

### Three Definitions

This semester I have been teaching students in three genres—poetry, nonfiction (memoir) and fiction. As I have considered their writing, I have thought some about what each genre does. Definitions of writing must be provisional but I want to offer some and say a bit about them. Here goes.

Poetry records the adventures and misadventures of the spirit in the world of time. Fiction addresses the hazards of socialization. Memoir traces the journey of the self.

It's not hard to write such sentences but what might they mean?

Poetry hails from the world of tribes and perils. Life was short, often violent and very uncertain. Forces that they did not understand hemmed in human beings at every turn. They lived provisionally but imaginatively. (Life as lived by human beings is, of course, always made up but the advent of science has obscured this.) The world of clock time did not matter. The origins of life were legendary and palpable in daily life. Rituals shored up this feeling and gave it dignity.

In the pagan world and the primal world, religion (the Judeo-Christian-Islamic juggernaut) had not segregated the spirit into a doctrinal entity known as “the soul.” Spirit is breath and poetry is the articulation of that breath. That breath is a fact of living and a miracle. Poetry walks the line between the two. It emphatically is not a religion and takes spirit at the basic level—without breath we die. The analogy—we cannot live without poetry—is not strictly true but it has much to recommend it in the imaginative sense. If we don't honor our breath, then we are lost. If life means anything to us, if we are something more than robots or ideologues or some other species of subordination, we should never take a fundamental miracle for granted.

Since it is preoccupied with breath, poetry is uniquely worthy of addressing mortality. A poem is literally a slap in the face of death. Since poetry never goes beyond our breathing, it has no interest in progress. Styles change, as language and mores change, but poetry is sempiternal. This annoys many people including some poets.

The misadventures are as important as the adventures. Poetry is the account of our unknowing. The endings of poems have the arbitrary quality of a sunset. What is the definitive final moment? The world of time, that poetry must always acknowledge even while it seeks timelessness, can name a minute, but that is a parody because it is fact not feeling. Poems end only because they must. But breath continues and poetry knows this. In that sense, poetry is a very sane art. Its practice by all the peoples of the earth in chant and rhyme and riddle and lament and lullaby testifies to its magnetic, anchoring sanity. It shapes our breath—how beautiful. In that sense poetry is always the province of children. The peoples of the earth who have seen themselves as children are the avatars of poetry, as is any child anywhere. When a poet-friend of mine is asked who his favorite poet is, he responds, “Any ten-year-old.”

The shaping of breath calls forth the formal side of poetry. Formalism, whether avant-garde or traditional, seeks to turn the means into an end. This temptation is understandable because it narrows poetry and makes it safer. It proposes that the shaping is an exclusive endeavor, a way of subduing the adventitious according to some notion of how poetry should be. The opposite is true, however. The shaping is an inclusive endeavor. The sanity of the endeavor resides in its trying to continually find ways to incorporate what wants to be said in ways that call the least attention to themselves. One irony of experimentalism is that it is a form of bondage. One irony of great poetry is that much of it seems not to be poetry in any preening sense. We read along in *Don Juan* or *The Canterbury Tales* and forget the medium. What a great compliment to the artist!

Fictions and memoir are prose and stand on the other side of a large divide. They hail from the adult world. Memoir, I think, came first with Augustine. He saw himself in the world and he wanted to account for himself. His journey was a soul journey but not in the sense that a hero in Homer was undertaking a spirit journey. A pagan did not know any better. Inscrutable fate was the glory of paganism. The sadness of Christianity and its two allied religions is that they know better. They have mastered tragedy.

Augustine has no poetry in him. It is beneath him. Our breath can be taken for granted. Or more precisely our breath is in need of being saved because our actions are so reprehensible. Breath is the fuel of our thoughtlessness. This lends a piquancy to memoir that continues to this day. We each must trace our journey even though we may not have been bequeathed a pattern for the journey. Confusion is the seed ground of memoir since we persist in trying to make sense of what seems to make little or no sense. The curiosity factor in a memoir is not what happens next but how it happens.

Augustine is concerned with his soul but he needs the world of the self to make that real. He must exist in the world of men and women as they live. Poetry is far too episodic and random for him. Fiction, however, would be a bagatelle to him, an impertinence. Augustine insists on the truth of actuality. He knows that our tendency is to fudge the facts (an echo of our fall). The deep call of memoir is to honor our capacity for truthfulness, for trying to trace the pattern no matter how bewildered the memoirist may feel. The achievement of a genuine memoir, of the likes of Frank Conroy or Tobias Wolff or Mary Karr and many others, is that the confusion is acknowledged and obeyed. There are no shortcuts in a real memoir. Each tentative step must be assayed.

The interest in memoir at this point in time is understandable. The individual sense of the self is at once diminished in a mass society and bloated amid the manias of consumer and therapeutic choices. We are lesser and greater at the same time, hence the importance of trying to locate our statures. Memoir attempts this location as it tells the story of a journey. Both the living of a life and the writing of a life enact this journey. The integrity of the memoirist impulse is its fidelity to human shortcoming. It is possible to turn this impulse into a shibboleth and many memoirs as they sensationalize abuses have done this. That is no reason, however, to give short shrift to the

memoir. Augustine had an agenda, to be sure, but he also recognized the value of his life. At its best, memoir glows with this feeling, even amid darkness.

Fiction as it took shape in the eighteenth century seems directly connected to the increased comfort, convenience and sheer safety increasingly available to the human race. In fiction we can take a degree of socialization for granted, by which I mean that strangers are something more to one another than members of different tribes. Of course, this veneer of civil recognition and curiosity is thin. That is one of the fiction's main themes. Nonetheless, whether the author is Jane Austen or Vladimir Nabakov or John Updike, the fact of socialization in what has come to be called the modern world is the inherent stuff of fiction.

There is something very touching about this attachment to the socialized world. The lure of a writer like Dickens, whom I take as one of the exemplars of fiction, is that of an orphan who recognizes that society is a family. It can be a cruel family but it can be a loving one, too. There is something tremendously galvanizing in the worlds he created. He is willing a sense of life making sense. His famous feeling for coincidence is the accompanist of this will. He doesn't need God, and by and large the novel hasn't needed God. Society is a form of redemption through its infinite variety and power. This may seem shallow to a religious practitioner but few in recent times would argue with the force that socialization exerts on human beings. We don't live alone, a fancy that poetry can indulge and, to some degree, the memoir. Fiction revels in the fallen world. That is Kafka's humor and Dickens's, too. The sanity of fiction lies in this acceptance of what cannot be changed and yet changes before our eyes as styles, governments, marriages and manners all change.

The differences among the genres are substantial. Moving from one to another is like crossing into different territories. One is still here on the earth and one never wants to forget that. But when one moves from one genre to another there is a sense of a different attitude and a different quest. This differentiation seems salutary. We need all the handholds we can get. (2009)