

*Some Green Words On Mostly One Topic*

The poems have to mean, and that's all. The how and what of the matter, like the why, properly belong to other faculties. Now, I may not own something that I think does not mean, may let it languish on the computer or as an opaque scrawl in a journal, but I won't, except by a practice of negligence or self-sabotage, edit a meaning into a study: to do so is to confuse the study with the poem, and I have done a great disservice to the body of my work, as have many others to theirs, when I do so. I say so in quite this way, with this confusion of tense, because the substitution of editorializing for editing has a retroactive effect on the body of work an individual or collective claims ownership to. Whether one wishes to consider a work's relationship to a larger body at all, I concede, is a significant issue here, but I wonder whether or not the ordinary agent in a work's conception gets to effectively raise this issue at all in the larger scheme of things. This may be a self-mythologizing that is always already out of one's hands.

I have referred to the ownership of a poem. What do I mean by this? When I write I am engaged in an act of possession. Whatever the particularities of a poem, if it is a poem, I claim them as mine by right of the fact that I write them into being. I spell them, in the most literal sense of allowing their reality to become through the application of words. I will unavoidably allude to the sum total of my history of reading; if an appropriate rubric could be found I would necessarily reveal myself as an amalgamation of influences and images of all sorts. This only reinforces my definition of the act: possession, to me, always guiltily includes the potential for theft, the actuality of theft in my more expansive or awful moods. Art of all sorts is theft; to love forthrightly is to steal as much as it is to give, and it is a very sweet thing indeed both to love and to steal in this way. Asserting all of this, of course, I give up the lie: the language of ownership implies power, and there is here only the appearance of power followed by the recession of the body into ordinary speech and the demand to crest the tide once more as soon as it can be conveniently arranged in one's admittedly practical schedule.

I don't know how accurate it is to talk about writers or anyone else as visionaries. I think this implied assertion of the "visionary" is part of the reason some people can't use the word "poet" without lowering their voices and taking a quick look around, like they're stepping too far out of the "ordinary" realms of experience and want to let any

potential audience know that they don't feel good about it. That's assuming they can bring themselves to use the word at all. I don't see why we can't claim a more modest connotation for the word that is nonetheless admirable and relevant. I would suggest that a poet is an enthusiast of life: when he sees it stuck and cooling on a hook, he casts the line. Some days you catch the proverbial boot, some days you get a poem, and some other days you just get drunk and try not to fall in while pissing over the side of the boat.

The reading and writing of poetry is an elitist activity in the most basic of senses: there are few engaged in either one, perhaps because the investment of time and effort required to do so seems to be too high (whether or not reading and writing poetry well actually requires much in the way of education or familiarity with cultural tradition, I don't know for sure, but obviously I have some suspicions).

This elite is as fractured, aimless, masochistic and frankly ridiculous as any of history's other elites. Its character has never substantively changed, and no bemoaning an imagined closeness between poetic craft and a "common language" is going to make the honest reader or writer of a poem believe that poetry is democratic. It is democratic only in the sense that a poem can accommodate anything, but accommodation is not the same as invitation, and we shouldn't confuse the two. Purporting to write a poetry "of the people" is to admit to being a jingoist in a cheap suit and bad tie.

If everyone liked your work there would be something wrong and if no one liked your work there would be something wrong. You're fucked coming and going, so you'd best just get on with it.

This business of movements and collectives, of fetishizing the detritus of culture, the superficial sparks spit off by the process of meaning, as a profitable business model or, in the more modest variations of this, as a profitable sanction for commiseration, I have no problem with. This is between other souls and their proverbial masters. As many declaim against the practice as engage in it, many manage to do both at once. I would only suggest that membership in such clubs is a bit like joining in a metaphorical circle-jerk where all the participants cum in exactly the same way for the entire duration, and I have no interest in getting Sisyphus involved in my sex life.

When I suggest that the poems have to mean, what I have in mind is that they catalogue with the movement of human blood in the body; that they serve a principle of turning in the direction of stillness; that they are alive, essential, and contain all the implications of that life. This is not allusion or a thinly veiled waving-off, but the necessary and unavoidable response, however impoverished. One can talk about the how, what, or why, insofar as one is not in that moment the poet who wrote the thing, but the impulse to mean will remain elusive. We can rig a scale of measurement that measures the presence and duration of innumerable varieties of energy, but this rigging will not tell us anything essential about the character by which this energy moves. If you take apart the old press of your eyes and leave it in the rain you can see things differently: soft-edged and throbbing. The only thing you have to give up is certainty, and it's not like you were ever very certain about that anyway.

It's useful to think in terms of a totality, a complete work, the project that you are undertaking as having a broader relation to a book-length project, or even as having a place within the summed up variables of one's artistic life. This is something I've come to only recently (like a lot of others at this stage in their lives for some reason). Looking at the discrete poem in this way solves some difficult challenges. The poem must still work on its own, and each individual image must carry the weight that the individual poem's structure requires of it, but it doesn't have to be the totality of that weight. There is a freedom in this that allows the poem to breathe; it's a necessary thing to transition the poem from being a mass of words and bone to being something more expansive, that gestures towards a defiance of its own nature as a structure. It's a contract every bit as potent as that between blood and stone, while at the same time conceding the fact that you don't have to say everything that you want to say about fish when you say fish (I like fish).

I want a style that is grounded enough to let me hit the higher registers without inviting too much parody (unless I just feel like a laugh, which has its own value); that can confuse that inner censor, that gentle machine, that finds and sorts whatever cultural datum we need to take the piss out of something. I don't know why it's there, save that we are taught to have a distrust of what came before even as we must embrace a pose that came before. If this were a manifesto in anything like the traditional sense, I would offer you a secret history of the reason why any effective style must confuse the self-censor in this way to produce the most effective result. I can only say that I impelled in

this direction because it is the only way that I can create anything, otherwise I'd be standing perpetually at the edge of writing anything at all, let alone anything that might be considered good. In this sense, writing, or at least my writing, is *pretentious* in the most literal sense: it aspires to hit the higher registers that we know are possible because we see them in the work that we embrace, and to do this it has to be prepared to fail. In accepting the necessity of the attempt, I ensure that the attempt will fail by offering to it a mind and body that is wholly inadequate to the task.

I cannot successfully replicate the sensation of the sublime, or the thing-in-itself (whatever formulation we use, the imagist and the romantic are basically the same). I can't do this because I am a human being, my thought is carried on time just as the reader's is. How can you adequately perceive the timeless, which is another way of saying how can art represent the timeless, when your medium of perception is time? If this sounds obvious that's because it is. There's nothing more obvious than saying that art can only, at best, tease us in the direction of the sublime; Keats even offers us the most teasing of all the attempts in our language, and yet we do seem to forget this often. Our concern is not whether we can succeed or fail, but to what extent we can manage failure. Indeed, as many have pointed out, even if we didn't identify the presence of error, we would be compelled to insert our own consciously into the work, as a kind of *memento mori*.

The poem can represent an endless process. Perhaps that's why we need it. It gives us disappointment without hatred, kindness without love. It aspires to an ending deferred, and in so doing makes vitality out of dead trees, dead sounds. As such, poetry is indeed, as a young John Berryman is reported to have said, a matter of life and death.

What I want is the poem that is an explosion. That neither the reader nor writer fully understands, but that, while offering enough detritus for the crime scene investigator to pick over and analyse, is really concerned with the shell-shocked survivor careening at the edge of the picture. Anyone who doesn't think that that moment is bound up in prayer is either a fool or a liar.

And even the worst poems can still have all the half-erect stanchions of our culture: weightless on the foamy surface, a crescent cuff in a very slight modern style, all business and drifting patterns of heat; the Israeli army on the television. Homes

hindering the blameless or less: the house doors going up in floodlights of white shear color. No more or less offensive anyway than grit on the surface of your teeth, or a woman stuffed up against a sink, with her limbs arcing like lanterns.

There may be a slight trumpeting involved, but at least it beats silence most of the time, the stamp of the terrestrial clergyman. I'd rather ape a heavenly style than be sent down-river with the bathwater.

And even if you read no deeper at all you still get to buy western peaks at reasonable prices; body art and the speaking of one's peace; cars ten feet away with large vault-bearing roofs, with the kind of tension that runs off like the lambent blue of a room that hasn't been left all day: a bruise against the sky or a long war; the declining twisted pennant of a starry morning into eggshell.

And the best? They can throb relentlessly like a late Turner or Rothko: hot-storm ribbons of sun and red storms over broken bits of men and ground. They can snake incredulously on the point of a sensation we haven't quite identified in any official language. They suggest a tint over the presuppositions, and most particularly the proposition of originality, upon which any community is born, particularly our own. They allow us to rise on the high headshot of old things made new and ekphrastic choirs and any of a hundred structures opened up by the vast entrails of the culture; there's a desperation in this, and it's infectious.

Having said all this, there are qualities of technique that I, as a reader, am likely to find in a poem that I consider alive, and by which I, as a reader will necessarily attempt to gauge the character of my own poems and those of others. These will include parapraxis and related gravities of form in terms of the poem's architecture. These will likely also include an impression of speed: the effective poem seems to display a rushing and pooling of energies at various points, more like water than electricity (the poem declares, in a sense, that it will refuse to pull teeth when it can pock the jaw). These will also include a music, which should not be understood by the vocabulary of music as a discipline, but rather as a ringing sense of paradox; something of the "still sad music of humanity" that old Friend Wordsworth coined, but all poets anticipate. This need not be primarily aural or use the aural in some way to achieve their effect, at least not in a literal sense, but would produce an aurality resultant from the undefined

commingling of their capabilities. You see here that I am getting away from myself. To attempt to unplug a poem in this way is like trying to describe some intimate series of preferences, is of course the same thing. It is as excessive in its reporting as it is reddening in its reception. So, rather than offer you a pornographic graveyard of further references, I will cite my relative (by which I mean almost total) obscurity, and beg off.

Obscurity allows for experiment. It may be that obscurity must follow in the wake even of fame. Obscurity is a discreetly pleasant if persistently uncomfortable friend. I have made friends with it by both the quirks of my nature and because I have frequently adopted it as a stance to lull it into some form of commiseration. It listens, but only as a half-creator (the very same autoerotic Wordsworth, our clear and dripping patron) lacking the will or archaeology for a more detailed encounter. One of the quirks of my nature is that I am young in both fact and text; I am obscure because I am thin on the ground, as it were. My only commandment in this regard must be to take the money and run whenever possible, with its proviso, hold your nose and take it, but only appear to partly hold your nose: the brandy coloured flame of the intestine or the dream in which your teeth fall out and seem to take your face with them, are all worth it. If your poems are alive you'll have no choice, and if they aren't, how will you realize it if your teeth are busy falling out?

P.S.: 10 random sources of aid: Berryman's *Dream Songs*, Berrigan's *Sonnets*, Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, Anne Carson, Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Frank O'Hara, Bob Dylan, early Ashbery, Robert Kroetsch, Mark Rothko

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