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Fragments of a Broken Poetics

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> Smile, if only from politeness, at the one moment of the world that concerns you.
>
> —Jean Grosjean, *An Earth of Time*

I

The poet's psychology, visible only to the poet's friends, floats lightly over the surface of the poem. It discolors some words temporarily, but never quite settles into them—provided those words belong together. If so, they will eventually cast off this shadow; if not, it will eventually smother them. Thus, it is the poem, not the poet, that we love. Through it the singular becomes shared, the transitory eternal.

II

The eternal, typically a conceit standing in for the hope of civilizations, acts differently in poetry. The words of the poem, once happily configured, may wait a very long time for a reader to read them as they were meant to be read. This is the eternity of the poem.

III

A poet only needs one poem, a poem only one reader. Moving from singular to shared in this instance is a rudimentary economy. It is less affecting than a mortal kiss, more than a passing conversation. The poem will always provoke an acute desire to know its creator, "acute" because hopeless.

IV

Disembodied, the poem provokes longing. Its incorporeity is inscribed in myth: the severed head of Orpheus adrift on the Aegean Sea. Though separated, the head continues to sing. The song it sings

is either a lament of exile from the body or a celebration of freedom from its material prison, depending on the direction of the winds.

V

The poet's emotional signature is retained in the poem. Aristotle, in his bipartite model of the soul, places the emotions under the obedient, illogical part, reason with command and logic. Yet both parts are cognitive and partake in the *logos*. Thought is the efficient cause of emotion. This is why a poem's intelligence is more moving than its heart.

VI

Just as ideas do not precede words, content is inchoate before form. Similarly, experience is inchoate before memory. This Proustian maxim holds true for the poem. Like us, words are ever-changing relics fighting for continued relevance. The poet's job is to preserve this "fossil language" (Emerson). In exchange, the poem returns the illusion of presence, the gift of the now.

Poetic form is the temporal conduit between the past, present, and future. It organizes the senses so that they do not hinder the intellect in its lonely quest toward understanding and, in some cases, unity with something greater than itself.

VII

What does it matter if there are poets or poems?

VIII

The idea of audience is a nuisance born of the need for spectacle. Poems haunting the precarious dialectic between existence and extinction do not need it. Their magic is dependent on the private experience of separate individuals.

IX

Poets whose readings lead us to believe ourselves part of a spontaneous and instinctive consensus have left poetry behind. Perhaps for the better.

X

The poet who foregrounds the surface qualities of the word—sound, texture, look—must be especially scrupulous when building the poem's semantic foundation. Effects should enhance complexity, not replace it, otherwise they risk giving complexity, which already struggles to justify itself, a very bad name.

XI

In poetry, as elsewhere, nature isn't what it used to be.

XII

The poem resists. It resists coming into being. It resists eloquence. It resists transmitting unpleasant or embarrassing knowledge. It resists grammatical constraints. It resists moving away from simple utterance. It resists revision. It resists completion. It resists success. Hopefully, the poet resists as well.

XIII

The book is the means, not the end. It should conform to the poem, not vice versa. Otherwise the imagination becomes a small box, which thinks only of the larger box it wishes to resemble. An ideal book is a bed: a comforting place in which poems can sleep while awaiting illumination. Both poem and book, however, are subject to the capricious lens of human attention.

XIV

The poem is responsible for the knowledge it proposes. It cannot account for what the reader does not know, nor should it account for what the reader desires. Any attempt to do so panders to a temporary and insufficient knowledge. The poem is not prophetic. It cannot foresee its relevance to others. And yet still it wants to be loved.

XV

The poet must understand seduction, because even capricious human attention is susceptible to courtship.

XVI

Poetry, in the abstract, offends no one.

XVII

Sleep, to whom Keats partly owes his "worthy rhymes," has long been kin to poetry. Saint-Pol Roux affixing a sign that reads "poet at work" to his bedchamber is the most playful example of this alliance. Both sleep and poetry open a passage to the unconscious, one by nature, the other by artifice. Both create memories of astonishing wakefulness, one through dream, the other through imagination. It is almost impossible to reproduce or transmit such experiences by other means.

XVIII

There are two kinds of poetic seduction. One is quick, content-based, and will tolerate no argument. The other is slow, formal, and easily deniable. The first may create wistful memories, but never a lasting relationship. The second, if successful, will become a part of you, a quiet attendant for life.

XIX

A momentary bewilderment arouses the mind. Many words, lines, and phrases may temporarily baffle without spoiling the reading experience as a whole.

XX

Though it is true that before creation every quantum of content has infinite potential form, the successful poem will pass convincingly for the sole formal option, effectively erasing the memory of all other solutions.

XXI

A word can be a seed from which an entire poem grows, or it can be an integral part of a well-balanced formal arrangement, one leaf among many. Some words may act like birds and add a touch of color. But should they chance to fly away the perception of the whole would not be altered.

XXII

Risks to the poet's life: drowning from self-love like Narcissus, or becoming infatuated with death like Orphée in Cocteau's retelling of the myth. Through the mirror lies the abyss in both cases, and thus it is impossible to tell them apart.

XXIII

The poet is buried in the obliterated whiteness beneath the dark letters of poem.

XXIV

The poem helps us to understand the mystery of the word. In the process the obvious becomes meaningless, the enigmatic revelatory.

XXV

Sometimes the poem has more friends than the poet.

XXVI

Publication, popularity, and prizes. All three are unreliable measures of value. In fact, any indicator of poetic worth that is immediately perceptible to people who care nothing of poetry is likely to be, in some part, false.

XXVII

There is a time in every poet's life when the mention of other writers, even if dead, is intolerable. It is a necessary rejection of the known

text in favor of the not-yet-written. If things go as they should, this allergy will be only temporary. The lively mind will eventually find such closed antipathy boring and opt for openness instead.

XXVIII

Poems demand a concentrated lingering to which we are unaccustomed. This is why they cause discomfort. When we stand still in one place, attempting to document and respect the details, we feel as vulnerable as a small creature in an open field beneath avian predators. Rapid and sequential page turning gives us a sense of progress and accomplishment, relieving us from the double threat of frustration and impatience.

XXIX

Language has no weather, and therefore is not, strictly speaking, an environment.

XXX

Poets who have learned a lesson write poems that teach.

XXXI

The hermetic poem is premised on a deep-held respect for an invisible knowledge already assumed to exist. It wishes to be like Hermes in Botticelli's *Primavera*, shooing away the little clouds. Moving clouds with a wand, however, is a very delicate business. The poet who attempts it lightly risks becoming lost in a mist.

XXXII

Inspiration is a matter of will, Imagination of mind. The former comes from forces outside the poet, whether they be divine or mundane, issuing from the Muse or the polis. Dull, meaningless environments dry up this faculty and put too much pressure on the Imagination, which arises from inside the poet, and can, if left without outlet, collapse.

XXXIII

A collapsed Imagination results in acute neurosis. And yet while all neurotics are imaginative, many poets are not.

XXXIV

I once wrote, "those who think poetry is working, are laboring under a misconception." By which I meant that the mental activity of writing a poem sabotages the mechanized reproduction of culturally programmed cognition: work-a-day thought is put to a stop.

XXXV

Poetry is play for very high stakes which, though the cause of an extremely competitive race, can never be collected.

XXXVI

Poets, once they reach a certain maturity, may begin to repeat themselves. This realization can stultify, and, for a time, silence. But there is no shame in refining a well-constructed and meaningful design. Subtlety has authored many a shakedown.

The established poet who, fearing calcification, reverts to a quest for novelty, not only robs the youth of their one advantage, but risks looking the fool as well.

XXXVII

The trick with fashion is to sit it out.

XXXVIII

> I have about the same interest in jewelry that I have in horse racing, politics, modern poetry, or women who need weird excitement. None.
>
> —Cary Grant, *To Catch a Thief*

You can learn a great deal about what people think of you by paying attention to the company they place you in.

XXXIX

The living language is intimately connected to poetic form. When Middle English went, so did "bob and wheel." And yet, since in addition to floating on the air, poems now live in books, archaic words and forms can be revived and, if sparingly applied, provide a certain charm to an otherwise speech-based composition.

As with Shakespeare's language, which is spoken nowhere but on the stage, we suspend our disbelief out of love for the fresh turns of phrase, *outré* diction, and elegant artifice. In this time of plain speaking some may also find that a moment away from "natural" speech can come as a great relief.

XL

I have met very few poets who are calm about or accepting of the way visual artists use language in their work.

XLI

After a point, even the poem can grow bored with its own devices.

XLII

It seems as if the able use of metaphor has precipitously fallen off since doubt was cast upon language's ability to represent the real, and yet simile, a far less interesting trope, somehow continues to thrive.

XLIII

Poetry is not politically efficacious in countries where it is not valued as a cultural necessity by the general populace.

XLIV

The poem occupies an invisible zone between the subjective emotional utterance and the objective reporting of fact. It is relative and universal, false and true. Negotiating this contradiction with finesse is crucial to the poem's success.

XLV

A great deal of overlap notwithstanding, the poem's knowledge is never quite identical to the poet's. Poets understand the intention behind their poems, and may even recognize the outcome, but there is always a remainder they cannot foresee and, indeed, may never detect.

XLVI

The poem's life is not coeval with the poet's.

XLVII

The novice poet uses the poem in the service of desire, while the expert pressures desire into the service of the poem.

XLVIII

Poetry can intimate the existence of forces beyond the understanding of the individual mind, and yet, as a strictly human endeavor, reliant on the individual, it is a poor substitute for religion. The fiction it provides can neither be standardized, nor significantly shape behavior. In addition, belief has nothing whatsoever to do with the existence of poetry.

Still we might ask: in the absence of God is poetry the best vehicle through which to address metaphysical questions? No. It is one way among many, and has never, regardless of the relative state of God and religion, shied away from questions of the Soul.

XLIX

It is easier to eavesdrop on and denigrate the compassionate, learned, and much interrupted conversation that makes up the history of poetry than it is to participate.

L

The most mysterious thing about poetry is that poets, even when lacking any prospect of reward or recognition, continue to find it satisfying to write.

AFTERWORD

In the winter of 2006, three French points of contact converged to create the conditions for the writing and occasion of these fragments.

The first was a graduate seminar I was teaching on the Symbolist Movement in poetry, which set me to rethinking my original commitment to poetry as provoked by Baudelaire and Rimbaud. The second was my colleague Kathryn Slott's graduate course in twentieth-century French poetry, which I was then auditing. Mme Slott taught the basics: Apollinare, Éluard, Reverdy, and so on, poets I had read before, but few systematically. Though I gained something from reading all of the poets, it was René Char's *Fureur et mystère*—particularly his writing on the architecture of the poem, "Partage formel" ("The Formal Share")—that sparked some new thinking in me. Char's use of aphorism, as well as his delightfully fanciful logic, suggested a refreshing way to avoid the line-in-the-sand rigidity of writing a contractual poetics—those manifestos of orthodoxy that, in laying down the poetic law, always manage to spontaneously recruit an army of cops to enforce it. Char's approach is different. A couple of examples: "XVI: *Le poème est toujours marié à quelqu'un*" ("The poem is always married to someone"); "XVIII: *Magicien de l'insécurité, le poète n'a que des satisfactions adoptives. Cendre toujours inachevée.*" ("As a magician of insecurity, the poet has only the satisfactions of others. Ash never extinguished.") Reading these statements activated my critical muse and I began to write my own series of aphoristic statements; to think from where I was, to try and state—simply, concisely—what I believed at that moment about the poetic art. My *Fragments* came very quickly, sometimes at the rate of two or three a day. I found myself formulating them almost compulsively. I set the goal of writing fifty, both to create an artificial deadline, and to encourage myself to continue. All this was happening simultaneously with my writing of *The Line*, which I now see (after it was pointed out to me by H.L. Hix) has much in common with these *Fragments*, notwithstanding their tonal and formal differences. But while I knew that *The Line* was to be a book, I had little idea about what I might do with my *Fragments* once they were completed.

The third and decisive point of contact was a visit from Emmanuel Hocquard and Juliette Valéry. In the course of what was a charming time (despite my regrettable *faux pas* of serving my French guests parsnips, which I later learned are not eaten by humans in France but thrown to pigs) Emmanuel made my household a gift of a small handmade book titled *Conditions de lumières: élégies*. Uncut signatures, few words per page, red ink titles wrapped in a sparkly gold paper cover. A treasure! It was, of course, a form of *blaireau*. Commonly, *blaireau* in French means "badger." In Hocquard's sense, it is a

way to designate those activities in D.I.Y. poetic circles of doing and making things that are not obviously valuable. The name "badger" comes from an analogously useless activity: cutting off of all the hairs on a man's shaving brush (traditionally made of badger hair), and then, one by one, gluing them back on. In his book *Ma haie*, Hocquard has termed this method of poetry and bookmaking "*la méthode Robinson*" ("the Crusoe method")—that is, an activity, a result, or a concept, all of which look—to any outsider, non-poet type—"ridiculously useless," "private and solitary," and "outrageously speculative and experimental."

With this little gesture I was reminded of how important the small exchanges of the friendship economy of poetry were to me. I knew then that my *Fragments* belonged in a little ephemeral chapbook, simply made and not too fine, and finally (and most importantly) in a limited edition sent only to friends. And so that is where they ended up. The chapbook I made was small, wider than long, and with a cover of orange card stock. I put only one fragment per page. They were divided using Roman numerals after the manner of Char, despite the fact that I cannot read Roman numerals with any facility, and must make a crib of Arabic ones in order to follow my numbering. If memory serves, at first I made but twenty-six, later a second run of fifty. I sent them out as planned. It felt good and right to do so.

In 2007 Ben Lerner offered to reprint the *Fragments* in his magazine *No:*, but I declined, not feeling they had yet done their *blaireau* work. Later, I did agree to have a very small selection of them posted on the *Counterpath* web magazine (guest edited by Jasper Bernes). But it wasn't until now that I felt ready for the entirety of the text to take on a new life as a "printed whole." I didn't actually know this until, after I read them during a visit to the University of Chicago in fall 2009, the editors of *Chicago Review* asked to publish them. The suggestion made sense. Four years had passed since their "occasion" in my life; it was time for them to seek other meaning.

I should like to finish by saying that I wrote these *Fragments* when I was at a crossroads in my poetic life, which is perhaps why the idea of "fragmentation" seemed fitting, though some friends have found my title to be a gross misnomer. But at the time of their writing I did feel "fragmented," and not in a positive "fragmented-text" sort of way. I was trying to decide whether I should expend more energy on pushing my work into a grander arena, on becoming more "professionalized." I have never liked such activities; I am bad at them and they depress me. Writing these *Fragments* proved a balm, for they seemed to let me off that hook by saying: *return to the question of the poem's making, for that is the essential act.*