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Commentaries: The Tunnel

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COMMENTARIES

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THE TUNNEL

I went tunneling into the earth . . .

My wife and I, going through an inventory of reasons, found nothing sufficient to the labor.

Still, she allowed, as I, that a direction once started, as if desire, and the desire to be desired, were mutually igniting, drew the traveler to its end without explainable reason . . .

Yet, does not the southern direction in extreme horizon look to the north, even as that of the north, finding the apex of its final arc, nod wearily south . . .?

So *I went tunneling into the earth*, through darkness that penetration only makes darker, faithful to the idea of light, said always to be at the end of tunnels; perhaps not yet lit, but in the universe moving in rendezvous, thus to shimmer under the last shovelful of earth . . .

COMMENTARY

Looking at this piece again after a long time, it does seem somewhat overly punctuated and full of clauses, as if it had longed another way than sentences and paragraphs. But it is the blah blah and hiss of prose since having first met literature in company of Dick and Jane that holds me in its mystery. Dick and Jane, they had a dog named Spot.

I went tunneling into the earth . . . For what? Gold? To make a grave? Or simply to find a more direct route to China? So-called deep meanings bore me. They're so common as to run in the streets like tears. One assumes meaning even if one is looking the other way as the work unfolds. Language is meaning without one's having to dig a tunnel for it. I had no idea what the speaker would do with his first line. But as the piece continued it seemed to be making fairly good sense, even if its speaker, claiming to be tunneling into darkness expecting light, didn't. The contradiction between the keys of one's keyboard and what they can type make for a kind of ticklish fun, jellifying one's brain into shimmering delight.

But, as I look at this piece again, though short, it moves with obsessive detail in its back and forthness, like a contract being drawn between reality and paranoia, that finally resolves itself in the cliché about

the light at the end of tunnels. Incidentally, I like writing soliloquies when possible; they're easier than having to write two voices. And of course it's always a piece of luck to find a cliché that fits one's work. The cliché is greatly underrated, when, in fact, it's a valuable tool of understanding: acting as a shorthand that frees the writer from having to do too much on his own. After about 15 minutes one wants to try something else. As I say, writing is ticklish fun, but too much tickling makes me nervous. This is why the prose poem is a good device for the nervous writer. Ideally, prose poems are short, which allows the writer to move from piece to piece rather quickly. But the best part is that so little is expected of the prose poem that the writer doesn't really have to push himself too hard, or to write at all if he just happens not to be in the mood. "The Tunnel" at the time just happened to fit my mood. And as I read through it again, it still does. All a writer really needs is some intuition, and a fair memory for clichés, and the desire to make something out of almost nothing at all. For no matter the content or nature of a work, there is the grand abstraction beyond the self. The *shape* of thought, the impersonal music of silence hovering over every page like a ghost emptied from a land of shadows . . .

"The Tunnel," from *The Tunnel: Selected Poems of Russell Edson*, Oberlin College Press, 1994.