

Uncanny the Singing that Comes from Certain Husks by Joy Williams

It's become fashionable these days to say that the writer writes because he is not whole: he has a wound, he writes to heal it. But who cares if the writer is not whole? Of course the writer is not whole, or even particularly well. There's something unwholesome and self-destructive about the entire writing process. Writers are like eremites or anchorites—natural-born eremites or anchorites—who seem puzzled as to why they went up the pole or into the cave in the first place. Why am I so isolate in this strange place? Why is my sweat being sold as elixir? And how have I become so enmeshed with words, mere words, phantoms?

Writers when they're writing live in a spooky, clamorous silence, a state somewhat like the advanced stages of prayer but without prayer's calming benefits. A writer turns his back on the day and the night and its large and little beauties, and tries, like some half-witted demiurge, to fashion other days and nights with words. It's absurd. Oh, it's silly, dangerous work indeed.

A writer starts out, I think, wanting to be a transfiguring agent, and ends up usually just making contact, contact with other human beings. This, unsurprisingly, is not enough. Making contact with the self—healing the wound—is even less satisfactory.) Writers end up writing stories—or rather, stories' shadows—and they're grateful if they can, but it is not enough. Nothing the writer can do is ever enough.

E. M. Forster once told his friend Laurens van der Post that he could not finish a story that he had begun with great promise, even brilliance, because he did not like the way it would have to finish. Van der Post wrote, "The remark for me proved both how natural stories were to him and how acute was his sense of their significance, but at the same time revealed that his awareness was inadequate for the task the story imposed upon it."

I like van der Post's conception of story—as a stern taskmaster that demands the ultimate in awareness, that indeed *is* awareness. The significant story possesses more awareness than the writer writing it. The significant story is always greater than the writer writing it. This is the absurdity, the disorienting truth, the question that is not even a question, this is the koan of writing.

Malcolm Muggeridge wrote in an essay on Jesus, "When a person loses the isolation, the separateness which awareness of the presence of God alone can give, he becomes irretrievably part of a collectivity with only mass communications to shape its hopes, formulate its values and arrange its thinking."

Without the awareness of separateness, one can never be part of the whole, the nothingness that is God. This is the divine absurdity, the koan of faith. Jean Rhys said that when she was a child she thought that God was a big book. I don't know what she thought when she was no longer a child. She probably wished that she could think of a big book as being God.

A writer's awareness must never be inadequate. Still, it will never be adequate to the greater awareness of the work itself, the work that the writer is trying to write. The writer must not really know what he is knowing, what he is learning to know when he writes, which is more than the knowing of it. A writer loves the dark, loves it, but is always fumbling around in the light. The writer is separate from his work but that's all the writer is—what he writes. A writer must be smart but not too smart. He must be dumb enough to break himself to harness. He must be reckless and patient and daring and dull—for what is duller than writing, trying to write? And he must never care—caring spoils everything. It compromises the work. It shows the writer's hand. The writer is permitted, even expected, to have compassion for his characters, but what are characters? Nothing but mystic symbols, magical emblems, ghosts of the writer's imagination.

The writer doesn't want to disclose or instruct or advocate, he wants to transmute and disturb. He cherishes the mystery, he cares for it like a fugitive in his cabin, his cave. He doesn't want to talk it into giving itself up. He would never turn it in to the authorities, the mass mind. The writer is somewhat of a fugitive himself, actually. He wants to escape his time, the obligations of his time, and, by writing, transcend them. The writer does not like to follow orders, not even the orders of his own organizing intellect. The moment a writer knows how to achieve a certain effect, the method must be abandoned. Effects repeated become false, mannered. The writer's style is his doppelgänger, an apparition that the writer must never trust to do his work for him.

Some years ago I began writing essays. They were strident, bitter pieces on topics I cared about deeply. I developed a certain style for them that was unlike the style of my

stories—it was unelusive and rude and brashly one-sided. They were meant to annoy and trouble and polarize, and they made readers, at least the kind of readers who write letters to the editors of magazines, half nuts with rage and disdain. The letter-writers frequently mocked my name. Not only didn't they like my way with words, my reasoning, my philosophy, they didn't believe my name. My morbid attitude, my bitter tongue, my anger, denied me the right to such a name, my given name, my gift, signifier of rejoicing, happiness, and delight.

But a writer isn't supposed to make friends with his writing, I don't think. The writer doesn't trust his enemies, of course, who are wrong about his writing, but he doesn't trust his friends, either, who he hopes are right. The writer trusts nothing he writes—it should be too reckless and alive for that, it should be beautiful and menacing and slightly out of his control. It should want to live itself somehow. The writer dies—he can die before he dies, it happens all the time, he dies as a writer—but the work wants to live.

Language accepts the writer as its host, it feeds off the writer, it makes him a husk. There is something uncanny about good writing—uncanny the singing that comes from certain husks. The writer is never nourished by his own work, it is never satisfying to him. The work is a stranger, it shuns him a little, for the writer is really something of a fool, so engaged in his disengagement, so self-conscious, so eager to serve something greater, which is the writing. Or which could be the writing if only the writer is good enough. The work stands a little apart from the writer, it doesn't want to go down with him when he stumbles or fails or retreats.

The writer must do all this alone, in secret, in drudgery, in confusion, awkwardly, one word at a time.

The writer is an exhibitionist, and yet he is private. He wants you to admire his fasting, his art. He wants your attention, he doesn't want you to know he exists. The reality of his life is meaningless, why should you, the reader, care? You don't care. He drinks, he loves unwisely, he's happy, he's sick ... it doesn't matter. You just want the work—the Other—this other thing. You don't really care how he does it. Why he does it.

The good piece of writing startles the reader back into Life. The work—this Other, this other thing—this false life that is even less than the seeming of this lived life, is more than the lived life, too. It is so unreal, so precise, so unsurprising, so alarming, really. Good

writing never soothes or comforts. It is no prescription, neither is it diversionary, although it can and should enchant while it explodes in the reader's face. Whenever the writer writes, it's always three o'clock in the morning, it's always three or four or five o'clock in the morning in his head. Those horrid hours are the writer's days and nights when he is writing. The writer doesn't write for the reader. He doesn't write for himself, either. He writes to serve ... something. Somethingness. The somethingness that is sheltered by the wings of nothingness—those exquisite, enveloping, protecting wings.

There is a little tale about man's fate and this is the way it is put. A man is being pursued by a raging elephant and takes refuge in a tree at the edge of a fearsome abyss. Two mice, one black and one white, are gnawing at the roots of the tree, and at the bottom of the abyss is a dragon with parted jaws. The man looks above and sees a little honey trickling down the tree and he begins to lick it up and forgets his perilous situation. But the mice gnaw through the tree and the man falls down and the elephant seizes him and hurls him over to the dragon. Now, that elephant is the image of death, which pursues men, and the tree is this transitory existence, and the mice are the days and the nights, and the honey is the sweetness of the passing world, and the savor of the passing world diverts mankind. So the days and nights are accomplished and death seizes him and the dragon swallows him down into hell and this is the life of man.

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This little tale with its broad and beastly strokes seems to approximate man's dilemma quite charmingly, with the added caveat that it also applies to the ladies ("she" being "he" throughout here, the writer's woes not limited by gender; like Flannery O'Connor's Misfit, the writer knows there's no enjoyment to be had in this life). This is the story, then, pretty much the story, with considerable latitude to be had in describing those mice, those terrifying mice. But it is not for the writer to have any part in providing the honey—the passing world does that. The writer can't do better than that. What the writer wants to do, to be, is to be the consciousness of the story, he doesn't want to be part of the distraction; to distract is ignoble, to distract is to admit defeat, to serve a lesser god. The story is not a simple one. It is syncretistic and strange and unhappy, and it all must be told beautifully, even the horrible parts, particularly the horrible parts. The telling of the story can never end, not because the writer doesn't like the way it must end but because there is

no end to the awareness of the story which the writer has only the dimmest, most fragmentary awareness of.

Why do I write? Writing has never given me any pleasure. I am not being disingenuous here. It's not a matter of being on excellent terms with my characters, having a swell time with them, finding their surprising remarks prescient or amusing. That would seem to be a shallow pleasure indeed. Rewriting, the attention to detail, the depth of involvement required, the achievement and acknowledgment of the prowess and stamina and luck involved—all these should give their pleasures, I suppose, but they are sophisticated pleasures that elude me. Writing has never been “fun” for me. I am too wary about writing to enjoy it. It has never fulfilled me (nor have I fulfilled it). Writing has never done anyone or anything any good at all, as far as I can tell. In the months before my mother died, and she was so sick and at home, a home that meant everything and nothing to her now, she said that she would lie awake through the nights and plan the things she would do during the day when it came—she would walk the dog and get birdseed and buy some more pansies, and she would make herself a nice little breakfast, something that would taste good, a poached egg and some toast—and then the day would come and she could do none of these things, she could not even get out the broom and sweep a little. She was in such depression and such pain and she would cry, If I only could do a little sweeping, just that. ... To sweep with a good broom, a lovely thing, such a simple, satisfying thing, and she yearned to do it and could not. And her daughter, the writer, who would be the good broom quick in her hands if only she were able, could not help her in any way. Nothing the daughter, the writer, had ever written or could ever write could help my mother who had named me.

Why does the writer write? The writer writes to serve—hopelessly he writes in the hope that he might serve—not himself and not others, but that great cold elemental grace which knows us.

A writer I very much admire is Don DeLillo. At an awards ceremony for him at the Folger Library several years ago, I said that he was like a great shark moving hidden in our midst, beneath the din and wreck of the moment, at apocalyptic ease in the very elements of our psyche and times that are most troublesome to us, that we most fear.

Why do I write? Because I wanna be a great shark too. Another shark. A different shark, in a different part of the ocean. The ocean is vast.