

Thoughts on Thoreau and Newborns (20 January 2015)

Ordinarily, I am, and for most of my adult life have been, very uncomfortable making generalizations about the motives, much less the thoughts, of others, individually or in the aggregate, being myself always wary of labels applied to myself or others, tags that always diminish their subjects, lenses that invariably fog their focal points, yet fascinated by the results of polls and surveys and statistical accountings of the ways and means of the mass, the tribe, the class, caste, party, faction, or what have you.

Yet, we all do, as we must, classify, group, bunch, lump and otherwise abstract our fellow humans, our all-in-the-same-boat sentient companions, maybe the more so, or more automatically, in times of stress or when we're otherwise out of sorts. However that may be, I've long been struck, especially since my graduate school studies in folklore and mythology, by how much we gear our lives to summings-up: the proverbs, saws, maxims, sayings, charms and buzzwords, the "god-terms" (Kenneth Burke called them) our dialectics culminate in, the clichés we try to steady ourselves with in the roiling waters we need to navigate on our way downstream, between the banks as it were, towards the unknown mouth of the undefinable current we're in.

At any rate, metaphors and images aside, for the past day, following the birth of my (first?) granddaughter, and this morning reading some commendations of several young poets' new books, I'm much aware that my thoughts have been coalescing around a lot of those folksy profundities that I've been marinated in my whole life. Among other quasi-conclusions, I note that my own writing, especially that of my more recent declining years—deliberately didactic, trying, like so many of my generation and those earlier generations looked to by mine, *To Be of Use* (as Marge Piercy titled one of her 60s-nostalgia books), while hoping obviously with little success to avoid the sententious, the pedantic, the paternalistic, dictatorial and authoritative, the banal—often devolves to little more than riffing on the commonplaces passed on to us from those gone before.

How feeble, how quixotic, how puerile and inane the innovative, the original, the individual, the "tradition of the new" as Rosenberg labeled it, seems in light of this overwhelming heritage of wisdom and lore, this "tale of the tribe" as per Pound. Of necessity, we try to orient ourselves in it, to keep our heads above water, our sense of person coherent, to steer some satisfying (or at least survivalist) course, narrow our perspective, select which stars we'll go by, cobble together what we will call our ancestral traces, see only those some dominating part of us wishes us to see.

This morning, looking over my left shoulder at yesterday—the 2 AM birth of Ciara Gregory, the news and memorials of acquaintances' deaths received later in the day, the reading and writing directed toward at last finishing my decade-and-a-half and ostensibly pound-foolish *opus poeticus*, beginning now that the sap is running to prune the fruit trees in the orchard, mayhem and machinations on the airwaves, the evening's enjoyment in town of friends' music interspersed with the rubbing of elbows and fond memories with more or less inebriated companions-of-the-moment more or less also listening to (faces toward yet hardly facing) the music—well aware of my own recent *faux pas*, bumbblings and self-embarrassments, my

apparently increasingly frequent missteps and fumbles (not only old-dog incompetence at new technologies, ineptness at new riddles, conundra and mind-twisters, but loss of proficiency at old tricks, forgetting of old lessons)—looking around me at the young and younger working out the ancient Chinese puzzles, the modernistic Rubik’s cubes, reinventing the wheels, inheriting the same old thesauri glimmering like family jewels under the thick smoke in the tent, engulfed by so much of the same old *scheiss*, recycling the plasticity—I’m reminded of some words of Thoreau, that late-Enlightenment master of aphorism who celebrated and added to said tradition of epigram, wit, *bon mot* and riveting quip.

For instance, “The memory of my country spoils my walk.” And in “Civil Disobedience” quoting Confucius: “If a State is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame.” And his better-known, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” But the one most relevant (that infamous 60s criterion) to me this morning comes a few lines later in the “Economy” chapter of *Walden*:

“Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons, as they must believe. . . . I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose.”

Well said, young whippersnapper, and more power to you. To the purpose. To the purpose.