

WONDER, CREATIVITY AND KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT: The modern convention of associating creativity with the active agent is so strong that it is hard to imagine what people have meant when ascribing it to muses, guardian angels and divine inspiration. The normal sociological approach, indeed, is to patronise such conceptions. I want to argue, nonetheless, on implicitly Durkheimian lines, that these religious understandings are also the sociological understandings most able to deal with the lived experience of creativity. Creativity is a gift to the grateful, an effect of a purposeless receptivity, a humble participation in the divine creation of the world. Creativity has no starting point in linear time or Euclidean space, but emerges from the eternal nothingness of the in-between: social relations that involve separation and connection simultaneously are necessarily creative.

Grace

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)*

*now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened*

(e.e. cummings, 1994: 167, ellipsis added)

I spent yesterday searching for where to start this article. Although I'd gone to the computer inspired, the rhythm failed and the words sounded false and forced. I countered this dispirited feeling with a renewed determination to find 'the right starting point', believing, crazily, that I couldn't begin writing without it. As the discarded sentences continued to pile, however, I began taking their failure personally, splitting my attention between the problem of the starting point and the larger problem of *me*: why couldn't I find where to start? My concern had initially been the intuition buzzing in my gut but now it shifted to a concern with the place where I should have been, and with this shift my failings and problems began multiplying, like the brooms in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. I could no longer hold a thought steadily. I was everywhere else, with nothing to hold me, no feeling of depth or resonance or belonging. My breathing was fast and shallow, as if I hadn't time to breathe, as if I didn't want the air inside me, as if it didn't belong to me.

Soon it was too much for me, a catastrophe. The elusive starting place was now only a symptom of the *everything wrong* in which I was drowning. I had to be saved because I could no longer imagine saving myself. If only my family and friends needed less of my time, if only I had more study leave, if only I didn't have to stop to do the shopping, if only universities were better managed: if only these reasonable conditions were met, the article would be written and I would be all right. Being 'all right' is the fantasy, derived from the logic of stories, that if we discover the secret distant place, if we succeed in our quest, then some ever after peace will follow.

Still another level of panic was reached when the catastrophe itself became cause for a search for blame and remedy. If only I was better or calmer or more intelligent

Self-blame and the blaming of others were alternating currents. I was a victim of others' control or a victim of my own failure of control: whether here or there, control was *somewhere*, and, wherever it was, if the writing, if life, if the

world was wrong, then someone or something was to blame and the problem should be fixed! But the words stayed ugly. And, throughout the day, I was ugly too, short-tempered and self-righteous and ungenerous with those I love. I couldn't feel the *life* of my love for them. I couldn't look directly at them. I was sulking behind the windows of my eyes.

This panic, which felt so out of control, was the result of my determination to exercise control. I couldn't *find* where to start or how to write, and the harder I looked, the more alienated I became from where I was *and* from what I wanted. But, then again, I couldn't find what I wanted because it wasn't lost: the place to start was always right in front of me. Where else could it have been?

Whether I'm writing, cooking, gardening or considering a problem, my responsibility is not to fix the text, the food or the garden, but to *be* with them, listen to them, respond to them spontaneously. As Annie Dillard says, 'I do not so much write a book as sit up with it.... I enter its room with dread and sympathy for its many disorders. I hold its hand and hope it will get better' (1989: 52). The remedy is neither up to me nor the other: creativity occurs *between*, but it only occurs if I trust the essential goodness of the other. And yesterday I couldn't feel the life in my text, any more than I could feel the life in my love for my loved ones.

The change that allowed me to write occurred in the late afternoon, not through discovery of a missing first word, not through any act of mine, but through a change in my relations with the world. I happened to look out the window and the sight that had been mute and uninspired, that I'd not been able to *see*, because I'd been elsewhere, this sight now held my gaze for a vital moment with its loveliness. I was surprised by the softness of the hills in the tender light before sunset; with the dew falling over them with utter gentleness, they looked vulnerable, peaceful, ready for sleep. I'm sure I was reminded of the sight of my sleeping children, a vision that never fails to carry me away, back to the world. But, then again, perhaps my sleeping children remind me of these eternal hills.

Because I could feel this tenderness in the hills, I could feel gentleness and compassion in me, and, with soft eyes, I saw my part in the world rather than my masterly oversight of it. In that moment of love, I took my first real breath for the day, except that it wasn't clear it was *me* breathing. Inspiration, as the word suggests, is a form of breathing, passive *and* active, accessing knowledge located inside *and* outside me:

The respiratory rhythm can acquire such a degree of interior manifestation that one can say: 'I am all breathing.' [*Tr.* This translation is but a feeble approximation of the German expression '*Es atmet mich,*' literally 'It breathes me.' In other words, the world comes to breathe within me; I participate in the good breathing of the world; I am plunged into a breathing world. Everything breathes in the world'] (Schultz, quoted in Bachelard, 1971: 179).

In this experience of interbreathing, there is a different sense of being 'all right': a sense of the eternal rather than the ever after. I would be all right not because I'd achieve some goal but because I was where I belonged, and always would belong, whatever I did. My restraints and choices -- what was given and what was needed -- matched as eternally as the child's weary head fits the nest of the parent's shoulder and neck, as my footsteps match the stone paths that wind around these hills. There was no judgement in the hills or the falling dew, just as there is no judgement in grace. And I could feel that the text deserved trust. I could feel its heart when I could feel mine. Writers, readers and texts can only work on each other, address each other, if they are in love. Otherwise, they are 'automatically at the wrong distance' (Cixous, 1988: 147). Creative blocks come from having expectations that take me away from where I am, and what is passing through me, at a particular moment (McNiff, 1995: 117).

If the answer to my writer's block was so close, and so easy, why did I make life so hard? During my writer's block, was my panic and frustrated anger a

result of my hubris as Author? Do I sulkily refuse what's offered because my self can't accept that it isn't independent, that it cannot control its fate, that I may do things without doing them *myself*? Does pride set me on a vain quest to find what's already been provided?

Gratitude

Einstein was once asked, 'What's the most important question you can ask in life?' And his answer was, 'Is the universe a friendly place or not?' ... I tell my students that every time you see angels mentioned in the Bible you should think Einstein, because you're dealing with the same issue. It's the ultimate cosmological issue. Can we trust the cosmos? Is the cosmos benign? (Fox and Sheldrake, 1996: 12)

The surprise of the hills filled my world, replacing the nothing that isn't there with the nothing that is. Weighed down with my failings and misfortunes, I'd wanted to be elsewhere, but now I overflowed with gratitude for the glory of the world as it was. Here I was! Here we were! The dew fell upon us, like a blessing of heaven, reminding me that the world I'd taken as given was, truly, *given*. Because I could never explain the gift, even if scientists eventually think they know *what* we've been given, I knew mystery, with absolute certainty. And so although a moment before I'd felt sick, picking and shuffling and unpicking my arbitrary thoughts and sentences, the gratuitousness of the world now made it both meaningful and inexplicable. My sentences were no longer *about* but *of* the world. I wrote to find new ways to say Hallelujah!

A parent sees this wondrous gratuity in the downy light they can never touch on the child's skin. They embrace their children desperately because they know, from the moment of the child's birth, that the child is a gift, an inexplicable blessing that intrudes in their lives and possesses their hearts, but is always going to be other, always beyond them, always liable to leave. If the constantly

renewed surprise of the downy skin ensures the gift isn't taken for granted, this vital sense of gratitude and mystery becomes the source of bliss, wonder, inspiration and learning. Gratitude for the child's grace allows parents to relearn what is important, how to live and die, how to see and smell and touch and taste and hear as if it matters.

When the hills reached out to me, I realised, in my return to the warmth of life, that I must have been dead when I took life for granted. This inspiring sight of the hills was as fresh as the moment of genesis. The world and I were *vitally* alive. This miracle of life in the middle of the endlessness of the universe is absurd unless gratefully received, yet many of us take gifts themselves for granted. Insisting that gifts are never *present*, because they oblige future repayment in the form of gratitude or return gift, cynics say that gifts are no more than a prettily-decorated form of economic investment. But the dewy light sought nothing from me, and had I purposefully looked to the hills for inspiration it would not have come. Rather than debt, it is joy and celebration that requires gifts and gratitude. Gratitude is itself gratuitous, for thanks must be *given*. Likewise, gratuities are grateful, if only for the opportunity for generosity that they give to the giver. Obligatory gifts and gratitude, then, *aren't* gifts and gratitude.

By changing what I take for granted, bringing more of the world alive by calling my surprised attention to things to which I'd been dead, gratitude is an inherently creative condition. My life changes whenever I gratefully accept the world's gifts. But these changes in turn bring something new to the world, something that is not simply mine but is nonetheless unique because of whatever special qualities I bring into play. My gratitude is at once a receiving *and* giving, just as my creativity is at once taken from *and* given to the world. This interchange is as easy, graceful and free as breathing, without any balance sheet mediating the moments, and without a distinct consciousness to play accountant. Characterising breath as the inspirational gift of life, David Steindl-Rast puts it aptly:

‘And’ is the decisive word in give-and-take. Mere giving is as lifeless as mere taking. If you merely take a breath and stop there, you are dead. And when you merely breathe out and stop there, you are also dead. Life is not giving *or* taking, but give-*and*-take. Breathing is an obvious example, but the same give-and-take can be found wherever there is life. It is the dynamic expression of universal belonging. (1984: 199)

Just as attention to breath can make me feel that I am all breathing, attention to grace and gratitude makes me aware that I’m not distinct giver or receiver but the very manifestation of ‘and’, the gift and celebration in-between. Life itself seems joyful praise, both gift and gratitude, and I am at once singer, listener, song and singing. In this, of course, I approach the condition of angels.

I imagine that when Bach wrote music as an offering to the glory of God, he was carried toward glory by his sense of gratitude for the gratitude that gave him his compositional gift of accepting the gift of God that produced the work. This ecstatic spiralling logic of the ‘and’ is the nature of divine music. It is also the nature of love and love-making, for who gives and takes in love-making? Who is active and who is passive? Whose body, breath and voice is whose?

Taking the form of praiseful thanksgiving, creativity and love no longer seem a manifestations of ego or acts of self-expression. Through creativity we find our central Godlikeness, but in a humble rather than Oedipal or Promethean way, through our nothingness. Praising and thanking God, saying Yes to the God’s gift of life, we cannot help (re)creating the world, and in doing so we are doing God’s work and imitating God’s own gift of creativity. The empty receptivity of gratefulness is itself a form of overflowing fullness. As Hildegard of Bingen says, and Wim Wenders’ film *Wings of Desire* shows, this fleshy creativity amazes angels, ‘[f]or the angel without the work of the flesh is simply praise; but the humans with their corporeal works are a glorification: therefore the angels praise humans’ work’ (Hildegard of Bingen, quoted in Fox and Sheldrake, 1996: 165).

Sceptics might say this argument focuses on joy and overlooks sorrow, but these aren't opposing terms. My joy in my friends and family, for example, is inseparable from the anguish of my knowledge that I will lose them at some time. Because it reminds us of our blessings, sorrow is itself a blessing, and anyone who turns from sorrow slips into a half-life, the fear of being really alive leading them to take the world for granted. As long as we attend to it, everything the world offers is a gift that awakens us to life. Once I could attend to it, for example, my writer's block gave me the right place to start this article.

Wonder

Artistic activity makes the artist aware that he is not the author of his works.... This ... age-old experience of inspiration ... takes on exceptional weight when one asks oneself whether enthusiasm or possession are not concealed at the heart of all activity, even beneath the primordial activity of consciousness and language; whether a delirium more profound than thought does not support thought; whether language which claims to be act and origin ... is not an inveterate passivity, the endless reiteration of an old old story, without beginning or end (Levinas, 1989: 151)

Many Christians find limitless inspiration in the Bible. Whatever page they turn to, it ministers to their needs, before they can themselves identify those needs. Bibles, however, are not the only holy text: the intensity of wonder makes a minister of the world itself. Shedding its faceless objectivity, as enchanted as the talking woods and animals in children's stories, the world directly addresses the person filled with wonder. Wherever I attend - the hills outside, casual phrases, my children's books, movies, songs - the world is alive to my concerns. Everyday events that normally pass unnoticed, half-lived, become auspicious; apparently separate phenomena reveal their profound connections. When the world *speaks to me* in this way, messages that I normally read at a mundane level sing out their sacred meaning, and I joyfully register their

announcements in page after page of my notepads. I feel the wing beats of miracle, serendipity, fate. And in these passionate suspenseful moments, I feel the *relation* between me and the world: we speak to each other, we belong with each other.

In wonder we feel in the presence of a (new) birth that is also our (original) birth. We chase some inkling of new understanding, before finally recognising, with great surprise and satisfaction, that we're back where we were (not) when we started. Wonder brings a sense that only now that our 'origin' has shifted do we feel at home there. We're where we were but seeing it afresh.

Consider wonder's characteristic double take. We see something, and then we stop and *see* something: cartoonists depict the second take as an elastic movement of head and eyes *toward* the newly seen object, which has suddenly come alive for us. Yet we also say we're 'taken aback' by the shock of the new, that it 'sets us back on our heels'. So the double take actually involves three moments - it draws me extraordinarily close to the other by estranging me from, by reminding me of, my ordinary senses of identity and the world. It suspends me in-between, evoking a sense of time that is here *and* there but is not chronological, is not here *or* there (see Irigaray, 1993: 73-4).

The doubled and suspended qualities of wonder partly explain why it calls out metaphors of vibration. Shuddering, buzzing, fluttering, shivering, shimmering: such terms insist on movement *and* stability. These terms also highlight wonder's suspenseful fragility. It is a way of knowing that evades the arrested qualities required for apprehension; it cannot be conveyed to another or stored for oneself; it is defenceless in the face of blasé trivialisation; its particular momentary qualities are not directly expressed in the cultural forms that emerge from it.

Perhaps most of all, however, the trembling indicates the dreadful edge of wonder. Sometimes, in the ecstasy of wonder, I think I'll explode with all the intuitions calling for utterance. Like the figures in Biblical paintings who

shelter from God's radiance behind their outstretched hands, I fear I can't take any more. Wonder is beautiful, and beauty, Rainer Maria Rilke said, 'is but the beginning of terror which we can just barely sustain, and we admire it so, because it serenely disdains to destroy us' (quoted in Steindl-Rast, 1998: 12).

The wonderful

[In Fra Angelico's painting, the] Angel for Vigils wears a dark scarlet garment and holds his horn as if he were ready to blow, but he is not yet blowing. His left hand makes a strange gesture that signals, 'Wait; not yet.' His eyes are turned upward. He waits in that reverent silence out of which every genuine sound must come. This angel personifies the expectant listening attitude that precedes genuine word or song.' (Steindl-Rast, 1998: 24)

So, wonder is where knowing and creativity begin. But although the word 'wonder' is often used in everyday life, we normally take for granted the connection between this everyday process and the grander forms of wonder. What's involved when I wonder which road to take, or what type of tree to plant, or when to intervene in a heated tutorial discussion, or how to draw the skeleton-knight that my son has requested?

Let's imagine that the thought 'I'm hungry' has popped into my consciousness. Wondering what to eat, I look at the ingredients in my refrigerator. If I'm speeding through my day, all over the place, nothing in the fridge will hold my attention and I'll quickly move, dissatisfied, to the kitchen cupboard. But if I *see* something in the refrigerator, clock-time pauses, and my eyes glaze slightly while I look, wonderingly, at the space *between* the ingredients I've noticed. This is a space that I can never get a grip on, but which I can feel, and palpate. It is space of thick rather than thin air. And it is located both outside me, in my refrigerator, and in my belly. Inside and outside mimic each other, without allowing me to settle which is the original and which the copy. From this

indeterminate but tangible space, from the belly of the refrigerator, I'm given an intuition about what to do with these ingredients. I do not will this intuition, but wait for it to occur or come to me. It might take the form of an image or a taste or a smell or a memory of another meal and another occasion. But the intuition isn't set down: it isn't a recipe, even if it leads me to a recipe, and it isn't, strictly speaking, an origin. It's a feeling that I must be open to, and trust, and follow. It's a form of knowing that cannot express what it knows, either to me or to others. Yet feeling the wonderful possibilities of these ingredients in my belly, and holding this feeling attentively, I can move toward a meal that gives form to the feeling without being a simple transcription of it.

According to the theologian Stephen Crites, the same process of wonder is involved every time we wonder how to tell a story, even if it's only the evening-time story of our day. Crites addresses this issue by distinguishing sacred and mundane stories. The former, which we are normally calling archetypes, live in 'the arms and legs and bellies of the celebrants' (1989: 69). They cannot be directly told because they are less objects of consciousness than the stuff from which consciousness is formed. Sometimes, though, in moments of clarity, we *awaken to* these stories, and our mundane stories, those that can be directly seen, heard and devised, are attempts to articulate these awakenings. Mundane stories are only effective because they remind audiences of the sacred stories that cannot be uttered directly, but mundane stories never exhaust the sacred, even if there are epiphanic moments when, as listeners and writers and readers, we feel the gap closed.

The philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Cornelius Castoriadis talk in similar terms of a gap between what is sayable and what is unsayable. Whether the speaker is the Archangel Gabriel or the person beside you on the bus, the desire to speak comes from

a void which swells in the already said; a void which is determined in the sense that the one who is about to speak knows that there is something other and more to be said than what has already been said,

but nothing positive beyond that fact, beyond the fact that it is not said by what has already been said. (Castoriadis, 1984: 132)

This void involves the familiar paradox of empty and full. An absence or lack, the void nonetheless swells as a presence. Indeed, it is so *positive* that what's been said pales into negativity: the presence -- the said -- comes to feel like an absence, while the void that cannot be said becomes overwhelmingly present. What matters is the thing that cannot be said, cannot be captured, but can so powerfully be felt.

Castoriadis highlights the parallel between unsayable and ground when he comments that the sayable 'leans' on the unsayable: words and other signs rest on 'horizons of imaginary significance' which can be discussed but never exhausted or expressed. The phenomenon of the horizon evokes what some call God, emptiness or nothingness, and others call transitional space, the in-between or prepositional. As Castoriadis says, these imaginary horizons of sociality '*denote* nothing at all, and they *connote* just about everything' (Castoriadis, 1987: 143). 'Nothing at all' and 'everything' turn on each other like emptiness and fullness.

Every time I speak, then, my words lean on the wonderful for which I have no words: I make an utterance without knowing exactly what I'm saying, then respond to it as my own audience, test it against the knowledge of my arms and legs and especially belly, feel a deficiency or void here or a discordance there, take another stab at the utterance, respond to this amendment - and so it goes, until time elapses or my body rests. Often I cannot find a word to fill the void, and the wonderful is lost, until apparently recalled by reading someone else's writing. Even when a word fits perfectly, it isn't because it repeats a pre-existing form. In Roger Caillois' haunting phrase, it 'is similar, not similar to something, just *similar*' (1984: 30). The wonderful, the imaginary, sacred or archetypal, is prepositional. It is palpable but cannot be grasped. It is nothing.

Despite being taken for granted, this strange process of wondering underlies most of the phenomena I describe as *my* decisions and activities. When I feel that I'm *really cooking*, the origin isn't me but a sensitivity toward the world's wonder. Making music from the sound of silence, the angel of vigil depicts the conception and creation of works of art, but is also a reminder of the most everyday miracles of life. The angel shows why thanks should be given for the humblest meal, but also shows why good cooking is necessarily grateful, why every meal is a sacrament.

Annunciation

At the moment of the Annunciation, Fra Angelico gives his angel wings that are banded in rainbow colours.... A man can only guess at the reality of a woman's conception, via the imperfect analog of what happens with language: when an author thinks that he has something to say, before speaking or writing, his body, as if filled with love, becomes uplifted and vibrates like a rainbow. He doesn't yet know where his idea will settle, or in which direction it will go, or in what shades it will be coloured. The bodily state which precedes the emergence of an idea in spoken form begins in an aurora borealis, a kind of totality shaped liked an opened-out fan, accompanied by such an emotion that the body experiences the word 'emotion' itself as that movement of soaring flight, enraptured and suspended, to which it refers. Hence these wings which beat like those of a bird fluttering over a fixed point without yet having decided on a direction, and which are shaded in every possible colour, of which, at the end, only one will remain. That is what intuition sees before the thing actually comes into sight. (Serres, 1995: 109; original ellipsis)

In the moment before messengers deliver their announcement, the world *outside* the would-be annunciator pulsates with the fluttering fullness that

Serres identifies *inside* the Archangel Gabriel. The opportunity to speak - the empty plate, the pregnant silence, the white page, the blank canvas - is itself inspiring, both empty and full, as indeed are we. It is a creative summons that calls us and strangely draws from us things that we recognise as what we wanted to say but that we couldn't have said by ourselves.

As would-be annunciator, I am summoned by the world to witness and receive its annunciations. My nostrils are filled with the breath of life that is the divine medium in which I live. The word inspiration hovers between breathing *into* the other (inspiring them) and breathing *in* the other (inspiring). Inside and outside, activity and passivity, inspiration and expiration: inspiration overflows such categorical boundaries. As would-be annunciator, I become a *tangle* of angel and flesh, or ink and flesh; I cannot say if I possess or am possessed by the thought which buzzes and grows inside me, demanding birth; I cannot say if I approached the world or it approached me; I become inside *and* outside, sender *and* receiver, Gabriel *and* Mary.

Fra Angelico's Gabriel and Mary are separate, not touching, their hands holding themselves in. Mary's conception and pregnancy is as far from Gabriel's direct understanding as Gabriel's angelic purpose is from Mary's; neither can conceive (of) the other's conception, but each, on either side of their meeting, signifies to the other their own mysterious condition. Mary's child and Gabriel's words: both are alloyed mysteries to those about to issue them, and both will remain wonders of alterity once produced. So Mary and Gabriel are separate, but they respectfully gesture toward each other. The possibility of a bond between them, what they recognise in each other, is the divine. The speaker who produces words and the mother who produces a child: these are irreparably different processes, but deeply intertwined through metaphor and archetype. In this moment of annunciation, where the conventional is-ness of things is called into question by their relationality and always emergent quality, Mary cannot settle on the form of salutary words to offer her visitor.

Orthodox causality is disrupted in this creative process: on his Master's instructions, Gabriel announces the imminent birth of the Lord, his Master; Mary receives a message from the Lord who will be her issue. To put this another way, at the moment before my annunciation, before I cook or write, I forgo the masterly univocality of announcement and enter the flow of a relation with the world around me. This enchanted moment of conception suspends inside and outside, and *performs* the religious experience of communion that Fra Angelico's Gabriel may have also represented. As Serres (1995: 25) comments, 'When angels breathe out, by so doing they reveal their message twice: what they produce, and what they are.'

Instead of announcing it, expressing it, representing it, then, I *conceive* the world's meaning in moments of creativity. Knowledge doesn't take the form of a description or expression but rather the conception and rebirth of the world, the reenactment of creation. This is the word becoming flesh: the word 'occurs' to me, it 'strikes' me. It is also flesh becoming word, allowing me to write the world through my body. The divine is not here or there but is the flow between, the shiver of resonance, effervescence, communion, inspiration. It is the *possibility* of what Merleau-Ponty calls 'reversibility', referring, for example, to the feeling painters have that the world they're painting is watching them (1974: 287-8).

This conception takes place not in chronological time but in eternity, which is to time what nothing is to things. Just as every thing leans on nothing, every beginning leans on eternity, as Mircea Eliade (1971) suggests in his account of the eternal return. Origins, Eliade argues, are not simply where we start, but what we find through the wonders of repetition. In ritually reenacting our origin myths, for example, we surrender chronology and self to the nothingness of acting. But while acting the beginning, we find this moment coming to life. This is no longer *just* acting: this has become *real*. We can feel the beginning of being human, or Australian, or part of a family, or the particular person we are. When we suddenly feel the presence of the creative forces that we were

simply representing a moment before, we feel the world and ourselves shift. We begin *now*! Our origin has been originated, or realised, in our return to it.

What we are feeling in this moment, however, is never simply the first chronological moment, the past or thing we are representing. But nor is it simply the chronological present of our performance. Instead it is the eternity that connects the origin and its repetitions. Just as we cannot know *one* until we learn its meaning through the nothing that makes one *and* two, we cannot know the origin in itself, for creation always involves first *and* second. In feeling the point of origin, people must also be feeling the fluttering eternity that connects the origin and its repetition. Creation occurs neither in the present nor the past, but in the eternal that lends its glow and authority to any particular counting of the chronological, any particular arrangement of repetitions. When we feel we're *someone*, it's because we've felt *life*. And so it is that any creation is a hymn, not so much to the world, but of the world.

Knowledge and Mystery

Our Western culture which is famous for its activism has very underdeveloped muscles of receptivity. We tend to fill this hole with junk because we're afraid of the dark or, if you will, afraid of nothingness. (Sheldrake and Fox, 1996: 126)

Let us conclude this article by considering how knowledge is to be understood, given the gift of inspiration. Let us, in other words, consider the relation of knowledge and mystery.

The opening credits in the *noir* suspense thriller *Body Heat* are appropriately suggestive moments of chiaroscuro. Mysterious shapes slowly undulate across the screen, dark on light, light on dark, as tantalising as silk drawn across the skin, lovely in their intertwining. Are they flames coiling around the dark? Or diaphanous curtains teased by breaths of wind? Or glimpses of the skin of

lovers? Mesmerised, the watching consciousness itself takes on the lightness of silk and can register the faintest whispers of imagination.

The work of creation involves the same voluptuous caress of dark and light. Gaston Bachelard (1971: 17) calls himself a word dreamer, and Marguerite Duras has observed that ‘one always reads in the dark.... Reading depends on the obscurity of night. Even if one reads in broad daylight, outside, darkness gathers around the book’ (quoted in de Certeau, 1988: 73, original ellipsis). Looking at Metsu’s *The Letter Writer*, a painting of a nocturnal scribbler working in the light of a candle held by a ghostly figure in the background, Michel Serres (1995: 132) discerns

the reality of the process of writing: a small glimmer illuminates the initial moment of creativity - next to the writer, outside of him, outside of his body, his pen, his page, his table.... Who is the shadow that holds it? Is this an angelic figure that resembles him like a brother? Is it a demon seeking to put him to death? Or is it the owner of a storehouse or treasury in which he can fish, before then, in turn, taking his place as an intermediary?

These quotations suggest that, as the John’s Gospel puts it (1:5), ‘the light shineth in darkness’. Night casts its own light, vital for reading, writing, cooking and daydreaming, and black and white light each get their power from their relation. The black words call up the reserves of the white pages; the cone of reading light opens the reserves of night.

Such a sense of the vital relation of thing and nothing contrasts with familiar understandings of understanding, for although children laugh easily at Cheli Duran Ryan’s (1986) story of Hildilid, the old woman of Hexham, who tries to sweep and scrub and scare away the night, few adults dare laugh as Sarastro pursues the same hygienic obsessions in *The Magic Flute*. When he proclaims that ‘the sun’s rays drive away the night, destroy the evil power of the dissembler’, Sarastro speaks for all who believe that the historical mission of

knowledge is to progress from darkness to light. Seeking to demystify and enlighten the world, Sarastro declares a holy war that turns detectives, teachers, explorers, missionaries and scientists into cold-eyed warriors using the torch and spotlight as weapons against the dark.

This holy war cannot win its prize because, once he isolates dark from light, Sarastro misunderstands dark *and* light. Darkness eludes him because he sees it only at its vanishing point, as it flees the first rays of his sun, and light eludes him because he can only look at it shyly, through dark glasses. Sarastro sees by light without seeing that light -- or the darkness he needs for shelter, or the shadows cast by the light of his own reason. *Dreaming* of awakening and enlightenment, with Daedalus's blind ambition but without Icarus's knowledge, Sarastro cannot see that the light we need in order to see is, at its core, as horrible as the heart of darkness (see Bataille, 1985: 57-8). A fully illuminated world, without darkness and dissembling, has neither depth nor soul, nor the doors and secrets we need to hold and house us. Whereas a flickering fire induces creative reverie, the relentlessly lit office is sterile and intimidating.

Although the enlightenment reworks the quest story for its own purposes, it forgets that the grail is given and not found. Lancelot, for all his heroic action, cannot *find* knowledge, but the grail reveals itself to Galahad because of the humility, respect, mercy and justice of his encounters with mystery. Galahad knows most because he accepts most. Knowledge doesn't derive from wilful action or the martial triumph of light, or dark, but is instead conceived in the purposelessness of their old friendship and their new love. Knowledge is chiaroscuro. It is produced from the respectful tension *between* light and dark, from their alluring dance, from the endlessly changing in-between space where consciousness, as diaphanous as silk, opens to the whispers of mystery.

Rather than being a finite amount of ignorance to be conquered and enlightened, darkness is the blessed excess that leads us on and gives light its character, and the light that guides readers and writers is one that augments, embraces, illuminates and highlights the resource of darkness. Because the task

of art and thought is to deepen mystery, knowledge is the glimmer connected to a fertile darkness. It's a whisper that suggests the richness of a secret, the fullness of a silence; it's the position that indicates an invisible prepositional nothingness.

As the known and mysterious exist in relation, they find *and* create each other. The mystery to be known, however, is necessarily excessive, just out of reach, and the relation with it is voluptuous. Truth isn't for apprehension, arresting, gripping or owning, but for caressing and receiving. Knowledge isn't a military force that swells inexorably as it feeds on enemy territory: it is the *shedding* of light, an augmentation of knowledge that simultaneously involves unlearning, forgetting, the development of simplicity and the development and appreciation of new mysteries. Knowledge is a relation of give and take, at once gift and act of gratitude. Without the giving away of knowledge, there can be no wonder. And without wonder we cannot recreate the world through our representations of it.

Notes

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