

Afterword

A Local Habitation and a Name: The Specifics of Place

“Poetry is a very large country,” as William Packard says, and we have no intention of confining writers to one province or another. But many poets today are forgetting lessons from poets of the past to give to airy nothingness “a local habitation and a name.” In our time, with such political pressures to ignore the natural world and let governments or corporations decide what’s healthiest for undeveloped areas and our downtowns and even local neighborhoods, we poets in the Northwest need to be paying attention and focusing our readers’ attention on the real, specific physical world immediately around us.

The first task is to incorporate in our poems more accurate and specific names of plants, animals, soils, climates, and other elements of the physical reality surrounding us. Poetry of the past has seldom shied from naming the natural as well as the “built” world: Shakespeare is a compendium of wildflowers and keenly observed and accurately named weathers and terrains and trees (Lear on the heath, for instance). Poets should delight in making poems with everything available to the poet, acknowledging the truth of Louis Simpson’s statement on “American Poetry”: “Whatever it is, it must have / A stomach that can digest / Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems. / Like the shark, it contains a shoe.”

A poem’s abstractions, philosophy, and generalizations become real through a vivid evocation of the natural world: The poem’s ideas are made substantial, and our subsequent experiencing of the natural world becomes tinged with the poem’s ideas. Poetry without sensory images is purely a mental

exercise; poetry without specifically named sensory images from the natural world tends to be generic.

The natural world, of course, is everywhere, in the deepest urban centers as much as in the most remote mountains. The leaping of electrons along the circuits of a computer are as much a part of the natural world as the exhaled breath of a CEO over a walnut conference table. "The natural world is the old river that runs through everything," as Mary Oliver says.

The populace of industrialized nations spend more and more time in front of computer screens and video screens with our backs to the real world of first-hand, immediate, physical experience. Poetry, as with literature in general, has always embodied what its producing culture considers important. When we turn our backs on the air, earth, water, plants, and animals which sustain us, we're in trouble. Without care and respect for the natural world, we may find it strangely altered and not for the better when we realize it is not functioning as it should. The past decade's dramatically higher temperatures here and worldwide should hint to us that increased logging of Northwest forests and stepped-up drilling for oil are not the best steps for the natural world.

Three thousand years of Western poetry have depended upon a familiarity with the workings of the natural world for its meaning and effect, from Homer's "wine-dark sea," Jesus's "grain of mustard seed," and Shakespeare's "lark at break of day arising" through Dylan Thomas's "force that through the green fuse drives the flower" and William Stafford's doe on the edge of the Wilson River road. What we now too often have in place of the references to the natural world—which never go out of style—are references to popular

culture. The lesson of specificity and particulars is applied to ever more transitory and commercial items.

Of course there's nothing intrinsically wrong about references to popular culture in a poem. Poetry always speaks primarily to the people of the time and place producing it, who would be likely to recognize and instantly make meaning out of the references. Yet when a poem depends upon such ephemera for its metaphors and core meanings to the exclusion of the permanent natural world, poetry is the poorer for it. It's quickly dated and often meaningless to those who are watching a different channel or who have developed different tastes or who have grown up on a different kind of street. Everyone breathes, though; everyone lives under the same stars, with the same sun and moon, and everyone can observe a stream bouncing or boulders and slithering through algae, as streams have done for millennia.

Poetry always involves the mind and the emotions, but it's the concrete, specific, physical world in some particular locale that leads us to the emotions and thought. Mary Oliver succinctly explains the relationship of specific particular to generalized thought in discussing some contemporary poems:

The finest of these poems brim from the particular, the regional, the personal, and become—as all successful poems must—“parables” that say something finally about our own lives, as well as the lives of their authors. . . . [T]hey slip from the instance and become the exemplum of the general; they glow with unmistakable universal meaning.

Without clues to the particular, regional places in which the action of a poem occurs, a poem implies that its action could take place anywhere the reader

cares to imagine. It's as though we live our lives against a generic backdrop, as if the emotions we feel in a downtown highrise are exactly those we would feel in a cabin on a cliff overlooking a pounding ocean surf or a cubicle in a sprawling industrial campus in Hillsboro. Places become interchangeable and standardized. Perhaps Ronald Reagan best illustrated this viewpoint with his comment that "If you've seen one redwood, you've seen them all." Only an isolated object is seen; what's missing is everything around it, which constitutes its "place": in this instance, what's missing is the redwood tree's connectedness to the hillside terrain, the soils it's rooted in, the Northern Californian climate, the slant of light through the canopy formed by the trees around it, and the small towns up and down the nearest highway. The poet's task is to see it all and to see the connections: to be true to reality.

In the last issue of *Windfall* (Spring 2003) we spoke of contemporary applications of Northwest ethnopoetic form in which the middle stanza serves as the climatic or central moment of the poem, while an equal number of other stanzas build up to and away from the middle in parallel or "envelope" fashion. We noted countless variations of syntactical and thematic symmetry beyond the "envelope" structure.

In a conversation we had this summer with Dell Hymes, Hymes cited a different kind of parallel structure in *The Sun, Her Myth*, a Shoalwater-Chinook myth which he has translated as *The Sun's Myth*. The myth concerns a man who sets out to find the sun. The first half of the myth tells of his journey and his discovery of great material wealth in the house of the sun. The woman there offers him all of this wealth, and as in many such stories of a man's search for

new material culture or power, he has achieved his quest and has only to return home to bring benefit to the people.

However, in the middle of this myth a second story takes over, in which the man is not satisfied with any of the material goods offered, but desires the only possession that the woman is reluctant to part with, characterized as a “blanket,” that “thing shining all over.” Eventually the woman out of her love for him hands over the object of his desire, and he returns to the people. The supreme gift of the sun, appropriate in its place in the sky but not on earth, is beyond his control and, in five crushing blows, destroys the people. In the end, the man is left entirely alone, the most grievous condition imaginable in many indigenous cultures, but in terms of the restoration of balance, solitude represents an appropriate outcome for his hubris.

Structurally speaking, the myth builds up to and away from a middle that doesn't really exist as a particular stanza or line. However, the parallel antithetical development between the first and second stories maintains a satisfying symmetrical relation between the two halves. The possibilities of this structure in a contemporary poetry of place are quite numerous. One that comes quickly to mind is poems which account for the way a place was then and the way the place is now.

In the last two hundred years (since Lewis & Clark), even within the lives of the younger readers of these words, the landscape of places in the Pacific Northwest has been vastly transformed. Given the relatively brief American history of the Pacific Northwest, the marks of this transformation remain more evident than elsewhere in “built” America. What do we, the poets who come after, have to say about this in terms of our own experience? Can we redeem the

past for our readers and ourselves in ways that provide sustenance for the future? Only in such ways can poetry find a place in the present in which it matters to readers as much as poetry has mattered in the celebrated Shakespearean past, or even the more recent Wordsworthian past. Perhaps we need a new realistic romanticism, in which the human relation to nature is once again called to account, as well as exalted. Poetry, in short, must engage a “local habitation and a name.”

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