

C.J. MARTIN POETICS OF THE PILE

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I.

One thing is one thing. One hundred things are one hundred things. One thing plus one thing is two things. One thing plus one hundred things is one hundred one things. One thing is not a pile. For any number n , if n things are not a pile, then the addition of just one more thing does not make them a pile. But in each case, then, we can never get to the pile, because each thing added leaves us just as much without a pile as before. Where then, when, then, do we arrive at the pile? Between number and too many to number (which must be a number, but must be a number we can't know) is Martin's poetics of the pile:

So CITY was mourning & they missed it,
mourning but not really answering.
A toy, a doll's eyes, for I have
a head now, too, where all manner --
instead they live upon have until now.
Not a dozen mourn on the road to Carna.
7/2d, 1882, "Down in the woods":
If I do it at all I must delay no longer.
(CITY: Vigilance, 2007)

Certainly not a breath-line. Against the best of breath-line poetics (after Olson, Creeley, etc.), the end-stops (, . -- . . : .) are glaring, and the lines as units sit more or less on top of each other with little syntactic-semantic torque – the hallmark, if there is one, of the breath-line. Torque, a manipulation of the line against reasonable expectations of its semantic completion, is a register of the time of the poem. The breath-line poem, the torqued line, happens always and over again in its own time.

In the above poem, though, vertical development suggests less a passage of particular, particularized time than it does a simple accretion of discrete units stacked, as I said, one upon the other. The first and second lines, as a sentence hinged on a comma, are their own unit. While that hinge of the comma suggests one function of the line-break (a place where the modifying clause gets added), the movement from the second line to the third –

mourning but not really answering.
A toy, a doll's eyes, for I have

– is to move from one frame of semantic reference to another. "CITY" and "they" disappear as subjects, and "I" appears as it gains head and eyes with the poem's movement from the third and into its fourth lines. This "I," though, is no more useful, in the ordinary ways, for organizing the experience of the poem than breath, torque, or time.

Though the first two and second two sets of lines read as pairs, the movement from one pair to the next is not to move forward in time as an experience curated by the poem. Nothing, other than that one set happens first and the other happens second, signals that these two sets should be understood as subsequent, or even related. In fact, the shift in frame of reference suggests the opposite. But not a relation of opposition, rather, of accident, indifference?

But the poem didn't happen, one senses, and especially in the deliberateness of the fifth line, but was carefully, carefully, carefully made. As the poem moves to its completion, the hint of the discrete promised by lines one and two, and three and four, comes to full bloom in the last four lines (and reflects back on the first four, bringing their hint to flower). Neither the line-break nor the aleatorical nor the processual nor the operational, the most interesting things begin to happen as they've been hammered into the middle of the lines: after the double-en at the end of the fourth line (another hinge proposing non-relation), lines are both unassailably complete-in-themselves –

Not a dozen mourn on the road to Carna.
[. . .]
If I do it at all I must delay no longer.

– and radically refracted, composite, constructed –

instead they live upon have until now.
[. . .]
7/2d, 1882, "Down in the woods":

And in no moment is a whole described or implied. What I want to be clear about is the complete (and stunning) non-relation of the poem to itself.

If I can pretend to make a later poem in the same series speak for itself, for this poetics, it is something like a "Bushel mechanism," a gathering to bulk, and not to kind. The poem:

Bushel mechanism --
else than mechanical drift,
if to increase the between
(touch & thing):
this means drafts, chances.

Minnows in the house.

Bright doll annealing

"Bushel mechanism" is better, but let me call it a "soritical [*soros*: Gr. for 'heap'] poetics." This means drafts, chances. A soritical poetics brings both together, not in a poetics of process, transparent practice, or auto-commentary, but in a petition for the worth of the pile, an appeal to the power of the vague. The poems here come close to the state of a pile – we could find a source for the quotes, a context for the statements, a reference for the dates, but then where would the poems be?

II.

The pile is a special set of relations. It is, in fact, a relation by way of non-relation. If relation is predicated on one of the simplest and most fundamental properties of the thing (its number, i.e. that it *is* one thing, and not two, or three, etc.), then the pile is first and foremost

an effacement of that property. A pile asks that the things that make it up forego their property of number. If they retain their property of number, however, then the pile is not a pile – it is a collection of n things, where n is a number that we know.

Thinking the pile tends to think *toward* the pile: One thing is not a pile. If we add one thing to that one thing, the thinking goes, the two things that result are not a pile. The same with an additional thing, added to those two things, and so on, *ad infinitum*. As logic has it, then, we can never arrive at the pile. So what to call these papers, these books here on my desk? Logic would have that my experience of them as “pile” is wrong – they are something else, then, obscured by the easy (or lazy) conceptual category of pile. If I took the time, I could say exactly what they were, without recourse to “pile.”

But a soritical regard for the papers on my desk would allow my experience of “pile” to stand, and it would take issue with the idea that numbering the papers (destroying the pile, destroying the *experience* of pile) is the correct way to know them. Again from *CITY*:

If ‘A line just distinguishes it,’ duration puts it over--first locally--then gathers piles in pans & barrows, quits altogether. For reason of too long absent, to whom relation’s a place of universal thralldom... So called because only in decomposition is her thought commensurable to a law of form. The world of objects matters urges. Bother. -- WORM as function, maybe, but minus proximity (which was recent) so finally clear of its uncertain residue. Remains here, herself, by cultivating methods of citing leaving. And so for her leaving family, city.

This is to think the pile from the perspective of the pile, not from the perspective of the thing, and this, in turn, is to respect both pile and thing. Starting from the pile, the logic is undone: one thing taken from the pile does not erase the pile. Nor does it make two piles (one a pile of one-thing, the other a pile-minus-one). The pile remains, unchanged, when the thing is removed, and the thing then comes into relief in the senses of the viewer, standing sharply as the sign of what it was formerly a part: the grain of sand, taken from a pile of sand, owes its discrete appearance to the pile behind it.

A soritical practice, then, doesn’t try to *build* a world by adding thing to thing, but instead to *preserve* it, though the practice may appear to be of fragments, stutters, incompletions, starts and stops, drafts, chances. The practice is to select, present the grains, one by one. Not in the effort to make a pile, but to preserve what remains unrepresented *as pile*. Like Wittgenstein will say of the *Tractatus*, this writing is composed of two parts, one being all of that which it says, and the other being all that has been left out:

IT ISN’T A SENTENCE WERE OVELY, BUT
they’d been in augur over’t.
As at century’s scrap (in An American
Exodus): were incessant grand-
father’d, who - were - each -
other’s – needs –
becoming

[. . .]

THE NATURALLY TRIED (BUT IT HOLDS
its lowered virtue)
ever collecting kind.
For when – and then as much as –
was at least something,
slowly. – Rigs it, blown.

(*Lo, Bittern*: Atticus/Finch, 2008, Buffalo, NY)

Thinking from the pile, not towards it, no amount of things taken from what is already understood as a pile will destroy the pile, as long as the number of things taken is known, and the starting point is, in fact and especially experience, a pile. Where language was once structure, then post-structural rupture, is now pile, an experience to be curated. More than a citational practice, more than a documentary practice, more than an aleatorical practice (all of which have hints in Martin's work), the soritical offers a re-thinking of relation, a re-attachment of the poem to the world. Like the grain of sand against the pile, a soritical poem achieves itself only against the backdrop of the inviolable yet fragile pile from which it was drawn, and at the same time is the sign of (makes visible) that pile.

It is the regard for experience in the soritical, in Martin's practice, that is so important. Experience of the pile, perhaps my experience itself as a pile, is what makes a pile a pile. Nothing else. The pile is vague, and this is precisely its strength, because in its vagueness is a special sort of care. Martin's practice is to name the grains, to select them, bring them forward, one by one by one by one by one, and the resultant poems testify most to where they have, where they must have come from. And this is a hopeful practice, because to think the poem in relation to the pile, to propose the pile first, and then the thing, is to save the one from itself: after Martin's practice, it seems that even the one (that if we added to other ones would never make a pile), when thought from the perspective of the pile itself, always refers to the pile. That is, one is one, but is never alone:

2 LITTLE HEAPS PARTITION:
behind all positive lengths, return-
ing me, a hedge doles
the leaving out