

INTRODUCTION

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There is something inherently anthropological and poetic about the process of twisting the familiar into strange and showing the strange to be familiar. Through instructions on how to look and how to find, a poet might be able to enhance or derail for wider purposes the text of any experience, depending on what is revealed versus what is expected by the reader. As students of the extraordinary, and perhaps of finding it in unexpected—including ordinary—places, the anthropologist joins the poet in hoping that such manipulations reveal much and wreck nothing beyond complacency about the nature of the world and our place in it. In that connection, I present *The Time at Darwin's Reef* primarily as a book of storytelling through mixed genres—verse, prose, and painting. It should be enjoyed in that capacity. However, on the premise that the same text can do other work as well, my intention is also to draw out some key dimensions of the poetics of anthropology and history embedded in creative writing—in the mix and on the margins of verse and prose, painting and writing, fiction and fact—to revisit the sometimes academically resistant idea that there is more than one way to say (and therefore to see) things. This is a poetic exploration of many themes encountered in the academic world's attempts to explicate reality, including travel through various cultures, times, and circumstances. The poetic commitment makes it at once less an effort "to get the name and address of every event in the universe," as Kenneth Burke once said of logical positivism, and more an effort to move in the same direction on vastly different terms, to engage all manner of experience through the more encompassing realm of what Burke understood so well to be poetic meaning.¹ As a tiny slice of that larger agenda, I offer here poetics with a footprint, a fingerprint, and a calendar—a diary of

¹ Kenneth Burke, "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," IN *The Philosophy of Poetic Form*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, pp. 136-67.

sorts, a torn travel ticket left on the bar by an earlier patron, a clue, a glimpse, a trace of having been and of moving on, a bare scattering of marks on a slate of enormous possibilities. History and anthropology are made of such things.

The goal of this little book is thus both aesthetic and analytic. It is also humanistic: commentary on the human condition through a slim history of looking and finding, being and not being, in a cross-cultural world. That may appear to be a big burden to carry in so small a package, but it really isn't. Most texts can be read at several different levels and most of what matters here—meaning evoked in the reader—is only weighty in other ways. Adding something as simple as datelines to this work, for example, is designed to stretch that evocation and to support the mining of both aesthetic and analytic interests. More than just another semiotic marker or poetic line, the datelines ultimately link up with more complicated things, including issues of authenticity and validity, textual authority and voice, not to mention mimesis and the various forms of authorial representation in texts. Their most immediate function is to create or enhance a twofold concern for time and place in each piece. Our ability to construct time and place from such laconic texts, Miles Richardson asserts with insight, is "one of the unsung contributions of our interpretive capacity, our facility to give narrative coherence, and thus meaning, to the many signs that inhabit the text of our lives. Given the sketchiest sentence or the most fragmented action, we fill in the gaps to produce a lucid account of what we, you and I, are up to."² We are compelled to interpret such signs and cues about our environment because, in a general sense, our very existence as human creatures depends on it. Our deeply evolved sense of place is strong, tied among other things to natality, kinship, and mortality; to sacred and personal space, spiritual help, travel, the seasons, and the

² Miles Richardson, "Place, Narrative, and the Writing Self: The Poetics of Being in *The Garden of Eden*," *The Southern Review*, 35 (2), Spring 1999, p. 334; for more on this process, illustrated in frustration, see Italo Calvino's metafiction, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, New York: Knopf, 1981.

calendar. Personal space is a collecting center for experience and identity construction and a center for *re*collection that can be variously hoarded and shared with others. When that is tapped by text or tale, we are implicated in the story by the process.

The general effect of reading this writing in the context of the datelines is plainly a poetic and a rhetorical function which compels us to read the work differently. So powerful is this cuing, this cultural and psychological bent for sorting time and place, that even the appended lists of the dates and places coded in this work can function as feeding grounds for our imaginary locators, a feast for swift travelers of mind—and a fountain for new questions. Is place really the anchor of all such experiences? Do we recognize it? Know enough about it to enjoy a fanciful imagining of passage there? If you visit a place at three separate times, is it still the same place? Does the place remember you? The answers are as much a function of landscape evolving as they are of finders finding what they want or need to see—a cultural meaning and orientation problem with historical implications. We are compelled to read beyond the proprietary claims of the author's name into something more specifically historical, the biographical. Was the author there? Is this part of the author's identity? Having hooked that in the author's text, empathy for the situation prompts an autobiographical sense of history and identity in comparison: Have I been there? Is this me? Mine? Can I imagine it? Do I understand it? Do I care?

How the answers are both elicited and given matters. Empathy should reign in creative communication. Written or spoken, specifiable history or not, the best of it should stir up something personal and caring in the consumer, even as it draws on the same properties in its own authorial emergings, in the formation of its own possibilities for meaningful connections to the times, geographies, cultures, desires, and imaginations of others—ultimately yielding a specific context of interpretation. Poetic reading makes that specificity generalizable as aesthetic context. Data masters will chase the details. The most pleasurable texts will find some common ground between the

two. That's why some texts in anthropology and history look suspiciously like literature. Here, it is enough to get a sense of the cultural and historical framework as part of the overall aesthetic experience. Specifying time and place both facilitates and constrains that in special ways.

Despite the emphasis on time and place as components of conveyable history, there are few obvious sequences from piece to piece and there is no overall chronological order to this work. To raise consciousness (and criticism) of the constructions and boundaries that implicitly define anthropological and historical writing—knowledge production in those fields—I have created what George Marcus has called a "messy text."³ It does several pedagogic and aesthetic jobs simultaneously and few of them exactly according to established disciplinary interests or form. Culturally, much of this work clusters around the Pacific Islands and México, but it is single-minded or conventional anthropology and history only in the breach of what is normally expected in the academic setting of detached observers. Flagged by its poeticity,⁴ this material is written to be read as much more personally and reflexively engaged with the subject matter (e.g., in terms of how the book as a whole fits into *my* personal history as an anthropologist, *my* sense of personal engagement with these cultures *in relation to* yours, the history of *my* own writing in relation to the history of *your* reading it, etc.). Similarly, comparisons amongst the individual datelines can be instructive, and some are explicitly intended to be read that way. But the first function of the datelines is to contextualize each individual piece for time and place. The dates I have assigned add an important dimension to the intellectual and aesthetic possibilities of the

³ George Marcus, "What Comes (Just) After 'Post'? The Case of Ethnography." IN *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994, pp. 563-74. See also Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.

⁴ See Ivan Brady, "Anthropological Poetics." IN *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000, pp. 949-79.

text. As particular statements, however, they are all significant to me but would seem to be truly potluck in their possible connections to readers. Still, whether or not the particular day or month named counts for anything (perhaps suggesting holidays, seasons), some readers will "get" the overall set and read in a rich context because of their own histories. Some will just get a sense of the moment and move on to the words that follow. Some won't care and will scan on with a tidbit of meaning filed away. There is no fixed or "correct" level of aesthetic consumption, only different forms and levels of interpretation and satisfaction. But, this time keeping with conventional interests in history, the generalizable combination of time *and* place seems to be the key to the most evocative readings, aesthetic or otherwise.⁵ It is not just Paris, but French culture *in* Paris 1929—when the Left Bank was thriving with philosophers and the world was still proving possible what we thought were its impossibilities, including failure of the American stock market that year, and so forth.

For the aesthetic traveler, the non-archaeologist, the historian on holiday, the datelines can be passed through without much contemplation, moving in even flow on to the writings they cap. That does not wreck the text. It may be the best path for the poetic experiences intended. Being analytic about aesthetics under the same cover, however, *is* playing with fire and can certainly wreck the aesthetic experience. It is possible to destroy a poetic reading completely by analyzing it to death. So some caution is required to avoid defeating the primary purpose in this multi-purpose book, which is both to inform *and* entertain and to

⁵ The universality of the categories (not the cultural particulars) of time and space makes it difficult to separate the paths of their conjunctions. One could argue that place is probably the primary factor in dateline equations, if for no other reason than the fact there is considerable poetic power in specifying or implying place without specifying time, while the reverse seldom makes any sense at all, at least in the mechanics of composition. Cf. Robert Levine on Judaism: "The prophets teach that the day of the Lord is more sacred than the house of the Lord. Temporal settings, rather than spatial ones, frame the sacred Jewish texts" (*A Geography of Time*, New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 208).

do so largely by writing in the realm of the possible, not necessarily the actual.

Determining what is true versus what "rings true" versus what cannot be true in poetic writing also makes a difference of interpretation. Slipping into this web, we ask: Are the circumstances of each piece real (the author was actually there at that time)? Or fictional (the author was there only by inference, imagination being the only transport; temporality invented by the author, no such activity in our physical reality at that time)? Are the places actual locations (existing in the boss reality as occupied space, or once occupied space, and can be rediscovered by going there in person, touching the landscape, and meeting people, or meeting whatever is met by archaeology)?⁶ Let me answer by saying that I have taken advantage of the human capacity for artifice and embellished everything in one way or another. I have deliberately blurred genres and therefore mixed up a lot of things, including conventional reporting of the Truth, as a way of marking the boundaries or, in some cases, calling attention to their inherent fuzziness. Some of this work is verse. Knowing full well that poetry can be cast as prose or verse and that the boundary between them is therefore ambiguous at that level, some of what I have included here nonetheless is writing perhaps best described as prose (or description minus obvious or overriding tropes) in verse clothing. Poetic line phrasing flags the writing as "poetic" but does not necessarily make a poem. It gives one sign of a poem but does not necessarily transform the work into poetry in any particularly satisfying or conventional measure. That is a function of deeper structural work in metering or rhythm and form (but not necessarily rhyme) and the semiotics shared in writer/reader relations—of language somehow elevated to higher functions. By the same token, some of this writing is prose best described as poetry (precisely because of its tropes). Some of it is verse set against

⁶ For an exquisite rendering that blurs the boundaries of all of these strategic dimensions in a single text, see Dennis Tedlock's *Days from a Dream Almanac*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

conventional prose as a way of developing different story contexts and aspects of a common topic (jaguars, for example, as implied in "Predator" and its relationship to the trilogy of "Jaguar," "Spot of the Cat," and "Archaeology?").

It follows that some of the poetic circumstances in this book are authentic and valid, some are stretched to fit the context I was trying to produce in the piece, and some are obviously fictions in the conventional sense of that term. Limiting themselves to the habits of thought and established genres of their objectivities and therefore asking only the wrong questions for the purposes of this book, fact masters may want to know precisely which is which and they will be frustrated by the fictions. I make no apologies for that. The mix is a way to remind ourselves of the difficulties of ideological discernment and cultural calculation, of writing and representation, especially in cross-cultural settings. It is a way to re-explore the shadowed but continuous ground that seems to cleave erroneously into hard fences for disciplines, separating the fictional from the factual. Through some conspiracy of not crossing the field of our collective writings in the light of day, we do not (or do not want to) see that the fence is made of old straw. Fiction can be closer to life than some fact masters will allow, and practically everything can be represented both ways. In the wake of postmodern challenges to author-*ity* on these issues, I have taken both the daylight and the larger field of our writings seriously and tried to turn the sometimes frustrating process of winnowing truth from the chaff of experience back upon itself. I've tried to put it back in the chaff as poetic artifice and hope that it will not be disguised or reduced in the process—that it will be discoverable and re-discoverable as enriched knowledge through the commonalities and creativities of our experience as readers and writers. But even that has a curious link with our senses of time and place and the study of history and anthropology.

All writing is fictional, as Clifford Geertz once said about anthropology (and Hayden White about history), in the sense of being something constructed, something made through

interpretation, and never out of whole cloth. It is a mix of constraints, easily exaggerated by special interests. Working both sides to make the point, we can say that nothing comes purely from the imagination, on the one hand, and the degree to which any work is grounded in empirical reality, as it is usually argued, is easily overestimated, on the other. Like other domains in the academy (and life in general), anthropology and history follow suit. They are burdened with cultural and imaginative impositions in their attempts to be factual, to portray the world accurately as it "is" or presents itself to the observer who would be objective. Conversely, the novelist can take the same principle and pass over actuality in facts and behavior, arguing perhaps for a string of events never seen or heard before. But plausibility and the fundamentals of communication assure some grounding in empirical reality. The work would otherwise fail. The larger point is that interpretation is as necessary to life as breathing. The interpretive quotient can be constrained through language and method, but it cannot be avoided. The capacity to represent the world in any manner we desire is fundamental to culture. We can lie or tell the truth according to a variety of standards, most of which are culturally specific. The power of the imagination inherent in that makes us both good novelists and scientists, that is to say, creators and calculators of substance and time, pasts, presents, and futures. We are anthropological and historical narrators, storytellers all.

As an arbitrary slice of the universal categories of time and location, history in the particular (*of* something, *as* a partial narrative whose beginning and ending points are determined by the teller) is shot through with such constraints. On the continuum of time that can be read forward and backward, the common view is that making history is a one-way street. It looks back in time and compares that necessarily with interpretations of the present, but back is the focus nonetheless. Nothing is history until it has happened in the here and now, and it can't be "true" in any sense until it has a chance to pass us in time, going backwards. By contrast, going the other direction, what might be

called "future history" is fiction in every sense of the term. The future context in which I contemplate my own death in the "Dead Painting" poem (Ireland 2023), for example, takes away the conventional historical dimension—for now. The fact that I have already written it makes the writing event itself a kind of history, but not the argument of the text. That's a separate reality, a speculation, plainly a fiction, and out of historical time. "Probable" is probably the best truth hedge for the future. Science fiction is the extreme hedge, hard to assess as probable, and definitely not history. It can be poetry or a part of poetry, however, and does figure into the equation of "Para Donde Vas"—a narrative poem that has implied time in real places. It is a story that holds a promise of conventionally factual history, but the promise is not fulfilled. The expectation of ordinary reality is broken through poetic license, that is, by manipulating literary form and premise for creative ends.

Reversing directions again, to the extreme past as opposed to the speculative future, I've tried to do similar things with myth. Classic (or autochthonous) myth is to be discovered, read, internalized, translated, repeated, or in other ways explicated. It can be told in whole or in part and re-telling is always a kind of rewriting, a creative act by definition.⁷ But rewriting fundamentals of structure or message can change the category (e.g., to parody or other forms of narrative), so there are limits. The Western cultural bias against myth as something necessarily false only confuses the issue: not recognizing the inescapability of mythic structures in the first place, and holding the idea of

⁷ I refer here to the general cognitive process of creative mimesis. It is inherent in all forms of representation and translation, intentional or not. Overt recognition of its transformational properties is probably as old as orature itself and it shows up as a topic in various philosophical and literary discourses. Bertolt Brecht made much of it in his work on originality in theater. It is also institutionalized as storyteller functions in the Brazilian *Literatura de Cordel* (see Candace Slater, *Stories on a String*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Mexican *corridos* (see Américo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

new adaptations of older structures aside, nobody wants a "new" myth. The very concept is seen at best as an oxymoronic amusement and at worst as fakery. Even where the long run continuity of mythic writing with the defining narratives of our times is better understood and respected, recent writing posed as myth is still likely to be assigned to a special category of fiction or interpretation that only emulates more ancient histories and therefore depends on a prior or perhaps more highly generalized and cross-cultural version to enter the debate concerning historical accuracy and related truth claims (Mormons have taken this one on the chin for a long time). I've called to mind for possible criticism the knottiness of these issues most directly in "The Spring," "Fire Knees," "Gilbertese Warrior," and "Spot of the Cat"—each of which has a legitimate claim to authenticity but is nonetheless nested in the wax of my creativity—and again through the mix of history with mythic implications in the more imaginative framing and less authentic storylines of "Shipwreck" and "Para Donde Vas." A fair reading of these pieces can defend the argument that mythic writing doesn't have to be authentically or overtly ancient in text or context to be recognized and celebrated as such or to carry legitimate claims to the truth of action reported and social or moral lessons inferred. And it hardly needs to be said, as in the case of future oriented fiction or biblical precedents, that mythic writing can be poetry or a part of poetry and more—classic poetics. It is for the most part simply a matter of form and expectations.

In narratives about the past or present as well as expectations about the future, irrespective of discipline or cultural orientation, the truth is necessarily relative to what is seen as possible, rational, and desirable in the reality framework the observers use (and may prefer to any others)—a possible disparity illustrated by the competing perspectives in my ethnographically authentic long poem, "Pueblo Canyon," and the laconic pairing of "Midnight Swim" with "Letter from Laurie." Like life itself, war happens from different perspectives and everybody knows something about the range of variations and storied outcomes.

The soldier's view is not necessarily that of the sweetheart and, despite their linkages in time and space, their stories may never match. Each is in important ways necessarily "outsider" to the other. But juxtaposing these differences starkly should evoke a larger text in the reader, a creative reading and launching into larger realms, a closure of sorts anchored in the reader's personal beliefs, desires, and experiences, that is, in the cultural preparation the reader brings to the event regarding its personal and cultural implications. The wedding of writing to painting should also create a new text between the texts of the paintings and the words on the page. Not only can we construct time and place with amazing lucidity and realism from laconic cues; we can build whole narratives from mixed packages of them with equal facility. I've tried to exploit that prospect by presenting diverse texts that make some links obvious and some informational gaps conspicuous among written texts and between written texts and paintings, and that puts a special emphasis on comparative differences within and between works—anthropology's first principle.⁸

Nothing stands alone in language and no single form or genre can say it all. If anything, the present texts move in the other direction. They are intentionally plural and incomplete. On careful inspection, they should suggest more than they say, and

⁸ The original paintings are signed and dated in their interiors and in that sense display their own "histories." But (unlike the copyrights) that information is not equally visible on the plates as represented here. The signatures and dates have slipped largely from history to mystery as an artifact of the reproduction process for this book. Moreover, while the paintings imply specific locations by "showing" place, neither they nor their titles resolve the ambiguities of exactly where. Such lacunae further exemplify the unfightable thesis that ethnographic and biographical information is by definition incomplete, always laconic at some level, always inviting new readings, new interpretations, and new satisfactions, personal and otherwise, only in this case through very different forms. Overall, the paintings punctuate the external text without ever duplicating it exactly, at one level, while simultaneously opening up new paths of interpretation and exploration, at another, thereby adding yet another voice (and conception of beauty) to the author's as each unveils geographies of fieldwork in strange places.

like other relations between makers and mindful others in the world of print and paint, they should link up in a joint project. Continuity of theme and thesis can only transcend such gaps through the creative cooperation of presenter (writer, painter) and consumer (reader, viewer). I have steered toward my own preferred interpretations and conclusions in what I have said and the manner of its placement relative to other parts of the book, of course, but I have not made many of these connections explicit beyond the tropes and arguments of each individual piece. Storytellers and readers in search of larger contexts, emotional reinforcement of their own passions and prejudices about being in the world, and so on, will fill the gaps with their own material. Texts are made and remade with every exposure. They are not necessarily remade radically and there may be great consistency of message and meaning between a particular writer and readers. Successful communication and social coherence depend on that kind of prospect. But every individual reading is nonetheless a personal remake and therefore a candidate for reinvention at new and hitherto undiscovered levels of comprehension, criticism, and satisfaction. That's the way the system works, no matter what penchants the reader brings to the project.

It takes no genius to conclude that there are larger thoughts and patterns of interpretation and levels of satisfaction to be had in the present work. I have offered no overriding analytic thesis beyond these few introductory comments on the nature of writing and reading in shadowed territory, and what is conventional in this writing can justify an equally conventional reception. But this is also writing laced with a twist or two on differences in life and culture and the various forms we use to represent our experiences with them. It raises some uncommon flags in the alleys and backwashes of genres and forms that academics in particular have come to depend on for predictable (or less troublesome) readings, if not for scholarly dissertations on the nature of the world and our place in it. The writing in this book represents other ways to talk about the same things. The focus on time and place and story-making fits these larger

interests and, more particularly, the variable frames and forms of experience attached to Darwin's Reef—the book, the poem, the experience of being there, the scoring of comparable experiences for different readers, different divers in different moments, my time, your time. Where you go with it depends largely on where you start, what you seek or perhaps need to find. Anthropology and history are all over this book but you may have to work to find them in some cases. A closer look may let you find them on several levels at once. The anthropology and history of the Reef poem, for example, are staked in part by the dateline, coded in my account of the ecology of the place, in the social relations entailed by and revealed about the events reported, in the self-revelations and other snippets of autobiographical identity contained in the text, and in the act of writing about these things, the cultural and cognitive processes of production itself. They are further constituted in important ways by what we (you and I) make of this work in the staggered time frames and largely open loop relationships of author and reader—some of which may be closed by reviews and other forms of feedback. There is also a history or two to be had in the review process, of course, and the culture of it all—representing the world through research, writing, reading, reviewing, and maybe even press parties—is fair game for any ethnographer. That is part of what makes The Reef such a rich place. It is a state of mind and more, and you can get there from here. Spill some thought on these pages and rehydrate the traveling. I've put notes as guideposts on some of it and left other parts alone. Make what you will of each piece and the overall, aesthetically and analytically, remembering that context is practically everything for determining meaning. My sincerest wish is that you will find pleasure in the journey.

IB, Fountain Hills, Arizona, June 9, 2003