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On Inspiration: Thomas Wolfe, Jorge Luis Borges, Raymond Carver

by Douglas Unger

Twenty-five years of experience teaching creative writing convinces me that our talk about craft in workshops tends to avoid the truly mysterious—what many of us call *inspiration*. Most writers don't talk about inspiration. It's as if poetic inspiration might be better left undiscussed, like a secret we're reluctant to risk giving away. Inspiration can and does develop from talk about technique and craft in workshop or studio arts class critiques. Focus on craft does inspire. Still, we mainly leave unstated our belief that poetic inspiration derives from matters of the spirit, from faith, from mystery, and from the developing writer's often delirious sense of mission.

One emerging Neo-Romantic view of poetic inspiration reasserts that great writing comes to us as a kind of ecstasy in collusion with the subconscious imagination. In criticism, this position is perhaps best exemplified by Julia Kristeva's intense new focus on questions of the soul, on desire and on love; there's also a revival of scholarly interest in Walter Pater's vision of the Renaissance as arising from contributions of exceptional individuals. In this Neo-Romantic view, the writer is the instrument of a mysterious gift—like a hollow bone through which it passes, as the late Lakota Medicine Elder, Fool's Crow, would say. Or it's as in Coleridge, "the royal Harper, to whom I have so often submitted myself as the many-stringed instrument for his fire-tipt fingers to traverse";¹ or in Plato, "that which follows God best and is likest to him lifts the head of the charioteer into the outer world."² John Gardner called it "mystery." The "vivid and continuous dream"³ he described as the effect of good fiction may be, while writing, really a heightened state that visits many writers at best occasionally. For some, this might happen only once, or for one intense season in their lives. Devotion and sacrifice to this mystery becomes integral to the writer's life. When we gather in workshops in pursuit of this now culturally marginalized activity of literary writing, a sense of mystery is a subcurrent to our sense of closeness, our shared conspiracy. We meet "rather as early Christians in the catacombs,"⁴ as the late editor/writer Ted Solotaroff put it, and so we parcel out among ourselves our sacred bits of literary bread.

Poet Edward Hirsch not long ago published an intriguing study, *The Demon and the Angel: Searching for the Source of Artistic Inspiration*, in which he makes a guiding metaphor from Federico García Lorca's concept of the *duende*—that dark gypsy spirit reaching out from death. For Lorca, it was the tragic discord in the *llanto*, the grief-cry of *canto flamenco*, perhaps daemonic, and in other ways not so different from Blake's visiting

ghost, who, according to Hirsch, “inspired and guided his creation”.⁵ Hirsch sets up an interplay between daemonic and angelic forces throughout his book as symbolic poles between which poetic inspiration might be comprehended, even revived as praxis and, ultimately, become again a term in our critical appreciation. It follows that some new close study of Coleridge should focus on his hallucinatory condition and religious beliefs, no matter if they were possibly drug-induced. Goethe’s depressive-ecstatic fits of visitation by song should inform our reading of his poetry.

If the subject of artistic inspiration is tracked back into antecedent, the Romantics held up as cultural example *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, the Renaissance sculptor (1500-1571), whose account of his life was published in 1728 and celebrated for its description of inspired creation. Cellini worked mainly in gold and silver. His dramatic, feverish tale of the casting in bronze of his masterpiece, *Perseus*, which stands in the Loggia del Lanza in Florence, and of his vivid visionary experience while in a delirium during a brief term in prison, and of other aspects of his adventurous life—all sources for his art—Cellini sums up as nothing less than caused by visitations from God.⁶

This *afflatus*, as Cellini called it—this divine breath—was widely believed by Romantics to be what imparted to artists a special knowledge, and their gifts of creation. Contemporary, language-based criticism and post-structuralist literary theory exclude or marginalize the possibility of divine gifts even as they “demystify” the artist. Marketplace criticism so current in multinational capitalist ideology measures artistic merits in terms of profits and products, an aesthetics that knows the price of everything and the value of little else. Writing workshop talk and teaching confined to craft and the materiality of language, augmented by the paternalistic mentor-student critique by the teacher-writer—useful and effective in so many tried and proven ways—in the main share both these prevailing (and now possibly bankrupt) aesthetics of the academy and marketplace cultures, thus how we teach may help to perpetuate the commodification of art. As Hirsch’s recent book suggests—serving perhaps as a corollary to any emerging new aesthetic—it seems high time for creative writing workshops to consider a closer study of poetic inspiration.

I.

A few years ago, while preparing a “Craft Talk” for the Centrum Writers’ Conference in Port Townsend, Washington, I was racing my way through *Writers on Writing: Collected Essays from The New York Times*, on the hunt for sage lines and anecdotes about the writing process that I could cite from my more famous, possibly wiser contemporaries. As I was paging through it, I found myself a little bored, really, and I’m not sure why, save that so much of the craft talk in it felt so repetitive, so self-evident, so dry. Then I came to Kent Haruf’s, “To See A Story Clearly, Start by Pulling the Wool Over Your Own Eyes”—a description of how he writes, which includes superstitions about his cow skull, his old manual typewriter, his ceremony with yellow manila second sheets (the kind of paper he prefers to write first drafts on) in his basement office in Illinois. Haruf puts strong focus on rituals he goes through, “to maintain this impression of spontaneity”—the things he uses to trick his imagination into being spontaneous. He begins his essay by reflecting upon famous writers and their own rituals:

John Cheever wrote some of his early stories in his underwear; Hemingway is said to have written some of his fiction while standing up. Thomas Wolfe

reportedly wrote parts of his voluminous novels while leaning over the top of a refrigerator. Flannery O'Connor sat for two hours every day at a typewriter facing the back of a clothes dresser, so that in those last painful years, when she was dying of lupus, she'd have as close to nothing as possible to look at while she wrote her stories about sin....

I found myself reading a line in the middle of the paragraph over and over again: "Thomas Wolfe reportedly wrote parts of his voluminous novels while leaning over the top of a refrigerator."⁷ This line stopped me because it recalls a story within the lore of my own family's history with Thomas Wolfe, one my grandmother told, that I hadn't thought about in a long time. The way it must have come to Kent Haruf is via A. Scott Berg's biography of Wolfe's heroic editor, Maxwell Perkins, and how Perkins described Wolfe's writing process:

Mr. Wolfe writes with a pencil, in a very large hand. He once said that he could write the best advertisement imaginable for the Frigidaire people since he found it exactly the right height to write on when standing and with enough space for him to handle his ms. on the top. He writes mostly standing this way, and frequently strides about the room when unable to find the right way of expressing himself.⁸

This image functions now as iconic of Wolfe at work, and I knew it to be fundamentally true but also incomplete. Later in life, Wolfe most often worked at a table or a desk as well as on top of refrigerators. My maternal grandfather, the sportswriter, Arthur Mann, kept a room down the hall from Thomas Wolfe for almost a year at the Hotel Chelsea—the last year of Wolfe's short life—and they became good friends. Wolfe would leave his door unlocked or partly open a crack so he could more easily stride in and out, do his pacing and thinking in the hallway, then he would dash back into his room to write more pages at his table. My grandfather described this process in an as yet unpublished memoir, written in 1958, twenty years after Wolfe's death:

Wolfe had long since developed to an unusual degree one faculty all writers seek, often in vain: maximum concentration to permit free and almost unconscious composition. Achieving it, Wolfe became the consummate artist in a method as esoteric as the delicate fingering of a Rubenstein or Casals. He was ridiculed and called a freak, a misfit. By ordinary standards, perhaps he was, but Wolfe was far from ordinary in anything. Under creative compulsion he was often extraordinary... He was a laborer, large, sweating, soiled and unkempt, hunched over a small, marble-topped table in the center of a parlor, chain-smoking, cursing, muttering, pushing scrawl-filled pages to the floor, rehearsing aloud the sound of the right word, the desired euphony of dialogue... I saw this unforgettable sight quite by accident late one night after Wolfe had said to 'drop in when you get back.' His door was usually unlatched at night so that he could relieve fatigue by pacing the 200-foot marble corridor at will, without locking himself out. I entered quietly in case he was asleep, then passed the empty bed and stood fascinated by the sight and sound in the front room.⁹

What Arthur Mann refers to here as "maximum concentration" and "free and almost unconscious composition" is a description of the inspired Wolfe lost in a hypnotic

trance of his narrative music. Wolfe's books are all in some way *about* inspired writing, evidenced by a deliberately excessive style we can't help but note as we absorb his flow of words, his piled on adjectives, his wandering, lyric, elongated sentences in his densely autobiographical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*. It's a writing style that draws attention to its own excesses, and to the psychological condition that evokes it, evident in this passage taken from Wolfe's epic effusion, *Of Time and the River*:

What is the fury which this youth will feel, which will lash him on against the great earth forever? It is the brain that maddens with its own excess, the heart that breaks from the anguish of its own frustration. It is the hunger that grows from everything it feeds upon, the thirst that gulps down rivers and remains insatiate. It is to see a million men, a million faces and to be a stranger and an alien to them always. It is to prowl the stacks of an enormous library at night, to tear the books out of a thousand shelves, to read in them with the mad hunger of the youth of man.¹⁰

What follows is the passage in which the autobiographical "youth," Eugene Gant, is driven "mad" by an insatiable desire to read: "Within a period of ten years he read at least 20,000 volumes—deliberately the number is set low—and opened the pages and looked through many times that number." His account details how this madness of needs reinforced his choice to live the lonely and solitary life of a writer, ennobled, and incalculably sad, all at once, especially in the context of the book's theme of time running out—the youth's painful awareness that there will never be enough time to achieve his ambitions.

Writerly inspiration is the metanarrative on every page of this novel, and iconic of this writer. Still, without his editor at Scribner's, Max Perkins, it's fair to state that Wolfe's words may never have reached final published form. Perkins reined in, revised, restructured Wolfe's effusions, locked in a one-on-one conspiracy with the author somehow to re-shape all that raw material of creative excess, cutting some 90,000 words—a whole book's worth of pages—from *Look Homeward Angel*. The draft of *Of Time and the River* came to Perkins stacked knee high, spilling over from two big wooden crates, and this was after Wolfe had dictated to a typist from a whole roomful of hand-written pages. Perkins took the better part of a year editing the book, at great personal cost, resulting in what amounted to open warfare that led to a final break with Wolfe over the published book. It can be fairly stated that Max Perkins "crafted" two novels from the raw material of Wolfe's inspiration.

In 1937-1938, at least two times, maybe three, Thomas Wolfe visited at my grandparents' farm in Cherry Plain, near Troy, in upstate New York. Arthur Mann was helping Wolfe through the Fall of 1937 with the character of the baseball player, Nebraska Craine, for Wolfe's new novel. Mann was a regular contributor to "The New York World," later, "The World-Telegram," as well as numerous magazines. Later, he would become press agent to Brooklyn Dodgers mogul Branch Rickey and earn a World Series ring, then write the biography, *Branch Rickey, American in Action* (Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 1957); among many other books, he also authored both the biography and screenplay, *The Jackie Robinson Story* (F. J. Low, 1950; and Grosset & Dunlap, Inc., New York 1956). Mann often ate with Wolfe and drank at bars with him when he had to stay overnight in the city to cover sports. To help with character research, Mann took Wolfe to the homes of baseball players and their families, and to the Baseball Writers' Association dinner, which resulted in an awkward yet humorous scene concerning Wolfe's childlike misunderstanding of the simple etiquette of tipping cited in Andrew Turnbull's biography,

*Thomas Wolfe*¹¹—a social failing that Mann explained as a consequence of Wolfe being so distracted by his writing, his need to keep track of the lives of so many characters in his head simultaneous to living his own life.

My grandfather's memoir states only that there were "visits" to the farm in Cherry Plain. I believe from family lore that there were two or three overnight stays. The memoir puts most focus on one visit that lasted most of a week in March, and a final visit when Wolfe came accompanied by his new editor at Harpers, Ed Aswell, and his wife, in late April. All agreed over that April dinner on a plan that Wolfe would move to the Mann farm for a two-month residency in mid-summer, 1938, to work on the massive job facing him—revisions of the thousands of pages of first draft, two crates full, of what would become *You Can't Go Home Again*. This time, Wolfe intended to cut and shape the book on his own, under Aswell's guidance, without the intrusions of Max Perkins.

From Arthur Mann's memoir about the March visit, it would be hard to say what or how much Wolfe wrote at the farm—if anything at all. He pointedly remarks that Wolfe brought no manuscript, only a rumpled suit crammed into a small suitcase. Contradictory to this description is how my grandmother, Marion Mann, told the story of Tom "trying out the house," which seems natural, as he would want to see if he would benefit from a longer stay. From her other comments and statements—never very detailed, as she was a naturally reticent woman, extremely protective of the privacies of her guests—what follows never-theless is how my family has come to imagine the scene of Tom Wolfe's visits, and how we re-tell the tale to each other as inherited lore. In this telling, I beg the reader's indulgence—especially the academic scholar's—for any most surely mythified departure from facts. I freely admit here that I can't be sure of exactly what happened on those visits. Still, from Turnbull's biography, from Eliabeth Nowell's, and from multiple other sources, including Berg's magnificent biography of Max Perkins, I do believe that there is more than ample justification in accounts of Wolfe's life to support such a speculative description:

Thomas Wolfe—this very big, ungainly man, big and broad enough to fill a doorway, all 6 foot 6 inches of him—settled down in Marion's kitchen, using it as his temporary office. Wolfe also roamed her house through the nights, knocking into things, as my grandmother put it, "like a lost bull moose," then he would rush back into the kitchen to his manuscript. He worked at chest level, bent over a refrigerator that looked like an older, 1920s style, white enameled icebox converted into one—the kind of small square icebox just tall enough that it was exactly the right height for a man his size to lean over and rest his elbows on its cool top as he wrote. The top was big enough to hold a stack of blank paper and an ashtray.

Wolfe penciled his lines as in a fever. He couldn't wait to get on to the next page, not caring even to stack the pages he had completed after filling them with tilted lines of his very large, easily legible handwriting. He was rushing ahead, writing so fast that, when he was finished with a page, he would just brush it out of the way and let it drop to the floor—each page floating out from under him, sailing off on air currents in that drafty room. They landed on the floor every which way, flying off around the kitchen, one or two even sliding under the glowing wood stove. Wolfe didn't care a damn where the pages landed, he was so pressed for time, so *into* his creative flow, so gone into his trance. He wrote all through the night, ten o'clock or so until dawn. He chain-smoked as he wrote, a few plain-end butts missing the ashtray and dropping to the floor among his pages. Wolfe sweated terribly, soaked through with it. He took off his shirt. He wore white cotton shirts with the sleeves rolled up above the elbows because they were too short for his long arms, shirts that made him look like an overgrown kid just let loose from Sunday school. By

midnight, he would take off his shirt and drop it, too, to the floor. He wrote in his undershirt through the nights, as sweaty as a boxer in the ring once he got going. Two or three times each night, he would step back just far enough from this fever of composition to reach into the icebox that hummed under his chest and elbows. He grabbed out a quart bottle of cold fresh milk with his free hand. He drank it down, the whole quart, in three or four big man swallows. He could do this without having to stop moving his pencil, without breaking concentration—he would leave two or three empty milk bottles on their sides on an old butcher block butted up against the icebox. Wolfe kept writing this way, stopping at times only to pace around downstairs then back into the kitchen. He was good for 5,000 to 10,000 words in a night, 20 and up to 40 pages dropping onto the floor, always pushing ahead into his flow, lost and gone into that underground river, following the inner vibrations of a demanding, mysterious continuum calling out to him—maybe even knowing he could die soon, he could die at any moment—so he had to get the words on paper before he did. He wasn't looking back, not even once, through that last winter of his poetic inspiration.

My grandmother's kitchen was big and spacious, though Tom Wolfe standing in it made it look small. Marion Mann was a woman who never had any literary pretensions of her own except as a lover of books, and the loving wife of a writer. She was well-known for entertaining writers my grandfather would bring home, so much so that Edgar Lee Masters had penned an ode for her titled "Marion's Kitchen". Over the years, she had cooked for Theodore Dreiser, the Kentucky novelist Jesse Stuart, Will and Ariel Durant; and decades later, in her widow's apartment in New York City, she entertained rising luminaries Pete Hamill and Raymond Carver, among others. That Winter and Spring, when she hosted Thomas Wolfe, she was the first one awake in the farm house, always around five in the morning. She very quietly entered the kitchen, intruding on the exhausted, bleary-eyed Tom's last few sentences. He was written-out by then, his right hand cramped up so much that it was painful to form letters, so spent that he was just standing there, weaving a little on his feet, so dreamy that he hardly knew anymore where he was. He jumped as she entered, as at a visiting ghost. "It's OK, Tom, it's just me," she said. "It's morning now."

She took the pencil out of his hand—this big, sweaty guy in his undershirt, eyes looking at her vacantly. Wolfe was by then incapable of speech. She offered to make him a pot of coffee and breakfast. He stared at her from some lost place of immense distraction, or even of a sickness, like an alcoholic fighting his way up out of a drunk but he hadn't been drinking. He said no, thank you, mumbling in his stammering manner. That was OK with her, and they both knew it was OK. Wolfe started out of the kitchen, so shaky and tired he could barely walk. My grandmother led him out into the hallway and up the stairs, telling him again which one was the guest room—to the left, third door down. Wolfe fell asleep without even taking off his pants, not stirring until just past noon.

After seeing him up to bed, my grandmother started making sense of her kitchen. She emptied Wolfe's ashtray, picked up the scattered butts, threw the windows open to let in some air. She shook out his shirt and set it aside to launder. Then she got down on her hands and knees and collected Tom's scattered pages from all over the kitchen—much as Aline Bernstein had done years before, when she had shared Wolfe's life and her apartment with him in Brooklyn—some of the pages having landed under the icebox, and one or two, singed at the edges, under the stove, where my grandmother had to reach in carefully to dig them out. She was a neat, organized woman by nature. She set the pages in an orderly stack on a kitchen sideboard, ready and waiting, with a ream of clean paper, for Wolfe to start writing again the next night. My grandmother went about

collecting and washing out the milk bottles. Then she pulled on her knee-high rubber boots and headed off to the barn to milk the family's two cows.

Who would have known these would be among the last few weeks of Tom Wolfe's life? During this period, my grandfather's memoir indicates that Wolfe was writing passages for his new book—his "George Webber" manuscript—what would later become a stripped down, posthumous version edited by Ed Aswell, called *You Can't Go Home Again*. He was at the time working on transitional passages in the story, filling in gaps, making sense of already extant movements of its symphonic prose so as to push his novel "to a further state of development and completion," as he wrote to Aswell that May.¹² My grandmother began planning to host Wolfe with his crates full of pages for a long-term residency at the farm in mid-summer. One of the last letters Wolfe wrote was to my grandfather, May 18, scrawled in pencil on Southwestern Limited stationery, mailed from Indiana at a stop on his train trip vacation to the Pacific Northwest to celebrate, and to rest, from finishing the first draft: "I finished with ms. 30 minutes before train time," he writes. "But hope to see you in a few weeks — ... I'm dog-tired but feel swell — I put through a big job and completed it — I feel completed — " (double-underlined by Wolfe).¹³

Thomas Wolfe was stricken with pneumonia in late June, while on a coastal steamer on his way to Vancouver from Seattle. By July 2, he had returned to Seattle and was hospitalized. The next two months were spent enduring an excruciating and feverish eastward journey by train, stopping for emergency hospitalizations across the country—from the effects of pneumonia, a tubercular tumor had burst in a lung and spread to his brain. At Johns Hopkins University hospital in Baltimore, where skilled neurosurgeons were attempting impossibly to save him, on September 15, 1938, Thomas Wolfe died.

My grandmother always spoke of Thomas Wolfe with an affecting fondness. She spoke of his death with a painful mixture of regret and frustration, conveying to us her unspoken conviction that, if only he had made it to the farm, she would have known what to do for him. "What a *writer* he was," she would finally say. "And *the way* he wrote, *all night long on top of the refrigerator....*"

So much for one more confirming source, other than Aline Bernstein and Maxwell Perkins, and now Kent Haruf, of this bit of mythic lore about Tom Wolfe's creative process. What's of most interest here is the portrait of Wolfe as an iconic example of writers who *get on a roll*, writers who *make contact*, writers who get connected with *it*. Any artist who has been *there* knows what this means—those moments out of time when we're so lost into the flow of words that we look up from our pencils or pens or typing machines and realize hours have gone by when time ceased to exist. We're amazed. We don't know and couldn't really say—probably wouldn't want to say—exactly where we've been. But *it's there, right there*, and it's a pure high—deriving from a seductive source, a "passion," as poet Yusef Komunyakaa calls the same experience. Once *there*, does any writer really give a damn about being anywhere else? Writers lucky enough to get *there* don't want to leave. We'd stay *there* even if it killed us. Some of us it has killed—it probably killed Thomas Wolfe. Still, I don't believe there's a single writer I know who could say just where or what exactly *being there* is, save that it's like a beautiful, all-powerful drug—bountiful and beneficent, monstrous and painful—and like a spiritual quest in pursuit of creative vision.

II.

Few writers I've known personally were as directly connected to poetic inspiration—as if able to turn it on and off at will, and in a way perhaps very different from Benvenuto Cellini's *afflatus*—as was Jorge Luis Borges. Many years ago, I had the privilege to get to know Borges a little, starting when I was a high school exchange student in Buenos Aires. One afternoon, on the advice of my adopted mother, I went to a literary conference in the Teatro Alvear at which Borges was speaking. At the time, Argentina was ruled by a military dictatorship. A Borges lecture was a barely announced event except for a tiny notice in the newspaper. In 1969, at the end of a fascist era more benign than the more infamous one of the murderous “dirty war” and of “the disappeared” that followed a few years later, there was a sense in Argentina that it was a touch illicit and even a little perilous to talk about certain kinds of art. The occasion of the conference was the 50th anniversary of the death of the Mexican revolutionary poet, Amado Nervo. In the theater, what struck me, and what made me sit up and strain to listen, was what can best be described as a kind of *aura* this guy Borges was projecting. Blind, standing alone, leaning on his dandy's cane on a vast theater stage, he spoke out in a nearly monotonic whisper at an almost empty audience. His voice was low and hypnotic, as mesmerizing as it was nearly impossible to hear. Borges had the ability to lean in a certain way on that cane, as if putting no weight on it, as though he were drawing something up out of it into his crossed hands; at the same time, he spoke with a tone or effect that can best be described as *spellbinding*—like a wizard's incantations. And I swear Borges had an ability to project a kind of faint white light aura around himself that had an enchanting effect on all around him—or so it seemed to me—brilliant and tangible, wherever it came from, similar to what I imagined to be a force field in science fiction. Youthful fantasy or no, I still insist Borges was lit up that way onstage that afternoon.

There were only about two dozen older men in the audience, in this big theater with about 900 seats. Afterwards, as most of them were starting to go across Corrientes Avenue to a café, one of the old men introduced himself and insisted that I go along. I did, and got a privileged seat at their table, right next to Borges, and had coffee with him. What I mainly remember Borges asking me about that day was music, what I was listening to—it was The Paul Butterfield Blues band, which he had never heard of, though he knew something about African-American blues. We talked about The Rolling Stones, how he thought Mick Jagger was a genius, “a great post-modern poet,” he said. Borges could quote lines from Mick Jagger's songs.

That was the start of something. Not long afterward, we met again, coincidentally, in the green room of a TV studio where we were both scheduled for separate bits on a variety and talk show program (Borges, with actor Roberto Villanueva, was promoting the film “Invasión”, for which Bioy Casares and Borges had written the screenplay; and I was representing the American Field Service as an exchange student). That year, there were two more brief conversations at cafés in his neighborhood near the Plaza San Martín. Six years later, I spent time with Borges each of two days in Iowa City, where he spoke to an intimate group of us at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and later at a big hall at the university. I was invited to sit in on writer Henry Bromell's interview with him in his room at the Iowa House. (Henry Bromell was an inspiring teacher at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, only a few years older than many of us, recently having published his first book of elegantly written stories, *The Slightest Distance*; he would go on to become a prize-winning screenwriter and producer for television for three decades, winning WGA awards and

Emmys, especially for his last work on the cutting-edge drama “Homeland”, before his sudden death in 2013—*requiescat in pace*, he is very much missed). Borges established an easy familiarity with both Bromell and me from the first day, calling Henry “Bromell” and me just “Unger,” and we called him “Borges.” There was nothing unusual in this—it was the same dignified familiarity with which he put at ease many hundreds of acquaintances, recalling perfectly their voices and names. Of course, I was in awe of his writing. This impression colored my worshipful interactions with him until the years came of the “dirty war” (1976-1983), when I was thoroughly repulsed, disgusted and angered by his distressingly pro-fascist political statements. That white light aura I once was so convinced I could see around him was suddenly gone.

In May, 2001, I was in Argentina, and spent an evening with the widow of Borges, María Kodama, at the home of the former Fulbright Director, and Professor at the U.B.A., Rolando Costa Picazo. We began talking about those years—the late ‘60s and the ‘70s. Borges was writing many of his later poems, only a few new essays and stories. He was blind (he saw the world in vague shadows and shapes as if projected on a murky screen), but being blind was something he considered one of his creative gifts—he had spoken of his blindness as a gift more than once. He would never have called his creative process *inspiration*. Borges would rather describe it as a kind of “dreaming” that came over him. When asked about his artistic process, he usually answered self-effacingly. “Why are you treating me like I’m Homer or Shakespeare or somebody like that? I’m just a writer of a few inessential poems and stories,” he would say, as he did to Henry Bromell and me during the Iowa interview.

He gave similar lines to many people. But I don’t believe he really meant them. He expected the Nobel Prize. He felt he deserved it more than Octavio Paz, that it was denied to him for political reasons—for having publicly excused and even praised the cruel dictatorship of the *junta* of *comandantes* that had “disappeared” and murdered 30,000 people, including two of my adopted brothers—the same reasons for which I and others of my generation had started cursing him. Only later did I realize that his support of dictatorship was really a literary position, the product of an elitism similar to Ezra Pound’s embrace of fascism, and that Borges knew little about politics, that “great lead weight of the world,” as he said. His disappointment at not being awarded the Nobel Prize remains a persistent theme in María Kodama’s conversations. Humbly enough—though still convinced of his genius—Borges dismissed questions about his creative process with the same kind of superstitious attitude with which he took pains not to have mirrors in a room even after he went blind. He was frightened of mirrors, and of masks, of any physical manifestation of the illusory intruding into his world. In my opinion, this fear of illusions was due also to a superstitious avoidance of any disturbance to his dreams. Borges had learned at will how to make frequent direct contact with his creative sources as with a waking dream state. He could close his eyes and continue dreaming in his erudite, textured prose and verse, escaping from the murky green darkness he described as his *visible* world.

One major source from which Borges composed fiction can be attributed to a visionary experience, and perhaps one not so different from those of Blake, or Thomas Wolfe, or Don Benvenuto Cellini. As Borges describes in *Un ensayo autobiográfico*, around Christmas, 1938, “the same year my father died,” he suffered “an accident.” On his way up a staircase, he bumped his head into an open window in the hallway. Later that night, a severe septicemia set in, with a high fever, and he was taken, delirious, to a hospital, where he was operated on, “and for a month I was, without knowing it, hovering between life and death... When I began to recover, I was fearful for my mental integrity.” Borges

came out of this near-death experience resolved to write stories, his mind filled with vivid ideas for them. Through the next year—1939 and into 1940—he wrote steadily at these stories, one after the other, beginning with “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” followed by “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” then “The Library of Babel,” “The Lottery of Babylon,” “Death and the Compass,” and “The Circular Ruins”—all among his most well-known tales, the main body of *Ficciones*, the book that made his name, all written, like Keats and the Odes, as if from one sustained creative burst. Sure, he revised. He rewrote. He knew his craft, how to move sections of stories around once written, how to tailor and tinker with the meter and punctuation of lines of prose, endlessly, even obsessively. Still, it’s fair to say that most of these stories by Borges were born almost whole, from that visionary, near-death experience, after which he awoke, as he puts it, “crying because I understand.”¹⁴

María Kodama described for me how, later in life, the blind Borges composed. After a light breakfast, he would sit in a comfortable armchair, in his front room, about nine in the morning. He would lean his head back. Sometimes, one of his cats would sit in his lap, and he would stroke it, very slowly, very rhythmically. Though he was blind and presumably had little need to, Borges would still close his eyes. A serene expression settled on his face, as if he were sleeping, but he wasn’t asleep. With his eyes closed, he would start nodding his head, inducing in himself a kind of trance, feeling the pulse of language he could hear somewhere in the depths, in his voice, his “other” voice, the voice of the famous “other Borges.” Sometimes, he would mutter to himself, repeating a line aloud, in a whisper. Mostly, he dreamed away quietly. He would do this for about two hours then would call for María Kodama—his secretary and platonic companion (only many years later would he marry her, make her the keeper of his estate, and his secrets). La Kodama would come into his study, the main room of his apartment, lined floor to ceiling with easily two thousand books. Borges would begin dictating to her a whole stanza of seven, eight or ten lines if he were writing a poem; or it might be a complete paragraph, long or short, of an essay or rare new story Borges had spent those morning hours dreaming up, imagining, revising, editing in his head. He dictated everything whole—finished—to María Kodama. The two of them would go to the dining room to eat lunch. After lunch and a short nap, Borges would work for about another two hours, dictate another stanza or paragraph, then knock off at about three-thirty, when he would prepare himself to entertain visitors. After some time had gone by—usually months, sometimes years—Borges would make changes when lines were read back to him from these drafts. He seasoned his work, cut and revised, applied writerly craft through multiple revisions. Borges knew that impatience is the enemy of art. Still, the first drafts were all mainly *there*, born out of his trance, those “dream tigers” the writer could pad around with through his surreal and mythic landscapes. His works were drawn forth as if at will from sources directly related to his capacity to enter into dreams.

My question: where was he *really* going, this old blind writer with his eyes closed? Borges would be one of the first to say that it wasn’t really *him* who was going. *He* was just Borges—it was that “other Borges” who was really the one taking the trip. The old guy I knew once was nice enough, sure, and he was an amusing conversationalist, except for his hurtful politics. But let’s face it, he was just a quirky, eccentric, *effete* old man sitting in a chair, talking esoteric nonsense most of the time, and even if it was very witty, charming chatter, that talk really was “inessential,” as he said. The *other Borges* is the guy I was always hoping to talk with—especially when I was a student at Iowa and so consumed by an ambition only to write. And I somehow believed that this “other Borges” could, like a Saxon sorcerer, wave his cane like a magic wand and so make *it* happen—

take me with him to that *there* where he was going. Even now, long after his death, when I page through his words, feeling his magic powers, I can't help but hope and even expect Borges should do this, if only to earn my forgiveness.

Poetic inspiration can't be shared or passed on with a laying on of hands. Or can it? When we taught together at Syracuse University, poet Tess Gallagher regularly used to call this *waving the wand*. "They want me to wave the wand," she'd say about students who approached her mentoring in a certain way. The personality cults created by young writers who surround older writers—which makes little sense, considering the solitary nature of the art—may in large measure be caused by a wish-fulfilling delusion that close, worshipful association with accomplished writers can somehow induce or transfer poetic inspiration. Why else would we want to get so close to them? Or they to us? And isn't our reverence for the artists we admire grounded in this same mystery?

III.

Literary history revises the lives of writers according to prevailing political ideologies and scholarly fads. Most recently, the American obsession with personality cults—driven by perverse marketing ideologies—revises author biographies according to transitory advertising values in the service of creating literary stardom for the purpose of selling books. In this mode, facts were getting twisted concerning the life story of Raymond Carver. Carver's biography was still under construction, and badly in need of objective scholarship to dispel marketing myths. (In 2010, finally, writer-scholar Carol Sklenicka published an objective biography, solidly based in painstaking research, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life*, with Scribner's, now the one major and reliable source about Carver's life). At the time of the original writing of this essay, one of the unfortunate twists in the market-advertising construction of Carver's life was to make many of his literary friends into figures no longer as contributive—or for some, far more collaborative (as in the recent Ray Carver-Gordon Lish controversy, with writer-editor exchanges published by "The New Yorker"¹⁵)—so rendering them subservient to fame agendas of mythic constructions driven by marketplace and popular distortions.

In some inessential way, my own long friendship with Ray Carver was also being revised. A 2003 biography in French, by Philippe Roman, *Parlez-moi de Carver: une biographie littéraire de Raymond Carver*, was published fraught with distortions of Ray's relationships with friends and family, including my own with him. In connection with the Centrum Writers' Conference, I ran across a brief author biography of "Douglas Unger" in a Port Townsend newspaper exemplary of this twist, stating that Unger was at one time, "Ray Carver's roommate." Actually, it was the other way around, at least for a time. We were close friends. Ray and I ended up sharing a roof together under various circumstances, in a lot of different places—in Iowa City, San Francisco, New York, and in Syracuse. The first time was in 1976, when Ray came to the University of Iowa to give a reading. I and my then fiancé, now my late wife, Amy Burk, hosted a party for Ray. Amy was Ray's sister-in-law from his first marriage to Maryann Carver, which was breaking up at the time. The way things worked out, Ray and I were friends first then we became shirt-tail in-laws—we were family.

After the Iowa City reading, Ray was supposed to be on his way to a residency at Yaddo. Instead, he got drunk at the party and ended up living in our basement for the next month. This was during one of Ray's worst periods—his alcoholism was killing him. He was drinking two fifths or more of vodka a day. Of course, he wasn't writing. He hadn't

written for a long time. Later, for brief periods in 1976-77 in San Francisco, Ray was our homeless guest, or he would stay just across the street at the flat of his old-buddy writer friend, Chuck Kinder, and his wife, Diane, or in nearby rented rooms, such as the one in the Castro district precisely described in his story, "Careful." Also: if anyone wants to know a source of the poem, "Distress Sale," I'm the "my friend" referred to—it's our furniture set up for sale out on the sidewalk, including our daughter's canopy bed. Later, Ray visited us in New York City; then, in the Spring of 1978, we ended up living next to each other in dumpy one-room cabins at the Park Motel in Iowa City. Ray was newly sober but broke, waiting for his first Guggenheim checks. I was doing odd jobs. About every other day, we loaned each other a crumpled ten-dollar bill so one or the other of us could pay the nightly rent for those pine-board dumps.

Though Ray was all set up there trying to work, and various friends around Iowa City loaned him or me offices and studies, the *place to write* didn't matter much. Ray was half crazy because he was having trouble writing. There were two stories on his desk—"Why Don't You Dance," which was soon published in "The Iowa Review," and a funny little draft called "Hooks," which he later published as "Viewfinder." These two stories at least were in the rewriting process. Carver was applying his craft, patiently and meticulously cutting and shaping, in his craftsman's way—14 and 15 drafts or more—to achieve those stark minimalist sentences all lined up like the bricks of a house. Still, he was miserable, frustrated, drifting all over town in a big blue boat of a Chevy Impala that, like his creative life, kept breaking down. Ray confessed several times that he wasn't sure if, in sobriety, he would ever be able to write again.

My memory of these conversations is that I kept reassuring Ray but only vaguely. "It's going to be OK, it'll all come back," I'd say, spooked to say anything more direct. We traded writing complaints, commiserated in our poverty, during those frustrating months in Iowa City. Creativity would come back to Carver about a year later, when he would find his legs in sobriety, achieve material and domestic stability with Tess Gallagher, and finally get freed up enough to let loose psychologically and let himself go with full focus on his writing.

In sobriety, Carver's writing habits were usually steady and daily. He went to his desk like a construction worker packs a lunch bucket and heads off to the building site. Few writers have been described as relying more on the application of meticulous craft. Still, Ray's life story exemplifies that—like Rilke's miracles—poetic inspiration can be earned. When he was writing, Ray would wake up early, before 5 a.m., if he could. He'd have coffee and one of those pre-packaged, sticky cinnamon rolls he'd warm up in a toaster oven. Before he went to his office—his study, his writing room—he would not only unplug the telephone, he would actually take the further step of wrapping the phone in dish towels and hide it away, deep into a bottom drawer in his kitchen, as if it could still ring even unplugged. The last thing he wanted was a telephone ringing. Sometimes, he forgot; or he had to leave it plugged in because he was expecting an important call. That telephone could ring while he was writing, as it did so famously in his account of writing the story "Vitamins" in his essay on influences, "Fires":

...I was in the middle of writing a short story when my telephone rang. I answered it. On the other end of the line was the voice of a man who was obviously a black man, someone asking for a party named Nelson. It was a wrong number and I said so and hung up. I went back to my short story. But pretty soon I found myself writing a black character into my story, a somewhat sinister character whose name was Nelson... this

character found his way into my story with a coincidental right-ness which I had the good sense to trust. ¹⁶

“The telephone rings and your life changes,” Ray would say. The telephone rang and that story changed. Usually, he unplugged the telephone, or even hid it away as described. Ray had to hide the telephone like that really from himself, from his temptation to procrastinate by “getting on the horn,” as he called it, dialing up his friends, which, aside from writing and fishing, was one of his favorite things to do. So, no telephones. And a sign in front of the house in Syracuse set up at the bottom of the steps—a frowning version of that obnoxious smiley-face logo that said *No Visitors*. Ray would check to make sure the front door was locked, double-bolted, and with a chain. He would go around the house closing window blinds. Only then—closed in like that—would he go upstairs to his study and start writing.

In Spring, 1987, during the months just before Ray got news of his lung cancer, we were in touch by telephone about once a week, and sometimes more. Tess Gallagher was teaching in Syracuse. Ray fled the social whirl that always grabbed at him in his role as newly famous writer, widely considered to be a fascinating blue collar primitive so many of the chi-chi literary people and others in New York kept demanding to see—to touch, really, in that strange, even vampirous way some people treat writers, as if whatever *it* is could somehow rub off on them. Ray fled the East for Port Angeles, Washington—his new home—so he could be free of such temptations and distractions.

In our phone conversations, I would ask Ray how it was going. He would say he was “whipped out” at the end of a day. He was at his desk early, by 5 a.m., writing in his slippers. He was composing one poem each morning, and he was amazed how the poem was coming out whole—a complete new draft of a poem. “Come on, really?” I asked. He insisted it was true. With that mischievous laughter he let loose whenever he felt like was putting something over on the world, he said that he’d done even better than that—he’d spent all afternoon at his desk and come up with yet *another* draft of a poem. Two poems in a day! Ray was also awaiting his new story, “Errand,” due to be published soon in “The New Yorker.”

“You lucky dog,” I said, with envy and despair, looking out over my own dining room table five inches deep with my students’ and other manuscripts I had yet to read. “You must be getting stoned,” I said, with an edge. Ray just laughed. Then he said, “I mean it. I’ve never worked so hard in my life. I’m so beat at night, about the most I can do is watch an old movie and eat a bowl of popcorn with Blue”—his blue Persian cat. “Really. I can’t wait to get to bed,” he said. “It’s really something.”

And I knew it was true. Three thousand miles away, I could feel those leather slippers padding off to his study long before dawn, could hear in his voice how he couldn’t wait to get to work again, off and gone into his last big flow, with what I believe were early drafts of most of the poems that would end up eventually in *A New Path to the Waterfall*—all of them just flipping up at him finished, and whole, like steelhead and salmon from his secret waters—that last book that can be said to be genuinely authored by Carver, published two years later, the year after he died.

Few writers in recent history have been defined by critics as more socially realistic, even to the point of a *reducto absurdum* of his masterful short stories and poems into a mere chronicle of the working classes. Ray rose to this role on many public occasions, putting emphasis on the “honest” and “true” and “real” in fiction. If anyone would have said to Ray that he was “inspired,” I don’t think he would have admitted it. He would have kept quiet about it, the same way he kept his best fishing spots secret. Stating what was

happening as directly as the term *inspiration* would have given him “the willies”—a word he often used when he was spooked by something, and Ray was often spooked. What he said was that he was going on “instinct,” as he did in “Fires,” or that he was just “lucky”—the same kind of “luck” he refers to in his essay, “On Writing.”¹⁷ Never very religious, Carver’s sense of this connectedness to *luck*—like a gambler’s luck, or at tougher times in his life, his lack of it—these whispered references to *luck* for Carver could take on all the weight and power of Old Testament awe at an omnipotent God. Ray was never as grounded in the real or the rational as he seemed, especially to the critics who apportion to him a new realist role, and who now consider him historically the standard-bearer of the “New Realism” (and which has now become an old realism). No matter Carver’s critical reception, in his writing process, there was always very clearly something mysterious going on, and about which Ray was far too superstitious ever to say anything.

This *luck* Carver spoke of so reticently belies the portrait of him as “realist,” at least in his process of composition. Of realism and Carver, I’m convinced more now than ever of the presence of *mystery*—in the stories especially. This mystery is perhaps best expressed as a philosophical position in *The Sense of Beauty* by George Santayana:

Reality is more fluid and elusive than reason, and has, as it were, more dimensions than are known even to the latest geometry. Hence the understanding, when not suffused with some glow of sympathetic emotion or some touch of mysticism, gives but a dry, crude image of the world.¹⁸

Luck in Carver’s creative process resonated with sympathetic emotions, and the mystical informed his stories in this way. Robert Graves, in his classic book on the origins of Welsh Celtic myth and poetry, *The White Goddess*—which Ray greatly admired and lent me to read—describes the ancient belief that the struggle of the poet is divided into two main competing, mystical and psychological forces. These, in turn, combine into a much sought-after trinity figure called the “Threefold Goddess” in poetic invocations:

The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird. All true poetry... celebrates some incident or scene in this very ancient story, and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial inheritance that they not only assert themselves in poetry but recur on occasions of emotional stress in the form of dreams, paranoiac visions and delusions.¹⁹

Graves points toward the poetic or writing self as a living presence that acts as a pole between two potentially beneficent or malevolent forces. One pole is the rational, practical mind fit for daily, vocational-technical use, exemplified by visible, structured, and eminently teachable forms of scholarship and craft. The opposing pole is the “other” mind, the one ancient bards had to engage by naming litanies to induce in themselves something like a hypnotic trance to be able to call up from memory their rich oral tradition of epic songs composed of thousands of complex lines. What Graves asserts here in other form is the mysterious capacity for artistic vision that makes any working writer appear strange at best, and surrounded by an attractive-repellent *weirdness*—like García Lorca’s spooky grief-cry of *duende*—a calling ever threatening to draw writers away from human company into imaginary worlds. That’s why so many writers seem so *weird* to the rest of

humankind; and why they can appear so saintly, blessed enough to be worshipped and followed, as prophets, or as if white light auras magically surround them.

Inspiration happens differently for every artist. Some writers are more aware of what it is than others. Still, even if a writer gets *there* only once—in one book, one story, one poem, even if only in a single, resonant line—this will be more than worth devoting a whole life. To write well at all, if a writer seeks *it* out—of course putting in laborious hour after hour in sacrificial solitude—the writer will get *there*, surely, with *luck*. This much must be taken on faith. The exemplary genius and creative processes of these three writers—Wolfe, Borges, and Carver—suggest that all the craft talk and workshop critiquing in creation can leave us at a loss if we don't honor our sources in poetic inspiration. We should teach the making of fine art as sacred mystery.

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