

The Real Substance of Nightmare: The Struggle of Poetry with History¹

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History has the cruel reality of a nightmare, and the grandeur of man consists in his making beautiful and lasting works out of the real substance of that nightmare. Or, to put it another way, it consists in transforming that nightmare into vision; in freeing ourselves from the shapeless horror of reality—if only for an instant—by means of creation (Paz 1985:95).

I

As an illustrative example of a poet's encounter with history, Wopko Jensma's writing offers opportunity for reflection upon concerns and tensions which characterised the 1960s and which emerged in his poetry in the 1970s. During these two decades Jensma was in his twenties and thirties, the time when he produced the graphic and poetic work which gives him his presence as artist and poet in our cultural midst.

Acknowledged by all who have read his work as remarkable for his capacity to demonstrate South African experience from multiple perspectives, Jensma offers an insight into his broad inclusiveness when he suggests in his autobiographical poem, 'Spanner in the What? Works' (of which only the opening lines are quoted), that to be a person in anything like a full sense of that term in South Africa requires multiple births and multiple deaths:

i was born 26 july 1939 in ventersdorp
i found myself in a situation

i was born 26 july 1939 in sophiatown
i found myself in a situation

i was born 26 july 1939 in district six
i found myself in a situation

i was born 26 july 1939 in welkom
i found myself in a situation (Jensma 1977:6f).

¹ This chapter is an amended version of an article published in *New Contrast* 72,18, Summer, 4 (1990).

If one looks at the three collections of Jensma's poetry—which is not easy to do as all are now out of print—one finds a diversity of languages, forms, identities and histories unequalled in South African literature. Reading through the collection of poetry, with woodcuts and collages placed among the poems, one is compelled to jump from language to language and from dialect to dialect, often within a single poem. A further notable feature is that the poems are dramatic presentations of voices which articulate their sense of reality. By this means, the speaker's history is reflected in the speaker's condition, for the people of the poetry are what experience and circumstance have made them. The most common condition is that which has been generated in diverse forms by relationships between those who are oppressed and those who oppress them.

That in itself says both little and much, but the hideous permutations of such relationships are key experiences of the 1960s for a sensibility such as Jensma's. Whether the voices in the poetry emerge from poverty, complacency, confusion or guilt (for example), those voices reflect the obsessions, preoccupations and nightmares generated by an excess of power over the lives of others by some, and by the absence of power in others to determine their own lives. Thus the forces which impinge upon the lives of those who speak in the poems are often brutal, crude, inflexible and resonate with felt immutability.

The diversity of the poetry is more than one of content, such as the race or class position of the speaker, or the physical context in which the speaker is located. Jensma's poetry draws on European techniques such as surrealism, dadaism and other twentieth-century resources to dramatise South African experiences. In addition to the attempt at reconciling African experience with European avant-garde, Jensma's poetry reflects pervasive presences of European, American and South African musical forms, especially jazz.

From an historical point of view, Jensma's poetry, in its movements across divisions of race, class, language and culture, is a significant counter-attack upon the barriers and distinctions which were built into South African society with savage persistence by political, economic and cultural interests during the 1960s. At a time when repression by systems of grand apartheid were least coherently opposed within the country since the resistance of the 1950s, Jensma began writing in ways that caused uncertainty about his identity and which transcended those categories peculiar to dominant South African practice. But perhaps the most distinctive achievement of the poetry is that it goes beyond identification, in its focus of sympathy, with the oppressed. The speakers in the poems are often both the oppressors and the oppressed, and are victims who share an essentially common situation. Were Jensma's analysis to stop there, he would have gone only as far as a broad humanitarianism, no matter how finely his poems appear to catch such obvious concern. What he traces is the damage done to those who participate willingly and helplessly in brutal manifestations of ra-

cial capital. Nowhere does he hint at structures which might provide the succour that people so desperately need when assailed by that system and, in particular, he posits no hidden utopia (such as refuge in the countryside) by which that damage could be judged and which thereby might offer some silent alternative. Jensma is only too familiar with what rural life, especially that upon white-owned farms and in rural towns, has become. Jensma makes it clear that the pastoral dream no longer exists and will never exist for those who grub in the detritus of the city or whose lives disintegrate in rural slums. Perhaps most important of all, neither the sensitivity to the other nor to self, nor the sharp wince of being alive are dependent upon a sense of hope or the promise of a future. The pressing presence of need and circumstance give the immediate a pungency and a poignancy in which the stink of life is asserted.

The temptation to applaud such an achievement must be checked by the price which has been paid for it. In the process of registering with uncanny accuracy a multitude of South African experiences, Wopko Jensma has lost the ability to write poetry. By extending himself across the barriers which criss-crossed South African society, he forfeited his coherence as a writer and, in effect, exploded his poetic centre.

II

The degree to which racial consciousness was forced upon South Africans is evident everywhere in Jensma's poetry. The claims for the benefits of racial identity under apartheid are shown to have no existential validity whatever and instead, the disintegration caused by such a system is profound. In the poem 'I Come', the presence of black and white voices in each others' dreams is dramatised. The dominant voice is white, whispering down the labyrinths of their joint history, tightening the nightmare of their racial juxtaposition with unnerving inexorability. The result, as Peter Horn has pointed out, is that 'the double-bind which ensnares us all' is a dream-world in which 'everything is just lies' (Horn 1977:118).

I Come

1	2
i am white and brutal	you lie hidden
i come to you after death	in the corridors of my fear and leave you completely
deserted	smelling of blood
a little tenderness	i've plucked out your eyes
a little care	i've smashed in your teeth
only hardens my heart	i've peeled off your skin

a gentle bayonet	but they don't believe
a breeze of bullets	- everything is just lies
is the voice of my existence	but they don't believe
i did not hear you	that i call you brother
i wont listen	
i did not hear a thing	you lie hidden
	in the corridors of my fear
i am white and brutal	smelling of blood
i come to you after death	
and leave you completely deserted	(Jensma 1973a:63f).

In this poem, Jensma brings to the surface one perspective upon age-old interdependencies within relations of power. The silent black voice is both confirmatory and revealing. While the white voice prowls, infests and asserts, the black figure has to endure invasion, exhortation and, most acutely of all, to being used as justification for the white nightmare. The white unconscious now needs the monster it has made of itself and of the other so as to provide itself with identity, validity and reason for existence.

Reduced to abstraction, the poem confirms what is rather obvious. Yet the palpability of the poetry presupposes an attentiveness to voices in society by the poet which goes beyond analysis of the relations between those voices. Both figures suffer and that suffering, though different, is recognised and understood. The erotic suggestions in the poem confirm the centrality of the acknowledgements made by the white voice and imply (in a necessarily perverse form) a shared predicament. And a historical dilemma is here painfully evident: to what extent are individuals, as inheritors and bearers of history, responsible for the degree to which their present is so dauntingly determined? The reduction of people to 'i am white and brutal' and to 'you lie hidden/ in the corridors of my fear/smelling of blood' does not happen within a single lifetime.

To the solitary but joint dreaming of 'I Come' must be added the effects of 'resettlement' upon the vast numbers of people who had been relocated in the creation of 'homelands' (disintegrating themselves as apartheid's structures decayed) as reflected in the minimalist poem 'Limehill Aftermath':

cos's bloat belly
'f only mealie meal

cos's dark stare
'n a comers

cos 'e only fears
'n pines away

cos 'e can't shout
we toss side to side

cos 'e lift 's fists
we wan' 'e'v'n here 'n now (Jensma 1973b:18).

Like their language, the human figures blur into clots, fragments and semi-random clusters, and they mouth contortedly their anguish, which eventually collapses into a demand for a hopeless ideal. Here Jensma presents an instance of what occurs to people when the intermediate is removed. These people had been uprooted from places of generational continuity and were dumped in a location in which the old and the very young died off almost immediately (thus destroying the past and the future) and are in this way. These people were translated from a community into a decaying collective of spasmodic gestures.

In poems such as 'I Come' (Jensma 1973a:63f) and 'Limehill Aftermath' (Jensma 1973b:18), it is possible to experience the linked effects of enforced division and collectivity. The deepest and most sustaining elements of community (read in all possible senses) have been destroyed. History has triumphed utterly.

The issue raised earlier about the historical dilemma created by inherited situations is given special point when dependency upon the reality of others becomes a political, personal and psychological absolute, and when escape from such dependency is prevented by the manifold agencies of state repression, as we find in 'Ja Baas':

1
'n renoster is 'n nors vent. meneer hier—
rye skedels, gekatalogiseer, op rakke (spykers in
my keel)
laat ons jou geheue, in alle redelikheid
oophark
nou, luister mooi hoe ek die bordjie sop opslurp
 luister na die sirene
 probeer nou deur jou gewete loop
 probeer voel hoe die visse jou vleis vreet
van renosters gepraat: is jy 'n suid-AFRIKANER?

2
16 desember en 'n skottel bloed op tafel
die karkas van afrika hang in-tempel
hallelujas onder koepelblou
'n skermutseling iewers
ek trommel my vingers op my propvol maag

3

ek is vredevors hier
ek wik en beskik
ek beshuit wie vrek

julle koppe rol rose van ranke

julle eet klippe vir brood

ek is vredevors hier
ek ken harde kontant
lek my gat (Jensma 1973a:9).

This poem is a guided tour by and of a perfect specimen of an oppressor, South African variety. With language as delicate as a meat-cleaver, he displays his knowledge, his trophies, his obsessions and his power. Notice the silence and the passivity of the listener, for even 'spykers in my keel' is an internal observation. Lumbering as he does through his exhibits, the 'baas' draws in the listener with the eager deftness of an interrogator ('laat ons jou geheue, in alle redelikheid/oophark'), guiding his prisoner ('luister ... luister ... probeer ... probeer') along the path of disintegration. Mixed with this is the tone of the passionate analyst who, in opening up a specimen, demands conformity to type: 'van renosters gepraat: is jy 'n suid-AFRIKANER?' (Jensma 1973a:9)

The world of the 'baas' is a closed one, as section 2 of the poem suggests. Ritual, icon, thanksgiving, justificatory violence (trivial to this consciousness) and a full stomach complete this complacent pantheon. As overlord ('vredevors', with its ironic reference to peacekeeping) this figure has powers of life and death over others. Notice too the modulation from the inclusive 'ons' when he begins the process of dissection, to 'julle' when he dismisses the mass of the powerless, and the final domination of the absolute pronoun 'ek' in the final section.

What else can be said in response to this tirade but 'Ja Baas' (Jensma 1973a:9)? But the contempt which this self-exposure reveals is not confined to the speaker. It smears off onto the listener and reaches beyond the brutality which drenches every thought and act. This is not the only view of Afrikaners which Jensma reflects in his poetry, but this is clearly the kind of universe from which he recoiled into an alternative reality based upon a much greater identification with those who have had to endure such savage tyranny.

That recoil has been finely observed by Mafika Gwala (1988:80f):

Wopko Jensma. For a long time I thought he was a black So when I met Wopko one evening, edged against his self-withdrawal, I could only think of one thing: his

white world was killing him, as if out to destroy him. Perhaps he had refused for too long to be the white he was expected to be. Another hurting thought flushed my mind. It was the gnawing feeling that with such cruel reality as we have in this country—with worse to come—it was futile to engage in existentialist resistance against a culture of oppression.

A culture of oppression is never without its countervailing culture of freedom, but for many that culture can be inaccessible, especially under conditions of fierce racial and class division. Both cultures have their triumphal and their neurotic elements. The tension between these aspects has been explored with amazing sensitivity by Mongane Serote, particularly in his poetry but also in his novel. Jensma, too, is alive to such swirling ambivalences which roil between apparent extremes and he catches aspects of such ambiguities in the poem 'Fear Freedom':

after freedom struck my country
after the thousands dead
i am the only one left
the only one to know
the only one guilty
the only one to resist death
before my people's bones
before flowers of freedom country

before my people knew no nothing
before flowers were fresh
i am the only one
the only one with no gun
the only one no one suspected
the only one
after my eyes were burnt out
after remains of whitewashed bones (Jensma 1974:8).

Jensma is obviously writing here about that deeply anticipated need which has occupied the minds and dreams of South Africans for so long now. The 1960s was the decade when black African countries achieved freedom from political colonialism. Written out of the obverse experience of oppression in South Africa, this poem translates the desired and longed-for into the nightmare of one who anticipates the horrors of not so much a violent as an unrecognisable world with which there seems to be no connection. Anticipating a cataclysmic confrontation between the opposing forces at the extremes of the great South African divide, the speaker suffers acutely in the mind. Incapable of imagining a process of change, the speaker has to live in a new world

which consists of a projection of old and familiar horrors. There is no irony in the term 'freedom' as it is used here: it is an event, a thing which has 'struck'. The irony exists in a situation in which the notion of 'freedom' is in fact unimaginable.

Movement from the past to the future in this poem is a wild lurch from one extreme position to another, as suggested by the swings from 'after' to 'before' and to 'after'. The lines of the poem are linked to each other by spasmodic association and every line is a tentative and an incomplete probe into what is for the speaker a hostile and searing environment. Since the moral is a condition of Jensa's poetry rather than its purpose, we need to notice the gentleness with which this condition of the speaker is understood. By establishing a connection between the past and the future, the poem accords to the speaker the worst of all worlds in which guilt, doubt, irrational and rational fears, suspicion and, most corrosive of all, acute self-consciousness now have inexhaustible space in which to ebb and flow. Against the resulting and inevitable catatonia, the self attempts mutilated gestures in the direction of coherence.

III

Against the disintegrative forces of oppression, Jensa, as poet, has one major counterforce, and that is form. Without form, all art is impossible. In the case of Jensa, the meaningful line, poetic and graphic, stands between him and utter helplessness. In his poetry, variety of form is closely allied to the necessity to speak with a wide range of voices. In a context which turns essentially upon racial identity and upon restriction, the assertion of a counter kind of coherence, in this instance poetic form, is necessary to keep at bay the essential chaos of rigid, mechanical, dichotomous and two-dimensional forms of reality which characterised the apartheid state.

The struggle of form against that chaos is evident in the six-part poem, 'Lopsided Cycle':

l
we're all underground now, bud
conspiracy against the state, you say?
one by one
e x p l o s i o n s
go off nea whe e sits one by one
e hammer'm
bulgin pop'n declare misjin co' plete, race
r e l a t i o n ' s
betta than eva. o numb son, what up now? t'many
e x p l o s i o n s

now. 'n den
't blew ma arshole to
s m i t h e reen
i juss crack some joke, you say
let's go paint heavensgate: whites only
i juss crack some joke, you say
let's go paint heavensgate: whites only

2
today we will be singing a sad song, son:
a song of our hunger
we will defy you, yessa boss
we will crucify the nearest christ
we will all be living aloud
you know why son, eh?
we carry the carcass of hunger gravewards

3
for billy the kid zambi
you breeze from far, spokes
still

your kwela
rocks in me
your wail's
a eh pá
our joke
the ol PIDE
hidin in ma
cona till a
end a fight
then
brandishing
the cosh, eh
pá, whea's a
hooligans now
ep
drink up ol
son an feel
the jazz breeze blowin fez

-eh pá: I say (coll. Portuguese);
PIDE : police (in Mozambique)

4

our cutlassregime hollers praise for the whip
our cutlassregime hollers praise for the whip
dumbfounde d prisoners a scratchin a prison walls
drips outa'
their nails
a log chain
a ma leg, oh ne v e rending pit a agony
set me free
Lod, i hea't
yours iGoli
leaves the gap for poor souls to die forever

-iGoli: Golden City (Johannesburg)

5

minha m~o está suja [my hand is dirty]
-carlos drummond de andrade

i got a gash in my head
blood spurts from it
i must cut my head off
i must hide myself
no one must see me do it
cause the blood is my guilt
i can't stop the blood
a force behind the blood
tears all bandages off
i tried it many times
in the dark of my room
i am very weak now
due to loss of blood
i only have my agony now
i must cut my head off
and replace it with
a shining conscience

6

we drum our fingers on our potbelly
and feel at ease with the world
we brood around
innumerable slotmachines
the prize will be

a body plus its labour
what a comfort!
a petty pass law gets us slaves:
right to use a gun (Jensma 1973a:10-15).

The most obvious lopsidedness evident here is the manner in which Part 6 distorts the cyclical movement of the poem and, in its extrusive smallness, decentres the circular movement as an eccentric gear does. The bloated complacency of the speaker in Part 6 (with echoes of 'Ja Baas') both contrasts with and is the source of the agitated condition of those in the other five parts. Significantly enough, Part 2 is the most lucid of the other parts of the poem as it shows an awareness of time, of action and offers explanation. As such, it is the opposing centre of force to the lopsided influence of Part 6. The cycle then turns around two pivots, poverty and excess, in tension with each other, producing the eccentric motion of South African life.

The typographical forms of Jensma's poetry would say much to careful attention. It is perhaps sufficient to note here that the differences and relations apparent to the eye establish a community of linked and diverse concerns. The part which speaks most desperately in the struggle against disintegration is Part 5 in which the repeated line 'i must cut my head off', with its ambiguous imperative, reflects acutely the predicament of the poet/speaker/thinker. When awareness and the need to articulate it have become a wound ('gash'), then the damage is heavy indeed. To the drumming of fingers in Part 6 we listen, as in a song cycle, to the explosions at the beginning, to the singing, the music, the breathing (read the 'a' in Part 4 stertorously) and to the sounds of Part 5 ('gash', 'spurts' and so on, including the sinister sibilants in the lines 'and replace it with a shining conscience') as a chorus of efforts to express what Cronin (1983:58), more contemporaneously and a good deal more optimistically refers to as 'the voices of the land'.

Appropriate form is what Jensma seeks in his poetry, form sensitive to his awareness of the manifold suffering of which he is part and to his understanding of the sources of that pain.

By exploding himself existentially and poetically into the multitude of personae and voices which utter in his poems, Jensma appears to have transcended the restrictions of racial, class and linguistic inheritance. In other words, he has defied the single and the either-or by becoming the many. The protean and the multiform in poets is nothing new, but in the instance of Jensma, the matter goes alarmingly further, to the point of creative collapse.

Such collapse is not attributable to severance from one's community, group and society, which opposition to apartheid meant for many whites, especially from

Afrikaans-speaking communities. That can be bad enough, as those whites who took firm stands against apartheid experienced. Isolation from family and community is severe and it needs to be understood that society tends not to remain passive towards those who make such a break. Mere withering in the wilderness by the outcast is often insufficient to it, and society is therefore capable of seeking out such a person and destroying him or her. Assassination takes very many forms. Hence the comment by Gwala, quoted earlier: 'His white world was killing him, as if out to destroy him'.

The question must be asked: When one such as Jensma broke with the prevailing attitudes of whites in South Africa of the sixties, where could he take shelter and receive succour and support?

What social formations had the resources to sustain such a person? Jensma tried many jobs inside and outside South Africa but could neither sustain them nor his troubled marriage. The majority of writers at the time either sought support within institutions, established sustaining groups around them, or else left the country. Little space for creativity and unorthodoxy was to be found outside of the official and the commercial, and repression was dire enough in the late 1960's and early 1970s to seem individually immutable.

A review of the names of people active in music, literature, the plastic arts, drama and other cultural activities in Pretoria and Johannesburg (places where Jensma seemed to work best) at that time suggests a relatively rich weave of creativity. But artists, writers and musicians worked either inside or outside township ghettos, and opportunities for easy mixing of class and race within a supportive environment were rare. Lionel Abrahams' *The Purple Renoster*, and his writing group, Bill Ainslie's art workshops, the poetry magazine *Ophir* edited by Walter Saunders and Peter Horn, Esrom Legae's art classes at Dorkay House and Barney Simon's drama groups are noteworthy exceptions. The dangers inherent in political involvement combined with a sense of isolation within the country as well as being cut off from the rest of the world led many academics and cultural activists to go into in exile.

It would be a grim irony indeed if the act of remarking upon the achievement of Wopko Jensma in speaking as the other were to imply that the admission of the reality of other beings into the self were an exceptional quality. To do so would be to reduce the notion of identity to quantifiable units. It is precisely this reductiveness which the poetry challenges and through that challenge reveals the horror of that which actively prevents exploration of the possibilities of the self.

Wopko Jensma reached beyond the limits that those from his race and class felt in those two decades to be almost absolute. In doing so, he sought one of the most intimate associations with the other that is possible. His poetry speaks with voices from within worlds that are ordinarily unreachable from without. And the radical nature of this poetic act is underscored when it is understood that he did not do so on

behalf of the other but as the other.

Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre (1984:106f) describes Jensma's 'method' as such:

In fact, in order to show a South Africa sickened by apartheid, Jensma has chosen to speak in the first person, as both hero-victim and the hero-murderer. But it is always the same 'I': it is the same person who suffers, the man who has been stricken by what he has himself conceived or done in a moment of aberration or madness. An inner universe takes shape, like the cross-section of a sick mind: it reveals the terrible schizophrenia of living all the time by two codes of conduct, one for one's family and (white) neighbour, the other for the sub-human black man cast in the role of servant. Thus the hero-victim dies a thousand times over, bleeding from a thousand wounds, while the hero-murderer constantly proclaims a brotherhood which is contradicted by the multitude of crimes committed against the flesh and the spirit of these 'unlike likes'.

There is an implication here that to acknowledge and admit the other under apartheid is to be a schizophrenic. In addition, apartheid generates states of schizophrenia, especially in those drawn from the dominant minority. Seen from this perspective, Jensma's poetry is an analysis of that state in South African society of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus the further autobiographical detail from 'Spanner in the What? Works', 'I suffer from schizophrenia/(they tell me)' (Jensma 1977:6f), has an important significance to it: both he and his society share the same affliction.

Understanding that does not lead to simplistic connections between the experience of South Africa and schizophrenia. Instead, if we accept Berthoud's (1989:9) aphorism: 'If the activist makes history, and the intellectual defines it, the poet experiences it—that is, makes it real to himself'—then it is to poets that we need to look for accounts of experience which are not to be found anywhere else, and which are explored with a complexity peculiar to the nature of poetry itself.

This discussion needs to go one step further and conclude with a focus upon Wopko Jensma himself, as one of us, who opened himself to the effects of South African history. A dimension of his disablement is finely caught in this account by Baudrillard (1985:132f):

If hysteria was the pathology of the exacerbated staging of the subject, a pathology of expression, of the body's theatrical and operatic conversion; and if paranoia was the pathology of organization, of the structuration of a rigid and jealous world; then with communication and information, with the immanent promiscuity of all these networks, with their continual connections, we are now in a new form of schizophrenia. No more hysteria, no more projective paranoia, properly speaking, but this state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore.

The schizo is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion. He is himself obscene, the obscene prey of the world's obscenity. What characterizes him is less the loss of the real, the light years of estrangement from the real, the pathos of distance and radical separation, as is commonly said: but, very much to the contrary, the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defence, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparency of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence.

There is much more than an individual, idiosyncratic instance in the case of Wopko Jensma. Aside from the sheer pain which being 'only a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence' must be for the person so afflicted, the effects upon a poet are obviously devastating. Jensma's struggle with form thus has a poignancy which is acute. And the bitter irony must be that in transcending with such tender understanding the barriers of race, class, culture and condition, Wopko Jensma now suffers the indignity of being unable to control or regulate the obscene flow of experience and sensation through himself. In seeking a fuller, more complete identity than the system of apartheid decreed, Wopko Jensma has lost his creative identity. He can no longer paint or write. The analyses that his poetry makes of the agonies of southern Africa are now applicable to himself.

Wopko Jensma disappeared from his place of shelter in 1993 and has not been heard of since. The shelter was gutted by fire in 1996.

I began with the quotation from Octavio Paz because it expresses an optimistic sense of the achievement of human beings despite the nightmare of history. But reflection upon the poetry and the predicament of Wopko Jensma makes the words of Paz—'making beautiful and lasting works out of the real substance of that nightmare'—difficult to endorse. Yes, Jensma's poetic and graphic works are beautiful and they will last. But they speak so powerfully of the damage and suffering which are their genesis and their nature that it asks for embarrassing fortitude to be able to acknowledge their beauty. One has to forget the subjects of the poetry so as to see and feel them again. And that is, perhaps, an old irony of art. Though the pressure of history's nightmare is unrelenting, the struggle for form continues, a struggle which only the unusually ordinary are able to undertake.

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