

In Defense of Poesie

When I edit my writing, I'm listening and thinking at the same time. A phrase might strike me as awkward. What do I mean? Hard to pronounce. Cluttered with verbiage, extra syllables. Too Latinate. Too abrupt. Self-consciously eloquent. Often the editing reveals the thinking is the cause. Something unclear that allows the language to tie itself in a knot. A word order that reveals illogic. Or reveals too much logic.

Then there's the editing for style – hearing a trite locution, a well-worn trope, an imitation of some old writer. It's a different attention than the purely musical one, but it's still the ear that detects it. The mind says, *I've heard that before, a thousand times, change it.* Or says, *there you go into sing-song again.* Or, *that's intellectually pretentious.* Sometimes my mind is sensing that a whole paragraph is redundant. Or in conflict tonally with the rest. It might even kill it, rather than reform. Now that I mention it, I'm in fear for this very passage. Why would my mind allow me to characterize *itself* as a bloody tyrant? *Shouldn't have said bloody.* Uh-oh.

'purely musical'...when I love a poem and say the language is beautiful, what do I mean? I don't believe it is sonic perception, although in the way we read silently there is an imagined hearing. Poetic sensibility is a distinct path of its own. We resort to 'music' and 'beauty' because we're groping for analogia. Sometimes we see it while enjoying a different art form. We'll say a film was very 'poetic', or even that an athlete was performing 'poetry in motion'. It's something distinct, unique. Poetry in motion meaning that everything she did was as if imagined and mentally shaped to its most pleasing consciousness of form and underlying meaning. She was saying something, singing a metaphoric wonder with her body, and doing it with exaltation that most of us don't experience. I thought that when I saw Wilma Rudolph run the dash in a track meet in 1960. Something pure and not yet imagined by anyone else. A running poem.

Seeing a poem on the page is the first message. Saying 'pay a particular kind of attention here'. What kind? Heightened. Watch & listen as you read. Watching a string quartet tune up, then glance at each other, bows at the ready...suddenly you're listening with all your might. But with a poem it's not, as I said, just listening aurally, it's being ready for mindplay. Or transport. As soon as the first line begins, we are tuned to its dimension, or...turned off with disappointment. *Oh, it's just talk. Just prose. Just a diary entry with line breaks. Just a sermon or homily or memoir. Touching...but not poetry.*

Poets often don't know where they're going with that first line. They're in a mood they detect as favorable: the muse is nearby. Even in formal verse or ancient, there is an invocatory passage, the reader is enticed and assured and signaled. Maybe the signal is to remember Keats... or Chuck Berry. Part of the signal has to be the unexpected turn, usage, thought. The more practice with one's own mindflow, the more sure-footed with the opening, the more confident that great lines will come in this mode.

What makes a 'great line'? We know by now that the esthetic range is probably infinite. punk, rap, dada, Dylan, the madman on the street...the spectrum in all the arts has opened out in a carnival shantytown of delights, and great lines can surface seemingly in any language matrix. But the history of poems in English makes it more likely and resonant if there is an understanding with the art of Shakespeare, Keats, Hopkins. That one can 'hear' that particular music. Not music – Poesie. That even if one is radical and driven to break with the tiresome past, one still knows that there really is a muse of poetry, distinct and mercurial. She will abide the city dump, but not a dead imagination.

When I was young, the modernists were in full sway. We could see that the sonnet and the villanelle and all the metric obsessions of prosody were at a dead-end. Free verse was the watchword. 'Experimental writing'. It was the headiness of the Jacobins deciding that a new calendar and measuring system were overdue. Sometimes I see ahead a few generations and imagine how 'modernism' and its offshoots will be seen. As tiresome — or lazy — a dead-end. Quaint, like 1950s magazine ads seem now. But I don't imagine formalism making a pendulum return. Something new, conceivably uncharted. My own impatience with my Times is the lack of invention and catalytic zing. Very little is written in search of the great line, the beauty, the music. The mundane, the depressed, the pop, the fractured consciousness— aren't leavened. The best one hopes to read is an interesting mood. A singular image or situation recalled. A poignant story. Random associations, vaguely attractive for their juxtaposition or mental density. Wry observations. In its salad days, free verse was written with hyper-awareness of malleable form as a conveyor of the old poetic experience. Tons of it will end up in a warehouse next to the one full to the top with flowery versifying from the previous century.

Impossible to imagine what the *new sweet style* might be because our history is teetering now. The future of civilization is as shaky as it was in the 1930s. A terrible down-grade may begin... dystopian warlord realms. Or will 'reason' prevail? USA culture will radically change, no doubt of that. Poets laboring against the heap of lies and superficiality will suddenly live in a new age. Will it be an age of savagery and fear? Or one of buoyancy and invention? I probably won't live to know... but clearly the poetic stream will be as shaken and diverted from what it is now...as the political. Hopefully the muses will re-invite themselves.