WHY LIVE WITHOUT WRITING

Questions are remarks. —Wallace Stevens

There are three questions that a poet is always asked once he's become reasonably well established, that is, isn't forever required to spell his name, and his CV is reduced to two or three worn phrases. Never mind the fact that these phrases come out of the platitudinous files of some press department. What matters is that he showed sufficient stamina in the pursuit of his solitary discipline, which might suggest pole-vaulting and dashing sprints, but probably has most in common with the monotony of the marathon runner. Whichever, one day finds him standing under the open sky with a few curiosity seekers in front of him. The air is thick with old ideas, fantasies about the poet's life unchanged since Homer's day. I'll bet you anything: they come out in the form of the same three questions. At the end of the reading, there's not even any hesitation or throat-clearing. It's as if the questions were always there, a kind of diffuse curiosity, a residue of admiration tinged with skepticism and a little bumptiousness.

"Can you really live off it?" is the first of them. It's always the one to start the dance, and it seems to be the one that's of greatest interest in a society governed by getting and spending. Money sets standards and settles issues. It's money that measures the worth of each individual, whoever or whatever

he or she may be: a pole dancer at a nightclub, an auto mechanic, a seasonal laborer in the asparagus field, a military spy hollowing out an enemy dictatorship, or—out of whatever frivolity of youth or deformation of personality—a poet. *Can you live off it?* It's the quest for a common denominator, the slightly sneering imputation of a low motive that even the poet-fantasist daren't go too far away from without risking a stumble. Whoever holds forth unpaid is like someone preaching on one leg: he won't be doing it for long. The question is a conscious and malicious comment on that flamingo or ostrich position. *Live off it* is a way of saying these fruitless verbal stunts, prestidigitations, aptitudes must surely lack in market value what they claim to have in terms of significance. To sensitive poets' ears it will sound like a threat, a tactless reminder of a bad habit, a warning against something that will surely end up as parasitism, in the warm bath of a state-endowed hostel.

Usually the matter is quickly resolved by a reference to the fee for the just-over reading (which the poet will certainly declare to the tax authorities). The fact that such an obvious connection doesn't occur to most people is due to the public subvention of literature. It is rare for people to have to pay for the privilege of hearing their bird of paradise (and asking him such and other questions). Few would stump up, if required. Free admission to the bard is considered a right. The same art lover who would pay hundreds of dollars for a seat in the stalls to hear some pampered tenor makes the silent assumption that the recessive librettist, the wordsmith with the light voice and the fluttering gestures, if he insists for some reason on appearing in person, will do it for free. The question about earning a living is half accusation, half condescension, because the party questioned inevitably strikes them as a poor fellow on day release from his cell in solitary, sitting there quietly reading out his difficult messages, a little nervous, as though

there were armed guards on either side of him, rarely straightforward. His material is as encoded as the secret messages passed from hand to hand in prison, those crumpled scraps of paper that look as though their conveyor had smuggled them in under his tongue. The spittle that issues from the reader's mouth is a grim little echo of those sticky scraps—but not as much as the poems themselves, these minimal jerky missives, these coded appeals in a secret language. Do I have to accept this and pass it on? the skeptical listener asks himself. What's it for? First I want to know if it's even possible to live off these messages from longtime solitary confinement. Basil Bunting, angry English member of the circle of the equally angry Ezra Pound, offers a portrait of the skeptic in his poem-monologue "What the Chairman Told Tom."

Poetry? It's a hobby.
I run model trains.
Mr. Shaw there breeds pigeons.

It's not work. You don't sweat.
Nobody pays for it.
You *could* advertise soap.

Art, that's opera; or repertory—
The Desert Song.
Nancy was in the chorus.

But to ask for twelve pounds a week—
married, aren't you?—
You've got a nerve.

How could I look a bus conductor
in the face
if I paid you twelve pounds?

Who says it's poetry, anyhow?
My ten year old
can do it *and* rhyme.

I get three thousand and expenses,
a car, vouchers,
but I'm an accountant.

They do what I tell them,
my company.
What do *you* do?

Nasty little words, nasty long words,
it's unhealthy.
I want to wash when I meet a poet.

They're Reds, addicts,
all delinquents.
What you write is rot.

Mr. Hines says so, and he's a schoolteacher,
he ought to know.
Go and find *work*.

If you think this scene from 1965 is a little dated—though I wouldn't know why—then you only have to substitute the many prejudices that lurk inside you about so-called modern poetry: incomprehensible, hermetic, elitist, socially redundant, indulgent, cerebral, and so on. And contrast that with the refreshingly blunt tone of the chairman in Bunting's poem, which, strangely enough, comes out of a collection called *Odes*. The poet himself evidently thought it sufficiently expressive to be included in one of his rare bibliophile editions, flanked by arid, dense nature poems, bone-dry histories of the

rim of Europe. It seems to be a problem of poetry, before all formal questions: its right to appear at all before the serious world of work. A profession is the spine of life, says Nietzsche. By that token, a poet would be an endangered species, condemned to live without a spine. Maybe that's why he so often has recourse to alibis. When questioned, he refers to his other occupations. He talks about his day job as editor and translator, mutters something about articles in prominent weeklies, deflects attention to his work in prose and his production of reviews, which in his own eyes, too, brings him closer to the generality. He wants to show that he is concerned with principles, with his own speculative contribution to what contemporary philosophy calls "the logic of the senses." He, too, is concerned with a methodology of contemplation (and not just sunsets and stamens). He promises that he is about more than merely chance self-expression, that he is exploring the basics. Casually he brings in his Ariel-like agility, his Hermes-deft understanding of the sciences. If he's going well, he alludes to the unique possibilities inherent in his eccentric situation. Then, having politely stepped aside, he brings in the poet in general, the finely honed senses this species has had for pioneer work in many fields, long before psycholinguistics or art philosophy occupied their own terrain, and long since, too. Because it's still not settled, he says, finally, who is taking advantage of whom. Phenomenology and dialectical thought, journalism and advertising, the mushrooming proliferation of writing up to and including the very latest self-help manual, they have all nibbled on the oatcakes of poetry. They have received a gift that came to its creators, if they're going to be honest about it, as a gift in turn—a gift, according to the ancient Greeks, from the Muses. And so he asks, with for once barely a trace of irony, that all questions of duty and ownership be set aside. A little calmer now, he goes on to talk about the privilege conferred by writing—the privilege of using his

gift of observation and his verbal finesse to make explicit statements on being human, to make notes on the real world and translate it, at one and the same time, into metaphysics. Perhaps it will even occur to him to portray writing as a specific form of understanding, or, following an original notion of Novalis, as "progressive anthropology." Once in train, he will insist that poetry is the most paradoxical and complex form of contemplation, and thereby the most valuable contribution to a natural history of thinking and sensation. If he finally succeeds in elevating this to a proof of existence, exalted over every bank statement and of almost inestimable cultural value, then, more exhausted than convinced, they may finally leave him alone. But right away, bet you anything you like, will come the second question, the starting signal for an expedition into the biographical hinterland. "How long have you been writing for?"

This question seems to be more straightforward. It would be enough to name some date or other, having recourse to some childish lisping-in-rhyme, some fairy-tale scene after which you were never the same. Or, following Proust, the recollection of that first sleepless night, when, instead of going over your notes on photosynthesis once more for the biology test in the morning, you started to tiptoe away from the present by starting to hammer out sonnets, for one whole week, till you got to fifty. Or you refer to some early trauma, running away from your family into a shrubbery that could be bent under only a line at a time, the triumphal arrival in the clearing you could reach only by writing, with the divining rod of words, and how you first came upon the Other, that Other you finally turned into, the more you became engrossed by this lonely game.

At first it sounds more innocent, this question of *when*, but it's not without its subtext either. It's generally brought forward more shyly, by people who do a bit of scribbling them-

selves in their time off, or who have set up reading groups to speculate about the intentions of their favorite mages. These good people have some sense of how to proceed. When they've determined one day where writing comes from; how it became an obsession; what part was down to heredity, artistic education, regional culture, or personal handicaps; how helpful or unhelpful were family conflicts, early reading tastes, and greater or lesser deviations from the standard educational program—when they've finally cracked the mystery by indiscretion and no little statistical hocus-pocus, they'll proudly inform us. Feeling themselves to be like-minded or allies, they begin by politely but firmly inviting themselves around. The particular focus of their curiosity is childhood, its many unlit niches and attics, where *animula*, that little soul-butterfly, slipped from its larva and one day took to the air. In other words, what they'd ideally like is a spy hole into the past for them to peek through into the intimate setting where such transformations took place. And this is where their interest coincides with that of the author. Because he, too, wouldn't mind knowing how it all began—even if only to be able to tell his grandchildren about it. He, too, would benefit from a modern espionage technique that could show him some live footage of the dawn of his own consciousness. But unaided, all he can do is project generally unfocused and in other ways untrustworthy images from his memory.

For instance, the warm cave of bed, where he would read Jules Verne and James Fenimore Cooper by torchlight deep into the night, to be ambushed not by the Hurons, but by his father, whispering "Lights out!" and pulling away the pillow. Or his unusual habit, when he spent his summers at his grandmother's, of prowling through the apartment, done up to the nines, chanting, armed with the little daggerlike knife sharpener from the top drawer of the kitchen cabinet, imitating the pose he had seen in the illustrated Shakespeare edition,

modeled on the sinister figure of Prince Hamlet. Or the secret vow, given after reading *Buddenbrooks* in school, which Thomas Mann wrote at twenty-four: By the time you get to be that old, you have to have done something as good . . . and what remained of that was the secret force of the word *vow*, to this day. No, all that won't do to furnish a proper medical file with a nailed-down, certifiable anamnesis. The status of this clear and well-upholstered prehistory is fiction.

It appears that the opening chapter of any bildungsroman is bound to be underlit, as if any artist had no option but to situate his self-portrait among baby talk, nursery rhymes, and, in Joycean manner, Dante and moocow. Because the *when* only incites to a hectic search for original actions, and behind every origin is another origin, every first cause masks another. "Don't trust any of the anecdotes about beginnings" is really the only good advice. What looks like the first time is actually déjà vu, a gala premiere after a long rehearsal period, some scene that memory has gotten expert at lighting. It can't help reminding you of the museum-ready installations in writers' houses, the rococo desk parked in front of the window—everything, of course, the way it was, the site of inspiration exactly as the master left it, still warm, papers untidy and inkwell open.

Really, the only good thing about the question is its undertone of yearning. The phenomenon it shyly inquires after is obviously much bigger than anything that can be said about it. In their heart of hearts, both participants know that it's not much good waving a questionnaire at the mystery of creativity. Because you will never catch the first murmured aside in flagrante, any later attempt can be nothing but a well-intentioned but ultimately vague reconstruction. Of course you can follow Proust and take the road of greater and greater refinement, sifting recollections into voluntary and involuntary and admitting only those that sidle into the photo album

unbidden. In this way, you will at least gain access to a kind of backstage, the place where the ur-images slumber in children's books, the characters evoked by the deft pencil, the ever-palpable ordinary objects. If you're canny about it, you can mingle with them again, place your body in their midst as once before. Maybe you can even find your way back into Act I, Scene 1, the original scene in the golden spring light, or at least resurrect one of those richly circumstantial moments, when you sat like St. Jerome in his cell, not with holy books, but at least a Roget's to hand among a slew of papers, and by the door instead of the sleeping lion the new bicycle, never so neglected as now, on this October day. Because the first time you were entirely oblivious to yourself, not in the wild harum-scarum way of sport and running, but in that quiet, cut-off way, fixed on something in the remote distance, recalled with a jolt only by a look at the clock.

But who could say if that was it, the moment that reflective understanding awoke, the immemorial and essential astonishment that is the precondition for all further writing? Just as you can't localize poetry in the brain—as the neurologists have long conceded—you can't date and trace its arrival in the life of an individual. The subsequent aim of the enterprise may be all about specification, the mot juste, precision of expression, objectivization, and so on—but place and time and the motives that launched it on its way will always stay in the dark. All that can be said is that the one thus questioned one day became poem-obsessed and that he has since then been avid for words; just as other individuals with deft hands may become craftsmen, or those with some sixth sense develop a feel for stock market movements or political developments. One day, something happened that would later awaken in him the desire for still more absurd retrospectives. After all, the question *when* violates a taboo, shooing the poet back into the early pastures of childhood, into the empire of

grown-ups, or giants even, where he spent so long as an embarrassing dwarf. If it happened to him later that, Gulliver-like, he was confused by size and sometimes felt himself too big, more often too small, then that had presumably to do with distorted perception resulting from being an author. At any rate, such metamorphoses and reversals came with the territory for him.

All these themes—self-isolation, split identity, forms of memory—are just the chapter headings from the one book that every one of us, not just poets, is writing all his life, and not always with belletristic ambition. In the whole of world literature, only one person to date has succeeded in transforming this project into one luminous whole, that is, in making a paper cutout of his own life so crisp that it can be held up against the light. Once again I refer to Marcel Proust, the sublime researcher into matters mnemonic, who has supplied the most conscientious answer to the question *when first.* His lavish self-portrait in the form of a phenomenological study eventually came to seven volumes of minutely descriptive prose. As someone who generally confines himself to poems, I of course don't have so much space. But, above all, the time for such a venture seems to be differently allotted in each individual life.

For myself, at the moment, there is only a line-by-line groping, the snipping of various phases of life into skinny little strips with plenty of space between them, the chronological leaps bedded among the peaks and troughs of various meters. All I have for now, by way of the guerrilla tactic of a poorly armed memory, is avoidance, the jump from poem to poem. Here and there a swift raid, and then back into the woods, the protective jungle hideouts. *Zeit schinden*—"playing for time"—you call it in German, the language I cohabitate with in a monogamous relationship, the occasional extramarital affair notwithstanding, and whose intrinsic intelligence

takes me on the most beautiful odysseys. To German I owe my most important insights and a few true moments of happiness.

What comes about in this way is at best a novel in fragmentary form. Something with the quality of a sketch. Then again, sketches have made panoramic paintings, given time. Each individual poem seems just to be a running-up; it starts over and over, only to withdraw quickly. It seems modest, fugitive, as though under a curse, as if blocked from the get-go by its tendency to end as a mere gesture, when it began with an aspiration to inclusiveness. But then, one day, you might ask yourself whether it's not the other way around, whether the poem isn't a product of extreme concentration, either on a sequence of images or movements, or a subtly articulated argument, or the pivotal scene of a period of life. Then its main drive would be semantic reduction. A few clusters of words express what the lavish epic draws out over hundreds of pages. Or to put it another way: Couldn't it be that poems, as long as they are alert and open to impressions, are novels by other means—and therefore do sterling service to readers short of time and hungry for intensity? What they have to offer are lessons in accelerated consciousness, machete slashes through a tangled world. For aficionados of the concentrated and powerful, they are distilled experience, abbreviations of existence, shocks and pronouncements in droplet form. It's not really surprising that people are curious to know where such a thing springs from and when it first makes its appearance in someone's life. In the end, the party asked, even if he has stamina and will continue to make his inquiries himself, will have to pass. Perhaps, as the lawyers say, he will agree to a settlement, in poetic form, of course. Then he will take the role of self-scrutineer as far as it can be taken and describe his first year. Perhaps a little like this:

(*In a different key*. "Sealed in air and summer / The blade

of grass in the ice-block outside the refrigerator plant, / I looked around, very early, too early, / With eyes that would have frightened any mother. / *And I saw more than was good for me* . . . / My little joints made the sweetest music. / Really, I wasn't asleep, I was just pretending, / In the role of a child (played by a child). / Through the seedy meadow ran a yellow peril / trailing after butterflies and dandelions. / Close to the ground and without memory / thus passed my first year, / somewhere yonder.")

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But the trickiest question is always the third one. It comes out only when the others have been shot off and hope sinks that there is any common ground of understanding instead of the deeps and trenches of idiosyncrasy. There's a hush as it is asked. It's a typical child's question. There are various permutations, but basically it goes like this: "*Why* do you write?"

As you can tell, the questioner has just taken a step back. He's been thinking about what it would be like to spend the livelong day sifting words. He can imagine it a little, from writing letters, maybe from learning French or Spanish at school. He is reminded of interminable lessons, blank expressions over blank sheets of paper, and the whole thing to him resembles something like an English essay for life—literally, a life sentence. The focus of his pity is the duress, the component of torture, he doesn't think of it as an adventure, sweet uncertainty, the atmosphere of sub-rosa assignations. He doesn't have a clue about the little discharges produced by rubbing electrostatic words together, the silent bliss caused by the imagination becoming so physical that it produces a tingle across the scalp, like a cranial massage.

Like all consumers, his view is rather one-eyed, either dominated by the question of effort (which strikes him as immense and incommensurate) or else by the question of out-

come, which seems disproportionate to such an effort, a sprinkling of letters plodding around the arid desert of the alphabet, a hermit protocol concretized in a couple of printed pages of doubtful utility. In the worst case, he will be dismayed by the renunciation of a life of large, visible projects, a life, as he would see it, out in the open, wild and professional—rather like his own.

What he completely fails to see are the joys of production, the sheer pleasure of this strange alchemical process, for which there are only few, scattered recipes and that at heart is as old as anything in the world, including the sharpening of flint arrowheads, tattooing, and baking clay. If it can be said to be a process at all. Because, as all the insiders will tell you, the thing can't really be described as a craft, however physical and preindustrial that may sound. Perhaps because we are dealing with something that's not just preindustrial, but precraft. Poetry, inasmuch as it is still in touch with its origins—the senses and the voice—somehow eludes history, it antedates all known structures of history and economy. It was present in the corner of the Stone Age huntsman's cave, just as it is there now in the cafeteria of a factory that makes jet planes. In both cases, it is unobtrusively and consolingly there between people in its shy but natural way, claiming no attention. You could rest from the effort of the chase, or momentarily forget about blueprints and lead times, because it was in the air, or, as they say, free to air—either as the monotonous chant of the eccentric cripple lying on the mammoth skin in the corner, or as the droning chant of the latest hip-hop bard featured on the morning show. What I'm getting at is that its sheer being there lifts it out of the category of craft. In fact, this very being there, unobtrusively omnipresent in music and commercials, folk song and requiem, indicates that it needs to be legitimized by the other professions and crafts in the first place. Sometimes I think that the poets were the first to have to

make their way through adversarial thinking and professional palaver, bickering in home and cave, in the office and on the factory floor. At least they had no choice but to listen to it closely, to collect everything heard and seen and then process it before it disappeared in the general confusion of voices, the chaos of—literally—the daily grind.

Which means that on the one hand poetry has always depended on there being a well-ordered society with a division of labor, ready to finance its festive bards, and on the other that in the interests of proper and concentrated recording, it has always had a tendency to stay off to the side somewhere. The latter has led to the insoluble paradox that it flourished in splendid isolation, cannily insisting on neutrality and right of refusal, while at the same time being always at the heart of things, in the middle of the banging and the slaughtering, there where the destruction of the temple was discussed, or the construction of the Trojan horse. Rather than chip in with advice, it has played the part of the observer, who would finally convert his collected silence into the one and only commentary that survived the wreckage, some unforgettable line of song, some key scene of an epic or heartbreaking elegy.

And so it can leave the question *why* unanswered and relax. Only a society despairing of its own destiny, devoid of any desires beyond economic reproduction, could allow itself to cast in doubt the so-called difficult art of poetry. I don't think much of a state that keeps badgering you for self-justification—whether intended as provocation, the final shred of theological doubt, or simply a request for practical advice. Of course, loss of a potential workforce, disorientation during purposeless time off, and the reduction of entire classes of the population into masses of passive spectators are all alarming prospects. Plato's poetic cleansing was an early indication of the way the wind was blowing. His plan to ban-

ish from his state those useless poets who did nothing but fiddle with pictures, and reach into the pleats of their togas for metaphors and phantasms, was not just an idle suggestion. So: What would have happened to them after their relocation to their Hyperborean island? They would have starved to death, for sure, and no one would have prevented it. Wrapped up in themselves, they would have done what they best liked to do anyway: bid farewell to the world in all its variety. The toughest would have lasted longest, iron sublimators of their destiny, reviling one another and recasting the chattering of their teeth into iambs and trochees. Perhaps some would have been turned by their dereliction into monotheists like the future Christians. Their tale about the extinction of their species, lamented between bouts of narcissism and cannibalism in artful psalms, would have continued to drift around the seas for a while, a message in a bottle. After a few decades, a young Apollonian bully on one of the coasts, a trained decathlete and arithmetician, would have fished it out and, after a swift nauseated reading, destroyed it before his eloquent and athletic comrades could denounce him in the gym for spreading unhygienic writings . . .

Society, at any rate, would have survived it, just as it has from time to time de facto survived the loss of its unbidden guests, the poets: either totalitarian-style, by formally condemning and liquidating those elements it deems noxious; or democratically, as a result of an exeunt through what it generously refers to as *Freitod*—"death by one's own hand" (read: suicide). In the twentieth century, the price for these losses was in either case the spiritual darkness of collectives, here the retreat into the shot-up ivory bunker, there the mass departure for self-destruction. Hardly a century has gotten through as many good poets as the twentieth. The conciliatory, if not exactly comforting thing about the question *why* is that, after all, it's just about a phantom pain. Such a question

can come only from someone who has lost something, even if he doesn't know exactly what it was. So back, quickly back to the euphoria that awaits the writer. On some days, the pleasure is such that every poet flinches a little at the sound of the word *work*. And the *why* wants to know about that, too. Because *work*—a job—as defined in the dictionary isn't something that you would publicly put into question like that. Not even prostitution, beset by at least as many taboos and half-truths, ever needed to furnish answers as to its whys and wherefores, and the fact that it was a job was never denied, not even by those who would like to outlaw it as a form of exploitation. No one was ever stuck for a justification for this occupation. You just called it the oldest profession and pulled rank. At the same time, you forgot that poetry, satisfying similarly inexhaustible appetites, was surely at least as old. If not older still.

No other occupation seems as fraught with doubt. Anyone brave enough to risk his bourgeois contentment at an early age will spend the rest of his life wondering if it was worth it. His social acceptance will depend entirely on his growing influence—or his talent, in layman's terms. It's not enough if he assures you he's getting by; no, he has to convince you that he's fulfilling some universally explainable purpose.

That involves fighting on several fronts. The *why* will strike the poet as a hydra-headed monster; as soon as he deals with one head, another pushes up. Why, oh why? The question splits into loads of subordinate questions: Why do you write when no one can tell me what the point is? Why do you have to do something so dubious? Why are you so difficult that hardly anyone can understand you? Why do you stand there so calmly, presiding over all your neuroses? The one question stands in for a tangle of other questions. And why not, since there's no one more available for such public introspection than the poet.

Not that the poet, in his life, bothers himself with this most infantile of questions for long. He inevitably disregards it, begins, forgets about the future and growing up, and—if he's lucky, anyway—remains a child at play for the rest of his life. Is it the repression of this big question that allows him never completely to lose access to childhood and to such qualities as playfulness, love of home, curiosity about the world, hunger for myths and stories? In the end, you're always left with the individual's psyche, locked in its embrace with the sweet idiom of the tribe. That's what condemns poets to these embarrassing questions. People look to them to pull answers out of their hats, answers that are more digestible than those of the philosophers, more entertaining than those of the priests, and—with luck—more comforting than those of those cynics, the doctors. Complicity with the latter, a bad habit of poetry in the twentieth century, only few are able to take. Poets shouldn't always be playing devil's advocate. Their insistence on physiology, on blunt physical realism and drastic disillusion, must be a disappointment to those who prefer to see them still in the role of landscape gardeners.

Not that poets are altogether unprepared for all these demanding questions. Since Kafka's story "A Country Doctor," they are the ones to have been put to bed with the patient, right up against the gaping wound. But never mind what they do and what they write when they're there, nothing is self-evident. Very little makes sense, reconciles or heals, and only in the rarest cases does it help people through their tangled day-to-day life, which thanks to progress and *Civilization and Its Discontents* has become quite a cozy little labyrinth.

Later, they might look up from their notes, and their eyes mist over at the sound of a word like *futility*. In its polysyllabic lightness it somehow evokes the Sirens' song, the trill of frustrated mermaids. But to whom have they not sung in some hour of weakness? As is well known, poets are people who

regularly get to hear their preorgasmic groaning simply on account of the work they do. Over time, they have learned to develop all kinds of defensive techniques against such tempting distractions. And that's how they want to help the rest of humankind. Odysseus, tied to the mast by his crew, open-eared to these deadly sweet sounds, is certainly a better model than poor Marsyas, who loses his skin in the flute-playing contest with big-headed Apollo. The only worse role model, no sort of exemplar, is Orpheus, who in the Greek version is the founding father of poetry. According to one variant of the story, women tore him limb from limb because he paid them insufficient attention. They nailed his severed head to his lyre, and threw it into the Thracian Sea, where it continued to drift about for a while, singing to itself. The other version has it that as punishment for his contempt for agriculture he was ploughed under by some peasants. Either way, he ends up in pieces. There's not much to choose between the two stories, they share one moral: the price of alienation, self-absorption, disregard for sex and property is a martyr's death in the service of the Muses.

Probably that's why poets have become more self-critical and more modest of late. They are back in the real world, no longer treading astral paths. More skeptical than most rocket scientists, they look about their immediate vicinity, registering the tiniest quiver of a needle, the puff of quartz dust on their instruments. Still with that fresh, animal gaze—albeit as the natives of language—they escort each new flight and describe things the experts miss. Their task is no longer metaphysics and contemplation of the Pleiades. Even if love and death remain their preeminent assignments (because who else is there who would accept them?), their radius in the last few centuries has steadily expanded. No philosophical, geopolitical, or moral problem has escaped their sensitive soundings. There is no crisis zone on the globe or in the mind

where you don't run into poets, no dirty work for which they consider themselves too fine or too romantic.

But by the same token, they will no longer stand for all the reproaches that are leveled against them. Someone who is spared nothing in what he does, who has no protection and no aesthetic privilege, such a person will at least lay claim to his constitutionally guaranteed space, as part of a properly constituted minority. So one shouldn't be surprised if these incessantly questioned parties start shooting a few questions back. Trained in self-doubt as they are, they know where the adversary's weak spots are. It takes them a while to launch into a counterquestion, but then they do it enthusiastically, and, as we will see, quite unscrupulously.

The representative question is the *why*. If you approach the matter unsentimentally enough, a meditation on the subject will surprise you. I don't want to frighten you, but have you thought about what happens to people who aren't artists? E. E. Cummings once gave a particularly blunt answer. His barrack-room tone was probably in imitation of some raw recruit. In the introduction to his novel *The Enormous Room*, he comes up to the reader with a pally "Don't be afraid" and gets a merry little dialogue going. In the course of it, the encouraged reader lets the fearless author talk him into the question: "What do you think happens to people who aren't artists? What do you think people who aren't artists become?"—only to be triumphantly shot back at by the author: "I feel they don't become: I feel nothing happens to them; I feel negation becomes of them." After that triple salvo—according to the author anyway—the reader has no more questions. At best, it's a whispered echo of the poet's final threat: "Negation?"

Well, one could probably be gentler about it. Delicate sensibilities may be hurt by a poet, of all people, arguing so ruthlessly and self-righteously. But why should he spare you a

peek into his own box of prejudices, when he is compelled on a daily basis to inspect those of others? Moreover, everything with Cummings has to do with this one, ambivalent concept, *negation*, which signifies both the process of negating and its effect, the result of disappearance, namely: nothing. And it is precisely this annulling, this deletion, this causing to disappear that is at issue. Are those nonartists, always terribly busy but finally disappearing without a trace, are they not the ones who are condemned to negate everything that doesn't press itself on them in the form of reality? They are the ones who have no possibility of returning, who spend their lives in the service of their own removal, all for the sake of banality and materialism.

Anyway, they don't contribute much to spiritual variety. If it were up to them, there would only be the world as is, which means rough and ready, drearily underexposed, a place of torment and tedium, a global Golgotha without witnesses—and not because they are entirely devoid of imagination and playfulness themselves so much as because all their activities are essentially negative, a sopping-up of resources, a clearing-away of what existed previously, a destruction of terrestrial substance without a chance of any revision, let alone irregularity. In truth, it is they who are holding negation, the philosophers' rattly old machine gun, in their hands, and it is they, not the bearded wise men of stoa and academy, who have most frequent recourse to it. They don't have to be ill-intentioned, it's enough that they continue to do what nonartists do when they are bored. Which means behaving like normal consumers of the universe, always busy, always on their treadmill, a.k.a. "the real world," or "common sense," or "business as usual."

Oh, that's just resentment speaking . . . In fact, artists and nonartists have a wonderful symbiosis. Each side profits from the weakness of the other and receives its legitimization from it; see above. Only, one side seems always to have known why

as a minority it always had a modicum of modesty, while the other was able to ignore it in its nihilistic philistinism. The wonderful thing about this little argument is the way it sharpens the issue of *why*. Instead of proclamations as to the function and purpose of their respective activities, it's an argument about who, bluntly speaking, is responsible for more of the overall pointlessness. Probably that's why the exchange is so satisfactory. Be warned: most artists, frustrated or otherwise, approve of this sort of thing.

Better watch out: artists are people who, unless they're feeling particularly hypocritical and ingratiating, would laugh to scorn the claim that there's an artist in everyone. Whether they appear in the guise of cool diplomats or cult figures or shabby drunkards, none of them is without that shred of vanity. Of course they are going to assume that someone without the lofty inner life suggested by art and poetry is to be pitied. Sooner or later he is bound to break up into aspects that may be connected to him as a legal entity, but that won't have the least thing to do with his inner world. They shudder at the notion that one day he will realize that none of this was him, and in all of it was hardly any of his. Then it's usually too late, and the person will dimly sense that for the whole of a selfless life he has been working in the cause of negation.

Writers are rarely as hard-boiled as they pretend to be. What drives them is their fear of the void everywhere. Hence the question that bespeaks dread rather than confidence, the long-repressed counterquestion that it will occur only to impertinent individuals, favored by some daemon or other, to ask. After two decades of habit, and barely a day without sarcastic self-communing, it goes: "Why live without writing?"

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Living without writing means, first and foremost, not having an exorbitant paper habit. At least in that point, the blameless

abstainer can look to be let off by the environment. But it also means, sadly, the wasting of one's only chance to break out of intellectual solitary confinement and become a little more communicative, more human—not just with the twenty-five relatives and friends with whom the average life furnishes you, but with all those who could really one day listen to you, tomorrow's unknown readers. I write for a reader who is as yet unborn. That sentence, misquoted from memory, can only have come from a manic writer. It's the sort of proclamation that shakes you, that sends a little shock through the naturally idle body. Because from the very outset it's the body that jealously keeps watch over writing and extorts ever new concessions from it. So, why write?

In the first place, I would say, you write to escape your dread of the sheer present. You fill page after page, as Nietzsche once put it with angry yearning, not to cozy up to your nearest, but out of love of those farthest away from you, and because the contemporary and the day-to-day will be all the more precious to you when you return to them in a wide arc over unknown terrain. Hence many people's habit of getting drunk in company: at close quarters only a maximum of inner distance can create moments of ease and relaxation. Hence the silent conversations everyone has with themselves, or locking yourself up in the bathroom to read undisturbed, or the distancing look in the mirror as soon as you know you're unobserved. Hence, too, the recurring need of lovers to go to the cinema and stare together at the magic screen, which for a precious hour and a half will make them forget their bodies. In writing, it is one's innermost being that tries to assert itself, paradoxically, by self-exposure. But publicity, as will soon become apparent, is nothing but a particularly tough protective shield.

And the second reason is a dilemma that concerns each individual psyche. You write, I believe, because you can't

quite shake the suspicion that as a mere contemporary and biological cell mate, hopelessly trammeled up in your own limited lifespan, you would always remain incomplete, half a man, so to speak. Someone must have put you onto the idea that only your most individual expression gives you the least chance of one day being seen in any way other than in your mortal sheath—say, as a kind of ghost. Ever since that tormenting voice (whoever it may be) first challenged you in the name of metaphysics, you've been trying by all the laws of glassblowing, a.k.a. poetry, to fix a little window in your own diminishing time, in the hope that tomorrow or whenever you may be seen through that little peephole. If you happen to succeed in making your sweetheart, or one or two of your friends, or yourself in your peculiarity visible—the way Vermeer, say, showed his pregnant letter reader—then it will have been worth the effort. Writing, the voice whispers to you, is the least circumstantial method of breaking out of the given and the immediate. Its only requirement is a mastery of the alphabet, which, thanks to universal education, may generally be relied on, at least hereabouts. You don't have to be able to draw or set down notes like Bach, and yet, once you've passed your spelling exam, you've mastered the only method by which consciousness can be recorded.

From which it follows, third and last: you write because the brain is an endless wilderness, whose roughest terrain can be traveled only with a pencil. As soon as we are in the innermost dreamy connections, all other art forms are dependent on verbal synthesis. The dream, as you discover when you write, is the fully authentic self. You will never have amounted to more. The world will not appear any more variegated. Which means the notion of what really exists can, with writing, be comfortably extended by a dimension or two.

Let me conclude this flight with an anecdote. I suspect it may be one of those grisly parables by means of which Oriental wisdom likes to offer instruction, often to the dismay of the Westerner. In it, all the issues we have treated thus far are settled, so to speak, by a stroke of the pen. The setting and atmosphere are familiar from Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, where the grisliness also has a strangely mild quality about it. In his diaries, Hugo von Hofmannsthal brings up the story of a German officer in China who, following the Boxer Rebellion, participated in a penal expedition:

> The officer sees a line of men sentenced to death, standing in a field. With his sword the executioner goes from man to man. There is no need for his assistants to tie or even to hold down any of them; as soon as it's the next man's turn, he stands there with feet apart, his hands gripping his knees, his neck stretched out, offering it to the blade. One of the last in line, still some way from coming due, is completely immersed in a book. The officer rides up to him and asks: "What's that you're reading?" The man looks up, asks back: "Why are you bothering me?" The officer asks: "How can you read *now*?" The man says: "I know that every line I read is something gained." The officer rides to the general who has ordered the execution, and begs him for the man's life for so long that he gets him off, rides back with the written acquittal, shows it to the officer in charge, and is allowed to go and take the man out of line. Tells him: "You've been acquitted, you're free to go." The man shuts his book, looks the officer in the eye, and says: "You have done a good thing. Your soul will have profited greatly from this hour"—and he nods to him, and sets off across the field.

IN THE NAME OF EXTREMES

On the brevity of life

1

Wrists slashed, thighs and knee-backs streaming with blood, stomach pumped full of poison, choking to death in agony in a steam bath—this was the man who had once written, "We live only a small part of life. The rest of a lifetime is not life, only time." Upon my soul—or *by Jupiter*, as the saying was in those days—little remained to him of that precious life as it played out in the end. An existence free of worry, sanguine and tranquil—he could hardly have been further removed from his ideal than in the hour of death. Considering the core problem of his philosophy, one would have to say that he failed from start to finish. Shameful enough that it wasn't he himself, a free Roman citizen, a widely respected celebrity, who after careful consideration and under his own direction had determined the hour of his death, but rather, of all people, Nero, his own undisciplined disciple. There can be little doubt that as an educator he had failed quite miserably. And now this squalid impatience, this frenzy, with which one sought to get rid of him. In fear and trembling we register here the decadent prurience with which an insane student tests the intrepidity of his old teacher. It was as if he had explicitly sought to humiliate him, the deceived pedagogue, for all his ostentatious Stoicism. Shattered was the mirror he had held up to the future emperor in his treatise *On Clemency*, and in vain his appeal: ". . . to show you to yourself as a human

being who shall become the greatest joy for all human beings."

Without question, he had thoroughly miscalculated. He had stuck his neck out a bit too far with his contempt for his industrious fellow humans and their antlike bustle. Had he not condemned the entire Roman society, lock, stock, and barrel? No trace of *otium*—the magic word he was pleased to hold up against the busy ones, the *occupati*. No sooner uttered than there it stood, as if chiseled in stone: the purest inner peace, free from politics and profit-hunting, a life of leisure in the country. And he had uttered it often and with relish. His letters to friends, numbering in the hundreds, are full of it—letters that in point of fact are really treatises: on equanimity, the good life, leisure, the steadfastness of the wise man. Hardly a speech in which it doesn't slide into place as the rhetorical keystone, as predictably as the "Amen" of these miserable Christians. *Otium*: how seductive its evocation of a restful retreat from civil service, far from Rome, the infernal city. A word that signaled the all clear for breathing deeply and closing one's eyes, that called forth the memory of those long, unperturbed afternoons in the shadow of one's private olive grove, those hours, viscous and golden as honey, in which one admitted to oneself, dozing over the pages of Theophrastus: Slowly, my friend, you're growing old. It was so marvelously easy to dream there of odes and epodes, of desultory leafing through poetry anthologies. It conjured up that mood, elegiac and excessive, in which one filed away contentedly at one's own epitaph and lost track of time. And yet, strange: *otium*, if listened to a while longer, didn't it begin to sound a bit like the creed of these same fanatics? Perhaps it was precisely here that compassion for their powerlessness caught up with him. Now, though he was himself wholly at the mercy of their chief persecutor, it can hardly have been more than an echo of that outlawed religion's creed. Yet there must have been a

ringing in his ears as the idea came to him there on his estate outside Rome. It was the password he himself had one day forgotten. Everything that had moved him as a philosopher his whole life long was contained in its three rising and falling syllables. Now that the end was approaching, there appeared another triad of sound in its place, something like *vanitas*. The entire peregrination, then, boiled down to the simple theme of every third-rate poetic ditty. *Otium, vanitas* . . . back and forth in his humming skull the siren song's pendulum swung. There, in his consciousness, now slowly disappearing, sinking into all-encompassing night with the final breath, it mocked on and on: *vanitas, otium* . . . *otium, vanitas*.

2

But let's not forget: the dying man about whom we're speaking had a precise conception of the meaning of life. The central thought of his philosophy: human existence has been worthwhile only if as much of it as possible has been dedicated to reading books. Our lifetime, whether brief or long, can be quantitatively stretched and qualitatively intensified only if it serves the quest for knowledge. Only he who holds himself rigorously aloof from the rat race has lived in self-determination. No compromises: happiness was to be found only in the private sphere, far from the treadmill existence of the majority. What follows then, without ifs, ands, or buts, is the paradox of an ethics that sees the ultimate good in the greatest possible remove from other human beings. A standard of behavior that, first of all, was radically egoistic, and second, amounted to flight from the world. Its first commandment was distance from the public sphere, abstinence in the face of every society. The rule of thumb, after a motto of Epicurus, went: live in seclusion. Live so that your survival depends neither on nepotism nor on the secure belay of oth-