

1-1-2009

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Runciman, Lex, "Why Do That?" (2009). *Faculty Publications*. Accepted Version. Submission 1.
https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac_pubs/1

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Why Do That?

Lex Runciman

I don't write poetry for money--that would be foolish. I don't write poems as a sport (bowling, basketball) or as a hobby (woodworking, macrame), although I think aspects of sport and hobby play their roles. Adam Kirsch (in the November, 2008 issue of *Poetry*), says poets write "for recognition." Grey Gowrie, in Dennis O'Driscoll's compendium *Quote Poet Unquote*, suggests "the reward is that elusive, extraordinary rightness no other art achieves" (p. 271). Two pages later, Jeannette Winterson calls poetry "a practical art. It's good as a knife for cutting through today's rubbish." And Pat Boran, in what is surely a grand assertion, says "The world consigns its myths, its religions, its dreams and deepest feelings to poetry for safekeeping: and, somehow, even its critics and doubters know where to find it in time of need" (p. 15). These writers are accurate, each and all. Yet.

Yet my own view is that a writer's earliest convictions about writing are at once prosaic and so deeply held as to be hardly uttered at all. Of these, the first has to do with writing as an activity, if not, early on, as a craft. This occurs to you: "maybe I can do that; I've been reading (or listening)--I think I can do that; I'm going to try." The second follows immediately--these understandings hold hands: "my experience isn't exactly the experience I've read." Put these together and soon you get a third conviction: "I'm the only one who can write my experience, my thinking, my imagining." Phrased that way, this third conviction sounds grander than it feels at the time. What you know (maybe what you keep knowing) is that there's some promise of personal reward that will come to you if you only get the right words in the right order. When you do that--and you're the first one to read them, once you do, even if it's only a phrase or a

couple of lines--the result is a clarity and an excitement that need not be compared to anything else.

I write poems because the process has the potential to teach me something about experience, including those parts of it shared with other people, including those parts of it shared with no one. My experience of time (hardly unique) is that it passes quickly, that I miss much of what goes on, much of what happens, and that I often feel experience only partially (and often understand even less). It's as though my own days pass but often I don't get what happens in them. Some days. I suppose that failure is just fine. I suppose there must just be dull days with no particular need for imagination or memory. If one believes in dull days. The time and the experience pass, and so goodbye.

In contrast, when I read a good novel or a poem that speaks to me, the first thing I do is read it again. I know there's more; I don't get it all. This knowing-I-don't-get-it-all holds the promise that if I read it again I might get to it, or I might get more of it. So I read again. Then again later. For a time, these works (Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill," Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish," Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree") become the reading equivalent of the art or the photographs one hangs on a wall. You hang a picture where you will see it daily--at the top of the stairs maybe. You hang it there not so you can ignore it but so you can see it, because for some reason or another it pleases you to see it.

We do the same with whatever's on the iPod or in the disc changer in the car: with some works, we listen and listen again. With poems, maybe I try to memorize what I'm hearing (I'm terrible at this, unless it's Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem so relentlessly metered and rhymed that even I can memorize it). Such recurrence, such reading and return, is easy with poems because they're relatively short. I try to do it with novels, too, but the

investment of time stretches to days and weeks for just one reading (as in *Moby-Dick* or *Portrait of a Lady*, when the last thing you want to do is hurry). My point is that writing a poem isn't so much different from reading one, except that the one I want to read hasn't been written by anyone else. I write the poem so that I can rewrite it, which is a kind of reading with benefits. It's this process I want.

Eventually, writing poems can become a habit, and it can become definitional in the way that habits define us (part of us, anyhow). I am the person who walks to work. I am the person who likes to wear vests in the winter. I am the person who enjoyed the effort and endorphins of jogging and still miss it (and them), though my lower back does not. I am the person who adds milk to my coffee. I am the person who reads as though reading is air and is therefore no more remarkable than breathing. I am the person who writes poems. I am the person who dries dishes when Debbie washes.

However, writing poems is a particularly rewarding habit because it differs from all other habits in one most significant way. Most habits are based in repetition; that is what makes them habits. But writing a poem is never repetition. In this, it mirrors days, which though they may seem to repeat, in fact really do not. Writing a poem is never a generic activity. Each writing of a poem--each writing towards a poem--is a process that cannot be foreseen. You know what you're doing but you don't know if you're doing well or correctly or foolishly, except that you're giving yourself over to a process that you do not fully control and cannot quite predict. It's a walk in the dark, but each step seems to offer a bit more light. It's a leap. You do not know what it will yield, if anything. You're using imprecise tools (words), and you perversely wish to use as few of them as possible.

I write for this process because it asks me to pay attention in as many directions as I am able, and I'm never quite sure how many directions that might be or where they might go or what I might find or how I might at last use language to tell me.

From:

Poetry: Reading it, Writing it, Publishing it

Compiled and Edited by Jessie Lendennie

2009, Salmon Publishing

<http://www.salmonpoetry.com/details.php?ID=15&a=88>