

Augustus Young Poetry and Prose a regular webzine

No.4 November 2006 All Anybody Could Want - Within Reason



Illustration 'The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp' by Rembrandt van Ryn

(see Art)

Mauritshaus, The Hague

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[New Poems](#)[New Prose](#)[Art](#)[Wine](#)[Doubt](#)[Politics](#)[More Welsh](#)[Info and Links](#)**A STORY REWRITTEN**

A man of peace, who supported a recent war through silence until shortly before his son was killed in the fighting, shared with the world a wish he once had - to lie (by omission) to his son on the existence of a speaking world other than his own, so the boy from birth would believe only the language that he gave him.

The father lied.
 And the son lies
 dead. And what's said
 can't be unsaid,
 or what's unsaid
 cannot be said,
 anymore than
 a father can
 speak for a child.
 Gulled and beguiled.
 the guileless son's
 undoing's done.
 'It was different
 for my godsent',
 said Abraham,
 throating the lamb.

I know not peace.
 I know no peace.

'You came of age
 in a language
 that's not my own.
 Out of me grown,
 my first born son,
 crew-cut Samson
 learning to kill.
 Blinded, self-will
 finds you your death,
 suicidally met
 taking enemies
 with you. Last cries
 that do not spare
 a mother's despair.'
 'Father, I knew
 not what to do.'

I know not peace.
 I know no peace.

'The God who held
 my hand's myself.
 I am who am.
 And you, my lamb,
 are no longer.
 I am stronger,
 but at the price
 of sacrifice -
 yours. I'm now clear
 in mind, don't fear
 myself any more,

and can deplore
 what, when you were
 mine, I wasn't sure.'
 'On me, Isaac,
 you turned your back.'

I know no peace.
 I know no peace.

FOR MARITA AT THREE IN THE MORNING
 'A poem is no place for an idea.'
 Edgar Watson Howe

Probably too late to respond to your Howe quote.
 Still I send it to you on the offchance, a remote
 hope, you check late night from an idling poet,
 whose thinking too much to sleep (you can't do both).
 Edgar Watson Howe's a great name, but who's he?
 'The Sage of Potato Hill' means nothing to me.

I'm less metaphysical than an Augustan
 as a rhymer, so cogito ergo sum
 comes second in my creative lottery drum.
 But I don't think ideas can be left out of poetry,
 anymore than sane poets can do without an 'e'
 (QuinPec and OuLiPo are not my cup of tea).

It's not that thoughts haven't better places to go.
 But slumming in poems all philosophers know
 is a vacation. Out of place when bringing in the dough.
 Although a poem has no place in an idea, who'd dispute
 that the thoughtlessness of nonsense verse intuits
 a big idea sometimes? Somewhere between lies the truth.

PIPE SONG IN DEATH VALLEY

Down in the gorge it's heavy on the blood.
 One plods breathless. Where are the Indians?
 But the air is lightly feathered by the bell
 of a running stream, ringing silver change.
 I'm suspicious of a man who doesn't sweat.

The pines withhold their freshness. Airlessness
 makes them selfish, shedding what they don't want.
 Fires being forbidden, hobos lighting up
 are shot dead by self-appointed vigilantes.
 A steam train crossed the valley in the old days.

I've a countering wish for the comfort
 of smoke signals in the distance. My tribe.
 What's needed is a dry stick. I strike myself.
 My head is phosphorescent. I climb down
 the rock face to put my feet in water,

restoring the peace with the quietest of pipes.

IN MEMORY OF MY NEIGHBOUR M. JACKY

1
 You know all about the sea.
 When it is safe to go out,

or not, as the case may be.

Not as a sailor. I doubt
you ever were on water
other than the drinking kind.

How dryly you speak your mind
in sips and listen to mine.
My slips are patiently heard.

There is talk of a daughter
you visit from time to time.
Otherwise, you're a lone bird.

Ancient railway man, the line
stopped here for you, a slow grind
to the buffer. Defunct stock

creaks to a halt. You were not
on the last train. A whistle
in the night. It's running still.

2

It was said you ran on smoke,
like the man in 'Twice Told Tales'.
Though, ran's an exaggeration.

You were a stoker who'd choke
on a fag, then light another one,
and move along at snail's

pace coughing. Puce complexion
trumps the heart over a stroke.
But it was both. The stray cat,

who doesn't like to be touched,
finding you dead in your flat,
licked you to the next station,

where you were in quarantine
three weeks, having been adjudged
a migrant without a fare.

Now you are back on a line
that the grass has grown over.
And you are going nowhere.

SONIC DISTURBANCE

Old people
of a certain generation
remember a time when noise
was optional. You made your own.
And if nature intervened
you sent it back.

Man-made
noise was a choice
between Grand Opera
and war. Or you gave it
the silent treatment.

.
Now it's all
ghetto blasters, goofer boys,
and air displays with crash landings.
Even domestic fights are louder.
Children scream for no reason.
Despite soundproofing, no room is safe.
There is always the sound from within.

Where I live sleep's a thing of the past.
All summer the windows are open.
Every noise under the sun comes in.
In winter I must cut off the light,
pulling shutters down on the starlings
that drown out the traffic.

The only
quiet moment is when there are fireworks.
The music stops and the light go out.
Birds and people are stunned into silence.
I enjoy some old time peace and quiet,
till the rockets shoot up and all hell
breaks lose. The Chinese are coming.

STOCKHOLM OCTOBER 2006

I'd prefer to be elsewhere
but fate tells me to be there.
The cynosure of all eyes,
having won the Nobel Prize
for Peace to stop my war on
other writers I find boring.

WINE FROM TWO GLASSES

Translated from Paul Celan, 'Ich trink wein aus zwei glasern'

I drink wine from two glasses,
reworking words
like that mad one
with his fragments
of Pindar.

God's tuning fork
is true
for the least worthy.

His tombola
gives me a choice.

VALENTINE

'I love you',
said the balloon.
And it burst.

MUSE

In Memoriam André Frénaud, 1993

Speaking of cats, the charms
they have spelt out with purrs,
so their comfort is ours,

our aplomb.
And what harms
they've quelled in us, what ease
they've put us at. Creatures
of philosophy (furs
keep the cold out and please
us).
Cum grano salis,
they lick the health from hair
(what vitamins they wear?).
The sole absolute is
experience. And you,
a poet with a corpus
behind you, before us
stroke the cat till it mews.

The VISITOR
After Josef Holan

She was dressed in white fatigues
like a waning moon that's paling
the world into black and white.
On her face a silhouette
of a tree shaking in the wind.

She sat with her back to me
on a stone bench, and chattered
in monotone on matters
unknown to my world, as though
nothing could be more natural.

Her presence was uncertain
like a snowdrop in autumn,
or an artificial flower
that has been rained on. The blush
of emotion had long been drained.

She wraps herself in paper
made from the bones of strangers.
When she turns around to me
her face is without features.
Her eye is on something else.

[New Poems](#)**THE CAKEWALK**[New Prose](#)

From 'The Sweet and Sour Chronicle'

[Art](#)

Officers of the Austro-Hungarian army would not be seen dead in the streets of Vienna carrying anything other than a ceremonial sword. It is said the decline and fall of the Empire began when it became acceptable on Sundays to dangle a cake box from a string attached to the little finger.

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I don't like to carry shopping myself. It takes the swing out of the stride, unless you balance the bags perfectly and widen your gait. But that is like being a catamaran on dry land. If the tramontane is in your face, you can find yourself walking backwards like Zbigniew Cybulski, the Polish James Dean, who ended up under a train. In crosswinds your trajectory risks running into other coasters. And with the wind behind you, you have to trot along to keep up with yourself.

Every day when I get my cake from Le Gourmand I saunter down by the water. Madame Gras does not tie it up with string. She simply bags the cake on a cardboard seat. You can nest it in your palm, reciting:

Calme, calme, reste, calme,
connais le poids d'une palme
portant sa profusion.

(Stay cool, and hold tight.) The other hand is free to run your fingers through your hair.

Today on the quay Ari Hantke, the Austrian film animator (who twirls a gai contrebasse at jeudi jazz night at the Bistrot de France), points me out to his companions, stroking his Gunter Grass moustache and thumbing the ground. I wonder if he is warning me I'm about to step on a dog crotte; or announcing an impending decline and fall of Bras de Vendres (the last one was sixty years ago, before Ari was born. The Germans bombed the port); or seeing me as a quotation from the end of 'Une Partie de Campagne' (1944):

'Anatol scratches his unruly white mop of hair. Dramatic burst of music. Pan to close-up of Henriette with tears in her eyes.'

Or maybe he's running a book on my cake of the day, speculating if it is 'Bateau Ivre', Gilbert's very newest creation, inspired by Rimbaud's:

Plus fortes que l'alcool,
plus vastes que vos lyres,
fermentent les rousseurs amères de l'amour.

(Red and blue mousse in a tub of absinthe.)

Madame doesn't think much of it. She suggested in her best English that I try 'La Lune Blanche' from Verlaine's 'paled with the silhouette of a willow, which weeps in the wind' (a floating island of meringue in custard). Not wanting to take sides I settle for 'Le Force Noir' (cream in a black hole).

Ari won't know all this. But I don't like that twinkle in his eye.

CYCLING THROUGH THE DOCKS

From 'Chronicling Myself'

Cycling through the docks, I lost Walmsley's 'Practical Anatomy'. It was only when I got home I realised it had fallen off the back of the bike. Its author had been Professor Mach's mentor in Leeds. Walmsley was a slim volume compared to 'Gray's Anatomy' because it had no illustrations. The parts of the body were described in words that, like poetry, were easy to remember. As it was out of print and there were only eight copies in the department, you could only have it for a month to learn the course of blood vessels and nerves. The lingual nerve takes a swerve around the hyoglossus...

My advertisement in 'The Evening Echo' was answered.

I made the almost perpendicular climb up Patrick's Hill, 'finders, keepers, losers, weepers' pounding in my head. I always lose my way when nervous. It's a diversion I could do without, but I got to Barretts Building in the end. A ruddy-faced man opened the door. 'Anthony Stuttock.' He held the dilapidated Walmsley to his chest like 'The Sacred Heart' hanging on the wall. Antony Stuttock, a stevedore waiting for the next ship, had been puzzling over the chapter on the blood circulation. I updated him on the latest news from Harvey.

He said, 'I know all that. I was trying to cop how it would be if it was the other way round'.

I did a sketch for him. 'That's how it is. It's always left to right.'

'No', he said and took me to a mirror. 'Now that's her', and demonstrated with some carnivalesque chest thumping why, when the wife was worked up, she turned blue and him red.

Descending to Patrick Street, gripping my brakes for dear life, I felt depressed. My Saint Anthony had refused the reward ('Students, all balls and no money'). It was as though I had left part of Walmsley behind with him. But by the time I reached Ballintemple I was at home with the idea. He was, in lieu of the reward, laying his claim on what was, after all, a communal book.

THE EIGHTH VIRTUE

From 'The Trivia Chronicle'

My mother thought a capacity to change your mind was the 'eighth virtue'. 'If more people changed their minds the world would be a better place.' I think of Mrs Thatcher's resolute 'no, no, no' in rejecting power-sharing in Northern Ireland, and jackpot winners on television and tellers in the stock exchange hollering 'yes, yes, yes'. My mother was right. The twentieth century might have been happier if only Hitler had said, 'I know I have strong views on the Jewish race but whenever I meet one in person they are really very nice'.

I forget about Stalin and a few others who should have changed their minds. But if Pol Pot, for example, had changed his, would all those skulls have grown hair, eyes and chins and talked to one another as though nothing had happened? Or what difference did Dr Spock's mind-change make? His regret for the bad manners and decline in spiritual values, engendered by the conditioning of mothers and babies to respect one another, came too late and the generation he produced in the West was no better than the previous one, only more self-conscious, given to acting 'in good faith' and saying 'I have your best interest at heart'.

'I have just come round to your view.' The tyrant stretches out his hand.

'That's a pity. We have changed our minds', say the people.

'Well, then, I must kill you all.'

So the mind is set and you can hear it ticking. You have been warned. It could go off any minute. 'The only thing you can do with a fixed idea', says Kierkegaard, 'is stamp on it.'

I'm not so sure my mother's idea was big or small, but I wouldn't want to doubt its importance without employing a Danish existentialist with a bad leg and poor motor control to detonate the landmines that lurk on the ground in Iraq or where ever I must find my feet.

HITS, KISSES AND MISSES

He said, my mother was a hit and kisser. She lost patience with me and hit me. Then felt sorry and smothered me in kisses. I could never see the point. She hurt me, and hurt herself in hurting me, and hurt me again with the kisses. I ran away. And that hurt her. And that hurt me. So it all began again.

He said, my wife was a kiss and hitter. After kissing her she always hit me. At least her feelings were clear. She didn't like my kisses and wanted me out of her life. I was going to hit her back when I thought of my mother. At least one of us was not hurt.

He said, now I'm happy to settle for a hit and misser. When she hits out the point is not missed, but I am. She is thinking of my wife and mother. She misses me and nobody is hurt. So it's all kisses. I think my mistress and me hit it off.

SMOKING GUNS IN SWEDEN

In a city where the sea meets the lake, the wind off the water makes it hard to light up. Now I'm puffing, I'm damned if I'm going to stop. Sweden, model of green air, whitewashed fields with red wooden saunas. The cross-country train is me.

Taxi-drivers in Stockholm talk of smokers. They are very welcome as long as they don't stay. No crime here to speak of, except in the red and yellow district for fast food. See through the windows genuine fatties. Water is the official language. After every conversation wash your mouth.

Leonard, there are no belly dancers in Stockholm. But you can see Finland in the eyes of the drunks on the subway. That must be a Polish poet with the big blondes massaging his ego. Toilet training is a public sport in the outskirts. Toddlers all wear Day-Glo tracksuits. The chamber pots are smoking.

The new Prime Minister smiles outside the Parliament. 'My people are open sandwiches. You know what you're getting.' The little dark folk do the dirty work, and even the toilet bowls look as though they are never used. Still, can we afford all this now the price of matches is falling? Everything is all right for the moment. The field of corn in 'Elvira Madigan' (1967) hides an assassin, playing 'Je ne regreta Garbo' on a paper comb.

LIT AND MISS AND POSTERITY

His first book was well worked and people liked it. The second showed talent and so there were doubts. His final work could not find a literary agent, let alone a publisher. He knew it must be good.

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THE LESSON ACCORDING TO DR TULP

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From 'The Pain and Gain Chronicle'

[Art](#)

In the eighteenth century, George Stubbs painted from death (horse carcasses in his attic) to bring Whistlejack alive (the best dead horse in art history). Anyone who has performed human dissection will realise how beautiful even an old pauper's unclaimed remains are when subject to the skilled unpeeling of the veins, arteries, nerves and the vital organs.

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Dissecting-room assembly paintings came into their own once deathbed scenes declined. Death at one remove, secular disparitions.

Rembrandt's seventeenth century 'Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp' was their onlie begetter. The expression on the faces of the doctor and his students is humanity's homage to the body. The soul may have departed but the body still mattered. Dissection in Protestant countries was made more acceptable in reaction to Cartesianism. Permission was given if it wasn't art for art's sake. Getting under the skin had to be for healthy reasons. Yes, and no. The lesson was made a public occasion. You paid to attend and anyone could come (philosophers and artists if they had the money). The event had the hush of a séance, spiritual as well as corporal. The emphasis was humanist, solidarity with the dead through admiring the beauty that remains can reveal.

Admiring choice cuts? A century before, the first Humanist, Montaigne (à mon avis), saw necrophilia benignly in his essay on Cannibalism (an extreme form of it), in contrast to burning people alive. Though he wasn't encouraging Hannibal Lectors to have old friends for dinner ('The Silence of the Lambs', 1990), only seeing more virtue in Brazilian savages than in the Spanish Inquisition.

Descartes lived in Amsterdam during Rembrandt's time. Twenty years spent writing his books in an environment where his ideas about the sun's centrality in the universe would not turn an eye. Fear of distraction led him there. And once his work was done he rather ignominiously turned his back on Copernicus and died in the dark embrace of the Church. Fear of damnation was stronger than standing by the truth.

Rembrandt would have heard the gossip around Descartes's latest ideas (my friend BR shares my hunch and offers some others). Snotty Belgians said that separating the soul from the body wouldn't have bothered Dutch Protestants because there you could be a ruthless bastard all the week in business and, on the Sabbath, lead the hymns and teach Sunday school. But it was simpler and less crude than that. Metaphysical questions centering on duality were irrelevant when you had to keep body and soul together to better yourself.

The Cartesian divide suited post-Reformation Catholicism. Vatican diplomacy was meeting Protestantism halfway. It is no accident that Church teaching on dualism reached its apogee in Victorian times when hypocrisy reigned supreme (it persisted in many countries well into the late twentieth century. I grew up with it). Apart from creating sexual confusion in matters of faith and morals, it reduced the vessel of the soul to an empty shell after death. The corpse was respected more as a memory than as a revered presence in itself.

Nowadays the Cartesian divide is no longer seriously entertained by

anyone. Not just scientists. Western thought, by and large, has returned to its Greek roots, where body and soul were inseparable. The soul was seen as the animating spirit of the body. Philosophy was its catalyst. The animation for Plato was an aspect of bodily development, after physical training, a skill to be honed through its exercise. He often referred to it in terms of human love (to catch the sexual emphasis you have to watch which translation you read. My friend AW recommends Allan Bloom's rather than the old Ox-Bridge Edwardian brigade, who had never quite recovered from Victoria's passing) and its dark side death. While Aristotle defined body and soul in dialectical terms. They were the two sides of the seesaw of life. The whistle blew and the game started. Up and down, body and soul. In life they achieved equilibrium each time they reached the fulcrum. In death the two were at rest together. The emblematic text was Homer's 'Iliad'. And the game was war. A sport that now seems to have taken over the world. Football by other means.

Rembrandt van Ryn was less a single-minded Protestant than two Greek gods rolled into one. Dionysus sobered into a well-organised Apollo. Idris Parry's two-for-the-price made him a humane man, capable of creating immortal masterpieces. His twin parts had more than Zeus as a father in common. Van Ryn's two guises reciprocate one another.

His childhood appears ordinary. But myths arise from a need to explain how, out of nothing exceptional, the extraordinary springs. Young van Ryn, twinned as Apollo, the shining light, and therefore the god of shade, and Dionysus, eternally on summer holiday, instructed by nymphs in the ways of the spirit world, and strange loners like Silesius who taught him agricultural skills. The boy with two lives grew up, leading Amsterdam a merry dance. Apollo, the leader of the Muse's band, a bow and arrow his baton. Dionysus, who knew the secret of the vines, and had snakes at his fingertips. Neither incarnation was a pushover when getting their own way. Apollo would say, 'A plague on your house' and the cat would die in mysterious circumstances. Dionysus just had to click his fingers and women (his maenads) and perverts (his satyrs) did his dirty work.

One and the same in different ways, their paths led to trees. But not before many adventures. Apollo became a dab hand at gouging Cyclops with whom he didn't see eye to eye. Dionysus, captured by pirates, turned oars into serpents, sprouted ivy on the masts, and so his captors jumped overboard and became dolphins. The two-in-one were given to chasing virgins. Van Ryn as Apollo caught up with them by stilling them into wind-compliant laurels, and as Dionysus made his gang work (sacrificing animals and cultivating arbours) to impress reluctant debutants and draw them into his cave. He married one of them, Ariadne, the purest and most abused of them (her father murdered her mother) and bore him many vintage children.

Apollo and/or Dionysus liked to dress up, often as one another, easy enough for soul twins. A paintbrush made from a laurel bough and animal hair gave them a mortal living (having a family to support). There is no confusion between them with a brush in hand, wearing a painter's smock and cap. It was a good living too, joint work under a single brand name, Rembrandt, an all too human Protestant artist. The divine reveler in him created a theatre around his sitters, idle bystanders picked up in the streets, costuming them to his heart's and mind's content, and the god of chiaroscuro organised the fancy ball into tableaux vivants so they could be painted on to large square canvases which sold well.

Rembrandt was the last of the Great Masters, representing humanism in

art as never before or since. After him art struggled to realise itself. Any genre he took up has been done and dusted. A painter either became Rembrandt's copyist, imitating his images and likenesses, or disappeared into a sub-world of retro-didacticism, neo-mannerism, abstract expressionism, cartoons, greeting cards, holy pictures, pop-up books and what ever the market found would make money. Korda's biopic of him is the nearest anyone has got to representing him, as he did, through the gauze of fancy dress or old men posing as Saint Paul. As Rembrandt, Charles Laughton had, indeed, a discriminating palate. He spoke words like the Master painted clothes. Korda saw that in Rembrandt's work, life and death were given equal billing, and his film takes the hint. But no print could possibly compete with the finished canvases in which Dionysus danced and Apollo accompanied him on a paper comb.

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With thanks to John Pohlmann, who gave me his permission to use his emails to me on this subject

[Art](#)[Wine](#)

From: Augustus
To: John at Beach Island Wine Club, CA

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You'll be aware of Robert Parker, the taster supreme. He has been causing havoc down these parts. A quarter of the wine in the world comes from here. But since the locals moved on to beer and spirits, the need to export is pressing. Unless the vintage is given a Parker ninety, it will be a matter of 'have wine won't travel'. I can see the Côte Vermeille run red with wine-dumping and the vineyards having to be turned into almond groves.

The impending visit has been anticipated by Michael Rolland, another American who advises on how to gain Parker points. He made it clear it would take several years to produce a Parker-friendly cru. So the growers are drinking their own and expecting the worst. They have seen what has happened to Bordeaux.

What do you think of the international wine-taster mafia? I'm not sure I have the right address as I am a bit pissed myself.

From: John
To: Augustus

Robert Parker is to wine what Lance Armstrong is to cycling, only more so. He will continue to win the wine producers' Tour de France indefinitely. I don't know about Rolland, but he sounds like the team doctor.

My personal opinion, shared by many cognoscenti, is that Parker is a malevolent force. He has dominated the world of wine to the extent that his personal tastes have become the global norm - which match his 6' 6" 260 pound dimensions. Wines today, thanks largely to Parker and American taste, which cannot abide deferred gratification, are made for immediate consumption. BP - that is 'before Parker' - wines, especially reds, often needed to be cellared to reach their peak, sometimes for decades. Italian wines, especially, were often high in tannin, which would soften over time - but which added character and structure not often seen now. One of the top American importers recently expressed it beautifully. He said he especially enjoyed wines that 'are a bit difficult', which he compared to having a conversation with a young person whose ideas become more 'interesting' as he gets older and his life more complex.

I myself have fallen victim to Parker's ratings (quotes as they are called, or cotes I believe in France) on more than one occasion. Once I bought some bottles of Pahlmeyer Merlot (\$75 a bottle), which Parker orgasmically described as 'having a 45 second finish'. The reality was that it tasted crude, harsh, and very much out of character for a Merlot, which traditionally is one of the softer reds. It reminded both Lyn and myself of the Ferrara carignane (called Vino de Caspano after its winemaker Casper) we used to buy for \$3.49 a gallon and bottle down back in the early days of our marriage, except that the carignane had more carriage.

The problem is that French Bordeaux producers have learned that a good score from Parker is necessary to successfully market their wines, particularly in America. They don't really like him, or the wine he inspires, but they can't afford to ignore his quotes or Rolland's stipulations.

We visited Smith-Madrone winery in the hills above the Napa Valley with a family of special friends several years ago for a by-appointment-only personalised tasting. The Smith brothers are Cal Berkeley grads who aren't in the business to get rich but rather to produce excellent wines at affordable prices. They sold off all their 1998 grapes and didn't produce a single bottle that year because it was an inferior vintage, something I don't believe another California winery did that year. Anyway, when I asked Smith what he would do if Parker gave their wine the 96 points or more that it deserved - would he double the price, which is often the case when Parker gives an especially high rating, his response was that every year Parker comes to the Napa Valley, sends invitations to all the vintners to send him their wines to be rated, and Smith-Madrone never bothers to send any.

Parker himself owns an Oregon winery *Beaux Frères*, which produces excellent but over-priced pinot noir, which is predictable. In sum, Parker is just another example of American cultural imperialism à la Wal-Mart or McDonald's. How does he do it? Part is that he does know his subject. His book on Bordeaux is definitive. Also, he claims to be able to recall every wine he's ever tasted, which is of course pure American bullshit, but he does have an efficient system of cataloguing wines and the memory to go with it. The reality is that wines, just as people, are individuals and each wine and imbibers have different tastes. I've subscribed for decades to a first rate publication called 'California Grapevine', put together by the former wine critic for the 'LA Times'. His format is to have a dozen or so similar wines blind tasted by a panel of a dozen or so experts. In all the years I've been reading the publication, I've never found a single tasting in which the 'experts' can agree on their favourite. In fact, I don't recall more than half ever agreeing, and it's usually 3 or 4 out of a dozen who agree on which they like best.

You may conclude this is all a bunch of elitist snobbery that doesn't really matter, which is probably true in the US of A. But elsewhere in the world wine is as big a part of culture as religion, as you well know. Parker is an imperialist and the colonies are stepping his line. I can't blame this one on George W, but the fact is that the same culture that produced Parker also produced Bush. If even the French can't stand up to Parker, how can we expect the doddering Democrats to stand up to the neo-cons?

Tell your winegrowers they can't miss Mr Parker when he comes snooping. Sign on to have him taste it and slip exchange a fine Bordeaux fortified with molasses-sweetened plonk from the Catalan hills. The big hungry boy will like it if he is kept thirsty. Chances are he or they will not live to regret it. And if his keen senses are not deceived, well there is always your Rolland. It may take a few years but it's worth waiting.

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EPILOGUE TO 'THE RIVER OF DOUBT'

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From 'Brazilian Tequila'

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Claude Levi-Strauss thought that, because he could never remember anything he wrote, his ideas were not his own, but came from the subconsciousness of the jungle. I am a one-man primitive tribe, he thought. His structuralist friends knew long tracts of their work off by heart. So to appease them he told how, when he was bored on a field trip in Campo Novo, picking nits out of some dog that had adopted him, and to block out Chopin's Third Etude which was driving him mad, he started scribbling anything that came into his head on the back of his field notes.

It became a play, 'The Apotheosis of Augustus', a version of Corneille. Cinna returns dissatisfied by his years communing with nature to find his school friend Augustus just about to be declared a demigod. Both have lost a taste for what they are good at. Cinna can't hear poetry anymore, having deafened himself with it in the dusty outback. Augustus is about to abandon the leadership of mere men.

An eagle tells Augustus that he should aspire to become a full god. This would give him a unique attribute, a capacity to put up with smelly animals. Cinna says this is true ('It's in Homer'). So they make a pact to kill one another. Augustus to see if becoming a real god made one accustomed to livestock, Cinna to achieve the black immortality of a demigod assassin. Of course Augustus is not to be trusted and Levi-Strauss, realising the ending would be conventionally crass, gave up, and returned to nit picking.

Lacan wanted to psychoanalyse him. But Levi-Strauss was not interested in playing intellectual games (Lacan liked to tie up his patients). In the Nhambis' final decline into decadence and disease, the ailing tribesmen believed they had been turned into wild cats by the shamans (all the better to get to know their future dinners - tapir, agouti and other cats). But seeing the menu in its natural environment is worse than visiting the restaurant kitchen and finding cockroaches up the walls. You become the vermin, and what isn't boiled or poisoned out is your cannibal fare. Hunting yourself down is also a form of suicide.

Returned to human form, no wonder they found their appetite lost. Levi-Strauss questioned the tribesmen, and their comical responses, playing Tom and Jerry to demonstrate their 'other' life, suggested irony, one skitter from scepticism. He concluded that they went along with the shamans and their pre-Columbian nonsense not without a world-weary sigh. But it was more convenient to believe, a little, in a mysterious explanation than to accept there isn't one. Being fooled by your ancestors rather than by a new fangled idea has merit.

Around 1560, in Rouen, Michel de Montaigne asked some Indians from the sertão region of Brazil what was the advantage of being a king back home. The reply was the same as Levi-Strauss received nearly four hundred years later. 'To be foremost in charging into battle.' It was as sincere then as it is now, he thought. 'Jeito' made them kings, and it has a double edge.

Levi-Strauss admired the Nhambis' 'vara'-esque acceptance of things as they are and opined with a heavy heart that when 'the real thing came along' they would change their minds. It was well on the way. He

had been looking for a society reduced to its simplest expression, and the Nhambis' was so truly simple that all he could find in it was individual human beings. Their extinction, having outlived prehistory, was inevitable. So with a clear mind (but not conscience) he moved on to split the atom of language, the pnenome, with his friend Roman Jakobson, and to write a joint monograph on the structuralism of Baudelaire's 'Les Chats'. The great sigh of his final paragraph of 'Tristes Tropiques', ending with the possibility of achieving 'an involuntary understanding with a cat', led him back from melancholy emotion to reason by way of the poetry of sensation, and he thereby lost his one true course, tacking back into the late work's safe waters ('banal depths' would be a subjective judgement. But I got as lost in his massive 'Anthropologie structurale' as in 'The Cambridge Book of Random Numbers' or Sartre's stinker 'L'Étre et le néant'.

It wasn't so much that 'mauvaise foi' was in the post-war air, but that reality and hope were at their usual variance, 'jeito' triumphing over 'vara', the story of history. When Merleau-Ponty refused to give back the advance on an unwritten autobiography, and offered a novel instead ('I can only give an imaginary meaning to the periods of my life I can't understand'), Levi-Strauss said nothing. At ninety-six he is still going strong, and to the library. Though the sound aspect of what we say has long since been superceded by the sense, rhetoric over reason (despite the flights of Saussure and the down-to-earth Jakobson). It's not history that's dead but mythology, the stories we tell ourselves to keep expectations alive. Who knows now what to think?

FOOTNOTE ON 'JEITO' AND 'VARA'

Literally translated, 'vara' signifies the staff of life. That, to us, is bread. What sustains our energy and growth. It is the cry in our revolutions, as well as being the core substance in the history of evolution that European thought has accepted as the continuity between our primitive origins and history. Scientific change, which is indubitable, has harmonised itself with progress. The controversial has been resolved.

Brazilians understand 'vara' as the other meaning of a 'baguette', a stick, a rod for divining the circumstances you find yourself in so you can locate the flow to go with. Acceptance of your fate is the wisdom of prehistory, and its justification resides in the mythology of experience, what has been found to be so. Stoicism, but not passive submission. Recognition, but not regret for some lost ideal. 'If a thing has no remedy, it can be considered remedied', says it all.

Europeans abhor 'vara'. We prefer to chance our arm, having loaded the dice. Call the game in the name of winning. Our approach to progress derives from the colonial experiments in the nineteenth century, rather than from internal developments. Thus we recognise 'jeito' easily enough - bullying and bribing, the obverse of 'vara'. 'Jeito' roughly translates into English as 'the knack', the knack of survival, through being fitter. It is inherent in the arrogance and contempt of colonialists, despised now by European intellectuals, though still widely practised under the cover of a patronising self-righteousness. Disdain runs deep. 'Vara' is misunderstood as compromise, a dirty word. So reluctantly we veer towards what we know, the less despised. A compromise. No wonder modern Europe invented psychoanalysis. We need it to live with the moral twists of our own making.

[algo](#)

NOT ABOUT THE AVIAN FLU – A MEDITATION ON PANIC

[algo](#)

From 'Bombing and Shopping'

[algo](#)

On the French/Spanish border the hills are alive with animals - badgers, foxes, hares, stoats, and wild cats and boars. But the vineyard workers have got so used to them (and vice versa) they are almost free-range pets. Their dogs and children can be seen playing with them. It is a sight to bring tears to lion-tamer's eyes. But recently a health warning has been abroad. 'Watch what you stroke on your lap.' It could well become a WHO technical report.

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Since the monkey that gave that lonesome herdsman a virus which he passed on to an airline steward on his way to San Francisco (circa 1979), animal diseases in man threaten to reverse advances in life expectancy all over the world. After HIV, mad cow disease (BSE, Creutzfeld-Jacobs), Hong Kong Chicken Flu and who knows what else, a new plague is not just on the horizon. It is flying all over the world courtesy of CutFine Airlines and bird migration. Though its presence is most felt in advance warnings, multiplied to the nth by instant communications, often sponsored by multinational drugs companies with future sales in mind. Governments are waking up to the profit and credit potential as well as the shame factor. The mad cow massacre in England changed legislation on animal feed almost as seamlessly as the war on terrorism has on human liberties.

The times of bubonic plague will be looked back on as simpler, more rational, than the present age. Then, at least, some scientists and soothsayers knew what was happening, or could if they only looked. A flea feasts on the blood of a dying rat whose blood is swarming with bacilli from his last meal, another dying rat. When the flea gets hungry again and finds it difficult to locate a living rat, he gorges on a man, and fast as you can say *pasteurella pestis* 'The Seventh Seal' (1957) opens.

Even darker days are back (lights out in fast-food joints and in Hong Kong) with the discovery of the prion. Something is known of what it does but biomedical science is still scratching its head at the how and why. Even its name is ambiguous. It could mean 'let us pray' in French, or derive from the Greek for 'saw', the kind magicians cut their women in two with. Prions generate when animals are fed dead animal matter. The burying of their dead in the belly of the next generation could be a rather profound Mayan or Kaska custom full of lunar resonances. But the cannibalistic feed was just the Post-Industrial Global Oligarchy (PIG80) recycling contaminated waste, cheaper than burning, and degenerate farmers in England bought it. The Industrial Revolution turned the pastoral talents of shepherds and herdsmen into pigswill and poetry, which made money, but not for John Clare.

The PIG80 ploy with animal feed is now banned more or less everywhere, but who enforces that law? Moloch's mouth is open to be fed, and statutes can't stop the shoveling in of offal and the human sacrifice. What about The Incredibly Shrinking God who has no zero – so he still exists? (The Incredible Shrinking Man, 1957). Maybe the world started with lots of gods and they have been eating one another and are now down to one, I suppose, true God, and he is suffering the consequences. In a world with an ailing God, the law is what suits the market, and the market fluctuates. God could do with the sending of a get-well card rather than a mention every time George W Bush opens his bouche. The prion in humans destroys the sympathetic nervous

system. So all muscular control is lost. No pain or tear reflex. The body atrophies into a flaccid mess. 'They don't feel anything', says Sister Sunshine in Saint Mary's Hospital, 'and that's a blessing'. I'm not so sure. There is such a thing as painful thought. And the victims do not have the muscles to smile through their lack of tears.

New prion diseases are emerging. The latest is Fatal Familial Insomnia, once thought to be a hereditary condition because it was first described in an Italian peasant family who ate diseased animals. In FFI, the prion wheedles its way into the thalamus, the area of the brain that tells us when to fall asleep, so the eyes cannot close, and you are constantly alert to your disintegrating body. Drugged daydreams are the best you can expect. You have to condition yourself somehow to living without reflexes. For example, electric shock treatment is necessary to facilitate defecation.

The prion is a mutant protein with a life of its own. How is that possible? says medical science. It must be a new form of life. A bit like the disembodied digits in Franju's 'The Beast with Five Fingers' (1946). Franju must have been inspired by Gogol's 'Nose', or Prokofiev's opera, but a nose cannot strangle you or play the piano, unless it's Victor Borge's with its scherzo sneeze (bless him). But a prion can, and I don't think it is a new form of life. The little finger of peptides has been waiting around a long time for its turn to twiddle mankind around it.

Man, despite his Cartesian superiority ('the beasts in the field are no better than mechanical toys'), adapts foolishly to threat. The worst is anticipated - and exploited by PIG80's doom peddlers - and the fear engendered does more damage than the perceived one. Animals are more sanguine, knowing that patience is the wisdom of nature. If you are going to become extinct you might as well enjoy it while you can. The stampedes of Gaderene swine, elephants, and lemmings are exceptions that prove the rule. Their uncontrolled rushing to their doom is not panic. It's done because they are too many and is essentially a pilgrim form of animal selection. It does the species a world of good. As do the overzealous in holy shrines in relation to the next one. The trampled are redeemed.

Human panic usually happens when the worst isn't going to. It is a state of mind that implodes on events and becomes one itself. A whole world of chaos is created around it. And an industry evolves to exploit it. It prevents people relaxing and being happy. So the victims stumble into other areas of risk and often perish as a consequence. It so often, for instance, goes with medication with undesirable side effects that a clinical reason for being overanxious becomes a physical reality.

We are all living on death row, and nobody, if they think about it, is expecting a reprieve. Out there, there are firing squads practising, electric chairs are being serviced, hangmen in emerging countries are reading foreign technical reports, and most of us are happy to spiritually prepare ourselves without giving it a second thought. It is a source of passing annoyance to some of us that we won't be offered a last cigarette or meal of choice. But in the main we reconcile ourselves to not knowing the day or hour and considering that a blessing. Death will come as a surprise, a moment of calm preceding it. There is dignity in that, says Montaigne.

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WELSH UNDER LA LOUPE

[New Prose](#)

From 'Conversations with Welsh'

[Art](#)

SENSIBLE DONKEYS

[Wine](#)

Welsh says to me, 'Augustus, you are too sensitive'.

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'Sensitive', like 'sincere', is a word I do not like, precise only in a false sense. You say them about someone when you mean something else. There is a thinly veiled irritation in both, I think. 'Sincere people are a bore', says Octave (Jean Renoir) in 'La Règle du Jeu' (1939). And he sacrificed his love to send, by way of a French farce, the romantic airman (Roland Toutain) to be shot dead by Schumacher, the deranged gamekeeper. Pound's 'I believe in technique as the test of sincerity' might make me want to think again, only he is concerned with poetry and painting, not people. So it does not count (the French 'sensible' with 'âme', as in Stendhal's 'happy few', is deliberately loose, in order to include a diversity of people with an attribute impossible to define exactly). Welsh is telling me to stop getting upset when a fool or a knave gets under my skin. Just pick them out with your fingernail and forget it. Nobody should disturb your beautiful temperament.

I suppose his fingernails have a point (a magazine editor, accepting some of my writing, had included a note saying how much his wife Svetlana liked my writing. Does that mean he does not like it? I said). But Welsh is really talking about himself, like an acquaintance Chain (so called because she calls her husband Ball), when she said, 'You intimidate me'. If I did, she wouldn't say it. Welsh is too 'sensitive' in the Highland sense to allow himself to become wholly serious.

WHO DOES HE THINK OTHERS THINK HE IS?

'A shipyard worker who can read and write and a local painter' is what he calls himself. Said with a self-satisfied air. Only that he is a painter is true, and a local one in that he likes to work from what's around him. Derridas and writes, I think, would be more like it. He has earned money during sales droughts as a barman, selling himself shorts, as he likes to quip. But it is no joke. Welsh tends to sell himself short so disappointments cannot touch him, I think. Not good for the soul, but it makes life easier. Not too easy though. He is a serious artist, sometimes.

I hesitate to write about his art because only the bread and butter Dufy pastels for holiday fodder depend on a trick (the negative of a photocopy coloured). When he is working for himself, even though I am something of a trick artist myself, I'm at a loss. His method is mathematical, but only up to a certain point. Then patience takes over as his inspiration. He waits for weeks before diving in, one hand behind his back, the other up his nostril, with a genial dab or two. Progress by procrastination means he completes maybe half a dozen new paintings a year. Not enough for a solo exhibition, and so he is satisfied just to sell from the studio. When I press him, he says, 'Expos! They're all show. Non, nonnynon. I no do'.

Nevertheless, after thirty odd years on the job, his paintings grace the walls of five continents (buyers on the Mediterranean come from everywhere). I doubt if he keeps exact records of sold works. More recent ones, yes. But the main body has fluttered away like butterflies,

and each season sees a new generation going the same way. Unknown in five continents, he says of himself. Why not say known? I think. Then I remember he needs to protect himself from possible occasions of disappointment. Why, I will never know. I am the opposite, setting myself up for rejection so I can exercise my penchant for scorn, which Chateaubriand said 'must be dispensed with economy because of the innumerable times it's necessary in this world'. If I haven't the sense to listen to the sanctimonious old cynic, I should at least imitate Welsh, who would never allow Souper and his insults to get to him. But I do like to dramatise my feelings so they can diminish themselves into a bitter little laugh.

THE SUBLIME SELFISHNESS OF THE SELF CONTAINED EGO

I think Welsh feels a deeper anger than mine, dormant, almost in desuetude. He has a hard plangent crimbly skin, but under it is a violence I would not know about. The ex-barman in him has taught the punk in hippie clothing how to look after himself, and when the anger surfaces, as it must sometimes, I think, knives fly and then I wouldn't want to be around.

'You know, I never think about myself', said Welsh.

I do not believe him. Absolute unselfishness is characteristic of saints and retards, I think, and he is far from either. He talks about himself all the time so others can think about him. Or he thinks of nothing else and it does not occur to him that there is anything else to think about. At least that's what I think. I sometimes think of others. Welsh's 'You know, I never think about myself' was in response to a question I put to him after he interrupted my homily on sincerity.

'Augustus, you ratiocinate too much about yourself.'

'So you never think about yourself?' I said.

He gave it serious pause and sounded surprised by his own answer. So I decided he talks about himself, but unthinkingly. But I am uneasy about judging others as egotistical. After all, when I think of another person I know at the back of mind I am thinking what does he think of me? Selfishness is a utopian concept, I suppose. But.

'Well, Welsh, I presume you leave it to me to think about you', I said, and he nodded enthusiastically, a risus grin from ear to ear. He does not like conversations to appear to become too serious. What goes on in the profound depths of his mind is not for philosophical snorkeling.

'There is never a man so stupid, with not a lot can be said for his intellect, who can't muster a few thoughts in his own interests.' Who does Welsh think he is today – Dr Johnson or Boswell?

THE OFFICIAL WELSH

When I heard him say quite flippantly that he'd kill himself, only he has his responsibilities, mentioning his five dogs and cats, and his muse, the painter friend who died in a crash that he survived in his youth, I thought, he is not talking about these others really (the dogs and cats are generic. Pick any five. And one of the dogs is bound to race after his BMW as he leaves for his weekdays in the atelier and is the bark that tells the world he is back. One of the cats smokes frogs). They exist inside his head as figments of himself. We all have our own Chesterton cartoon of a fine fat Pozzo of a man and the weedy Unlucky chap in his

shadow. 'What I am and what I'd like to be.' Welsh's own idealised self is so deeply engrained that reality can rarely get to it, and when it does I see him dancing around beside himself, shaking a fist with two talons. Reality had better watch out.

STORY LINES

The more I hear Welsh talk, the more I think my theory of his thoughtless egotism is too classic-comic. After all, it was he who first drew it to my attention ('You know I never think about myself'), and he was thinking about himself. Perhaps an enforced exception, but still a thought about himself. He talks in parables, telling stories all the time, dipping into his tombola apparently at random. The stories are honed to tell well without thinking, so he does not bother to remember if you have heard them before. He is talking to himself. Around and around the stories go. Hobby-horses, swan rides, shaggy dogs and buddhist special offers. Wait for his yen story about the bean in the river to surface again. I don't say, 'I've heard that one before', because I am listening to hear if there are any changes in the words or emphasis. There never are. He could be pressing a button. You listen but he doesn't.

The pattern, I found, is threefold.

Stories about himself, happy in an idealised sort of way. He tells them when his mood is sad. The hippie in the desert with nothing in his caftan pocket and it all works out, because the bedouins arrive at the oasis with nothing either and they share their sweet nothings happily because they are young. Even the story of his real mother is more beautiful than tragic in his telling, he wrings a single tear.

Secondly, stories in which he is a bystander, often in a bar. They tend to come when he is in a bad temper. You can tell from the texture of his skin. It thickens into plangent pall when he's off-colour. (When he is sad, it has a transparent quality.) These stories are closer to reality, with a punch line that is either violent or a crude joke. They are picaresque. I think, other people are not real to him so he does not have to confront their reality. These stories are more formally hermetic than the idealised ones, which seem as though he is flying a kite (though he has a firm grip on the string. The kite performs exactly the same no matter what the wind is like). Half-truths about others, I think. He lunges into them, a little like Jude White taking the initiative with a handshake to offset confrontation, or Hemingway buying a round of drinks to escape gracefully from boring company. For Welsh, it is a way of not listening to others in order to hear himself. A turning of the back or head on the world. Other people are there to make stories from, and to be eavesdropped on. I respect this, but don't like it so much.

The third kind come when he is happy. You can tell from the luminosity of his complexion, a canvas of many moods, his masterpiece. These are the yen stories. Not all are buddhist. There could be a one-liner from the Goons, spun into a bubble that bursts with éclat. These stories mean nothing except he is happy. Pippin's song, all's right with the world. He may not have been born under a lucky star but he likes to think he always lands on his feet (wearing the right shoes). I love his yen stories because I don't have to judge them or Welsh or myself. So I become the ideal boon companion. Le garçon rigolo's other self.

(To be continued...)

[New Poems](#)

This is a regular magazine featuring the work of Augustus Young.

[New Prose](#)

MAYAKOVSKY 'A CLOUD IN PANTS'

[Art](#)[Wine](#)

Young's translation of this poem was finally launched at the Ars Interpres Festival in Stockholm, 5-9 October, and the text is published in full in Issue 6 of the double Issue 6-7 September 2006, 'Locks and Keys', of the Ars Interpres Journal. See link below for full details.

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Young was also interviewed about his translation on Leonard Schwartz's radio programme 'Cross-Cultural Poetics' on KAOS, Olympia, WA, and read extensive extracts. The broadcast went out on October 22. See link below for full details.

Info and Links

LINKS

The Menard Press

<http://www.menardpress.co.uk/>

Ars Interpres

<http://arsint.com/>

Elliott & Thompson

<http://www.elliottthompson.com/>

Cross-Cultural Poetics

http://kaos.evergreen.edu/programs/cc_poetics.html

Ian D Scott

<http://www.ciorse.com/>

Nichol Wheatley

http://www.perfectcirclearart.com/page/pca_home.php

New Hibernia Review

<http://www.stthomas.edu/irishstudies/nhr.htm>

Brian Lynch

<http://www.brianlynch.org/>

WORD SONNET OF THE MONTH

Ignorance Is Bliss

I
only
write
about
what
I
think
I
know
to
find
out
I
don't.

[↑ Haut](#)

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