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"Poetic Justice"
Approx. 2,440 Words

Poetic Justice

Sitting Down to Write

As I sat down this morning to write, the sun outside my office window was low, corpulent, dyed an eerie orange by smoke blown down from fires in Wyoming. I'd already jotted down a phrase—"red-gold smear of sun through haze" in my notebook, so that I might return later to the peculiar emotion the sight of it had awakened in me.

I had to return, because I wasn't sitting down to write poetry, or some sort of creative prose, but a brochure promoting my employer's corporate relocation services. This is the kind of writing I'm paid to do—the writing that installs the bread on my table.

There's nothing unusual in putting poetry aside in favor of gainful employment, of course, and the conflict between job-time and writing-time is certainly not news. But the conflict can be particularly acute when the job involves a kind of writing with (let's face it) no redeeming spiritual or social value. Writing whose only purpose is to make money. Writing with a shelf-life shorter than all but the most dispensable journalism. At the root of this conflict is a nagging

sense of breaking the faith with the higher purposes of language—a really bleak feeling shared even by promotional writers who've never harbored the desire to become the next Whitman. "Writing is like sex," goes the saying in this business. "First you do it for yourself. Then you do it for a few close friends. In the end you do it for money."

There's a social dimension to the conflict as well. After all, the common attitude toward promotional writing is negative (the sympathetic characters of Michael and Eliot in *thirtysomething* being the exceptions that prove the rule), and is especially so among artistic writers, that club to which most "serious poets" would like to belong. It smacks of "selling out," aesthetically and spiritually; and for those who despise the values of capitalism, it is political anathema as well.

Rarely does a day go by that I don't feel the pinch of this multi-dimensional conflict myself. "Sellout," a voice in my head hisses. To which I always find myself answering, "Yes, but." Yes, every time one writes for strictly pecuniary ends, one breaks faith with one's highest aspirations. I'll even admit that certain types of writers—those who believe that the language itself is somehow sacred, or that poets fulfill some sort of sacred function within the culture—can be destroyed as artists by attempting to make their writing serve utterly secular ends. On the other hand, those of us who view language as a medium of expression, not the substance of it, or those who agree with Wordsworth that a poet is a human being speaking to other human beings, may learn a great deal from writing to fulfill a purpose imposed by the paycheck.

This, in fact, has happened to me. Earning my living by producing ephemeral, essentially valueless writing has improved my real work. It's even helped me clarify my own reasons for

continuing to pour my best energies into an art that can claim only the most miniscule of audiences. Discovering why all this should be so is an exercise fraught with irony. But it isn't the final irony.

Will and Desire

In 1968, amid vast political and social upheavals, I achieved something utterly unique: I graduated from high school.

My last days in the school had been euphoric. After all, I'd been accepted at college (a happy alternative to the nastiness in Vietnam); I had a summer job lined up and good prospects for another on campus when I arrived there; I had a girlfriend, a car, and what seemed like an endless amount of time ahead of me. I was living on the future.

My clearest memory of living in the future comes from my last day in the halls of Denver's North High School. Like most of the seniors, I was making the rounds of favorite teachers and friends, delivering thank yous and goodbyes. I'd stopped by the office of Tom Murnan, a counselor who'd sponsored our school literary magazine, which I and a half dozen other artistic types had edited that year. As it turned out he wasn't there, so I sat down in his stifling little cubicle to scrawl him a smart-assedly affectionate note. I'd gotten just a few lines down when someone spoke my name. I looked up to find Karen standing in the doorway.

Karen was a long-time friend, with whom I'd worked in reader's theater presentations of *No Exit*, *The Hollow Men*, and selections *from A Coney Island of the Mind.* She'd also co-edited the magazine I was emoting over to the absent Murnan. I have no memory of what we said in the minutes that followed. I remember only the heavy fragrance of dogwood blossoms from the open

window, and how the June heat seemed to become more intense as we talked. This was the effect Karen always had on me, and on several of my male friends as well; those who were attracted to bright, mature, impossible girls. I was her "impossible" status, in fact, that made her parting gesture to me so extraordinary. She handed me a book—the yellow, pocket-0sized Harvest edition of Eliot's *Selected Poems*—and gave me a long earnest hug. I stammered something as she was leaving, but whatever it was, it didn't approach the eloquence of her farewell.

It was also unequal to what she inscribed on the title page of her gift. "For your will and desire," it read. "Love, Karen."

The sense of this I was simply unable to extricate from the tangle of adolescent feelings she'd left me with. But as time went on—time, that is, meaning years—I found myself returning again and again to that little book, the first collection of poems by a single author I had ever actually owned. Whenever I'd take it down from the shelf, the phrase "will and desire" would intrigue me afresh, like a gnomic verse. Twenty years later, I feel I've just begun to grasp its ramifications, both for the art I create for free and the craft I exploit for pay.

When I work on a poem—and from what I've read and heard, this is true for many other poets—I begin with nothing more than the desire to write. As I write, peripatetically and with little sense of direction, themes may emerge; though just as often, nothing emerges: the images are dry and dull, the rhythms rote, the sound patterns thin or frankly unmusical. It's like falling in love. Sometimes desire leads to delight, sometimes it simply leads to frustration. But above all, or under all, there is the desire to express … something. Because I seldom know what it is, I'm usually surprised when the expression feels authentic. This surprise is one of the great joys of

writing, and the authenticity its only personal reward. The poet Linda Hogan, in conversation, once remarked that our poems are ahead of us, and we change our lives to follow their lead. Certainly no poet would bother to write if he or she didn't feel that some revelation is at hand.

Yet desire alone isn't enough. Somewhere along the line, as the poem develops, will enters in and begins to shape the verses. It seizes on the internal logic of the metaphors, on the emerging musical ideas, and extends them, tests them, always serving the desire. In some poets, the desire demands traditional forms to realize itself—Dickinson, Frost, the early Lowell, Seamus Heaney; in others, a just-as-rigorous formal openness is required—Whitman, Williams, Levertov, the later Merwin. Of course, there is no neat demarcation for many poets; whatever form desire seeks, the will struggles to provide.

When readers complain about the shapelessness or laxity of "free verse," what they're really touching on is a weakness of will. For only will can make a poem that both expresses and communicates. I feel sure that the rise of traditional formalism in recent years springs from a need to discover will after a decade dominated by raw desire. That much of the resulting verse has been slavish and vapid doesn't argue against the legitimacy of the trend. After all, even that archetypal "leaping poet" Robert Bly has begun counting syllables, in an effort to better serve his expressive desire.

In my case, promotional writing has taken the place of a return to sonnets or heroic couplets or those uneasy borrowings from the algebraic tables of French verse. It has helped me develop my will as a writer by requiring me to exercise it on behalf of something other than my own desire.

Language and Audience

All promotional writing has one ultimate goal. It seeks to inspire the reader to act—to check the hand box for more information, or call the toll-free number (there is no obligation), or redeem the valuable coupon, or fill out the simple application form. It does so by bringing the writer's will to bear on a more or less narrowly defined audience. The more specific the audience, the more effective the writing will likely produce. Responses not only authenticate the promotional writer's skill, they justify his or her continued employment, because responses turn into sales, sales into profits: the so-called bottom line.

We are far from poetry now, but at the center of will. For will is all that can pull a writer who cares about language through the process of creating promotional copy. That's because writing that sells is formulaic and repetitive. It addresses the lowest common denominator in even the most sophisticated audiences, showing the product or services being sold in the most favorable light—which is a light that cast no shadows. The reader is asked simply to buy: a fundamentally emotional decision. So the writer's task is to use language that is both vivid and superficial. Marshalling words that play upon the reader's desires in ways that affirm but do not illuminate them. It can be a most dispiriting effort.

"Yes, but"—this kind of writing *does* develop will because it forces the writer to think dispassionately about the effect of words on readers. It also drives home the fact that language—unlike every other artistic medium—is the common property of all its speakers, and as such demands respect for the assumptions those speakers make about what they hear and read.

These attitudes toward language and audience are what I've carried over in my real work. Whereas my early poetry—under the influence of Eliot (the poet as symbol-monger) and Bly (the poet as pipeline to the Jungian unconscious)—was written to no one in particular, with no object other than the creation of poetry, my mature writing has been written with a specific readership in mind: what I would call "intelligent readers of good will." When I take up the pen, I no longer feel that I'm performing some vaguely sacred act that requires a solemn mood of mystery. Instead, I write to express my desire as honestly and directly as possible, allowing my will to shape the expression with respect for the common assumptions about language—chief assumption being that words point toward realities, from which they derive their only authority.

My views are much against the grain in this period of French-fried criticism, of course, which prefers to view literature as a closed code, self-referential and detached from external reality; something that can be "deconstructed" only after issues of will and desire have been eliminated from consideration. This particular idiocy has infected too many artistic writers, for whom wrestling the angels of will and desire seems to be a pointless exercise. Think of the pretensions of the "language poets," the dispensable wisdom of surrealism and its deep-image cousin, the glittering word-games of so many "new formalists"—all those writers for whom nothing real is ever at stake! After an hour spent reading such stuff, even the severely debased language of promotional writing looks superior, if only because it lacks the arrogance that leads bad poets to turn their backs on the audience.

All this is not, I hasten to add, an argument against difficulty. As Edwin Muir puts it, in his great essay "The Public and the Poet" (from *The Estate of Poetry*, Harvard University Press, 1962):

> The supreme expression of imagination is in poetry, and so like philosophy and science it has a responsibility to preserve a true image of life. If the image is true, poetry fulfills its end. Anything that distorts the image, and tendency to oversimplify or soften it so that it may be more acceptable to a greater number of people, falsifies it, degrades those for whom it is intended, and cannot set us free.

Poetic Justice

No matter how often I say "Yes, but" when I consider my career as poet and promotional writer, no matter now deeply I believe that my paid writing has improved my real work, there is an irony I can neither dismiss or resolve. And that is the irony that Americans actually prefer writing that is cliché-ridden, even patently false, to writing that speaks the truth and therefore stands a chance of setting them free. On good days, this reality leads me to withdraw into a recurring daydream of teaching college. I see myself pacing before a fresh-faced class, the sleeves of my natty shirt rolled to the elbows, holding everyone in thrall with my discussion of tense-shifts in James Wright's poem "Redwings." On bad days, it simply fills me with desperation, and the fact that I earn my living by mining this dark streak in the American character only heightens the feeling.

If there is any virtue in going on in this state of irony, it lies in my sense that it mirrors the spiritual condition of most Americans and so allows me to bear some kind of meaningful witness. We are, after all, a deeply divided people: afraid of our desires, yet devoted to an economic system that panders to them; anti-intellectual, yet ravenous for understanding; addicted

to the hackneyed in literature and politics, yet linguistically inventive to a fault. There's something I love about being at the center of this paradox, something that actually fuels my expressive desires and strengthens my artistic will. I can't judge whether the results are worthwhile, or the emotional cost will eventually prove too high. But I can say that struggling to provide antidotes for the illness I myself am involved in creating strikes me as an exquisite form of poetic justice. As a representative of our problematic culture, it's the only justice I've learned to deserve.