

# THREE TAKES ON AN AESTHETIC AND A SYNTHESIS

## I. WRITING AS APOCALYPSE

*Everything that is dead quivers. Not only the things of poetry, stars, wood, flowers, but even a white trouser button glittering out of a puddle in the street. Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks.*

~ Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

What I want from my art and from my writing is to reveal what Kandinsky hints at in the above quote – to lay bare the “secret soul” of the seemingly ordinary world. Perhaps it is my rejection of a post-modernist world, an insistence instead that there must be something that lies behind each word, as amorphous as it may be. I hold onto an old belief that writing is akin to sculpting – there is a blankness presented before in the page, but buried in that blankness is the remarkable and astonishing. It is up to me as a writer to discover what lies within. It is my obligation as well to not flinch when I find it, be it terrifying or joyful, brilliant or dark.

To be an apocalyptic writer, I must approach language with an awareness of each word's historical and psychological weight. While it is impossible to have a complete knowledge of all the ways history and prior writings might inform a reader's experience with a word, an awareness of the complexity of the reading experience and a close crafting of each line can help tune the reader in to a much richer experience.

What is beautiful then? From the apocalyptic standpoint, beauty arises out of the countless unfoldings of the natural world. The fractal and the infinite. To approach each object, place, and person with an exacting attention to detail will only reveal more astonishing detail, more unexpected beauty. It is an artichoke full of wings to echo Neruda. It is that white trouser button abandoned in a street puddle beneath the moon.

Perhaps it is the programmer in me that seeks this quarrying for a core. It is after all a recursive act to call upon the same function – `examine_item(x)` – which calls upon itself with increasing specificity until at last it reaches the indivisible and singular self, which can only be called its “secret soul.”

## II. WRITING AS EXILE AND MEMORY

As the contemporary Chinese poet, Liu Hongbin, once said “Writing poetry is the beginning of exile.” From the outset, once we put ink to paper, the poem or essay has

moved out of the home of our mind and into a strange new place from which it can never truly return. Writing exiles the idea from creator, exiles the artist from his community, and exiles the moment from its historical context. The work becomes a letter adrift in the world, without name or destination, it wanders from mind to mind, book to book, always in search of its rightful home.

Still, even if writing ultimately makes the work itself a refugee, the act of writing is an act of attempted salvation or restitution. We write to remember or recreate what we fear to lose, or most likely have already lost. I write to capture a certain stillness in place, the moment of the pendulum swing, even the sense of weightlessness there. If the present moment that I write becomes exiled from the past and future, I must find it a new land to set down roots. Each manuscript is a calling together of lost children from the same village who come stumbling out of darkness, violence, and obscurity into the space on the page.

If writing is a form of exile then what is beautiful must be that which echoes something from the land I came from, some familiar line or phrase borrowed from the language of loss and memory. Whether that land is a place in time, in the world, or in some buried emotional reality, it is a meeting ground for many people. It must be a universal language. Something that lies at the root of what we all long to say, but do not know how.

### III. WRITING AS INVOCATION

It is an old Kabbalist tradition that should the true order of the verses of the Sepharith be revealed and spoken correctly, one could create worlds after the same fashion as this one, or raise the dead, or perform all manner of miracles. There is a force that lies within the transcribed word. To write is to record with the expectation that it will be spoken, whether solely in the mind, or audibly to the open world.

Whereas some might write to evoke a certain memory, I write at times to invoke a latent power, to awake what sleeps within the text itself. When I write, I frequently call out each line, expecting the next to appear. When I am stuck, I return to the beginning, and read each line aloud, till a momentum builds, and the next line forms even as I come to the place which is blank.

If writing is a call to the unknown within the page, or to some unseen deliverer of words, then I, as a writer, must be willing to sit in what sometimes can be an almost unbearable silence. But I have also learned, that sometimes the longer the silence, the deeper the space that will be revealed.

If writing is an invocation, then beauty must lie in the depths of the breath before and after the words. That is to say, what is beautiful in writing will long to appear on our lips. We will wish to speak it, to hear how it turns in the mouth. How it falls on the ear. How it twists in the moment of speaking and becomes something

unforeseen. How even saying it brings it to some form of reality.

Writing is an invitation to the world of ghosts and memories to step into a moment. To write is open an conduit to something bigger than our own consciousness, be it the collective consciousness of Jung, or the broad world of semiotics and symbols.

## SYNTHESIS – A CERTAIN ALCHEMY

At the end of the day what I'm really after is the creation of a text that an amalgam of these three approaches. I want to write in such a way that there is a deep emotional and spiritual resonance in the language, a lyricism not born of artifice but of some vision of the world that lies beneath the surface of this one. I feel (at least for poetry) that sometimes fact must take second place to the emotional truth of the moment. In writing creative non-fiction, the challenge is finding the correct rhetorical moment – the *kairos* – for speaking. Perhaps what I want is work that operates much like a Zen rock garden whose completeness cannot be observed from one vantage point. Both the writer and the reader must move and try different views before the garden's beauty can be opened to full appreciation.

If writing is part invocation, then it is akin to the way I program. Each line calls out to the next. Or more precisely, I write and reread what precedes it. Then I place a demand in my mind for the next line. Then I write that line and the next until I can go no further. Then I reread from the beginning till something new appears. At times I am a compiler stopping at every mis-coded sequence, reworking the faulty lines till the eye crosses over the length of the piece without being halted by inconsistency or error.

Writing remains a revelation of the world and of the self. I maintain a deep belief in purpose and meaning. That the elements that surround me have significance. That the fundamental language we speak is image and sound – to understand the world in detail is to move toward fluency in that language. Confucius once taught that calling things by their proper names is the beginning of wisdom. I believe this implicitly. But paradoxically, I also believe a fundamental idea from computer science, that the shortest most accurate description of a program and its workings, is the program itself. That is to say, the only name for a thing is the thing itself. A poem simultaneously describes and enacts what it describes. It is a condensed form of emotional reality.

Perhaps what I'm saying is that I am looking for a home. And the poem is looking for home. And emotional truth that triggered the poem, is looking for a home. And we're all looking for names for ourselves and our experience. The three of us. The text where we meet – this brief intersection which may or may not bring us back together in the future – becomes something that transcends all of us: a document of that moment and a window on all three.