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Why Art?

Good art is a truing of vision, in the way a saw is trued in the saw shop, to cut more cleanly. It is also a changing of vision. Entering a good poem, a person feels, tastes, hears, thinks, and sees in altered ways. Why ask art into a life at all, if not to be transformed and enlarged by its presence and mysterious means? Some hunger for *more* is in us—more range, more depth, more feeling; more associative freedom, more beauty. More perplexity and more friction of interest. More prismatic grief and unstunted delight, more longing, more darkness. More saturation and permeability in knowing our own existence as also the existence of others. More capacity to be astonished. Art adds to the sum of the lives we would have, were it possible to live without it. And by changing selves, one by one, art changes also the outer world that selves create and share.

Windows

Many good poems have a kind of window-moment in them—they change their direction of gaze in a way that suddenly opens a broadened landscape of meaning and feeling. Encountering such a moment, the reader breathes in some new infusion, as steeply perceptible as any physical window's increase of light, scent, sound, or air. The gesture is one of lifting, unlatching, releasing: mind and attention swing open to new-peeled vistas.

A "window" offers a different kind of plunging, the swerve into some new possibility of mind. The poem stops to look elsewhere, drawing on something outside its self-constructed domain and walls, whether carpentered from the conceptual, imagistic, or linguistic. A window can be held by a change of sense realms or a switch of rhetorical strategy, framed in a turn of grammar or ethical stance, sawn open by overt statement or slipped in almost unseen. Whether large or small, what I am calling a window can be recognized primarily by the experience of expansion it brings: the poem's nature is changed because its scope has become larger.

All writing holds such transitions, expansions, reversals, and alterations. Between the first word of a sentence and the second, a tiny expectation rises in its listener, requiring fulfillment. An article leans toward its noun, a noun toward its verb; a preposition tells us the mind is about to be moved in time or place. Any statement made in the context of literature leaves us wondering why it was made, where it will lead; images and stories function as small, planted seeds. A poem's transitions, especially, pitch thought forward, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by verbally unsignaled changes of attention or image that simply happen, as a jump cut does in film. A window, then, will always be in some way a transition; but a transition specific in effect, a place where something in the poem not only alters but breaks different ground. As with Dickinson's poem, a window can coincide with the poem's emotional center of gravity and pivot, but as with Donald Justice's poem, it need not. It will, however, be something more than the next step forward. A window will enlarge both room and view.

Balance between Form & Aliveness

Thought is thought, color is color, sound is sound. Each becomes recognizable also as art when a secondary awareness, one tuned toward shapeliness, movement, and intention, enters in. The forms we experience as "art" balance between the stilled familiarity of established knowledge and the fluidity of the creative mind at play. The linguistic root of "art" means most simply "skill": it signals a task undertaken in some particularly effective way. Near it in the dictionary are words concerning themselves with small, ingenious, and movable fittings: words used to denote the body's physical joints, or the idea of compression, or the condition of things packed tightly together while still maintaining their distinctness. Etymologically, then, an "articulate" person is one who speaks by dividing things into their precise parts, but also with awareness of the precisely geared clockworks on which an argument must turn. The "artificial" is that which has been cleverly maneuvered, altered by the ingenious human hand. The artist begins by fitting one thing into another—a cup to its hand, a lid to its box, a color to its image, a story to its cultural and individual occasion. Once placed into the world, the cup is lifted for use, the lid swivels on its small brass hinges, the story shifts a little with each telling.

A good poem, though, goes beyond its own well-madeness. Even in motionless, time-fixed paintings and sculpture, there is the feeling of hinge-turn we find in poems and often name with the terms of music—alterations

of rhythm or key that raise alterations of comprehension and mood. Music, almost undefinable in itself, is delineated by philologists by contrasting it not to silence but to "noise"—sound that lacks structure, intention, and meaning. Music's self-aware re-orderings bring experience out of randomness and into the arc of shaping direction, into the cross-trusses of what has been made recognizably formal. These shifts are made by patterned departure and return, by dramatic selection, by awareness of cadence shift, emphasis, harmony and useful dissonance—all the progressive unfoldings of sound-rhyme and sound-variation we have come to find useful engagements with feeling and beauty. Language enters artfulness by the same means. But ordinary language, unlike ordinary noise, does already include structure, purpose, and meaning. One way language signals its entrance to art, then, is by the inclusion of music's intensified awareness and music's full-ranging, engaging intentions. The sentences of poetry, fiction, drama, attend to their music the way a tree attends to its leaves: motile and many, seemingly discardable, they remain the sustenance-source by which it lives.

The centrality of movement and alteration in any art form can be seen by what happens if the word "art" is given a negative prefix: the opposite of art is inertness. It is the nature of living beings to move—some quickly as that stream-immersed trout when an insect disturbs the surface above it, others as slowly and inexorably as a bishop pine growing the narrowest of annual rings around its two-thousand-year-old heartwood. Art—some part of a life distilled to essential and self-aware gesture—is similarly active and moving, in its enactments and in its effects. And when a work of art is unable to move us—because of some failure in its conception or clumsiness of execution, or because we are too far from its originating circumstances to understand what request it makes of the senses, heart, and mind—that work itself becomes inert, becomes noise, deafened to meaning and feeling.

Art that keeps its heat and breath is quick, alive as a blow.

Encounter with the Unknown

Encounter with the unknown seems almost a nutrient in human life, as essential as certain amino acids—without it, the untested self falls into sleep, depression, boredom, and stupor. The trick then is discovering how much, and when, to admit the random, chaotic, unknowable, into our lives—if, that is, we are among those who have the privilege of choice at all. It is also a matter of balance. The child at the mercy of an incomprehensible world requires reassurance; the adult, stalled in the familiar, may require an opposite prod. In a situation where nothing is new or changed, the repertory of experience will be confirmed but not expanded. As in ecological zones, periphery and boundary are where diversity and transformation lie—in art, in science, and in the day-to-day experience of a life, whether the renovation sought is of thought, feeling, or technique. Too much familiarity asks no attention; too much that is new cannot be comprehended at all.

Pursuit made without guarantee is in itself an innate, paradoxical pleasure, one that allows a writer or painter to persevere, even if externally unrewarded, for years. The wagered hope, the adrenaline risk of failure, are themselves part of the lure. Any artist seeking a true discovery, like any person seeking an unplacid life, must be willing to stand in harm's way—behind the door there may be a lady, there may be a tiger.

A story by Jorge Luis Borges, lover of tigers, comes to mind. The narrator of "The Lottery in Babylon" describes

a society in which a lottery has expanded beyond its usual form to govern every aspect of life. The drawn ticket subjects a person to potential impoverishment as much as potential prosperity, affects societal role along with financial status. A person might go from consul to slave, from thief to priest, as the drawing of the lots decrees. The result—since the Company in charge of the lottery functions invisibly—is a world exactly like our own, but compressed, steepened, "saturated," as the narrator puts it, "with chance." "I have known," he says, "what the Greeks do not know, incertitude." The sentence is spoken with pride. Those who think the Company fictitious are branded heretic, and fools: for Borges's imagined Babylonians, a world believed governed by secret drawings is more alive and desirable than one that is not. To feel is to be at risk, and to be at risk is to feel.

Hiddenness

The lesson runs deep in both literature and the psyche: survival depends on an intimate, attuned comfort with similitude and the art of disguise.

The inventions of biological hiddenness are countless, witty, wily, and poignant. Insects mimic twigs and flower parts, the sexual partners or foods of their prey, whatever is poisonous to those for whom they themselves are prey. Flowers seeking fertilization take the form and scents of the sexual partners of insects. A cohort of caterpillars bands together to travel in a single column, mirroring the body of a large and dangerous snake. There are spiders that look like bird droppings, pipefish that sleep vertically to blend with surrounding reeds. Octopus and cuttlefish change the color and texture of their skins to match the surfaces over which they travel; a jellyfish hides in its own transparency. Motion and motionlessness, too, can be shelter: minute aquatic organisms, whose predators know them by the disturbance they make in the water, become cryptic by holding still. The same squid that first hides in the camouflage of protective coloration will, further threatened, jet swiftly

away, leaving behind a shadow-body of ink: highly visible, substanceless decoy.

In the arts, the breadth of inventive disguise is much the same. To plunge one thing into the shape or nature of another is a fundamental gesture of creative insight, part of how we make for ourselves a world more expansive, deft, fertile, and startling in richness. The borrowing of attributes found in lyric image, metaphor, and parable is also one of the principles of sympathetic magic, used as a way to attempt to nudge the hand of chance or fate. A small example can be found in the Hoxne Hoard, a collection of late-fourth-century Roman treasure dug up in a Suffolk field in 1992 by a man who set out looking for a friend's lost hammer. Among the objects is the silver handle of a pouring vessel in the shape of a leaping tigress, heavy teats swelling down from the arc of her body. The sight pleases in its unexpected grace. It is also a promise of abundance—the principle of correspondence proposes that the vessel with such a handle, like the body of an actual nursing tigress, will not be emptied without that emptying causing it to refill.

To see the tigress hiding within a handle, the handle waiting within the tigress, is to throw off the boundaries of the literal and recognize that even the simplest fragment of existence can carry multiple uses, possibilities, connections. The union, like all metaphor, brings revelation and addition, while it also covers, complicates, veils. Art amplifies intelligence: to experience the tiger's silver-doubled resonance is to join in the leap the mind must take toward a more sophisticated comprehension of the world. And that leap into new comprehension is also the difference between the more overt simile and the way a fully realized metaphor affects us—to say that a handle is "like a tiger" would merely perplex, but to make of a handle a bounding tigress is to enter the world of dreams, in which all things

mysteriously contain

more the idea of authentic presence—the idea that a work, like a person, is original not because it is new in subject matter or technique but because it has the uniqueness that moistens and flares in all embodied being. These aspects of originality are not entirely separate, but they are also not the same. From its beginning, the concept reaches in both directions.

The word *original* comes from the Latin verb *oriri*, “to rise,” which refers especially to the rising of the sun and moon; but it reaches English through the noun *origo*—the rising of a spring from its source in the earth. Each root contributes its flavor. The first is intermittent and repeated, the second a continuous flow. One offers a sense of time that is cyclical, arriving and leaving; the other is timeless. One tells the old debate of light and darkness; the other murmurs of a sustaining essence, water’s steady, unaccountable emergence from rocky earth. The paradox of originality is that it points both to the newly appearing and to a continuance free of time and says within itself that they are one.

Though from different roots, the Sanskrit word translated as “origin,” *samutpāda*, contains the same motion as the Latin: *sam* means “completely,” *ut* is “up,” and *pāda*, “created.” Its Tibetan counterpart, *’byung-ba* (pronounced jung-wa), means similarly “to arise.” These words hold the insight, familiar from both Buddhism and physics, that the world we think we know is made up—and in that phrase a certain momentum continues: the creative is buoyant, it climbs. The founding metaphor comes from plants: roots go down, stems and leaves ascend. Such basic perceptions form an underground river, always available, from which we draw both our world and our words; in its fluid and fluent waters, meaning begins.

Originality

IMAGINE walking down a city street, distracted, hurrying, hot, and seeing, in the mass of people about a half block ahead, a friend. From a glimpse of dark hair and perhaps the dipping motion of one shoulder, how easy it is to recognize a person we know amid the rest. Physical being is effortlessly original: we can press our fingertips against any surface and leave an unmistakable signature. Yet few writers seem able to press that same individuality unblurred into words. A question, then, is how does a poet enfold into language the singularity that marks each living creature and object of the world and also those works of art we most admire?

ANY thinking about originality needs first to acknowledge its two faces. When we call a work “original,” we point to the way it is irreducibly and creatively itself—individual, recognizable, and distinct. Sometimes, though, we use the word to refer to innovation, to some quality within it previously unseen, while at other times we mean

Originality without Intention

ARTISTS freely admit their ignorance concerning creative insight. A letter said to be Mozart's describes it this way:

When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer—say, travelling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep; it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. *Whence* and *how* they come, I know not; nor can I force them. . . .

When I proceed to write, the committing to paper is done quickly enough, for everything is, as I said before, already finished. . . . But why my productions take from my hand that particular form and style that makes them *Mozartish*, and different from the works of other composers, is probably owing to the same cause which renders my nose so large or so aquiline, or, in short, makes it Mozart's, and different from those of other people. For I really do not study or aim at originality.

(trans. Edward Holmes)

Art-making begins when the mind enters a condition different from everyday, discursive thinking—the condition Mozart called being completely himself and I have called concentration. In this state, what arises feels less *made* than *gift*, and Mozart's indifference to originality is widely echoed. Even the most revolutionary writers deny any conscious effort toward uniqueness. Thus, Gertrude Stein:

You will write if you will write without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought or afterwards in a recasting. Yes, before in a thought, but not in careful thinking. It will come if it is there and if you will let it come, and if you have anything you will get a sudden creative recognition. . . . The great thing is not ever to think about form but let it come. Does that sound strange from me? They have accused me of thinking about nothing else. Do you see the real joke? It is the critics who have really thought about form always, and I have thought about—writing!

Then there is Pablo Picasso:

The artist is a receptacle of emotions come from no matter where: from the sky, the earth, a piece of paper, a passing figure, a cobweb. This is why one must not discriminate between things. There is no rank among them. One must take one's good where one finds it. . . .

When we invented cubism, we had no intention of inventing cubism, but simply of expressing what was in us. Nobody drew up a program of action, and though our friends the poets followed our efforts attentively, they never dictated to us. The young painters of today often outline a program for themselves to follow and try to do their assignments correctly like well-behaved schoolboys.

The painter passes through states of fullness and of emptying. That is the whole secret of art.

(trans. Brewster Ghiselin)

And Walt Whitman:

The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is.

Intention, then, does not matter; the artist's concern is the task at hand and how to pursue it. Wallace Stevens put it this way: Anyone with a passion for truth will of necessity be original.

Originality from Passion for Truth

PASSION for truth is an idea with more than one face. It includes the determination to look closely and long, to be unsatisfied with the secondhand and assumption. It includes the emotions and the body, acknowledging that the writer's whole being is the instrument of perception, not only the mind. It also hints that only the hunger for something beyond the personal will allow a writer to break free of one major obstacle to originality—the fear of self-revelation.

The Buddhist psychology system known as Abhidharma includes a list of five great fears—fear of death, fear of the loss of livelihood, fear of unusual states of consciousness, fear of loss of reputation, and fear of speaking before a public assembly. Each can play a part in tempering the glimmerings of original thought, but public speech is the particular demon of writers. Whether autobiographical or seemingly fictional, every sentence exposes the writer to a fear of social rejection that the Abhidharma ranks alongside fear of death.

The reluctance to expose untempered thought is well schooled: a good part of childhood is spent discovering what is acceptable, what not. We learn to speak and act in ways that will receive favor, learn the punishments and rewards by which the conventions of society are

enforced. Even in the realm of biology, self-revelation holds risk. Animals find safety in camouflage and blending in among others: the antelope that stands out is the one that is taken. History, mythology, and folktales are filled with stories of people punished for saying the truth. Only the Fool, exempt from society's rules, is allowed to speak with complete freedom.

Right speech is at the core of a right life. Buddhism teaches that the quality of one's speech is a part of liberation's path; the Bill of Rights lists speaking freely as fundamental to democracy's health; Judeo-Christian tradition commands us not to lie. A matured truthfulness is what every culture asks of its wise elders. But the very existence of formal religious injunctions toward honest speech confirms that self-revelation is no easy task. Leaving the refuge of silence demands the willingness to be seen, to be judged. It demands that we turn away from our desires to please, to fit in, to spare the feelings of those we love, and also from our desire to create a shapeliness that does not reflect how awkward, unfinished, and ambivalent actual experience is. For the writer, the person of public speech, it demands risking the fates of Mandelstam or Horace, Sor Juana or Christopher Smart. Or more likely, risking failure more minor: boredom, triviality, confusion. Risking seeing that we are lesser beings than we had hoped.

Originality from Exile

Originality requires the aptitude for exile. The physical exile of writers from Po Chü-i to Joseph Brodsky and, in her own way, Dickinson, is the outcome of their willingness to travel first the roads of independent mind. Such independence may be of ideas, or it may be of style; in the end, the two are the same. As is the result: a solitude that, however difficult, is also held in affection—even if an affection sometimes mixed.

But the world and its ways must also be held in affection: each new work arises within a tradition and can be received only within that tradition's modes. If a writer is to speak meaningfully, she may stretch communal understandings, but at least some listeners must be able to follow her words. Even if those listeners are only a handful, it is they who will keep the work available until broader recognition arrives.

Artists with a truly idiosyncratic aesthetic are rare, but the issue touches all to some degree. Every writer draws on the great works of the past: they have given her or him everything. But what they give is also by definition the already known. The writer desiring a free ear and eye cannot fall completely into the available knowledge and syn-tax or into any inherited discovery of poetry's powers. Instead he must learn the tradition and rise above it, absorb and then abandon what has come before. Bernard Berenson's definition of genius in painting comes to mind: "the capacity for a productive reaction against one's training."

Each writer fully awake to her task rediscovers and remakes poetry's language, plunging it into immediacy, into the perceptions and diction flowing within this moment. Originality can then mean altering the course of a tradition's river: broadening its banks through new usage, pulling in a new tributary of dialect. Or it can mean simply—as

with Dickinson, for example—changing it through the voice of a deeply eccentric muse. But originality can also be found when the water of common language bites more deeply into the groundrock of experience, revealing freshly its buried layers.

Originality from Openness

In my middle years I became fond of the Way
And made my home in the foothills of South Mountain.
When the spirit moves me I go off by myself
To see things that I alone must see.
I follow the stream to the source,
And sitting there, watch for the moment
When clouds rise up. Or I may meet a woodsman;
We talk and laugh and forget about going home.

(trans. Tenshin Reb Anderson)

Predetermined desire, including the desire for independence, could only obstruct this sage's path. Any effort toward a particular end would be objectifying, dividing the poet from his experience. Wang Wei cultivates the mind of openness, in which stream and cloud may take their own paths and there is room, too, for the human. The creativity of such a mind is not concerned with any form of deliberate making—a quiet and full attentiveness allows each moment to reveal what is called “original mind.” And though the poem shows most clearly Wang Wei's childlike spirit, both camel and lion are also here. Each successive stage is not abandoned, but integrated into the next.

Creative attention is forged not only of openness. The earliest writerly advice of classical Roman literature is Cato the Elder's *Res tene, verba sequuntur*, which translates roughly, “Just hang on, the words will follow.” Patience, even stubbornness, are necessary traits for a writer—though a stubbornness permeable, turned outward as much as inward, faithful and transparent to the world. Wang Wei follows the stream to its source, then sits down to see what arrives; Picasso's artist is the receptacle of cobwebs and passing clouds. What crops up in our lives matters—it is the substance we think with and the face of what we will become. “Perception is not whimsical, but fatal,” Emerson wrote. To meet the incidental with the same intense gaze we bring to the chosen objects of our attention is a further gate to original thought.

“Behind each jewel are three thousand sweating horses” is another call for persistence, this time from Zen. Good writers undertake the work of those horses, in each moment's effort and in the long apprenticeship that muscles the tongue with words as a dancer's barre work muscles her legs and back with movement. Learning the hard-won repertory of craft is also a part of originality—only the presence of many possibilities allows a writer to see which may lead toward the new. Plenitude calls forth plenitude, of the world and of the mind.

PART OF any good artist's work is to find a right balance between the independence born of willing solitude and the ability to speak for and to others. Nietzsche's “Three Metamorphoses” offers some insight into how this is done. The philosopher describes three stages through which the spirit must pass before it can truly serve. First it must become a camel, then the camel a lion, and finally the lion a child. The camel, who feeds on acorns and grasses and the hunger for truth, is a being who has agreed to bear the weight of the world, to carry the difficult forward by her own obstinate strength. For a writer, this stage represents the willingness to be instructed by things as they are, to enter into tradition and culture and be affected by the issues and hardships of common human life. Having accomplished this task, Nietzsche writes, the spirit needs to turn lionlike and slay the dragon of external values, whose every scale is a golden plaque reading “Thou shalt.” Here, a writer steps outside received opinion and enters creative freedom, beginning to find his resources within. It is a stage described also in a saying from Zen: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” But rebellion and independence are still not enough. The lion too must give way, and become a child: only in a child's forgetting and innocence can a truly new spirit come into the world. This is the beginning of genuinely original creation, the moment in which the writer can turn at last toward the work without preconception, without any motive beyond knowing the taste of what is.

A poem by the T'ang dynasty poet Wang Wei offers a glimpse of such a state:

Subtlety

Another facet of poetry's solace, related to *solutio*, is the increase of subtlety a good poem provides. Subtlety's etymological roots lie in loom-woven cloth. It is the name we give to thought that is both finely textured and ranging, able to bring disparate and multiple qualities into the unified, usable fabric of a new whole. The uncertain is subtlety's inscape: what is woven has—and needs—gaps. In subtle response, thought is stitched into place with its own undertows, opposites, and extensions, by a mind that questions and crosshatches its statements and feelings. Language itself is subtle by nature, multi-stranded of meaning—and what is good poetry if not language awake to its own powers? Even in poems that may seem to risk the didactic, if they are good poems, the buoying tact of the particular—whether in image, metaphor, music, or rhetoric—counterbalances certitude's lead weight. The recognition of language's skillful means extends far beyond

literature. "Style," the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer once said, "is the deference action pays to uncertainty. It is above all style through which power defers to reason."

Subtle thinking liberates its subject from the expected and assumed, from arrogance and the ordinary versions of what is thought true. On the scales of exact/inexact, accurate/inaccurate, right/wrong, true/false, subtlety steps to the side, slicing through cognitive categories as Chuang-Tzu's Taoist butcher sliced through the bones of the ox—finding the place where the joints fall open. Yet subtlety's openness is not to be confused with vagueness. Another exchange that followed a physicist's lecture comes to mind, this one involving Niels Bohr. Bohr had spoken on complementarity; afterwards, one listener asked what the complement of objective truth (*Wirklichkeit*) might be. "Clarity," Bohr replied.

Ambiguity

Poems, if they are good at all, hold knowledge elusive and multiple, unsayable in any other form. Resonant, fragment, traveling more than one direction at a time, poetic speech escapes narrowing abstraction and reification as richly as does life itself. This is why lyric poems are so rife, as Lowry's is, with irony—good poems undercut their own yearning to say one thing well, because to say one thing only is not to say enough. Over-certainty and single-mindedness irritate as well as bore; the idea that one can know what is right, or that a general truth is possible, affronts the true complexity of the real.

Uncertainty and Uneasiness

One of the penalties and graces of consciousness is waking each day to the awareness that the future cannot be predicted, that the universe's foundation rests on an incomprehensible receding, that bewilderment, caprice, and the unknowable are among the most faithful companions of any life. Mostly, it seems, we go on by inventing a story. Yet no story completely suffices, and eventually the turtle appears in its runic shell, munching some contemplative bit of lettuce.

For those willing to let themselves feel it, any story leaves behind an uneasiness, sometimes at the center, other times at the edge of perception, and like the remainder left over in a problem in long division, it must be carried. Literature's work, and particularly poetry's, is in part to take up that residue and remnant, to find a way to live amid and alongside the uncertain. Plato banished poets from his republic in part because he thought poetry escapist, that it dulls the desire for truth by the hypnosis of beauty. But good poetry, as we've begun to see, doesn't in fact allay anxiety with answers—it startles its reader out of the general trance, enlarging a bearable reality by means of a close-paid attention to attention's own ground.

Keats described poetry's relationship to the unknowable in a letter written on the winter solstice of 1817. In it he famously ascribed poetic genius to a kind of anti-talent. "Negative Capability," he called it—"that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." A century later, William Empson echoed Keats's insight when he named ambiguity the central quality of poetic beauty.

Awareness of the fragility of intention and hope; a steady dose of doubt and self-doubt; knowledge of the Heisenbergian effects of the observer's own existence—these identifiers of human consciousness are also markers for what we call "literature," as opposed to those forms of writing that inform, dictate, flatter, plead, terrorize, lure, or simplistically entertain. Awareness of uncertainty signals the entrance of human individuality into the consciousness of the commons. What we think of as "art" goes further: it makes the encounter with the uncertain a thing to be sought. Death-fear is turned into *Gilgamesh*, doubt of other and self becomes *Hamlet*, and our human relationship to what cannot be known is permanently altered. That anxiety, grief, and the abysses of chaos can be lured into beauty and meaning, and into the freedom such transmutation itself brings, is no small part of literature's power, whether experienced as Aristotelian catharsis or in more subtle forms. The point is not resolution, but knowing.

Crisis and Consolement

A lyric poem does not solve any outward dilemma; few answer any practical question, none refastens a single loose shingle to a house. As Auden wrote in his elegy for Yeats, "Poetry makes nothing happen." Yet when crisis requires a mode of negotiation with the chaos, entropy, and loss-terror that co-inhabit any human life, poems are turned toward, as a plant requiring its photosynthesized sugars turns toward the sun.

How to name where poetry's consoling powers may lie? One part can be found in what has already been seen in Anna Swir's poem: the sense of connection with others that good poems both emerge from and forge. In the simplest act of recognizing the imaginative, metaphorical, or narrative expression of another, you find yourself less lonely, more accompanied in this life. Another part may come in what the medieval alchemists called *solutio*—the process of making something workable and transformable by making it more fluid, whether in the physical or meta-

physical realms. A difficult thing is "hard," we say; a mathematical answer arrived at is "solved." A good poem, then, is a solvent, a kind of WD-40 for the soul. This is the efficacy of Aristotle's catharsis. To feel oneself moved creates in itself an increase of freedom; outward circumstance is not the self's only definition when the imagination is present to press against it. Primo Levi described the exhilaration he felt at Auschwitz, when, sent with a fellow prisoner to fetch the midday soup, he attempted to reconstruct and recite for his partner (with whom he could scarcely communicate, not sharing a language) a canto from Dante. During those minutes, each recovered, however briefly, some sense of what it is to feel fully human.

Poetry often enacts the recovering or emotional and metaphysical balance, whether in an individual (primarily the lyric poem's task) or in a culture (the task of the epic). Yet to do that work, a poem needs to retain within its words some of the disequilibrium that called it forth, and to include when it is finished some sense also of uncomfortable remainder, the undissolvable residue carried over—disorder and brokenness are necessarily part of human wholeness. Anna Swir's poem is virtually all remainder. It refuses any idealization of poetic wisdom, any transformative lyric closure; it ends as it begins. And yet this poem does what good poems do: increases our sense of participation in the human. It counters isolation and meaninglessness, even while offering no replacement beyond its own presence. The satisfaction felt by its reader—and for me, Swir's poem does bring a considerable solace—comes in its reminder of the commonality of grief, perplexity, and the failure to comprehend or transcend. By drawing from what is so often the strategy of comedy—that is, by admitting the truth—the poem makes despair both lighter and more bearable. It does this by showing despair for what it is: a touchstone of any life spent without blinders.

Izumi Shikibu's tanka is not so different from this as it may first seem—if the reader doesn't grant the wind and leaking house their full severity, the poem's moonlight means nothing. The relationship between uncertainty and solace in these poems—as in life—is not curative; it is one of "also." And that is enough. Wallace Stevens called writing an act of self-preservation, the imagination pressing back against the inward-pressing real. This is less a wisdom coolly achieved than sleight of hand, a conjured aikido of language. The most serene works on the bookshelf are nonetheless in the lineage of Scheherazade's stories—art holding incoherence and death at bay by invention of beauty, detour, and suspense. This is Sartre's definition of genius: not a gift, but the escape a person invents in a des-