LETTER TO POETRY

followed by replies

TOM MANDEL

Geben dir meine Schriften nur Anlass, Dich mit einem hohlen Gespenst von Verstehen und Nichtverstehen herumzuschlagen, so lege sie noch beiseite.

— Friedrich Schlegel
(from a letter to Schleiermacher)

chax
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Postface: Poetry & Chance
Dear Poetry,

Having found your address early and by accident, I’ve been writing you most of my life. Yet until now I haven’t thanked you for your replies, perhaps because at first I was so surprised to receive them, perhaps because I still am.

I don’t fool myself that you’ve been impatient for my gratitude. Plenty of attention comes your way these days. You may find much of it burdensome, including this note. Still, I’m grateful: I can’t imagine what I’d have done all these years without you.

Common sense tells me to close this note here. But, I ask your indulgence instead, as I recount a conversation I had with our mutual friend Harry Mathews some years ago as we sat on his backyard patio drinking wine and chatting in the late afternoon sun of Key West. Harry handed me a newly-published book of his poems, remarking that to compose it, “I had to teach myself to write poetry all over again.”

I found these words puzzling & objected that, although better known for his novels, he’d been a poet the whole of his writing life. Yet, he replied, the poems he’d written over the last few decades had been Oulipian. It was the traditional craft of verse he’d needed to relearn to write this new volume.
I continued to object. But the sun descends quickly in those parts. Evening was soon upon us.

Though we never had occasion to return to the subject, Harry’s remark stayed with me. As I rehearsed his words in memory, however, two of them swapped places, & I seemed to hear him say, “I had to teach myself to write all poetry over again,” a notion which is either ridiculous or meaningless or both.

Yet, it was in this altered version that Harry’s words left their mark on me. Beginning a project some weeks later, I found myself writing a few poems which seemed determined to revisit (& in some measure to revise as well) distant days & ways from the history of poetry.

It goes without saying that I can’t saddle our friend with any responsibility for these odd works. I had no choice. The muse may be a fiction, but we obey her all the same.

Nor should you, or anyone, read these remarks as evincing any impatience with the term avant-garde, its shallow teleology, its metaphoric militarism, the air of self-praise that so often marks its use. In this era of an unopposed, pre-canonized & altogether automatic “(p)reproduction of the new,” such a label can only be viewed as parodic.
What Matter Does Doesn’t

On-off-on the sensor array
Touches palm to palm
While time looks away

There’s nothing new to see
No one’s left but we
Who dance here hand to hand

Must turn the other cheek
To cheek as face to face
We live from day to day
After Georges Perec

Depressing these utopias
They leave no room for chance

But sort all to an order
Difference won’t abide

No habitation in taxonomy
For miscellanies no grant

Nor with all else in position
May any old thing slink

Back to its usual any old place
There’s nowhere left to hide
Tom: Taxonomy is simple, transparent; it only shows itself to reward your attention.

Lyn: The epic is monumental; the saga is long, a testimony to powerlessness.

Tom: The older I get, I need to lean in close to read the writing on the wall.

Lyn: A gust is already blowing aside the curtain over the bed.

Tom: This is how I understand the phrase “the person who makes,” who arises in the identification, as a source of attraction, an occasion for desire, someone to love.

Lyn: The characters include “Vice President Boynton, who kicks chairs when he gets mad & hopes to do a swan dive into your conscience.”

Tom: Famously, after a symphonic work ends, the hall reverberates with silence. Then there is applause.

Lyn: & then she told her mother, “Mother, take him home & make him rest.”
Circular Labors

I wander happily
a world where others

travel too as a rising
breeze puts out the

blaze someone’s sure
to claim I ignited

when in pain I dropped
my candle, crying

“Why this repeated
impact of collections

& my forehead?” If
memory inquires what

collisions serve, I
hope you will agree?

Wearing my blindfold
I strolled my library’s
perimeter (to the soundtrack I’d chosen
Marvin Gaye’s tenor croon; I hope you
approve) when behind covert eyes
heat engulfing my step I hit the shelf
the walk taken to unwind my clocks
& time my dominion’s geometry, this
despite the advice of so many to wind
them instead (but none could tell me
how). Time’s arrow whatever might
Cubical Bird Call

Ready, flee, aim!
in each encounter
sorrow’s fraction

A sensual thing
on the brink of joy
speaks of obligation.

The mail arrives
in a cigar box
when a child &

Spring cause this
wonder: “life” as
“simple” advice.

Each letter says
“put me first,” for
whatever lives is

dead right before
any coming yesterday, while minutes
jar slightly in our captivity. The boss of spirit will fire

the boss of law in my jealous dream of desire. There’s

nothing in the still now but March mud while, unrequited

even entropy loses so tenderly does a lit match play back

cruelty recalled that the winner shifts remembered cruelty

a cunning moment when rare game comes a-running as

change rises. What is it to sit back down? Entropy
against a co-pay?
Gravity dances on
this path; they say

even Proust fell:
one time for a biker
once for a hitchhiker.