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On Poetry and Uncertain Subjects

The game involved me or my brother climbing on top of something not too high, like a sofa, or a tree stump, and asking Dad to catch us. He would get into position and say, “Go on! Jump! I’ll catch you,” and every time we leapt, he’d back away and let us fall. We’d try it over and over, each time becoming more suspicious, demanding new assurances, squinting and giggling as we scrutinized his face. He’d be already laughing as he said it again, “Go on! Jump! I’ll catch you.” He never caught us, and never would catch us, and that, we understood, was the whole point.

What we loved about the game was precisely the feeling of being unsure — the naïve, delicious, uncertain tension before the jump: maybe, maybe, maybe this time; even Dad must have wondered if he could hold his nerve indefinitely. Nowadays I get my uncertain tension-feelings most tangibly as a writer, and specifically as a person who writes poems. With poems you have to risk all kinds of small, hopeful, doomed leaps; uncertainty is central to your business. You not only have to acknowledge the innate inaccuracy of language as a system that cannot catch or hold onto anything securely, but also that it’s precisely this characteristic of inaccuracy that a poetic, empathetic transaction rests on. Writing poems, you don’t just look up from your computer screen every so often and remind yourself that endless reinterpretation threatens to destabilize each of the terms you are using, or that those terms are calibrated and reliant upon endless further terms, wobbling, drifting, and stunning each other like a huge shoal of jellyfish. Instead, you deliberately build your poem as an open habitation; you have to learn to leave holes in the walls, because you won’t and can’t be around later on to clear up any ambiguities when the lakes of your readers’ lives come flooding up through the floor.

If a poem works it’s because you’ve made it such that other people might participate in making it meaningful, and this participation will always rest on another person’s understanding of the poem and its relationship to a world that is not your own. Your own understanding of the poem will evolve over time too, as you reread it in light of your changing world, just as you will find the world altered in light of the poem you wrote to understand a small uncertain corner of it.

With poems, you never get to settle on a final meaning for your work, just as you never get to feel settled, finally, as yourself. So it seems entirely natural to me that poets, exploring and nudging such unstable material, foregrounding connotation and metaphor, and constantly dredging up the gunk of unconscious activity over which they have no control, might start to doubt the confidence, finality, and the general big-bearded Victorian arrogance of certainty as it seems to appear in other forms of language: mathematical, religious, political, legal, or financial. I've reached a point now where I'm so used to accepting how flimsily language in poems relates to the world that I can't help but feel appalled at the hapless trust we place in other kinds of language elsewhere. Surely all of meaning and knowledge is apprehended, expressed, and configured unstably, is just as much a shoal of jellyfish? Surely we should be uncertain about practically everything?

Before the beginning — unknown.
As after the end — unknown.
But floating, stretched between,

the mind's harmonic mappings,
frail as gossamer,
costing not less than everything.

I am alive. I'm human.
Get dressed. Make coffee.
Shore a few lines against my ruin.

That's Anne Stevenson, at the end of her long poem *A Lament for the Makers*, which imagines that hell is only for poets. "Before the beginning — unknown. / As after the end — unknown." This idea of an overall, timeless uncertainty is not new, by any means, especially when it comes to poetry and different philosophies of language. Poststructuralism in particular has had this covered for over fifty years, and I've waded uncertainly through enough of that to know the limits of my own understanding. Elsewhere, feminist theory has exposed how the Western history of human knowledge has been dominated by white, male knowers, making our so-called "universal claims" according to finalized, standardized terms, spoken from our supposedly "objective" perspectives, as if somehow our minds pertained toward a special clarity and coolness, like water fresh from the fridge.

QTA: should it be "enough of it to know" (referring to poststructuralism)?

Scholars and critics might conclude that the uncertainty of language has been so commonly theorized that revisiting how poems work according to this same uncertain quality is merely “re-inventing the wheel.” But these are our working conditions as poets; uncertainty is our predicament, and we are compelled to reconsider it in our work all the time. And anyway, “re-inventing the wheel” is a pretty good analogy for our business; we are always weighing our egoism against the poems that precede us, staring down our insignificance, shoring a few lines in spite of it. So it’s writing poems, not reading theory, that makes me wonder if the empathetic negotiation of meaning between poets and readers, which is innate to the effectiveness of poetry, is also a dynamic feature of other fields.

In her “Short Lecture on Socrates,” the poet Mary Ruefle introduces Socrates’s “only true wisdom”: “knowing that you know nothing.” She writes:

I am forever telling my students I know nothing about poetry, and they never believe me. I do not know what my poems are about, except on rare occasions, and I never know what they mean. I have met and spoken to many poets who feel the same way, and one among them once put it this way: “The difference between myself and a student is that I am better at not knowing what I am doing.” I couldn’t put it any better than that if I tried.

We all encounter stalling moments of uncertainty when the strategies we have developed for ourselves and each other fail to console the overwhelming complexity and unpredictability of being alive with everything else on earth. At these times we tend to look upwards in the hope that God, or the seemingly omniscient physics of the universe, will disclose to us the Truth, the reason, the theory, its ointment:

*Please: a word so short
it could get lost in the air
as it floats up to God like the feather it is,
knocking and knocking, and finally
falling back to earth as rain,
as pellets of ice, soaking a black branch,
collecting in drains, leaching into the ground,
and you walk in that weather every day.*

— From *The Word That Is a Prayer* by Ellery Akers

What interests me about poetry is that rather than looking up for answers, it tends to lead us back indoors, to the mirror, as if seeing ourselves reflected within its frame, confused, gawping, empty-eyed, and scalded by circumstance, might re-teach us the lesson: that meaning presents itself precisely as a question — therefore, you can't entertain it by seeking to answer it. Imagine! The old, old universe, arranging itself legibly into a puzzle that our small brains might be qualified to solve with the knowledge we can accrue from our small corner of its tablecloth. Solving the mysteries of the universe: isn't that just the most arrogant, preposterous thing you ever heard? The idea of there being some sort of Answer to Everything is an admirable feat of imagination but also displays a woeful lack of it.

But poems use language so unstably they remind us that the concept of meaning in the universe belongs only to us, and not, in fact, to the universe itself. Meaning is a human beloved: we are *literally made for each other*; no one understands us like we do. So it's as a poet that I feel relatively qualified in my not knowing, and my knowing I don't know, because I spend so much time within that odd intellectual hollow, where words will always fail me. Like Ruefle, I also teach poetry for a living, so I guess I am also in the business of teaching my students not to know, and teaching them to understand how and why they cannot know, and to regard this as the "only true wisdom," that is, to see not knowing as a crucial advancement of knowledge. It's really the only kind of knowledge we were born with, and we spend our lives forgetting and remembering it.

But this argument is very abstract; it's got no things in it, and things are of great importance and interest. Of things, Jung says, "if a man does not know what a thing *is*, it is at least an increase in knowledge if he knows what it is *not*," which is one of those quotes that feels very helpful, but also, immediately, not helpful at all. Jung's things are too abstract as well. But we can take from this, by implication, that poetry, unburdened by the need to demonstrate knowledge in a way that is quantifiable or provable, is free to explore the world of things in a way that relies just as much on dissonance or absence as coherence, or evidence. In poems, the foggier aspects of language, which most of the time we ignore or squint through in order to swap workable sentences with one another, are instead called upon deliberately to blur things, to describe things Impressionistically; from across the room a sentence might denote a bridge, a pond, some water lilies, but up close, as it is in poems, language becomes paint again: gestural,

QTA: should
it be a period
or a semicolon
instead of the
comma after
“layered”?

layered, the awareness of illusion is part of the effect —

Here is where an afternoon eats its meal from the hollow
of elbow pits.

— From *Asmara Road, NW2* by Momtaza Mehri

Poetry is a deliberate act of foregrounding language, smudging it, to signal possible meanings beyond the everyday, sharper constraints that words and sentences usually afford us, or rather, we afford to them. We know that language is being foregrounded in poetry because often enough we can recognize a poem immediately on the page. Poems tend to announce or frame themselves, either as discrete items surrounded by white space, or else by some other unusual formal arrangement. Form is part of the ceremonial dress code, as if language is putting on some nice white robes to mark itself out as different from the congregation, or it's like in films when people recede on a dance floor to form a circle, making room for someone who has something specific to say by their dancing. With the exception of the poems that deploy a prose line, usually the page recedes from around a poem, making extra room for the spatial specifics of its performance. But poems foreground their uncertain language in less visible ways as well.

Usually we tend to read texts in a single direction (left to right, top to bottom, in the case of most Western languages) and poems also appear to take place in this same predictable sequence, aside from some notable Modernist or avant-garde exceptions. We are encouraged to trust the standard technology of a sentence, even when it's chopped up into lines, or musically interrupted by great clanging rhymes every ten syllables. But if we look closely it becomes clear that poetic language often operates against the sequential logic of the sentence it inhabits and comprises. For example, when Plath compares her father to a “bag full of God,” she asks that the properties of both the father and the bag full of God be examined simultaneously, interchangeably. The words stay fixed in their position in the sentence, but the mind hops back and forth, overlapping the ideas that the words assign, smudging their meanings out of order. The act of comparison, central to poetic thought, antedates the sequential logic of a sentence.

Then there's the fact that poems are commonly held to be rereadable objects, so the whole longer sequence of the poem gets played over, looped, layered, taken out of order; the sustain pedal is held

down until the individual notes become the one great chord of the thing, reverberating. Metaphor, symbolism, music, irony: connotation floods the banks of a sentence so naturally and regularly that language must surely have evolved with these extra breaching, poetic qualities as integral to its working. Without this propensity to overflow, any act of communication would be stunted, cold, robotic, and yet we hardly ever credit this unstable stuff with making knowledge possible, but tend to insist instead that ideas are most clearly communicated through orderly syntax, correct grammar, a breadth and specificity of vocabulary. The epistemic value of poetry has been shunted way down the pecking order. You may as well cough into a hedge and wait for a fact to fall out, that's how our culture feels about poetic knowledge.

It is very romantic to be a poet ... like having a bad back ...

But it is also a pleasure ... like squeezing your legs together ... and buttoning your blouse all the way up ...

But then it is too much pleasure, like peach pie

And it becomes ... too average to live ...

That's Chelsey Minnis, from her book *Bad Bad*, in which she also says things like, "Poetry is made to produce an expensive drowsiness ... /With a true flickering of disinterest ..." or "When I write a poem it's like looking through a knothole into a velvet fuckpad ..." If you accrue knowledge through Minnis's poems then it is untethered, fractious, annoyed at being made to sit still. It's a knowledge that wants you to quit being so grabby all the time. An uncertain knowledge. Or take this, from Morgan Parker's "The World Is Beautiful but You Are Not in It":

I am getting close
enough to the sun to touch the tip of its cigar.

We carry what is shocking and heavy in blood.
Music seems brighter: the sky the sky.

What to do with a sky that is itself twice over? You can't paraphrase

or simplify the complexity of this speaker's predicament. You can't know the shock and weight of the knowledge they carry; instead it's kept bloody, hidden. But this is not the kind of hiding or confusion of elements that shuts you out. It gets you wondering, doing the imaginative hard work of empathy, the heat of that sun, its cigar-tip crackling, the sky doubly wide open, and something shocking, mortal, weighing down on a collective memory of trauma. Can you feel it? Can you understand? Almost. Maybe. Not something definite, but definitely something.

This is the kind of uncertain knowledge made possible in poems. I don't mean uncertainty as indecision, but as a philosophical, empathetic stance: I am uncertain. Most poems take this stance in one way or another, and of course there is a wider avant-garde tradition and conceptual field of poetics where meaning in a text can be viewed as a secondary or entirely incidental feature of its construction. But what these various poetics have in common is a resistance to finality in language, and to the kind of certain knowledge that shuts down revision or discussion, or suggests that knowledge can't also be (say it) *felt*.

But it can't just be poems where uncertain knowledge is openly recognized as productive and beneficial. I am sure that if we look we will find that every field of thought employs language that either includes poetic features, or else lives in denial of the inevitable gap that must exist between the word and the thing; it's just that with poetry, and art in general, we are encouraged to feel safe enough in our uncertainty to admit the "true wisdom" of not knowing to ourselves. If we look at humankind's moth-like progress toward the front porch light of knowledge it is typified not by the subtraction of falsehoods to a single strand of Truth, not by a reductive fundamentalism, but by the production of more and more gestures of certainty in different directions. More and more versions of Truth, more and more sources of light on the porch.

We can choose to ignore the noise of other people's certainties with a close-minded conviction in attending to our own; we can rig up a contraption of agreement and say we all see it one way, pretending that there is not enough discrepancy in the small print of our subjectivities to prove this a lie, or we can simply admit that Truth in the Universe Knowable to Humankind is really a great diversification of certainties, crystallizing endlessly away from a mythical absolute. Knowledge is, at very best, infinitely Venn diagrammatic. If art has anything like a duty to the rest of human thought, perhaps it is to

remind us that the more versions of the Truth we declare, the less absolutely true our Truth can be.

And since I'm already on my horse, and am prone to finding advantages, I might also suggest that poetry, that oft-maligned, wafty corner of dynamic not-knowing, that shadowy Hamlet mooning around on his platform at midnight, strung out, self-effacing, and spoken to by ghosts, should be acknowledged as the prime medium for the articulation of our knowledge of the unknown.

Uncertain knowledge is declared and revealed everywhere in poetry: "the glass and salt my crooked pathway; impassable glass and salt," writes Rachael Allen impassably in her poem "Kingdomland"; "we talk about how weird it is/to be 'a thing,'" writes Stacey Teague in "it becomes a part of—," and I guess Jung would say that this "is at least an increase in knowledge," while Chloe Stopa-Hunt explains in "Harbour-Chapel" that "We all decode our blows: *What light is, / What vessel, what heart is,*" and we can only feel our way to believing her strangely, as we feel our way to strangely believing Don Mee Choi, who writes in "Weaver in Exile," "Dear Father, I am sitting on crows' backs that wobble with grease. Stars look like pebbles from here." And E.E. Cummings, what does he have to say about it all?

what's beyond logic happens beneath will
.....
since the thing perhaps is
to eat flowers and not to be afraid.

— From [*voices to voices, lip to lip*]

Eat the flowers and do not be afraid — of uncertainty, of doubt — that seems key; that seems to be what poems are proof of: a fearlessness toward, or defiance against the profound inaccuracy of our perceived reality and relation to it. In "Of the Surface of Things," Wallace Stevens writes: "In my room, the world is beyond my understanding; / But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud." Of course, he's oversimplifying things to show us, by the inadequacy of his limited scenery, the impossibility of the task in hand, the task of trying to describe what it's like being alive in the world. Oof! It hurts your guts just thinking about it. But then, being brave, staring it down if only for a moment, you can tell yourself what Sophie Robinson does, so restoratively, in "Hurtface (after Ceravolo)":

QTA: added
comma after
uncertainty
-- OK?

o bum! o joy! o bloated world!
what dreams i am on the stairs of!

Sometimes I get a whooshing-out feeling, a kind of abstraction or self-consciousness about being, especially in large groups of people. I don't think this is unusual. I'm pretty sure most people get feelings of sudden distance from their surroundings for no apparent reason, but with friends, having a nice time, this distance can be entirely pleasurable, sublime even. Someone I love will be talking, or dancing with someone else I love, and in a way I can only describe as cinematic, the volume, or context, drops, and there it all is, this unstable, miraculous wad. I realize I have no answer for it, nothing to say, no conclusion to draw, and yes, I feel something like tranquility, but also awe, a happy, overwhelming fear. The lack of an explanation for all the wide mad fuss of the world only makes it the bigger miracle: "How — I didn't know any / word for it — how 'unlikely' ..." as Elizabeth Bishop puts it in her poem "In the Waiting Room":

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world,
into cold, blue-black space.

What tethers us down seems so plainly tenuous, so "unlikely," that I think every now and then we should want to fall into that "cold, blue-black space." It seems so arrogant to dismiss its emptiness as unremunerative, or mistake it for an impasse. We know that there's nothing to be found out there, but we can still feel ourselves standing upon the precarious ledge of an inconsolable question together. In poems we can look down at the sheer, deathly drop of it. "Go on! Jump! I'll catch you."

QTA: should
it be "deathly
drop"?