

[draft of an unpublished poet]

still life

beneath a faint brush of dust
the gangly green thingliness
of philodendron tendrils
dangle
in familiar entanglements—

just as quietly
time accumulates in its gray quantities,
dull, desiccated, indifferent.

and the vital sleep of a vegetable self,
suspending the pulse of sentience
between nescience and consciousness,
slow slumbering,
says nothing in silences—
absorbing sopor,
blotting blotchwork—

and sleeping and waking are difficult to tell,
peeling from the logic of the mind,
the worded world
—rubbery burst skin of afterblister—
waking from sleeping,
upwards from down,
nonsense from unsense,

in unworded silence,
where all suspensions deliquesce,
beyond the troubles and the trembles
of the flesh

—or, what does it mean to think of such a thing?

“Bravo! What competent work! Richly ambiguous!”—said one of the more disreputable members of the crowd, to the dismay of those in his immediate vicinity.

“A lyric poem! Now there’s a genre! We don’t pay much attention to this stuff nowadays. In fact, one might say it’s the finest example of an anachronism in our contemporary world. You see, the lyric (speaking loosely (or strictly)) is structured around a state (or states) of ‘consciousness’ as articulated in the linguistic material of the poem—it’s a space open for perception and description, impression and expression, experience and memory—except that consciousness isn’t quite the right word for it, since nobody can agree on what that is, but we use it anyway, because it’s the nearest receptacle for such miscellany, and expediency is no mean virtue. The poem presents an immediate experience, paradoxically mediated through the word—in this janus face is the space of irony, or the space between truth and lie, or between the unknown and presumptuous error, or between stupidity and sheer delusion—it all amounts to the same thing. In short, it’s a delicate fabric. It’s our definite starting point, and the boundary (a priori) of all that we can know, since it encompasses the bounds of knowability—it’s our precondition and our absolute horizon, so there’s no purpose in arguing over how we feel about it. Yet. That is, we’re never any more outside of consciousness than we are outside of error—but this is straying from the point.

More to the point is that I’m even beginning to think that this unpublished poet here isn’t the worst of the lot. Why, those are some finely crafted poetic gestures for a critical eye to lavish its patience upon! If one were to have the time to invest in it, the will to do so, and nothing better to read within convenient reach—in short, if one could just kindle for a moment an adequate interest in poetic form and craft that likely was present at some moment in one’s life (even if only once during a sunset, or a summer abroad), wholly uncontaminated by either pretense or misunderstanding revealed in retrospect, but simultaneously repress all desire for any greater poets

and poems that one might prefer to read, or re-read, given time's limited allotment, then it might be worth looking at this lonely example of a poem and considering it for a moment, before putting it down, rubbing our eyes, moving on, and inevitably forgetting it. Afterall, some overeducated slob poured his brain's guts into this thing, and you'd hate to think such a vast mass of languages, literatures, histories, thinkeries, and other cultural detritus would be for naught, nil, and nothing. Even if it's only an accumulation of errors without consistent intention, a midden of meaning—still, what an impressive mound! Or, to put it perhaps more convincingly, if left unread the poem remains entirely in communion with the infinity of forgetfulness—in reading, our attention momentarily rescues it from that infinity, animating it and fleetingly rendering it a communicative, social act—we steal the work from the infinity of oblivion for a brief moment before it sinks down again with the elegance of prayer—that's our task."

(Pregnant with the significance of this announcement, a pause—)

In admiration of his improvised rhetoric, the speaker sniffled and gently dabbed his eye, feeling himself amply entitled to such a genuine act. At this, the crowd divided into two camps: one that found in his words a sincerely needed plea for spiritual qualities—in the alltoocrowded timespace of our modern counting, the infinite, so they intuited, had lost precious ground to recent quantifying advances, which, *pave* the improvements of those advances, sucked the quivering out of life (as one of them had put it), and left a cadaver called "use" in its wake (quoth another). Their attention piqued, they saw the speaker as no less than a guide in spiritual affairs, and in the metaphysical unity of their will they determined to follow him through all adversity, or at least to the limits of their reasonable patience.

Another group, however, was far less indulgent, and found the speaker's words too purple for proper prose. They demanded a point. What had the speaker, or the poet (they had already begun to confuse the two), to communicate? What was the writer's intention? What was the sentiment expressed? And in all seriousness, who could find the flabby belly of poetic opacity at all attractive when the lean build of clear prose stood alluringly by? (no answer)

Members of a fifth group organized over a common bond in seeing the speaker's words as a crass ploy to elicit sympathy from his audience (Ms. Tooclever had led their protest), a ploy as defective as it was apparent, and they were united in their self-congratulation at exposing and defusing such rhetorical legerdemain—their number quickly swelled. A subfaction thereupon emerged from this collective (which was never much more than a loose affiliation) on grounds of a family dispute (it is alleged), and aligned itself with those beginning to feel alienated from the third group, along with the failed leader of a coup among the second, a captain of martial prowess and poetic skill whom some had early on identified as the reincarnation of a dancing god of some book of lore, but who, upon having been chased into exile for reasons ineffable, with no other hope for refuge, ultimately decided to make allies at the expense of principle, to the chagrin and disillusionment of his most ardent acolytes.

Now the speaker, whom some had begun to identify as an infamous aesthete, renowned for numberless duplicities, and who, like all hermetic knowledge, preferred seclusion (adequate grounds for suspicion), on this exceptional instance prepared to proceed. Some in the crowd remained indulgent, and his explications (let's put this theory to work!) he unfolded thus—

“So this piece here we could think of in the following way. You see, it’s structured around a shift in consciousness of some sort—it arrives at a question, one as indeterminate as what “such a thing” might “mean”. Clearly the posing of this question suggests an attainment of a level of reflection, as it positions itself in relation to the reverie that constitutes the rest of the poem. But of course the question itself, stated in plain words, is entirely indeterminate—what is a “thing” exactly? How does it happen that something allows itself to be reflected upon, and that something allows itself to engage in the activity of reflecting? Our issues here are metaphysical and ontological, so whatever our approach we need to keep these two intertwined strands in mind, in order not to get tangled up. So it’s both hopelessly difficult to render in plainspeak, and is also the most easy and natural task—that’s the first thing. What thing? “Thing” suggests the initial “thingliness” of the dangling plant that hangs from the front of the poem in jangling lines, and further reflection raises the question of what it means to be thingly—in what sense a plant might be a thing?, or (as the poem proceeds) might consciousness (or sentience) be a thing?, or (as per its title) life a thing?, or what kind of different “things” do they become when rendered as images or concepts in a poetic work?, or whether sl(ee)ping and waking consciousnesses are things? or to what extent they’re constituted by things?, what kind of thi(ng) is the poem itself? a written text? (or)? the jux?taposition of the sleeping self with the plant self(?), or the smooth reveries of thought interrupted by an abrupt shift in consciousness to provide aesthetic balance?—are these things? It’s a “volta” (thank god we have a name for it!) —a structural hinge of a poem—but that doesn’t really tell you anything because it’s a structure of conscious((n)ess) too—a bending, or shifting of the self, that can posit itself as a thing in relation to itself—meta/consciousness, if you prefer, except it’s not so much “above” or “beyond,” as the etymology might suggest, but rather “in bent relation to.” Given self-consciousness, you’ll always find a volta. I’d like to think of such a thing, but the thought eludes

me—but that wasn't my point. As was the play, so is the poem the thing—and this thing will become that thing to say, in perfect symmetry, I am that I am—“

“Gesundheit!,” offered one in the crowd.

Recollecting himself the aesthete proceeded.

“In prompting reflection the poem becomes a thing in the true sense of this piece—something that unfolds from being thought about. The more it's understood the more it reveals its imbricated layers. Hear the third stanza echo with the consonance of “nescience,” “consciousness,” and “sentience,” sounding the shimmering glide of differing planes of awareness, knowing, feeling, and sensing—the sinuous folds of the self stretching out along sibilant syllables, suggestive of all such transitions. And in the fine line “troubles and trembles of the flesh” erotic and mortal connotations resonate in consonants' harmony—and the sleeping self (again) stands in structural balance to the plant imagery.”

Someone else nodded in kind accordance, another one in refined approval, and yet a third rounded out the sequence, the latter having sharply crooked her brow as if to affirm that while all theses are ultimately specious, this particular one wore such an adequate lacquer of integrity as to merit the expression of arched inquisition that she reserved for such occasions of indulgence. Approval met—thread of gratitude.

“This redeems life!” shouted another in stupefied revelation, prompting a neighbor to show concern for his health, and offer him water.

But not all in the crowd were so kindly inclined. Small voices chirruped from somewhere in the trees a caustic taunt—*You're ruin-ing it for us! You're ruin-ing it for us!*—they decried in tight unison.

“Yes, why thank you, but you know, as I was saying,” (the aesthete wiped his wet lips with his sleeve, suddenly feeling himself queezy [sic] about the bowels) “the more you think of such things the more fertile your mind becomes, cultivating an aesthetic sensitivity—and this right here is choice fertilizer. In addition, the facts:

‘Little is known about the poet, but it is rumored that he was not identical with himself, nor did he adhere to laws of denotation, poor slob. Most of his time spent writing was spent reading, and he found the best way to memorize things was to strive to forget them—he thereby acquired a great store of memory and one still greater of its loss. Were it not for his fraying at the edges (as well as the middle), he would have made quite a character. He smelled of armpits and garlic. His signature was always the same but different, and it is known he felt repulsion at all repetitive gestures, particularly those that harbored any existential import—either that, or some god shook him whenever occasion prompted him to signify his legal self. Ample receipts from grocery and liquor stores attest to all of this. Out of necessity or free will he wore secondhand clothes, and only through the certitude of the enforcement of law was it ensured that he would return to the same home each night (the neighbors had stories). Nonetheless, his aesthetic he acquired by hearsay, rumor, and slander, and that, combined with his innate gift for plagiarism, produced a style that is nearly the culmination of this age of democratic mediocrity (though the era itself has yet no inkling of this, and likely never will).

All of this, of course, rendered him broke, sorrowful, and full of regret, which, for this artist, was the optimal state of affairs, and always preferable to plump contentment, if deplorable nonetheless. He married twice for love, and either had affairs or didn't (sources conflict); eitherway, barren was his scepter which put forth no scion other than these poems, which much lamentably found no success in courting handsome publishers. Perhaps such disappointment made them raw, but while the compositions had always maintained their independence from his will, they had of late, secretly and amongst themselves, begun to question whether they weren't bastards. Their illegitimacy, they reasoned *sub rosa*, was the cause of their want of comeliness and the concomitant lack of love that had plagued them since birth. The unreliability of paternity being a perennial question of no small consequence, the bewarted compositions decided against their own authenticity, rejected their putative progenitor (to whom, in truth, they bore no resemblance), and with the eloquent muteness that only printed words can muster offered themselves like suitors (to use the kindest word) to other paternal claims, while remaining, for the time being, anonymous.

And yet he loved them in spite of their errancy, and took endless delight in their irregular crevices and their awkward growths—he prized their asymmetries, reveled in their malodors, and gently stroked their motley lumps (though one did have to admit that at times they were willfully obnoxious, to their own detriment, and that as a result they didn't always live up to their highest potential, nor did they conduct themselves with the dignity adequate to their inner merit—but still, they were very fine works for all that and undoubtedly worthy of a poet's pride—let everyone else think otherwise). Loved were his works with the uncommon warmth of a youthful dotage, or more likely, of some diagnosable malady, and loved in such

a way was this “plant pome” (as his notebook refers to it) that we have before us, a work which in comparison with its alleged brethren was of at least middling appeal, and generally less inclined to give offense. That the world had so callously spurned them all made them only more precious in his mind, and he could remember bearing and birthing each one—that they should reject him he could accept, as this was not uncommon in the natural order of things—but surely they would never plot his overthrow. unthinkable.’ ”

Murmurs of intentional fallacies and other phallic intentions flitted throughout the crowd. Of what credentials, credibles, and creeds accrued to the speaker’s name, inquiry was made.

“A master of arts and crafts, and years’ work as a wageslave—I hold a bachelor’s degree in solitude, and an associate’s in logic—my research focuses on multiplicity, with a concentration on distraction through an analysis of dissolution—and tomorrow,” he said with a nervous quaver in his voice that he attempted to correct with the staccato stutter of a throat-clearing, “I defend my thesis—and its antithesis.”

Some in the crowd gasped, as if a sacred animal had been defiled by accident.

“He’s holding a full dialectic, this one is,” thought another approvingly to himself, but tipped his hand through no outer sign of approbation, nor any other form of recognition.

But the mood in the room would have changed had it ever been the same. The ire of other onlookers arose and they began to hurl at the aesthete damning accusations, barbed with insults, imprecations, defamations, libels still to this day not fit to pr*nt, rotting vegetables, steaming

manure, and Trump campaign slogans—they made Sicilian gestures and quoted Polish grandmothers, accompanied by the souring strains of mockery and ridicule—“useless!” hollered one, “stop makin’ up this crap!” cried another—“speculative humanist!” jeered a third—“poorly executed” delivered the final blow.

“Oh, but there’s more—there’s infinitely more!” the insistent aesthete pleaded. “We haven’t elaborated on the poem’s vital dormancy, or traced the trajectory of its imagery, or addressed the tension between word and silence, a dynamic that inheres in all lyric poetry, but in this particul—”

“yes, we get it we get it,” emerged from the low hum of grumbling in the back, as the first shufflings of dispersion ensued.

“nor the—,” he awkwardly attempted to assume a mantic pose (or so some recalled), but his voice was already drowned out by the sounds of brusque departure. What great disappointment to see so promising a beginning devolve into such an exodus. Should darkness ever settle so quickly on the sky as it did on this piece, we would surely

take it as
a sign
of the
end—

*

And so the poet was left in this darkness alone—so dark it was he couldn’t tell his own poems from any others. No glow emanated from the pages of his scribbblings, not that he had really expected that to happen, because that would be a ridiculous thing to think, and only under some uncertain

influence did such a stupid phantasy ever flitter through his mind, and even then only to be immediately dismissed, or subsequently pathologized. But it may be the case that all knowledge comes about through negation, that all error contains truth, and that every rejection brings one closer to one's full realization—and thus was the cancelled artist sublated to learn next time not lead with the goddamn poem.

end