

My Life As a (Non-) Poet

I am not a poet. I must insist on this point. I once expressed my insistence by writing this poem:

This Is Not a Poem

I try to say to myself,
to form the words
“I am a poet.”
I can't.
When I read these lines I feel
discomforted, embarrassed,
ashamed.
I am no bard. I
don't even know
what makes these lines
poems.

So think of them as dreams:
strange, irrational,
unpredictable, inexplicable,
inexhaustible—
the stories of our secret selves.

What kind of non-poet, you may ask, would write this—or any other poem? It's like this: When I meet someone at a party and they ask what I do, I don't say, "I'm a poet." I don't write "poet" in the space provided for "Occupation" on my income tax form. I write "college professor"; my job is teaching courses in my college's Dept. of Writing. Most important of all, I don't think of myself as a poet.

I have colleagues who do unabashedly refer to themselves as poets. Me, I'm just a guy who writes poetry sometimes. That may sound like the most tedious kind of academic hair-splitting. But the writing of poems does not provide me with an identity; it doesn't define who I am. It's not my career, and it is most certainly not my "vocation" or "calling." That fact is what makes it possible for me to write poems at all.

I wrote poetry when I was in high school. I got up the courage to show them to my tenth-grade English teacher, and she kindly encouraged me. I managed to show some to a couple of trusted friends, and they did not humiliate me. I continued writing poetry into my mid-twenties until one day I was reading through my old poems and was horrified by how bad they seemed. Most of my poems got thrown away.

I started writing poems again while being treated for depression. (If such "melancholy" sounds like part of the romance of a poet's life, let me assure you that there was nothing even remotely "romantic" about my condition at the time and I would have gladly destroyed every scrap of poetry in the world in exchange for feeling some spark of positive emotion.) My therapist suggested, as a way of exploring what was going on beneath the surface of my mind, that I try writing: just sit down and write anything that comes to mind. No matter what it is, just put it down, just keep writing.

I resisted following her advice at first. As part of the "writing process," many writing teachers assign this kind of "freewriting" to their students (a paradox if ever there was one). I don't, because I shudder at the thought of having to read the result. My teaching resembles my own approach to writing, which has become very businesslike. I write when I need to communicate something to someone and the written word is the best way to do it. I write mostly emails, memos, and the occasional essay—the kinds of essays I teach my composition students to write. But desperation, and confidence in my therapist, led me finally to sit down at my computer and do what she had asked.

It was a dreadful business and the product was equally dreadful (I have since erased the files lest I die unexpectedly and they be discovered by my loved ones). But looking over some of it, with cursor and return key I started dividing some of it into lines. My therapist read it and said, "I think this was written by someone who has a lot of poetry inside him."

She surprised me. When I was younger, I read a lot of canonical poetry, but I don't read contemporary poetry. I only started attending poetry readings when I started reading my own work to the small audiences who astonished me by showing up for a poetry reading. I prefaced this next poem at a reading by saying, "I wrote this poem for my therapist. Actually, I write all my poems for my therapist." People laughed. They seemed to think I was joking.

Automatic Writing

These words come from the hidden
scriptorium of the heart,
transcribed in runes obscure, so intricate
only a hand disconnected from the mind
could ever hope to write.

I had hoped that you would know
the long-lost hermeneutics, the key
that would permit the exegesis of these lines.
But you only turn and ask,
“What do *you* think they mean?”

Not for me to explicate or even know
the meaning of these words
but just to write.

As my mood improved, I decided I liked writing poems. For one thing, they're short. Unlike many other kinds of texts, it's possible to finish them. I can easily write a whole one in one sitting, and go back and polish it later at leisure. They require a much less daunting commitment than sitting down to write a novel or scholarly monograph.

Once I had collected a couple of dozen poems, the question arose of what I should do with them. This question was the snake in the Garden of Eden. But I now had at my disposal a resource I never had as a youth: the internet. I "published" them on the web, where, I told myself, they *could* be seen, they *might* be read by anyone, but where they are in fact, being non-pornographic in content, ignored by millions daily. Still, it seemed better to post them on my web site at no extra cost instead of killing trees to put them into print, where they could sit ignored on shelves until someone undertakes the labor of recycling them.

Friendly colleagues, though, encouraged me to submit my poems to contests and for publication. Since they were familiar with the outlets for new poetry, they were able to direct me to likely "markets," removing the excuse of having to research opportunities for publication on my own. And a handful of my poems have won small prizes and, lo and behold, appeared in print. I could conceivably attempt to impress the unsuspecting at cocktail parties by claiming to be a

"published poet" without being guilty of lying outright.

Better yet, these little citations give me something to write down on the annual activity reports on my "professional activities" that I must submit to my employer. As a non-tenure-eligible faculty member, I don't face very severe expectations in that regard, but for some years, I was hard pressed to find anything whatever to write under the line that appears on these forms for "Publications." I am ashamed to admit that the prospect of accumulating some small credits toward some unlikely future advancement motivated me to seek publication for my poems. After all, I thought, I've written them and I might just as well get some benefit out of it. For a time, while I wrote poetry without publishing or reading it publicly, I felt like there was something I was doing in my life that was in some sense pure. No more.

Speaking of careers, when I discuss them with students, I always give the same advice: If you can't stand the thought of not being a writer or musician or actor or other creative artist, by all means go ahead and try to make a living at it. You're still young. You may fail, but you won't later be nagged by thoughts of "what if," by knowing that you didn't even try to follow your dream. If you can stand the thought of not being an artist, then prepare for some other career. You can always pursue your creative activities as an amateur. It's hard to get very far with any creative work in the "spare time" left by work and family, but that's what the world is offering you.

I tell them that to make a career in the arts, you have to have a healthy (or perhaps unhealthy) appetite for rejection. (Need I add that my own appetite is rather meager?) Sweating blood over your work, you then submit it for the approval of others, who mostly reject it. It's a hell of a way to live. Even if you achieve success, you live with the memory of that earlier rejection and the fear of future failure.

Nonetheless, I must hasten to add that few things aggravate me more than the constant stream of essays and memoirs by writers describing the agonies of the writing life. C'mon, if it's so agonizing, why don't you just go get a job, for crying out loud? Now, along with my fellow teachers, I like to complain, but I know deep down that this is the work I've chosen, and compared to some other kinds of work I've done, it's work that needs to be done and it's not that bad. A lot of writers don't seem to feel this way. Maybe they feel that they have not chosen writing, but that writing has chosen them. Maybe they've been living with rejection for so long, or maybe they take their writing more seriously than I do.

Maybe they're working on big demanding projects instead of the occasional dinky little poem. But this is why I have to keep my distance from the identity of being a "poet": I'm afraid of someday succumbing to the temptation to add to that bitter stream of essays and memoirs.

For my own part, I work with the insecurity of having no idea of what I'm doing. But I am unwilling to do what it takes to learn my craft. My colleagues have participated in poetry writing workshops and now lead them. They have taken graduate-level seminars in poetry writing and now teach undergraduate courses in the same subject. I admire their courage and that of the students who enroll in their courses and fill them to capacity. Frankly, the idea of engaging in such a process myself, either as teacher or student, fills me with utter horror. I'm not kidding. Submitting my own poetry to this kind of microscopic workshopping and having to "give feedback" to the poetry of others who are right there in front of me—it sounds like some kind of hellish recurring nightmare. It's for souls hardier than mine.

Poetry is such an intimate art that I prefer to keep my readers at a distance. That's the appeal of publication on the web. If people are going to read and form a reaction to or judgment of my poetry, I want them to do it someplace where I can't see or hear them. Remember, we're talking about someone who was paralyzed out of writing poetry for twenty-five years by his own criticism of his own work.

So why do I go on writing poetry and showing it to others? That question I explored in another poem:

So Long Lives This

Voices chatter in the mind:
Where do they get their ideas?
Sleep cannot quiet them,
but gives them freest rein.
Who designs and animates
the figures whose mouths move
when voices speak in dreams?
Walking through my waking world,
enjoying what I coyly call "consciousness"
voices still natter, sneer, mumble,

snarl, cajole—but whose?
Do not say in your patronizing tone
that I ventriloquize them
from the oxymoron,
“unconscious mind.”

Sweeney and Prufrock,
Tiresias and the couple grappling
on that same divan or bed: I know
where they came from.
But death did not silence them.
Prince Hamlet and King Lear,
all their attendant lords,
still strut and fret after centuries,
not in the poet’s mind, but mine.

Why set the voices down
in lines? Can poets only find
peace by letting voices speak
in readers’ minds instead?
Apologies, hypocrite lecteur,
for humming the song
stuck inside my head,
and putting it in yours.

Many writers tell me they write out of some pressing inner necessity. They write all the time whenever they can and have done so for as long as they can remember. What they fear most is writer's block—the inability to write. Most of the time, I don't write. I write poems only occasionally, when lines of a poem come into my head and won't go away until I write them down on paper where I don't have to think about them for awhile. That's why I'm writing this essay, because yet another writer's lament about the agonies of the writing life made some of these sentences start rattling around in my brain. I write not out of constant inner necessity, but only out of occasional inner irritation. I have the luxury of taking that attitude because I don't consider myself a writer. Or perhaps I'm not a writer because I have the luxury of taking that attitude.

So I will keep on writing poems and showing them around until they stop appearing in my mind. I go for long stretches without their appearance, especially

when the demands of work are pressing. For me, poems show up only in the mental space enlarged by leisure. But they still have a way of showing up from time to time.

Written in Invisible Ink

When I wrote these words
they seemed exactly right
although I don't know how.
Before I could show them to anyone
their meaning disappeared.
That's all right.
There's plenty more where they came from.

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