

Digital Writing Circa 2004

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There have been many times that the USA and any empire since Rome has been likened to Rome. The American poet Robinson Jeffers spoke in 1924 of ‘the republic hardening to empire’. A long process, apparently. We see that the main emphasis of the Roman culture was not on art—their art is notoriously retro in homage to the Greeks, although there were some originals such as Catullus and probably many we do not know. But the genius of their culture was in its engineering and its legal system, systemic things. And its military. It’s weaponry. Sounds a bit familiar.

I recall reading the dramas of Seneca, which were telling re-writes of the classic Greek tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The most compelling parts of Seneca’s plays were the descriptions of apocalypse, as though there was a longing in Seneca for apocalypse, for the destruction of what, by then, was pretty bad. Seneca was Nero’s tutor. Anyway, the introduction in the book of Seneca’s plays was quite good. The writer talked about some of the differences between the Greek and Seneca’s versions. For instance, in Medea, when Jason, Medea’s husband, begs for the bodies of their children that Medea has just slain, in Euripides, she doesn’t give them to him, a kind of cruelty. In Seneca’s play, she pours them on him from on high before exiting deus ex machina. Seneca’s plays were written in a time when the entertainment included bloodsport of feeding Christians and others to the lions. Of course we in Canada know our bloodsport hockey very well. And, of course, the news these days, of sexual torture in Iraq, of the bombings of weddings, of one atrocity after another by the Americans and other ‘coalition’ members, including you know who, this is a kind of horrific and absolutely degrading news entertainment that degrades us all. Yet it of course needs to be shown. Better that, in any case, than covering it up. But we feel that numbing resentment of being part of an empire that has descended into one bald lie after another, one atrocity after another in total disrespect of everything worth living for.

The scholar who wrote the introduction to Seneca’s plays noted that in a time such as Seneca’s, the culture was not really in a way to appreciate Greek tragedy. Perhaps the popular dramas were, as in our time, violent and simply heroic, clear winners avenging the wrongful deed. That is what you get, apparently, in cultures that cannot look themselves in the face. Rather than less imbecilic examinations of matters of guilt, innocence, justice, and destiny, both individual and collective.

Perhaps it was hard for a lot of the Roman writers and artists to take art too seriously in such a time. Apart from the fact that it was dangerous to speak out against the rulers, it would be hard to get too excited about creating art for a public that was happiest amid blood sport. What would it have been like for artists in Nazi Germany. Sure, let’s make some art for the Nazis.

I think that it’s this sort of complicity that we deal with. Digital art has tended to be part of a more optimistic period. One in which pushing the technical and artistic boundaries

meant something toward an art that could deal eloquently amid a sense of composition in multiple media together with a sense of the programmed as part of the art. Where such work succeeds, it gives us art that we have simply never experienced before, art that really does open up new forms of poetry or music or visual art, or communications, or synthesis with the app, and synthesis among all these things. Art that really does take poetry in new directions that it has not been in before with such fine energy. Art that explores a new literacy, a literacy of text and image, sound, network communication, programming, and so on. An art that is polyartistic and also uses both sides of the brain, as it were. An art of the avant garde that looks to Apollinaire, for instance, in its history, Apollinaire who said, in 1917

“Typographical artifices worked out with great audacity have the advantage of bringing to life a visual lyricism which was almost unknown before our age. These artifices can still go much further and achieve the synthesis of the arts, of music, painting, and literature One should not be astonished if, with only the means they have now at their disposal, they set themselves to preparing this new art (vaster than the plain art of words) in which, like conductors of an orchestra of unbelievable scope they will have at their disposal the entire world, its noises and its appearances, the thought and language of man, song, dance, all the arts and all the artifices, still more mirages than Morgane could summon up on the hill of Gibel, with which to compose the visible and unfolded book of the future.... Even if it is true that there is nothing new under the sun, the new spirit does not refrain from discovering new profundities in all this that is not new under the sun. Good sense is its guide, and this guide leads it into corners, if not new, at least unknown. But is there nothing new under the sun? It remains to be seen.”

Apollinaire from “L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes”

But it has also to deal with darkness intelligently and deeply, and this is where new forms and media often encounter difficulties. There is a maturation process to artistic media and forms whereby we come to have a sense of composition through all the dimensions of our experience, in this case involving multiple media and programming, and this sort of compositional consciousness takes time, apparently, much longer than it takes to create the technology. But I do think we long for digital art that can transcend the wow and the amazement and cleverness threshold into deeper territory. For this is a time of lies and of tragedy, of shock and awe at the depths of the wrong that the west is coming to represent.

It seems like it's a time of sadness and anger and profound cultural regression into religious fundamentalism, for instance, having more power in matters of state than it should ever have in an enlightened state such as the USA is in certain ways. A time when language is so thoroughly abused in the big lies of the age. A time when art is in danger of being a mere confection amid journalism that gives us our daily porn news of the empire's willful or bumbling atrocities. There are no precision weapons, and when modern militaries are unleashed, they are the dogs of hell and will wreak nothing but murder and destruction. They are not trained in etiquette.

Digital art has tended to be an art of joy. Joy can be real. Art of joy can be real. But art of joy in a time such as this must also be able to deal with darkness or it risks simply fiddling while Rome burns.

How to deal with that sense of the likely inconsequence or even complicity of art in a culture of barbarity? Each will have their own way of facing the music and trying to do something of consequence and relevance to other people to both enlighten and also oppose the forces of dullness, and further the art into territory that it has not ventured into before. Gerry Gilbert, a poet from the west coast of Canada, says

‘Poetry, the trick to read what can’t be read,
quick to write what can’t be said.’

There are all sorts of ways to interpret it, but ‘quick to write what can’t be said’, among other things, means it deals with issues that are hard to write about because of, say, the emotional conflicts involved and the lack of clarity. But we are more or less obliged by our own confusion and guilt and resentment, our own complicity, our own pain and that of others, to work toward some sort of acknowledgement and articulation of our problems via the art.

However, if this is a recognition of the importance of the ‘political’ in art, allow me to temper it with a recognition related to the sort expressed by Britain’s Tessa Jowell. In an article in the Guardian by James Fenton about Jowell’s writing, he begins thus

“Supposing you were a potter, and you went to your bin of clay and scooped out a lump, and threw it on a wheel, and took the result, and baked it, and glazed it, and baked it again, and at this point the minister arrived and asked what you were up to, and you had the wit to say, “I am attacking adult illiteracy” - you would be a very savvy potter indeed. This is precisely the kind of potter the government has been on the look-out for. This is the kind of rhetoric they have wished to reward.

It descends from Stalinism, from the old questions of the form: “What has your string quartet done, comrade, to further the cause of revolution?” One might have expected such perverse rhetoric to die with Stalinism. Instead it morphed into a social-democratic “instrumentalism” - the arts were to be judged as instruments of social change. The oboe concerto was expected to help young mothers escape the poverty trap.

“Too often,” writes Jowell, “politicians have been forced to debate culture in terms only of its instrumental benefits to other agendas - education, the reduction of crime, improvements in wellbeing...” One might quibble, perhaps, at this way of putting it: too often it is the politicians themselves who have forced others to justify their activities in these terms. Too often they do so still.”

James Fenton, The Guardian, Saturday, May 29, 2004, “Down with this access pottiness”

theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/may/29/artspolicy

And in net.art and art writing we are familiar with this phenomenon. But intellectual and artistic independence is as important as a sense of application to the issues people face in their lives be these philosophical or political or even as practical as Fenton's somewhat facetious example of mothers escaping the poverty trap.

Art and art talk have to be taken with a grain of salt—this too, then. It is as subject to propagandization and its fashions as the fashion world, and it is all too often equally vapid and opportunistic. Particularly in net.art, we see one-liner works celebrated for their putative political content, works that are little more than a brief one-line validation of the liberal politics prevalent in international net.art. You have to go your own way, find your own voice, or mouth the rhetoric of the day. Art, for those who take it seriously, is not a trite political message but is the sum of your life's work, of your expression of what it is to be a human being in the time in which you live.

We see the element of game involved in Fenton's potter's statement that she is "attacking adult illiteracy." A game of winners and losers. What is winning and losing in art? A while ago I watched an old movie called *The Verdict*. It was about a disillusioned lawyer who got a case that he could believe in. He was defending the little guy against a big corp. But, as the movie progressed, it became clear that he *had to* win the case in order for there to be a *victory* of some sort. It became clear that he couldn't lose the case, *because the movie didn't have the backbone to sustain his losing the case*. It didn't explore victories of the spirit to sustain him losing that case whereas there is a tradition in western literature called tragedy in which though all may be lost in a worldly sense, some human dignity, some victory of the spirit, is often at hand. Which doesn't make the tragedy, the failure in the worldly sense, any less hard to bear, in a way, any less significant, it doesn't mitigate the tragic like, say, the Christian myth does, where it's OK, they're going to heaven, this world doesn't matter. Not like that. It's been said that there is no such thing as a Christian tragedy, for this reason. This world does matter in tragedy. We matter. I think our biggest victories are of the spirit. There's winning and there's losing but which is which is sometimes confusing. Victory in a worldly sense is different from a victory of the spirit.

As we know, some fine artists created works that were barely noticed during the life of the author. And when you push things in terms of innovation, for instance, that is likely to be the case. Because if the work is at odds with society, if the work is at odds with the literary status quo, if the work is at odds with itself, if the work deals with things in a way that people would rather not acknowledge, and if it does not validate their world view, it is not likely to have much worldly success.

A friend once told me there are basically two types of power in this world. There's power that can be bestowed on you by other people, and there's your own power. As an individual, as a human being, as a moral agent, as an individual witness. And this is basically the power of the artist and the individual human being more generally. And it is important to affirm this, even in the face of what most artists experience, namely worldly failure but, at times, victory of the spirit. What is worldly success in the absence of a victory of the spirit? It is empty. Art can go deeper into the machinery of our destinies than journalism typically does. And it is really only only in such a context that any victory is meaningful beyond the concourse of atoms.

My own feeling about digital writing is that it is still in its infancy on a societal level, but has been developed into something like a strong beginning by digital writers. It is in its

infancy on the societal level in the sense that peoples' consciousness of writing as a polyartistic enterprise through several media is not as widely prevalent as print-minded literacy. People do not have much of a sense of composition in several media, and their reading skills of such work—and by 'reading' I mean here something more comprehensive than reading solely text—are in the initial stages.

But people *do* have increasing occasion to compose things like web pages themselves, wherein there usually is at least some conjunction of text and image. And of course using a computer, using computer applications is becoming quite a widespread literacy. The browser, the email client, the word processor, etc. And these do deal in an iconic language that is *instrumental* in a different sense than the one Jowell meant. And, increasingly, people have experience of creating other forms of media as well, whether this is sound or movies or whatever. And programming skills are becoming more common; *that* literacy is becoming useful for more and more people. In general, media *production*, as opposed to simply *consumption*, is becoming much more common, and, correspondingly, media literacy is becoming more common. Though the development of such literacy is apparently a long term thing, a longer term thing than we might have thought. Because it takes much longer for peoples' imaginations and sense of composition in multimedia to develop than it takes to create tools to author such work. It takes longer to divine the patterns of our destinies, our wins and losses, through the signs and experience of new media.

But these patterns are hopeful, are not the foregone conclusions we read in poetry and fiction, though there are always a few writers who persevere with the old forms into something extraordinary. New media does and does not deal with the same old story. My feeling is that such work is important to poetry, to our sense of understanding of the world and ourselves as we increasingly use computers, these incredible extensions of our minds and memory and senses, to operate in the world, to express what it is to be alive and a human stretched and slapped, angry and hopeful through our times, seeking to create poetry that will suffice to express our changing sense of what it means to be a writer, a poet, and a human enlarged and diminished, changed by language through all the dimensions of language.

The British critic Terry Eagleton has said that literature is a record of barbarism in the sense that the works handed down to us have tended to be from the winners of history and that the literature has tended to validate the world views of the winners of history. The means of production of literature and art have tended to be in the hands of the winners. In the contemporary world, the net and its tools are not in the hands of everyone, but are in many more than the hands of publishing houses and magazines. Writers take to the net for a variety of reasons, but one of them is to be able to publish their own work as they see fit, and to an international audience, if they participate in it. I still see the net as a place of very interesting possibilities for writers who want to do something different and hopefully contribute to something other than a record of barbarism, in Eagleton's sense, the creation of an international digital literature that takes poetry in startling new directions around the globe and through all the dimensions of language. A certain amount of failure seems like it is probably attendant in such a risky thing, but it has been a rewarding experience for me that I have participated in with many people at this conference, and I wish you well amid the imaginary and eternal corridors of the spaces in which we write and live.