

Werner Ulrich's Home Page: *Ulrich's Bimonthly*

Formerly "Picture of the Month"

November-December, 2010

Against Counting: A Year-End Reflection

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As the year is drawing to a close, it is time to pause. Time to look back and to be grateful for the good, and to come to terms with the not so good. Most of the things I have reasons to be grateful for, or to come to terms with, are of a private nature though, and I will keep them private. I'll limit myself here to a brief glance back of a more academic nature, concerning a peculiar way of rating the year that many academics appear to have internalized and from which I want to emancipate myself (or better, I am just learning to free myself from it); I mean counting the number of publications that the year has added to one's list.

As usual, I have once again been studying and writing a lot this past year; yet I suddenly realize I have published considerably less than in previous years. I like to share my ideas with others and doing so has brought me many valuable contacts and exchanges; but not everything I wrote or drafted in the past months looked to me as if I needed to publish it so urgently, if at all. So I didn't. *Who cares anyway?* Quite right: nobody. In today's academic world, most of us suffer from having to read too much, so we should actually be grateful to those few colleagues who limit their amount of publishing to small, digestible doses!

Dated as the thought may appear in an epoch that ties university financing to quantitative measures of publication output per faculty and similarly self-defeating criteria of (supposed) academic achievement – do we really need to rush and publish everything we write as soon as we manage to, for the mere sake of seeing it published? True, I am sufficiently independent now (not everybody is) to admit it to myself and publicly that *quantity is irrelevant* in assessing academic work. I can only wonder why this truism is not expressed more often, and more loudly, by tenured academics as well as by university and financing authorities. Do university people and financing authorities no

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longer dare to state such basic and essential truths, or have they perhaps really forgotten by now?

What kind of a world would it need to be in which policy makers would avow that quantity of output (numbers of publications, students, research projects, and so on) is an inadequate measure of the quality of teaching and research, and would accordingly stop financing academic institutions on the basis of such measures? Isn't it clear to them that it is not just pointless but really harmful to use quantitative measures of success *except* when we can be certain that they measure exactly what we want to get and nothing else? Obviously, if the evaluation standards used for financing universities tend to *measure* something other than true academic achievement, we will also *reward* and thus *promote* something other than true academic achievement (i.e., high quality teaching and research, in case anyone should have forgotten).

That is what's actually happening. We reward and thus encourage a rising number of publications. As if we suffered from a lack of academic publications! *Who cares about their content?* Who even cares to read them all? (Clearly not the policy makers.) Isn't the problem that there are *too many* publications that nobody would miss if they hadn't been published, so the financing mechanisms should actually *discourage* rather than promote the mass publishing of all the stuff that is being published for apparently no other reason than its "counting" as output, given that mediocre content is apparently no obstacle to such "counting"?

The triumph of the countable But of course, I got it all wrong. Measurable quantity of output is obviously what policy makers *do* want, even if it comes at the expense of (immeasurable) quality; otherwise they would not use such measures. It would be impolite (if not naive) to assume they don't know what they are doing. They *must* understand that if they tie financing mechanisms to quantitative measures of output, what they get is ... yes, exactly, quantities of output. *Countable results is indeed what counts*, for policy makers no less than for those depending on them, as it is the only kind of results (I was tempted to write: the only kind of responsibility) that can be planned and secured bureaucratically. We've got the numbers right, it's what counts and

nobody can blame us for that. So it can't exactly be a surprise that mediocrity triumphs in the end, can it?

The only other (but as I said, impolite) explanation would be that those who prescribe and use such standards don't know where they want to go. If you don't know where you want to go, you shouldn't be surprised if you arrive somewhere else. Or worse, that they are *cynical* about what they are doing, by saying something else than what they know and think. But that comes down to the same thing: if you say something else than what you mean (and accordingly measure something else than what you want), you can hardly be surprised if in the end you get something else. *Q.e.d.*

Arriving at year's end: four last songs Happily, my year wasn't subject to quantitative measurements and bureaucratic imperatives. So I have arrived where I hoped I would. I have had a good year full of meaningful projects and am reasonably content with what I have managed to do (one may always imagine better). The word "content" is fitting indeed: I am content with the *content* and intensity of my work, with the efforts I made to advance my own thinking though not to publish. Who cares about the sheer *number* of my publications? Exactly: nobody.

As it looks, the year will end for me as it has been all along: keeping me busy with ongoing projects. So, for once, this last *Bimonthly* of 2010 is rather brief. Just a short stop along the way. I've chosen as my topic some of the most beautiful, most relaxing, most inspiring music I know. Quite fittingly, it comes in very small doses and there is precious little of it altogether. I mean the *Four Last Songs* of the German Romantic composer and song writer Richard Strauss (not to be confused with the Austrian "king of waltzes," Johann Strauss). Richard Strauss composed his four last songs in 1948, aged 84, after he and his wife had been able to emigrate from war-demolished Germany to Switzerland and had found their peace here. Strauss must have felt that these songs were the last compositions he should complete. They radiate such an incredible sense of calm, completion, and rest! In these four songs, at least for me his work found its absolute culmination. The lyrics he used are equally beautiful and were in fact very dear to him; the authors are Joseph von Eichendorff and Hermann Hesse.

Winter Alpenglow, or: it is time to rest and see the year fall silent There are many different recordings of the *Four Last Songs* and I appreciate most of those I have heard, but the most special one to me is the 1965 recording with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf as soprano and George Szell directing the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Berlin. I cannot reproduce the music here for you, just encourage you to try and hear it for yourself if you get a chance, in case you do not already know it. (Be sure though you have a quiet and relaxed moment, it's not the kind of music you want to hear during breakfast, before running to catch your train.) I can only reproduce part of the lyrics here. I'll limit myself to the fourth and last of the four songs. It's titled *Im Abendrot*, which means as much as "in the evening glow" or "in the last glow of the sunset"; my translation is *At Glowing*, as it reminds me of the "Alpenglow" on a clear and cold winter evening in the Alps, shortly after sunset. The title is more usually translated as "At sunset" or nicer "At gloaming," but these titles lack some clout, I think. In any case, it is also for copyright reasons that below, I offer my own translation of the original German lyrics rather than, for example, the translation that comes with the Szell/ Schwarzkopf recording.

Im Abendrot to me is the most beautiful of the four songs, both for its music and for its lyrics. In addition, its theme of *letting things end in peace* is most meaningful as the year draws to a close. And finally, it inspired me to take the photograph that I reproduce below. It has become one of my favorite winter photographs, as it reminds me of this wonderful music and of the peace it radiates.

AT GLOWING

Through worries and joys
we have walked side by side.
Let us rest from walking now,
behold the quiet countryside.

Around us the valleys open up
as the sky grows darker.

Two lonely larks still rise
dreamily into the delicious air.

Come near, and let them fly;
soon it is time for sleep.
We must not go astray
in this solitude.

*(Joseph von Eichendorff, 1841;
first three of the poem's four verses;
my free translation)*

Original German text:

IM ABENDROT

Wir sind durch Not und Freude
gegangen Hand in Hand,
vom Wandern ruhn wir beide
nun überm stillen Land.

Rings sich die Täler neigen,
es dunkelt schon die Luft,
zwei Lerchen nur noch steigen
nachträumend in den Duft.

Tritt her und lass sie schwirren,
bald ist es Schlafenszeit,
dass wir uns nicht verirren
in dieser Einsamkeit.

*(Joseph von Eichendorff, 1841;
first three of the poem's four verses)*

I wish you a happy, peaceful ending of the year.

Werner Ulrich

Picture data Digital photograph taken on 13 January 2009 around 6 p.m., view of the Jungfrau Massif seen from near Rüeggisberg, Switzerland. ISO 100, exposure mode aperture priority, aperture f/4.1, exposure bias +0.30, exposure time 1/100 seconds, focal length 45 mm (equivalent to 90 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera). Original resolution 3648 x 2736 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 159 KB.

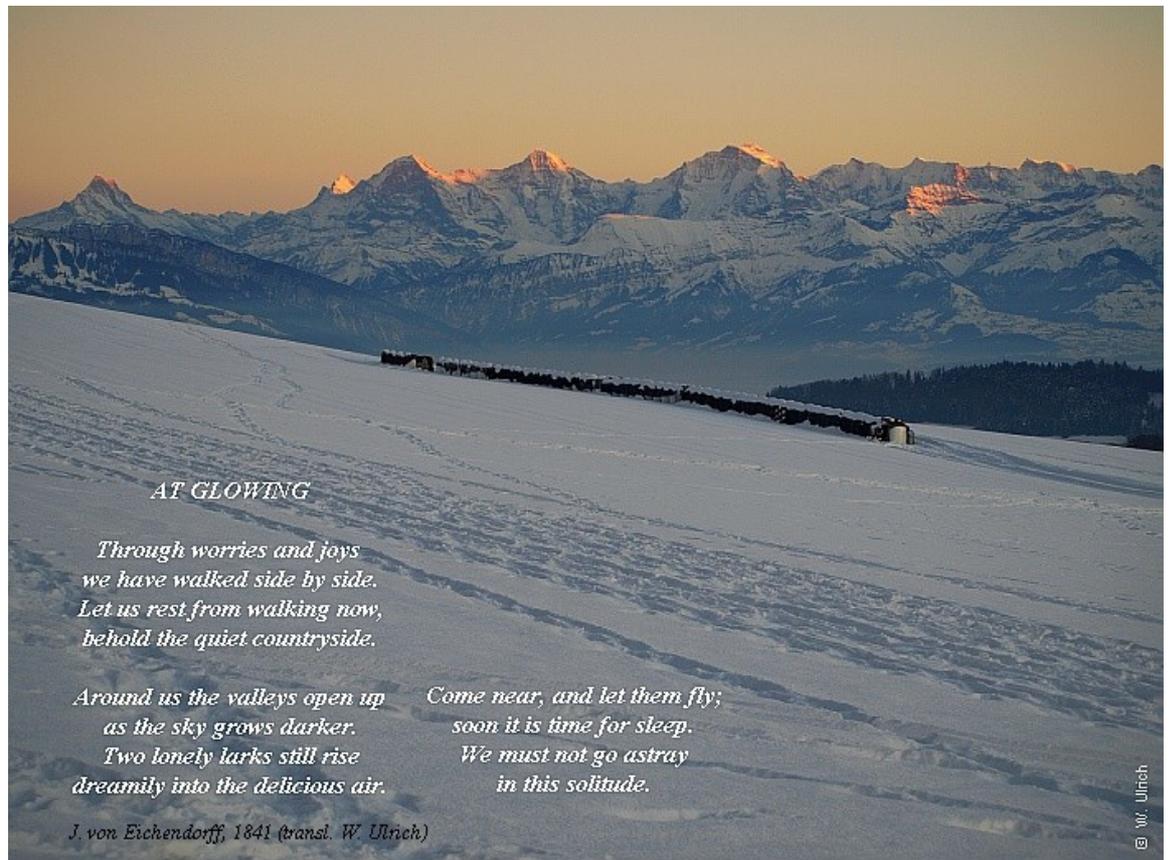
November 2010

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

December 2010

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

November-December, 2010



AT GLOWING

*Through worries and joys
we have walked side by side.
Let us rest from walking now,
behold the quiet countryside.*

*Around us the valleys open up
as the sky grows darker.
Two lonely larks still rise
dreamily into the delicious air.*

*Come near, and let them fly;
soon it is time for sleep.
We must not go astray
in this solitude.*

J. von Eichendorff, 1841 (transl. W. Ulrich)

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Winter Alpenglow: the year will soon rest and so should we for a while!

„**A**ll through the year we've been busy and ardent;
it's time to rest now and see the year fall silent.”

(My year-end variation of Eichendorff's theme)

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