

On Some Uses and Drawbacks of Poetry for Living

Untimely Meditations

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Estragon: You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!
—SAMUEL BECKETT, *Waiting for Godot* (1954)

The worm has grown no teeth, no jaws, no spiked claws, no poison fang, no armoured back, no speedy feet: nothing. Yet how it has endured! Soft, slow, blind, brainless, defenceless, it crawls stupidly through the earth, through time, through life; persisting over change and race, from the far past to the far future.
—THO. B. ROBERTON, *Newspaper Pieces* (1936)

Natur' is natur' wherever you find it.
—THO. CH. HALIBURTON, *The Clockmaker* (1836)

There's an old joke about a winter so cold spoken words hung frozen and unheard in the air till spring thaw—a joke that clearly evokes a sense of nature's breath-taking power, even over such a formidable human invention as a system of sounded signs. Like any enduring wordthing, though, the joke no sooner has its say than it unsays it, then unsays the unsaying, and so on, ceaselessly folding back on itself in its semantic unfolding (neither the saying nor the unsaying is prior or necessarily more significant; each unsays the other as it says itself—but since we grasp meanings in time, we typically experience and analyze the simultaneous process as sequential). In this particular case, the joke about spoken language's natural limitations unsays itself by telling as well of talk's elastic tenacity, its remarkable cryonic capacity to cross time and space in the folds of a portable encrypting medium (the whorled inner ear of the cerebral cortex, the bound pages of a codex), and then to revive itself phoenix-like not just in the tongue's moist flame, but also in the re-embodiment of heat of

the retinal or the cochlear nest: in short, the joke tells of language's transcendent as-if-it-were aliveness.

For it is as-if-alive, this *techné* we call language—the term a conceptual canopy stretched over a forest of tongues whose varieties are as many as the kinds of trees, or more. As if alive, not as generalizing cover-term but in each of its singular instantiations: a thing capable of virus-like dormancy outside speakers and possibly even speech-communities and of virus-like dominance over them, capable too of lichen-like symbiosis with them, of animal- or god-like domestic service under them as well as alien force within and through them. This is maybe a way of saying that language is also the rarest sort of tool: one that makes partial (in both senses of the word) use of its user and so blurs the line between tool and toolmaker or tooluser, between using and being used—a stronger claim than Coleridge's recognition in the *Biographia Literaria* that as linguistic distinctions become naturalized 'the language itself does as it were *think* for us', yet not so totalizing as the claim that language speaks us (Heidegger's 'die Sprache spricht, nicht der Mensch'). For even while they are tied to bodies, cultures, and histories, human tongues remain loose, on parole, potentially ungoverned, only partly governable. Mysterious, then—if that word can still name what we cannot wholly grasp, though we handle the thing every day—because potentially wild, though tamed in many territories, its wolves made dogs, the dogs, dim simulacra.

The same is true for human thought, for human poetry, both of which typically house themselves in language so that others besides the thinker or the poet may enter into them (I abstain here from pretending to know whether thought and poetry inhabit extra-human forms or are other than after words, either pre-existing language or enjoying a parallel existence with it, their several tracks sometimes fortuitously crossing, but the prospect at least of paralife seems intriguing). If not quite life-forms, thought and poetry, along with the verbal hides in which they often abide when we encounter them, are at their best effectively energy-giving, self-undoing, life-expanding forms, media, agents: wild, moving, unknowable except in part; capable of play, depth, exquisite precision; inherited as well as invented; and variously groomed, dishevelled, diminished, or augmented by our interactions with them.

Their untamed almost-aliveness, though—language's, thought's, poetry's, like the actual aliveness of earth where they take place—too often escapes

notice, our deepest awarenesses dulled by the anaesthetic rub of getting on in the 'Western' world (which has for centuries increasingly been baffling itself against the unworldly, the earthly, the natural),¹ by a somnolent investment in habits hung on us from birth. It is no simple task reawakening or reinventing these awarenesses, which we disremember when we are schooled, as most of us in Euroamerica have been and are still being schooled, to put down the animals and the children in ourselves—the official religions of our inherited or 'Western' culture refusing to share their single soul, converting all else to livestock, the more recently sanctioned Econotechnocults carving all common ground into disposable shares, converting all that is, not excluding persons, to liquidatable resources. The gods, too, insofar as they are given standing in some quarters, have been put down. It is likewise no simple task finding out alternative modes of feeling, thinking, being.

Intermezzo: The Dead Await Your Reply
(Rejects from the Fortune Cookie Factory)

- Silence too can be a glib and oily art.
- What if instead you made a habit of a dog's nose?
- The heart stands aside, yet its impressions fill the whole.
- Cash flows—some drown in the spillways.
- No need to respond if you already forgave at the office.
- Spending was once a sexual term.
- Women and children thirst, the men aboard the sinking ship.
- What better gift than water from a dry well?
- The trick is to be an ex-patriot without leaving.
- Of course, the margin of error may be your only refuge.
- All times spring from bent words, grammatical swerves.
- Airy layers are crucial to good compost.
- This too is a discipline of excrements.

- If memory serves, is the labour any lighter?
- If only we were old hands at monkey business.
- Trouble is, the future has happened so often already.
- Of course, increasing your profit margin does mean shrinking the text.
- Fat chance, slim pickins.
- One fact about the back of your hand, please—no peeking.
- Happy are those who really can name their poison.
- Twitter twitter little bird as you drop your toxic turd.
- All roads lead to Rome, so why not get out of the car?
- Green grow the rashes, oh.
- Strike while the iron's hot; replacement workers also need jobs.
- The shoe fits, but where does it come from?
- You've got to hand it to machines, yes sir!
- Maybe you need the syntactics of a devil's advocate.
- The road to Hell is paved with a fixed percentage of recycled material.
- Self-service today on the altar ego.
- If it ain't broke, more credit to it, and try again.
- At today's rate it's one glass slipper to a glass ceiling.
- You take the high road; I'll just wander in the clearcut.
- Time is money: an equation there's no going back on.
- What else can we be but our instruments' instruments?
- . . . and it's the unicorn by a nose!
- If wishes were horses, we could harness them too.
- How much we owe to the errancy of portable thought.

- The heron stands for hours on one leg.
- Words are all you really have for wings, no?
- A rod, a cod, and he thinks he's God.
- Hellfires first sizzled in the human brainpan.
- Keep your hose clean, and beware of Freudian slits.
- The first symptom is corky fruit.
- Death was seeded in you from the start: why not be a late bloomer?
- The right touch and the salmon of lust rises to spawn in your brain.
- First as sperm castings, at length as worm castings.
- If you were the odd man out, would you have it any other way?
- Sometimes eagles will sit in a fallow field.
- Savour that stitch in time: there's no place like ecstasy.
- The death of one dog is the death of all?
- Be froglike, tongue at the tip of your mouth.
- Make every sense a port of call, safe haven for the radiance of things.
- Ash, acids, and radiowaves—the airs we put on.
- The mushroom cloud was not the brainstem's bloom, but the cortex's uncorking.
- The wind still gets tangled in trees.
- Night's delights we owe to the suns of darkness.
- Glued to the set, you can listen safely to the sirens outside.
- The new Kingdom Come: virtual smorgasmopolitanism.
- No, you're not just a number—you're also a codeword.
- Thank you for obviating the need for a simple injunction.

- Fortunately, we are all within the thing in itself.
- A self-made man, you say? Your own effigy, your own fugue.
- By night, by day, from null to full and back again: what moon would be another sun?
- Some bright ideas launch highbeams in the fog.
- The tongue flags, overstretched by breezy underuse.
- Shall irony, or will urinary?
- End it or mend it, the proverb says; we're for both at once.
- Redeem the time before the coupons expire.
- Many happy returns—so you needn't change your buying habits.
- Earth's plates are slowly reset in time: a family's too.
- But then you prefer a proper story, don't you?
- Just try seeing eye-to-eye with a sitting duck.
- The dead await your reply.

Attempting such anti-anaesthetic tasks is one of poetry's callings, and one of its finest; for powerful poems—those singular yet repeatable ceremonies wherein language, thinking, and feeling gather to dance as one and wrestle as several—can help rub some of us right again, ready us: not for salvation or some such other-earthly goal, since poetry is no ersatz religion, however much priestly poets or critics might want to tempt one round that slough-strewn detour; rather, like its supposed antagonist literary criticism—which I would want to be earthly in its aims as well as worldly and which with Edward Said I take to be ideally secular and oppositional (self-oppositional, if need be)—poetry is one crafty art amongst others, some of whose self-altering, self-expanding, and communion-offering functions can be in effect religious (bonding/binding)—or just the opposite, and sometimes both at once. Not for salvation, then, but for continual myriad-minded salvage—since every human being like every human culture is partly a social Crusoe lost in its moment with a scattered shipload of tools and materials not

entirely of its own choosing, but increasingly over recent centuries with access as well to the treasures and the detritus of other likewise foundered ships—and through salvage for salvage, joinery, and self-undoing (individual and collective), for being here, earthly, wordworldly, for homing in, looking round, reaching out, rising up, getting down.

Powerful poems can do this sort of anti-anaesthetic work because they are shareable forms of attention—hand to mouth, mouth to mouth, lip to ear, page or pixel to pupil—drawing us as lovemaking, birdwatching, conversation, politics or prayer ideally can out of ourselves, sometimes by turning us inside out on ourselves, purifying, pollenating, polluting, and hybridizing at once; moving poems, in other words, are portable vessels and vehicles of longing, of knowing, of localized enlarging and confounding; makeshift spans across the gaps that stop a shifting self's flow into otherness (inner as well as outer), its flow into a self.

Breakers of adulterating human habit, such forms can call from us an animal alertness to the various domains in which we dwell, a childlike delight in sheer being, new ways of seeing (where seeing is understood to stand for all engaged sensory attention)—as even in something as unrealized yet prophetic as Pound's early attempt to re-imagine himself: 'I have been a tree amid the wood / And many a new thing understood / That was rank folly to my head before' ('The Tree'). As if for the first time—or indeed for the very first, as anyone who continues to visit poems remembers—powerful poems can variously attune the ears, point the tongue, unsettle the mind, sharpen the eyes, rattle the heart, open every feeling fibre and unused sense to uncaught, forgotten, or unforeseen qualities of our constitutive elements, from lone words to the manifold cosmos.

The point here is not poetolatry, of course, but rather something easily overlooked in a social and critical climate where culture and language are understood anthropologically as almost inescapably deterministic (the overreactive counterpart to a prior idea of complete individual mastery): all of us handle language; not all of us handle it in word- or world-altering ways. 'All writing', Charles Bernstein asserts, 'is a demonstration of method; it can assume a method or investigate it'—or, in the case of consequential poetry, both at once. 'In this sense, style and mode are always at issue, for all styles are socially mediated conventions open to reconvening at any time.'²

Propositions & Postholes

that nature was never book or word—
god's inaugural utterance obscuring a perpetual advent
everywhere

that every thing that is is an unfolding ingathering
both pupa and pupil

the whorling cosmos too

that the scent or breath or speech of each is also its spiring iris
and light broken is light seen

that the lustrous rustle of leaves is lust lutestrung
and each body is thus a pianoforte string, taut or slack
as it is keyed to radiance

that the human head too is a sonorous marrowbone
home to scores of the whole

that the eating of creature by creature is a clash
and transposition of live notes

mimed and defied in every coupling
fire fruiting

that there is said Blake a place where Contrarities are equally True
and this, this is it

NOTES

- ¹ This triple contrast ('unworldly, earthly, natural') is an attempt to escape the binding binary of Heidegger's nevertheless complex distinction between world and earth ('The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter [New York: Harper and Row, 1971], 17-81). Perhaps more useful is Dennis Lee's synthesis of the antithesis through the admittedly arbitrary term 'planet', which subsumes both world and earth in a dynamic agon defined by the metaphor of 'savage fields' of force (*Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology* [Toronto: Anansi, 1977], 3-12). Still more useful to my mind is Gary Snyder's zen-derived 'nature no nature', which, encompassing even 'the urban, industrial and toxic', is elusive, virtually unknowable (Preface to his *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* [New York: Pantheon, 1992], v).
- ² Bernstein, 'Writing and Method', in his *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), 226.