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Affirming Limits
Essays on Mortality, Choice, and Poetic Form

Robert Pack

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PREFACE

Each chapter of this book was written to be an essay complete unto itself, and so the reader is invited to skip around if he or she so pleases. Yet, I have always had in mind the themes of how the idea of death is related to the idea of literary art, and, more generally, how human beings resist or accommodate themselves to their own mortality. These central themes have provided the book with its unity and structure which the reader may wish to consider.

A serious artist can hope for nothing more than to be read with care for detail and nuance, as well as for the sweep of passion and psychological or philosophical meaning. This book is my partial attempt to give thanks to the master artists whose work is here examined by reading them with sustained attention. I take their works to be their best inheritance. What I have learned about the demanding craft of poetry over the years, I have learned mainly from them; and what I have taken to heart about cherishing the little life we are given to live, that, too, has been their gift. As Stevens said: "In the last analysis, [poetry has] something to do with our self-preservation." The pleasure that poetry offers, I believe, must augment our troubled will to survive.

For the convenience of my readers, I have included within my own text the poems that are being discussed when they are relatively short. It is assumed that the reader will have access to such longer works as *King Lear*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Prelude* even in a time in America of the dominance of television and popular culture. I trust that this always will be so.

I wish to record my gratitude to Harold Bloom, John Elder, Paul Mariani, Gary Margolis, John Bertolini, Syd Lea, and Jay Parini for their insights which have helped me test my own, for their detailed editorial suggestions, and, especially, for their friendship. Patty, my wife, listened and advised from beginning to end. Above all, I have tried for clarity and directness, assuming my reader to be a companion in the fellowship of art.

PART ONE

One

Art and Unhappiness

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So Tolstoy begins *Anna Karenina*, choosing unhappiness as his primary theme, for only in unhappiness does human identity and uniqueness seem to reside. Happiness is anonymous, and therefore it may appear inherently uninteresting to the contemplative artist. It is an emotion to be lived, to be experienced, an end in itself with no need or compulsion to examine itself. Happiness is essentially wordless, or so the logic of Tolstoy's statement would imply. "And so they lived happily ever after." The happy lovers vanish into their happiness, and we, as readers or writers, return to our true medium, our suffering, where, in Keats's words, "to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs." The inexorable dialectic of the thinking artist, to alter Descartes, would read: "I suffer, therefore I am." Or as Byron says: "Knowledge is sorrow." And as Denis De Rougemont claims in his study *Love in the Western World*, "Happy love has no history."

Theoretically, there is no aspect of reality that the gifted artist cannot describe or dramatize. Does the theme of happiness, then, present the artist with some special problem? Is

there something in the very nature of literary art that militates against choosing happiness as a theme? In paradise, or in a social utopia, would there be little motivation for the creating of art? If, in choosing to become a literary artist, one henceforth depends upon the world's unhappiness for one's creative substance, how can one oppose that unhappiness upon which one's identity depends? Is the project of art in some way tied to the sickness of man's loving the very affliction out of which his art arises? The fact that one sets out to be an artist may affect the way one looks at the world by tempting one to focus on violence and pain because such themes are more exciting than those of tranquility or contentment. If, as W. B. Yeats says, "art is but a vision of reality," how can artists hold to that model of objectivity if they wish to compete for an audience whose bias is to be told of anguish and terror, of human failure?

We all can recognize in ourselves the perverse pride that we take in talking about our own troubles, as well as the perverse pleasure we take in gossiping about the failures of others. This is the universal principle of malicious joy, *Schadenfreude*, from which artists also suffer and in which they delight; it has been described as "the bearable sorrow one artist feels when a fellow artist receives a bad review." To be told by a friend that he understands your troubles is to be accepted as human, to be embraced for your endearing frailty. To be told by a friend that you have not suffered is to be dismissed condescendingly, to be banished from the human circle. "I suffer, therefore I am; I suffer more than you do, therefore I am more human" such is the logic of perverse pride that worships pain and can make of art the temple in which pain is exalted.

The romantic fascination with and adulation of pain has come to dominate and perhaps even determine almost all contemporary poetry, novels, drama, and film. Violence, sadism, rape, suicide these are our themes. Hatred and anger these are our voices. It is routine to find a movie advertised with such words as "shocking" or "brutal" because these are "qualities" that will attract an audience. Imagine a book jacket that claims a novel to be about "a serene and peaceful marriage." Who would buy it? The most difficult

achievement for an artist is to present suffering so that its main effect is not entertainment (attention and profit for the artist), and to present what is good in such a way that the spectacle of goodness, as in human kindness, is as compelling as the spectacle of degradation and destruction. "Evil, be thou my good," says Milton's Satan. "Evil, be thou my source of power" is the unspoken principle at the heart of much contemporary artistic endeavor.

There is an alternative view of the artist's relation to evil that argues that all art is affirmative because it is the creation of order, no matter what its theme or its attitude toward evil. In this view, there is no nihilistic art, there is only good or bad art according to the coherence or power of its own order. The hidden assumption here, however, is that human life is fundamentally chaotic and without purpose. The order that the artist creates replaces the sorrow of chaos, even as chaos remains the theme. This paradox suggests that art is joyous simply by being art, no matter how gloomy its vision is of the human condition. The artist is thus the happy bringer of bad news.

Art is joyous in that it transforms cruelty and chaos into order and meaning, but in so doing it places art above life and loses touch with the very evil that it purports to confront. Auden reminds us that "No metaphor, remember, can express / A real historical unhappiness. / Our words have value if they make us gay. / O happy grief, is all sad art can say." But if art can only be happy and if life itself is sad, then the happiness we enjoy in art is merely fantasy, a holiday from reality, and such happiness is all too fragile and vulnerable. The art in love with its own "happiness" can never help to guide us in our own lives. In our struggle to survive with purpose, what we need is an art in which the indigenous happiness of art, its order-giving power, is wedded to an idea of goodness—a goodness that is attainable in daily life. When this idea of goodness is passionately held, the theme and spectacle of evil may be treated without exploitation, for the deprivation or loss of good feelings (as in friendship or love) will be powerfully felt, and the power of the longing for their restoration will replace the increasing need for shocking stimulation that the imagery of violence generates. This desire to evoke and restore

good feelings is what Wordsworth calls "tranquilizing power," and it possesses the "wondrous influence of power gently used."

The temptation of valuing art more than daily life is that it indulges the fantasy of existing beyond limits, for artists have greater control of their own created worlds than they do over the historical and cultural conditions of their births. The wish for omnipotence and the desire for immortality are manifest in our oldest myths, and they are undoubtedly primal forces in the human imagination. All artistic creation partakes of the wish for power and control, which in its fullest fantasy is the wish for immortality, to exist beyond the bonds of nature. Since artists' creations are always themselves, their own substance, they are both creator and creature in one, they are parents unto themselves, and they survive in the form of their own offspring, which is also themselves. The fundamental rebellion against nature and its absolute limit, mortality, is completed in the fantasy of creation, and, as Freud argues, all our instincts are galvanized in the enactment of this fantasy: "All the instincts, the loving, the grateful, the sensual, the defiant, the self-assertive and independentall are gratified in the wish to be the *father of himself*." But such a wish, persistent as it has been throughout human history, is doomed to failure. We must return to our lives, to the limits of our aging bodies; we must return from the realms of our creation, from our imaginings, to the circumstances of time and place. Our invented worlds cannot replace the world that is given us prior to any choosing. As Wallace Stevens says, "we live in a place / that is not our own." If we build our creations out of hatred for the world we have, since it is not the world we would have made or chosen, then we merely add to the hatred and ugliness that is there already. And since we cannot create anything truly alive except through the natural process of childbirth, we must necessarily survey what our art has wrought and cry out with Keats: "Cold pastoral." Art is the creation of dead things. All art is epitaph.

"We had fed the heart on fantasies," says Yeats, "the heart's grown brutal from the fare." When violence is the

theme of that creation, the energy that goes into artistic creation exploits that violence by directing it against mortality itself in the fantasy that the work of art can overcome the necessity of one's own death. But this fantasy must fail, and any art grounded in this fantasy is finally a pathetic rebellion against the inexorable facts of decay and death. Rather than relieving us of violent passion that rebels against our mortal condition, the energy of art in the fantasy of creating its own order exacerbates that feeling of violence out of the primary frustration of all art: it cannot prevent death, nor can it give life. Frustration compounds frustration, anger compounds anger, and the hatred of life for what it denies and what it takes away continues to build so that the given world comes to be seen as adversary. Yeats's lines go on to define precisely the brutality that derives from the nurturing of one's fantasies. He asserts that there is "More substance in our enmities / Than in our love." Where, then, is the art that can proclaim our love and find in it a happiness that is equal to our hatreds? On what premise might an art based that would free it from a dependence on violence as its primary source of energy and thus lead the artist from the maker's happiness back into his life? In that return, the artist might become a model, adding a tranquil perspective out of his ordering power, and thus freeing his voice from dependence on irony or cynicism.

For all Yeats's fascination with violence, there is a longing for an alternative power, an intense peacefulness, that is "by quiet natures understood." This peacefulness, potent in its achieved equipoise, is given intermittent expression in his writing, but nowhere is it more lucidly described than in his *Autobiography*: "We artists suffer in our art if we do not love most of all life at peace with itself." I believe that Yeats means that the artist without a vision of life at peace with itself suffers as a human being, but suffers equally *as an artist*. He suffers as an artist because his depiction of violence, his moral perspective of human suffering caused by human viciousness or injustice, is merely the thematic excuse for his art unless he possesses a heartfelt belief in a genuine alternative to such corruption. Without such a belief, he is an aes-

thetic hypocrite, for there can be no true moral horror in the face of violence if violence is the only possible mode of human interaction or the primary source of artistic power. The challenge the artist must confront is to realize the "drama," the quiet intensity, of life at peace with itself, so that all the imagery of violence will be felt, not as vicarious sadism, but as a deprivation of peaceful goodness.

Peaceful goodness can only mean the harmony of man with the conditions of his life, knowing what is within his power to change, and knowing as well what is merely in his power to accept. What every man must accept is his own history, his one life, his particular body, and finally his death which may be mitigated only by the survival of others, his children. For a little while his memory endures. For a while, perhaps, his work endures. But within a finite span everything is lost. The human mind cannot avoid this thought. As Yeats says: "Everything that man esteems / Endures a moment or a day." The knowledge of final and absolute loss is inescapable. Yeats continues: "Man is in love and loves what vanishes." If this condition, the vanishing of all things, cannot be accepted, there can be no harmony, only the fantasy of an afterlife or the illusion of a kind of immortality through art. Neither the creation of art, the power of the tyrant, nor the murdering of rivals can confer immortality. People die. If artists consider artistic creation as primary to the meaning or purpose of their lives, inevitably they enact the fantasy of giving birth to themselves that is at heart the manifestation of their deepest despairthe wish for omnipotence. Until they can outgrow this wish and reject it, cast it out, artists live and work as adversaries of nature, for limitation and finitude are their enemies, and they must necessarily find their voices in the violence of opposition. Their inescapable theme, seemingly beyond choice, must be unhappiness.

II

The only way to create life is through the sexual coming together of man and woman in the making of a child. Incredible

as it may seem, this is the limiting fact that the artist is prone to suppress or forget. The artist dreams that his mind is androgynous and can generate living things, like Athena's springing from the head of Zeus or like Shakespeare's imprisoned King Richard who imagines: "My brain I'll prove the female to my soul; / My soul the father: and these two beget / A generation of still-breeding thoughts." But they are only thoughts, and Richard is not free to escape his fate. He is not the omnipotent creator. His world of thoughts is a mockery of his condition; it is a marred imitation of true begetting. The artist must take natural begetting and generation as his primary model, but he can never hope to emulate nature's model, for he cannot bring forth a truly living thing. Yet, this knowledge can serve him, for it can combat the essential pride within his wish to be omnipotent and bring about humility which will allow him to place his art in the service of life. This humility is the fundamental acceptance of limitation and the parent's knowledge that his or her life must be given over to the life of the child. Acceptance of the fact that one generation replaces another is the very trial of parental love. As Blake says, "The most sublime act is to set another before you," and this act of achieved harmony through renunciation and acceptance must be the artist's model as well, as he humbles himself before the natural order of inevitable change. If there is no happiness in the creating and nurturing of children because the despair of relinquishing oneself for another is too great, then there is no image of life at peace with itself, of life's accepting its own passing; thus the artist will have no theme but his unhappiness. A happy art necessarily celebrates biological creation and mortality; it is an art in praise of parental acceptance and parental love, either directly or in surrogate form, finding its power in what it serves.

The suppression or replacement of biological creation as the primary model for creation with the model of the creative human mind results in the repression of the fact of mortality. Such repressive thinking resembles the magical thinking of childhood and of dreams, for it places mind over nature, and it dwells in an unsustainable holiday from reality. On the other hand, to affirm the idea of having and nurturing children as

the true model for creation-woman and man together-reminds us that neither we nor our works are immortal, and we can then begin to seek what is good in our lives within this knowledge, free of the despair of longing to be other than what we are, of longing to become divine. Freud says: "as for the great necessities of fate, against which there is no remedy, these [man] will simply learn to endure with resignation." Art cannot cure us of our mortality, nor can it remove "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Art cannot even cure the world of man-made evil ("We have no gift to set a statesman right," says Yeats); it can only aid the individual artist, and his reader, in relieving despair in the face of death and injustice. No matter how great the artist's satirical powers and his ability to shame us; no matter how compelling the artist's vision of suffering caused by human cruelty, the world goes on as it always has. If Shakespeare's *King Lear* could not and cannot humanize us collectively, then what can? We leave the theater, this "two hours' traffic of our stage," a time apart from our lives, having been made happy by a spectacle of evil transformed by the poet's art into a play. Momentarily, we enjoy the illusion that we are safe, that we live in an order created by the mind. But we are not safe, fantastic play comes to an end. What has the play added to the reality to which we must return? Is the violence that we must confront on our "awakening" intensified as a source of our unhappiness, so that our seemingly happy art, inevitably at its conclusion, speaks again of sorrow?

For art not to be unbearably sad, it must return us to a source of happiness that precedes the artist's "rage for order," as Stevens describes the basic human wish for power and control. That source of happiness, life at peace with itself, is the only theme that can rescue art from solipsism, the fantasy that its own order controls anything other than its own material, which is not human events, but only language. Satan's "*non serviam*" (I will not serve) is equivalent to the artist's refusal to put his art at the service of natural creation seen as natural goodness, and to make, in effect, a religion of art by regarding it as the highest of human values. Rather than serving in time, the rebellious artist seeks to perpetuate him-

self through his art as if he could control the future, and this "will-to-self-immortalization," as Otto Rank calls it, "arises from the fear of life." But to set another before you, to be at peace with that act of renunciation, and to affirm it in its sublimity is finally to accept one's replacement in life. We owe nature a death, and to be at peace with the future, even to love one's children, is willingly to give over the gift of life. Not to do so is to desire one's own perpetuation through a denial of natural generation. This is "desire," as Stevens tells us, that is "too difficult to tell from despair." We are "sick with desire," according to Yeats, when we wish to be "out of nature" and take on immortal form, to become, as it were, a golden work of art, to become our own progenitors. The cure for such desire, which is the violent rebellion against nature, can only be achieved by the artist when he puts himself again in the service of nature, when he affirms the very conditions of his own death, and when he chooses the model of nurturing parenthood as his guide to achieve peace within what is possible. Stevens describes this possible peace, free from the sickness of desire for the unattainable, when he says: "the health of the world might be enough."

The artist who puts himself in the service of life becomes the artist as celebrator, but this can only be achieved when he overcomes his fear of life which is inseparable from the denial of limits. Only then does his art cease to be a retreat into a fantasy of power or of self-immortalization. Knowing that he can neither control the future nor change the course of history with his art, he may become free of the curse of pride and need not cry out with Hamlet: "O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" Rather, he becomes Erik Erikson's aged man who has achieved the peace of "integrity" through the "acceptance of one's one and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions." Or he becomes the ecstatic Yeatsian artist who collectively finds in "creative joy an acceptance of what life brings," so that "we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion." This is the sublime extreme of life at peace with itself, at peace with its own nec-

essary limits, in celebration of its own mortality. Choosing to be only what he is, the artist leaves his inheritance: the dramatization in his poems of the power to make such a choice. The choice changes nothing except his attitude toward necessity, but therein lies his freedom, and with that freedom an ecstatic peace becomes possible. In freely affirming the limits of his one and singular life, the artist may achieve harmony with his own mortality, find his own unique history infinitely precious for all its disappointments, and thus remake the choice to be exactly what he has become. Contained in that choice, which must continually be remade as the dynamic of daily life, is the vision that human happiness, what Wordsworth calls the "little unremembered acts of kindness and of love," is a higher value than the happiness that art can bring. If art is to serve human happiness, it must choose to remember our acts of kindness and of love, even within the spectacle of violence and of loss, and celebrate their goodness.

III

Historically, the primary function of art was to praise God and his works, his manifestation in nature, or, as in Milton, to "justify the ways of God to men." Art was not its own end, for human creation served the purpose of extolling divine creativity and was totally dependent upon God as the creative model. The acknowledgment of this dependency was crucial for the artist in defining his humility before God's power and thus in accepting the limited scope of his art. In this spirit Gerard Manley Hopkins enjoins us: "long before death / Give beauty . . . back to God, / Beauty's self and beauty's giver." The origin of art was the ritualistic celebration of power and beauty beyond the fabricating strength of man's greatest efforts. The role of the artist was to serve and glorify divine power that "doth not need / Either man's work or his own gifts," as Milton exclaims. The modern artist, sick with alienation from the world and thus from himself, speaking mainly in the sardonic tone of irony, retreats to his art as if it were a world in which he might live, though its only sub-

stance is his own unhappiness feeding upon itself. He has nothing to serve but his own creation, and thus his art becomes a monument to his own solipsism. Even in an age deprived of the supporting belief in a benevolent God whose presence in the world makes all things holy, the artist still needs to place himself in the service of nature. In spite of nature's indifference and man's historical inhumanity to man, the artist must continue to serve the simple power to enjoy what our senses engage in daily life, to enjoy the demands and consolations of family love as if those pleasures were all the meaning we needed and all the fulfillment that we desired. In such service to a power outside and beyond his art, the artist, as Wordsworth says, would embody an "homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves." We must learn again in our time of collective despair and pervasive apocalyptic imaginings to take pleasure in pleasure.

If we think of affirmed pleasure as the source of human meaning and thus the source of human happiness, we must return to the artist's fascination with sorrow and the peculiar problem that happiness itself may create. The fear of happiness taken as a human end derives from the fact that affirmed pleasure brings us to a limit, forces the awareness of that limit upon us, and thus reminds us of our mortality. The instinct to rebel against our condition may arise in us most potently when, in happiness, we reach the border of human possibility. The greed for *more* is most threatening and dangerous when we have achieved what we have wanted. Unlike accepted happiness, however, sorrow projects us wishfully into infinite possibility, and secretly we may prefer this sorrow since it nourishes our fantasies in which no limits need be confronted. In this way, even happiness may be converted into sorrow so that our fantasies need not be abandoned, and in that sorrow the artist again may find his theme, seeming to oppose what inwardly he perversely nurtures. The difficulty of loving a real woman and real children is the same as the difficulty of accepting the conditions of one's life and one's mortality. All require choosing the actual; all require affirmation

of limits and renunciation of the desire for something beyond. The power of the affirming artist is the power to celebrate those limits, to see in finite happiness an image not of deprivation but of human fulfillment. The banishment of fantasy returns the artist to himself as friend, lover, and parent, to his one life in whose service he places his art.

To allow oneself to be happy, to accept what one is, does not mean that one becomes passive in one's relationships or unfeeling toward the suffering of others. Rather, to know clearly the goodness that those who suffer are deprived of may become part of the energy that seeks to better their condition. The artist with a vision of happiness, life at peace with itself, is compelled to enhance the desire for that happiness in his readers at the same time that he seeks to exorcise the reader's desire for power beyond human possibility. The vision of possible happiness, happiness that comes from the acceptance of limits, enables the artist to place evil and suffering in their proper perspective: they are seen as the deprivation of goodness. Without a vision of goodness as a possibility residing in ordinary experience, the artist is compromised by depending on the very suffering that is the source of his creative powers. With such dependency, the artist serves the devil, the father of the lie, the father of the fantasy of power, under whose aegis, as Isaiah proclaims, "we have made lies our refuge." The test of honesty in the face of the temptation of power necessarily must be confronted in the attitude an artist takes toward his material. It is not enough to hate what is hateful, for one cannot hate hatred away through satire or outrage, which only adds to the sum of hatred already in the world. The artist must love what is lovable, he must name it and glorify it, and his depiction of life in its simple and essential goodness must be the theme that brings forth the power that resides in his love of language and verbal order.

Nothing comes more readily to man than self-deception. The artist in his pride is particularly susceptible to this vice. Yet we all need to dream at night; adult and child alike require a time to play; no one can endure without periodically taking a holiday from reality. Art can provide such play and such "feigning." Through art we can enjoy a respite from our