On Obscure Writing

One should never impose limits or rules on creative writing. Those who do, generally obey political taboos or atavistic fears: actually, a written text no matter how it is written, is less dangerous than is commonly thought; the famous judgment passed on Silvio Pellico’s My Prisons, which supposedly harmed Austria ‘more than a lost battle’, is hyperbolic. It is a matter of practical observation that a book or a story, whether its intentions be good or bad, are essentially inert and innocuous objects; also in their most ignoble incarnations (for example, the Nazi-tinged sex and pathologic-pornographic hybrids) can only cause scant harm, certainly inferior to that produced by alcohol, smoking or corporate stress. Their intrinsic weakness is aggravated by the fact that today all writing is smothered in a few months by the mob of other writings which push up behind it. Furthermore, rules and limitations, being determined historically, tend to change often: the history of all literatures is full of episodes in which rich and valid works were opposed in the name of principles which later proved to be much more ephemeral than the works themselves; from it one can deduce that many precious books must have disappeared without leaving a trace, having been defeated in the never-ending struggle between those who write and those who prescribe how one should write. From the heights of our permissive epoch the trials (real trials in court) of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and D. H. Lawrence, seem as grotesque and ironic as the trial against Galileo, so wide does the gap
between judges and judged appear today: the former bound to their time, the latter alive for all foreseeable futures. In short, to legislate for the narrator is to say the least, useless. This said, and therefore emphatically renouncing any regulative, prohibitive or punitive claim, I would like to add that in my opinion one should not write in an obscure manner, because a piece of writing has all the more value and all the more hope of diffusion and permanence, the better it is understood and the less it lends itself to equivocal interpretations.

It is obvious that perfectly lucid writing presupposes a totally conscious writer, and this does not correspond to reality. We are made up of ego and id, spirit and flesh, and furthermore nucleic acids, traditions, hormones, remote and recent experiences and traumas; therefore we are condemned to carry from crib to grave, a Doppelganger, a mute and faceless brother who nevertheless is co-responsible for our actions, and so for all of our pages. It is known that no author deeply understands what he has written and all authors have had the opportunity of being astonished by the beautiful and awful things that the critics have found in their works and that they did not know they had put there; many books contain plagiarisms, conceptual or verbal, of which the authors declare in good faith they were unaware. This is a fact one cannot fight against: this source of unknowability and irrationality which each of us harbours must be accepted, even authorised to express itself in its (necessarily obscure) language, but should not be considered the best or only source of expression. It is not true that the only authentic writing is that which ‘comes from the heart’, and which actually comes from all the distinct ingredients of consciousness mentioned above. This time-honoured opinion is based on the presupposition that the heart which ‘dictates inside’ is an organ different from that of reason and more noble, and that the language of the heart is the same for everyone, which it is not. Far from being universal in time and space, the language of the heart is capricious, contaminated, and as unstable as fashion, of which it is indeed
a part: nor can one firmly maintain that it is the same within
the confines of a country and an epoch. To put it differently, it
isn’t a language at all, or at the most a vernacular, an argot, if
not an individual invention.

So he who writes the language of the heart can turn out to
be indecipherable, and it is then right to ask oneself what was
the purpose of his writing: in fact (I would say that this is a
widely acceptable postulate) writing serves to communicate,
transmit information or feelings from mind to mind, from
place to place and from time to time. And he who is not
understood by anyone does not transmit anything, he cries in
the desert. When this happens the well-intentioned reader must
be reassured: if he does not understand the text it is the
author’s fault, not his. It is up to the writer to make himself
understood by those who wish to understand him: it is his
trade, writing is a public service and the willing reader must
not be disappointed.

As for this reader – and I have the strange impression of
having him alongside me as I write – I must admit that I have
slightly idealised him. He is similar to the perfect gases of
thermo-dynamics, perfect only inasmuch as their behaviour is
perfectly foreseeable on the basis of simple laws, whereas real
gases are more complicated. My ‘perfect’ reader is not a
scholar but neither is he an ignoramus; he does not read
because he has to, nor as a pastime, nor to make a splash in
society, but because he is curious about many things, wishes to
choose among them and does not wish to delegate this choice
to anyone; he knows the limits of his competence and educa-
tion, and directs his choices accordingly; in the present case he
has with good will chosen my books and would experience
irritation or pain if he did not understand line by line what I
had written, indeed, have written for him: in fact I write for
him and not for the critics, nor for the powerful of the Earth,
nor for myself. If he did not understand me, he would feel
unjustly humiliated, and I would be guilty of a breach of con-
tract.
Here it is necessary to confront an objection: sometimes one writes (or speaks) not to communicate but to give vent to tension, or joy, or pain, and then one also cries in the desert, moans, laughs, sings, and howls.

For those who howl, provided they have valid reasons for doing so, one must have understanding: weeping and mourning whether restrained or theatrical, are beneficial because they alleviate pain. Jacob howls over Joseph’s bloodied coat; in many civilisations the howled mourning is ritual and prescribed. But then the howl is an extreme recourse, good for the individual as tears, inert and uncouth if understood as a language, because that by definition it is not: the inarticulate is not articulate, noise is not sound. For this reason I am fed up with the praises of texts which (I quote at random) ‘sound at the limit of the ineffable, the non-existent, the whine of an animal’. I’m tired of ‘dense magmatic imposters’, of ‘semantic refusals’, and stale innovations. White pages are white, and it is best to call them white; if the king is naked, it is honest to say that he is naked.

Personally I am also tired of the praise lavished in life and death on Ezra Pound, who was perhaps even a great poet, but in order to make sure he would not be understood even wrote in Chinese at times, and I am convinced that his poetic obscurity had the same root as his belief in the superman, which led him first to Fascism and then to self-alienation: both germinated from his contempt for the reader. Perhaps the American court which judged Pound mentally ill was right: a writer by instinct, he must have been an abominable thinker and that is confirmed by his political behaviour and his maniacal hatred of bankers. Now whoever does not know how to reason must be cured, and within the limits of possibility respected, even if, like Ezra Pound, he lends himself to making Nazi propaganda against his own country at war with Hitler’s Germany: but he must not be praised, nor held up as an example, because it is better to be sane than insane. The effable is preferable to the ineffable, the human word to the animal whine.
It is not by chance that the two least decipherable German poets, Trakl and Celan, both died as suicides, separated by two generations. Their common destiny makes one think about the obscurity of their poetry as a pre-killing, a not-wanting-to-be, a flight from the world of which the intentional death was the crown. They must be respected because their ‘animal whine’ was dreadfully motivated: for Trakl, by the wreckage of the Habsburg empire, in which he believed, in the maelstrom of the First World War; for Celan, a German Jew, who by a miracle survived the German slaughter, by the uprooting and unappeasable anguish in the face of triumphant Death. For Celan, above all, because he is our contemporary (1920–1970), we must speak with more seriousness and greater responsibility.

It is evident that his song is tragic and noble, but confusedly so: to penetrate it is a desperate enterprise for the common reader but also for the critic. Celan’s obscurity is neither contempt for the reader nor expressive inadequacy, nor lazy abandonment to the flow of the unconscious: it truly is a reflection of the obscurity of his fate and his generation, and it grows ever denser around the reader, gripping him as in an ice-cold iron vice, from the raw lucidity of Death Flight (1945) to the atrocious chaos without a glimmer of light of his last compositions. This darkness grows from page to page until the last inarticulate babble consternates like the rattle of a dying man, and in fact that is just what it is. It attracts us as chasms attract us, but at the same time it also defrauds us of something that should have been said and was not, and so it frustrates and turns us away. I believe that Celan the poet should be meditated upon and pitied rather than imitated. If his is a message, it gets lost in the ‘background noise’: it is not a communication, it is not a language, or at most it is a dark and truncated language precisely like that of a person who is about to die and is alone, as we all will be at the point of death. But since we the living are not alone, we must not write as if we were alone. As long as we live we have a responsibility:
we must answer for what we write, word by word, and make sure that every word reaches its target.

For the rest, talking to one’s fellow man in a language that he cannot understand may be the bad habit of some revolutionaries, but it is not at all a revolutionary instrument: it is on the contrary, an ancient repressive artifice, known to all churches, the typical vice of our political class, the foundation of all colonial empires. It is a subtle way of imposing one’s rank: when Fra Cristoforo (in Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*) says, ‘*Omnia munda mundis*’ in Latin to Fra Fazio, who has no Latin, the latter ‘at hearing those words pregnant with a mysterious meaning, and pronounced so resolutely ... it seemed that in them must be contained the solution to all his doubts. He calmed down, and said ‘Enough! You know more than I do.’”

Nor is it true that one can express only through verbal obscurity that other obscurity of which we are the children, and which lies in our depths. It is not true that disorder is necessary to depict disorder; it is not true that the chaos of the written page is the best symbol of the ultimate chaos to which we are fated: to believe this is a typical vice of our uncertain century. As long as we live, and whatever fate may have been assigned to us, or we have chosen, there is no doubt that the better the quality of our communication, the more useful (and agreeable) to ourselves and others we will be and the longer we will be remembered. He who does not know how to communicate, or communicates badly, in a code that belongs only to him or a few others, is unhappy, and spreads unhappiness around him. If he communicates badly deliberately, he is wicked or at least a discourteous person, because he imposes labour, anguish, or boredom on his readers.

Understandably, for the message to be valid, clarity is a necessary but not sufficient condition: one can be clear and boring, clear and useless, clear and untruthful, clear and vulgar, but these are subjects for another discussion. If one is not clear there is no message at all, the animal whine is acceptable
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coming from animals, from the dying, the mad and the desperate: the healthy and whole man who adopts it is a hypocrite or a fool, and condemns himself to not having any readers. Discourse among men in the tongue of men is preferable to the animal whine, and it is hard to see why it should be less poetic than in the whine.

But, I repeat, these are preferences of mine, not standards. Whoever writes is free to choose the language or non-language that suits him best, and everything is possible: writing which is obscure for its own author may be luminous and open for him who reads; and the writing not understood by its contemporaries may become clear and illustrious decades and centuries later.