

Against Sincerity

by Louise Gluck (1993)

Since I'm going to use inexplicit terms, I want to begin by defining the three most prominent of these. By actuality I mean to refer to the world of event, by truth to the embodied vision, illumination, or enduring discovery which is the ideal of art, and by honesty or sincerity to "telling the truth," which is not necessarily the path to illumination.

V.S. Naipaul, in the pages of a national magazine, defines the aim of the novel; the ideal creation, he says, must be "indistinguishable from truth." A delicious and instructive remark. Instructive because it postulates a gap between truth and actuality. The artist's task, then, involves the transformation of the actual to the true. And the ability to achieve such transformations, especially in art that presumes to be subjective, depends on conscious willingness to distinguish truth from honesty or sincerity.

The impulse, however, is not to distinguish but to link. In part the tendency to connect the idea of truth with the idea of honesty is a form of anxiety. We are calmed by answerable questions, and the question "Have I been honest?" has an answer. Honesty and sincerity refer back to the already known, against which any utterance can be tested. They constitute acknowledgement. They also assume a convergence: these terms take for granted the identification of the poet with the speaker.

This is not to suggest that apparently honest poets don't object to having their creativity overlooked. For example, the work of Diane Wakoski fosters as intense an identification of poet with speaker as any body of work I can think of. But when a listener, some years ago, praised Wakoski's courage, Wakoski was indignantly dismissive. She reminded her audience that, after all, she decided what she set down. So the "secret" content of the poems, the extreme intimacy, was regularly transformed by acts of decision, which is to say, by assertions of power. The "I" on the page, the all-revealing Diane, was her creation. The secrets we choose to betray lose power over us.

To recapitulate: the source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth. Blackmur talks of this: "The life we all live," he says, "is not alone enough of a subject for the serious artist; it must be a life with a leaning, life with a tendency to shape itself only in certain forms, to afford its most lucid revelations only in certain lights."

There is, unfortunately, no test for truth. That is, in part, why artists suffer. The love of truth is felt as chronic aspiration and chronic unease. If there is no test for truth, there is no possible security. The artist, alternating between anxiety and fierce conviction, must depend on the latter to compensate for the sacrifice of the sure. It is relatively easy to say that truth is the aim and heart of poetry, but harder to say how it is recognized or made. We know it first, as readers, by its result, by the sudden rush of wonder and awe and terror.

The association of truth with terror is not new. The story of Psyche and Eros tells us that the need to know is like a hunger: it destroys peace. Psyche broke Eros's single commandment-that she not look at him-because the pressure to see was more powerful than either love or gratitude. And everything was sacrificed to it. We have to remember that Psyche, the soul, was human. The legend's resolution marries the soul to Eros, by which union it-the soul-is made immortal. But to be human is to be subject to the lure of the forbidden.

Honest speech is a relief and not a discovery. When we speak of honesty, in relation to poems, we mean the degree to which and the power with which the generating impulse has been transcribed. Transcribed, not transformed. Any attempt to evaluate the honesty of a text must always lead away from that text, and toward intention. This may make an interesting trail, more interesting, very possibly, than the poem. The mistake, in any case, is our failure to separate poetry which sounds like honest speech from honest speech. The earlier mistake is in assuming that there is only one way for poetry to sound.

These assumptions didn't come from nowhere. We have not so much made as absorbed them, as we digest our fathers and turn to our contemporaries. That turning is altogether natural: in the same way, children turn to other children, the dying to the dying, and so forth. We turn to those who have been dealt, as we see it, roughly the same hand. We turn to see what they're up to, feeling natural excitement in the presence of what is still unfolding, or unknown. Substantial

contributions to our collective inheritance were made by poets whose poems seemed blazingly personal, as though the poets had performed autopsies on their own living tissue. The presence of the speaker in these poems was overwhelming; the poems read as testaments, as records of the life. Art was redefined, all its ingenuities washed away.

The impulse toward this poetry is heard in poets as unlike as Whitman and Rilke. It is heard, earlier, in the Romantics, despite Wordsworth's comment that if he "had said out passions as they were, the poems could never have been published." But the idea that a body of work corresponds to and describes a soul's journey is particularly vivid in Keats. What we hear in Keats is inward listening, attentiveness of a rare order. I will say more later about the crucial difference between such qualities and the decanting of personality.

Keats drew on his own life because it afforded greatest access to the materials of greatest interest. That it was his hardly concerned him. It was a life, and therefore likely, in its large shapes and major struggles, to stand as a paradigm. This is the attitude Emerson means, I think, when he says: "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men-that is genius."

That is, at any rate, Keats's genius. Keats wanted a poetry that would document the soul's journey or shed light on hidden forms; he wanted more feeling and fewer alexandrines. But nothing in Keats's attitude toward the soul resembles the proprietor's investment. We can find limitation, but never smug limitation. A great innocence sounds in the lines, a kind of eager gratitude that passionate dedication should have been rewarded with fluency. As in this sonnet, dated 1818:

| WHEN | | | I | | | HAVE | | | FEARS |
|--------|--------|------------|---------|---------|--------------|---------|-------|----|-------------|
| When | I | have | fears | that | I | may | cease | to | be |
| Before | my | pen | has | gleaned | my | teeming | | | brain, |
| Before | | high-piled | | books | | in | | | charact'ry, |
| Hold | like | rich | garners | the | full-ripened | | | | grain; |
| When | I | behold, | upon | the | night's | starred | | | face, |
| Huge | cloudy | symbols | of | a | high | | | | romance, |

And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
 That I shall never 100k upon thee more,
 never have relish in the fairy power
 of unreflecting love!-then on the shore
 of the wide world I stand alone, and think

Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

The impression is of outcry, of haste, of turbulent, immediate emotion that seems to fall, almost accidentally, into the sonnet form. That form tends to produce a sensation of repose; no matter how paradoxical the resolution, the ear detects something of the terminal thud of the judge's gavel. Or the double thud, since the sensation is especially marked in sonnets following the Elizabethan style, ending, that is, in a rhymed couplet; two pithy lines of summary or antithesis. "Think" and "sink" make, certainly, a noticeable rhyme, but they manage, oddly enough, not to end the sonnet like two pennies falling on a plate. We require the marked rhyme, the single repeated sound, to put an end to all the poem's surging longing, to show us the "I," the speaker, at a standstill, just as the dash in the twelfth line makes the necessary abyss that separates the speaker from all the richness of the world. Consider, now, another sonnet, akin to this in subject and rational shape, though the "when" and "then" are here more subtle. The sonnet is Milton's, its occasion, the fact of blindness, its date of composition, 1652:

WHEN I CONSIDER HOW MY LIGHT IS SPENT
 When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest He returning chide
 "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent

That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
 Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state
 Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and wait."

When I say the resemblance here is sufficient to make obvious the debt, what I mean is that I cannot read Keats's poem and not hear Milton's. Someone else would hear Shakespeare: neither echo is surprising. If Shakespeare was Keats's enduring love, Milton was his measuring rod. Keats carried a portrait of Shakespeare everywhere, even on the walking tours, as a kind of totem. When there was a desk, the portrait hung over it: work there was work at a shrine. Milton was the dilemma; toward Milton's achievement, Keats vacillated in his responses, and responses, to Keats, were verdicts. Such vacillation, combined with inner pressure to decide, can be called obsession.

The purpose of comparison was, finally, displacement; in Keats's mind, Wordsworth stood as the contender, the alternative. Keats felt Wordsworth's genius to lie in his ability to "[think] into the human heart"; Milton, for all his brilliance, showed, Keats thought, "less anxiety about humanity." Wordsworth was exploring those hidden reaches of the mind where, as Keats saw it, the intellectual problems of their time lay. And these problems seemed more difficult, more complex, than the theological questions with which Milton was absorbed. So Wordsworth was "deeper than Milton," though more because of "the general and gregarious advance of intellect, than individual greatness of mind." All this was a way for Keats of clarifying purpose.

I said earlier that these sonnets were like in their occasions: this statement needs some amplification. The tradition of sincerity grows out of the blurring of distinction between theme and occasion; there is a greater emphasis, after the Romantics, on choice of occasion: the poet is less and less the artisan who makes, out of an occasion tossed him, something of interest. The poet less and less resembles the debating team: lithe, adept, of many minds.

In the poems at hand, both poets have taken up the question of loss. Of course, Keats was talking about death, which remains, as long as one is talking, imminent. But pressingly

imminent, for Keats, even in 1818. He had already nursed a mother through her dying and had watched her symptoms reappear in his brother Tom. Consumption was the "family disease"; Keats's medical training equipped him to recognize its symptoms. The death imminent to Keats was a forfeit of the physical world, the world of the senses. That world-this world was heaven; in the other he could not believe, nor could he see his life as a ritual preparation. So he immersed himself in the momentary splendor of the material world, which led always to the idea of loss. That is, if we recognize movement and change but no longer believe in anything beyond death, then all evolution is perceived as movement away, the stable element, the referent, being what was, not what will be, a world as stationary and alive as the scenes on the Grecian urn.

In 1652, Milton's blindness was probably complete. Loss makes his starting place; if blindness is, unlike death, a partial sacrifice, it is hardly a propitiation: Milton's calm is not the calm of bought time. I say "Milton's" calm, but in fact, we don't feel quite so readily the right to that familiarity. For one thing, the sonnet is a dialogue, the octet ending in the speaker's question, which Patience answers in its six sublime lines. In a whole so fluent, the technical finesse of this division is masterfully inconspicuous. It is interesting to remark, of a poem so masterful, so majestic in its composure, the extreme simplicity of vocabulary. One-syllable words predominate; the impression of mastery derives not from elaborate vocabulary but from the astonishing variety of syntax within flexible suspended sentences, an instance of matchless organizational ability. People do not, ordinarily, speak this way. And I think it is generally true that imitations of speech, with its false starts, its lively inelegance, its sense of being arranged as it goes along, will not produce an impression of perfect control.

And yet there is, in Milton's poem, no absence of anguish. As readers, we register the anguish and drama here almost entirely subliminally, following the cues of rhythm. This is the great advantage of formal verse: metrical variation provides a subtext. It does what we now rely on tone to do. I should add that I think we really do have to rely on tone, since the advantage disappears when these conventions cease to be the norm of poetic expression. Education in metrical forms is not, however, essential to the reader here: the sonnet's opening lines summon and establish the iambic tradition, with a certain flutter at "consider." No ear can miss the measured regularity of those first lines:

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide..

The end of the second line, though, is troubled. "Dark world" makes a kind of aural knot. We hear menace not simply because the world is described as "dark," alluding both to the permanently altered world of the blind and, also, to a world metaphorically dark, in which right paths cannot be detected: the menace felt here comes about, and comes about chiefly, because the line that has been so fluid is suddenly stalled. A block is thrown up, the language itself coagulates into the immobile, impassable dark world. Then we escape; the line turns graceful again. But the dread introduced is not dissolved. And in the fourth line we hear it again with terrible force, so that we experience physically, in sound, the unmanageable sorrow:

And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless..

"Lodged" is like a blow. And the next words make a kind of lame reeling, a dwindling. As I hear the line, only "less" receives less emphasis than "me." In these four words we hear personal torment, the wreckage of order and hope; we are carried to a place as isolated as Keats's shore ever was, but a place of fewer options. All this happens early; Milton's sonnet is not a description of agony. But loss must be vividly felt for Patience's answer to properly reverberate.

The most likely transformation of loss is into task or test. This conversion introduces the idea of gain, if not reward; it fortifies the animal commitment to staying alive by promising to respond to the human need for purpose. So Patience, in Milton's sonnet, stills the petulant questioner and provides a glimpse of insight, a directive. At the very least, corrects a presumption.

Great value is placed here on endurance. And endurance is not required in the absence of pain. The poem, therefore, must convince us of pain, though its concerns lie elsewhere. Specifically, it proposes a lesson, which must be unearthed from the circumstantial. In the presence of lessons, the possibility of mastery can displace the animal plea for alleviation.

In Milton's sonnet, two actions are ascribed to the speaker: he considers, and, when he considers, he asks. I have made a particular case for anguish because we are accustomed to

thinking the "cerebral" contradictory to the "felt," and the actions of the speaker are clearly the elevated actions of mind. The disposition to reflect or consider presumes developed intelligence, as well as temperamental inclination; it further presumes adequate time.

The "I" that considers is very different from the "I" that has fears. To have fears, to have, specifically, the fears on which Keats dwells, is to be immersed in acute sensation. The fear that one will cease to be is unlike the state of chronic fearfulness we call timidity. This fear halts and overtakes, it carries intimations of change or closure or collapse, it threatens to cancel the future. It is primal, unwilled, democratic, urgent; in its presence, all other function is suspended.

What we see in Keats is not indifference to thought. What we see is another species of thought than Milton's: thought resistant to government by mind. Keats claims for the responsive animal nature its ancient right to speech. Where Milton will project an impression of mastery, Keats projects a succumbing. In terms of tone, the impression of mastery and the impression of abandon cannot co-exist. Our present addiction to sincerity grows out of a preference for abandon, for the subjective "I" whose impassioned partiality carries the implication of flaw, whose speech sounds individual and human and fallible. The elements of coldness to which Keats objected in Milton, the insufficient "anxiety about humanity" correspond to the overt projection of mastery.

Keats was given to describing his methods of composition in terms implying a giving-in: the poet was to be passive, responsive, available to all sensation. His desire was to reveal the soul, but soul, to Keats, had no spiritual draperies. Spirituality manifests the mind's intimidating claim to independent life. It was this invention Keats rejected. To Keats, the soul was corporeal and vital and frail; it had no life outside the body.

Keats refused to value what he did not believe, and he did not believe what he could not feel. Because he saw no choice, Keats was bound to prefer the mortal to the divine, as he was bound to gravitate toward Shakespeare, who wrote plays where Milton made masks, who wrote, that is, with an expressed debt to life.

It follows that Keats's poems feel immediate, personal, exposed; they sound, in other words, exactly like honesty, following Wordsworth's notion that poetry should seem the utterance of "a

man talking to men." If Milton wrote in momentous chords, Keats preferred the rush of isolated notes, preferred the penetrating to the commanding.

The idea of "a man talking to men," the premise of honesty, depends on a delineated speaker. And it is precisely on this point that confusion arises, since the success of such a poetry creates in its readers a firm belief in the reality of that speaker, which is expressed as the identification of the speaker with the poet. This belief is what the poet means to engender: difficulty comes when he begins to participate in the audience's mistake. And on this point, we should listen to Keats, who intended so plainly that his poems seem personal and who drew, so regularly and so unmistakably, on autobiographical materials.

At the center of Keats's thinking is the problem of self. And on the subject of the poet's self that he speaks with greatest feeling and insight. Those men of talent, he felt, who impose their "proper selves" on what they create, should be called "men of power," in contrast to the true "men of genius," those men who, in Keats's view, were "great as certain ethereal chemicals operating on the mass of neutral intellect-but they have not any individuality, any determined character." Toward the composition of poems that would seem "a man speaking to men," he advocated the opposite of egotistical self-awareness and self-cultivation; he recommended, rather, the negative capability he felt in Shakespeare, a capacity for suspending judgment in order to report faithfully, a capability of submission, a willingness to "annul" the self.

The self, in other words, was like a lightning rod: it attracted experience. But the poet's obligation was to divest himself of personal characteristics. Existing beliefs, therefore, were not a touchstone, but a disadvantage.

I referred, some time ago, to our immediate inheritance. I had in mind poets like Lowell and Plath and Berryman, along with many less impressive others. With reference to the notion of sincerity, it is especially interesting to look at Berryman.

Berryman was, from the first, technically proficient, though the early poems are not memorable. When he found what we like to call "himself," he demonstrated what is, to my mind, the best ear since Pound. The self he found was mordant, voluble, opinionated, and profoundly withheld, as demonically manipulative as Frost. In 1970, after *The Dream Songs* had made him famous,

Berryman published a curious book, which took its title from the Keats sonnet. The book, *Love and Fame*, was dedicated "to the memory of the suffering lover & young Breton master who called himself 'Tristan Corbiere.'" To this dedication, Berryman added a parenthetical comment: "I wish I versed with his bite."

We have, therefore, by the time we reach the first poem, a great deal of information: we have a subject, youth's twin dreams, a reference, and an ideal. But this is as nothing compared to the information we get in the poems. We get in them the kind of instantly gratifying data usually associated with drunken camaraderie, and not with art. We get actual names, places, positions, and, while Berryman is at it, confessions of failure, pride, ambition, and lust, all in characteristic shorthand: arrogance without apology.

It can be said of Berryman that when he found his voice he found his voices. By voice I mean natural distinction, and by distinction I mean to refer to thought. Which is to say, you do not find your voice by inserting a single adjective into twenty poems. Distinctive voice is inseparable from distinctive substance; it cannot be grafted on. Berryman began to sound like Berryman when he invented Mr. Bones, and so was able to project two ideas simultaneously. Presumably, in *Love and Fame*, we have a single speaker-commentator might be a better word. But the feel of the poems is very like that of *The Dream Songs*; Mr. Bones survives in an arsenal of sinister devices, particularly in the stinging, undermining tag lines. The poems pretend to be straight gossip, straight from the source; like gossip, they divert and entertain. But the source deals in mixed messages; midway through, the reader is recalled from the invited error:

MESSAGE

Amplitude,-voltage,-the one friend calls for the one,
the other for the other, in my work;
in verse & prose. Well, hell.
I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends.

Impressions, structures, tales, from Columbia in the thirties
& the michaelmas term at Cambridge in 36,

followed by some later. It's not my life.
That's occluded and lost.

On the page, "autobiography-in-verse" is a single ladylike word, held together by malicious hyphens.

What's real in the passage is despair. Which owes, in part, to the bitter notion that invention is wasted.

The advantage of poetry over life is that poetry, if it is sharp enough, may last. We are unnerved, I suppose, by the thought that authenticity, in the poem, is not produced by sincerity. We incline, in our anxiety for formulas, to be literal: we scan Frost's face compulsively for hidden kindness, having found the poems to be, by all reports, so much better than the man. This assumes our poems are our fingerprints, which they are not. And the processes by which experience is changed-heightened, distilled, made memorable-have nothing to do with sincerity. The truth, on the page, need not have been lived. It is, instead, all that can be envisioned.

I want to say, finally, something more about truth, or about that art which is "indistinguishable" from it. Keats's theory of negative capability is an articulation of a habit of mind more commonly ascribed to the scientist, in whose thought the absence of bias is actively cultivated. It is the absence of bias that convinces, that encourages confidence, the premise being that certain materials arranged in certain ways will always yield the same result. Which is to say, something inherent in the combination has been perceived.

I think the great poets work this way. That is, I think the materials are subjective, but the methods are not. I think this is so whether or not detachment is evident in the finished work.

At the heart of that work will be a question, a problem. And we will feel, as we read, a sense that the poet was not wed to any one outcome. The poems themselves are like experiments, which the reader is freely invited to recreate in his own mind. Those poets who claustrophobically oversee or bully or dictate response prematurely advertise the deficiencies of the chosen particulars, as though without strenuous guidance the reader might not reach an intended conclusion. Such work suffers from the excision of doubt: Milton may have written proofs, but his

poems compel because they dramatize questions. The only illuminations are like Psyche's, who did not know what she'd find.

The true has about it an air of mystery or inexplicability. This mystery is an attribute of the elemental: art of the kind I mean to describe will seem the furthest concentration or reduction or clarification of its substance; it cannot be further refined without being changed in its nature. It is essence, ore, wholly unique, and therefore comparable to nothing. No "it" will have existed before; what will have existed are other instances of like authenticity.

The true, in poetry, is felt as insight. It is very rare, but beside it other poems seem merely intelligent comment.