

BEGGING THE QUESTION

By Michael Ventura

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Young poets are beggars, begging the poem itself to tell them what it means to be a poet. Young painters beg the same of painting; young novelists, sculptors, dancers, actors, photographers beg the same of their forms. "Shut up and write," the poem says back. Every art gives the same implacable answer: "Shut up and do the work." As you get older you realize that Art is a living entity far wiser than you or any artist will ever be; and that the answer you've been given--"Shut up and work"--is exquisite precisely because, if you obey it, it makes you forget the question.

If you can't forget it--which is to say, if your enthrallment with the work doesn't go deep enough--maybe you become an academic, losing yourself in the labyrinth of "What does art mean?" instead of living in the challenge of what art *does*. Specifically, what it does to you, as it fires and racks you, eats and feeds you, demanding to live through your particular experiences and sensibilities. "For poetry isn't, as people imagine, merely feelings ... it is experiences." (Rainer Maria Rilke) Literary critics (or "theorists," as they're called on campus) tend to be people of limited experience whose primary and unadmitted motive is to defend themselves against their inexperience by dotting on "meaning" (or the deconstruction of same). They invent mazes of jargon for unsuspecting students, and for each other, so that one's primary experience of literature becomes the juggling of jargons, a non-activity that keeps mystery at a safe distance. Students would do better to heed the great and brutally under-recognized novelist Hubert Selby Jr. (author of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, among others), who recently said:

"Being an artist doesn't take much, just everything you got. Which means, of course, that as the process is giving you life, it is also bringing you closer to death. But it's no big deal. They are one and the same and cannot be avoided or denied. So when I totally embrace this process, this life/death, and abandon myself to it, I transcend all this gibberish and hang out with the gods. It seems to me that that is worth the price of admission."

A street-elegant way of saying, "Shut up and work," with Selby letting you know just what the ante is in this gamble.

But there are times when you can neither work nor speak. Nights when neither drinking nor praying, nor fucking, will touch the unreachable or make the unspeakable more coherent. When you are begging the question--not any pointless question about art, but the *question*--only to find that the question is begging back, begging you, two beggars with nothing for each other but the necessity that drives you to beg. The terrifying meeting of the question and the questioner. And then one goes either into silence or into the night.

As you get older, you tend to prefer the silence--not because it's better, but because you're better at it. Silence, of course, is a discipline that takes a long time to learn. Sounds so simple: sitting at a window in a darkened room with a cup of tea. And sitting. And sitting--in that other light we call darkness. Or more accurately, as Duke Ellington put it, "where darkness is only a translucency." Until you are no longer the questioner, and there is no longer a question, but you occupy the space between questioner and question, and you become the space--you unite the two without taking

sides with either. It passes for peace, and might well be. And then in a day or two or 10, because of that experience (and stillness can be the most intense of experiences) you find the art rising in you and bursting forth so you can hardly keep up with it. "Inspiration," after all, literally means "breathing in." You have taken a breath, a breath in the dark that may have taken all night to inhale, and now the exhalation comes out as what you call your "work."

When younger, I didn't often have the strength or patience for such silence, which in a way is fortunate, because I would have missed many gifts of the night--like being 20, in the Bronx, in the winter, at the kitchen window which looked out upon the thick blackness of a brick wall some yards across the alley, a wall lit only with the hall light behind me. And it felt like every brick in that wall was about to explode. Couldn't take it. Went out into the night, in a shin-length black winter coat, scarf around my neck, cold, took the subway for the better part of an hour into Lower Manhattan--those nights when everyone on the train seems as desperate as you. On such a night, the poet Hart Crane imagined the head of Edgar Allen Poe swinging from one of those leather straps on the old subway cars, straps you clung to as you stood and swayed to the subway's rocking.

Got off at Brooklyn Bridge. It was snowing now. Thickly. The bridge was my place of last resort, always. Massive, beautiful, it had been written of by Whitman, Crane, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Federico Garcia Lorca, Henry Miller--I knew their words by heart, I felt I could walk with those artists there, they could help me, they were my proof: Others had taken the same journey, and had found themselves and their art within it. It didn't matter that Crane and Mayakovsky ended as suicides, that Lorca had been assassinated by fascists, not even that Whitman had died content, nor that Miller was still alive, finally famous and solvent in his old age after an indigent, obscure, chaotic life; it mattered that they'd found some of themselves and their art where I now walked, across the great bridge in a snowstorm.

"O harp and altar, of the fury fused," Crane had written of the bridge. By "altar" he meant the two great church-like towers from which the bridge literally hung; by "harp" he meant the graceful web of thick cables from which the span was suspended. "And we have seen night lifted in thine arms." The night, and little me. You walk out onto the bridge, the traffic beneath you on the roadway, and hundreds of feet below is the East River, and on the far side, the lights of Brooklyn, and behind you, the skyline of Manhattan. But this night the snow was too thick to see the river below or Brooklyn on the other side. Midway onto the bridge, I could see neither Brooklyn nor Manhattan, nor the river, nor anything but whirling snow lit by the spotlights on the bridge. I was high above everything and alone in all the world, freezing, but with an inner fever. "And so it was I entered the broken world," Crane had written. And: "There is the world dimensional for those untwisted by the love of things irreconcilable"

To have faith is to follow your heart no matter what. But what if you don't know your heart? Or what if you have many hearts? What if you love things that are irreconcilable? And to follow one means you must deny the other, for each requires all or most of you, and you cannot give that in two directions? "I too will spare no words about good things," Mayakovsky wrote on this bridge. It is good to have even a torn heart, if it is truly your heart, and you are not trying to make it an imitation of what you think a heart should be. And on this bridge Lorca warned, "Life is no dream! Beware and beware and beware!" But in the same poem he also warned that iguanas will come "to bite the men who do not dream," and imagined "a landscape of opened eyes." How, how, how do

you follow your heart? The question held out its begging hand to the questioner. And the snow was wonderful. And the city was invisible.

Years later, I would read the Swedish poet Tomas Transtomer: "If at least I could just get them to grasp/that this quivering underneath us/means that we are walking on a bridge" We are walking upon the thing we are. Between the question and the questioner, is one way to put it. And no one can tell anyone how to follow their own heart. Anyone who tries has already lied, by the very attempt. But you can learn how to sit in the center of your silence. Or to go out into the night. Or to shut up and work. "Being an artist doesn't take much, just everything you got."

In the winter in New York, in the wee hours on the subway, the savvy know where the heaters are, built into the structure under the seats, and they sit right over the vents. It warms your freezing feet. Back in the little kitchen, with the window on the alley, a hot cup of coffee and a cigarette in the gray snowy dawn. Mama walks in, in her bathrobe. "You been up all night again, kid?" There were five of us in that one-bedroom apartment, Mama and I working to support my brothers and sister. I'd go to my job without sleep again, but you can do that when you're 20. "Trying to write, eh? Remember what I told you: Words are music."

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