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A Poetics, of Sorts

Part of the fun of being alive is arranging and categorizing—a dangerous sort of fun, but it is part of being human. For instance, we think of ourselves, we humans, as different from non-humans. Heidegger, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, says rocks are “worldless” (*weltlos*), the animal is “poor in world, (*weltarm*),” and man is “worldforming” (*weltbildend*). I have always liked this kind of quick system, but have always also considered such a system temporary, contingent—a poem. A poem is a system for sorting: putting words and sounds and commas and semicolons and whatever comes to hand into groups with connections.

“Sorting” is part of what we do with and to poems—establish genres. Or, the poem can be a response to being out of sorts. The *OED* suggests that “sort” as a verb implies a measure of randomness—it derives from a Latin word meaning “to divide or obtain by lot.” By chance. Poetry, to me, is always and intimately connected with randomness, with unpredictability. Poetry is what we have in lieu of explanation, and in place of consolation.

Recently I used the word “shibboleth” in a poem—see somewhere in Judges the story of that word’s use to separate the outsiders from the insiders, and how its *meaning* (“ear of grain,” or some say “stream”) in the denotative sense hardly matters. Mispronouncing the word meant death. I often return (frequently against my will) to the Bible, when I look for explanations of my own linguistic habits. Perhaps “accountings” rather than “explanations.” And not only the Bible but the various rituals and readings of a religious childhood. Here is some of what such backward looking suggests: that early on I experienced language as “meaningful” but not as an information storage and delivery system; that words and sensory response could collude and form a new sort of meaning (cf. the taste of the wafer at mass, and the smell of incense, and the sound of the responses I was reciting by rote); that communities consist of isolated individuals who might speak the same words but had rarely the same feelings and thoughts, but speaking the same words gave them...consolation. Except I was not consoled.

The poem is always what happens when we think something else is happening—the poem exists always “in spite of,” rarely because of.... Or at least this is true for me, and it is true for me both as reader and as writer. Language, and all the sounds we make whether language or not, suggests the shape of the inside of the skull. The mind. The brain’s volutions and convolutions. The closest we can get to our own thinking is to attend to the words, the shapes our thoughts make as they escape. (I could, however, make a similar sort of case for any art, any application of individual notions of order to the received world—and I can make the case for mathematics, too—the shape thinking takes when it escapes the internal boundaries.)

The connection of writing to drawing, for instance, is significant and ancient. Poetry for me is not primarily about sound—at best, sound shares equal authority with the very look of words and lines and letters inked on paper (or shadowed on screens). The poem as physical thing, as extension into space, like the book as physical object, is beautiful in its efficiency and its ancient and its contemporary elegance. Poetry is an attempt to be aware of language as physical entity, and to make out of that awareness both elegance and intensity. Poetry is about what all physical things—including human beings—are about: the refusal to be something else; it is about the dignity of being.

As a maker of this stuff I have a suspicion that the making of poems gives greater pleasure than does the reading or hearing of them. Hence the ratio of manuscripts submitted for publication versus the number of printed books sold, for instance. But that is a story which takes us into the realm of poetry and economics, the poem as gift versus the poem as commodity. The concept of the Gift (see Marcel Mauss via Lewis Hyde, Derrida, et al.) helps to account for much of the awkwardness in this particular historical moment of art in general and poetry in particular. We live in an era suspicious of gifts, an era which understands only reciprocal relations, which wants to have an accounting, a bottom line to everything, and it is a time which wants an end point to relationships. It wants the clarity that comes with language establishing limited meanings, with people knowing what they want, with sexes being well-sorted and stable, with national boundaries being clear and unvarying. The world has never been that way even when it is peopled by those who want it be so, and that is part of the delight of the world’s gift of itself to us, *as us*. Poetry is a reminder of what “possibility” means. Poetry re-minds us, gives us again our minds.