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Kite Flying at Midnight

Where did I acquire the notion that writing about the dead puts them—and perhaps me—in their places?

I once wanted to be the royal palm tree, or the ravishing stanza. I still do, though I tell myself “no” and that by this I point myself toward my true fate.

Our belief in memoir is part of the pathos of our time. We hope to plunder our pasts, representing people there as we wish, with the hope that the resulting voice will drown out all the other voices hoping to be *the* voice, though *the* voice alone will hardly save anything. Glory and immortality through sentence and paragraph become the ultimate consumable, the final testimony to our look back amid material plenitude. It seems we must make our time on this earth into material. It’s the one material we can’t buy. And yet we hope to sell it. We want it to stand for others, for the unattainable.

He thinks to have his name mentioned in print, especially in the writing of a friend, is a compliment. He trades his obscurity for a betrayal.

Someone else’s successful style gives us permission to pursue our own instincts of style, though it doesn’t instruct us in how to apprehend our style; it jeers at all our imitations, desperate itself to be the most imitated, as a sign of love and, eventually, proof that it matters.

I recall a day in his apartment two years ago. His new laptop computer glowed on his dresser top. He was grieving for his broken marriage. He was making of each new diminishment in his life a grand garden through which he might stroll with a friend forbearing out of respect for his suffering. I see that blue glow on his dresser top and envy the spareness of it, of the room.

The terror in losing your greatest passion is that there is no terror at all, only an easing, a hand that will not be lifted...or, most invincible, a feeling of accomplishment.

Exhausted, I misread a sentence from Valery, replacing “ancients” with “accidents” in the passage, “skilled in transposing the ancients in our language.”

During the “1812 Overture” in the park, just before the fireworks, the old man’s hand floats downward, like a leaf, with the music, following it but also bringing it down as though conducting it, as he is in his mind.

Thousands, in their folding chairs, face away from the orchestra, toward where the fireworks would appear.

In the middle of this, children cling to a statue.

Most poets betray their own cherished propaganda.

This page awaits most things I write—or I might write—with an imperious demand: interest me. So almost no life makes it here. Writing here is answering the question: How do I dare?

His neck is now wider than his head. He once played Mozart with the symphony; now he sells long distance services and hopes to impress me with his inwardness by telling me that he is back to writing in his journal.

To give up writing I would have to rely solely on people for my interest. What would I then bring to them, or they to me?

In poetry, refrains are lectures...or soon will be.

Choose twelve perceptions, spaced a few weeks apart, and you will have metaphysical juxtapositions. This is the glory and speciousness of poetry.

The writer must concede his tourism in existence, with better intelligence.

The action of every great character in literature seems unexpected and then apt and inevitable. So, too, in life, every great change of individual consciousness—of method, perspective, imagination—causes one to ask, ‘Why didn’t I do this earlier?...so obvious it is now, and salutary.’”

Few things are so haphazard and demeaning as trying to interest people.

We can imagine anything but having what we want. We are moved by shortcoming.

Overheard: “No matter what they do at the end of this poem, they will never be cleansed of that odor.”

Style, as a device for salvation, exhausts the user.

All writers are romantics, but some choose to express this perspective in manners which either amplify its tendencies and preoccupations, or challenge them, or expand them toward an imagined opposite, or conceal them in some form of aesthetic shame (i.e., correctness, as the author fathoms it). Alexander Pope was one such brilliant—he strove against limitation and was, with his warnings of “presume not God to scan,” god-like in his ambition to smash down those likewise striving.

For life, we recognize the poet’s sensitivity, though in lesser poets it produces a tedious attention to anything.

I stop by the roadside and look at the rolled hay and the stilled tractor and the shadowy ridges in a cloudy dusk. I look and do not have to frame it (compose it, choose the best angle) to see it and take pleasure. We need art because we are not there.

It’s lonely for the artist only when he comes out of his dream.

Fame is defined by the quality of silence it leaves behind.

A poem is greater than the sum of its parts, but it is not clear what all those parts might be, since a number of them are unidentified and live elsewhere than where discussions of grammar, lineation, meter, etymology, punctuation and figuration, etc., might locate them. Some of the parts live in the reader and some in the mood of the age. They are non-categorical and exist in the relationship, the dance, the reflection and counter-reflection of those components we can identify.

Even his greatest confidence is a cliché—even the pain in it. (A cause for further clichéd pain?)

The hindrance of nearly always grasping the situation immediately...

A poem must be a breakthrough. As such it is its own cause for celebration. It inspires dissatisfactions which, perhaps, generations hence, will result in further poetry—though poetry has nowhere to go.

In every good writer there is a quality that insinuates things about us, that introduces us to our venality and missed chances. We see ourselves—even a disturbing glance, so self-absorbed we are.

And yet a misguided reader feels himself indicted by every literary portrayal of human folly and social blindness, shattered destinies and cowardice.

In our age, we may have to read poetry that imitates—and sometimes devours—the great religious texts, to be bothered to read the latter. This may be their afterlife.

Self-excoriation is impatient wisdom.

“...meanwhile, the tone of the poem changes to a woman.”
—student essay

“You really have to pick up the slyness of the words and then transmit them as a cat.”
—student essay

Discontinuity is no longer a relevant aesthetic shock.

If I could bleed the philosophy of a leaf or a patio chair into these words, they might threaten to fulfill my want of speech.

Jabes is brilliant. He puts me into sleep.

Kitsch is a fundamental meaning. Its subject is shortcoming, most often its maker's, which the viewer seems to attempt to redeem with an ironical smile, a second shortcoming.

You can quote yourself with a straight face (and possibly conviction and hope) only to children.

There is an excoriation in reading a writer who simply names what we wear, our home towns, our motives for being present in this room, now.

The poem is to the poet's life as his reflection in the mirror is to him as he looks away from it.

Not writing lately. I've misplaced the unknown and don't realize it yet.

Her stories are familiar to me like a bend in the road home that I treasure and forget, repeatedly, as I pass on an errand or for pleasure: the light wind, the color, the attitude and countenance different each time. Yet that bend bears a character of the eternal and is dependent upon being viewed from just that angle—in memory—to retain it.

The obvious is the doorway to the mystical. This is why the latter "defies" articulation. Few can bear to begin with a cliché (and few can endure it); rare is the writer, or talker, who can supercede it. Most find the audience (if they find an audience) content with the reassurance of beginners, of beginnings.

It seems most writers think a phrase can't devour them, only immortalize them.

Afterward, because I thought I saw how much he condescended to me, my grand praise of him in public only demeaned me more. The greater the chunk of eloquence I hefted and offered, the smaller the ant I was.

Beauty is serendipitous, not convenient. The desire for predictable availability makes the latter condition the major selling point when beauty is peddled; but even then the actual appearance of beauty is serendipitous.

He's reached the point in his accomplishment that seems not to have come from anywhere.

X: "So are you saying that expressiveness is, ultimately, an attempt to dominate?"

Y: "Dominate what?"

The stupid deserve a different form of expression than art.

In every generation, there are eleven-year-olds whose glibness and intuition supercede even that of their most educated elders. Their savantism should indicate that the child has discovered style, and that all, ultimately, is style. Instead, the child is seen as a threat or a joy. The rest, for the child, is luck. For those around him, a test of imagination—that is, a test of tenderness and enthusiasm and restraint.

Sooner or later, all painters bring their crayons to the mountains, but the question is: how will they paint the heartbeat of one bringing crayons up the mountainside? This is not a romantic subject.

A deliberate sense of wonder: despair, or the ambitions of a health nut?

Now, the game is always publicity; moving people as you wish is the ultimate—if temporary—victory. Poetry cannot merely point out that this corrupt inspiration is the norm. Poetry can never be more than half poetry if it only warns. It must also not be caught up in lamenting a future—poetry that understands neutrinos are passing

though the earth and us, poetry that understands that pictures and music rain invisibly from the ether, received by those who have paid for the code...

There is no rescue in a work of art that grants all wishes (especially those forgotten with childhood).

Describing things as they are is more devastating than telling the truth.

She became a moralist to relieve herself of her great burdensome powers of observation.

The weirdly charming will soon become merely weird if the charm doesn't expand from its first style of presentation.

Now we know: you can be an expert, or artist, of crucial experience—and too late with your genius.

All works of fiction blame certain characters—and pretend that they do not. It is the extremity of these incisions—and their obscurity—that is of value.

The dead make us more sentimental.

Matter depends on metaphor to extend itself, and to inspire further metaphor.

He's been dead fifteen years—his most enduring achievement, it seems now.

Habit is the whisper of your most ancient, cunning want.

I write most of all to be in the state of mind I am in while writing. Writing prepares me (for the state I wish to be in just after writing).

Dreams are to conversation what the moon was once reputed to be to bad poets.

As I'm driving beneath live oaks along Albany Avenue, I hear a portion of Mozart's "A Little Night Music," on a radio program titled "Romance." I imagine a man in Mozart's time, gazing at some corseted beauty. He savors her perfection, while it speaks of ultimate loss—beauty that will not be his at all, nor even the possession of the beautiful.

I realize that the gazer's eye for beauty is not the live oak's eye for beauty, if it has such an eye. But I think of the stars, and the animals, and wonder what their eyes for beauty might be. I realize that poems—like Mozart's music, like the corseted one—are beautiful in a small way, beautiful to those few who can see this quality in them. Yet they also suggest, by their painfully limited beauty—by their painfully limited capacity for recognition as the beautiful—that all things must be beautiful.

How often we rely on mystical moments, like this one with Mozart, to shake us and frighten us with that troubling fact. Mozart is great because his music can inspire such feeling and thought. The image of the gazer on his lucent lady, as I pass beneath the eyes of the stars and the live oaks.

The more intimate the secret the duller the secret.

She sent him off to death in her poem with the good wishes of sincerity aimed not at him but us.

It's often asserted that we read fiction to imagine other lives, and that is the moral dimension of fiction. I would add: we write nonfiction—memoir specifically—to imagine how others might imagine our lives.

Not how you want your life to appear to others but how your life might be surmised by others from the facts available.

You become to yourself what you nearly are to others: a character. In other words, one more typical than what it feels like to be you.

The one whose main inclinations can please another always thinks the pleasing is a simple matter, however strenuous that undertaking might be.

He keeps charging oblivion with being his muse.

Aesthetic revolutionaries are, eventually, sentimental. They longed for an advantage they couldn't inherit; so they became leaders. They are always, in the end, quaint, even when they show us something more advanced than they are; even when they are fully enmeshed in the truly and usefully unfinished.

The satirist is the most pious of writers because he proceeds on the premise that correction is necessary and possible. The habit of the anti-habit....

He will make his piety more enveloping than yours because it will, finally, not even forgive itself.

"On the other hand, Picasso was not able to think beyond his gift."
—student essay

Those who choose to suffer, as an aesthetic endeavor, may wish to incite our sympathies, or they may wish to incite us to question our sympathies and compassion (as if genuine compassion now needs an anatomist to reveal its workings), perhaps because they believe both are corrupt and the source of more suffering in our time. Or perhaps they wish us, in confusing life and art, affliction and physical pain as exhibition, to congratulate them on evoking a visceral response from us. To induce pain in oneself publicly is an exhibition (thus self-interested), and so the inducer must accept our indifference and our reluctance to view our indifference as a component of his artistic undertaking.

Culpability of the witness of art—especially poor art—is highly prized, and more highly prized among the failed. (A quick, always essential aspect of art—there must be a viewer.) But can a viewer be accused of viewing, or wanting a view, without implying that art is itself corrupt? How much can you accuse the audience before you drive a stake through the heart of your pretension as artist?

Failed art is an affliction, of course. The conceptual artist who hurts his body for us—like the religious figure who hurts himself in imitation of saintly suffering, or as an example—deserves no compassion but our judgment, though the judgment each seeks from us is different, in each case. Once these artists choose to act on their bodies, they cannot expect us to care about their pain as pain but pain as a *modus operandi*, as a medium—and a pleasure, too. Are we

supposed to care about what they feel—or what they hope we feel? They are not indifferent to us who would not go beyond the bounds as they have, they who risk being mere curiosities, something memorable, to become an object of contemplation.

“Artistic” success in public is the triumph of the previous. It requires of the artist confronted with such luck a bewildering and ironical resurrection.

Talk about a work of art is easily pretentious among those who love it and are just discovering that love—that is, those coming to insist upon it.

If you had been Whitman’s or Dickinson’s patron, what kind of poems would you have expected them to write for your money?

She praised my praise of the poem because she wanted the poet to believe me, and I could never be believed alone.

Subject matter now deemed too familiar may charm the future with its strangeness. What then will be the truth in it—if future readers seek truth in it? I want them to seek it. Horace was not reluctant to refer to the present.

Deepest regret has driest eyes. (Would that existence were so elegant!)

Explanation in the extreme will be parodic.

His triumph was such a foregone conclusion almost no one noticed it.

At dinner, the esteemed poet says that if he’d been a single man these past twenty-five years, he might have become a lesser poet—because his wife reads his work, and so he has not written directly about his sexual experience but has had to make it into a fiction, to distance it from himself. This cover-up inspired a broader, deeper presentation.

Then he asks me about my love experiences.

All writing is about reality—what each writer thinks it is, what each writer’s talent will accommodate. Writers do decide many things about their writing, and they decide many things as they write, but there are also so many unforeseen gratifications that are later inexplicable, or lauded, or the object of apology, or simply unrecognized by anyone of the next generation.

He was not yet old enough to be unconcerned about how his singing sounded—which was the only way his song could charm (though he did not understand that yet).

Ashamed of itself and thus cunning, jealousy makes for some useful thinking ‘against.’ It also invites all within hearing to witness an intimacy that is never the speaker’s true subject.

The writing (or written work) that could provide the conversation we never had because there was no such conversation for us to have—only the wish to have one more obviously elaborate than the one we had....

She has a clear, opposing view and doesn’t utter it—and finds she forgets it. How could it have mattered? At the beginning? That beginning must have been an illusion (or so one hopes, trying still to defeat futility).

He only sounds sincere when he laughs.