

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 be-
hind covert eyes

heat engulfing my
step I hit the shelf

the walk taken to
unwind my clocks

& time my domin-
ion'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 yester-
day, 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.