

A Plea for Vision and a New Romanticism in Poetry

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Somewhere along the line of his illustrious career, the poet Wallace Stevens said, “all poetry is Romantic poetry.” He did not, of course, mean it was about love. What Stevens was pointing to is that poetry, by its nature, drifts across the territory of the Great Human Dream -- our real *Real Estate* of commons -- in which we find, to quote Robert Duncan, that *eternal pasture folded in all thought*.¹ A poet, Duncan chooses his words carefully. A pasture is not, as city folk might think, just a chunk of land with a fence around it. The word's roots imply *forage, fodder, foster, feed*. They are the same roots from which we eventually get *antipasto, repast*, and finally, via the Latin, *panis* (bread), there follows all words descendant of that, such as *pantry*. The idea is that pasture implies a storehouse of nourishment. It is a place, in which, on which, to feed... *that eternal pasture folded in all thought*.

Let me make a personal picture for you. Inside such pasture sits the emanations from Cabalist's Tree of Life, the alchemist at work on his *magnum opus*, the cosmology of the ancients, the magic squares of the early Renaissance mathematicians working their permutations, the conjecture and arguments of Pythagoras, Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler

¹ Robert Duncan, *Scales of the Marvelous; Insights, Working Papers in Contemporary Criticism*, New Directions, 1979

and their like, the hand written Folios of Shakespeare, Bach at work on the fugues, the Grimm Brothers collecting their tales, the Amazonian shaman-healer, the Tulku of Tibet, all of Chinese medicine, Penelope at her loom, the returned Odysseus planting his oar, the Hanged Man and Fool of Tarot, the Ouroboros swallowing its tail, the curandera of Hispanic America, the beautiful half-lit interiors of Vuillard and the milky whites of Vermeer, the Book of Hours, the poems of Sappho, Homer, Keats (coughing as he copies out the last poems), John Donne, Dickinson, Yeats, Poe, H.D., Neruda... (you can make up your own list of heroes here). This is not to mention the Saints, the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, the erotic Temple carvings of India, the tapestries of the Unicorn, the quilts of the American Slaves with their embedded directions north, I'm skipping over Eleanor of Aquitaine, Gandhi, Sojourner Truth, Mother Jones, Sacco and Vanzetti, Billie Holiday, Picasso. Skipping over Stein, over James Baldwin. Skipping all who wrote behind bars, on prison walls, in internment camps--here and abroad. Skipping individuals such as Mary Frank, St. John of the Cross, Matisse at work near blind, Cezanne found dead in the field with his paint box strapped to his back, Beethoven deaf (!), and all those, known and unknown, who did what that had to do to keep their appointment. This is the pasture Duncan points to; the one poetry meanders through; to which it is both husband and wife, and for the sake of which its disciples have laid down their bodies to defend. Romantic? Tell that to the Polish poets, or to Akmatova, husband and son killed, tell it to Mandelstam put to death in one of Stalin's work camps; or to Nedezhda, his wife, who memorized his entire oeuvre so that the poems would survive him. How could such a project be anything but Romantic? When someone tells me that they are interested in poetry for reasons of self-expression, I cringe. Of course poetry is

self-expression. So are my best desserts! I cringe because the lens they are looking through is so small; it leaves out the pasture, *their* pasture and, thereby, reduces the self they can bring to their writing. We all lose by such reductivism.

Lore has it that the Ancient Greek poet Alcman, (7th century BC), learned meter by listening to the songs of the birds. *Words*, says Susan Brind Morrow, in her wonderful memoir--really it is more than that--, The Names of Things² *begin as description. They are prismatic, vehicles of hidden, deeper shades of thought. You can hold them up at different angles until the light bursts through in an unexpected color.* The word carries the living thing concealed across millennia, as in the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt whose symbols were called “sacred words”, and whose images betray our evolutionary development as well as a rudimentary glimpse of language-in-the-making. The sign for “m”, for example, was in its hieroglyphic form that of a wave -- signifying water. Spelling is, of course, nothing less, than the casting of a ‘spell’. Thus can we trace in language, as Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian seer and founder of the Waldorf School movement has insisted, the earliest linguistic patterns of our development -- movement to sound to image and, cumulatively, to speech; a development that each human child recapitulates between during their first seven years.

I must interrupt myself here to relate a phenomenon that should be taught in every public school, but is not. (Perhaps it is considered overly “socialist”.) My information comes from the poet, social philosopher, and founder of the Lindisfarne Association, William Irwin Thompson, in his 1981 book on the origins of culture; The Time Falling

² The Names of Things, Susan Brind Morrow, Riverhead Books, 1997

Bodies Take To Light³ _ We have all heard how a group of women living in close proximity will over time develop a common calendar of menses. What's less known is that human beings are so tuned that as you listen to me, the various elements of your voice apparatus, larynx etc., though silent, move in a syncopated sympathy to the specific words I say. They mirror them. The closer we are, the stronger our connection, the greater our bond, the more we dance. Pillow talk is a virtual pas de deux. By the way, phrased as "how to dance, sitting / down" -- was a favorite definition of metrics of the poet, Charles Olson. Now, back to the child.... I expect many can recall an experience equivalent to my own of sitting in the dirt with a sharpened stick, making glyph-like marks on the ground --- then drawing specific images, stick people, suns, later, words -- curses, names, dirty words. Remember carving into the bark of a tree, the top of a desk? Juvenile temptations, yes, as "tagging" is thought to be today, but that impulse may well go all the way back to the Paleolithic. Our early instincts toward writing belie our need to record and bear the long history of our kind -- from the paintings of the Cro-Magnon caves to the Petroglyphs of North American, to the fragments of Sappho's 6th c. BC poems, found on shreds of mummy. Writing is magic and has always been so. Language in its many forms is our precious human-made environment. We seek out its mysteries in order to extend it - knowing we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves. They did then. We do now.

I was in attendance at a concert of Philip Glass's music at the Mondavi Center, on the of U.C.Davis campus, last spring. The evening's program was varied, beginning with two piano etudes by Glass, then moving to a long suite written for solo cello, called

³ The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light, William Irwin Thompson, 1981

“Songs and Poems” for reasons Glass could not, at the moment, remember. It ended with a composition for piano, cello, and percussion. The cellist was Wendy Summers. Glass gave a talk --an open ended conversation-- before the concert during which he related a story about Ms Summers’ cello.

Explaining that he sometimes found himself writing with the sound of a particular instrument, as well as its musician, in mind, he said that Summers cello was four hundred years old, making that date meaningful by reminding us that this places the instrument pre-Bach. He went on to explain that it had spent two hundred years living and working inside the Vatican (where it had been embellished beautifully with hand-painted angels). Its following one hundred-fifty years of ‘youth’ had been spent in a private collection in Pennsylvania, positioning it to have conceivably been available to and used by the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, host to extraordinary young musicians. All this was by way of preface to Mr. Glass explaining his belief, widespread among many musicians, that musical instruments, like humans, are enhanced or damaged by the quality of their experience, that they come, in time, to have the ‘voice’ that is the accumulated result of such. Lacking an individual will, the cello’s story naturally emphasizes what happened *to it* such that *it* became the extraordinary instrument that *it* is. We are not, of course, objects but, I believe, the story has pertinence to a life in poetry, namely, that the way we use language and allow ourselves to be used by it, forms us and our so-called voice. While writing -- I think the word composing is actually closer to the truth for poets -- it is not so much that we have something to say but that we are in the midst of something trying to say itself. In this sense, we are listeners -- midwives as much as authors.

The poet Forest Gander, who holds degrees outside poetry and has a keen interest

in science, quotes Whitman as having said that it is in the beauty of poems we will find *the tuft and final applause of science*. Gander feels, despite his interest and experience elsewhere, that poetry is the discourse in which the greatest energy is still possible. To tap into that energy however, we must guard against our taste -- that individual and sometimes inherited arbiter, chair of the department of hegemony, that would keep us penned inside the already known and approved. Poets write to get at what lies at the bottom of Appearance, where the significance of what we see cannot be exhausted. The poem, insists Duncan, is not an object; *it is an event*. *There is another world*, wrote French poet Paul Valéry, *but it is inside this one*. And Olson chimes in -- *the under parts, though stemmed, uncertain / is, as sex is, as moneys are, facts / to be dealt with as the sea is...* Because our habits of thought can so easily influence and even overpower our presumptions, it is useful to remember that when we are working with words, we are working with powers, energies. It is the nature of energy to find and to fill new forms and applications for itself. *Poetry (in its many forms) does not compete*, offered the great Objectivist poet, Louis Zukofsky; *it is added to like science*. We must force ourselves to open to a practice of responsibility (our *ability* to respond), a practice of reciprocity, curiosity, and enthusiasm; to a practice that writes against fatigue, depression, ideology, trivialization, dilettantism, cynicism and its circus barker, REWARD -- toward vision and that *eternal pasture folded in all thought* that Duncan spoke of.

Thomas Carlyle in his essay "The Hero as Poet" writes,
It is a man's sincerity and depth of vision that makes him a Poet. See deep enough, and you see musically; the heart of nature being everywhere music, if you can only reach it.
That was in 1841. Modern physics is proving him to have been correct.

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