

MAZE

Birds are amazing, newspapers, stoves, friends. – James Richardson

But wait, there's more – as when the hummingbird
 flies backwards for the hell of it, or
the odd flamingo's pinkened up by snacking
 on blue-green algae. Aeschylus, potted
by a dropped tortoise, was one unlucky Greek –
 from the same stable as Melvin Purvis,
who pioneered belching on national radio.

Were you an ant you'd start the day by stretching,
 and, at a pinch, have a big yawn;
were you a cricket you'd listen through the slits
 of your eager forelegs: were you, alas,
a white shark, you'd never take sick but always
 be hungry: and if a caterpillar,
you'd boast to the end a couple of thousand muscles.

The ermine in white is the weasel in brown, and the chow
 the only dog with a black tongue:
mice were sacred to Apollo: a camel-hair
 may be a squirrel's tail: the mosquito's
wings are thrashing a thousand times a second.
 If you look for the only crying creature –
or laughing come to that – consult a mirror

and find, your mind bested by wonder, your eyes
lit up again at the starry torch,
rue and its makings, something of jubilee,
the shot-silk of the hours. Better,
as the man said, to keep on dreaming small,
than see given to dissipation
the friends, the stoves, the newspapers, the birds.

Stealing Poseidon's Trident

'Now he submerges once again into the sea of the unread and then surfaces puffing and rejuvenated, as proud as if he had stolen Poseidon's trident.' Elias Canetti, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981 'for writings marked by a broad outlook, a wealth of ideas and artistic power,' writes this in a journal entry perhaps of himself.¹ Whoever he had in mind, I take it as a sketch of many readers in action, at many stages of life. That sea, that surfacing, that rejuvenation – they all sound familiar. And now for a few strokes of my own in the oceanic territory, where even puffing can be revealing.

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At the southernmost tip of the Attica peninsula in Greece, on the bluff of Sounion, there stands a temple of Poseidon. Ruined over its twenty-four centuries but much restored today, there it is, in a locale as dramatic as it is beautiful. Many visitors have cut their names into its stones, including that romantic ruffian George Gordon Lord Byron. The sun blazes over a theatrically blue Aegean, the columns rise at once austere and elegantly. If the whole thing were more striking it would be intolerable. And if Poseidon existed, he would have been pleased.

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1 Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Picador by Pan Books, 1986), p. 191

To the ancient Greek mind, pleasing him could take some doing. God of the sea and of water generally, brother of Zeus the sky-god and Hades the keeper of the underworld, he had his home in a golden palace in the depths of the ocean, from which he would emerge, using his trident to lash the sea into fury, and causing either earthquakes or the welling up of new springs. He was the originator of horses, the builder of Troy's walls, and a copious begetter of various gigantic or ferocious offspring. He was the god of navigation and a god of vegetation. Black bulls were sacrificed to him, and bullfights were held in his honour. He was worshipped as a physician. Restless to the last, he was rarely shown as seated. Not a figure to take lightly, whether you went by sea or by land.

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Canetti, who knew so much and so many kinds of things, would have known this and more about Poseidon. A splendidly original reader himself, he could think of the moody god as having an interest in the oceanic realms of the written. For that is what they are, not only in the sense that the words stream out, day after day, by the billion, but in the sense that meanings interleave and overlap and sleek their currents through one another, making climates of their own. Going with some zest into reading is like going down to the sea in ships.

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For even the most enthusiastic and tenacious of readers, an incalculably large proportion of the readable is unread. While you read that sentence, millions of words were printed. Unless we are one of the obsessives of whom Canetti wrote so well elsewhere, we don't want to keep up with it all – wanting that would be like seeking the King Canute Prize for Verbal Greed. But even if what drives us is some narrower interest – in the political economy of Patagonia, in the durability of textiles, in the shifting nomenclature of rock bands – we haven't much of a chance. There are such things as experts of course, and they know (as we say) what's what; but reading in hopes of

keeping up with the entire archive is under the disadvantage mentioned of a certain academic conference; not only did everything have to be said, but everybody had to say it. Being conscientious in such a world is a good way of getting what used to be called a 'broken head'. Not to mention the heart.

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Still, it keeps coming, and so do we. After all, we do like abundance for its own sake – not always and everywhere, but often and in many places. I have no wish to traverse the Sahara Desert, but am obscurely gratified by the fact that it is big enough to accommodate something the size of Australia. It is very pleasing to know that during the Ice Age, the present site of Chicago was under a mile of ice. And what could be better than to read, of our battered planet's early fortunes, that it once rained for millions of years? Perhaps such information takes us back, beguiled, to the days when we were Lilliputians in an upscaled world, which was, as Milton says of Adam and Eve's world at the end of *Paradise Lost*, 'all before them, where to choose'. Since then, the knowledge of exile has set in pretty convincingly for most of us, but we can still get a whiff of pomegranate from time to time.

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I tell my students that if they can't read slowly they can't read, and they look at me either as if I am telling them that sodium chloride is a salt or as if I am heterodox to my fingertips: but it is still true. More of this later. Let us now, instead, praise scurrying, voracious, intemperate readers. When we began to walk, it was with little elegance, but in runty, lurching fashion: catwalks might, for all we knew of it, exist only on the moon. But walking caught on, as we did, and here we are, doing it every day as if we had done it all our lives. It isn't that we want it to happen all the time, otherwise there would be no palanquins, sedan chairs, or Toyotas: but sometimes nothing will do but Going for a Walk, the appetite its own justification. At such moments, the blundering zest of our early days is vindicated anew, and we course our own little worlds like so many lords of creation.

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And so it goes with reading. Perhaps our elders sometimes not always, our betters – thought that no good would come of us if we did not proceed with a proper decorum, going dutifully from one small, well-made sentence in which the cat sat on the mat and kept its mouth shut, to larger quarters in which one clause let guardedly into another before the patient gaze, and so on until we hit the varied show in which Cicero ate fire in one patch, Montaigne did swallow-dives from one trapeze to another, and Shakespeare clowned it perilously among the big cats. And perhaps the elders were right, most of the time. But the mind, like its sibling the heart, is a larrikin some of the time, and needs to live riotously. Larrikins and prodigals remember what their more proper relations are inclined to forget: that every major human resource is veined through with magic, and as such is only partly biddable. We do not learn to love reading simply by being courtly: we have to do some courting as well, and that is usually all the better for some impulsiveness.

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Memory is a rummage-sale much of the time, and no surprise, either, given the way it has been fed items even by so apparently orderly a source as the inscribed or the printed page, let alone our eerily-flickering friend, the computer screen. When the medieval scribe fills a blank patch on his vellum page with ape and curlicue and a terse complaint about the chill in the scriptorium, this is all flourish: but then so is much of the sacred tale-telling to which he is devoting his energies. It is not the mockers of the Bible but its most assiduous exegetes who bring into luminousness its variety, its contrapuntal gambits, its sprawling ménage of types, incidents, behaviours, contrivances, destinies, upheavals, solacings. Split it into chapters and verses, web it over with echoes and foreshadowings, orchestrate it from Genesis to Revelations, and it still comes up with a fiesta of astonishments.

I wonder whether, in the many studies of the Bible's impinging on human imaginations and its stimulating book upon book upon book like its own deprecated Babel, enough account has been taken of its role as exemplar or provocateur along these lines? Without some predictability we can't live, and without some novelty we don't want to; and until pretty recently the

biblical ensemble catered in a degree to both needs, just as they had no doubt played upon its complex origins. But even for those who are comparatively untouched by the Bible's reverberations, writing which is not exclusively technical is laced through with rhetorical energies, all bidding for attention and allegiance. However we may be when we read it, the written word is having a fine old time.

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I was young, 'pre' most things, when I went with my parents and brother to Bunbury, for a holiday. We were not much for travel in those days: unless somebody sent you to a war, you stayed home, and were glad of it. But Bunbury was near enough to count as one of the purlieus of Perth, and had a beachy languor about it. My father and I sauntered along its wide main street, and came across a sale of second-hand books. With a common joy, we bought and began to read *Acres and Pains* by S. J. Perelman of *New Yorker* fame – pure quirk dashed through with irony. Nowadays, when my own behaviour or someone else's seems the stuff of which hemlock is made, I occasionally think, 'But there's still Perelman.' My Perelman include 'Kitchen Bouquet', and 'Short Easterly Squall, with Low Visibility and Rising Gorge'. Respectively, they begin like this:

Yesterday morning I awoke from a deep dream of peace compounded of equal parts of allonal and Vat 69 to find that autumn was indeed here. The last leaf had fluttered off the sycamore and the last domestic of the summer solstice had packed her bundle and caught the milk train out of Trenton. Peace to her ashes, which I shall carry up henceforward from the cellar. Stay as sweet as you are, honey, and don't drive through any open drawbridges is my Christmas wish for Leona Clafin. And lest the National Labor Relations Board (just plain 'Nat' to its friends, of whom I am one of the staunchest) summon me to the hustings for unfair employer tactics, I rise to offer in evidence as pretty a nosegay of houseworkers as ever fried a tenderloin steak. Needless to say, the characters and events depicted herein are purely imaginary, and I am a man who looks like Ronald Colman and dances like Fred Astaire . . . ²

2 S. J. Perelman, 'Kitchen Bouquet', in *The Best of Perelman* (Modern Library, 1947), p. 3

What elfin charm, what pawky and mettlesome humor, tessellate the pages of Oliver Cudlipp's new garland of whimsical papers, *From a Misanthrope's Inkwell!* The title, so gruff that the unwary may not descry the impudent grin lurking beneath the domino, is a wickedly disingenuous one, for if ever author were untainted by the cheap cynicism that characterizes your modernist, 'avant-garde' scribbler, it is Cudlipp. Mellow, fantastical, *un feuilletonistic bien spirituel*, he wends his roguish way, gently puncturing our foibles with his unerring quill but never overstepping the bounds of good taste. If, occasionally, it is impossible to tell what he is driving at, do not be fooled into thinking him insipid. Pompous, attitudinizing, unreadable, yes, but never insipid . . .³

This is torrential behaviour, possible at all only because that is one of the mind's ways. We are alarmed and despondent when, against our will, mind and mouth are given their head, and the issue is manic, or outright mania; it is the mental equivalent of avalanche, and we recoil from the spectacle, let alone the experience. But like it or not, the mind is a fast breeder, intelligence is torrential after all, the natural history of the senses is of sumptuousness as well as of discriminations, and we swim with the skill of a porpoise though the krill of consciousness, the incessant storm of event. And every so often we can be glad to yield, expressly, to the tumult can be elated by the outrageous. Wit is all very fine, rapier flicking off rapier, but the sweep and plop and splash of comedy is also something for which we have a healthy appetite. A Perelman on the loose is our crumpled sibling, and something important dies in us if we deny him room.

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James Joyce, reporting that he had spent a morning on a sentence, and asked whether he was looking for the *mot juste*, said that, no, he had all the words – he was looking for the order. Perelman was out of that stable. An unbroken stallion, he was still bridled by distant, formidable intuitions of the way things must go. Having written for Marx Brothers films, he remembered

3 S. J. Perelman, 'Short Easterly Squall, with Low Visibility and Rising Gorge', *New Yorker* (24 October, 1953), p. 29

this with hatred, perhaps because for all the precision that could be seen in those performances, it is hard to isolate finesse: and what Perelman was always after was ebullience crossed with finesse.

Jonathan Swift wrote a whole book in which he deployed cliché as though it were a gift from heaven, electric with the divine intervention: Perelman, in both of the passages quoted, takes to cliché as the dark ground across which the bright mind can play – buoyant, fleeing, exuberant, a maker of splashes. 'A deep dream of peace compounded of equal parts of allonal and Vat 69' conflates one of Leigh Hunt's more lustrous poems with one of life's direr and more self-indulgent blends.⁴ 'Peace to her ashes, which I shall carry up henceforward from the cellar' plays (as he might have said) fast and loose with Victorian mock-classical lingo while taking the beset householder not only down to earth but into it. 'Stay as sweet as you are, honey, and don't drive through any open drawbridges' is an incantation that I used to recite to myself for years as a mantra, in the face of the inevitable, the unintelligible and the gratuitous. It has none of the spiritual warrant of (say) a phrase from the Psalmist, but it has pretty well the same claim on memory.

Talking, after all, is often a way of trying to find out what the devil is going on: and even the most suavely suited and grandly capped individuals are bushed about that for much of the time. Solemnity is commonly about three-quarters bluff, and the existence of countless institutions which might be called Solemnity Clubs dotted over our fragile ball of dirt and water does not change that fact. Auden, near the end of his poem, 'In Praise of Limestone', says, 'The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,/ Having nothing to hide.' Not being the blessed, and having much to hide above all, our not being the blessed we care greatly. Perelman does not care, and storms upon us accordingly.

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4 Leigh Hunt, 'Abou Ben Adhem', in *Leigh Hunt, Selected Writings*, ed. David Jesson (Carcanet, 2003), p. 59

Unlike various would-be grandees of cultural life, Perelman knows that there is no way out of the ignominies of the verbal circus. St John's Gospel, in the tender and momentous formulation, says that 'the Word was made flesh', the best words in the world, so far as I am concerned. But human flesh, and its language, is also 'flash', as in that great Australian expression, 'as flash as a rat with a gold tooth'. All of our flair is the flair of approximators, compromisers: as, first, an American Mr Big, and then an Australian one, said in response to the question, 'what do you do?' 'I do the best I can'. Language does the best it can, is gesticulant, often unshaven, not always well coordinated. Language both makes a gift of us to one another, and gives us away. It is what we all are, for better and for worse. And when, in the second of Perelman's beginnings, the speaker goes on locking one small shield into another unwary, '... not descry ... disingenuous ... untainted ... unerring ...', this, while ludicrous, also makes overt a permanent anxiety. Language is often padding, but padding as buffering. We keep saying things lest silence should say its terrible word to us. All of those welded negatives carry the flash of fear.

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To have that, too, come home, along with more precious things, it is necessary to take time, at least occasionally; slow is beautiful. The curious convention of poetry whereby, usually, it is out there on the page's white arena, space around it made obvious, can also suggest to us an advantage in time's being made 'spacious', time's being given its time. For some reasons, it is not our practice to attach to poems the regulatory signals we take for granted with music, no 'allegro', no 'prestissimo', but psychic pacing is of an importance which can hardly be exaggerated in poetry. Getting that wrong is like getting wrong the timing of a space-capsule's docking.

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In the Poseidon story, the god is not only earth-shaker and ocean-perturber, but palace-dweller and wall-builder. Somewhere between these conditions

is the origination of horses, those creatures which can stand either for untrammelled vitality or for disciplines and harmonies. Most if not all of what we read has a stake in both sides of this relationship. Rhetoric, whether seen or heard, is like music at least in this, that it is completely unintelligible unless it takes place between the poles of formulation and investigation. The purposes in question may be very various instruction, edification, entertainment, surprise, description and so on but there is a basic dynamic that can never be eluded, however eager the writer may be to do that. Much of the time there is no such eagerness, and the words become a kind of festival of accepted contrast. A favourite of mine in this regard has always been G. K. Chesterton, an essayist to the last which is to say, a maker, savourer, and releaser of tensions. Here he is, on 'The Advantages of Having One Leg':

To appreciate anything we must always isolate it, even if the thing itself symbolize something other than isolation. If we wish to see what a house is it must be a house in some uninhabited landscape. If we wish to depict what a man really is we must depict a man alone in a desert or on a dark sea sand. So long as he is a single figure he means all that humanity means; solitary he means human society; so long as he is solitary he means sociability and comradeship. Add another figure and the picture is less human – not more so. One is company, two is none. If you wish to symbolize human building draw one dark tower on the horizon; if you wish to symbolize light let there be no star in the sky. Indeed, all through that strangely lit season that we call our day there is but one star in the sky – a large fierce star which we call the sun. One sun is splendid; six suns would be only vulgar. One Tower of Giotto is sublime; a row of Towers of Giotto would be only like a row of white posts. The poetry of art is in beholding the single tower; the poetry of nature in seeing the single tree; the poetry of love in following the single woman; the poetry of religion in worshipping the single star. And so, in the same pensive lucidity, I find the poetry of all human anatomy in standing on a single leg. To express complete and perfect leggishness the leg must stand in sublime isolation, like the tower in the wilderness. As Ibsen so finely says, the strongest leg is that which stands most alone . . . ⁵

5 G. K. Chesterton, 'The Advantages of Having One Leg' in G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (Cosimo Inc. reprint, 2007), pp. 21-22

People will, and should, write about anything; Montaigne on 'thumbs' is a case in point because people will do anything. (Many decades after Chesterton wrote his essay, the *London Times* reported, on the 18th of July 1957, that a Sydney orthopaedic specialist was leading a research party into Arnhem Land to investigate the Aboriginal phenomenon of standing on one leg.) Chesterton's assumption was that, since everything is ultimately connected with everything else, all may shed light on one another. This is not to say there is no such thing as implausibility, and those who dislike either his opinions or his demeanour are quick to point this out. In the course of his long and immensely copious life as a writer, G. K. Chesterton would sometimes jibe at being called a paradox-monger, but that is what he became on off-days or when one King Charles' Head or another bobbed up over his horizon. Still, the sloshing around of paradox when nothing else came to mind was a carelessness about something for which he usually cared deeply and passionately, namely his conviction that for us to be at all is at once gratuitous, essentially benign, and relational. In that sense, he did know where he was going to come out, whatever he was writing about: but it is a pretty expansive 'where'.

He wrote, as many do, partly for the drama of the thing, and one avenue to drama is the subjunctive. His 'If we wish' and 'If you wish' are signals to the reader to be on the *qui vive*, challenged and challenging. Chesterton seems to have assumed that the human mind is usually on the verge of wandering off an assumption which I believe to be perfectly true and it had constantly to be twitched back into concentration. No doubt his view was in part a consequence of his being a journalist, but many a writer who has had little to do with that trade writes as though we need all the psychic exercise we can get if we are to go the writer's way. More significantly, the drama of writing and of reading can be an implicit ritualising of everything that is large and persuasive in the conduct of our lives, which, from their most to their least material conditions, are a tissue of firmness and fluidity, of stopping and going.

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At its simplest, verse celebrates this; its rhythms, crude or subtle, answer to rhythms in our seated or lying bodies as well as in our bodies on the move. Verse's 'measures,' however described, have a constant traffic with our minds' 'measures' in the face of the blizzard of events through whose thousands or millions we make our way daily. And prose is another device whereby we do more than itemise, more than denominate: it exercises us in continuing insight, and helps us, as we say, to realise things. Chesterton was, often, a better-than-average versifier, though rarely a good poet; the prose, by contrast, was a milieu in which he could, time after time, be reborn as a knowing being.

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One thing he knew, and continued to report upon, was that, if we need to move through oceans of significance, we also need, frequently, to fling through the air of play; Chesterton was a kind of dolphin of the mind, moving fast through complementary elements. His love of play was partly a love of art, partly a love of life. All those subjunctives his, but also the millions of them that thread their way through writings remembered and forgotten are in part play, are esprit, just as every artistic innovation, not only from one performer to another but from one performance to another, is gambitry, in liberty. And what Yeats calls 'life's own self-delight,' whether in urchin can-kicking or in Olympic virtuosity or in the invention of the telescope or the gene-shear, all this is spirit on the wing, whatever its great or little palpable yield. Writing cannot and should not be saying this expressly all the time; sometimes we need the tranquil, and sometimes we need the dire. But play will out wherever life shows its hand in a big way, and Chesterton found it his business and his pleasure to be there and say so as often as possible. He could also, as with Ibsen, mock without hating, a rarer gift than it sounds.

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Inventiveness and conjecture, however vibrant, share a cosmos with all the matters of fact, and sooner or later have to cut deals with them. In the seventeenth century, Andrew Marvell, like many of his intellectual comrades, could go on

entertaining possibilities with an almost unending fluency, 'Meanwhile the mind/ from pleasure less,/ Withdraws into its happiness:/ The mind, that ocean where each kind/ Does straight its own resemblance find; Yet it creates, transcending these,/ Far other worlds, and other seas . . .'⁶ But Marvell also had the business of being a Member of Parliament for Hull, not the most oceanic of milieux, and other poems of his have the reek of the pragmatic and the politic. The rest of us, however enchantable, wake to worlds in which we too have to manoeuvre, sometimes flummoxed, sometimes cynical, frequently provisional, and always, whether or not we like it, exposed. Here is Diane Ackerman, in her *A Natural History of the Senses*, doing the daily thing in a more-than-ephemeral way:

Look at your feet. You are standing in the sky. When we think of the sky, we tend to look up, but the sky actually begins at the earth. We walk through it, yell into it, rake leaves, wash the dog, and drive cars in it. We breathe it deep within us. With every breath, we inhale millions of molecules of sky, heat them briefly; and then exhale them back into the world. At this moment, you are breathing some of the same molecules once breathed by Leonardo da Vinci, William Shakespeare, Anne Bradstreet, or Colette. Inhale deeply. Think of *The Tempest*. Air works the bellows of our lungs, and it powers our cells. We say 'light as air' but there is nothing light-weight about our atmosphere, which weighs 5,000 trillion tons. Only a clench as stubborn as gravity's could hold it to the earth; otherwise it would simply float away and seep into the cornerless expanse of space.

Without thinking, we often speak of 'an empty sky'. But the sky is never empty. In a mere ounce of air, there are 1,000 billion trillion gyrating atoms made up of oxygen, nitrogen, and hydrogen, each a menagerie of electrons, quarks, and ghostly neutrinos. Sometimes we marvel at how 'calm' the day is, or how 'still' the night. Yet there is no stillness in the sky or anywhere else where life and matter meet. The air is always vibrant and aglow, full of volatile gases, staggering spores, dust, viruses, fungi, and animals, all stirred by a skirling and relentless wind. There are active flyers like butterflies, birds, bats, and insects who ply the air roads; and there are passive flyers

6 Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. George deF. Lord (Everyman, 1984), p. 48

like autumn leaves, pollen, or milkweed pods, which just float. Beginning at the earth and stretching up in all directions, the sky is the thick, twitching realm in which we live. When we say that our distant ancestors crawled out onto the land, we forget to add that they really moved from one ocean to another, from the upper fathoms of water to the deepest fathoms of air.⁷

The American philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, once called the phases of education those of 'romance, precision, and generalisation'.⁸ This does very well not only for protracted disciplinary activity but for pieces of writing as short as Ackerman's. Without 'romance', the engrossment factor, the demon of boredom takes over the management straight away; without 'precision' – names, dates, places, numbers – we wonder, or should, whether somebody is just making hypnotic passes; without 'generalisation' – the mind in its sweeping mode it is not so much that we all will feel stockaded in among things smaller than ourselves, it is rather that any old passer-by who throws us a few slogans is likely to capture our restive attention.

Whether by accident or by design, Ackerman's kind of writing offers a triple satisfaction. First, she 'romances', by way of the exotic and the various. All of us not cursed with unequivocal adulthood like to gape a bit from time to time, and for some the magicking force will attach to Colette's name, for some to the cumulus of scientific detail, for some to 'estrangement' as such horizon at our feet, oceanic water meeting oceanic air, the great hand of gravity with all the atmosphere in its fist. Engrossment, too, can be reinforced by the switches from one rhetorical gesture or pitch to another from command or appeal, through position and counter-position, to the proffering of one comprehensible detail to another. It all sounds animated, sounds energetic and appealing; listening to it, we know not only that something is going on but that someone is coming through.

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7 Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (Random House, 1990), pp. 236-37

8 A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (Ernest Benn Limited, second edition, 1959), pp. 28-30

As for 'precision', and besides the obvious particularities, Ackerman is up to one of the oldest intellectual games of the West, the imprinting of macrocosm and microcosm upon each other. The ancient saying that 'man is the measure of all things' can be construed in many ways, and among them is the sense in which we can gauge things partly by finding ourselves at home in them, as the familiar car clears the familiar gate-post, or the tall householder the low lintel. Careers, fortunes, masterpieces and nightmares have been made, of course, from a contrasting sense that we don't fit, aren't wanted, and will always be unspeakable, but that is not the only option, and is certainly not Ackerman's. *The Tempest* in airy nature, the washed dog in the sky, our very naming of anything and everything to which we turn our attention, this is a dovetailing of self into milieu, and a scanning, and a spanning. What is to be made of all this exercises as many people as ever, no doubt: but that something is to be made of it, and never without us, is one of the elementary givens of any humanism, whose fashionable enemies are inescapably parasitic upon it at every turn.

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And 'generalisation' interests us sometimes for straightforward reasons of codification, while we herd the genera of some realm or other; grown men and women can love taxonomy as small boys once loved toy soldiers, regiment by regiment, But I think that our taste for generalisation is also a sign of an appetite that is emotional, and ethical, and ontological. We hanker for the lot: that sky, that ocean, have got into our hearts. Autism is a dreadful affliction, though all of us flirt with it from time to time; the bid of generalisation is one of the ways in which we act against it. Generalisation has its own pathologies, and its own appalling complacencies – somebody could write a play about them, to be called *Waiting for Drongo* – but it is quite impossible to do without it, and at our best, as well as at our worst, we don't want to. It, too, is a way to 'inhale deeply', a way to keep a few strokes ahead of vengeful Poseidon.



Peter Porter: Littoral Truth^I

In an essay on the poetry of George Crabbe, Peter Porter wrote, 'It is a great pleasure to me, a man for the littoral any day, to read Crabbe's description of the East Anglian coast.' Happily, there is by now a substantial and various array of writings about Porter's work, and I would like simply to add that his being, metaphorically 'a man for the littoral,' with all its interfusions, is one of his distinguishing qualities, and something to rejoice in. Coastlands, and marches, are essential to his intellect and to his imagination. He may never have had one foot in Eden, but he did rejoice in a plurality of territories. With a hallmark ruefulness, he would joke that the principal use of poetry was to supply novelists and film-makers with titles for what they produced: but he was himself a constant crosser of borders between prose and poetry, music and verse, the most sumptuous of visual works in western civilization and poems which might revere, chasten, or ironize them. He could mount a commanding array of insights while offering in the same breath a disarming modesty about their power. If ever there was a case of someone writing poems to see what happened, Peter Porter was the man – 'for the littoral any day.'

^I All quotations from Peter Porter's prose are taken from Peter Porter, *Saving from the Wreck: Essays on Poetry* (Trent Books, 2001).

‘The model for art remains that of metamorphosis: imaginations, great events, are all transformation scenes.’ This was Porter’s project, and it was besides his passion. He usually wrote poetry as, in my experience, he always spoke – rapidly, as if somehow to offer the trace of what was escaping, while the curiosity of what was emerging became apparent. In a zestfully mordant early poem, ‘Farewell to Theophrastus’, he reports that ‘*Overdoing It’s* lost a carnation but has/ two rosebuds in his right lapel;/ he offers the table the name of an hotel/ in Amalfi and spends a minute on his knees/ retrieving the Chairman’s pen top.’ This is like Swift singing – a startling spectacle, but one which wins assent through the blend of farce and calculation with which it is carried off. Porter wrote, later, ‘Satire I hold to be only another version of pastoral, a way poets have of managing to relish what they dislike. They have cause to bless their enemies for existing.’ This too is to be ‘a man for the littoral’, and it means that no day need be wasted.

Like Auden who was one of his exemplars, Porter could exult in a variety of modes, each of which had a mutable face. A handful of his poems’ titles insinuates a repertoire: ‘A Great Reckoning in a Little Room’, ‘The Lion of Antonello da Messina’, ‘The Pines of Rome’, ‘The Cocks of Campagnatico’, ‘Mutant Proverbs’, ‘Leafing Through the Latin Dictionary’, ‘Whereof We Cannot Speak’, ‘At the Reunion of the Answers’. Various, the demeanour could be that of applauder, of busker, of bearleader, of someone being put to silence eloquently, of wary enquirer, of a hailer of love in the presence of death, of a commander whose troops are prone, unpredictably, to desert him and then to return.

‘No poet can be great’, he wrote, ‘who is not memorable, unmistakable and a virtuoso’. He did not establish a priority between these endowments, but he certainly did not think that to be a virtuoso was to be an also-ran. He had from first to last a certain innocence, an openness, about a new poem’s coming to be. The poem could not be wrenched from the realm of the unknown: it could only be had where surprise and expertise were both allowed their due. The many expressions of surprise in the poems are not ornamental or strategic: they are, as we say, telling.

Like many poets, and in spite of a brightly-polished scepticism, Peter Porter had a number of talismanic predecessors. Pope was emphatically of their company, and so was Browning. Porter wrote that 'In his copious and generous output, Browning satisfies the unquenchable haranguer which is in each of us. We are born, we talk and we die. But chiefly we talk, and when we meet a good talker we listen. Browning is the talker *non pareil*. Any acquaintance of Peter Porter's will smile instinctively at this, because his own diurnal talking was itself a part of his own 'copious and generous output'.

Beyond that, though, the whole of his poetry may be seen as a deliberate talking-through of his way in the world. A rending poem after his first wife's death is called, 'Talking to You Afterwards', and some modification of that title could be used of the poems late and early. Answering questions after a poetry-reading in Australia some years ago, he said when asked whether he had an ideal reader, 'Yes, and it's me.' He meant by this that if the poem could not evade strictures which rose in his own mind, then it lost credibility. But even though he was sometimes charged with writing esoterically, he was disinclined, whether by temperament or by choice, to write poems which stood clear of the ruck of affairs, or which aspired to do so. If you missed the talking-through, you missed an important dimension of the poem.

Porter, who delighted to bestow and to modify characterisations in his poems, called Browning 'The Father of Us All', in that he 'changed the coordinates by which poetry is recognized . . . The chief gain was poetry's escape from a ghetto of appropriateness. The poet ate further down the table from the salt, but he ate more voraciously.' Porter saw this as a common indebtedness to Browning, but that way of putting it applies with special force to his own work. Many excellent poets work most happily within particular thickets in their own cultures: Peter Porter wanted a forest, and his poems keep on expanding its borders.

'The Father of Us All', himself a man for the littoral, might well be pleased with the degree to which Porter embraced the new opportunities. No doubt his deep and lasting fidelity to music taught him much about intellectual decorum and its range of possibilities, but his poetry still escaped the 'ghetto of appropriateness' with a zest of its own. Once again, titles give the cue: 'Syrup

of Figs Will Cast Out Fear,' 'Who Gets the Pope's Nose?,' 'Inspector Christopher Smart Calls,' 'In the Giving Vein,' 'Exit, Pursued by a Bear,' 'What I Have Written, I Have Written,' 'The Pantoum of the Opera.' Juan Ramón Jiménez advises, in a notebook: 'If they give you lined paper, write the other way,' which applies very well to Porter, provided it is remembered that 'the other way' thereupon becomes a new way, with both new opportunities and new requirements.

'The poet ate further down the table from the salt, but he ate more voraciously.' Nobody reading through the Porter ensemble could doubt the voracity. When it came to poetical reputation, he regretted that he was not nearer the salt, but where political affairs were at issue, the whole disposition of the table was up, at best, for critique. I am writing as it happens on the day of the British elections, which is also Porter's funeral-day. In a letter written shortly after the elections of 1997, he wrote, 'It struck me suddenly the other day that I suffer from the paranoia of not being political. If I were political I would see ways of changing things for the better – as it is, I can concentrate only on the appallingness of ruling classes and what might be called the transferable iniquity whereby their opposing Tribunes and Radical Replacements are forced to copy the sins of their office.' Camus, in a notebook, wrote, 'I am not made for politics, since I am incapable of desiring the death of my opponent.' Porter, a constant scrutinizer of mortality's ways, might not have desired the death of the powerful, but he thought that the least that should be given them was a hell of a good talking to, though he did not suppose that they would do much listening. Donald Hall remarks that 'Poetry weds the unweddable and embodies the conditions we live under: nest of pleasure, twigs of dread.' It might be a coda to Porter's, 'For a poet his hope and his benison will usually be his energy. What he has to say is often possessed by gloom, but he becomes of the party of hope if he pronounces it with energy and art. How he does so is a great and unexplained mystery.' Far more pages of his poetry than not bear witness to the attempt implied here, though the mystery, to me at least, remains as great as ever. Porter used to quote the exchange between Mozart and a (presumably thoughtless) enquirer, who asked him why he wrote so much. Mozart replied, 'Because it fatigues me less than not writing.' That says a good deal about Porter at the desk, whose hankering was always beyond the present poem or the next, and included the hope to understand 'the mystery'.

'All the poetry I love,' he said, 'is potential energy come to rest.' This lapidary phrasing, which for Porter could point to Herbert as to Rochester, to Shakespeare the sane and Smart the mad, to Pope and to Auden, is of a piece with his constant rethinking of the relationship between poetry and music. Dennis O'Driscoll's view that 'poetry is music set to words' would have been his own, though he would instinctively have nuanced the proposition, saying perhaps (as he did) that poets 'are musicians by other means.' Porter also wrote, 'I consider Pope to be the most musical poet in English, though he may not have cared for a note of formal music . . . music teaches us to relate words by their adjacency or their sympathy and not merely by overt meaning. It further reminds us that syntax is the most important element in poetry, the poetical equivalent of harmonic construction.'

There would be plenty of blinking at that last sentence from various schools of poetry – some hedge-schools, some from Harvard Yard – about which Porter was so thoroughly informed: but for my money it is exactly right. The mind is more than intellection but is nothing without it, and so it goes with poetry and syntax, without whose good offices the potential energy can never come to rest. Thinking of Rochester and of Martial, he remarks that 'Classicism means keeping technique in the foreground,' and he had strong allegiances in that direction, whether in the most or the least quippish of his poetry. He was accustomed to say that music was his first love, and as such it had things to show to later loves, including poetry. (One night, in Melbourne, in a small, well-fuelled company, he proclaimed that we should all go down on our knees and thank God for creating Mozart: but the idea did not quite catch on.)

'A man for the littoral': I have tried to suggest a few of the ways in which Porter bore out this wittily-conceived condition or agenda. His transactions with the mind, its words, and the world were versatile, pluriform, and constantly open to revision. In another early poem, 'Walking Home on St Cecilia's Day', unhappiness exacts its tribute, but 'There is a practice of music which befriends/
The ear – useless, impartial as rain on desert – // And conjures the listener for a time to be happy, / Making from this love of limits what he can, / Saddled with Eden's gift, living in the reins / Of music's huge light irresponsibility.' The conjuration went on occurring, and so did its fruits.

I last spoke to Peter Porter, by phone, a couple of weeks before his death. The conversation ended with my being drawn to say, 'You've been a very easy man to love, Peter.' So he was: and so he is.

