

that the latter is what the written ad is trying to convey, but when I look at Paul's eyes, I think I see the madness, rack, and honey of it.

The phrase *madness, rack, and honey* came to me in a dream. And I want to tell you what the words mean to me, I want to publicly interpret my own dream, which consisted solely of these three words. Let us work backward, beginning with the word *honey*. Here is a famous Persian poem I love, originally written centuries ago in Farsi, told to me by an Iranian woman who could not remember the poet's name, except to say it was *not* Rumi, and that almost any Iranian, except herself, could identify the author. Still, after exhaustive searching, I can't find reference to this poem anywhere, so in my heart, I give it to the great Hafiz.

I shall not finish my poem.
 What I have written is so sweet
 The flies are beginning to torment me.

It is so simple and clear: the "figurative" sweetness of the author's verse has become honey, causing "literal" flies to swarm on the page or in or around the author's head. This is truly the Word made flesh, the fictive made real, water into wine. That is the honey of poetry: the miracle of its transformation, which is that of creation: once there was a blank page—scary!—now there is something in its place that is attracting flies. Anyone who has not experienced the joy, pleasure, transport, and

sweetness of writing poems has not written poems. If it has never once been fun for you, you probably haven't experienced what we talk about when we talk about poetry.

But let us return to the poem. There is a transformation in the poem from the figurative to the literal, without, of course, the poem ever leaving the figurative world of itself. Time has presumably passed in the poem, has just passed or is just beginning to pass—if you believe that the flies have gotten wind of the sweet verses and started to pursue them—and yet, being wholly a lyric poem of the moment, in which nothing happens on the scale of birth, love affairs, or death, how is it that we measure time in these three lines? I am talking about time as *event*, time as measurable in terms of what happened, our usual, quotidian way of measuring (some might say creating) time. And I am at once struck by what a perfect example the poem is regarding *metaphor as event*. Metaphor as time, the time it takes for an exchange of energy to occur. Metaphor is not, and never has been, a mere literary term. It is an event. *A poem must rival a physical experience* and metaphor is, simply, an exchange of energy between two things. If you believe that metaphor is an event, and not just a literary term denoting comparison, then you must conclude that a certain philosophy arises: the philosophy that everything in the world is connected. I'll go slowly here: if metaphor is not idle comparison, but an exchange of energy, an event, then it unites the world by its very premise—that things connect and exchange energy.

And if you extrapolate this philosophy further, you eventually cease to believe in separate realities. Why then do poets persist in insisting upon their separate realities (I know I insist on mine)? Because—goes the answer—it is also the nature of poetry to assert individual identity.

No, that's not true; I'm sorry but I chose the wrong words there. I should have said a very different thing; I should have said, "It is also the nature of poetry to *determine or affirm* one's relation to the incomprehensible condition of existence." I say "existence" because it is different than identity. I say "*determine or affirm*" because there is an option here: the great sculptor Giacometti once said, "I do not know whether I work in order to make something or in order to know why I cannot make what I would like to make." Perhaps when one makes something one affirms, and when one tries to make and knows they cannot (another kind of making) one determines. One determines that they cannot, one determines this by endlessly attempting.

"By the end of the nineteenth century, the German philologist Heymann Steinthal"—philology is the study of human speech as the vehicle of literature and as such sheds light on cultural history—"had concluded that language was not meant solely for communication. 'Language is self-awareness,' he said. 'That is, understanding oneself . . . as one is understood by another. One understands oneself: that is the beginning of language.'" (Russ Rymer, *The New Yorker*, April 13, 1992)

But self-awareness means many things, and one of the things it can mean, can come to mean, is that the self is aware that it is not distinct or separate. It is and it isn't; it is capable of both affirming and determining that it cannot affirm. I apologize for sounding obtuse. But I have been thinking—probably too hard—about this little poem that moves me so, and it caused me to remember a time in my life as a poet when I suffered a great crisis of metaphor. I will spare you the details of my agony, but I felt, for a while, that I was wasting my life making idle comparisons between things that could not and need not be compared. Recently I came across something so simply put it took my breath away. It's a remark originating with the Sung master Qingdeng, though there are many different versions of it, including this one, used by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh: "Before I began to practice, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. After I began to practice, mountains were no longer mountains and rivers were no longer rivers. Now, I have practiced for some time, and mountains are again mountains and rivers are again rivers." Metaphor doesn't actually exist, insofar as it does not reside in nature, but it exists insofar as it spontaneously arises in the human mind as a perceptual event. To conceive of things that don't exist is a *natural* act for a human being. My crisis passed but what stayed with me was the knowledge—implied, I think in the Buddhist saying—that these cycles will endlessly repeat themselves as long as we are alive. The *event* of metaphor, of

figurative language and thought, will arise and subside, like any event. And our world is richer for it. Perhaps a little more complicated than it needs to be, but the presence of human beings on this planet has always complicated things—no one will deny that, not even terra firma herself.

I shall not finish my poem.

What I have written is so sweet

The flies are beginning to torment me.

This poem *is* a physical experience. The poem, once begun, is so physical that it cannot realize itself: like an actual physical event (not like a poem at all) it must die, finish, or end *without completion*. Physical events, remember, only appear to reach completion—such as when we eat food or burn wood—all that energy is actually exchanged and transformed ad infinitum.

Enter the flies who feast. For the poem clearly reminds us that honey has complications—those flies are beginning to *torment* the poet. Torment, pain, torture, is what I mean by *rack*. A rack was a device engineered to induce pain, “an instrument of torture consisting of a frame having a roller at each end. The victim was fastened to these rollers by the wrists and ankles and had the joints of his limbs stretched by their rotation”—sometimes beyond endurance. The OED devotes three pages to the word *rack*, half of them practical, the other half painful:

want of proper economy or management; waste and destruction [as in rack and ruin]
that which causes acute suffering, mental or physical, also the result produced by this; intense pain
to strain to the utmost
to examine searchingly, as by the application of torture
to pull or tear apart, to separate by force
to undergo strain or dislocation
to strain the meaning of, as in forced interpretation
to stretch or raise beyond the normal extent, amount or degree

It is what poetry does to the world, what poets do with words, and what words will do to a poet. And that's the rack of it. And if you have never experienced the rack while working on a poem then you have never worked on a poem. Have you never put language in an extenuating circumstance with dangerous limits until an acute physical sensation results? Stanley Kunitz has said it gets harder and harder to write, not easier, because your standards and expectations—the limits of your endurance—become higher. He was thinking of the rack of it. And Elizabeth Bishop, in a letter, says the same thing. But Galway Kinnell has said, “the secret title of every good poem might be ‘Tenderness’”; surely he was thinking of the honey of it. Frankenstein's monstrous and tender creature, in a remarkable

passage, says, "Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again." I am physically struck every time I ponder his words. It is a passage of torture, retreat, and nullification; but the "sometimes"—implying the stamina of more than once—and the "again" ("frightened me into silence *again*")—implying the multiplication of defeat *but also effort*—transform the passage into one with a clear echo of persistent, if faint, hope.

"You are a walking paradigm of the human condition—you think you know more about the universe than you actually do." "You are congenitally unable to do anything profitable." These astute remarks were made to me by someone who knows me well. And I am thankful for them, for they encourage me in ways he could not imagine and did not intend. John Ashbery, in an interview in the *Poetry Miscellany*, talks about wasting time: "I waste a lot of time. That's part of [the creative process]. . . . The problem is you can't really *use* this wasted time. You have to have it wasted. Poetry disequips you for the requirements of life. You *can't* use your time." In other words, wasted time cannot be filled, or changed into another habit; it is a necessary void of fomentation. And I am wasting your time, and aware that I am wasting it; how could it be otherwise? Many, many others have spoken about this. Tess Gallagher: "I sit in the motel room, a place of much passage and no record, and feel I have made an important assault on the Great Nothing." Gertrude

Stein: "It takes a lot of time to be a genius, you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing." Mary Oppen: "When Heidegger speaks of boredom he allies it very closely with that moment of awe in which one's mind begins to reach beyond. And that is a poetic moment, a moment in which a poem might well have been written." The only purpose of this lecture, this *letter*, my only intent, goal, object, desire, is to waste time. For there is so little time to waste during a life, what little there is being so precious, that we must waste it, in whatever way we come to waste it, with all our heart. Charles Lamb: "A man can never have too much Time to himself, nor too little to do. Had I a little son, I would christen him NOTHING-TO-DO; he should do nothing. Man, I verily believe, is out of his element as long as he is operative."

Recently I found myself filling out a grant application by writing: "I seek an extended period of time, free from all distractions, so that I might be free to be distracted." Distraction is distracting us from distraction. Perhaps we wish to be distracted by the slightest nuances of being, thinking, feeling, or seeing. (We are drifting into the *madness* of it now.) Sometimes I think a poem is the "essence of distraction," which is certainly an oxymoron, since an essence is that which is most concentrated and distraction so wide; in a poem life distracts us from our lives, and only with the utmost of our concentration are we able to follow the exchange as it takes place. So the kind of distraction I am speaking of is one that leads to concentration, the