

October 26, 1985

Dear Peter:

I am tardy here, but that was beyond my help. The most difficult impediment was the sudden hospitalization of Eleanor's sister with pneumonia -- not the best ailment for a lady with oxygen for emphysema. She has recovered enough to go home.

Now for the book. I have been reading it -- first for the compelling interest that it evokes, and later more slowly, and carefully, piece by piece. Not as a whole, but piece by piece. I came away with the conviction that the author is indeed a writer, a real one. For there is great vividness and movement here.

Now I must say that I am not sure that the writer has written poems -- in any final sense. I do not mean the degree of goodness or badness here, unit by unit. Prose in a narrative can be compelling, vivid, evocative, etc. It can underlie the facts of narrative or scene, can make the inner meaning available, can be essential to the final, most significant, meaning of the whole. But prose works by diffusion, I might hazard.

Poetry does not. Not characteristically, though sometimes, especially in long narrative or dramatic pieces. In poetry -- in the sense of the shorter forms anyway -- we do not observe the diffusion, but by the focus and embodiment of meaning. No, at the best it becomes meaning, at least the dramatization of meaning as abstractly conceived.

In poetry the reader (and of course the writer) may be said to embody, physically, the meaning, the drama for any poem, or almost any poem, can be thought of as a drama, however remote). There is the muscular play, usually unconscious and however incipient, the strong sense of actual articulation (even when the poem is read silently, vowel play felt, pause and thrust, pace, and God knows what else. The first example to pop into my mind is from Antony and Cleopatra, one line, after Actium, Antony speaking:

Unarm, Eros; the long day's task is done,

What is said here may be paraphrased:

Discard your weapon, Eros; we've had a tough day