

News essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

What we write about when we write about poetry. (Antioch Review)

Let us begin by recognizing that one comes to a poem—or ought to come—in openness and expectancy and acceptance. For a poem is an adventure, for both the poet and the reader: a venture into the as yet-unseen, the as-yet-unexperienced. At the heart of it is the notknowing. It is search. It is discovery. It is existence entered. “ You are lost the instant you know what the result will be,” says the painter Juan Gris, speaking or and to painters. But what he is speaking of is true of art in general, is as appropriate to poetry as to painting. What he is reminding us of is the need to remain open to discovery, to largess—the need to give over our desire to define, to interpret, to reduce, to translate, We need to remind ourselves, in short, that in a poem we find the world happening not as concept but as percept. It is the world happening. The world becoming. The world allowed to be-itself. Another way of putting the same thing, this time from the per-spective of thinking (the perspective of the mind in its engagement of the world), would be to say that the poem is an enactment of thinking itself: the mind in motion. Not merely a collection of thoughts, but rather the act of thought itself, the mind in action. The poem is not trying to be about something, it is trying to be something. It is trying to incorporate, to realize. Not ideas about the thing, writes Wallace Stevens, but the thing itself. As Denise Levertov has said, “ The substance, the means, of an art, is an incarnation—not reference but phenomenon.”

This is of course what gives to poetry, to good poetry, a feeling of aliveness. Touch its body—the body of this particular “ thinking” –and you will feel it pulse with hidden life. Which in a sense is much the same as saying that it

will pulse with mystery. For what is more mysterious than the fact of life? I mean life actually encountered, its own self-sustaining presence. What greater difference than that between a living being and the corpse of that being, the life gone out of it? One moment it is a living presence of mystery. The next, it is something completely other, something best defined by absence, by what is not there. I can never get over it. At every moment I am astonished by it. Touch by it. Awed by it. Perhaps that facts, as much as any, is why I am a poet, why I have to keep searching for verbal bodies the mystery can be present in, where that hidden life of the planet we are part of can be seen again. Can be heard again. Touched again. And perhaps that reason, as much as any, is why we need poetry, have to have it, have to keep coming back to it.

What we are talking about is the world's physical presence. And about our inevitable entanglement in it—our minds, our bodies. About the inexplicable capacity of words to embody the mystery of it. To actually embody it. Not just stand for it, or point to it, or suggest it: but somehow to be it. It is this quality of language—of words—that poetry, throughout history, has sworn its allegiance to.

In this respect, poetry is not so much a defining as a revealing. It recognizes the inherent mingling of the spiritual and the physical—-that is, the metaphoric nature of the world (or; as the Romantics would have said, the metaphoric nature of Nature). That is to say, it recognizes (or feels, or intuits, or perceives) that the world both is and means. And that language both is and means. And that for us—human being—languages is involved in both

aspects of it: both the being and the meaning. And this is what we must give ourselves to when we come to a poem.

Most of the things we do to and with the external world have ulterior motives, have uses they wish to serve. And to this extent they are unwilling, or unable, to allow the world simply to be. Likewise language- -always a part of our involvement in that world-is a part of our daily commerce with the world of use and purpose, of management and manipulation, of reduction and partiality. Poetry is where language can be released again into the fullest of its nature. Into its participation in the mystery. Into, in short, its metaphoric life. Likewise, poetry is where the world is allowed to be-independent of any designs we may have on it, any merely self-serving ends-and where, therefore, it is allowed to have inherent meaning.

But poetry is always more than mere meaning, more than mere use. Meaning is merely a familiar morphological structure it shares with other experiences of language. And use-well, use is of our species' favorite categories of identification and valuation. One of its most impressive, of course. And also one of its most destructive. Both the medevac helicopter and the inevitable series of oil spills. Poetry knows use in both its guises, embodies it in its contrariety.

Poetry, I suggest to you, has no designs on the world. Rather it manifests the desire (the need) to be at one with the world (which is to say, atonement: at-one-ment). A longing to be whole. To be unified with. To be reunited with. To be alive again to the world's living. To be alive to language's mysterious participation in that living. To enter the depth of it, the quiver of it, the dark

knowledge the body has of its respiratory involvement in the rhythms of it: the music of being.

What does this tell us about the close reading of poems, and about writing about poems? Well, it tells us something about what not to do, something about how not to approach a poem. But more importantly, it gives us some sense of where we might look as we try to talk to ourselves about the journey the poem is. An uncertain sense, to be sure (we are after all trying to talk about something that has mystery at the heart of it, and mystery is by definition not susceptible to explanation or solution)–but a sense nonetheless. We recognize that what we want most in a poem is the feeling that it has life in it, something that is not expressible by mere “writing.”

Consider Mary Oliver’s poem “Spring”:

In April the Morgan was bred. I was chased away. I heard the cries of the horse where I waited, And the laughter of the men.

Later the farmer who owned the stallion Found me and said, “She’s done. You tell your daddy he owes me fifty dollars.”

I rode her home at her leisure And let her, wherever she wanted, Tear with her huge teeth, roughly,

Blades from the fields of spring.

Always the question for art is, it seems to me, how to make the moment existential, how to make it a living moment of the world. Here Mary Oliver listens, with her poem, to the great echo in the blood the seasons and the irresistible drive of sex make together. We enter it and we feel it, its deep

pulse and motion. Our bodies ripple with their dark knowledge of it, the rhythms we share together on the earth, their great ease and fulfillment, the delicate violence the flesh is heir to.

And of course there is the poem's eloquent, silent recognition (made not so much by the speaker as in and through her): namely, the kinship of flesh and flesh, the awesome mystery our shared physical life is. And here is Oliver's poem "Winter Trees":

First it was only the winter trees– their boughs eloquent at midnight
with small but mortal explosions, and always a humming under the lashings
of storm.

Nights I sat at the kitchen door listening out into the darkness
until finally spring came, and everything transcended. As one by one
the ponds opened, tool the white ice painfully into their dark beliefs,

I began to listen to them shore-slapping and rock-leaping into the growl of
creeks,

and then of course the ocean, far off, pouring everything, ever and over,

from jar to enormous jar. You'd think it would stop somewhere, but next it
was rocks

flicking their silver tongues all summer, panting a little on their damp under-
sides.

Now I listen as fall rides in the wagons of the wind, lighting up the world

with red, yellow, and the long-leaved ash as blue as fire, and I know

there's no end to it, the kingdoms crying out-and no end to the voices the heart can hear once it's started. Already like small white birds

snow is falling from the ledges of the north, each flake singing with its tiny mouth as it wings out

into the wind, whispering about love, about darkness as it balances in the clear air, as it whirls down.

Of course this is a beautiful poem, no doubt a more compelling poem than “Spring” (I won't say a “better” poem). And we could begin talking about it from many different angles. But I think a particularly interesting way of “thinking about” this poem (having already given ourselves to its immediacy, its living presence) would be to talk about, to think about, its language. The way, for example, the poem comes to say/dares to say. “the voices the heart can hear,” all of us knowing that the heart as a seat of the emotions is a much-mauled metaphor by now, one coarsened by the roar and grind of thousands of trucks along the endless highways of America, battered and smudged and lacerated by great strips and chunks of the immense tires our lives ride-and explode-on, always en route to Nashville. And we know, as Donald Barthelme has eloquently said, that one of poetry's central, one of its most crucial, projects is “restoring freshness to a much-handled language.” The problem for the poet is to find language we can believe in, one in which

there is an opportunity to hear something that is not merely comfortably familiar, not merely reinforcing of one's own prejudices or assumptions.

It is always so, has always been so, though perhaps it is even harder today—with the ever present pressure from our devouring commercial culture, our technology of hype and manipulation.

How can one be sincere? How do we find a clean language, one free of political and social contamination?

It is first necessary, always “to silence an existing rhetoric” (Barthelme)—necessary to clear the mouth and the throat and the ears. It is necessary to listen: to what makes available to us more than mere schemes and rationalizations, strategies and maneuvers. We must let the world as it enters our ordinary lives, not as world-view or system but in sharp particularity.”

First it was only the winter trees— their boughs eloquent at midnight with small but mortal explosions, and always a humming under the lashings of the storm.

As always, the world has entered the poem—has entered us—as that inseparable mixture of things and words. Has entered the poet's memory and mouth, has entered her body's unconscious harmony with the physical realm we all are part of, which we wake and sleep on, its autonomic oneness.

What Oliver's lines know is as much the body's knowledge as the mind's; more even. And the words speak that knowledge, vibrate with its physicality. We're not talking here of some instance of cleverness on the part of the

poet, not pointing to some poetic device involving sound manipulation, not merely noting the sound of water in “ shore- slapping and rock-leaping.” We’re talking about how the life of the body (ours and the rest of the world’s)–how the life of the body is somehow in them. In the words. How water, as both environment and constituent of the body itself, echoes in the lines. In us. How it is both foreground (in the growl of creeks) and the immortal element itself, water, stretching and pouring, “ over and over, / from jar to enormous jar,” our lives forever caught up in the vastness of it, the resistless run of it, around us and through us. And inherent in all this–inherent in all this: the great roll of the seasons, known to all our senses, the very fact of Time incarnated, in this and in us.

We read these lines, listen to their music of presence, and the world is alive in it–alive in us–our quiet fellow citizens the rocks “ flicking their silver tongues all summer, panting/a little on their damp under-sides.” Already, we know, “ like small white birds//snow is falling,” each flake, each word knowing their great fragility, the vulnerability of our brief launchings into flight, the desperate courage each winging out floats on, trusts to. Nothing is about anything: everything is. But it is, of course, in time: actually in time, its poignant tug and pull. So when suddenly we, as the poem, say there is “ no end// to the voices the heart can hear once/it’s started,” we are saying the literal truth this poem has found out the literal heart, with its dark, venous connections to the voices life sounds through us, their brief moments in time: the voices–the body–“ whispering about love, about darkness/as it balances in the clear air, as it whirls down.”

The literal heart. Its physical truth. And so, therefore, instinct with metaphor.

Where the life is—in the poem. The signs of its presence. That’s what we’re talking about. This, I am suggesting—this mysterious presence— is a touchstone of something. If it is there, however difficult it may be to devise an adequate language to describe it, we believe in it; believe reality is in it; believe being is in it; believe it is an instance of—to borrow a phrase from Heidegger—world worlding. In other words, we believe it is art. If however, we are unable, no matter how attentive we are, to find this presence of life in it—in that case we are likely to say that what we faced with is a a failed poem.

What we are talking about, therefore, is that which is most important for us to find in a poem and, if we are going to talk about it, that which is most important for us to talk (or write) about. It is what we must never remove, or kill off, by translating the poem into some other mode of discourse. This presence seems to be at the heart of the matter, and so must be preserved and respected at all cost when we speak of the poem.

What is of primary importance is that poems should not—must not— be translated into some mere category; they must not be reduced to only an aspect of themselves—of ourselves. They must not be only what we already know (or “ understand,” or are able to explain). Poems are never merely. That is to say, they have being rather than meaning. They are their own uses. They are not resolved, they are entered. Poems are where, physically, our own bodies and the bodies of words join in reality’s pulse and movement. They are where, physically and spiritually, our existence is entered, in its mysterious fullness. Poetry is not a saying: it is a becoming. It is never an errand, at the servi