

*Words and Stones,
Eloquence and Astonishment*

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It may be that the poet, rather than someone who has a facility with language, is a person who has a certain difficulty with it. Words may remain for him distant, opaque, recalcitrant. For some poets, words, rather than the simple means of an exchange, have the stubborn, unmanageable quality of things. Such a poet will be able to bear witness to language because he remains to some degree outside of it, looking across at it. Words will appear to him first of all as a surface.

river

This is a complete poem by Robert Lax. Nothing could be less mimetic. The solid massing of the stanzas is sculptural rather than fluid, a structure perhaps in the manner of Carl Andre. The poem seems at first sight to be a classical piece of minimal art; cool, insistently material, pared of all associations. This assumption is not wrong but if we can place the poem in the larger context of Lax's other poetry, which is affectionate rather than detached, then something less abstract, less forbidding, begins to emerge. The words are not just deliberately placed; they are repeated. Repeated again and again, the words betray a fascination. There is no notion of a referent at this stage. Either the poet has picked the word up, forgetting its meaning, or through repetition, like a child's game, the sense has drained out of it. The river has disappeared behind the dazzle of its name.

I think that it is the problem with words, that they dazzle or fascinate him, which makes Robert Lax a poet, which makes him the poet he is. A poem by Lax always has the quality of serious play, of a child picking up stones or building a dam against meaning. But of course, in the poem above, the word is not just visually repeated. It may be sounded. If we imagine a poet's verbal fascination as being in part at least aural, if we sound the words with him, observing the pauses of the poem, then the waters begin to break and we have not a flood but a gentle, inevitable flow. Meaning in this case is only deferred, it is held up long enough for us to admire a surface, to establish a pause between the recognition of a thing and its appropriation.

A Poem which is aurally and visually close to my first example was published in Lax's New Poems of 1962. The title of the book suggests not just a recent collection but a new, abstract art, of which this is perhaps the most extreme example.

never
never

This is again the complete poem. Practised in the river poem, we might find the meaning here to be nearer the surface, just held in check by the severity of the form. The fact that the adverb refers to no verb or noun creates an unease that runs throughout the poem, giving it an unqualified, universal implication. In what tone of voice should we imagine the poem being read? Should it be sepulchrally, like a final pronouncement, or firmly, as if conspiring with the inevitable? The emphasis on objective structure denies any tone which the word might invoke. At the same time, the form of the poem attempts to duplicate its meaning. There are no stanza breaks in this poem. No occasion is allowed to interrupt its timelessness. An odd number of repetitions suggests the closure is arbitrary, that the poem might continue to infinity. I think that the simplicity and repetition here are again the result of fascination, that the poet partly values the word for the evenness of its syllables, which fall almost as a benediction on the poem's negative import.

Elsewhere in Robert Lax's poetry there is, of course, more syntax, but its movement is often halted or interrupted to bring the poem back to some simple action or perception. The same aphasia which afflicts his relations with language is also present in his dealings with things. He is unable to treat them merely as tools, as indifferent agents of his will. One might say that Lax's consciousness is fixed at a point before things were degraded to instruments. In other words, this is a poetry of wonder.

one stone
one stone
one stone

i lift
one stone
one stone

These are the first two of nineteen stanzas in *33 Poems*. Only the intrusion of the fourth line gives notice that this poem will be less austere than the previous examples. The lower case personal pronoun is formally discreet. It is also emotionally exact because, although the protagonist is astonished at his own temerity in lifting the stone, although the possibility of such a simple action seems momentous enough to be mentioned again and again in the course of the poem, it is the insistent presence of the stone to which the poem returns

Two words, two almost equal syllables, are the constant form which this poem departs and to which it constantly returns. There is no attempt to describe the stone. There is no verbal dexterity. Not the stone's particularity but the fact of its existence is the miraculous subject of the poem. This bare fact arrests the poet's attention. It is what Heidegger calls "the first of all questions," why is there something rather than nothing? Whatever the success or failure of philosophy, no answer to this question can be found in poetry but it is the virtue of Lax's poetry to raise this question again and again. Heidegger goes on to suggest it is in the forgetting of this first question that we fall into the inauthentic existence from which we build social rules, cultural mores, a whole technology. Lax's one stone presents itself to him, and to us, as an irreducible, awkward but quite glorious fact without context.

The third stanza introduces a further consideration,

i lift
one stone
and i am
thinking

but of what is the poet thinking? Of the stone, of the human implications and associations of the stones, or of something quite different? We are not told. Only the stone, the physical action of lifting it, and the presence of thought occupy the rest of the poem. This is enough for the poet, or already too much. If we are unsatisfied with it, perhaps it is a symptom of our own restlessness for meaning, our impatience with things which have not been assigned to a context. As another philosopher, Hegel, has said,

The tendency of all man's endeavours is to understand the world, to appropriate and subdue it to himself; and to this end the positive reality of the world must be as it were crushed and pounded, in other words, idealized.

In contrast to this, Robert Lax is able to co-exist with things, to allow them their own dignity and integrity. He does not cover them over with language. That we feel his attention and his thought in this poem to be so entirely unpredatory is a rare achievement.

The innocence of vision is something prevalent in Lax's work. The poems may be abstract, tender or wry but the narrator is always self-effacing. How is such innocence (from *innocere*, incapable of hurt) maintained? Rather than speculate on the personality of the man, I would

prefer to say that within the poetry it is the product of a strong formal inclination. The movement of the poem above is strikingly close to the practice of meditation; the object of meditation (one stone) is brought to mind, the mind drifts now and then to the physical action of lifting, or to its own thought process, but each time it is brought back to the object. The poem ends with five stanzas of repetitions of ‘one stone,’ complete meditative absorption in the object. This pattern of digression and return is typical of many of Lax’s best poems and is a token either of fascination or of gentle insistence. Although the poem unfolds, it binds the reader in a single moment of perception, like light dancing on waves, or as Lax puts it in an early poem:

The river moves but each wave holds a place.

The form of the poems is usually intuitive rather than strict. The interest is less in working out a structure than in the play of attention about an object or idea. In the most abstract poems, where Lax is not held by the mystery of things, the formal effect is musical.

In Robert Lax’s work, in the poems, prose, journals and photographs, there is a remarkable unity of vision, an integrity. It is all one thing. There is in the end no contradiction between the seemingly banal reiteration in some of the poems and their formal precision. Innocence may be a matter of control. Intelligence is not a competence but a brightness. As the poems return again and again to a word or a phrase, so the poet returns to a primal perception, to a non-instrumental knowledge which is the sub-stratum of experience.

a
cer-
tain
know-
ing

(in
all

the
chang-
ing
days)

Such knowing may have the hardness of a stone. It may be as complete as a stone, making of a whole life and work a single moment. In such knowing, perceptions will arise which will be inseparable from praise, the praise a spontaneous response to perception. The lesion that has occurred between ourselves and the world is not inevitable and may be healed. We need only to raise things to their proper dignity. We need only to be wholehearted about them.

prais-
ing

this
mo-
ment

with
all

of
his
heart

gave
him
heart

It is not by culture alone, by everything that we have dragged forth from our own entrails, that we have been or will be sustained. Our happiness, our culture, our very lives, depend upon a gift which we have not properly appreciated. The value of a few artists and poets is that they declare a gratitude for what is given. Rather than supplying examples of eloquence, expression, genius, they remain stunned by what they know and what they see. They are inept, God's fools. A contemporary theory of writing has it that writing surrounds us, that the world is a text of similarity and difference. To function in society or in the world is to acquire competence in reading this text. Literature, according to this theory, is not the production of individual works but the articulation of an ongoing human writing. If this is so, there will always be those who cannot manage it, who do not have the necessary facility, who stand too astonished before words and things. We will continue to need the name of poet for such people.