

Muse And Myth

by

J. Chester Johnson

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BUSINESS AND THE POETIC LIFE: DO THEY MEET SOMEWHERE? OR DOES THE TRUE POET RUN SCARED, OUT OF HIS OR HER WITS, FROM A NORMAL 9-5 OR 7-7 OCCUPATION FOR FEAR OF THAT EVER ELUSIVE MUSE BEING SOMEHOW CORRUPTED OR BAMBOOZLED AND VANISHING FOREVER? IS THAT A FEARSOME MYTH WITH WHICH POETS LIVE? SOMETIMES? ALWAYS? TOO OFTEN? OF COURSE. MAYBE. REINFORCED BY CLASSICISTS, FOLKLORE AND PRACTICE? AND ADDING TO THIS MYTHOLOGY ARE THE TWO SIDES OF THE BRAIN ARGUMENT.

TRUE STORY. A FEW YEARS AGO, SOON AFTER THE PUBLICATION OF MY MOST RECENT BOOK OF POETRY, I WAS INTRODUCED – BECAUSE OF MY DUAL LIFE IN POETRY AND BUSINESS, AT A BOOKSTORE OUTSIDE OF MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE — AS THE MAN WHO COULD THINK OUT OF BOTH SIDES OF HIS BRAIN, SUGGESTING I HAD JUST

ESCAPED FROM THE LOCAL CARNIVAL AND FROM MY CO-ENTERTAINER, THE BEARDED LADY, OR I WAS SOME KIND OF POST-MODERN HOUDINI – FOR, OF COURSE, IT TOOK MATH TO CONDUCT BUSINESS (TAPPING THE BRAIN’S MORE QUANTITATIVE LEFT SIDE) AND INTUITION (EXPLOITING THE RIGHT SIDE) TO COMPOSE POETRY.

LET’S TAKE A MINUTE TO TRY TO TEST THE NOTION THAT BUSINESS AND POETRY ARE MANIFESTLY DIVERGENT.

I’LL START WITH A SHORT EXCERPT FROM A CELEBRATED POEM BY SEAMUS HEANEY, “DIGGING,” WHICH COMPARES THE ACT OF SPADING IN POTATO FARMING BY HIS FATHER AND GRANDFATHER WITH HEANEY’S OWN WRITING OF VERSE:

“BUT I’VE NO SPADE TO FOLLOW MEN LIKE THEM.
BETWEEN MY FINGER AND MY THUMB
THE SQUAT PEN RESTS.
I’LL DIG WITH IT.”

HE EQUATES THE WORK OF WRITING A POEM TO THAT OF SPADING SOIL. THE SAME SOURCE – YES, THE SAME – THAT DROVE THOSE

STOOPING IN RHYTHM AND STRAINING THEIR RUMPS IN THE SOD
DROVE THE WRITING OF HEANEY'S VERSE. THE VERY SAME.

A SHORT EXCERPT FROM A LIGHTER POEM OF MINE SAYS THE SAME
THING A LITTLE MORE DIRECTLY – THAT IS, THE COMMONALITY OF
WORK, DIGNIFIED WORK, WHETHER SPADING, HONORING A
REGULAR JOB OR WRITING VERSE, ALL DRAWING ON THAT
UNRESTRAINED ENERGY TO PRODUCE, CREATE, OF BECOMING:

“AND DON'T COUNT ON SPEED TO HELP, THOUGH SOME WILL SAY SO,
FOR SPEED DELUDES AND SUGGESTS MAGIC IT CAN'T DELIVER,
WHILE STILL OTHERS SAY TO BE CLEVER
IS TO BE LYRIC, IF NOT HEROIC.

BUT I SAY THAT ZING AND ZEST
AND ENERGY IN THE CHEST
BRING FORTH THE EYE THAT WORKS THE PAGE
TO CRAFT THE LINES TO TAME THE RAGE.”

T. S. ELIOT CONTINUED TO WORK IN THE FOREIGN ACCOUNTS
OFFICE OF LLOYD'S BANK WELL AFTER HAVING ALREADY WRITTEN

“THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK” AND “THE WASTELAND.” DID ELIOT SOMEHOW IMMEDIATELY BECOME THIS MAJOR POET WHEN HE LEFT LLOYD’S BANK FOR EMPLOYMENT AT A PUBLISHING HOUSE? OF COURSE NOT. AND IT WAS WALLACE STEVENS, WHO, WHEN OFFERED THE POETRY CHAIR AT HARVARD, REFUSED IT, PREFERRING HIS POSITION AS HEAD OF THE SURETY CLAIMS DEPARTMENT FOR THE HARTFORD INSURANCE COMPANY. WALLACE STEVENS, THE POET WHO SAID BUSINESS MADE HIM A BETTER POET.

SURELY, EMILY DICKINSON RECEIVED PARALLEL SATISFACTION FROM HER SUPERB KNOWLEDGE AND INTENSE EXERCISE OF BOTANY? FOR SHE HABITUALLY APPLIED HER POLYMATHIC SKILLS IN BOTANY TO HER POETRY. WHY DO SO MANY POETS FEEL SO RELATED TO, IF NOT FULLY COMFORTABLE WITH OTHER WORK AND BUSINESS ACTIVITIES ALONGSIDE THEIR OWN VERSE? IN THE INIMITABLE WORDS OF LANGSTON HUGHES, CITING THE CREATIVE MOMENT:

“BY THEN THE POETRY IS WRITTEN
AND THE WILD ROSE OF THE WORLD
BLOOMS TO LAST SO SHORT A TIME. . .”

IT’S CLEARLY NOT JUST FOR THE DOLLARS AND CENTS ALONE THAT
BUSINESS OR WORK LIKE METAPHORICAL OR ACTUAL SPADING CAN
INSPIRE POETS, ALTHOUGH MONEY DOESN’T HURT WHILE POETS
ATTEND TO THOSE OBSTINATE LITTLE LINES; STILL, FARMING, FOR
INSTANCE, HARDLY HAS AN OVERWHELMING ECONOMIC APPEAL –
ASK FROST OR WENDELL BERRY.

WHERE CAN THAT CONFLATED NEXUS RESIDE FOR BUSINESS AND
POETRY? IT PROBABLY DOESN’T IN A FULLY COALESCED WAY, BUT
EACH, THROUGH ITS OWN INDIVIDUAL NATURE, ENDOWS THE
VESSEL – NAMELY, THE POET – THAT DRAWS ON BOTH.

FROM POETRY, A “TRUE CONTEXT” THAT ONE COMMUNICATES TO
ONESELF, THROUGH VERSE LOOSED, LEADS TOWARD A GREATER
ATTENTION TO, AWARENESS OF AND FAMILIARITY WITH PERSONAL
AND PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY, FOR POETRY’S PURPOSE IS, IN THE
WRITING TO ONESELF, TO REFINE, IF NOT DEFINE. I SUBSCRIBE TO

THE THESIS THAT A POET IS A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD AND SHOULD BEHAVE THAT WAY; AND HONEST POETRY BRINGS ONE TO THE BRINK OF WHAT IS ETHICALLY, INDIVIDUALLY ACCEPTABLE AND TOLERABLE IN BEING A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD; FOR THE POET, HAVING WRITTEN FIRST TO ONESELF, THEN FREES THAT MESSAGE, AS A CITIZEN, TO THE WORLD AT LARGE, REGARDLESS OF THE SIZE OF THE POEM'S READERSHIP. I ACTUALLY BELIEVE THERE IS A DIFFERENCE, IN THIS RESPECT, WITH THE POET, DISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE NOVELIST OR THE PLAYWRIGHT, FOR WHOM APPEAL OF THE NARRATIVE, REGARDLESS OF THE MAKEUP OF THE CONDUIT THROUGH WHICH THE STORY WILL BE TOLD, IS CONSUMING. ON THE OTHER HAND, A "TRUE CONTEXT" TO THE CONDUIT, THE POET, IS NOT ONLY VITAL BUT ESSENTIAL. TO RETURN TO SEAMUS HEANEY FOR ENDORSEMENT OF THIS VIEWPOINT, HE DESCRIBES, IN HIS NOBEL PRIZE LECTURE, THE POET'S "TRUE CONTEXT" OUT OF WHICH THE POET SHALL DERIVE THE ADVANTAGE AND ADVENTURE TO WRITE: "THE POWER TO PERSUADE THAT VULNERABLE PART OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS OF ITS RIGHTNESS IN SPITE OF THE EVIDENCE OF WRONGNESS ALL AROUND IT, THE POWER TO REMIND US THAT WE ARE HUNTERS AND GATHERERS OF VALUES, THAT OUR VERY

SOLITUDES AND DISTRESSES ARE CREDITABLE.” IN THIS MANNER, THE POET USUALLY FINDS HERSELF OR HIMSELF CLOSER TO THE PHILOSOPHER AND THEOLOGIAN THAN TO THE NOVELIST OR PLAYWRITE.

NOW, OF THE EFFECT ON THE POET OF WORK AND BUSINESS, IT IS THAT CERTAINTY, THE CONTINUOUS STRENGTH OF ROUTINE, THE RULES, THE NORMATIVE PREDICTABILITY, THE COMFORT OF THE MACHINERY AND PROCESSES; THAT SURETY IN BUSINESS, IN WORK, THAT 1 PLUS 1 ALWAYS AND FOREVER MORE WILL ACTUALLY EQUAL TWO, NOT A HYPOTHETICAL TWO AND A HALF OR THREE AND A THIRD, BUT FULLY AND INCONTROVERTIBLY A TWO;. THAT A POET CAN DIG AS EMILY DICKINSON DID – SHE, OFTEN IN THE MOONLIGHT – AND AS WALLACE STEVENS UNDOUBTEDLY DID THROUGH MOUNDS OF PAPER EVERY DAY AT HIS DESK IN HARTFORD IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH – HUMAN, IF NOT ETERNAL – FOLLOWING A DISCIPLINE AND KNOWLEDGE THAT HAVE PREVIOUSLY AND FOR SO LONG PROVED UNAMBIGUOUS; AND THAT SPADING LINKS THE BUSINESS OF BUSINESS AND REGULAR WORK TO THE VISION AND HORIZON OF THE POET.

IT WAS W. H. AUDEN WHO ALSO SAID WRITING A POEM IS JUST LIKE PUTTING A MOTORCYCLE TOGETHER; I THINK HE MEANT IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY.

I'VE UNDERSCORED MY OPINION THAT TOO MUCH HAS BEEN MADE, OVER THE YEARS, IN THE MANUFACTURED DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE WORLDS OF VERSE AND BUSINESS. IT HAS LED TO SOME STUPID ASSUMPTIONS. FOR EXAMPLE, BEFORE MY WIFE, FRED A, AND I RETIRED A FEW YEARS AGO, ONE OF OUR COMPETITORS WOULD OFTEN TELL A PROSPECTIVE CLIENT, WHICH HAD, AROUND THE TIME, SOLICITED PROPOSALS FROM FINANCIAL ADVISORY FIRMS, THAT I WAS A POET, THINKING IT SOMEHOW PORTRAYED ME AS A DREAMER, A SUSPICIOUS "RIGHT BRAIN" THINKER. FRED A AND I EVENTUALLY CAME TO BELIEVE THE CHARACTERIZATION DID MORE GOOD THAN HARM. OUR COMPETITOR OVERLOOKED THE PERSUASIVE EFFECT THAT IF OTHER OF OUR CLIENTS FOUND POETRY IN ONE'S FINANCIAL ADVISOR AGREEABLE, THEN THERE MUST BE SOMETHING FAVORABLY ADDITIVE IN ACTUALLY HAVING A POET AS AN ADVISOR. NOT SURPRISINGLY, ONE OF OUR MORE

EXPOSITIVE CLIENTS WAS QUOTED IN A NATIONAL NEWS OUTLET, SAYING HE LIKED THE IDEA HIS FINANCIAL ADVISOR WROTE POETRY; HE FOUND THE QUALITIES OF PRACTICE AND FAMILIARITY WITH THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND DEMONSTRABLE PATIENCE IN THE MIDST OF HIGH INTENSITY CONSTRUCTIVE.

AS A NATURAL CORRELARY TO THESE OBSERVATIONS, WE SHOULD KNOW THAT POETRY – WHETHER AS A READER OR AS A WRITER OF IT – CAN BE JUST AS ENRICHING AND EDIFYING FOR THE PERSON IN THE STREET (PICK THE PROFESSION OR OCCUPATION OR NON-OCCUPATION) AS IT CAN BE FOR THE “HERMIT” DWELLING IN THE GARRET. ONCE I RECEIVED A LETTER FROM AN EDITOR COMPLAINING HOW RESTRICTED HIS LIFE HAD BEEN – ALL FOR THE GOOD OF HIS VERSE AND FOR ALL VERSE – AND QUESTIONING WHY I SHOULD BE PUBLISHED SINCE I’D LIVED A BROADER LIFE IN A BROADER HEMISPHERE, INCLUDING THE BUSINESS WORLD AND THE BENEFITS THAT HAD PROVIDED. IN OTHER WORDS, I’D NOT PAID MY ASCETIC DUES. I WISH I HAD HAD, AT THAT TIME, THE EMAIL I HAVE NOW FROM A MAJOR AMERICAN POET WITH WHOM I’VE RECENTLY BEEN COMMUNICATING ABOUT TODAY’S EVENT AND WHO

COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE ENCOURAGING ABOUT THE NEED FOR THIS SYMPOSIUM, SAYING HOW MANY OF HIS ENGLISH AND MFA STUDENTS "END UP IN DEAD-END JOBS, ADJUNCTING," MEANING TO EXIST AS A PART-TIME TEACHER.

I WAS FIRST A POET AND THEN I FOUND A SURROUNDING LIFE THAT WOULD BE CHALLENGING, INNOVATIVE, PROVOCATIVE, ACCOMMODATIVE, AND ENJOYABLE, AND MY BUSINESS CAREER CONTAINED ALL OF THOSE ADJECTIVES. IN MANY RESPECTS, IT DEVELOPED INTO AN INDEPENDENT CHOICE, SINCE ACADEMIA DID NOT ATTRACT. I KNOW ACADEMIA WORKS WONDERFULLY FOR MANY, FOR MANY OF MY CLOSE POET FRIENDS, BUT IT SIMPLY WOULD DISAPPOINT. RATHER, TO HEAR THE ADVICE FROM GWENDOLYN BROOKS IN HER POEM, "A CATCH OF SHY FISH": "HUNT OUT YOUR OWN OR MAKE YOUR OWN ALONE."

I DON'T WANT IT SAID AT THE END OF MY LIFE WHEN SOMEONE MAY LOOK OVER MY VERSE, SIGHING, "WELL, SOME OF IT IS GOOD TECHNICALLY – FROM A POETICS' SLANT – BUT, YOU KNOW, HE REALLY DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TO SAY OF CONSEQUENCE, FOR HE

DIDN'T WISH TO INTEGRATE HIMSELF INTO MUCH. HE MAY HAVE READ A LOT, AND HE MAY HAVE LEARNED A LOT, BUT THE RANGE OF THAT ENGAGEMENT, OUT OF WHICH HE WROTE, HAD BEEN QUITE NARROW." MY WIFE, FRED, REQUESTED I END THIS PRESENTATION BY READING MY POEM, "ST. PAUL'S CHAPEL." HOW CAN I NOT ACCOMMODATE MY WIFE? SHE AND I ARE BOTH ENORMOUSLY PROUD OF THIS POEM AND THE FACT IT CONTINUES TO BE USED (AFTER MORE THAN A DOZEN YEARS) AS THE MEMENTO CARD FOR THE PILGRIMS AND VISITORS – ABOUT 30,000 A WEEK – TO THE ICONIC CHAPEL, WHICH SERVED AS THE RELIEF CENTER FOR THE RECOVERY WORKERS AT GROUND ZERO HERE IN NEW YORK CITY; THIS POEM CARD ALSO ILLUSTRATES I WAS A VOLUNTEER THERE, MOSTLY ON WEEKENDS DURING THE CLEAN UP AFTER 9/11. I CAN ONLY HOPE THIS POEM WILL BE REMEMBERED AS A POEM OF CITIZENSHIP:

St. Paul's Chapel

It stood. Not a window broken.
Not a stone dislodged.
It stood when nothing else did.
It stood when terrorists brought September down.
It stood among myths. It stood among ruins.

To stand was its purpose, long lines prove that.
It stands, and around it now, a shrine of letters,
poems, acrostics, litter of the heart.
It is the standing people want:
To grieve, serve and tend
celebrate the lasting stone of St. Paul's Chapel.

And deep into its thick breath, the largest banner
fittingly from Oklahoma climbs heavenward
with hands as stars, hands as stripes, hands as a flag;
and a rescuer reaches for a stuffed toy
to collect a touch;
and George Washington's pew doesn't go unused.

Charity fills a hole or two.

It stood in place of other sorts.
It stood when nothing else could.
The great had fallen,
as the brute hardware came down.
It stood.

Sources For Presentation
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