

Stan Rice

Metaphysical Shock While Watching a TV Cartoon

Things come from nothing.
The lawnmower
the bulldog uses
to shave the cat
in the cartoon I am watching:
from nothing.
The startled duck bursts
from nothing; drags its feet in the water;
doubles the blaze.
Suddenly, where there was nothing,
there is a lawnmower.
In the next scene the cat is not shaved.
Its hair has returned spontaneously,
and the bulldog's jowls are overlapping
a big naked bone which then
is a stick of dynamite which explodes the dog's head.
In the next scene the dog's head is a dog's head again.
Nothing did it, and nothing
made it ok. The logic of the cartoon
overwhelms me. I watch the TV in the mirror
over the fireplace to get some perspective. But this just
doubles the nothing. I came
from where that lawnmower came from.
Jesus, I whisper. Im frightened; and write down
on the telephone messagepad the first line
of this poem; itself, especially, suddenly,
from nothing.

Excess and Accuracy

My intention in this essay is to illuminate the poems chosen by the editor for this anthology by describing the concerns, temperament, and vision out of which they were written.

If you are asked to picture mentally the last time you went swimming, you will probably "see" yourself in the act of swimming as though you were a witness somewhat at a distance from the swimmer, rather than "be" the swimmer and feel the water against your face, your arms extending from your shoulders, your body invisible behind you, the lake at eye-level before you. I take it to be a habit of brain (very familiar in dreams) to "see" oneself at a slight objective remove, as though you the rememberer were watching a film of the swimmer.

I believe this tendency to create a cinema in an "aesthetic distance" characterizes all intelligence, and that a poem is an event of intelligence which compresses all the techniques of mentation into a single rhythmic unit. To me the act of writing a poem gathers up and focuses sensualized forms of thought, just as memory gathers up and focuses the swimmer. A poem is brain in the act of braining. When the poem works it is a supreme pleasure for it is the objectified event of mind working well. When the poem fails (or when a year's worth of poems fails) it is a keen displeasure, for it is a model of indecision, vanity, and madness.

Brain strives for a state of patterned integrity. Poem strives for a state of patterned integrity. Since poem is a product of brain and brain is a product of Universe and Universe itself (however mysteriously) is striving for patterned integrity, to write a poem is to attempt to touch the godforce. This lofty equation is with me constantly. To consider the act of writing as anything less is to reduce it to a therapeutic hobby.

I think I am a religious poet. (My critics might argue that the tone of the poems in this anthology is that of a tent evangelist; I can hardly argue with them.) This "religion" is not to be confused with Christianity or Buddhism or Marxism or any other proscriptive belief system. By "religious" I mean an attitude toward matter and energy as intrinsically awesome. The goal of language, in my opinion, is to "worship" phenomena. The poem is always an act of homage, the intention of which is hallucination. The memory's objectified "view" of the self swimming is an hallucination of the swimmer. The trees vanish, the sky vanishes, the car you came to the lake in vanishes: what rises intensely to attention is the swimmer as Image, as emotionally charged icon, as "vision." The entire poem, for me, is a musicalized network of these religiously elevated vision-events. This is true of bombastic oratorical poems and murmured still-lives-of-the-heart. I



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Stan Rice was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1942, and lived there until he was 18, when he married novelist Anne Rice. They moved then to San Francisco, where they still live. Their first child, Michele, died of leukemia in 1972 at age six, which occasioned the poems of *Some Lamb*. They now have a four-year-old son, Christopher. Rice attended North Texas State University and the University of California, Berkeley, and received B.A. and M.A. degrees in creative writing and literature from San Francisco State, where he has taught for seventeen years. For eight years he was assistant director of the Poetry Center there, and is now chairman of the Creative Writing Department. He has won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Joseph Henry Jackson Award, and the Academy of American Poets Edgar Allan Poe Award. His books, *Whiteboy* and *Some Lamb*, will be joined by a third, entitled *Body of Work*, to be published this spring.

✱ would contend that the very nature of intelligence is hallucinatory isolation of details. Every bush, intensely seen, is a burning bush.

Given this predisposition I have found myself struggling with a dilemma all my adult life, one that I have yet to resolve. I have found myself temperamentally at odds with most of the English and European verse which is my heritage. Most of it is, to my taste, overly concerned with what I would call "static harmony"—like the balance of equal weights on a seesaw—whereas I am inexorably drawn to "dynamic balance"—the mutually repulsive and attractive tensions which keep a solar system in coherence. The poems of my immediate tradition lack the teeth (not to mention the fangs) that I feel all objects and experiences have. They are *physically* dull to me. The nude intensity of phenomena seems untouched, even untouchable, by most English verse. The erotic complexity of phenomena seems to me an absolute given. The paper on which I write these words is *in fact* a furnace of molecular activity. How can a poetry dedicated to religious discovery (revelation) exclude (in its themes or in its language use) this feverish intensity, this aspiration in all entities to achieve as much as possible while still maintaining Livingness? My goal in every poem is to include as much as possible while remaining faithful to the parameters of the experience being examined and the poem itself. A poem has only one rule: to achieve and maintain livingness. The alternative is the death of the object. We say of such a poem "it doesn't work." We could as easily say "it failed to attain life."

The poems I wish to write always risk exaggeration, for this is the price of admission to the cinema of brain. The poems also willingly embrace the risk of theatricality. All thought is theatre. The nature of thinking is the transformation of sense impressions into Images which can be sorted, collated, and reassembled in insightful relationships. All "thinking" is "imagination" (image-making) or we could not figure-forth the image of the swimmer at all. The very chemistry of mental activity, we are gradually learning, is a tension of electrochemical accretion and release. This tension crests as the theatrical phenomenon known as Imagery. Poetry is an already theatrical and dramatic subjective process objectified. What falls on the remembered swimmer is the spotlight of Thought.

Post-Beowulf English literature rarely treats mentally exterior events or mentally interior events as radiant theatrical integrities. For a long time (and still to a large degree) I worked with a sense of isolation from the mainstream of European and American poetry. Even surrealism I found to be only *linguistically* interesting. I usually felt I was "reading words" rather than truly touching the tongue of the world.

Having declared religious hallucination as a goal, I would hasten to add at this point that I am not after a poetry of distortion, disorientation, or rapturous blur. The essence of insightful hallucination is accuracy. I have found in recent years

two models for the hallucinatory vividness which I seek while retaining fidelity to the thing-itself: primitive poetry and 20th century science. While this may seem an odd marriage, to me both thought systems approximate my sense of the poem (and all experience) as an erotically braided net of semidiscrete luminous moments. The preliterate poem is congenial to my sense that the poem's truest order is that of lucid image clusters organized with greatest simplicity and greatest vividness. Such poems begin (as all religious acts begin) awestruck by Stuff and bearing true witness to the thingness of things, and then proceeding by stark sincerity to honor both the world and the transformations of the world that go on in brain to turn these accurate observations into emotionally charged images. Modern scientific theory also informs my work: blazing splinters of phenomena comprise this seemingly inert paper. Post-Kantian philosophy, Einsteinian physics, modern linguistics, computer technology, and subatomic physics all arc back over centuries of rational and scholastic thought to corroborate the techniques of primitive art. In the primitive idiom and in the computer I find a home for my twin interests in Excess and Accuracy.

All I have said so far has seemed to omit any mention of "theme." But for me it follows inexorably that the quest for the blood in the turnip (while never sacrificing the turnip's integrity) leads to themes which examine eternal verities. Otherwise the theatrical intensity becomes thin and shrill, the evangelical zeal becomes polemic, candor becomes vanity, and I get the horrible sensation that I am shouting into a barrel. I feel the death of the mind. This of course is not a new idea, but it bears repeating that even the most autobiographical theme (and all the poems in this anthology were drawn directly from my life) must be a context for insights that exceed the private self. I would argue that if the private is treated with passionate lucidity, it exceeds itself and becomes Image. And it is a characteristic of lucid Image that it reverberate with multiple meanings. This is true of even the simplest concrete detail. To figure forth the Image of yourself swimming is to exclude all irrelevant data and to focus not on "you" but on flesh, water, air, coolness, vulnerability, and even death. As you can see, I'm not a very good swimmer.

The poems chosen by the editor for this anthology do, I feel, demonstrate these governing concepts in action. But I should add in closing a kind of disclaimer. This description of "what I do" surely includes a lot of "what I'd like to think I do." One must set the governing concepts against the poems and ask if the two are a match. What a poet cannot clearly see are his "givens," his axioms, his unquestioned assumptions. But even so, perhaps there is worth in an essay of this kind; especially if it, too, exceeds the private and becomes a vision for action.