The Idea of Courage

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OCCASIONALLY, discreetly, a new encomium introduces itself into the critical vocabulary. Not a new theory, which makes, necessarily, a more splendid debut, being, like all comprehensive visions, explicitly corrective, fueled by the ancient human impulse to reform. The process I mean to discuss is more covert: if not covert, unconscious, and the particular term under scrutiny one much more likely to be used (in my experience) by the poets themselves than by critics.

Poets have something to gain by giving currency to the idea of courage. In a solipsistic culture, no criterion of objectivity checks the need driving such analysis: when the world mirrors the self, recognition is experienced as a claim. Repeated use, moreover, lends to any terminology certain totemic properties: around a single word, brotherhoods and sisterhoods are created, the word itself coming to stand for all jointly held ambition and affirmed belief.

That courage animates a body of work seems, as an idea, immensely attractive. It dignifies the materials, infusing them with qualities of urgency and danger. In the ensuing confrontation, the poet becomes Perseus slaying the Medusa. Equally appealing is unconscious, helpless courage: Cassandra who cannot help but see. This alternative carries the additional benefit of suggesting that truth and vision are costly, their purchase secured by sacrifice or loss. The glamor of these, and related, images stimulates the aspiring visionary, who need simply reproduce the outward sign to invoke the spiritual condition: in this instance, need simply arrange to have paid.

Obviously, my focus here is narrow: courage takes on a more pointed meaning in more obviously oppressive societies, societies in which it is literally not safe to speak. As is often noted, art benefits in such regimes (though artists do not) in that it acquires immense prestige, a prestige American poets may quite reasonably envy. But reasonable envy does not excuse muddled thought, nor can assertion of another, more amorphous species of courage convincingly argue the issue of peril.

In its local use, the term "courage" responds to poetic materials felt to be personal: in so doing, it concentrates attention on the poet's relation to his materials and to his audience, rather than on the political result of speech. Its obligation as analysis is to suggest analogues for exile and death: to name what is at risk.

Courage, in this usage, alludes to a capacity for facing down the dark forces. (Lust for generalization ignores the fact that not all people fear the same things.) From time to time, some permutation of the term acknowledges a range of essentially combative tones, tones one hears, say, in Lawrence (who uses them brilliantly): picking fights with the reader seems weirdly daring (and, by inference, courageous) in its apparent disdain for poetry's single reward, namely approval. In an extension of this reasoning, courage is also accorded the writer who makes some radical change of style and so courts disfavor. Present use of the term cannot be restricted to that poetry which arises out of genuine acts of physical or moral courage, perhaps because examples of such courage are so rare, perhaps because most examples seem corrupted by any first-person account, perhaps because the occasions themselves seem suspect, tainted by an air of contrivance. Ultimately, however, the point is that this sort of definition will not extend the uses of the term, and it is exactly this extension most poets desire. The need for incentive runs deep: the free society, the society that neither restricts speech nor values it, ennervates by presenting too few obstacles.

Desire notwithstanding, these assertions misunderstand the act of writing and, as well, the nature of courage.

No matter what the materials, the act of composition remains, for the poet, an act, or condition, of ecstatic detachment. The poems' declared subject has no impact on this state; however assessment is subsequently revised, the poet engaged in the act of writing feels giddy exhilaration; no occasion in the life calls less for courage than does this.

What seems at issue is the discrepancy between the impression of exposure and the fact of distance. The poet, writing, is simultaneously soaked in his materials and unconstrained by them: personal circumstance may prompt art, but the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance. For a brief period, the natural arrangement is reversed: the artist no longer acted upon but acting; the last word, for the moment, seized back from fate or chance. Control of the past: as though the dead martyrs were to stand up in the arena and say, "Suppose, on the other hand ..." No process I can name so completely defeats the authority of event.

Such defeat naturally imbues the poem with an aura of triumph. And it may be that this encourages misreading: the exhilaration of victory—over confusion, blankness, inertia, as well as over the past—resembles in appearance the victory of courage over dark matter, or the victory of passionate spirit over the impediments of civilization.

In this misreading, the material, or civilization, stands for the adversary, whose identity, whether human, animal, or inanimate, physical courage must always specify. Courage implies jeopardy, and jeopardy to the body depicts itself in correspondingly concrete terms. Whereas spiritual jeopardy, being invisible, lends itself to more speculative discourse, conception of the adversary growing very easily abstract.

But questions persist. If courage informs a poem of personal revelation, what, or who, is the adversary? What is at risk?

And the ready answer is: the possibility of shame. But it seems to me that no presumed confession, no subtle or explicit exposure, no ferocity of tone, no brazen (or compelled) shift in style can, through the mediation of the reader, transform the poem into an occasion which truly risks shame.

The empowering distance of the poet from his materials repeats itself in another equally useful distance: that of the poem from its reader. That the poem, that art, makes a bridge between one being and another—this commonplace perception—says as much: no bridge is necessary in the absence of distance. Inherently, the dynamic of shame depends on response: but response, for the poet, to the poem, occurs later, in an elsewhere distant in time from the time of composition; for the duration of active composition, the poet remains insulated from the future as from the past. Insulated, consequently, from any real exposure, from any present source of censure or mockery. True, the act of writing posits a listener, that one-who-will-understand. But an idealized listener differs from any actual listener in that the actual listener cannot be controlled: only the latter is a legitimate threat.

At such remove, the artist seems enviably shameless (or courageous). This perception is not so much false as skewed: indeed, the artist is shameless, protected from all humiliation, all real source of shame—as shameless, as easy in the performance of nakedness, as a naked dancer, whom the stage similarly protects. This is not to say that the motive of speech is exhibitionism. But the fact remains: for the artist, no *contact* occurs. And there is no confession, no possibility of shame, in the absence of contact.

A case can be made that publication reinstates vulnerability, collapsing the distance between both poet and materials and poet and reader. This overlooks the artist's most stubborn dilemma, itself a corollary of distance: specifically, the impossibility of connecting the self one is in the present with the self that wrote. The gap is both absolute and immediate: toward a finished work, only the most tormented sense of relationship remains, not a sense of authorship at all. The work stands as a reprimand or reproach, a marker permanently fixing an unbearable distance, the distance between the remote artist self, miraculously fluent, accidentally, fleetingly perceptive, and the clumsy, lost self in the world. Critical assault of a finished work is painful in that it affirms present self-contempt. What it cannot do, either for good or ill, is wholly fuse, for the poet, the work and the self; the vulnerability of the poet to critical reception remains complicated by that fact. And the sting the poet may suffer differs from the risks of more immediate exposure: the ostensibly exposed self, the author, is, by the time of publication, out of range, out of existence, in fact.

As to the argument that courage informs certain radical shifts in style: the need to write is, after all, the wish to be caught up in an idea; for the writer, thinking and writing (like thinking and feeling) are synonyms. Style changes when one has got to the end, willingly or not, of a train of thought. The choice, then, is between another train of thought and the spiritual equivalent of lip-sync. In any case, to deal in the written word is to deal, at the conscious level, in the future. The reader lives there, and the artist of unusually powerful or unusually fragile ego will favor the long future over the immediate, in part because an accumulated audience offers greater possibility of response, in part as protection or insurance against the potential coldness of present readers (the hunger for revenge against circumstance translating easily to this set of conditions). Toward his critics, the artist harbors a defensive ace: knowledge that the future will erase the present. Not all writers possess in equal measure these preoccupations: that they are available at all, psychically, to diminish the force of critical judgment, separates the judgment of published work from the more annihilating judgments which can occur in actual contact.

Our claim on this particular fortifying virtue cannot be made regarding the act of writing. For poets, speech and fluency seem less an act of courage than a state of grace. The intervals of silence, however, require a stoicism very like courage; of these, no reader is aware. □

B-52

Brenda, at bingo while the fireworks begin over Baghdad, dreams
of life without welfare when the computer she gave her son
for Christmas will be paid off, the diamond drop earrings
she slipped inside her daughter's velvet purse. Red
markers dot her cards. Once, at a game upstate,
she won luggage that looked like desert camouflage:
sandy beiges, greens, like those jackets kids wear to look army.
Three piece, cheap, no keys and locks, but she'd won with ease
and it wasn't the last time. Four, five hundred
dollars since, more with the lotto, and once in a while, numbers,
but she's got to watch—gambling runs in the family,
like beer, free, and dangerous. Her oldest son warned her
before he left for the Gulf: Keep your nose clean, Ma.
She remembers his uniform. Handsome. So fuckin young. Tonight
her Irish is up. N-33. The ladies at Visitation
breathe hot and heavy over their game. A few sweat,
even in January, but Brenda's flush is skin-deep. Underneath
she's cool, waiting. When her number comes, swift
as a missile, she says: Bingo. So quiet only she knows who's won.

—Maureen Seaton