

Three Notions of Truth in Poetry

“The profoundest of all sensualities is the sense of truth.”

--D.H. Lawrence

1.

Truth, uncompromisingly told, will always have its ragged edges.

--Melville, *Billy Budd*

Truth, that wobbly absolute and cousin of the transcendent, has been defined, redefined, and fine-tuned by philosophers from Plato and St. Augustine through Nietzsche and Heidegger, the latter who returned to its notion from classical Greek antiquity: *aletheia*. The derivation of the word, *a* (out of) plus *Lethe* (the river of forgetfulness) begins to comment on the nature of art itself, which is a function of truth. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger tells us “the nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by denial.” Truth and remembering force being out of forgetfulness, and Heidegger argued that the nature of poetry is “the founding of truth,” one that occurs through concealing and revealing. In short, the process toward truth, as Melville suggests, is abstract, for while form provides a finished aspect to poetry, truth, veiled in content, provides a continual opening.

Perhaps it was Nietzsche’s metaphorical death of God, however, that has most impacted transcendental notions of truth, and how later, according to Derrida and Foucault, we must reinterpret all major western texts if the phrase “In the beginning was the word, and the word was God” is no longer valid. Modern and contemporary writers, as well as composers and painters, might find consonance and safety in a phrase from Melville: “Truth, uncompromisingly told, will always have its ragged edges.”

Although Melville’s salient remark from *Billy Budd* reveals his complex quarrel with God, it also stands as metaphor for what in art is often most indefinable and thus most alluring. It’s not what seems finished to the eye that haunts us, but what remains unfinished to the heart, for that is the inexhaustibility of content we sometimes refer to as paradox. Here’s the opening of Linda Gregg’s “Goethe’s Death Mask”:

The face is quite smooth
 everywhere except the eyes,
 which are bulges
 like ant hills someone tried to draw
 eyes on.

The speaker goes on to tell us that although “the mouth is shut / like a perfect sentence,” there is nothing that we can discern from the death mask about the trips to Italy. What remained unfinished were Goethe’s ecstatic trips to Italy, his room on the *corso*, his desire to become a painter, his ascent of Mt. Vesuvius, visits to Pompeii, Sicily, his search for the Urplanze, the prototype of all plants, and his sexual affairs. All of this too remains remain unfinished in the poem and the speaker suggests that the “smoothness” in the death mask represents the happiness in Goethe’s life. Gregg’s poem becomes striking through hiatus. None of the tragic details of Goethe’s life are mentioned—his stormy relationship with Charlotte Buff, the death of his son August. Instead, the poem ends by looking for what it may have missed: “The part / we do not notice.”

The language he made
 was from the bruises. What lasted
 are the eyes. Something ugly
 and eaten into. What a mess his eyes are. (Gregg 22)

What remains also are the eyes “like ant hills someone tried to draw / eyes on.” The synesthetic image, vibrant with unfinished movement, haunts us with its lack of smoothness, for we are told earlier, “If the happiness lasts, / it is the smoothness.” Satiation will become erosion, for erosion is the true map, and that is what Gregg exaggerates, otherwise her poem would be mere depiction. Goethe’s eyes that sensually devoured the world are now themselves devoured.

Here is Goethe's "Wanderer's Nightsong II" in the original and with my translation. The poet supposedly carved it on the wall of a wooden cabin near Mt. Kickelhahn.

Over every hill	Über allen Gipfeln	
it is quiet,	Ist Ruh,	
in all the trees	In allen Wipfeln	
you can hear	Spurest du	
hardly a breath;	Kaum einen Hauch;	
birds in the woods are silent.	Die Vögelin schweigen im Walde.	
Wait, soon	Warte nur, balde	
you, too, will rest.	Ruhest du auch.	(Goethe 50)

Perhaps one of the most startling poems on death, it takes us almost totally unawares, for that silence we bask in is a form of death itself. Well, that's the metaphorical side, but the literal sense is just as startling: when birds in the wood fall silent, it is most often because predators approach. The phrase "in all the trees / you can hear / hardly a breath" anticipates the reader's participation, his breath and demise, while "birds in the woods are silent" presents a dark, spirit-laden image, almost one of eyes looking out of the darkness." The silence is that ragged hole/whole moving toward us, or of which we are a part. The poem's hushed imperative, "Wait," turns, morphs into surprise: one whose literal pause anticipates the reader's own death.

The poet's eyes that witnessed springs in Italy also witnessed the death of his mistress and later wife, Christiane Vulpius. She bore him a son August, who died at the age of forty, two years before Goethe, also in Italy. "Mehr licht" (More light) were supposedly Goethe's last words on his deathbed "What a mess the eyes are."

The "ragged edges" of truth are always the most troubling since they are unresolvable to the heart and therefore the most compelling. We witness this continually in the works of Melville; what some term his "quarrel with God," but we also witness it in the work of many writers and artists because most notions of the divine, especially as they apply to mandates are irreconcilable

with human life. The quote from Matthew 5:37 illumines the difficulty: “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” Morally the suggestion is alluring, but realistically it is often impossible because human beings live in vast areas of doubt; they inhabit the endless hallways and thresholds of *if, maybe, and perhaps*, where decisions are blurred and people become lost. William Stafford’s “Traveling Through the Dark” begins *in medias res* and hauntingly orchestrates the conditional and subjunctive aspects of truth in respect to the recount of finding a dead deer, a pregnant doe, on a dangerous canyon road. Echoing the opening of Dante’s *Inferno*, Stafford’s poem begins, “Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.” The speaker, having stopped, then mentions that it is usually best to roll dead deer into the canyon in order to prevent further accidents. It is at this point, when the speaker examines the deer, that the moral dilemma opens:

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly. (Stafford 61)

Upon further examination the speaker finds that the deer’s side is warm, that “her fawn lay there waiting, / alive, still, never to be born.” It is the following line, the twelfth, where the worlds between yes and no, what to do or not to do, become endlessly and wonderfully protracted: “Beside that mountain road I hesitated.” The personification of the car in the following stanza humanizes the mechanical to such a degree that the speaker blushes publically, acknowledging both shame and necessity in his actions.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

One recalls Petrarch's lines "mortal beauty, acts, and words have put / all their burden on my soul." The poem ends with a final couplet that formally congeals the speaker's role with the deer while paradoxically denying the possibility of a third life, the fawn's.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving--,
Then pushed her over the edge into the river.

Conditional phrasing in the poem suggests uneasiness, possible regret, and sets the poem's brooding tone: "It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:/ that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead." — And Stafford's eerie use of detail, through the nouns "glow" "tail-light" "heap" and the verb "stumbled," creates an anxiety that anticipates and will later heighten, then question the speaker's decision. The phrase "a recent killing," an odd choice if the deer was struck by a car or truck, further clouds the event. Was the deer poached and then abandoned?

The discovery that the doe is pregnant occurs exactly midway through the poem and not only morally complicates the event but adds a formal irony to this drama that begins *in the middle*, for the doe waits to be born just as the speaker waits to act. What would occur if this were a human and not an animal life? Stafford's timing is impeccable: "Beside that mountain road I hesitated."

Stafford's personification occurs not a moment too soon in this tragic confrontation of machine, animal, and human world. As if to compensate for the morally untenable situation, the car aims "ahead its lowered parking lights." The subsequent depiction of the speaker "in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red" is one of brilliance, for the inner psychological trauma of deer and fawn has been externalized. The speaker wears it like a *red coat* as the "warm exhaust" turns red: doe and fawn bleed into the atmosphere, its moral weather. Human, animal, mechanical worlds irrevocably collide and the speaker admits: "around our group I could hear the wilderness listen." The paradox of the implied speaker's family along with the demise of doe and fawn becomes resonant far beyond the poem.

The truth, here, "uncompromisingly told," seems best articulated by the speaker's attempted steadfastness, just as truth, we like to believe, is steadfast: "I thought hard for us all—my only

swerving-- / Then pushed her over the edge into the river.” Swerving moves into swerving: What we question morally is finally all deduced to the natural world—the river whose constant change seems a truth only in that it mirrors ours.

2.

L'exactitude n'est pas la vérité. (Exactness is not truth.)

--Henri Matisse

If the greatest sources of art—truth, hope, love, joy, despair—are immeasurable, how can the art created from them be exact? I'm reminded of the seemingly various and often sexual, deific origins of art—Etruscan fertility sculptures, cave paintings at Lascaux—and also of a remark by Jasper Johns: “Sometimes I see it then paint it, sometimes I paint it then see it. Both are impure situations, and I prefer neither.”

Or perhaps those greater truths reside in the imagination, for they have not completely arrived yet, and like the light of stars, their distance is more alluring. The imagination, and its truth partially withheld, is what we don't forget because we must work to retrieve it. Perhaps the German writer Peter Handke summarizes it best: “Reason forgets, the imagination never.”

In John Ashbery's “These Lacustrine Cities,” the specific is generated from the abstract and general in such a way that a dream or nightmare might, as if to say that we are no longer a product of nature, but of our cities, an artifice we have constructed. We both control and are subjugated by these towers, these wildernesses of the artificial, municipalities that grew and evolved near lakes. And at times do they not wish to recede back into nature? At every turn the reader must participate, conceive—through the imagination of the poem—both joy and fate. The poem begins: “These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing / Into something forgetful, although angry with history.” One can sense the poem's arcing attempt to grasp history. Ashbery, in a rare

critical commentary available on PennSound#18, suggests that often an artist can say things more effectively in an obscure manner than directly. This of course has to do with implication. The notion that these cities “grew out of loathing” suggests that civilizations often move forward through war and forms of rebellion. Ashbery also comments in the interview that he had visited Zurich and was thinking not only of the lake there but of the ancient lake dwellers whose civilization had been recently discovered nearby. Ashbery’s poem continues its riff on these cities via history, culture and what seems the religious implication that evil is often a catalyst for progress.

They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance,
Though this is only one example.

They emerged until a tower
Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love. (Ashbery 9)

Nostalgic for the past, towers built partially through greed and capitalism arch back toward their origins and perhaps a more bucolic time, but metamorphose “into useless love.” The image recalls the nostalgia inherent in all progress and one thinks of a Babel-like structure bending back under its own weight to glimpse a kind of Arcadia? Is it through such movement that growing civilizations finally produce art which, as beautiful and urgent as it may seem, may be considered by some to be “useless”? —The light that is beautiful in paintings cannot physically heat a room the way real sunlight does. We are accomplices by these “lacustrine cities” that lean toward their sources only to glimpse their own demise. Ashbery’s poem reinforces Matisse’s notion that “exactness is not truth” and also suggests that myth can have more force than truth. Ashbery constructs the mythology of these lacustrine cities through wonderful ambiguities. They function in a way similar to Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. We can never picture them exactly but feel their imponderable presence.

In her poetic “Essay on What I Think About Most,” Anne Carson rightly suggests that “Metaphors teach the mind // to enjoy error / and to learn / from the juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case.” She implies that a good metaphor opposes almost exactly what the Chinese proverb says, “Brush cannot write two characters with the same stroke.” In Carson’s jarring prose poem “On Shelter,” the speaker admonishes a lover by suggesting a door that cannot be closed must be replaced. Love is a type of spiritual shelter for our bodies, one here that is made concrete. The speaker then beautifully conflates time (long) with brightness (glowing).

ON SHELTER

You can write on a wall with a fish heart, it’s
 because of the phosphorous. They eat it. There
 are shacks like that down along the river. I am
 writing this to be as wrong as possible to you.
 Replace the door when you leave, it says. Now
 you tell me how wrong that is, how long it
 glows. Tell me. (Carson 45)

Carson’s brush in fact paints two characters at the same time, and fascinatingly enough, the poem constructs a shelter out of uncertainty. The speaker writes “to be as wrong as possible” to both the lover and implied reader since a trust has been broken. “Replace the door when you leave, it says.” But how can such a door be replaced? How can love gesture again after such abandon? Writing on a wall with a “fish heart” seems an almost Paleolithic, pre-language gesture. It has the power of rupture, and yet we know that the phosphorous-glow, like love’s, will disappear. The phrase “how wrong that is, how long it glows” creates a hologram for what can never be substituted, or what can never replace emotion, though we continue to eat of its fruit in the past, to glow with its expiration.

In his “Critique of Judgment,” Immanuel Kant tells us that in nature, the beautiful” is connected with the form of the object, having definite boundaries.” He then informs us that the

sublime “is to be found in a formless object,” one in which “its boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.” Though it does not exhibit all the negative qualities of the sublime, Marvin Bell’s “To Dorothy” does begin “to violate purpose in respect to judgment” and clearly suggests how the amplitude and complexities of truth are primarily due to their inexactness. The poem begins, “You are not beautiful, exactly. / You are beautiful, inexactly. / You let a weed grow by the mulberry / and a mulberry by the house.” The final stanza of the poem begins with a maxim said by a child: “Things that are lost are all equal.”

But it isn’t true, if I lost you,
 the air wouldn’t move, nor the tree grow.
 Someone would pull the weed, my flower.
 The quiet wouldn’t be yours. If I lost you,
 I’d have to ask the grass to let me sleep. (Bell 52)

A child uttering an adult maxim seems to provide a naïve authority, but falsely, for in the speaker’s view the natural world cannot accommodate such loss: “the air wouldn’t move, nor the tree grow.” The phrase “weed, my flower” implies the subjectivity of love, a loss that will always be singularly personal. A miniature wasteland results, and the speaker would—upon such loss (like Orpheus, whose lament moved trees and rocks) — “have to ask the grass to let me sleep.” Boundaries are “beautifully” transgressed and, as we often find, the inexactitude of loss will measure the mind more exactly.

3.

“It’s not so much that I had lied, but that none of the truth remained to be told.”

--Ernest Hemingway

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro”

—As if history, its slow accumulation, were in fact exhausting a primal innocence that once existed. As if, more persuasively, beginning with Descartes (“I think, therefore I am”), the axis from a deity-based truth, to one subjective, ensured a narcissistic flight that would devour all

greater beliefs. And I can think of no better poem to bear its cumulative burden than “The Drunken Boat,” written by the precocious sixteen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud.

The narrator’s intoxicated ride is nothing less than a justified, adolescent’s rebellion against the Industrial Age’s spirit-destroying commerce. It is at once a flight from innocence (the violence and beauty witnessed within the poem) and it is also a vision of Rimbaud’s future life of exploration and dangerous trade in countries that include Ethiopia, Sudan, Cyprus, and Egypt.

As I was going down wild Rivers
 I lost guide of my deck hands.
 Yelping Indians had targeted and nailed
 Their naked bodies to colored stakes.

I cared little for any crew, whether those
 Of Flemish wheat or English cottons. (Translated Mark Irwin)

What is often so acute in Rimbaud’s poems is the notion of flight and movement. Not only did he often read and write poetry while walking long distances, thus moving through both physical and literary space at once, but the poet also longed for an absent elsewhere in the imagination, something that can be seen in many of the poems from *Illuminations*, such as “After the Flood.” This absent elsewhere transposes itself into physical exploration when Rimbaud ceases to write and becomes a merchant/trader in Aden and Harar. In other words, Rimbaud’s poetic silence and life in the later years might be seen becomes a kind of action-poetry where his earlier ideals of science are realized.

When the dreamed *coup* and opening of “The Drunken Boat” is finished and savage innocence partially restored, the narrator is free to begin his hopeless, Edenic quest, one that will end as most adolescent dreams do, cloaked in a depressive reality.

I ran like winter itself, dumb and aloof
 As any spacey kid into the furious (no stanza break)

Lashings of tides. Loosened peninsulas
 Never survived a more wild assault.

Visions will occur, and places unspool, one after the other in an intense and desperate witness that moves expansively from “Floridas” to “Leviathans” and “Glaciers” in a kind of cinematic sweep that is no place in particular yet all places at once. This is the poet’s movement through pregnant space in his attempt to reach an elsewhere.

I've pitched against magnificent Floridas
 Where flowers seem panther eyes with human
 Skin, where rainbows arc their bridle reins
 Beneath the sea's horizon toward greenish herds,

I've seen great swamps ferment, fish-traps
 Where a Leviathan rots among reeds!
 Torrents of water splice a calm so-close;
 The far-away cataract toward whirlpools!

Glaciers, silvered-suns, pearled waves, dusk-
 Charred skies! Brown gulfs issuing toward
 Impossible strands where giant serpents devoured
 By bedbugs drop from gnarled, stinking trees! (Translated Mark Irwin)

Rimbaud’s use of surrealism and the irrational is fascinating and Alain Borer in his excellent book, *Rimbaud in Abyssinia*, goes so far as to say “after failing to transform Reality through poetry, Rimbaud failed to see Reality” (Borer 196). Borer refers to Rimbaud’s failure to record many of the astounding events that occurred around him in Abyssinia. Rimbaud does transform reality in earlier poems like “Sleeper in the Valley” or “Seven-Year-Old Poets,” but in most of the *Illuminations* this does not occur. Often vision transforms the imagination. In “The Drunken Boat” the transformation of reality occurs primarily in the opening and the two penultimate stanzas. Yet it is the irrational that often distinguishes this poetry, and as Hugh Davies comments

on the work of the painter Francis Bacon, “The mystery lies in the irrationality by which you make appearance—if it is not irrational, you make illustration.”

As the surreal narrative charges forward, this narrator — a distant cousin to Huck Finn— will glimpse (after near wreckage of his bark) a surreal paradise lifted from the sea’s womb:

I would have liked to show children those sun-
Struck fish of the blue wave, fish of gold, singing
Fish. Flowers of sea-foam cradled me
And incomprehensible winds winged me at times.

Finally, the narrator, having matured through the vision that he will abandon for reality, realizes the weaknesses that he dream-shared with many adults.

But really, I’ve wept too much. Dawns
Rip the heart. Moons devour. In suns I expire.
Love’s butchery has left me drunken and
Blue. That I might shatter and become the sea!

Unique in western literature, the poem’s final two stanzas embrace in all humility not the success, but the risk and collapse of the artistic imagination, that of an adolescent whose search for sensation and liberation from the conventional world has led him on a miniature Odyssey, in which the child becomes adult and hero so that the temporal and eternal can be glimpsed and lost.

If I dream a water, it’s Europe’s, the black
Cold puddle where a child sadly squats
And releases into the twilight
A boat fragile as an insect’s wings.

Lazily draped in the sea's waves, I can
 No longer follow in the cotton boats' wake,
 Approach the swagger of flags and flame,
 Swim under the awful eyes of prison ships.

The imaginary quest (at times more real than life) collapses in the reality of a “Cold puddle,” a tonal shift from ecstasy to tragedy only rivaled by Keat’s “Cold pastoral.” For the artist, the narrator’s mask as boat, is stripped by reality: “Je est un autre” (I is someone else) as Rimbaud said in his famous letter to Izambard, suggesting that through suffering and a derangement of the senses the “I” becomes a subconscious “I” of the world, or as Rimbaud says in the same letter, it’s a mistake to say: “Je pense: on devrait dire: on me pense” (I think: one should say: one thinks me.) The artist cannot sustain the heroic imagination and the child cannot return to the convention and safety of childhood.

The toy boat fertilizes a puddle that becomes ocean and voyage conceived far from the parentage of Europe. I’m reminded of the intentional bathos and dark humor of a passage from Kafka’s diary: “One doesn’t learn how to be a sailor by playing in mud puddles, but too much play in mud puddles can render one unfit to be a sailor.” –Here, the paradox by which the artist lives.

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Talk of truth in poetry is liable to upset both philosophers and literary theorists. Literary theorists often feel that to ask whether a poem is "true" or not is seriously to miss its point – that poems are about much more than truth, that literature is not bounded by the question, "But is it true?" Philosophers are wary, on the other hand, of the notions of truth that poets are liable to come up with. One does not have to have done much philosophical thinking about language and concepts to find this notion of a primordial, immediate contact with the things of the world incoherent. Yet we do say, "that's true," or, "there's a deep truth to that," about lines in poetry; we praise certain poets for their honesty or insight; and we say we have learned from poems and poetic utterances.

Three Notions of Truth in Poetry. *American Poetry Review* 37, no. 4 (July/August, 2008): 47-50. Irwin examines the notion of truth in three poems: Gregg's "Goethe Death Mask," William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark," and John Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities." Kevorkian, Karen. Review of *In the Middle Distance*. *Virginia Quarterly Review* 82/83 (Summer, 2006): 272. Looks at Gregg's style and content, noting how the poet's work has evolved while maintaining a distinctive style. Mlinko, Angie. Reviews of *All of It Singing*, by Linda Gregg, and *Sources*, by Devin Johnston. *Poetry* 193, no. Poetry or truth? Many would say they're the same thing. *Weird, Gay, and Misunderstood*. A senseless battle with himself. Elsewhere, a critic notes that three of Bertolt Brecht's first four plays [!] portray sexual relationships between men, especially *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923) and *Edward II* (1924). Absurdist plays painted an image of man's loneliness and inability to make contact at the same time that gay artists were depicting their struggles with their sexuality and society.