

FEAR OF HAPPINESS

Among the distinguishing characteristics of mythic or totemic stories, let me call two of the most obvious to your attention: first, by definition, they stay in the mind—durability distinguishes the archetypal from the anecdotal. Second, more peculiarly, they mutate, or our perceptions of their fundamental truths change. Perhaps “mutate” is inaccurate; better to say that what magnetizes attention shifts. A story with staying power will offer a variety of possible centers of focus (though these may be perceived sequentially rather than simultaneously). Stories of this type, whatever their scale (and they may, superficially, resemble the anecdote), possess a certain interior spaciousness within clear outlines, so that they seem, on reflection, at once copious and eternally unresolved. In simpler terms, every time I see *Children of Paradise* it has a different hero. And every time I read *Wuthering Heights*, I feel a different moral or emotional imperative. When I was sixteen: value passion. Meaning sacrifice anything to it. When I was twenty-five: be wary of passion’s tendency to screen narcissism. And so on.

All this holds true, as well, in the realm of the personal. We have, each of us, certain charged stories or referents, the sorts of stories we tell those people we wish to befriend, so that they will see what has formed us. What is odd is that, over time, the same story can be used to make different points, though we may continue to befriend the same sorts of attractive strangers.

When I was in my early twenties and beginning, finally, to master in psychoanalysis the range of symptoms I had been controlled by, when I was able to perform dazzling acts like eating in the presence of other human beings; when I no longer needed to do the same tasks daily in the same order; when I was no longer wholly withdrawn (which is the common legacy of shame), I found myself suddenly terrified. A vision of des-

olate normalcy presented itself. I was terrified, specifically, that normalcy—whatever I meant by that—would somehow eradicate the need for or capacity for what even then I ceremoniously called my work. For five years I had been struggling desperately to become whole and sane in order to rejoin a world made, as I saw it, entirely of the whole and the sane, a world free of the humiliating loneliness and fear that constituted my reality. And I remember very clearly my panic and the terms in which I accused my analyst, who had conspired in all this: he was going to make me so happy I wouldn't write. I also remember his response. He looked at me directly, an event in itself rare (and possibly the underlying reason I remember this exchange). His response was memorably succinct. The world, he told me, will provide you sorrow enough.

For the egotist, a revolutionary concept. What interested me in this story initially was the analyst's unprecedented directness together with the sense that his personal history had, briefly, entered the room. Also the strange unease his response provoked. My confidence in him was, for complex reasons, shaken. He had no right to be so present in the room, to substitute for Delphic silence and sly direction a remark so tainted by the personal. Also, I thought he was wrong. That is, I thought the world couldn't possibly provide as much anguish as I needed. If he was wrong, I had duped him; if I had duped him, he was no longer reliable. Did he really know how wily I was, how inherently powerful (despite the present restrictions of performance); did he really think the world was any match for such force? I generated my sorrow; nothing and no one could be trusted to meet my fierce and specific standard. Later, his remark took on an aspect of prophecy, which always has about it something of the echo—in this case, what was echoed was my own early perception of the world in exactly the aspect my analyst noted. Growing up, I had transformed myself into the agent of the inescapable; I couldn't bear chance, as a principle; I saw the world as whimsical and lethal, a machine for doing harm. And took over its work, to avoid being its victim.

In fact, it wasn't until very recently that I began to read this exchange from another angle, to examine a certain underlying assumption. Specifically, why was I so sure unhappiness was essential to the making of art? Or, more precisely, what attributes of what I imagined happiness to be did I believe subverted creation? Plainly, I ascribed to happiness some opacity or chronic unresponsiveness; accurately enough, I saw responsiveness as essential to the creative act, but my definition seemed to limit it to a particular type. I saw responsiveness, it appears, as resulting

from a keenly felt abrasiveness between the self and the world, as though that boundary could be perceived only in the most dramatic and negative terms. What is emphasized in such definitions is the self, not as a secure pole or referent, but as a fundamental dimness clarified by oppositions. Its very haziness gives rise to its avidity; it strives constantly to define itself (as more clearly realized selves do not), and it is able to define itself only relative to what it is not.

In the period of which I've been speaking, whatever my surprise at my analyst's observation, I had a somewhat diminished stake in maintaining the presumably fecund misery from which, in my view, he insisted on rescuing me. Luckily, or so I presently believe, I was protected from my asserted wish to shore up suffering, to stabilize it, by the intensity of my suffering at that time. I had, too, this recent memory: I began analysis imperiled not by happiness but by despair; in the years that was most acute, I was wholly silent, on the page and in the world.

Set aside, for the moment, natural speculation regarding the talent of the artist, of the restless, demanding, insatiable soul, for actually attracting and sustaining serenity. Assume, for the moment, that some parenthesis of well-being does, from time to time, open, even in the lives of people of this type. Think, for now, only of the meticulous resistance to that state, which perhaps some of you have felt already. As in the moment when love ceases to be narrative, ceases to be dramatic capitulation, and the single next thing appears to be sterility, a vista of suburbs. As though the suburbs, as though the mutations of love in time, could only be sterile.

Curiously, once the question is posed, once the whole issue of the relation of unhappiness to the making of art comes under scrutiny, the sources of this connection grow clear. They derive, I think, from the original set of impulses and rewards that draw individual minds to this vocation. Most artists, most writers certainly, are drawn to the creative act by its capacity to promote catharsis and, through catharsis, affirm a faltering sense of power. Pre-existing anguish, in being given form, is externalized; in being externalized, it is transformed. Transformed, as opposed to neutralized; it gives rise to its extreme opposite. What results, for the artist or nascent artist, is euphoria. Not only are anxiety and tension temporarily relieved—something comes into being to which the self bonds with a kind of desperate ardor. Unfortunately, the learned dynamics of catharsis, the conversion via writing of despair to elation, will not sustain a creative gift any more than the animating rages of youth can be mechanically prolonged. Equally unfortunately, the more effi-

ciently catharsis reins in suffering, and the headier the sense of elation that results from the making of a work of art, the greater the self's investment in art. In art, obviously, but also in the increasingly ritualized process leading to art. And ultimately an odd shadow of dependency or addiction creeps in. Suffering gradually becomes the presumed first condition of elation or triumph; the more efficiently catharsis works, the more likely it is that an artist is being created, a person, that is, whose sense of power and worth depends primarily on these surrogates, these objects it has created.

This dependency is my subject, and, beyond it, a certain practical speculation as to the usefulness, to an artist, of happiness, in whatever form it may happen to present itself. By which term I mean not euphoria (which is in any case familiar to people of this type, a state of grace like falling in love, and, like falling in love, an intoxication)—not euphoria, but that strange country I glimpsed in my analyst's office, happiness defined as well-being.

The artist, that person whose sense of self absolutely depends on continued creation, begins to connect his survival as a powerful, or in any case, viable being to despair; despair, however damaging, however threatening, however eroding of the physical self, cannot damage what is perceived as being truly essential: the ability to make art. Quite the reverse: this it preserves and sustains. The real threat, according to this reasoning, is happiness which, by removing active unrest, sabotages creative life, which proceeds from an accumulated misery that demands cathartic release. The dependency on dissatisfaction, the courting of it by the artist—this is less a Faustian compact than a destructive, or at least limiting, hope. Destructive not in the obvious sense, in that it places at risk or undermines the whole world of relationship, or physical soundness, or social function, but destructive in exactly those terms by which the self experiences its deepest sense of authentic being: what is threatened with destruction in this system is the artist, who was born, long before, not only of will but of its hopeless and powerless opposite, out of lack of control.

At the heart of this dilemma, the tacit rejection of happiness, is the problem of control, which is, first, the problem of vulnerability. It is the latter that attaches to happiness, to any form of *having*. Like material wealth, emotional or spiritual wealth stands to be lost: better the security of having nothing than the anxiety of well-being, which can only diminish. Moreover, the willed renunciation of well-being acts as a kind of protection: no one, the artist reasons, gets everything. So renunciation

of what others hold most dear shores up, in the artist, what *he* holds most dear, his talent. And whatever its size, it is likely to be perceived, with some regularity, as precarious. The unfamiliar unnerves; in this system, misery and despair tend to produce an odd repose—they are at least known; they generate no obsession with subtraction, since they are that state to which subtraction ultimately descends. When nothing exists that can be taken away, a secret power asserts itself, a sense of control that well-being systematically threatens or erodes.

An early form of the pattern will seem, I believe, familiar. Put simply: once the addiction is established, despair becomes safety, and the artist begins to attempt to control or limit the ways in which he is influenced, trying to replicate indefinitely those circumstances or states of mind believed to be favorable to the making of art. This puts the matter, perhaps, too optimistically, makes choice seem to exist. Whereas the artist is, more likely, a being who has found a marginally viable existence which he goes on to frantically defend. His frenzy is natural, a function of the conviction that the alternative to present modes is not different modes but nothing, the abyss. This cleaving to pattern can coexist with apparently expansive or experimental behaviors, since what is being cleaved to is an edge, that is, precariousness. Only those experiences or behaviors characteristic of what we can loosely call normalcy or serenity are ruled out. And this comes to be a ruling against the unknown in its most radical form, a ruling made, oddly enough, in the name of risk.

Over time, the true danger, the true sabotaging routine domestic space becomes that edge to which panic roots the creative being. The words by which this edge is described affirm its glamorous shakiness; in fact, it has become wholly conservative space. I have seen this particular timidity in my own nature; I have watched it and heard it in my students. It fuels those questions about the future in which multiple desires or leanings figure: is it dangerous for a writer to be an academic? Will medicine (or law or business) destroy my gift? And, particularly among women, should I marry? Should I have children? And although no one can guarantee that the married doctor with children will also write enduring poetry, or that the passionate adolescent who finally permits himself maturity and pleasure will evolve into a deeper thinker, the person who, through cautious clinging to the known, the ostensibly safe, arrests or constrains his native fascination with medicine or desire for family is diminishing the possibility of his making original art. Meaning art unique to a specific and profoundly lived experience. Only such art attains the force and durability of paradigm. Whereas the "paradigmatic"

artistic life, the edge I have been describing, when clung to through will, yields up an art hardly deserving of that name, an art too predictable in its judgments and, finally, too superficial to attract attention over time.

Behind the choice of despair (as opposed to the accident of despair, as opposed, also, to the tragic vision, which is another matter)—behind this choice is the unarticulated assumption that the life most conducive to art is entirely empty of anything interesting enough to distract from writing or satisfying enough to replace the need to write. But the earlier, the formative despair, the galvanizing memorable despair of adolescence, is not replicated through willful perpetuations and imitations. And the sadder form of these questions about the future is not question but statement, the asserted decision to turn from a natural bent lest the gift be damaged.

This is the mathematics of insurance (which insulates against the more painful perception of injustice). The need to write, or make art, gives rise to the wish to keep alive and affirm *only* the creative being and suppress or constrain all satellite selves. And as the only emotion held to be entirely safe to that being is unhappiness, the only congenial conditions turmoil and retreat, the only activity held to be free of environmental contamination and harmful distraction is the reading of great literature.

But once literature is sought for these reasons, it changes. Whatever it was once, infinite and necessary air, it now becomes restriction, less that air than the conditioned air of a sealed room. That is, it is being valued for what it is not; it is being used to screen out impurity. Or, to use another figure, it becomes something like steamed vegetables, safe because they contain nothing known to cause harm. To read for these reasons, to read to stay safe, is to undermine the essential capacity and service of literature. Those gifts become accessible again when less elevated pleasures are accommodated. Pleasures like cooking and bad movies, pleasures like the indefensible television's. I believe these pleasures also nourish though in mysterious ways: they relax the soul. They are the little worlds in which the spirit is not tested. The difficulty is that the artist cannot take pride in what they nourish because pride, in him, is so utterly connected to the creative act, and because his imagination concerning that act is limited by fear to a kind of magical system, rife with taboos and forbidden gestures. And, to people of this type, what is not a source of pride is, *de facto*, a source of shame.

Let me urge now the utility of happiness. First: understand that happiness or well-being does not automatically produce a poetry or prose

that sounds these same sanguine notes. What is far more likely, certainly in the artist whose vision is tragic, is that some measure of well-being strengthens him sufficiently to enable the deepest excavations. The spirit, fortified, can afford to go more profoundly, more resourcefully, into its materials, being less imperiled. But principally I wish to argue for well-being as a means of increasing openness to diversity and, by extension, a means by which the artist increases his range or, possibly, locates a fundamental subject. Dependency on despair acts to limit the subjects with which the mind contends or engages to those subjects available at the time the rituals of catharsis were discovered. In my own experience, periods of despair resemble one another, even to the sense that each seems, at the moment and despite its antecedents, the true platonic desolation, the terminus, the authentic nadir. Whereas happiness surprises in both its advent and its causes: it releases information. What unhappiness tends to perpetuate is an isolating and, usually, limiting fixation on the self; except in the very rarest cases, this is bound to be an aesthetic limitation. Whereas well-being, in paying homage to its sources and causes, seeks out the world, a place likely to be more varied than the self, particularly than the artist self, so long protected from dubious influence. In periods of well-being, the world of external object and event enters perception. Focus moves outward as well as inward.

I believe my analyst was correct in his remark. The world, whether zealously monitored or allowed a looser hand—the world will indeed provide sorrow enough. The intensity and frequency and type of that sorrow depend to a painful extent on luck, which is called luck because it cannot be controlled or lured or annexed. We can't do anything about whatever luck decides to do with us. We can, however, refuse the narrowness of that determined unhappiness the will insists on. Occasionally something will give pleasure, will actually charm or divert or entertain, will, to use that terrifying word, disarm. Insofar as our fearful, compulsive, rigid natures allow, I think we should welcome what follows, since for natures of this kind, there is no embrace until one has been disarmed.