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WHAT HAPPENS IF A POEM IS ABOUT NOTHING

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What happens if a poem is about nothing, or, more accurately, not about anything? If the poem has no subject which you can support or which you can get behind or which might hold up some ideals that you and your contemporaries can agree with, then what is left in the poem by which it might be valued?

As I often do, I rely upon random connections to pursue some ideas and, while thinking on this, the following quote came up on my social media and, upon searching for the source, the first connection I got was in the introduction to *Voronezh Notebooks* by Osip Mandelstam:

Any given word is a bundle, and meaning sticks out of it in various directions, not aspiring toward any single official point. In pronouncing the word 'sun,' we are, as it were, undertaking an enormous journey to which we are so accustomed that we travel in our sleep. What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road. (20)

My instinct here is that the relevance of this is to be always on the road and that work which is more obviously contained within a project, a particular cultural, political or social investigation has defined a certain amount of its destination, its shape, its position before it has made itself available to the reader. That's fine, I'm not trying to create a podium for valuing work, but I am suggesting it is already there, even if the positioning of first, second, gold, silver, etc., shifts over time. What I'm trying to do is acknowledge, or have acknowledged, the idea that this is the case and that this is not

so much on the road but somewhere off the road, already a destination arrived at or in the process of being formed from an already available desire.

In the poems I want to look at, which William Rowe read at The Surrey Poetry Festival online in 2021, there are lines included which are there and not there. What I mean is that, when William sent me the page version, these lines had a strike through but had not been completely erased, they were effectively mid-edit, perhaps a paginated version of live thinking on the page. He was unsure whether these should be included, but for me, the reader, they were there if in a slightly different format from the rest of the lines, so not only were the poems on the road but they were even questioning the possibility of road at all, or dimensionally considering other roads or dimensions, other futures and other pasts for the poems.

I don't want to lose the initial question though. What if the poem is about nothing, or not about anything? I want to revisit that Mandelstam quote, its initial phrasing, "[a]ny given word is a bundle, and meaning sticks out of it in various directions, not aspiring toward any single official point." To consider that in another way, if a poem is not intensifying a particular subject, how do we know it is a poem; if we consider the words at their earlier stage, before they identify particular positions within a subject dialogue, how do we understand them as poetry; and, or slightly later in this equation, as the words are admitting or emitting meanings, possible points of reference, if we consider their action, can we evaluate their success as poetry, as when O'Hara writes, "you do have the excitement of seeing whether you're really going to get it to be a poem or not" (23). Within the slightly earlier frame of action that quote would imply, for example, not so much that it be a poem

as an evaluation of whether, within certain dynamics, there is a poetics in place whether or not the overall gets to meet the undefined designation of “poem.”

And as an aside, the question raises itself for me as to whether this idea of mine, temporal as it is to this time of typing, mid-august 2021, will achieve anything, whether it is valid in any sense of right or wrong, provable or true, and, from the perspective of my own Performance aesthetics and dynamics, to further consider that something which fails often creates its own truth, its own gaze or point of view other than the one being sought or considered so that this piece of writing might be about something else entirely.

At this stage, then, I’m briefly unsure if I’m writing about William’s poems or my own idea as it might be positioned, by, via, through, around, in, on William’s poems.

As a consideration of what a poem might or should entail, I’m thinking: What is the risk? Shouldn’t there be a risk? Should poetry be risk-free, other than getting it to be a poem or is that the risk? Skill should not be the ability to dissolve the risk factor, ie., skill, the manipulation of language in the service of poetical tropes, should not be the key to success. There has to be a risk so that knowing how to write a poem, knowing what a poem should be, should not be the key to guaranteeing the quality of a poem. No, a poem needs to run the risk of failing, however much it achieves beyond the sum of its writer’s capabilities; it must reach a breaking point or points to be a poem, perhaps even only in the experience of the reader or listener while actioning the poem.

This, then, would make the designation “poem,” as in O’Hara’s phrase, “get it to be a poem” (23), written in response to a particular subject, that subject being shared or held in common between you and your contemporaries, harder to achieve, harder to reach the breaking point of, as

its subject is already an attractive prospect. In the mind of the reader, the poem attains its poetic sum more swiftly, perhaps too swiftly—unless it contravenes some rule or law or harmony within the common agreement of what poetry is. At this stage, we might understand that in breaking this agreement it dismantles its own poetic status unless the premise from the start is that a poem cannot be understood as an equation, as a known entity. Now we begin with the risk, that of retreating to the known in order to reach a certain status of poetry instead of risking the work disappointing the reader. Instead disappointing the reader might be a more vital passage in delaying the expected or denying the desirable, offering the unknown, the experience of doubt as an action within which the reader might be engaged.

So where does William Rowe's poem come in here? It, at least at this stage, is stationed within a struggle. Should these lines remain? What is the value of their being deleted, what does it add to the whole, to its rhythm, to its semantic pattern, to its music? Some keys need a flat note, some discordances need harmony to acknowledge them. How many lines acknowledged on a Zoom interactive chat during a live reading does it take to destroy the prospect of the poem remaining a poem?

Maybe I've spent longer here on the question than on the poem, but maybe it's not an answer I need but a poem, and maybe the poem should not be an answer or the answer but the possibility of an action which is both a question and an experience of what is unknowing, an experience of the not known which is, of course, a question, but is also a future as opposed to a past.

Twice in this poem, *Initial Frame Inertial Frame*, lines that have been scored through have then been repeated just as they are, with no change, or very little, to their line length or wording:

~~two lines of yellow~~

~~thick bright knitting wool~~

~~more orange than yellow at the end~~

~~i read the words~~

~~the happiness of happiness~~

~~legible in its moment~~

two lines of thick yellow

bright knitted wool

more orange than yellow at the end

i read the words

the happiness of happiness

legible in its moment (Rowe)

and the slightly more complex repeat in the poem *Remains*,

~~I want to say there's a~~

~~river of shit and I can't~~

~~see it and there's a river~~

~~shit and I am in it~~

~~I want to say~~

~~the time I'm inside~~

~~and where it is (is it)~~

~~coming from~~

~~is a river of shit~~

~~with bodies gasping~~

~~and you can't see the banks of it~~

I want to say

~~the time what I'm inside~~

~~is a river of shit~~

~~with bodies gasping in it~~

~~and you can't see the banks of it~~

~~and where is it coming from~~

~~and don't say you know~~

~~it's BJ and the Eton boys factory [the children of Eton]~~

~~(because they are not the ones who know {even they don't know})~~

I want to say

there's a river of shit

and bodies gasping in it

and you can't see the banks of it

and where is it coming from (Rowe)

Does this imply that the decision was between a repeated phrase or a single phrase, or does the inclusion of a phrase once with score through and once without imply a different kind of listening, a different kind of attention, and should one be read aloud and the other read silently or even only looked at and not even read. It's not just that some lines are under question but that the repeated phrasing with score through considers a different kind of reading, a different kind of experience of being in front of the words on the page; it places the decision-making process of the writer into the experience of the reader but not in some hypertextual, early web poem play as an enactment of the writing process, but rather in perhaps the most temporal primary condition of writing. The poetic dynamics here are prior, or mostly prior, to any subject or content decisions. The poem here can be about nothing or not about anything and still fundamentally engage and test the poetics in action.

In fundamental terms, the poem can engage the reader in a set of dynamics that make no or minimal call on the semantic, the syntactic or the metaphoric through the subject. The bringing of this action to the forefront of the poem skews the relationship between the reader and the site of, carrier of, meaning. The poem is not a message to be deciphered. It is an experience to be lived through and meaning is not only sticking out of the word and there is a prior to the speaking that is forever on the road. While this might be always true the difference here is that this prior of William Rowe's poem is at the front as an experience for the reader, not a subject of the poem being pointed to.

This action, this experience, is not containable as a phrase in the chat function of a Zoom reading.

Perhaps the most important part of “writing that is not about anything” is its ability to slip past the profound, that mire where thoughts and ideas stick, blur, muddle in the sultry closeness of agreement. There is no doubt in profundity, no air, no struggle.

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