

To Steven Heighton

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Dear Steve,

After reading your letter I got to thinking about how I arrive (or not) at decisions about the merit of a piece of writing and whether or not or to what extent I am influenced by sheer name and reputation and other factors that deflect me from really attending to what is being said whether it's in a poem or a political speech or elsewhere. And of whether or not such factors should be thought of as irrelevant to the meaning of the work.

When I was studying English lo many years ago I took a course based on I.A. Richards's book *Practical Criticism*. We would be given a story or a poem or a play or a novel about every week-and-a-half and write an essay about it. We weren't supposed to know who wrote the poem or story or whatever. The whole approach of The New Criticism, of which Richards was a proponent, involved an attempt to approach literary works with one's own critical faculties (such as mine were at age 20) and not rely on biographical or historical information, for instance. The exercise was supposed to develop literary judgment. Rather than train one to frame one's judgments within the organizing principles supplied by biographical criticism, etc.

So far so good. But the New Criticism had, I think, at least two big failings. Two come to mind, anyway. First, I think, there was the assumption that there exist universal standards of merit and taste. I recall reading either Richards or Cleanth Brooks saying something like Aeschylus's *Oresteia* could be appreciated for the great work it is independent of the culture of the reader. They underestimated the degree to which our concerns are ethnocentric. More generally, they underestimated the extent to which minds may differ.

Secondly, they assumed that 'good' poetry did not require the reader to acquire knowledge about the world which is written about other than inside the poem itself. They assumed that 'good' art is self-sufficient in a way that seems quite problematical to me now. So that diverse readers could expect to arrive in the same general vicinity after reading a piece. I studied the *Oresteia* for a long time and it wasn't until I started to learn about the culture from other sources that I was able to understand and appreciate much of the trilogy. The Greek idea of pollution, for instance, and how pollution can happen to families.

Anyway, one week we had to write an essay on an old sonnet. I didn't like the sonnet. I slagged it in my essay. Of course it turned out to be one of Shakespeare's and the discussion in class was tinged with the awe and appreciation of Shakespeare's work you might expect to exist in such a discussion.

I went away and reread the sonnet. My o my how much more I could discern in that sonnet. I was able to find meanings in it that I had previously not found at all. I was far more generous in my reading than I had been before, had expectations of profundity that I hadn't had before toward that sonnet.

After about a year, I had to admit to myself the extent to which my literary judgments are affected by such factors as reputation. More generally, what I think is deeply affected by what is thought by others. Though there wasn't much talk about this in class.

I wonder sometimes at the alchemical reaction that takes place inside the pages of a book, perhaps to each letter, when the book wins a prize. Might it be that upon such occasion each letter is transformed into something more glowing, something containing more promise to the reader of relevance, significance, and import to their lives?

Another story comes to mind. When I was doing the radio show, I had occasion to interview Jane Rule about her book *Memory Board*. There are three main characters in the book. I can't remember the name of one of them. We'll call her Diane. There's also David (Diane's brother) and Constance (Diane's lover). All three are elderly, but Constance has Alzheimer's. The book is told alternately from the viewpoints of Diane and David. Rule said she didn't have an interest in telling the story from the point of view of Constance, that she'd have to pull all sorts of Faulknerian tricks and so forth to tell the story from the point of view of someone with Alzheimer's.

Rule told me that she was getting a rather predictable response from readers of *Memory Board*: people would tell her how much they loved Constance. Many told her that Constance was the best character she'd ever written. In Rule's opinion, the other two characters were more fully drawn. The story, after all, is told from the point of view of David and Diane, not Constance. "But," she said, "Constance is the beloved of both Diane and David. They both love Constance. And the reader does seem to receive that message: LOVE CONSTANCE. I thought to myself, is it as simple as that: tell the reader what to think and they think it? David and Diane are much more interesting to me."

Rule told me that her mother didn't like *The Young In One Another's Arms*, in which each chapter is told from the point of view of a different character in the book. "You come to know each of those character's minds quite well in that book, I think," she said, "including all the shit in their heads. The distribution of sympathy among the characters that the reader should feel is not clear at all."

About a month later I read a review of *Memory Board* written by Constance Rooke in *The Malabar Review*. Sure enough, even Rooke raved on about Constance.

Perhaps there are unwritten rules that inform how books are read. McLuhan pointed out that environments are invisible. Frames are often invisible. Apparently you can mail away for the rules on how to write a romance. Those aren't the same, I suppose, as the rules used to read one. I guess the game is to get the rules to write one and understand how those rules relate to the reading rules.

When I go to art shows, I note that people will often look at the C.V. before they look at the show. This, I suppose, is to some extent so they know what they are looking at. They don't trust the evidence of their own eyes. They lack confidence in themselves to respond authentically or in the artist to declare himself authentically or seek authenticity in the validations of a C.V. Or just seek clarification amid a bewildering display of who knows what? Or just further elaboration.

Some time ago there was an article in the newspaper about some of Warhol's work. There were some collages for sale. I can't remember the price tag, but it was big. The collages included some images of Superman cut out from the comic book. The collages were dated 1965. Someone who really knew their Superman pointed out that the particular drawings of him couldn't have been done until 1968. So either Warhol dated them incorrectly by accident or he didn't date them or he dated them incorrectly on purpose. The reason that the article appeared in the newspaper was because the collages' authenticity (and hence their monetary value) were in question. I like to think that he dated them incorrectly on purpose. Art from the grave. This question of authenticity came to dominate the talk about the work. And, of course, it was a question that interested Warhol. The work was thus framed by the question of authenticity. What makes art valuable? Whoever did the collages, there they are unchanging and unaffected by who did them. But the observer changes his or her perspective toward them and the price tag changes depending on who did them.

Is this a bad thing? Or is it neither good nor bad but an expected occurrence when art is up for sale and when the frame interacts with the work and the frame is as large as the relation of the work and the artist or even the non-artist to the world? The frame is actually active in a way that cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the meaning of the work. Not just in the case of the Warhol/notWarhol collages but elsewhere. This meta-meaning, these meta-frames have incredible influence on how we categorize our experience. All the more because they are largely unexamined.



I remember arguing with a writer about what determines which writing survives over time. He felt that there is some sort of process by which "the best" writing survives. The natural question is: "the best" according to whom and according to what criteria? I have heard it said that if such a process of natural selection actually does function more or less as you would expect it to do, then there would be more women writers from past centuries within the canons. The countering argument asserts that the minds and lives of women have been burdened with such shit that you would not expect many good women writers. In any case, I think you'd expect more than we have.

I remember reading in one of the Platonic dialogues (I can't remember which) a discussion about the nature of "the good." So it could have been one of several of the dialogues. The straw man was giving examples of a good this and a good that. A good social contract, perhaps, or a good familial arrangement. Socrates said to the straw man that he wasn't looking for examples of good things or actions, but what is common to all of the examples. "It is only then that we should know what is "good". And there must surely be something common to all these ways of speaking of what is good or we would not use the same word for them."

This is only one of the arguments Socrates supplies for the existence of "the good." I suppose the dialogues may be read as one long argument for the existence of "good." But this particular argument depends on an integrity in language that surely is problematical. Just because we use one word to describe different things does not necessitate the existence of anything. It's a poet's argument, really. And a poet from a different age.

It may be that essences do not exist. When we speak of love is there something common to our uses of the word? Humpty Dumpty almost said "When I say a word it means exactly what I say it means." But we only say the word, rarely what it means never mind what we think it means. One word in a sentence impinges on the others and vice-versa and they are like a community in which ambitions and hopes and desires conflict and compete and sometimes they cooperate with one another. Maybe the meaning of sentences and the play of words within them are like that game where a message is whispered to each in turn and each passes it on to the next.

In any case, I think we're often mythed in our thinking and feeling by the Platonic forms. So that the writer I was arguing with could assume the existence of "the best" writing of an era and not feel that the notion is shot full of holes. As though there existed objective criteria by which an intelligent person might arrive together with another intelligent person on decisions concerning literary merit. Maybe such criteria exist, maybe they don't. But even if they do that doesn't mean they're applied. People argue for the literary merit of this or that for all sorts of reasons ranging from genuine appreciation to professional advancement to the furthering of some ism.

All too often the phrase "the best of" is used uncritically, in a way that capitulates to the language of advertising. When a magazine I know of was billing itself as the best literary magazine in Canada, I argued with one of the people who worked on the magazine about this choice of language. It seems to me that one of the things a literary magazine stands for is the capacity of language to be meaningful and honest. Billing one's magazine as the best in Canada is simply a meaningless advertisement. What it tells me is that the people making the claim (particularly since they're the people who run the magazine) are unmindful of the very thing the magazine supposedly stands for. I told this to a writer. He said that maybe it's the case that when you write a book you use one language and when you sell it you have to use another. But which language was he using at the time? One of the things writers are up against is the trivialization of language and thought and feeling that results from a language tailored to the sneering hucksterism of our society. So that we finally do not know ourselves what language we are using. So that we can say one thing and do another without awareness of the sheer convenience of our confusion. George Orwell's essay called *Politics and the English Language*

is excellent, I feel, in its elaboration on the political consequences of lack of attention to language. But I'm more immediately concerned with the personal consequences. As poets we aspire to a kind of articulation that's difficult when one can't talk straight.

I don't know whether essences exist or not or whether the question is a misnomer or what. However, I do know that the phrase "the best of" is too easy an evasion of problems that beset us. And its use usually is a poor substitute for thought, is usually a personal approval masquerading as a general consensus. In that sense it is not only meaningless but dishonest. At best, it displays an unmindfulness that borders on the simple-minded.

Nonetheless, we must make judgments, literary and otherwise. We wish to speak out for some works and against others. We feel that some work shows the way to what is true and beautiful and just and some doesn't. And we desire that work of vision, such as we conceive of it, sees the light of day and is influential in shaping the shapes we see in the clouds and on the streets. So we argue as we can for what we are passionate about in the literary landscape in the mid or late days of the empire amid a mindscape full of roads that lead to parking lots where the spots are marked 'reserved.'

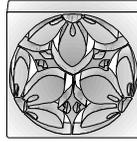


I think of poetry as an action. I don't know what it is, precisely. I don't think that it has to happen on a page. Or even in words. There's something in the old phrase "poetry in motion." This opens me up to other arts and to life (when I've got the guts). And it helps steer me away from formulas (when I need something lively bad enough). I'm at my best when I intensely know that I don't know what poetry is: possibilities open up.

I try to approach poems as though they're people. You get to know people slowly. You give them the benefit of doubt. Being an editor was an exhilarating challenge sometimes. We (the editors) had some high-energy knock-down-drag-em-outs arguing passionately about what we wanted in or out of the magazine. A real challenge and push toward clarifying our own thoughts and one hell of a way to get to know somebody else. The editors got to know one another all too well at times.

I recall reading Aristotle writing something like 'the end of education is an attunement of the mind and emotions and body toward the possibility of acting and reacting authentically.' So that our deepest conceptions of what is beautiful and true and just are not in hopeless conflict with one another and themselves and are indeed in harmony with whatever love and wisdom may be. A TALL ORDER. I do not have to look far for evidence of my failure in such aspirations be it as an editor or otherwise.

I often come across literary work that I honestly don't know how to read. I read it but I'm aware that I'm not reading it with anything like an informed perspective. But I meet people about whom I feel the same way. Don't understand where they're coming from or misread them. It happens with people why shouldn't it happen with poems?



Here are some poems (and an essay/letter) for consideration in Quarry. *Alice in Flatland* and *The Secret Life of Trees* have not been published at all. *Safe Cracking* appeared in a little enterprise out of Seattle called **Red Sky** done by some friends of mine where each person submitted 200 copies of a poem. So there were 200 copies of that magazine. Neither of the pieces called *The Meeting Place* have been published anywhere.

Keep up the good work, Steve. Glad to hear you're getting some poetry readings together. I've put some together here in a fairly volatile atmosphere. Some of them went off like a dream and some of them were just all right and one of them ended in a fight.

Unfortunately I was in it. We had an open mic at the end of the reading and one of the editors of **And Yet** didn't want an open mic in the first place but insisted that I keep the readers to 5 minutes if we did have one and I did and a drunken Irish poet fiercely objected when I kept him to the 5 and, well, it just went downhill from there. Mind you, this particular writer is someone I've had a long-standing disagreement with. The next morning three of my tires were slashed. Oh yes, poetry wars... but was it art? Lordy! I should have let the sententious son-of-a-bitch drone on some more, I think. You take a chance or two with an open mic. I like having an open mic. Five minutes was too short. I shouldn't have agreed to keep the readers to 5 minutes. Come to think of it, he was at your reading and at that party afterward. Did you meet the man from Ireland? Saints preserve me from drunken Irishmen from Limerick! That's the problem—instead of arguing about things that are important we tend to degenerate into drunken arguments of vanity and egos. Aristotle would snort, perhaps.

Warm regards,

Jim Andrews