

A Humbling Muse

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I am forever praying to the goddess of limitation, a figure draped in golden divinity but bound in rusty chains. Her eyes follow her soul's greatest yearning, gazing upward toward Olympus, yet her body is transfixed, feeling the weight of her bondage and age. Her ivory hair tumbles down in waves over her shoulders, but she is weathered with the streaks and bruises of time. My frequent visits have left her altar in want of repair; perhaps someone will repaint and leave the place pristine and virginal once again. Every artist is made to feel like the first ever to kneel before her.

. . . I need no reminders of my limitations. I know them better than anyone ever could. Here I am groping toward an artistic life with little more than resolve, hope, and a fragile childhood memory that has led me to this point. The consciousness of a five-year-old is a volatile thing, and it is hard to know whether the memory comes from real experience or whether I have dreamed it since then. But memories of any kind, especially those embellished by our imaginations, bind themselves to the mind and spirit in a way that makes me doubt if it would really matter. Through the lens of my memory I can see that moment, the birth of some creative drive within me that still motivates me to search always for more truth and beauty . . .

In his essay "Souls on Ice" Mark Doty contemplates and struggles with the ways that we try to get at truths about the world. The physical world and our senses stimulate us, but that is not enough. Human beings, and artists in particular, are drawn to think about what is not physical; we yearn for that which is representative, universal. Something of the metaphysical sets us in motion. Abstract ideas about love, identity, and creativity intrigue us, but our human limitations stand between us and the knowledge we seek. Something of the abstract is always lost in translation. Nevertheless, our artistic minds keep searching for ways to represent and hold on to whatever fleeting glimpses of truth we manage to visualize. We can't seem to help ourselves.

Doty's creativity is sparked by a display of frozen mackerel at a supermarket. It isn't a romantic portal to transcendent truths, to be sure, but people cannot control or predict what might spark their imaginations. Doty is wise

enough to trust his fleeting attraction, and his contemplation of the fish becomes a metaphor through which he confronts his grief after losing a lover to AIDS. Of course, it's never really about fish; it's about interpretation, meaning-making, figuring out where we belong in this crazy universe. Sometimes we need fish to get there.

And we almost always need to allow ourselves to be surprised, to be hooked like one of Doty's fish. It would have been so easy, in that ever-sensible and impatient way of modern living, for Doty to think, "No, I don't need any mackerel today . . . but where can I find some eggs?" A trip to a grocery store is about practicality, not poetry. It takes time and even more effort to follow metaphors properly, from fascination to fruition, and sometimes we just don't want to deal with them, or in the lull of daily monotony, we overlook them. The extraordinary often lives in the ordinary—or even obligatory—moments of our lives.

I tripped over one such moment while taking notes on a public art exhibit. Hunched over a notebook with the weight of my first real college assignment, I scribbled *Tom Otterness—The Real World—Battery Park*. Just then, as I examined Otterness's lifeless bronze subjects, two brothers tottered into view. They were unconcerned with our scholarly study of the bronze forms. They had more important things to do. They reached out to grasp the statues and lifted themselves onto one, exploring it, discovering it as they would some uncharted land of priceless treasures. The bronze melted away from me, unimportant in that moment. It would be here for another visit another time, but these boys . . . they would grow up and play sports and get jobs; they would move past this sculpture, having engaged with it in a single fleeting moment of curiosity. I was embarrassed to feel that I could not join them in their exploration. At some point I had become convinced that my mind could no longer grasp at truth and my eyes could no longer recognize real beauty, and in the fog of growing up and a foolish sense of self-importance in my task, I almost lost this moment.

Statues, whether a bronze reality or an ivory figure in a dream, have the power to endure. *That* moment, however—the nearly sunset sky, the stillness of the light through the tree branches, those two brothers discovering and imagining with all the intense playfulness that young children possess, together yet independent, with their watchful father speaking a few encouraging words to them in Italian—that moment was for me alone, never to be recreated or relived the same way. That is what getting a little bit lost in a moment can do, letting the unexplainable magic of some place or time into our consciousness where it is free to shape us.

. . . I was five years old, at the theater with my dad. It was the end of a long rehearsal and everyone was filtering out, eager to return to important adult lives. The lights remained on, casting an eerie bluish haze over the stage. The boards reflected the light and seemed to give off some of their own. This light came from no source that I could see or understand. The theater was outdoors, exposed to the sounds of insects and the rushing of the river behind it, in the way that the ancient Greeks might have experienced it thousands of years before me. Even at five I could feel the timelessness of that moment. The power of that stage, imposing itself on the dry western landscape, held me in a state of wonder and rapture that I still strive in vain to evoke when I stumble upon such objects of quiet fascination. I turn that almost-memory over and over in my mind, wanting to feel the seizure of my whole self again, to understand the fascination, to reach out and grasp it more fully, like a child absorbed and unhindered in exploration under the protective gaze of a father . . .

In a moment of artistic experience, the mind and soul are awakened by the senses, and the world seems to come into focus. James Joyce creates such a moment for his protagonist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For a fleeting second, in his mind's eye, Stephen Dedalus sees a winged figure, his mythological namesake, rising into the sky on wings forged by his own craftsmanship. That image, different from a display of fish and yet still somehow the same, inspires not only a moment of fascination, but an epiphany:

A hawklike man flying sunward above the sea, a prophesy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood. . . . His throat ached with the desire to cry aloud, the cry of a hawk or eagle on high, to cry piercingly of his deliverance to the winds. This was the call of life to his soul. (Joyce 173—174)

Joyce reveals a sacred moment in the life of his protagonist—a sacred moment for any of us. Somewhere in the recesses of our bodies lives a force that is just out of reach, a soul that is longing to be called.

Opening up our conscious minds to those sensory prompts, those fleeting fascinations, is a process that is artistic, spiritual, and psychological. It happens on the delicate tightrope between the conscious and unconscious mind. The psychologist Carl Jung tries to explain that balance in his essay “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” but even he grants artists a kind of sovereignty over the creative process, claiming that no psychologist can or should try to define what exactly art is. The “collective unconscious” to which Jung makes reference in his essay informs the creative

process and leads to the production of art that transcends space and time (298). This collective unconscious taps into the deeper wellspring of life.

. . . *Perhaps the goddess was there, too, even then. It took great strength to climb onto that stage. "Be careful," she whispered, both warning and inviting me to revel. "There's magic up there." And there I stood, gazing into the empty audience, an expanse of grass that became a rolling ocean at the touch of the warm night breeze, each blade joining in a dance that had been passed down through the ages, from a time long before even the ancient Greeks had built their great amphitheatres. There was a powerful calm in the air; emanating from the boards along with the blue haze that still filled the space with a sense of enchantment . . .*

Drawn to these transcendent moments, artists struggle to make them permanent, but limited as they are, failure often accompanies their efforts. Yet there is something powerful about the creative process itself, something that moves us beyond our human limitations. Jung explains: "Indeed the special significance of a true work of art resides in the fact that it has escaped from the limitations of the personal and has soared beyond the personal concerns of its creator" (293). Jung reminds us too that the "creative process" is "a living thing . . . an *autonomous complex* . . . which leads a life of its own outside the hierarchy of consciousness" (295). The artist, of course, needs her sense of the world, however faulty it may be, to find the inspiration for her work, but her work, in turn, is only powerful to the extent that it transcends those faults.

The struggle of the artist to live the balance between the physical world and the transcendent "collective unconscious" is expressed most vividly in "Burnt Norton," the first poem in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. For Eliot, the physical and sensory part of human consciousness is represented by time. Transcending time is another fundamental artistic struggle. History has shown that the greatest works of art are appreciated for hundreds of years after their creation because their greatness lies in their ability to appeal to what is eternal within us all. Throughout the poem, Eliot explores the idea that the beauty of given moments is partly in their transience, and the ability to live fully in those moments relies on an acceptance of our sensory limitations and our temporality. He recognizes how unbearable that duality can be for the artist, reaching toward the eternal while stuck in the transient and physical, but he nonetheless revels in the problem:

To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall

Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered. (84-89)

Although our senses and our consciousness bind us to the physical world and separate us from the “collective unconscious” in certain ways, Eliot reminds us that these limitations are also what make our art meaningful. Eliot’s own collective unconscious, which he describes as “the still point of the turning world,” is only approachable from that artistic tightrope, caught between the stillness of truth and the ever-moving specter of time (62).

. . . And then I was conscious of another light, one that had nothing to do with electric bulbs glowing above and around me. The sky was strikingly clear in the way that only Idaho summer skies can be, and the stars were burning, piercing through the dense vale of late-night blackness. I became a silent and still participant in that scene, a one-night engagement on a great yet still temporal stage made of wood and stars and the dreams of a child. And there was magic there—something that filled me with awe and terror, but also stillness. I stood “at the still point of the turning world” and I felt, although only later could I put words to it, that this was maybe as close to God as I could ever bear to be . . .

The world is full of images that strike our imagination. It is the artist’s privilege and responsibility to attend those images and be moved by them. Moved to think and wonder, moved to awe and anger, moved to create. Our time and our place in the world are gifts that connect us to the transcendent, but also gifts that keep us away. Doty speaks to the heart of the artist’s life-long toil when he proclaims that “our explanations will fail, but it is our human work to make them” (42). To transcend the self to reach the collective unconscious, to live only and entirely in the still point of the world, would not only be impossible, but would also signal the loss of our essential humanness. The divinity of humanity is the ultimate paradox, and yet it is the foundation of artistic life. The goddess of limitation is *our* goddess. In the instant that she binds our bodies to our senses, she also supplies us with the means of reaching beyond our limitations, as our souls yearn for what we cannot touch and cannot see. We do so as if we were born to follow an elusive metaphor or a buried archetypal image to what is most vital and most beautiful.

. . . The silence of an empty theater has never let go of me. Somewhere in my still-fragile consciousness lives a five-year-old standing silently absorbed in the wonder of it all.

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