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The Longest Day: Some Thoughts on the In-Betweenness of Art

It's 1970. I'm twenty-one, in the rare book room of my college library reading Chinese poetry and making notes for a poem—no doubt a bad poem—and yet I am caught up in it entirely. Below, out the library window, in the college's main quadrangle, there is a large protest going on against the Viet Nam War. Students are yelling, faculty members challenging each other's beliefs in public, and the whole school debating whether it should shut down early, cancelling the rest of the semester's classes in protest of the Kent State shootings and the Cambodian bombings and occupation. I'm caught between my personal enjoyment of the poems I've been reading, the poem I'm trying to write, and the world outside my window. And the moment is even more complicated because I'm acutely aware that what I am doing inside the library—reading and writing poems—hardly matters in the historical scope of what is taking place outside.

I'm fast forwarding now to 1996. I've driven to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C to see the Vermeer exhibit. I've come not just because I love Vermeer as a painter, but also because, a few days before, leafing through a New Yorker, I was stopped by two small images that had been superimposed over one another: one was the face of Dusko Tadic, a Serbian accused of multiple rapes and murders, of supervising the torture of Muslim prisoners, including at one point, of forcing one man to emasculate another with his teeth. The other image was the hauntingly beautiful face of the young girl in the Vermeer painting we know as "The Girl with a Pearl Earring," sometimes referred to as "The Girl in a Turban." These images, so incongruous, were

the lead-in to an article by Lawrence Weschler called “Inventing Peace.” The origin of the article was a remark by an Italian jurist on the Yugoslav War Crime Tribunal in Hague. Asked by Weschler how, obliged to listen to and adjudicate atrocities like that of Tadic’s each day, he kept from going mad, the Italian judge replied, “as often as possible I make my way over to the museum to spend a little time with the Vermeers.” Now one might conclude that the judge simply found a respite in Vermeer’s oriental rugs or those lush, velvety folds of curtains and dresses. Or in those moments of human life when, absorbed in the act of writing a letter or pouring milk or weighing pearls, we enter the rhythms of shifting light that falls through a casement window. But for the judge, Vermeer’s achievement resided in the way the painter invented a “zone filled with peace, a small room, an intimate vision” at a turbulent juncture in history when the geography of the Netherlands, the distribution of Protestants and Catholics, and threats from both the English and French were being sorted out and contested.

We might say that Vermeer’s curtains, dresses, windows, and oriental rugs, all manifest the order that is already there, in things as they are. Not the order we think should be there, but the one that is. I don’t mean to suggest that Vermeer did not choose to apply a thin glaze of blue paint over a base of reddish brown so that a plaster wall seems to radiate its own inner light. Up close, of course, the threads of the Oriental rug reveal themselves as thin, brushed lines of white paint, and surely a wooden table was placed perpendicular to the picture frame to achieve a compositional balance. But I do mean to suggest that the serenity of Vermeer’s work always seems to lie in Vermeer’s refusal to privilege one thing over another. Vermeer inherited the epic tradition of history paintings and the already culturally determined idea of what subject matter was appropriate to that tradition. His great strength was to reside in the in-between of his paintings, looking away from what society had learned to see so that he

might look at the specific individual in those moments that make up our everyday lives. Intimacy and distance: Vermeer makes an accurate report of both and, in doing so, invents the peace that both Weschler and the Italian judge find so dear.

Chinese poetry and Vermeer: two moments, twenty six years apart. What links these two moments is the tension between one's responsibility to the personal demands of making art and to the social world one shares with others. As writers, we are always in conversation with the world we live in, whether or not we write directly or indirectly about the events of our day. Evan Boland, the Irish poet and essayist, notes that "who the poet is, what he or she nominates as the proper theme for poetry, what self they discover and confirm through their subject matter—all of this involves an ethical choice." True enough. Poetry is an act which gathers and shapes, which looks for wholeness, even as our daily experience is continuously shattered against what Wallace Stevens called the "pressure of reality." If, as Stevens says, the pressure of reality is always a force of disintegration and self-division—the sufferings and sorrows which daily cross our path—then poetry must be an equal and counterbalancing force, the acts of the imagination pushing back against the pressure of reality. And yet if "reality calls for a name, for words," as Czeslaw Milosz put it, we also know, as Milosz knew all too well, when that reality draws too close, the "poet's mouth cannot even enter a complaint of Job: all art proves to be nothing compared with action." Poetry, of course, as Auden said, "makes nothing happen." It cannot stand in the way of political and historical encroachments.

But I do believe poetry makes something happen. So did Auden. The line I quoted from Auden is almost always quoted out of context. It appears in Auden's elegy for Yeats, written in 1939, in a time when nations were gearing up for WWII, "each sequestered in its hate," as the poem puts it. In

the section of the poem where the line about poetry making nothing happen appears, Auden considers how “mad Ireland” “hurt” Yeats into poetry and how, now that Yeats is dead, Ireland’s madness continues. In that context, “poetry makes nothing happen.” But, there is a too often forgotten colon after the word “happen” and what follows in this section and the next is an explanation of what poetry does make happen. Consider:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making, where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

Auden’s poem continues, in its next section, to advise poets in the voice and meter of Yeats’ “Under Ben Bulben,” to

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice,

With the farming of a verse,
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress,

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days,
Teach the free man how to praise.

In context, the often quoted line about what poetry cannot

do, helps delineate what poetry can do, must do even. If we ask poetry to stop a bullet, to feed the hungry, yes, it can do nothing. Perhaps poems only “survive” because the people that “matter”—executives who wield and deal power and money and people’s lives—pay it no attention. Or perhaps these executives never want to enter what Auden calls the “valley of poetry’s making,” a valley where for Auden the poet holds up a mirror to the self, and struggles to “make a vineyard of the curse.” As Auden knew, poetry cannot make us good, but it can prevent us from imagining that we already are. John F. Kennedy, speaking in honor of Robert Frost at Amherst College in 1963 shortly before his own death, said quite powerfully, “When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence.”

But how does poetry (and art, in general, of course) create such transformations? In the title essay of Seamus Heaney’s book, *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney gives us a parable about poetry; it’s based on a familiar parable from the gospel of John. In the Gospel narrative, the Pharisees bring a woman who was caught in the act of adultery before Jesus. The Pharisees say the woman must be stoned according to the law commanded by Moses. Jesus does not answer the Pharisees when they ask him for his judgment. Instead he writes with his finger on the ground. When the Pharisees persist with their questions, Jesus responds, “He that is without sin among you, let him cast a stone at her,” and goes on writing in the dirt. Here is Seamus Heaney’s inspired response: “The drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break with the usual life, but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase. It does not say the accusing word or say to the helpless accused, ‘Now a solution will take place’; it does not propose to be instrumental or

effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.” As the executives and the nations were in Auden’s poem, the members of the crowd in John’s parable are convicted by their own conscience. The accusers of the adulterous woman—you and I and each of us who say ‘This is someone whom I am better than’—are forced by Christ’s silent writing to reflect back on their own moral position. Poems, then, are like Christ’s writing in the dirt—they can create an interval where cause and effect logic is suddenly undermined. In that interval, the writing’s very lack of moral judgment is its morality, a morality that changes the direction of the Pharisees and brings them face-to-face with the individual woman who is standing before them. The woman must be responded to not as a type—adulteress—but as someone worthy of their fullest human response. That is what poetry makes happen: poems create that interval in which we can see the very fullness of our existence; or, to say it another way, poems create a space in which it is possible to turn away from the dim, reductive hearts inside us.

I want, now, to look a little harder at that interval which Heaney called a “rift” in our usual thinking. I just said that the very lack of moral judgment in that rift or interval is writing’s morality. Keats famously said that the best poems have “Negative Capability” –he was trying at the time to define great achievement in art, especially in literature (Keats wanted, quite simply, to define the quality which made Shakespeare, Shakespeare). Negative Capability, Keats said, occurs when a person is “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” What Heaney called a “rift,” what Keats called “Negative Capability,” I’m defining as in-betweeness,

a word I am borrowing from my friend and colleague at Holy Cross, James Kee, who informs me that he found the idea of the “in-between” in Eric Voegelin who, in turn, was working on Plato’s use of the preposition “between” in the dialogues. I’m using the word “in-betweenness” because I want to suggest that in-betweenness is the condition of our humanness. We live between our birth and death, about which we can know almost nothing. And in between our birth and death, we try, simultaneously, to make sense of the unexplainable, terrifying and painful aspects of human experience as well as the intrinsic joy of being. The tools we have to make sense of these contradictions are, on the one hand, the demystification that a necessary deconstructive self-consciousness brings to bear, and, on the other, an openness to the mystery that consciousness can never represent or master. Our life, as the philosopher Simone Weil knew so well, takes places on the cross of these contradictions.

So, too, I am arguing, does poetry, and art in general. The poem, as Wallace Stevens, has said, must exist, “in the difficulty of what it is to be.” Part of the “difficulty of what it is to be” has to do with how hard it is for the writer to capture what Anne Carson, the classicist and poet, calls an “understanding of what life feels like.” Reality by its very nature, remains extraordinarily complex and opaque. As Vaclav Havel has written: Spirit, the human soul, our self-awareness, our ability to generalize and think in concepts, to perceive the world as the world (and not just our locality) and lastly, our capacity for knowing that we will die—and living in spite of that knowledge—surely all these are mediated or actually created by words.” As words users, Havel subsequently points out, we have tried “incessantly to address that which is concealed by mystery, and influence it with our words. As believers we pray to God . . . as people who belong to modern civilization—whether believers or not—we use words to construct scientific theses and political

ideologies with which to tackle or redirect the course of history—successfully or otherwise.” Note Havel’s use of the word “influence”: we want to influence that which is concealed by mystery with our words. For Havel the power of words is neither unambiguous nor clear-cut. Words can compel us with their freedom and truthfulness and they can deceive us, madden us. Havel’s warning about words is simple and direct: it pays to be suspicious of words, to be wary of them since “the same word can be true at one moment and false the next, at one moment illuminating, at another deceptive.”

So what is the writer to do? In her wonderful essay, “The Sublime and the Good,” Iris Murdoch reminds us that when Shelley said that “egotism was the great enemy of poetry,” he meant that writing is an exercise in overcoming one’s self, in attending to something “quite particular other than oneself.” As such, art’s greatest enemy is fantasy since fantasy constantly deforms the reality we are sunk in. Instead of attending to reality, it is easier for us to deform it, to create theories and explanations that give us a kind of control of its mystery and, in turn, make us monarchs of all we survey. Our task, then, as writers/artists is to make the real world as real as possible, to paraphrase Gary Snyder. To overcome fantasy, egotism and solipsism requires love according to Murdoch. She defines love this way: “Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.” But for Murdoch love entails a tragic freedom. The tragic freedom is this: “we all have an infinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others. Tragic, because there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there any social totality within which we come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled. We have only a segment of the circle.” Yes, we have only our in-betweenness, our segment of the circle, from which we must

keep imagining the circle. In a poem of my own called “Czeslaw Milosz’s Glasses,” I say about Milosz that “he knew words/could never navigate the roundness of things./and yet knew, too, that his work was to catch/the complexity of all in one unwritable sentence/he tried to write again and again.” If art is an act of attention, that attention necessarily involves an act of love, an act which we can only extend out of our in-betweenness—that is, the infinite extension of imaginative understanding towards that which remains irreducible in its otherness and yet open to our understanding and recognition.

In-betweenness. The Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. At the end of his book, *Real Presences*, George Steiner writes:

There is one particular day in Western history about which neither historical record nor myth nor Scripture make report. It is Saturday. And it has become the longest of days. We know of that Good Friday which Christianity holds to have been that of the Cross. But the non-Christian, the atheist, knows of it as well. This is to say that he knows of injustice, of the interminable suffering, of the waste, of the brute enigma of ending, which so largely make up not only the historical condition, but the everyday fabric of our personal lives. . . . We also know about Sunday. To the Christian, that day signifies an intimation, both assured and precarious, both evident and beyond comprehension If we are non-Christians or non-believers we conceive of that day as the day of liberation from inhumanity and servitude But ours is the long day’s journey of that Saturday.

Steiner knows that in the face of the countless inhumanities that take place, all art is helpless. But he also knows that

without the figurations of art, which tell again and again of our sorrows and our pains as well as our hopes and happiness, we could not wait and wait. The artists' responsibility is to Saturday. To want the certainty of Good Friday or Easter would be, an "irritable reaching after fact and reason," as Keats said. But on that longest of days, the artist must make the most accurate report he or she can muster, not because the artist is in search of what Milosz mockingly calls the "golden fleece of a perfect form," but because artist's report is as necessary as love and is the only way we have of balancing the violence of reality.

I was just a confused, bad poet as I sat in that library room some forty years ago. But I knew poetry's magic; I knew words gave the world life and the "savor it possesses," as the poet Wallace Stevens once said. And I knew poems had to confront those events which are beyond our power to tranquilize. This is not to say that those events are the same for everyone or even that certain subjects should demand a writer's attention. But it is to say that poetry is a counterbalance, an act which gathers and shapes and looks for the "whole" when we are confronted with the forces of disintegration and self-division. The writer must learn to live "in-between"—he or she must be part deconstructionist, "wresting the past from fiction and legends" (a phrase of Milosz's) so that things may be described as they are, and part fabulist so that what is seen and described is recreated in the imagination and becomes, as Wallace Stevens put it, "a revelation in words by means of words." When we hear those words, they must come to us as a need fulfilled. Wallace Stevens, Vermeer, Auden, Milosz and Seamus Heaney all insist on art's power to "redress" (Heaney's word). Though the title of Heaney's famous essay, "The Redress of Poetry," uses the word redress in its usual sense as a noun, Heaney's interest is clearly in the suggestions of redress as a verb. In this time when poetry, and art in general, is too often viewed as mere-

ly a reflection of the power structures that produced it, when poems are too often praised or criticized solely for their politics, Heaney rightly insists on poetry's power to redress—that is, “to set a person or thing upright again.” Heaney explains how this setting upright occurs, when he writes, “I want to celebrate [poetry's] given, unforeseeable thereness, the way it enters our field of vision and animates our physical and intelligent being in much the same way as the birds shapes stenciled on the transparent surfaces of glass walls or window must suddenly enter the vision and change the direction of the real bird's flight.”

Poems must know the “nightmare of the dark,” as Auden named it, but the poem's work is always to free us from the curse of being locked inside of our own self-isolation. The poems we turn to induce a “swerve” in us; they change the direction of our flight not by telling us where to go, but by transmitting the “thereness” of the world to us; in doing so, they create an interval in which we might choose the light of justice and the goodness of the cosmos, even if we live in darkness, and know that darkness as part of ourselves.

In It

I'm watching a wall
of fast moving grey-blue clouds
turn into a door the sun walks through
on this windy 29th day of October.

It walks down the yellowing hillside
and right up to a pair of scrub locusts,
which are of no importance at all
and yet, wired up with bittersweet's

red and yellow, seem just now to be
electrified by the light that just keeps coming,
crossing the street, extending itself
so that I am standing in it as well,

the skin on my face growing warmer.
I close my eyes and then, as if I had been
sleeping in a strange place, I let the light
wake me and tell me where I am.

Sartre's Entourage

*After I took mescaline, I started to see
crabs around me all the time.*

He first saw them while strolling in the Midi,
three, then four crabs, lobsters really,
he'd later say, clacking along behind him.

After the drug wore off, he knew
they were imaginary, but they'd already become
part of his life. He never walked them

on a leash like Nerval, or said they knew
the secrets of the sea, but they kept him
from forgetting how he was here, simply here,

without justification. When he taught,
they sat at his feet, absolutely still.
He could never tell if they were arrested

by what he'd said, or were just sleeping.
At the movies, one might sit on his leg,
its stemmed eyes waving in disbelief

over a hero too gun-ho to dread
the responsibility of what he's decided
he must do. Sartre liked their assent,

but needed their reproach—they'd cross
their claws in disgust whenever he mistook
narcissism for an inner life. He wanted

clarity. They helped him live with
the knowledge that it was possible to be
duped by almost everything, always

another truth underneath the truth
he could see. When they disappeared,
he felt a vague and incoherent fear.

What was he to do now that he was alone
with a gaping, always deceitful self
he could not possibly begin to know?—

that made him feel as if he were standing
alone on the edge of a cliff,
absolutely nothing holding him back.