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WHAT THE POEM WANTS

The ancient battle. Wit versus Music, neo-classic versus romantic: these are manners, sometimes strategy. But the contrast, so familiar, doesn't address what we need to know: who, how, the quest of Vision.

Pound's three 'powers of poetry' are effective descriptors of the surface or *evident* of a given poetry, but gives no hint of its urge for vision. What it needs to learn from the poem, its commitment to an order of learning that only the poem can create. Pound's three account for strategies and methods of any possible poetry.

But they do not address the ways, say, that metrically adept Byron differs clinically from no-less adept Keats. Keats wanted more than he knew, maybe more than we know. He wanted to know what the poem would tell him.

"What the poem wants." What nonsense! Yet it is the deepest truth of poetry. Or poets. We strive at the behest of language, for the sake of what it yearns to discover itself capable of saying.

The poem always wants something.

Question: Does the poem in front of the reader want something that it wanted (a) before (b) during (c) after the writer wrote it down?

How accurate our language is—“writer” can mean Blake or Dumas or a Scottish lawyer or a typist from the office pool or the spray-paint artist in the subway yards. The writer is someone who writes down whatever comes along to be said.

We are all the same. We write down.

Always imagining that we are writing up.

In this world, the *down* of clay and stylus, pen, keyboard is the *up* of mind.

That is the deep, simple meaning of *scripture* and our reverence for it.

Scripture is ‘what is written.’

Afterword

But the case of Wit v. Music in the Court of Vision, that’s what I started out being after here.

We live in a time when (never mind now the reason) wit and music have been dissociated.

People look to packaged music (that commercial empire of glittery repetitions) for what they hear for pleasure. People look to poetry (if they do so at all) for comfortingly undemanding abstract patterns that engage the background of the mind, and give the reader a rest from emotion.

(A Clark Coolidge poem, say, works the way a reproduction of a Pollock canvas does on the wall of the dentist's waiting room. See, but don't react. Pay attention. Keep cool.)

1 December 2009

= = = = =

Carry it along with you

far as it goes.

Then remember April.

Our bodies are the 'secret
ministry' of destiny.

1.XII.09

= = = = =

Always waiting for a little more—
save innocence for aspirants.

Take a gander at the flock
a queen's mind in a peasant's body—

so much for her. A lifetime
of shopping has left us keen appreciators
of goods on offer. *Volo et nolo*,
we want what's in the window,

dissuade ourselves by strategies
of mere rationality. *Lèche-vitrine*.
I hunger for your glass.

1 December 2009

ENOUGH OF THAT

It's time for roses.

Leproses maybe,
dawn's a cruel island.

Down? Too dim
to seem. Why is 'anapest'
a dactyl? Why is 'dactylic'
an amphibrach?
Doesn't anybody care?

2.

Speedboats won my heart
in 1940 when I read a book
Ivy League freshmen
on their way to Mecca.
They had toothaches, took
opium, they skinnied,
looked ahead, loved sun
on water though it hurt their
eyes like Olson. Just like me.
A motorboat is such a peaceful
car! Years later there might be
Smith girls in it too, unruly
white skirts, hamper of sandwiches,
cheese, tomato, chicken salad.

You remember. You splashed
in the same water. You sat with me
and did not know it. We read the sea.

3.

In the museum there were crucifixes
that scared the little kids.
One especially, blue-eyed, staring,
blood pulsing the sockets of his arms,
being stared at all these years.
Those eyes have waited for me
two thousand years he thought,
my hands are rusty with waiting.

Things have a way of hurting us.
We wound from anything at all.
In the museum the children run away
to a room full of mothers
watching small boats off the coast of France.
But do they ever find their own mothers?

4.

I've told you all the stuff
that frightens me.
Your turn now—
lie down across my lap
and turn out the light.

If you can reach it
from the awkward posture
of telling the truth.

Lie to me,
lies communicate,
don't worry,
I'm not really listening,

just the images
in all your drivel
hold my attention.
Your body seeps
into my body till
there's nobody here.

1 December 2009

NEPHILIM

Have I been frightened enough?

The crows all fly up at once

their wings whoosh a flurry

I hear through the closed windows—

maybe glass can hear as well as see.

Is this going to be one more day

that tells me Listen? I'll try,

I'll really try. There are giants

asleep in the hill, the crows

tell me this, they wake

every thousand years even here,

it's time, they wait till wars

distract the littler humans

then they come out and breed.

Read ancient poems to discern

what they might be up to now.

They're giants, but not very big,

not like movies. The couple

sleeping behind my summerhouse

are maybe twelve or thirteen feet tall,

they can't throw cars around or uproot

trees, but they're big and strong enough.

And their dreams are loud all through the yard—

I hear them dreaming even in my personal sleep.

1 December 200

= = = = =

If you put on a person's hat and
on its way to your head it passes your face
you smell the smell of the person's hair

no matter how clean the person is
or the person's hair is, even if the person
shampoos twice a day you'll still

smell the smell of the person's hair
or the person's shampoo or what the person's
shampoo does with the person's hair

there will always be a smell to do with hair
with a person other than the person
whose hands hold the hat on its way to the head

unless your hand slips the hat on your head
from the rear never passing your face
even then you're likely to imagine it

smell of a person's hair even holding your breath.

1 December 2009

= = = = =

The rocks I see
talk back to me
seacliff on the level
with the birds

gulls swoop past
I admire vacancy
paved with ocean
far island silent

everything else
talks. World
before money
land with no lease.

This dirt owns me.

2 December 2009

[DREAM]

Lean old man in cornfield
tall but the corn was taller
towered over him he stood
slim in the furrow smoking
a white squarish pipe
under the sky. No smoke
came up. He was lean
and old and a man
but was in fact inside
a woman all this while
he and his pipe and his
cornfield and his sky
were all inside this woman
and when she was quiet
he would talk to her and tell.
I said to her This is what
you have to do, listen
to the old man inside
the field inside and believe
in whatever he says.
Would she listen to me
though, would she listen?

2 December 2009

= = = =

You're allowed to turn away from me
allowed to replace my black ink with blue
and rip the collars off my button-downs
brush a soft green fur across my yogurt
you're allowed even to fray my shoelaces.
But one thing you can't do: go into tomorrow
leaving me stuck today. The day is sovereign,
is my appeal. Because a day is the opposite
of time, of history, loss, befuddlement.
A day is my ticket to Andromeda. A day is free.

3 December 2009

= = = = =

Bulbous landslide
mother lode exposed
the slurry of human feeling

sex is sea depths
where only friction gives light
whale allurements

whispered thee—think
sometimes could die
of sound alone

the squeeze of size
pronounced out loud.

2,
Description will make
anything less appeal—

a mass of gummy adjectives
and you with no spoon

imagine me as your mother
or the young man whose uniform pleases

color of cucumber
carrying home interesting chemicals

to effect change below stairs.
Imagine me an ocelot

held cautiously on your lap—
nobody knows how long

an animal like me sits still
or how long the animal soul

consents to composition with
its human analogue

or if some raveling inside
the latter sets the former off—

the cat scratches, the young
man is gone in his silly green shirt.

3.

See what I mean?
You ate me
and I did not nourish,
the clock strikes
but there is no time.

We have to make up
for everything. Life
is restitution offered
for a forgotten crime.

What a wise remark!
but why did I have to say it?

3 December 2009

THE ARCHAIC

Minute by minute
a kind of trying
as when from the sea
a great roll of fat
unflensed is rendered
liquid in the presence
of heat and a city

forms

 abruptly
 made just from its smell
a stink of utility
on every bus

and yet the maiden—
gold-plastered
 supersaturated
 salty and smooth
upon her chariot
is borne high through tired streets
for edification of that populace—

means

 building her houses in their heads—

the maiden

has a word she speaks

early in sunshine

and the same

later when her staggering percherons

ease her chariot in at the barn door

and she sits down by the old pump

her knees for a moment

free to the airs that stir

at evening in such yards.

How sleek she is

they think who look at her

but in her strong mind

she ponders the word she has spoken.

3 December 2009

LESSON

Let one thing listen to everything
let it be a knife
a knife knows how to listen

▣

And then the letters
of no one's name
carved in elm bark

then the tree falls
and someone somewhere
hears his name called

▣

More than that
requires hard long words.
Episteme. The Unconscious. Mind.

▣

There are diseases of these
things. Time for example
it is December yet I am outside
warm enough that blackbirds
are still here and all their kin.
Icterids. Long words. Sunshine.

☐

Get the balance right.

We saw Dürer engravings

in Boston last week

seems recenter crisp

black lines on new paper

fresh impressions from old copper

Halte Maaß he said,

keep measure, but what

if there is none?

or there is

but it is sunshine?

And you have no knife?

3 December 2009

= = = = =

I want the old pipe back
the one that spills
from Gerritsen Beach
you could walk all
the way out onto the bay
scaring your mother
what are mothers for
anyway, chalices
of excessive feeling
I want the bay and the huge
cloacal pipe extending
far into the fish places
where Uncle Joe caught fluke
I was not at that time fond of
under the coarse
shadows of bridges
since then I have learned to value
the white easy meat of the thing
itself not without delicacy
an animal like me
a think with eyes.

3 December 2009