Writing from the (Proletariat) Bones

Different class experiences do breed a different bracket of tastes, or, at least, a different bracket of familiarity with certain subject matters and objects that are in turn used, say, in a literary work. There are certain brackets of frustration that are more or less belonging to different classes. There tends to be a different politics. It might be easier to put it just as the underprivileged and the privileged, defined in terms of disposable income and material circumstances but also in life-experience (head-experience) in general. Though privilege and quality of experience happen along a spectrum, it still seems that the two broad categories are generally recognizable as such. In writing, they are often quite recognizable, and my gripe is that the voice for the underprivileged realm of experience seems under-represented.

The chief editor of Vancouver's new literary production *Sad Magazine* writes this:

> *Sad Magazine* is not political, but it comes from a group of people with entirely different life experiences than our successful superiors in the industry. We live in shared houses and apartments, we survive on minimum wage and tips, and we want to write and read about entirely different subjects: drag queens, vintage clothing storeowners and migrant workers included.

She says later that she and her production partners "feel in a small way that the death of big magazines these days has a lot to do with a *dearth* of good content that makes sense to today's audience." For me, these claims resonated immediately and give some explanation as to why I often find the writing in so many Canadian literary magazines, especially prose writing, so boring and gutless. On one hand, I am not interested – and *Sad*'s editor is saying very many people are not interested – in writing whose dilemmas and subject matters locate it in privilege in some way, in which case there is little shared with the writing, little camaraderie.

The issue extends beyond taste, too. A hypothetical writer who is, internally and externally, really privileged would lack the kind of blood that Hemingway said he bled while at the typewriter – the blood of pain, got through living with a toxic combination of battery, loss, and rage. The real difference in cognition and perception of someone with some of this blood is found in all kinds of places. In his book *Real Education*, Charles Murray relates a maxim attributed to Lyndon Johnson's press secretary: "No one should be allowed to work in the West Wing of the White House who has not suffered a major disappointment in life." Murray adds that "the responsibility of working there was too great…to be entrusted to people who weren't painfully aware of how badly things can go wrong." Murray is warning against those who are unacquainted with failure – and I attach a greater, more enduring experience of loss, failure, and not-having to the underprivileged – and the lack of caution and full consideration that it tends to breed in business and political leaders who act on behalf of other people. This unschooled person fails to see and feel possible disaster in the same way that someone who is really schooled in grinding loss and misfortune does. To put it another way suitable to writing, a really privileged person who is unschooled in failure suffers from a certain lack of imagination and is liable to have a very different outlook and guiding mythology. This is one field of imagination, disaster, as an example amongst others.

In the most extreme terms, insofar as the damage of one's life feeds into a writer's mental problems, an unschooled writer lacks the neuroses required of a really good author. This is what Roland Barthes argues in his *The Pleasure of the Text*: it's the neurotic writer that is really able to produce pleasure or bliss in the reader by forcing the reader's grasp on his self and his world to slip and fracture. But, perhaps a really good writer does not need to be a neurotic mess or to have a strip regularly taken out of him by life's outrageous fortune. At any rate, there is a real class difference in experience, taste, and imagination, and I side with *Sad*'s editor when she suggests that an underprivileged voice is scantly represented in literary magazines to the loss of a large demographic of readers.

Take recent issues of Vancouver's literary magazine *Prism* and Saskatoon's *Grain* as examples of privileged writing. The summer 2009 issue of *Prism* contains the results of their prose and poetry competition. The winning story, called "The Dead Daddy Game," is about a couple of children dealing with the loss of their father and a neighbour's hurt pet pig – the injury and recovery of the pig standing in for a kind of redemptive and regenerative silver lining in the story. In addition to immediate cultural echoes of children's movies like *Babe* with cute talking pigs that undermine any attempt at the story achieving the seriousness it aims for, the story's imaginative structure comes straight out of middleclass America. At bottom, it is just a permutation of the stock story of the hurt dog of the nuclear, middleclass family. To keep "Dead Daddy" from this very obvious, hackneyed drama of a hurt dog, it removes the dog to a neighbour's house and turns it into a pig where, just as in the stock story, the children gather around and pin their hopes. In this way, the story oozes middleclass privilege and family drama. On top of that, the trivialness of a hurt pig is so badly out of step with the gravitas the story tries to garner that the story really falters as a serious drama. But then, you think, if the pig were the site of a strange (and neurotic) imputation of the children's feelings over their father, or if the story ended with the old neighbour butchering up the pig for pork hocks (like a traditional Englishman), or the children's sweet feelings for the pig being crushed when the stupid pig bites off one of their fingers, or something, there might be a surprising story here with a moral of irredeemable loss or how unfair life can be. That is not the case, though; the pig is its own site of feeling and there are no ruptures to the story's pedestrian framing. As it is, the story's imaginative structure and its ambition for great dolor by way of a hurt pig really weaken the story for an underprivileged audience that feels the story's class and petty foisting of heartache.

The second place story called "Something Fierce" in *Prism* likewise locates itself in a straightforwardly privileged voice and set of concerns. The characters here relish in their wealth, youth, looks, and education. During his night at the bar, the speaker brags that he is "loaded" with wealth. His friend distills the speaker's biggest problem like this: "It's unjust, a dashing young intellectual like yourself going unlaid. Somewhere, clearly, the culture's gone wrong." If he were not already blessed and carrying a virtual guarantee for copious lays to come, his problem might not be so lame. Although we can all probably relate to being drunk and lonely, we will not all sympathize with the woe of this particular spoiled kid, nor does the story work or try as a satire of spoiled University students. The dialogue of the characters drips with arrogance

and a tiring number of references particular to English students, like D.H. Lawrence and Harold Bloom, on top of references to essays and essays delivered at conferences. Whatever drama there is in the story occurs in a very specific and pampered world of good fortune and erudite cultural references. I am not sure how this story can appeal to anyone, let alone a less privileged group of readers who are likely to find its highbrow references worthless (they are not meaningful even if you know them) and the speaker's claims of drunken profundity and woe annoying.

Grain's summer issue is filled with examples of privileged writing, too. One called "Mulchy's" starts like this: "Back in the 1980s, I would occasionally visit my good friend Dr. Dan Snidal, the Associate Dean of Medicine at the University of Manitoba, and accompany him on his daily rounds of the school at the Heath Sciences Centre, the hospital in the very heart of old Winnipeg, butted up against the streets named after those pioneer madams." The rest of the story keeps this opening tone. We have, then, a character who clearly associates himself with the intellectual status of a medical doctor. And why mention that the Dr. is the Associate Dean (it is not important to the rest of the story) if only to sharpen the sense of how intelligent this Dr. must be, and, by relation, how intelligent the speaker must be? Even the dating to the 80s adds to the sense that we are dealing with an older and wiser individual who has been interacting with intellectual elite for decades. Naturally, too, we do not imagine the two men talking about baseball as they do the rounds, but speaking of the mysteries of life about which they know something that we do not by virtue of their great intelligence. The story ends with no less than the culmination of this intelligence when the speaker places all human beings in their place within the Universe (which happens to be nowhere):

> Here, somewhere between two psychic extremes, the starting line and the finish, we rev our fearsome engines, our gaskets flapping wildly in the cosmic gale. We are precisely here – and everywhere else too, all at once! And we're fast! We are the benighted and benumbed, infantile with our Gnostic all-knowing "something"! Yes, we have "something," and somehow we know it!

The story has plainly apparent pretentions to rarefied knowledge and elite status, which happen to be placed within a setting of a life of relative ease and contemplation.

Another story in *Grain* called "Tip" gives us another fortunate world. In the story, a young intern at a law firm has a short affair with her married superior – she does this knowingly – and the drama of the story is this girl fretting over whether he loves her or not. He does not, of course, and turns out be a dirty, sexist old man who wants to impregnate her. In the end, however, this romantic tousle is no serious problem for her because she can simply "pick up another man, or maybe two, with ease and nonchalance." So, she is a good-looking, to-be lawyer, complaining about romantic difficulties with a married man, which does not stand in her way of being sexually satisfied, anyway. This is truly a spoiled world, and not a satire, either. Her discomfort stemming from her extraordinary sense of entitlement alongside of her already copious good fortune earns this drama scant sympathy, let alone empathy, especially from a humbler readership for whom this story cannot help but be irrelevant.

Grain's summer issue is also filled with another kind of privileged writing. A bunch of them are not privileged in that they are dramas stemming out of a well-to-do world; they are privileged in that they stem out of a vaguely postmodern, academic world which tends to (tries to) exclude those who are not ordained. The fault here slides from the story itself to the author, who writes on a pedestal. The target audience here is exceedingly small, and I tend to think that the topics themselves are luxuries. For example, "Heidegger's Typewriter" is a story about the physical act of writing and typing and the role of technology in that. Mostly, though, in addition to dumbly mucking around in Nazi history, the story gives you lengthy paragraphs just on the memory of the pencil lead on paper and the tin ring of a pencil eraser, or the feeling of using a typewriter or a keyboard. I can only imagine this story having much camaraderie with not just the well-educated, but with well-educated writers. A similar exclusion is true for the story "Table," which is, of course, all about the value of tables. The table is amongst the most ancient of objects in civilization, the speaker says. I would expect a flat surface on which to do things would be used all the way back in human (and animal, insect, and plant) history, and that does not earn it special philosophical attention. The same is again true of the story "The Line," which is all about the value of lines. And here are also robust examples of pseudo-philosophical ruminations: a line is one of the most generative forms; this is evidenced by the fact that the line as a noun is used in the vocabularies of math, art, hunting, geography, etc, the speaker says. The line is just a rudimentary way of relating to spatial dimensions and naturally shows up in things having to do with space. Our eyes find lines easy, and so we write and read along a line rather than in twirls or some other pattern, and so on. The point, though, is that these topics are basically academic in nature and postmodern in their mostly fractured, heady style, obsessing over things so banal as pencils, lines, and tables, and this automatically places these stories in a very exclusive space of interest and reference.

If these stories are indeed irrelevant to the experience of the majority of people, which is partly the reason for the floundering of big magazines, why are these stories winning? Who likes them (outside of the editors)? On one hand, this is a problem of class and correlative experiences and tastes. On the other hand, there is also a pressure to write pretentiously, which shows in the huge prevalence in *Grain* with its stories about lines, tables, and typewriters where the attempt itself is pretentious, but the writing does not even meet its own standard; that is to say, the writing is peppered with bad logic and hammy philosophical statements and fails to be even a solid example of an intellectual rumination on an object. Their strain to be academic implies the presence of the pressure to write up to a weird standard, and to take value in this standard, as an editor. In the meantime, hope for more of the kind of underprivileged, "working-class" voice and realm of experience that the editor of *Sad Magazine* speaks of does lie in magazines like *Sad Magazine* or *The Peter F. Yacht Club*, but also in some unexpected places. You will not find any stories about tables and lines in some lusty literary magazines (well, unless the tables and lines are involved in sex) like Toronto's *IN MY BED Magazine* and Ottawa's *The Moose & Pussy*. There, we have the alternative: down-to-earth, punchy, and vibrant sex-stories that do not isolate themselves in some kind of fortunate world.

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