

ARTISTIC STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

It is poetry or disintegration – I am already adrift – but if I forsake the boat of language, and oars of sense – surely I will go in the deep, until my strength is overwhelmed and I swallow the waves till death. Why should poetry be so important for a person who has been saved by Jesus; who has life in the Word; who has inherited an eternal salvation? Because poetry is my commission: my life itself does not depend on it, (I can still walk palely into the flowers), but I myself depend on poetry as substance, am in fact part of it. This is because of the way God makes writers; like other men, we too have been made for a particular purpose. If Paul had not preached, he said then “woe to me”. If Martin Luther King had not been willing to face injustice, he would surely have perished in disgrace. If a mother fails to love her children, it is woe unto her. And if a writer forsakes the sentences to come, he will find in the end no bed will welcome him.

Trailing a poem is like an encounter with a snake: taking the snake alive will always have a charge, but the sweet little thing in a plastic or glass enclosure may lay still and quietly disperse all the natural spectacular in the vision. Sometimes I wonder if I were to develop as a poet at a miraculous rate, producing work as good as the poems I most admire, if the path even then would be worth the main of my life. Does great work really say enough? Is it really striking and beautiful and meaningful enough?

And tonight the answer came closer to me. When you need to write, you do so to shift the material of life, the clay of experience, placid or horrible in spots, around until it takes a shape that is unified, that is meaningful and true to the self-witness. Poets are terribly self-preoccupied, even more than other writers, (so I've heard). But we are engaged in a necessary work that involves the self. It is not that we always find ourselves so interesting, but more that the locus involves our personal ground, which cannot be lost.

On the other hand, sometimes even the most charismatic writers can have a certain emptiness and impersonality. Maybe Ginsberg, Keats, Shakespeare, Rumi, are this way. This is like the wooden sounding board which is part of our equipment to produce the sound. Or it could be said it is like the wheel for throwing pots, or like the writing desk itself. Or even like the launching pad of a shuttle. This is true in particular when the gulf between the unconscious and conscious self has got to be crossed.

I think this matter is true to the extreme in my own case. If not for poetry I would almost belong in the State Institution, not only for the insane, but for the developmentally disabled, the mentally challenged. Since I was a wee child I was profoundly unimaginative and unplayful; a real lump. And this separation from the generative ground eventually spread, becoming so profound that my psyche fragmented into schizophrenia. And I can hardly overstate how catastrophic and painful that was. Eventually I experienced an almost total healing on the day I converted to Christianity. I still take medicine, and still have about 5% of the trouble I did, but I know a huge relief, and also have a different diagnosis, receiving reversal by the Lord's hand in crucial aspects of my old illness, like poverty of thought, lack of affect, poverty of speech, confusion, continual fear, (to name some big ones).

My commission in poetry is the task of establishing a beautiful architecture of meaning, as though a bridge spanned my unconscious and conscious self. Pursuing that lovely snake, (or is it a staff?) the way is built through some interpretative loveliness. It is the loveliness that sustains the bridge. But only at the proper place on the bank – the place where all the real facts are! - can the equipment for the building be found. In this way the conversation and fluency increases between the two spheres. (I say the bridge is beautiful, but only because that seems to me inherent to the poetic project, whether we succeed or not.)

There will be crossings of the river of the psyche from the beginning, whether by ferry or other means. After writing poems steadily for about 7 years, (I had written poems passionately but irregularly before that), the bridge is built partway, and I consider it a blessing that the traffic on it includes the assailants who must suffer my inspection, and who are more easily turned back, because these are the same ones who would hold me in thrall without mercy (by storming the banks). Whether the crossing of this river will be of use to others or not, and it is perhaps unlikely that anyone will be directly moved by reading, the writing is nonetheless a miraculous anointing to recreate my self, someone with almost no power, who had very nearly lost what little self he had.

The glory of the girl I loved, the tragedies silently mingled between friends in hours of alliance and deception, the broken power of the family dominion, the justice in the cry of the oppressed; these things become fleshed out in a lasting way according to the design of God. To engage in the act of realization, and turn that positionally into sincere love for all creatures, and kindness to those in my life, is all I could ask. And to develop this expression jointly with God, even, though I resist it, with the intervention of hateful parties, this is a kind of freedom which, so long as I live genuinely, I will not be deprived of. Praise God.