

ESSAY ON WHAT I THINK ABOUT MOST

Error.

And its emotions.

On the brink of error is a condition of fear.

In the midst of error is a state of folly and defeat.

Realizing you've made an error brings shame and remorse.

Or does it?

Let's look into this.

Lots of people including Aristotle think error
an interesting and valuable mental event.

In his discussion of metaphor in the *Rhetoric*

Aristotle says there are 3 kinds of words.

Strange, ordinary and metaphorical.

"Strange words simply puzzle us;

ordinary words convey what we know already;

it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new & fresh"

(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10-13).

In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?

Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself

in the act of making a mistake.

He pictures the mind moving along a plane surface

of ordinary language

when suddenly

that surface breaks or complicates.

Unexpectedness emerges.

At first it looks odd, contradictory or wrong.

Then it makes sense.

And at this moment, according to Aristotle,
the mind turns to itself and says:

"How true, and yet I mistook it!"

From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned.

Not only that things are other than they seem,

and so we mistake them,

but that such mistakenness is valuable.

Hold onto it, Aristotle says,

there is much to be seen and felt here.

Metaphors teach the mind

to enjoy error

and to learn

from the juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case.

There is a Chinese proverb that says,

Brush cannot write two characters with the same stroke.

And yet

that is exactly what a good mistake does.

Here is an example.

It is a fragment of ancient Greek lyric

that contains an error of arithmetic.

The poet does not seem to know

that $2 + 2 = 4$.

Alkman fragment 20:

*[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not.*

Alkman lived in Sparta in the 7th century B.C.
Now Sparta was a poor country
and it is unlikely
that Alkman led a wealthy or well-fed life there.
This fact forms the background of his remarks
which end in hunger.

Hunger always feels
like a mistake.

Alkman makes us experience this mistake
with him
by an effective use of computational error.
For a poor Spartan poet with nothing

left in his cupboard
at the end of winter—
along comes spring
like an afterthought of the natural economy,
fourth in a series of three,
unbalancing his arithmetic

and enjambling his verse.

Alkman's poem breaks off midway through an iambic metron
with no explanation
of where spring came from
or why numbers don't help us
control reality better.

There are three things I like about Alkman's poem.

First that it is small,
light
and more than perfectly economical.
Second that it seems to suggest colors like pale green
without ever naming them.

Third that it manages to put into play
some major metaphysical questions
(like Who made the world)
without overt analysis.

You notice the verb "made" in the first verse
has no subject: [?]

It is very unusual in Greek
for a verb to have no subject, in fact
it is a grammatical mistake.
Strict philologists will tell you
that this mistake is just an accident of transmission,
that the poem as we have it

is surely a fragment broken off
some longer text
and that Alkman almost certainly did
name the agent of creation
in the verses preceding what we have here.
Well that may be so.

But as you know the chief aim of philology
is to reduce all textual delight
to an accident of history.
And I am uneasy with any claim to know exactly
what a poet means to say.
So let's leave the question mark there

at the beginning of the poem
and admire Alkman's courage
in confronting what it brackets.
The fourth thing I like
about Alkman's poem
is the impression it gives

of blurting out the truth in spite of itself.
Many a poet aspires
to this tone of inadvertent lucidity
but few realize it so simply as Alkman.
Of course his simplicity is a fake.
Alkman is not simple at all,

he is a master contriver—
or what Aristotle would call an "imitator"
of reality.
Imitation (*mimesis* in Greek)
is Aristotle's collective term for the true mistakes of poetry.
What I like about this term

is the ease with which it accepts
that what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,
the willful creation of error,
the deliberate break and complication of mistakes
out of which may arise
unexpectedness.

So a poet like Alkman
sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse
and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes
in order to engage
the fact of the matter.
The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection.

Alkman breaks the rules of arithmetic
and jeopardizes grammar
and messes up the metrical form of his verse
in order to draw us into this fact.
At the end of the poem the fact remains
and Alkman is probably no less hungry.

Yet something has changed in the quotient of our expectations.
For in mistaking them,
Alkman has perfected something.
Indeed he has
more than perfected something.
Using a single brushstroke.

ESSAY ON ERROR (2nd draft)

It is also true I dream about soiled suede gloves.
And have done so
since the day I read
in the third published volume of Freud's letters
(this was years after I stopped seeing him)
a sentence which I shall quote here in full.
Letter to Ferenczi 7.5.1909:
"He doesn't look a bit like a poet except for the lashes."
Freud hesitates to name me
but
let me tell you
that was no
pollen stain.
Here
I could paraphrase Descartes
the hand that busy instrument
or just let it go.
After all
what are you and I compared to him?
Smell of burnt pastilles.
I still remember the phrase every time I pass that spot.