

**Writing About Cities?:
New Orleans, Destruction, and the Duty of the Poet**

“I see the water as extension of my mind,
The troubled part . . .”

[Louise Glück]

“Don’t write about New Orleans.”

[A New Orleanian]

In one of her letters, Emily Dickinson explains how a chosen “subject matter” can create a distance between a speaker and a listener:

When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is ‘acquainted with Grief,’ we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own.

It wasn’t the description of the nature of God that Dickinson “listened” to in Jesus’ teachings, nor was it his description of heaven, his “Home,” no matter how original his parables may have been. In this letter, Dickinson defines listening’s opposite as “distrust,” or a “turning away,” and “to turn away,” as Dickinson certainly knew, was the opposite of a religious conversion. Conversion, literally translated, means to “turn toward” something. Not to trust, not to turn toward God—these are defiant religious terms of her time, as she lived during the Great Revival of Protestant New England, and was strongly pressured to convert, to profess her faith publicly, to stand up and say she was a Christian. Because she would not do this—“They thought it queer I didn’t rise. I thought a lie would be queerer”—she was deemed a student “without hope” at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.

But: “But,” Dickinson says, when the New Testament’s savior confides his human secret, telling us he is grieved, or when he weeps, or when he cries out that he has been forsaken, she listens. Or rather, “we listen,” she says, blooming her own experience into a universal claim. This is the authority of Dickinson.

Why do we listen at this point, and not when Jesus speaks on a theme, or on the subject of heaven, or on God the Father? Dickinson’s answer is that we are not “acquainted” with those things, even if we are acquainted with the imagistic terms of their correlative parables. We are, however, acquainted with our own human grief: “I like a look of Agony/ Because I know it’s true,” Dickinson writes in one of her poems. She wants nothing that can be “feigned,” she says. Dickinson doesn’t want the false, the facile, the mask. She seems to have no time for them, nor for anything else that might qualify as distant from what’s true. She is the poet I look to for a fierce intellectual and spiritual honesty; she’s the most fiercely honest American poet we have, I think. I read her as a master of knowing and finding what is worth “listening” to in life, and that

finding the emotional depths of a thing—in art, in religion, in looking, in writing, in waiting, in being a friend—is the most intimate of conversions.

What if we imagined Emily Dickinson were our reader? What if we were to write poems not like her but *for* her, knowing there might always be the risk of her distrust in us, her turning away from us when we write on chosen subjects, on places visible or invisible, yet give no human emotion, whether it be anguish, agony, relief, joy, or simple happiness?

When I moved back to New Orleans after the hurricane and flood of 2005, one of my friends told me not to write about New Orleans. The tone sounded like this: *Whatever* you do, *don't* write about New Orleans. I think I understand why he said this—any writings about disaster and extremity are easily vexed by cliché, melodrama, and a sentimentality that actually diminishes, in the writing, how devastating an event was. But, in my mind, I also heard the warning of not starting out to write “about” something. Not to have a set theme, project, or mission to my poems. No city or place should ever be the endpoint of the poem’s ambition, and often, I think, books of poems that begin as subject-driven projects remain confined to the space dictated by a poet already knowing what she will write about and say. Pre-set notions create a trap, a small space for writing. The act of writing, however, without knowing where one is going—without a map, an idea to shove in, a dogma, a polemic, and so on—is much more likely to land on wide, compositional discoveries than a “chosen subject” is.

Edgar Allen Poe says, “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem.” He wrote this statement when he recollected how he composed “The Raven”—where should the poem reside? The choice of the bird, the music, the setting, the window, and all else were choices towards beauty, however famously melancholic the poem became.

For some reason—for the poem’s reason—a poet shouldn’t sit down with a subject—any subject—in mind, but must learn the subject during the act of composition. “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting,” Robert Frost said. It is the melting that is the poem’s will, its organic and secretive path. Whichever way the ice melts, it is not so much a matter of a poet’s choice as it is the demands of the imagination and countless other factors invisible, emotional, historical, physiological, religious, technical, subconscious, and so on, that melt that ice. It must ride “its own melting.” A reader must always be asking where the poem will go, where it will end up, what turn it will make, what surprise or idea might arrive next. If expectation is fulfilled, surprise and mystery are killed, and we have no reason to read the poem again.

I’d like to suggest that poets should not set before themselves the task of writing “about” anything in particular. Poets are not essayists cataloging for a reader facts and theories. Nor are we map-makers, journalists, historians, or theologians. I love all reading in all of those fields—I envy them, very often—but these simply are not the tasks of the poet.

Our task is much more blind than that, the workings of a poem more mysterious, and its composition requires an openness so bare all thoughts must be vulnerable to utter destruction. The will towards a particular subject must stand ready to become a wrecked ship hauled back to

port, no longer fit for sail or transport, although it could perhaps be docked close to shore for the purpose of shipyard reminiscence of how poorly things were built in the old days. The mind is full of mistakes as we set out to write the poem. We have flawed thoughts, collapsing systems, rotten boards and corroding anchors that make up how we think through a morning, through a day, through a love, through a life. When I sit down to a poem—especially if I imagine Dickinson as my “listener”—I have to be ready to die inside. Beliefs will be utterly shattered and old selves stripped awake. Discoveries will show me what a fool I’ve been.

It is a shocking art, partaking richly in that old definition of “creativity” as part invention, part destruction. Part life, part little and large deaths. Environmental phenomena and global warming will, by and by, see to the destruction of our cities. Our writing, though, must be about the destruction of our lies, our falsehoods, and our shallows.

I hope New Orleans was never my chosen subject. I lived there between 2003 and 2006, first in what is called uptown and then in a neighborhood called the Faubourg Marigny, a district of New Orleans where artists and bohemians tend to live. My husband and I saw things there we’ll likely never see again—a man who made a full band of himself by attaching dozens of instruments to his body, honking his horn while he tugged a rope that would strike a drum strapped to his back. A neighbor who walked a dog, a cat, and a goat, all in a little line strung one to the next. Three generations of one family, all sitting on the porch of a house with no air conditioning on what New Orleanians call “century days”—100 degrees and 100% humidity. Mardi Gras beads in the trees and poisonous, stinging caterpillars falling from the oaks after they had eaten all of the leaves. And one more thing, something I hope never to see again—the eerie light and panicked air of a place that has a category 5 storm off its coast, its “storm-track” predicting it will head straight for the city, a city below sea level, a city whose federal levees couldn’t (and still can’t) withstand a category 3 hurricane. A city shaped like a bowl, a bowl about to be filled.

Some of these details made their way into my poems, certainly. But the compositional difference I want to discuss here is how *facts* about a place—whether it is the city we love or the countryside we hate or vice versa—*cannot* be our subject. They can be our starting point, our orienting image we “think around” or “at,” but if we simply write *about* New York or Fez or Tripoli or Casablanca, the reader will wonder where the poetry is. Facts and descriptions are not enough. As Matthew Arnold says, “For poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact.”

The poem wants, like the layers of the earth, to drive itself core-ward, each layer—topsoil, crust, mantle, outer core, inner core—separated by the task its depth decides. Perhaps we should think of the places we write “in and beyond,” as the topsoil, or even the crust of the poem. Beware, however, of trying to have it settle as the core, for its heat won’t match the molten heat prescribed for such depths. The poem will be a surface masquerading as a depth. The reader will go looking for the heat, the gravity of the poem, and will not find it, as it has not been provided. “I am a little world made cunningly,” John Donne writes. I like to think of this “I” not only as the human speaker looking at the world of his own body, but also as the poem *itself* speaking. The poem is a world made cunningly, an earth of its own.

Far truer than any chosen location is that deeper, other setting: the mind of the poet. I think that is the only setting we really have.

We experience all locations through the sensory experience of our bodies, and never, in any pure form, do we experience Naples or Moscow or Lvov or New Orleans or Barcelona or San Francisco. Our mind is our setting. Our emotions are the landscape cast over the literal landscape. If we write with a place as our subject, our writing will only reach the reader who has an inherent interest in that place, a history there, or plans to go there as a tourist. William James calls these incidental, crossover intrigues “added secondary” emotional effects, effects that give rise to the “the awakening of memory and association.” In other words, emotions might be evoked in me if I read a poem about a girl growing up in Oregon because I, too, was a girl growing up in Oregon. Many, many books today sell because of these secondary effects: I like to knit, so I buy books on knitting; I am interested in neurology, so I buy a textbook, and so on. Poets, however, cannot allow themselves to rely on secondary effects. We can’t write only for those readers who have something in common with us. Appealing to a commonality (or worse, utterly relying on it) diminishes the poetic task entirely.

In addition to teaching us about the secondary emotional effects, William James discusses, in his giant 1890 work, *The Principles of Psychology*, what he calls “the subtler emotions” evoked by art:

In listening to poetry, drama, or heroic narrative we are often surprised at the cutaneous shiver which like a sudden wave flows over us, and at the heart-swelling and the lachrymal effusions that unexpectedly catch us at intervals. In listening to music the same is even more strikingly true.

Imagery—here James discusses the images we see and hear in the arts—has physiological effects, of this there is no doubt, James says. In other words, art works on the body, not only on what we call the emotions, whatever those may be. It’s true! There is no unifying theory of what, in fact, an emotion even is. James’ theory of emotion, in short form, is that the body is changed in response to “an exciting fact,” and the emotion follows the physiological change. Prior to James, it was long held that just the opposite was true—that we have an emotional response to an “exciting fact,” and then our bodies respond to our emotions. We are sad and then we cry, for instance. No, James said, we are sad *because* we cry. Our bodies change at the sight or sound or taste or smell or tactile sensation of something, and *then* emotion arises. We are happy because we laugh, we are scared because our bodies are fleeing.

James’ theory has excited criticism, as all radical theories do, yet neurologists and scientists and theorists today acknowledge there is something true in what James said. As Emily Dickinson so famously said, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that it is poetry.”

Change me physiologically, and I will listen to you. Art works on the body, James says.

How do we know if a city or village or field of corn or rye or soy, whether Sudan's horrors or New Orleans' drowned neighborhoods or the disasters of our ecosystem ought to be our subject? I've suggested above that these things can be the surface concern or earliest images of our poem's conception, but that they ought never be the heart of the poet's work. The subject, instead, is what we've discovered or felt about such places through the compositional process itself, and should not be a conclusion drawn prior to the act of writing.

This past winter I heard the poet and translator Marie Ponsot say it another way in response to the question, "What is the duty of the writer?" This was at a panel at the annual conference of the Association of Writing Programs. "In the country of the poem," she said, "we are governed by the poem," she said. We are bound, she continued, only to "the welfare of the poem." That is our only duty as poets: the welfare of the poem. "Anxiety about subjects," Ponsot said, "is useless. It is not a question for working poets."

For our concerns here in Morocco, perhaps it should not be a concern or worry what "places" are attended to in our writing, and what ones are not. I have never, for instance, felt a lack of countryside or a lack of cities in the work I've read. I feel, instead, a lack of emotion. A lack of originality. A lack of gravity. When I leave untransformed, I'm disappointed. As a reader, I want to be changed, and I care very little what land- or city-scape I'm visualizing. As a poet, if I fret that I have forgotten the meadow, the shore, the fields or the coal town I pass every day on the train, if I worry that I must, since I lived through America's largest natural disaster, write now about New Orleans, I enact an enormous force, or *will*, upon the poem. And that is a trespass against the poem, and does not have the poem's welfare in mind.

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Writing is a living transaction between artist and art. A poem is not simply a "made thing," which is a slightly crude, if accurate, definition of a poem. It "makes" the artist too, makes her until there is enough there to destroy. After the destruction, there is more making. The Canadian poet, essayist, and classicist Anne Carson writes of Leonardo da Vinci's process of painting the *Mona Lisa* in this way:

Every day he poured his question into her, as you pour water from one vessel into another, and it poured back. Don't tell me he was painting his mother, lust, et cetera. There is a moment when the water is not in one vessel nor in the other—what a thirst it was, and he supposed that when the canvas became completely empty he would stop. But women are strong. She knew vessels, she knew water, she knew mortal thirst.

Perhaps this can be our instruction as we move forward to write "in or beyond the city." If the city haunts, if the suburbs are pouring questions into you, if the farmland vexes you, if a place makes a vessel of you into which it pours its waters, whether foul or fair, if a certain landscape is requiring your mind, if it feels endless in its questions, begin there, write from or through or to

or around it. The gravity of the place might pull you in. And, if you find you were wrong, if you find there is no world of ideas and discoveries for you beneath that topsoil or crust, you will have to abandon that city or village. You will have to begin the world again.