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WILLIAM H. GASS

The Literary Miracle

Acceptance speech for the 2007 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism, Iowa City, October 25, 2007

I have already participated in the Truman Capote Prize for Criticism, first as a nominator, then as an evaluator, so I am familiar not only with this award's selection process, but with many of the texts which have been considered for it in the past. They comprise a company I should be proud to say I keep, and I am grateful that you have now encouraged me to that immodesty.

I have always been interested in miracles (not just in the one we are presently celebrating) but especially in the secular kinds. A miracle is something that cannot happen, and shouldn't, and won't again, but has occurred all the same, despite laws, odds, expectations. A miracle is also something fortunate, and suggests the influence of a higher power—doubtless a holdover from its sacred days. We don't say, "wow, five hundred people died from eating the same ice cream cone. It's a miracle!" though it is remarkable, even deplorable, depending upon the flavor.

There is another sort of miracle though, equally unlikely, equally difficult to explain, but one that occurs with satisfactory frequency despite enemies almost as persistent as mortality itself, and that is a phenomenon called consciousness and its tendency toward individuation.

Hume, I think, was right in insisting that any event that deserved to be classified as a miracle should be examined by a host of competent observers who had nothing to gain if Lazarus, to take a famous example, were to wake from his death to boast that now only his belly ached. Suppose dispassionate and qualified observers could be found in Beijing, Berlin, and Boston. Then Lazarus would have to oblige by dying (when he wasn't booked elsewhere) in front of gathered specialists in these varied cities, who might attest then to his pre- and post-mortem condition. Of course, if his revival was used to support the claims of any religion, political party, or upcoming movie, it would be immediately disqualified for violating the impar-

tiality rule, and if it passed all tests it would simply become another exceptional break in an otherwise impeccable regularity like black swans or albino squirrels, and no longer a miracle at all. Footnotes would merely mention that a few folk, each one named Lazarus and owning a mole on his left cheek, occasionally returned to life after their deaths, if their deaths occurred on the second of February, and they performed their demises in public before qualified officials for the edification and amusement of many. This kind of circular begging of the question is okay if Hume does it.

Not content, we would explain the anomaly by showing that—whatever the exemplary occurrence was—some subatomic particle, not the butler, had done it, and further that this surprising breach of the laws of nature formed a pattern with others of a similar sort (like albinism), and was, in fact, establishing a February second, mole-cheeked regularity of its own. If black swans can do it, why can't the Lazarites?

The finer works of art are miracles in the sense that they are so unlikely to have emerged from the ignoble and bloody hands of man that we stand in awe of them, and that they have been written or built or composed at the behest of superstitions so blatantly foolish as to embarrass reason, and cause common sense to snicker, is itself wondrous and beyond ordinary comprehension. However, the fact that a gay guy painted the Sistine ceiling is not nearly as dumbfounding as the papacy's protection of pederasts in spite of their official attitude toward such "objectionable" practices—one of which ought to be the ceiling itself, for if anything is unnatural, for them, genius is.

The secular miracle is an incomprehensible juxtaposition of events, not a rare or occasional break in the order of things, but a paired regularity that persists in making no sense: the first being the creation of inspired art, and the second requiring a wonder equal to it, namely, that such astonishments are accomplished, often, by quite ordinary or even sub-par human beings. For a long time I have been trying to understand these two things—the miracle of their appearance and the unlikely nature of their cause. Moreover, some of these artists are required to perform their miracles many times, for patrons and audiences everywhere, something we know Lazarus could not manage.

No wonder the Muses worked overtime, and inspiration, itself inexplicable, was often offered as an explanation. As cognitively empty as the concept has always been, there was this much to it: when inspiration struck, the vain slow-witted poet of common-places left his body like someone removing a soiled shirt, and the spirit of a higher power took his place. Pete the poet didn't do it, any more than Paul the Prophet had the vocal cords to speak for God, but simply lip synched the deity's messages which had been conveniently pre-recorded for this purpose.

Yeats writes amazing poems on behalf of a personal mythology, Blake also roars at the wind like a hound at the moon, dozens and dozens of other poets, ditto; Wagner rises to unheard of—or rather heard—heights despite a character that would not be chosen by a jackal; Mozart often played the fool; Marlowe was a murderer; some artists are bigots, some are thieves, far too many were Tories. Out of the mouths of sewers fine wine flows; out of bitter British laureates, truths sneak like thieves. What is to be made of this? What are the contents of these revelations?

Are we really to suppose that Dante was right about the after-world? is that why his Comedy is so compelling? or that he was just such a fine chap he should have been canonized by the Church as well as the Academy? and his genius pours out of him like wine from a bottle he couldn't stopper? Ah...it's because it is a handsome moral tale of revenge and redemption. Well, an act of revenge it surely is. No one ever got even as unfairly or as often as Dante.

Gertrude Stein (not one of the slow wits) said: let me tell you what history teaches, history teaches. And painters paint, musicians compose, and writers put one word next to another, as we all do when we write, so what is the difference? But Shakespeare had profound thoughts, deep feelings, a proud incorruptible pen? We wish we knew. What we do know is that his words, led by music, rich in range and reference, a remarkable image in every line, expressed ideas with the force of a fist, evoked passions more profound than the abyss (not the pit's which are easily provoked but as shallow as a saucer), and, to consider that proud pen's problems...well, it probably made humiliating accommodations to stagecraft, actors, donors, and the political weather.

What works of art testify to is the presence in this world of consciousness, consciousness of many extraordinary kinds. Not that of the artists themselves, for theirs are often much the same as any other person's. They are merely partaking of the evolutionary miracle found most obviously in man, but not necessarily any more useful to his survival than a raven's, or a cat's, or a chimp's is, to its. It is not the writer's awareness I am speaking of but of the awareness he or she makes. For that is what fine writing does: it creates a unique verbal consciousness. And how it happens, and what value it has, has been a persistent question in my little exercises.*

Emerson's essays build the mind that thinks them. It is that mind that is the miracle that interests me. Did he think the thinker who then thinks his thoughts? "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second, and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world." I don't believe he began by having "the eye is the first circle" arrive in his own inward office like a parishioner with a problem, and that, subsequently, he copied this thought down exactly the way it appeared when it knocked, and as he would have been required to had the words come from Allah or from God. He wrote them down so he could think their thought. And when he thought "the eye is the first circle," I'll bet he didn't know what the second circle was. But writing notions down means building them up; it means to set forth on a word only to turn back, erasing and replacing, choosing and refusing alternatives, listening to the language, and watching the idea take shape like solidifying fog.

"Dream," he writes... "Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus." Apparently life is a train made of metaphors: life is just a bowl of cherries, life is rosy as a cheek, life is alum, stinging nettles, a bog, a lawn, a log on which we may sit in good company while we converse beneath another, not yet fallen, tree. I feel fulfilled and ripe today, rich with juice, but yesterday I was as sour as a grape. In essays like "Circles" and "Experience," Emerson takes the measure of our moodiness, our vagaries, in different sentences, other images, chang-

*A *Temple of Texts* (Knopf, 2006), the work for which the Capote Award was given.

ing speeds. It is not the idea, but an awareness of it that he catches. "What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this Will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall."

Thoughts are assembled, worried like a cat with its mouse, armed against enemies, refined and refashioned, slid forth into the world like a christened ship. Perceptions, feelings, energies, and images are parts of the same verbal enterprise that creates, for instance, a poem. "For it's not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."

To adorn nature with a new thing: that is the miracle that matters. Most prose flows into an ocean of undifferentiating words. To objectify through language a created consciousness, provide it with the treasured particularity we hope for each human being—that is the cherished aim of the art.

What does make a sentence or a line of verse rise from the dead and walk again, run for a record, and even dance as dancers do when blessed? It is important for the reader to respond to these miracles with belief when they occur, because two or three inspired lines can turn a sonnet into a masterpiece, or make what might have been a rather slight little song into an arresting aria. It is equally crucial for the critic to be aware of those who merely mimic greatness through grandeur's empty gestures, and not be taken in by inarticulate simplicity's pretense to profundity, or answer to the trumpets that announce the coming of deep feeling as they might the queen. In addition, the critic should remain suspicious of imaginative sweeps more suitable to a broom, or a rhetoric that's about to ride long-haired but bareback through the streets.

Matthew Arnold called genuine poetic moments "touchstones," since it seemed to him they were exemplary instances of inspiration, and Paul Valéry, who liked to think artistry was an arm of intellect, confessed that some lines, images, or phrases appeared suddenly, inexplicably, from who knew what embarrassingly irrational depths, and between these glistening peaks were the dull unam-

bitious gulleys that the skills of the poet had to fill with intelligence and technique as you might try to level a road. In short, between these rare and wonderful gifts from the gods, a chain-gang's labor.

Though the three greatest masters of English prose—Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Taylor, and Sir Thomas Browne—came to their loose syntax and noble music by way of Latin, they were capable of some resounding Anglo-Saxon when those notes were needed, and it is among their sentences that the miracles, I have been speaking of, can be most frequently found. Emerson may have had passages from Browne's *Urn Burial* in mind when he wrote "Circles"—especially the one by Sir Thomas that begins: "Circles and right lines limit and close all bodies, and the mortal right-lined circle must conclude and shut up all. There is no antidote against the opium of time, which temporally considereth all things; our fathers find their graves in our short memories, and sadly tell us how we may be buried in our survivors. Grave-stones tell truth scarce forty years. Generations pass while some trees stand, and old families last not three oaks."

I can repeat these clauses with the same appreciation I have for the greatest poetry: "our fathers find their graves in our short memories"; "grave-stones tell truth scarce forty years"; "old families last not three oaks."

But the sons and daughters of such sentences—Virginia Woolf for instance, Henry James—aspire always to, and often realize, such heights. From their eminence they urge even us, with our lesser talents, to make the climb, because, though we must halt at a ledge halfway, the view of the valley below is still sublime.