

The Poem as Sign

There is a path through the forest of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky that leads across an earthen dam, up a set of wooden steps, and along the pond impounded by that dam. Walk ten paces past the steps and look to your left. Look carefully for what I am pointing to is not easy to see. Down toward the pond, you should see a small sign, smaller than this page, hand-painted, broken roughly in half, strung to a tree at eye-level (my eye-level, anyway). Follow the words across the split where it has broken and the sign reads, in neat, black, cursive letters:

*This tree forks
at the bottom
and reunites at
the top.*

And it does. The trunk forks just a few inches above the sign, perhaps at your eye level, and the two forks continue skyward in parallel for perhaps ten more feet, then arc back toward each other and rejoin. The long, narrow empty space thus created is round at the top and pointed at the bottom so that it resembles a long, narrow heart without the middle dip or a plastic Christmas tree icicle or an extended, inverted teardrop. The main trunk continues upward out of that joint, but the two former forks each send a trunk, not so tall and not so stout, upward off the shoulders of the rejoined tree so you could imagine the tree an emblem of the trinity or of the three crosses on Golgotha or or the Buddhist Tipitaka or any number of sacred, symbolic triads.

But I prefer to think of the sign. Humble, anonymous, merely factual, arrhythmic and unmetaphorical, nonetheless, I think it is something like a poem.

Gethsemani is the home of the poet-monk Thomas Merton, but I do not think this sign is his work. He died, after all, in 1968, and this seems to be newer work than that. It is a single, small piece of flat, gray plastic, split obliquely in two, perhaps by the weather. It has been drilled in three places --that triad again-- A string loops through the holes to fasten it to the tree. Some care was taken in the lettering. My cousin, Brother Harold, who knows many things about the Abbey, knows nothing about it. Who would have thought to do such a thing? Someone, I think, with the mind of a poet, someone with a careful eye who took note of this single tree in three thousand acres of forest and took care to help us take note of it as well.

This sign may not be a poem as we think of a poem, but it does something a good poem often does: it identifies something that the poet sees and directs us where to look. Everyone else on the path has missed it, this wondrous thing obscured in a blur of dailiness, that forest in which we cannot see the trees, but the poet sees, and with the poem, points us to that wondrous thing. Look, the poet says. Look here! And if we follow, if we raise our heads above eye level, we can see it too.

In other words, the poem is a sign.

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At times, the pointing in a poem is external and explicit, as when the poem points to an object out in the world. Hence, the famous poem by William Carlos Williams:

*so much depends
upon*

*a red wheel
barrow*

*glazed with rain
water*

*beside the white
chickens*

Wheelbarrows are no longer so common as they were a century ago, so we might forget that, for a reader of the time when Williams calls on us to look closely at this wheelbarrow, it was common enough to remain unnoticed, as unnoticed as the woman in “Proletarian Portrait”:

*A big young bareheaded woman
in an apron*

*Her hair slicked back standing
on the street*

*One stockinged foot toeing
the sidewalk*

*Her shoe in her hand. Looking
intently into it*

*She pulls out the paper insole
to find the nail*

That has been hurting her.

The title leads us to expect a manifesto, something inspiring and uplifting about strikes and oppression. But Williams is too cunning for that. Instead, he surprises us by guiding us to observe the woman closely, in her irreducible individuality. The line breaks, as in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” encourage us to slow down in our reading and to look

more closely and more carefully at what he is calling to our attention, The result is that we are inspired and uplifted in an entirely unexpected way by a woman who in her particularized manner may have her troubles, but is clearly capable of taking care of business.

And then, in “This Is Just to Say,” there are those plums:

*I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the ice box*

*and which
you were probably
saving for breakfast.*

*Forgive me
They were so delicious
so sweet and
so cold.*

I have never looked at plums in the same way since I first read this poem. They have looked more delectable; they have tasted sweeter.

We can assume that Williams really did see, one day, a red wheelbarrow and it struck him with its radiance, its thingness, and its importance in the sweep of the world. And we can assume that he saw such a big, bareheaded woman, perhaps as he was on his rounds as a physician. And we can assume that the sweet, cold plums were chilling in his kitchen.

But unlike the sign tied to the forked and reunited tree, these poems no longer point to anything existing. The wheelbarrow is rust; the woman has ended her troubles. The plums? Well, we know where the plums went before the poem was ever written.

No matter. The purpose of the poem as sign is not to point to something near at hand; the purpose of the poem is to teach us how to look. What is there in our lives on which so much depends and which, if it were not for such a poem, we would miss? Who among the people on our bus has all the force of the big, bareheaded woman? What might we miss in life so delicious, sweet, and cold? The poem as sign teaches us how to direct our eye toward the unseen commonplace and to appreciate what is underfoot and easily ignored. The poem as sign trains the eye to perceive and appreciate the person at the checkout counter with a scar across her cheek, the angel someone made out of cheap plastic beads and a paperclip, the little clutch of leathery snake egg shells at the side of the path.

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What does a sign do in everyday life? Points us here, or there, indicates a direction. Serves notice, advertises, gives information. Labels, as in the sign beneath a painting at an exhibition. Tells us where we are. Tells us where to go. Tells us where to look. Warns us.

What road are we on? Which way are we headed? Which way should we go?
Read the sign.

There is intentionality in a sign. The person who makes a sign does so for a purpose. The person who makes a sign wants us to pay attention.

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Look---

*The moon thumbs through the book of the night.
Finds a lake on which nothing's printed*

*Draws a straight line. That's all
it can do.*

That's enough.

A thick line. Right to you.

--Look.

-Rolf Jacobson,

In this poem by Rolf Jacobson, as translated from the Norwegian by Robert Hedin, we are commanded, “Look.”

What does the poet want us to see?

Dismiss, for the moment, the notion of the moon “thumbing through the book of night” as whimsy and disregard it for a moment from consideration. What we have now is a poem in which the poet directs our eye to the physical fact that the light cast down on dark water appears to beam directly toward the viewer. It doesn’t matter where you stand, the light cast on the water will draw that straight line in your direction. The light cast on choppy water will make a choppier line, but the line is still straight and still beamed in your direction. Any light will do. When I walk my dogs by the river at night, the lights of the marina on the Kentucky side create the exact same effect. (I have been fooled more than once into thinking the marina light was the moon.) The poem creates a brief, clearly delineated, commonly-experienced physical scene. And if it did no more, it would still be a fine poem.

But just as marina lights are not nearly so poetic as moonlight, so Rolf Jacobsen is more of a poet than this simple pointing would suggest. There is a radiance to this deceptively simple poem that points to something beyond our quiet lake and our straight line of light.

The moon Jacobsen gives us is not just a lamp and the poem he gives us is not merely a lesson in optics. The clue to all this, of course, is in that opening metaphor we dismissed earlier. We see, once we bring the metaphor back in to play, that the moon “thumbs the book of night,” as if there were something to be learned here. And the moon chooses this lake as a blank page on which to write. The message on the page? That line drawn directly to the reader.

*. . . that's all
it can do.
That's enough.*

A simple message, but sufficient. And the lesson?

---Look.

What are we to look for? I think the poet is telling us to look at the living world and to see that it *is* a living world. The moon, a living artist, draws us a line across the water which is all that we need to awaken us to mystery,

What mystery?

---Look, he tells us, Look.

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Since we are looking, let us look at another Jacobsen poem, “----When They Sleep.”

*All people are children when they sleep.
There's no war in them.
They open their hands and breathe*

In that quiet rhythm heaven has given them.

*They pucker their lips like small children
And open their hands halfway,
soldiers and statesmen, servants and masters.
The stars stand guard
and a haze veils the sky,
a few hours when no one will do anybody harm.*

*If only we could speak to one another then
when our hearts are half-open flowers.
Words like golden bees would drift in.
---God, teach me the language of sleep.*

The poem begins with a simple, but startling observation. Startling to me, anyway, though perhaps not to you. Just to think, my wife, my grandson, my father-in-law, the current president, that woman down the street with the annoying dog, all take on the same, child-like manner when they sleep. This is something we can observe any time we see someone sleeping on the bus, or on a park bench. The sleeper takes on the face of a child.

Jacobsen then extends this observation to a political note: “There’s no war in them.” God only knows what Stalin dreamed of, but at least he ordered no deaths while he slept. While he slept, he was a child like all the rest.

There is in this statement just the hint of a metaphorical opening, but Jacobsen is too cunning to move us further along that line yet. Instead, he returns to the straightforward observation. He points us back to the sleepers and how they move their hands, how they breathe, how they move their lips, and again, how they open their hands, as if, in sleep, we become more open and generous, less grasping.

Only now does he return to that earlier, political notion. We are all equal in sleep, he tells us. "Soldiers and statesmen, servants and masters." All are equal, and all are at peace in those few hours "when no one will do/anybody harm."

Only now does Jacobsen take us the next step:

If only we could speak to one another then
when our hearts are half-open flowers.

If only . . . If only . . . We have moved beyond the level of physical and political observation to a place where observation cannot take us. Only metaphor can. The hands, half-open, have become flowers. Words, the peaceful words we could speak if only we could become as children, have become bees that drift in with a suggestion of pollination and fecundity in contrast to the waking experience of gripped hands, harm, war. So it is almost inevitable that the poet ends with the prayer, "---God, teach me the language of sleep."

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So the poem as sign can point us to something beyond the directly observable by pointing us, though metaphor, to that which cannot be observed directly. In the poem, "God's Heart," Jacobsen gives us a different sort of signage:

*We don't know God's heart,
though we see
something that showered down around us
like rain over our hands*

*We don't see His eyes,
though we sense
an imperceptible light over everything
as on a summer night.*

*We don't hear His voice,
though we find*

*roads everywhere and signs in our hearts,
paths of quiet light.*

We know where to find the line of light across a body of water, and we can easily find sleepers to watch for their signs of peace. But where do we find God's heart? God's eyes? God's voice? The roads and signs are all around us, the poet tells us, in the "imperceptible light" of a summer night, in the rain that showers around us. But the guideposts are also internal, "paths of quiet light" that open up if we know how to look and listen.

The poem as sign points outward to the unseen marvelous in the world and points inward to the marvelous in the reader's own heart.