

“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”

–Aristotle

Year 4.04

“**Homogenized American bullshit**, make work job security, personal crisis fabrication, poetry power politics, and just plain bad writing. As the cop says to Paul Sorvino in *Goodfellas* when they bust him, ‘Where’d you fellows get those clothes? Somebody sure pulled a fast one on you.’” They’d wanted his opinion and they got it. In answer to the question, didn’t he appreciate the purely cerebral in writing, he’d said, “Well, yes, I suppose if you like masturbation, and hey, who doesn’t? I’m with Woody Allen on that one. It’s like having sex with someone you really love.” And while he was on the subject, he thought he’d add, “The intellectual climate in this country can be described as adolescent, and that leads to a lot of masturbation, but serious masturbation. Something badly written, disorganized, gets a lot of attention and it makes you wonder why, what is not evident, what are you missing that everyone else gets or, you ask yourself, is that what readers want, something that insults their intelligence, the most bald faced manipulations and self aggrandizements?”

The two intellectuals, the one affecting Susan Sontag’s eyebrows and the one who looked like she cut her bangs with children’s paper scissors interviewing him for the splashy French online art magazine, *Selon*, asked questions that sent him back searching memories from his beginnings.

“Jeez, I hate to think that far back. If it was an express straight through, but no, it’s the local with all those stops along the way.” He did remember that the name of the first indie magazine he’d ever published in was called *Louder Milk*. “You have to be a selfish self-centered prick to survive as a poet.”

In regard to a question on his process, he’d allowed that “My head often knows nothing of what my hand is writing.” It was a quote he’d come across, quoted by someone who was quoting someone else who was quoting Wittgenstein. Maybe those degrees of separation were prophylactic enough that he could claim it as his own. It certainly fit his experience like the proverbial glove. He’d also repeated one of his signature comments: “I wrote that by rolling the dice, an old trick I learned from Mallarmé.” And he’d quoted the French poet, “*laisser l’initiative aux mots.*”

He’d accepted, he told them, that without attention to the grain of everyday life, the essential tension between substance and sign is prematurely broken. “The source of poetry should be the quotidian in that it is precisely the most usual whose unusualness is unknown or not noticed for its unusualness. The most usual itself becomes what is most unusual,” he’d explained. But it gave him pause, was he nothing more than a cataloger of coincidence? Hypnagogic figments float up out of a chemical dispassion, i.e., boredom. What is language before it reaches the tongue, after all—a soup of body chemistry? And there he was running around with his hair on fire and his head up his ass.

“There’s no purpose in writing for your peers as they are too busy with their own self-importance, or in writing for the previous generation, as they either think they know it all or are totally clueless and like it that way, which leaves the younger generation, full of potential and themselves, searching for something new among the old to bootstrap a reputation of being smart as well as diligent,” he’d answered to the question about the younger generation of poets.

He understood only too well the law of the West: that there will always be someone a little younger, a little faster, hungrier, better looking. The breaks, the grants, the fellowships were going to a professional class of classroom professionals, As the poetry prizes got bigger and bigger, the winners got younger and younger it seemed. All the same, much of what was written as poetry was often only an addendum to a *curriculum vitae*. It had a purpose other than itself and had to be viewed as merely superficial. And while he could admire the intelligence brought to bear on the pyrotechnical display, it was strictly methodological and impressionistic. “The horror of mortality had been replaced by the fashionable lie in the hall of linguistic mirrors.”

“You’ve been quoted as saying that you’re a revolutionary on his way to becoming a reactionary.”

“It would seem inevitable, don’t you think?”

“But some people think you’re a revolutionary, that you’re way ahead of your time.”

“I was, once. . .but to myself, I’m rapidly becoming a reactionary, my arteries are closing off the vital flow of creativity, that’s what’s happening to me now. . .there’s nothing out there, I can’t see it, it’s all trite and pretentious with not one original or unique idea. It’s all philosophy and hype, I know, but at the same time if what you’re saying is correct, they’re using my early work as a referent which puts them incredibly behind the times.”

“You’ve moved on from that.”

“I left that behind long ago.”

“I guess the young poets who are using your example are just as reactionary as you say you are.”

“One man’s revolution is another man’s status quo.”

“But don’t you somehow feel vindicated?”

“Not at all. Some of my early works are an embarrassment, others I just don’t relate to anymore. They are too long past their use-by date. The poems that endure are ones I can view like snapshots in a photo album. They are fascinating in the kinds of emotions and memories they call up. They evoke a time, induce nostalgia, none of it very useful in the long run. Like rich food, they’re palatable sparingly.”

“Yet you’re not without critics,” Sontag eyebrows interjected ironically.

“To those whose searching is different than mine or who don’t experience the awful futility of being caught up in the egocentric projection of social extremes, who believe that the tawdriness of civilization is usefully progressive, or believe in the myth of progress, or those who reap the benefits of this lemming-like inclination, promoting and calling it desirable—for these

people my poems undoubtedly appear preposterous and probably not worth considering.”

Maybe it was the medication but he couldn't resist babbling on. “When I stopped caring about what other people thought about my writing, I started caring about what I wrote. I used to worry about not having a signature style or central subject matter or a fixed character of poetry, and at some point the worry ceased. I gave myself permission to do what I've been doing all along without worrying about it. A poet has to be able to shoulder the weight of meaning in his aimlessly scattered words.”

And they had wondered, now with renewed interest in his work and his sudden celebrity, how was he handling being considered the grand old man of poetry?

He didn't feel old—he was not yet sixty, a year and some months short—just a little tired, an aftereffect of the trauma, the doctor had explained, and the medication, it was bound to slow him down. On the other hand, the celebrity part was highly overrated. It not only made him a recognizable target but it brought out the most servile sycophantic tendencies of friends and strangers alike. Approaching the double thirty, would it be as important a milestone as the original thirty? Or just another round number, the completion of an arc, one large step for him, one small stumble for poetry.

“The fear as a writer as I get older is that my language use is on the verge of becoming archaic. Even the words I use are losing their timeliness. Although their meanings are still fresh for me, they are no doubt a little worse for the wear, threadbare, for others. Fortunately or unfortunately I am finding myself at an edge in history where what I do is anachronistic. It doesn't come overnight. You wake up and that's who you are and it's been going on your whole life.”

He'd been reminded of what Jeremy Beljahr had said about new poets being born upon the deaths of other poets. His birth day was October 20th 1950, midcentury, on the cusp of balance and lethal. Of the poets who had achieved nominal renown, Edna St. Vincent Millay had died the day before he was born, of a heart attack. Yet if he considered the year he had actually set something down as a poem, that would have been Masefield, Hughes, Yoshino, Sandberg, even Sassoon. Not that any of them rated high in his pantheon of poetry heroes written in the stars. “I've written close to a million words since 1967 when I first began to write, poems, essays, aphorisms, journals, and any number of unfinished novels that I would never admit to having started. Poetry has rationalized my errantry, my essentially prodigal behavior. I have also been the victim of an ego craving superiority and worst of all, fame. I cravenly used poetry to gain me respect, idolatry, sexual success, and everything else that goes along with it.”

And no interview would be complete without the quote from Plato: “Acquaintance with poetry must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.” That had been tattooed on his

prefrontal cortex from the very beginning when this exact same experience had signified his doom as a poet.

“How does one penetrate the veil of interpersonal relations, the aura field, invisible to the learned sensibility, that the eye as the sole discriminator, the evil genius, filtering all information, in control of all the senses, smell, touch, sound, even taste, and subject to whatever wavelength triggers the visual cortex?” the bookish one with the bangs and glasses had asked.

He wasn't quite certain exactly what she'd asked, if it was even a question and not just a spew of undigested concepts ending on an interrogatory note, but he answered anyway. “There is someone, others you might say, privy to their own information about their bodies and the semblance is exuded in numerous subtle ways affecting interaction that includes the senses as well as a presumed psychological state measured against our own ingrained knowledge of ourselves, and how accurate that is will determine the success of our engagement.”

“Could you talk about the drawbacks of being a poet, of writing poetry?”

“You should know that poetry is a seducing forbidden fruit and whoever has once tasted its sweetest innermost juice is irretrievably lost to the active living world. I forget who said it but that, in a nutshell, is the poison of poetry, that poets become actors who regard the whole of life as a role, addressing from the podium of the page an ideal ultimate world so that real life becomes a miserable patched up imitation for them. Not surprisingly, there is a destructive element in all artistic activity, poetry in particular, an antisocial disintegrating force.”

“Earlier you made mention of what you call ‘true poets.’ Would you elaborate on that?”

“To begin with you should know that there are very few true poets in any one generation. Among American poets there are not quite a half dozen who are for real and not playing at it.”

“Would you care to name them?”

“That wouldn't be polite.”

“What do they have in common?”

“A source in the primitive. In the pre-logical. True poets' lives tend toward anarchy and chaos, and their poetry is apt to neglect discipline and order, perseverance and steadfastness because of certain irrational factors that are peculiar to the practice of poetry. True poets are not creative in the sense that they decorate or embellish the existing literary canon. They are the ones who bring in the new to shatter the old. Such poets form the progressive element of the community, but at the same time they conserve and link back to the origins of their art. They establish new provinces of consciousness and overthrow antiquated systems at the behest of the voices whose summons they follow. The depth of the unconscious from which the new springs, and the intensity with which it seizes the individual poet, is the real criteria of this summons by the voice, and not an ideology of the conscious mind. Poets are the unwitting vehicles of this illumination and consequently become alienated from normal human situations. This entails suffering because in their

struggle for freedom they are also the victim and representative of the obsolete old order and forced to bear the burden of it in their psyche.”

“Is it a prerequisite that true poets suffer from this sort of alienation?”

“The nature of true poets is as manifold as the agonizing situations of real life. They are compelled to sacrifice normal living in whatever form it may affect them. The danger to which true poets are exposed is the isolation in themselves. The suffering entailed by the very fact of being egos and individuals is implicit in poets’ situations of having to distinguish themselves psychologically from their contemporaries. Poets have uncommon vision. They are not taken in by the purely temporal which means that they are out of time and necessarily alone. True poets can claim their psyches as their own because they have fought for and won them. As a consequence true poets stand between two worlds: the inner world that threatens to overwhelm them and the outer world that wants to condemn them for going against the grain. True poets stand their ground against those collective forces and act as examples of individuality in possession of Prometheus’ gift, the torch of freedom. So it is up to true poets to destroy the old, extricating themselves from the constricting coils of culture, by creatively breaking the stranglehold of outdated tenets.”

“That sounds rather bleak. What about publication parties and readings, awards, and the regard of your contemporaries?”

“All the things you mention are like the foam on a pint of stout. While it may be creamy and taste sweet, it will never have the substance of the brew itself. In the end the true poet comes to realize that to be a poet is nothing, that poetry is all. Poems are made to speak, not to possess. Poetry’s greatest achievement is negation in dialogue with that which it negates. Poetry destroys you. No one bothers to tell you that. And if it’s not destroying you, is it poetry?”

“What then is poetry?”

“If no one bothers to ask me, I’m confident I know. When someone does ask, I have no idea.”

“Surely you must have an ontological conception of the art you practice, where poetry comes from.” Bangs again, with a severe intensity.

“Ok, if you insist. Poetry arises when the space of possibilities is too large by far for the actual to exhaust the possible. After all, the purpose of poetry is not communication in the sense of a message delivered or of an idea expressed. It is, instead, communication as the continuous encounter between ideas and things in language on the page and in language in between the ears. The meaning of poetry is positive and synthetic precisely because it provides an outlet for emotional components that have been suppressed. The positive voices of the unconscious find expression in creative persons and flows through them into the community. Partly they are old voices shut out by the specialization of culture and partly new and untried voices destined to shape the future.”

He liked to use what he called the Eastwood classification of poets: the good, the bad, and the ugly. As always, the problem with that sort of taxonomy was that sometimes the ugly wasn’t so bad nor was the good always

all that good. “On the other hand,” he’d advocated devilishly, “there are some who would say poetry in America is widely perceived as useless, even by the poets themselves. It is non-productive, degenerate, barely a product, mostly bilge and dregs of a deluded class of authors. Poetry, they say, is the excrement of civic life.”

“Do you believe that is true of poetry today?”

“Poetry today, if anything, has lost much of its spontaneity and has become the prize in contemporary poetry’s fights against itself, against its origins, against its basic inclinations and instincts. Previously writing a poem had been regarded, if not as a process of letting one’s self go, then, at any rate, as that of letting one’s self be guided by one’s talent. Now it seems as if every poem has to be some kind of *tour de force*, an achievement that has to be wrung out of one’s self, obtained in conflict with that self. As if poets each had a separate unique way of expressing themselves, distinct as stripes on a zebra, when it’s really just a borrowing from everyone else around and multiple media sources, decanting the latest distillations of *bon mots* and how it might be like to repeat something their favorite celebrity, contemporary or antique, might have said with the same intonation and sense of gravitas or sarcasm or incredulity.

“The role of poet is basically anti-social. To acknowledge the acceptance of their work for true poets would mean lowering their standards merely to be social. Society at its most social is a predatory relationship based on acceptability according to consensus. The unique, the novel, the uncommon are acquired tastes available to all only after it has been commodified, packaged, leveled to the point that what was once unique is now banal, overcooked and made into pabulum.

“Poetry nowadays is no longer about ideas. It’s about style. The most crucial career decision for poets is picking a good ‘ism’ so everyone knows how to categorize them without really understanding the poems. Say some poets write goofy pedestrian faux clichés so then they’re pegged as suburban post-modernists. Maybe they wanted to be neo-deconstructionists but their moms wouldn’t let them. However things are tough for the subpomo poets because the insubstantiality of goofy pedestrian faux clichés doesn’t really recommend them to being remembered as anything special. Besides, no one really wants their tax dollars to support poets who are regarded as effete blood suckers, and corporations won’t support them unless they’re famous enough to effectively advertise their cultural enlightenment.

“The problem is that the point of the current crop of poems generated among the writing workshop cliques and MFA pods is the idea that syntactical, grammatical, logical anticipation and expectation should be thwarted. The thought being that the further away the poet slash poem can land after the dissolve in the verbal slash syntax slash visual logic of the text as meanwhile another track is quickly laid over and over again in some kind of white noise iteration will generate grunts of approval from the audience—if that’s what they are and not a cultural dyspepsia inflicted by bad poetry—as an acknowledgement of the poet’s avant-garde credentials. That’s what the poem has become. Its function is no longer where you might lead someone or

offer a unique linguistic experience but that you have channel changed seemingly without any structural goal, motive, or purpose solely because you can or as a failed attempt at random cerebral similitude. It is the signal that the poet has triumphed over something, someone, or some subconscious dynamic in doing so. And hopefully, in the process, made a contribution to neuroscience. What this something or other might be is never made clear. Unless, of course, forced to endure the disaster of hearing some poet's tedious exegesis. Then it's an agonizingly embarrassing view into the abyss of that poet's cluelessness.

"This is unfortunate because a common mistake poets always make is thinking that poetry is created for others. In reality poetry is a private language for sophisticates to congratulate themselves on their superiority to the rest of the world. Their statements on poetics explain that their poetry is utterly incomprehensible and therefore full of deep significance. Invariably they misspell *weltanschauungs*, but then such declarations always say more than their poetry does. So they deconstructed syntax in a vain attempt to vanquish society's heinous hold over their pitiful lives and brains."

The interviewers scanned their notes for any lingering boilerplate questions they might not have asked. "How important is truth to a poem?"

"Poetry speaks the only truth, but a truth treated so subjectively that not everyone hears it. That said, a poem can't be measured by any external standard of truth but in an absolute immanent way, through the gap between itself and its own exemplification. Truth is infinitesimal which is why it's often overlooked, but it has a large aura that catches the inner eye and a poem can be infused with it." And he'd added, as if it needed to be repeated, "Truth is a convenience not everyone can afford. For the poor, the disenfranchised, truth has many more subtle variances than it does for the wealthy who act like they own it and can sell it to the highest bidder. For the poet, the truth of the poem becomes what it is as part of an historical process. Every succeeding poem imperceptibly changes the poem that preceded it, and inevitably its subsequent relation to the truth."

They inquired as to his reaction to the bad reviews of the publication of his book length poem, *Procreation*.

"They're like paper cuts, they hurt at first, sting like the devil, itch, but they heal soon enough, and eventually you forget about them."

"Do you ever respond to your critics?"

"I try not to take it personally because I'm confident in what I do as what I do. Most of it is pseudo-criticism anyway, and doesn't get at what I'm at or it's merely literary chit-chat which can make reputations boom and crash in an imaginary literary stock exchange. Much of it, whether it hems and haws over an obscure point or vacillates for ulterior motives or reacts by taking refuge in cliché is merely uninformed leisure class speculation and conversation. Over half the poets today are working under a mistaken job title. They should be philosophers or theoreticians, but that requires a discerning intelligence—you have to have a clue. Or they can become literary critics. That way they never have to have an original idea of their own. Those

remaining true poets know exactly where they stand as all but lost to the rest of the world.”

“Could your outsider outlaw reputation be one of the reasons why you were never published in *Poetry Magazine*?” they’d asked.

“*Poetry*? Outta Chicago? That’s a laugh. When I was coming up *Poetry Magazine* was considered a joke. Now it’s a joke with a lot of money,” he’d answered.

There were so many other things he could have said, walking the woulda shoulda coulda tightrope of what was better left unsaid. Poets see hidden intention everywhere and invent meaning where there is none.

“What looks large in the distance up close ain’t really that big.”

Poetry is a process in which every phrase is a summation and transformation of the previous phrase in that it incorporates the series of phrases or transformations through which it has developed and as a result of which it assumes its own form and structure.

Wisdom often smiles but rarely laughs.

The illusion of a work of art makes a prison of passion.

The relationship between artists and their art is always tenuous—what in one moment of elation is luminous can be soul murdering garbage in the next.

Poetry aims for the universality of autobiography.

Existence is necessarily a line drawn in the sand that joins other lines to spell *Help!*

If you’re going to live a lie, make it a good one.

And when they’d asked if they might do follow up questions over the phone: “Telephones? I stay away from telephones. They’re like truth serum. As soon as I get on one, I start babbling. There’s no telling what I’ll say or reveal just to accommodate the device.”