

Tracking contemplations
Two specimens and three comments
by
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(GMU 1980 and 1987)

Because of continually writing, I can track the origins of some of my poetry and stories over fifty years. I didn't write because of advice from anyone. Such programs as *writing to learn, deconstruction, writing to think, or The Artist's Way* were unknown. I simply wrote to capture language so that I could later read it aloud because I liked reading aloud. When I learned to put notes on a staff, I did the same with music. Here's an example of some of the contemplative writing that led to the poem at the end of this essay.

SPECIMEN 1:

“Journal entry 1/1/73: Notes relating to The Profit of Doom. Play as exploration. Build the tale out of fragments or glimpses. One does not expect much from a glance. One learns to glance so as to encompass everything of importance. One restricts oneself to one's data/experiences. Sunlight is itself intermittent, varying.

“You are not your own.” Travel will not change it. This imposed privacy...If you were your own, what would you do. Impose some new deprivation on yourself. To be commanded to do what one wants—to be kept well in your own pumpkin shell. Some people (young SPs) force themselves into tight places, box themselves in—then see if they can get out. This psychic risk is as great as the physical risk taken by a daredevil. The prison break is not the explosion and escape. It is an internal switch—like repentance. Time is locked out, but one is locked into a dull circuit of ideas, a habitual repetition of the same thought. The catch is inside the cell. (Cf. Forster's underground Machine).

The prison break occurs not by explosion and ensuing calamity but rather by an internal switch-switchback and an internal change which could be called repentance. Time is locked out but locked into a dull circuit of ideas, a habitual repetition of the same thought. The cell is perfect privacy. Time is closed out; within is only routine. The catch is inside. It must be opened from inside. There is no need to travel or to move. No simple physical displacement will alter this nor enlarge the domain. This simple, restricted, confined living space; the small house, compartment, prison cell; this restricted compass of action with confined dimensions. Emotions kept limited and few. Contained maybe in a six-sided space with two-tone walls. All concrete. “You are not your own. You have been bought with a price.” This promotes an objective point of view. One sees oneself in a liberal prison. One lives vicariously—as an opera lover might live through Wagner.

So this is an extended meditation on being boxed up. On confinement. “Sealed up in a coffin underground for seventy-eight hours, a striptease artist from Milwaukee, with snakes . . .” Or under the Mediterranean sea with Cousteau. Or in a cave. He lost his sense of time. Primate isolates and their rage. Skylab and other spatial isolations. An old

man unable to leave his house because of snow. Prisons as a way of solving criminal problems: put them out of sight. Hide them. Even as I hide my feeling or an unpleasant thought. Lock them up. What about being locked up inside any life support system? We ask, of course, what effects does it have? What are the risks involved? How would you survive? The basic issue is lack of stimulation. What is the optimum? How could you set this up? What effects have our buildings and constructions unwittingly brought into being? There was isolation in other times: the prairie, the monastery, the long trip, the debtors' prison, ostracism, persecution, commandments forbidding entry or exit. "They drew a circle to keep me out." Black holes, nihilism, alienation

One either diverts oneself from isolation or one cultivates solitude. Yet for the latter there must be others. The former, often leading to the routine habits and addictions, has no need of others. The Box. Six Faces. Euler's theorem holds. And topologically, its shape can be altered so long as its vertices keep their positions. Inside-outside: a distinction of "no eternal consequence" except for those inside or outside, perhaps. The cube: things have definite borders and dimensions. Cabins. Airsickness, claustrophobia, salivary secretions stop. Tightness in the throat. Hot and cold off and on. One wants to sleep but can't. Can't breathe. Can't escape. Breathless, trapped. The Trap: animals in zoo cages, pacing staring, indifference and rage; defiance and acquiescence; hate and servility. Do "open" schools, prisons, and open mindedness really offer a contrast or a solution? Or is this an ontological condition. And isn't there irony in a school or philosophy of open-minded thinking? Given people afraid of flying, the bigot in Africa, enclosure in Gray and Goldsmith's time, cloture. Contain these facts in this concept. But then take care to step out of the concept. Restricting one's life to one pursuit . . . "this above all you must keep. And he handed him a tiny, jeweled box." Genie in the bottle. Bottles. All our housings of powerful agents and of persons . . ."

COMMENT: Meditation takes its own course, however much one might try to direct it. During the period in which I made the above journal entry, I was a graduate student chafing at the need for specialization, a husband about to become a father, a jobseeker, and engaged in research on the topic of *habituation*. The writing, however, continued its wide, slow spiraling around a story and set of poems that did not become a book until forty years later. By this time, I already had a collection of journals going back to 1965 and the death of a college friend which had set the spiral going.

Most of what is in my fifty years of journals could not be used for the book, but all of it was necessary in building the habit and tranquility needed to complete the book.

As incoherent as the entry may seem, I find in it innumerable connections not only to writing but to professional and academic life—indeed, to a choice made not to write for a living. The entry was not only a precursor to several poems, such as "*The Place in Town*," "*Quickening*," and "*Rooms*," in the book, but also to an early plot device about one character imposing certain routines on others—a device which became less prominent in every rewrite.

What would I say now? Rooms are unavoidable, like our skins. Our professions, our choices, our habitats, our specialties, our views of all kinds. The choice of rooms is

forced, but one may decide *which* rooms and, more importantly, *how one will dwell in them*. Routines, habits, concepts—all are matters of choice. Epictetus said it more eloquently.

SPECIMEN 2 “Journal entry for 5/18/87 Specialists—phonemic, morphemic. Each a subdiscipline divided into self-contained parts. Maybe all this about specialists is just a big side issue—something that should be mentioned with a flick of the hand. Now I’m doing it. I’m thinking and writing together. Using the tool—this is the whole point. Just to start writing. The physical act primes the thought.

Back to specialists. Is this a problem to solve? Do poems begin as problems? Housman says they’re secretions. Frost thought this a flawed idea, maybe pretentious. Skinner also accounted for it differently. Suppose that poems *do* begin as problems. What is it they resolve? They bring about a more settled, stable state? Perhaps stating a problem/ asking a question well could be enough. Stating it at all might be enough. What I do here is different than what I do any other time of the day. Fast as I can, I record what I “think.” Of course, there’s the intermediation of the physical act of writing. I could record *talk* but that’s less convenient since to get a written track I must play it back. . . Think of a society so specialized that introspection was assigned to one group. Here’s a fellow working on the problem of his personal frustration when using his keyboard. When he types the numeral “2”, the screen shows “1”. Imagine having to *write* “1” while *saying* “two.” Or think of the left margin of a screen stealing a space but not showing it as you type. Or think of some device like a particle counter or Geiger counter with a built-in quirk that requires a mental correction for every reading. For his whole shift, the fellow feels increasing frustration of repeatedly making the covert corrections. . . Frost’s “Departmental” gets at the idea better, of course, but I think I have a different angle on it. [Two workers in the cognitive industry of the future, one with the frustrating problem; the other a specialist in introspection.]”

COMMENT 2 I inserted the bracketed comment to abbreviate the entry. What interests me is that this strand of meditation about specialists, rooms, and so on, is still active sixteen years later, leading to the content and unsettling meter of the following poem:

Patch this to his midbrain.

In a six foot line that one must read as five
by somewhere stealing stress, more briefly to arrive,
the Morphemic Operator designated
contrived (uneasily) to write a pattern slated
for another operator from the pool.
Tedium, praise for the end of the shift, or the Rule
itself a challenge (confining duty to directives):
though she was only to abbreviate connectives --
for whatever reason -- she had tired of this
and pulled up a readout problem none would miss.

It came from the bench of a Particle Counter
like a meditation upon emptiness.
This Scintillator on his early morning stints
(shift same as hers; as tedious, on evidence)
was wasting costly beta cocktails on restarts;
his overruns required excuses and new parts.
The screen's left margin stealing a space each line,
zero untrue and shifting, he could not assign
corrections fast enough to track the slight advances
and declines; the rubato robot ruined chances
of his ever keeping error five percent:
Just the problem for subvocal management.
She produced a ponder program to improve his dwell
on noise and static and give him peace with the erratic:

*Come, Oh come, Oh sweet and careless feast of lips and hands
and breasts and tongues and catching, spilling,
wasting, reaching, tasting, drinking, stretching;*

*Come and come again, droop and rise increased; dwindle,
dally, strum the belly of desire; swim the medley --mound
and cave, brook and pyre, reach within reach settling
only to reach higher, slowing to heaviness and subtler, bluer fire;*

*Come, blue-green and slippery from slumbering eddies: lie
slyly on my thoughts, you fingering, shallow roots;
drench me, seize my gentle flowers, crush my shoots with
swelling softness, salt me in your shuddering breeze.*

This the Morphemic Operator for the Counter
whose quench curve flagged and error rose unsated,
prepared: a sutra, subvocal and subzero,
to conduct him, as a pilgrim on a saunter
through emptiness and cool expanses of unstated
uselessness, to dwell in secret warmth of snow.

COMMENT 3: Clumsy, slow and inarticulate as contemplative writing may be, I don't want it turned over to a "*subvocal manager*", even if there's an app for that. This kind of writing may not be published, but it maintains a kind of explorative mental activity, an extended, spiraling processional movement of mind and behavior; in fact, a kind of prayer, which I define as *sustained attention and creative engagement leading to a cognitive procession from fate to will, ignorance to understanding, grasping to acceptance, waste to salvage, fear to hope, opportunism to compassion, exclusion to inclusion, and partial work to soul work.*