly. (*Stars Seen in Person* 119)

The creative process can be demanding, exhausting, and lead to burnout, but it can also catalyze latent energy that results in fresh perspectives and renewed motivation. The advice in the final lines offers another admonition; playing with fire risks getting burned, but the alternative is far, more dire. Woe to those who shun passion; the pitfalls that accompany emotional experience outweigh the peril of becoming “cold.” Wieners suggests balance. When one ultimately learns to coexist with the flames, they do not incinerate, but illuminate, invigorate, and transform the soul. After a poet makes peace with the fire, she discovers how its energy can be harnessed for good, at which point it is no longer destructive, but rather the intense, magical heat of creativity. Wieners affirms as much in his journal a few pages later:

There is a music that passes through us, that  
is a sign of another spirit than our own –  
It is akin to fire, but a mild unseen  
fire, that leaps up in a rush, as sun  
from a bush. A halo of fire, sunrays  
in a cone, rushing as if through Van  
Gogh’s eyes, off the trees.

It is a silent fire, that contains music  
within it, and gives us a few words to  
speak, in a rhythm that is our own, dictated,

The word mystical, is outdated, but how  
else to describe it. (*Stars Seen in Person* 132)

These flames inform the poem’s title. This fire, or “heat” as he names it in “Music,” entails more than just the flow of ideas and language. The supernatural process of ordering words “in a row” supersedes simple inspiration and includes the other components introduced in the previous two stanzas: reflecting on the past, pain relief, breath, competence, and passion. Most importantly, it means tapping into and becoming one with the universal life force – “the music that passes through us” – that is inherent in every sphere of the cosmos. The enigmatic, “mystical” combination of everything results in “heat” from which flows the rhythmic music of

poetry.

The stanza's remaining six lines run into one another like the energies of alchemical transmutation. Line 17 introduces divine forces, yet questions whether inspiration materializes from within the self or is nurtured by higher powers. Wieners's Catholicism suggests that the plural, lowercase "gods" refer to poetic muses and the mystical "heat," rather than to the Almighty. However, the distinction is really not important; the magical source of poetry exists beyond human capacity to understand and the protagonist has no interest in unravelling the mystery. Wieners expresses as much in an August 6, 1959 journal entry, "It is necessary for the poet to be ignorant of the true mystery and yet to contain it wrapped around him" (707 80). Mystery compels him, delights him. Six years later he notes, "it is the unKnown which completes me" and "it is the unknown that gives power to our / lives." (*Stars Seen in Person* 118, 132). Wieners does not attempt to answer the questions of the universe, instead, he focuses on refining his craft; tapping into the "heat" and riding the ecstasy of the "flow." The dizzying reverberation of long "o" end rhyme – "flow," "row," "know" – demonstrates precisely such a mindset, as do the short lines that drift to the right, which help accelerate the tempo. Although the verse meanders through disparate elements and uncertainty, its lyric beat ties everything together. The sonorous simplicity and form perfectly explicate the message. Rather than trying to figure it all out, Wieners focuses on the exacting work that the art necessitates: "the doing."

Not only does "the doing" concern ordering words "in a row," it also involves conscientiously noticing and reflecting upon one's surroundings. Blakean attention to detail peppers Wieners's poesy. From a young age, the Boston poet understood the importance of throwing off the shackles of established form and becoming a "washed, receptive, observer to the world" (*Stars Seen in Person* 18). Pages of verse paint pictures of the world around him, whether it be mundane household objects, scenery glimpsed and sounds heard from open windows, or down on their luck characters roaming the streets. By opening himself to and tapping into the life flow Wieners evokes the truth and essence of his subject matter because of his empathy, and immense capacity to comprehend value in everyday objects, occurrences, and people. Moreover, by maintaining mindfulness, he recognizes "specks of song, / melody rushing to the ear": the music of the mundane (*Stars Seen in Person* 115). In doing so, the poet sings the songs of his subjects. Being an *ars poetica*, "Music"



focuses those energies on the craft itself.

Peculiar enjambment and punctuation in the stanza's final four lines warrant special attention because meaning morphs depending on how they are read: "more than the doing, / the flowing / rain upon the roof. That one hears, / and reveres" (lines 19-22). Read as a continuation of the previous three lines, line 20 keeps the focus on the actual writing process ("the doing"); the "flow" of language and ideas. When coupled with line 21, however, "the doing" can be understood as the act of deliberately noticing "the flowing / rain upon the roof." Read in this manner, the lines stress mindfulness and become an exercise in keen observation. The period in the middle of line 21 is particularly jarring. When reading the lines for the first few times the mid-line caesura completely disrupts the flow of thought and language, especially since the short lines surrounding it and the "r" consonance quicken the pace. The sudden full stop disorients the reader. After the initial awkwardness subsides, however, acclimation to the line prompts contemplation. In one respect, line 21 completes the train of thought that begins in line 17, however, the full stop also cuts it off prematurely. The sudden stop prompts another dilemma. Does "That" function as a relative pronoun that connects the following clause with "the flowing / rain upon the roof"? Clearly, the line of thought does not stop at the period, so we are tempted to read line 21 without pausing. "That" both is and is not the continuation of the previous sentence. Further compounding the uncertainty and disorientation, the "hears / and reveres" end rhyme, line 22's brevity, and the fact that it is the stanza's last line compel one to read straight through the period. However, capitalization and the start of a new sentence require "That" to be read as a demonstrative pronoun. Read this way, the rain on the roof is not only noticed as it occurs, but also remembered after the fact, the theme of the ensuing stanzas. Such a predicament clearly demonstrates that careful observation, mindfulness, and contemplation by both the poet and the reader are among poetry's most essential elements. Wieners compels us to think deeply, to imagine the possibilities of language.

Hearing Wieners recite "Music" would provide great insight, but, alas, an exhaustive search has not produced a recording. Nonetheless, the lines serve as a superb example of poetic opacity because the poet's intention is enigmatic. The abrupt stop undeniably encourages closer scrutiny of the line of thought, the words surrounding the period, and to the poetic process, which is certainly intentional.

The conscious decision to punctuate the line in such a manner clearly demonstrates what poetry is, not by explaining, but by "doing." Rather than having to choose one reading over the other, acknowledging lines 21-22 as multitasking workhorses is far more satisfying; they function to end the third stanza – which focuses on the doing and flowing – and simultaneously begin the fourth stanza that addresses the importance of reflecting on the past. Understanding that Wieners is playing a complex game with words, grammar, and poetic form means that we do not have to choose. The poem asks "what is poetry?" Wieners answers, this musical flow of language.

## VI. The Heat that Reminds of the Cold

The poem's fourth and shortest stanza – aside from the final monostich – bridges thoughts that begin in the third and continue through it to the subsequent quatrain. Although stanzaic boundaries blur, the tercet stands on its own because it touches on the importance of place: "inside, away from the cold / within the house / where the heat" (lines 23-25). The stanza's depiction of the bard waiting in a secluded, interior space for the breath of inspiration to stir the soul appears periodically in Wieners's work. A July 17, 1959 journal entry notes presciently that his role as a poet will concern "writing out history in some dark room, doing my bit towards creating / a new structure / from love" (707 43). A comparable vignette opens the 1965 poem, "December 30," this time emphasizing the importance of diligence and patience.

Sitting up by candlelight  
Waiting for the right  
voice to fall across inner ear  
exact image to descend  
and proper object to appear (*Cultural Affairs* 52, lines 1-5)

The sketch evolves in "Paltry Freedom," stressing that the craft's creative reimagining of the past happens at home: "At home the answer lies / when in grace and review one / recaps the unmentioned past anew" (*Cultural Affairs* 111, lines 25-28). The 1972 letter to Creeley's class radiates a more magical aura: "poets create the art, in dank rooms, or the poet retreats into shadowy places, to call forth the spirits that minister his rhythm or meter" (182). "Music's" fourth stanza echoes

these previous musings; solitary contemplation, reflection, and patience fuel poetic inspiration. Its lines evoke a secure, cozy environment conducive to summoning the muse and fostering imagination, thereby allowing the “heat” to flow, yet, it also reveals the loneliness of the poet. It is from this place, both physically and mentally, that Wieners composes. As in previous stanzas, the form and lyricism exemplify the heat flow. Ensuing lines shorten and drift to the right, accelerating the clip. The “in” half rhyme in the first two lines and the “h” consonance in the latter two tickle the ears, as do the echoing “w” assonance and repetition of each line’s penultimate “the.” The antithetical “cold” and “heat” structurally and thematically counterbalance all of the repetition. The combination of various techniques demonstrates, once again, that poetry employs language, syntax, and ideas that differ from ordinary speech and common perceptions. From the safety of a removed space, the poet opens himself to inspiration and taps into the flow to compose poems that take on lives of their own, reimagining the past with a fresh linguistic approach.

The line of thought continues across the gap into the fifth, penultimate stanza, which resounds the significance of past experiences. Sheltered from worldly distractions – “away from the cold” – the “heat” enables the poet to reanimate the past anew. Again, “The New World” journal entry contextualizes the lines and enhances their meaning.

And how quickly gone, all time is,  
when one’s mind leaves that little light  
and returns to the room, where ironically  
life is. Or is it, life at all? Or just  
a simulation of life, under which reality  
hides. The real hides itself under cover  
of things; upon the mind’s screen lies  
the true nature of things; there the  
flux of time presents the objects  
which endure; and persists in that  
they return so quickly, when one is free  
of the world and its demand. (*Stars Seen in Person* 116)

Despite the house’s protection, Wieners questions its very reality, echoing one of his early proclamations: “poetry is reality to me” (707 80). Yet, it provides a safe environment as a stepping-off place from which the realm of poetry can be accessed. Verse originates from a state beyond, seen in the mind’s eye, a world

Wieners depicts in "II Alone"; a place where inspiration "looms large / as a dream, a prairie within our dream, / to which we return, when we need to" (79, lines 7-9). There, electricity, lights, and heat flow coalesce, reanimating the past and enabling the poet to re-see things as they truly are. It is the magical world described in the letter to Creeley's students, where the poet is free; free to sing, dance, cry, love, jump, and run. The string of monosyllables and short 'i' assonance race lines 26-27 forward, conjuring vivid visions of "rushing" like an exuberant child roaming, a jazzman scat singing to a frenzied, red-hot groove, or lovers deep in the throes of passion. Although "cold" has an inhospitable quality in the previous stanza, in line 27 it acquires an exhilarating sensation – the kind of invigorating frigidity that gets the blood pumping and makes you feel alive – that is supported by the subsequent line's "rushing." The subtle "d" slant rhyme in the stanza's latter three lines not only provides a hard stop to each, thus tempering the pace, it focuses attention on the charged picture the words paint. Commanding its own line, "mad" certainly pertains to the affliction of mental illness from which Wieners suffered. It may hint at acceptance. Yet, it can also be read as an extension of the previous two lines' exuberance; an endorsement for living foolishly, in the sense espoused by Roald Dahl's Willy Wonka: "a little nonsense now and then is relished by the wisest men." In the same vein, it encourages an ecstatic, Thoreauvian mindset of living deeply and completely. The stanza evokes memories of simple, childlike wonder and the pure euphoria of living in the moment without a purpose nor care in the world that everyone has experienced and longs for again. The vestiges of days gone by in lines 27-29 fuse together, becoming a swirling, hallucinatory combination of ecstasy, old pain, and wild abandon that has been filtered through wisdom gained from the passage of time, contemplation, and acceptance. The flowing words may no longer be as vibrant nor traumatic, the rough edges have been worn away; the lines embody joyous gratitude, nostalgic longing, and bittersweet contentment that results from reflection and introspection.

## VII. "A Music that Passes Through Us"

After the frenzied tempo of the previous stanzas, the final monostich slows everything down, offering closing remarks via a new query and a single-word conclusion: "Intelligence or emotion? language" (line 30). Thematically, "Music" can

be divided into two parts. The first two stanzas respond to the initial question in a rather straightforward manner; the past, pain relief, hard work, technique, and raw emotion are all important, accessible components of verse. The far more esoteric latter half examines the poetic process. Some of the aforementioned ideas are revisited – “words ordered in a row” certainly exemplifies technique, and the significance of reflection plays a prominent role – however, inspiration, mindfulness, and other intricacies of composition exist in a cryptic sphere that do not lend themselves to simple elucidation. Poetry encompasses far more complexity than simply intelligence and emotion; the craft is an elaborate concoction of everything mentioned in the poem’s 30 lines – and more – that defies rhetorical explanation; hence, the simply put, “Four sides to every thing.” Beyond its myriad thoughts, emotions, and retrospection, poetry artfully harnesses the universal flow of energy, what Wieners calls the “music that passes through us, that / is a sign of another spirit than our own” (*Stars Seen in Person* 132). Opening himself to this energy flow allows the poet to deliver universal truth via language. In this sense, poetry truly is a magical art.

The poem culminates with a single word: “language.” Wieners seeks to express in words the multiverses in which the human psyche exists, to linguistically communicate the voyages of the soul. At the age of thirty, he wrote about the importance of listening carefully, waiting, “fight[ing] for the right words,” so that he would be able to “set the record straight, / new words to music, the key to existence” (*Stars Seen in Person* 150). In both form and content, “Music” does so exceptionally. Its language is highly condensed; each word is important. Its lines carry humility and grace, all while delivering precise, deliberate, and flawless phrasing both within and across the line, replete with harmony, rhythmic intensity, and mindful attention to tempo. Poring over his journals unearthed this gem, which succinctly summarizes the poem as well as Wieners’s comprehensive understanding of the poetic process, “Music / does express the rhythm and longing / of the soul” (*Stars Seen in Person* 133). “Music” streamlines Wieners’s meticulous meditations about poetry into a single, coherent poem that not only provokes thought about composition, but about existence. Cognizant of the priceless past, mindful of life’s mysteries, faithful to the craft, and ever-hopeful, the poem lyrically voices the human experience, encapsulating the boundless desires, regrets, triumphs, and tragedies that are born of the poetic imagination. “Music” is not only the answer to

the question the poem poses, it is the manifestation of John Wieners's poetic vision and practice.

### Notes

1. Unless specified, all pagination refers to *Supplication: Selected Poems of John Wieners*.
2. Wieners was strongly influenced by Charles Olson. He built a mentor-student relationship with the elder poet that spanned fifteen years, studying with him at Black Mountain College and again in Buffalo during the mid-1960s.
3. Two drafts of the poem appear in the 1965 journals collected in *Stars Seen in Person: Selected Journals* 110-111. Both differ from the version cited here.
4. Wieners was born on Eliot Street in Milton, Massachusetts. It was predetermined that he was to be a poet.

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