Not By Wisdom

It would be sensible to begin by addressing the title of the thesis, not only because it is the most immediate feature, but also because it betrays the entirety of my process. As T.S. Eliot declares in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.” Eliot’s description of the artist as a medium through which a feeling is conveyed, rather than as a personality expressing emotion, is agreeable to me. In my writing, it is certainly the case that I am not discovering any new emotion. I am merely taking the material supplied by our predecessors and arranging them in the manner of the moment. Eliot observes “the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.” I would insist, though, that in their furnishing of rich material, the artists of the past have improved, even if not in their time but in ours, upon art. Without exposure to such material, would feeling move so desperately through our bodies now, in order to find new expression? As an example of this, I may point to the title and subtitle of my thesis. The title is a general reference to the extent to which I rely on the strength of others, but also acknowledgement of the fact that what I am inheriting remains a “mystery.” The subtitle might illustrate this concept better, since it refers to an extinct cinder cone known as Tantalus in my home town. My experience of this place is inevitably colored by the myth of Tantalus and the many representations of it over the centuries. The Tantalus cinder cone is known for having a long, winding drive and a grand view from the top. This location is important to me because it was where I first understood what it meant to be torn from the self, in experience of what we call the sublime. It was where I at once realized what it is that the artist seeks and also that it was impossible to obtain. Would I have described it this way if not for the myth of its namesake? How would one stand on a hill named Tantalus, looking down at the gleaming waters and up at the bright heavens, and not recognize Tartarus?

This notion of borrowing was formative, not only for this particular undertaking, but for my development as an artist and a person, if these two are different things. A life seems to be the accruement of moments, a gathering of things so fine that it appears whole. And yet, some of these particles in our accretion remain conspicuous. They do not fade into that accumulation of forgetfulness that we call the self. Perhaps they swirl in, like mixed paint, or alter the center of gravity. In these past couple of years, I had the fortune of experiencing an exceptionally profound moment, instigated by a professor. I had submitted a poem for review, and it was pointed out to me that it was entirely devoid of any kind of personal character. It was heavily laden with allusion, from the title to the last line. At that moment, I realized that I did not know why I was writing. What good was borrowing? I suddenly recalled that grave entreatment of Rainer Maria Rilke in those famous letters to the young Franz Xaver Kappus, to me, to all of us: “Ask yourself, in your night’s quietest moment, Do I *have* to write?” He later continues, dreadfully, “if you feel you *can* live without writing, that alone is enough to mean you *mustn’t* write.” This was the advice that a young poet might brush off, as I had done. “Of course,” he would say, then he might paraphrase James Baldwin and claim “we have no choice but to write.” But writing suddenly felt wasteful. In this narrow allotment of time, it seemed better to read. Ten thousand lifetimes would be insufficient for studying the work of a hundred masters, and the list is growing long. Of course, this was a revelation driven by greed. Applied universally, art would never have improved, we would not have this surfeit to gorge upon. But this avaricious consideration was a personal one. *I* would not need to write, I could leave it to others. This pointlessness of writing, of course, assumes that I could not surpass those that I would read, which I also believed. Rilke assures me that every effort heretofore would not be in vain, and for a while I was content to give up on writing. In this period I turned my attention to a broader range of classics, and there are few masters more worthy of study than Confucius. By some mocking fortune, the copy of the *Analects* that I picked up was translated by Simon Leys, who included a wonderful introduction that proved a new splash of color, a recentering of gravity. In

defending the necessity of his new translation of such a well-attended work, Leys references that immortal claim of Bernard of Chartres, that as dwarves atop the shoulders of giants, we see further than the venerable ancients. I had never fully appreciated this sentiment, especially with regards to something as seemingly unsolvable as literature, until Leys supplemented it with a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges: “Readers create anew the books they read. Shakespeare is more rich today than when he wrote. Cervantes too. Cervantes was enriched by Unamuno; Shakespeare was enriched by Coleridge, by Bradley. That’s how a writer grows. After his death, he continues to develop in the minds of his readers. And the Bible, for instance, today is richer than when its various parts were first written. A book benefits from the passing of time. Everything can be of benefit to it. Even misunderstanding may help an author. Everything helps–even readers’ ignorance or carelessness. After you have read a book, you may retain an inaccurate impression of it–but this means that it is being amended by your memory. That happens often to me. Caramba! I don’t know whether I dare to confess this–but whenever I quote Shakespeare, I realize that I have improved on him!” Through my engagement with this introduction by Leys, I gained a new understanding of what it meant to “see further” and to “improve,” and suddenly, writing wasn’t so pointless anymore. For now, I understand writing as a necessary extension of reading. What we create today is the filling of the space between the horizon of yesterday’s giants and what we see now. Without writing, we would not fully appreciate their contributions, or our own sight. Borges helped me to understand that, in his charming audacity, that my poor treatment of the masters is a way of studying, and honoring, them. Perhaps a bit off balance, and not knowing what hue I am or will be, this amalgamation found it agreeable to continue writing. This new attitude manifests both directly and indirectly throughout this work.

This work comprises six series, the titles of each referencing the primary text from which they draw inspiration. I was rather pleased by what the inclusion of epigraphs, at the suggestion of

my advisor Professor Jeanne Heuving, could do to create a context or tone for the poems within each series. The first two series have a similar structure and style, but the later series quickly depart from this in order to be looser. The original plan had been to have six series in the same style as the first two, but by the time of finishing the second one, it had already started to feel a bit formulaic and lifeless to me. That is not to say that I am not fond of the format, or would not want to return to it, but I realized that my primary interest is in writing poems that have a greater ability to be considered on their own. There are two reasons for this. The most shallow is that much of my early exposure to poetry was through anthologies, and when considering the kind of thesis I wanted to produce, I once mistakenly stated that I wished to create one. Of course, these are usually compiled by someone else and contain the works of multiple writers. However, the word anthology, and the principle behind it, was still appealing to me. Understood as a "gathering of flowers," it brought to mind the art of arranging flowers. An arrangement should not be so disjointed as to be an eyesore, but the character of each individual flower should not be entirely subservient to the whole. A single flower is a beautiful thing, and that beauty is not contingent on its neighbor. In a sense, I would like for my reader to be able to pluck the flower most appealing to them without too much of it being shorn off for being too entangled with the next. Furthermore, I wanted there to be a variety of arrangements, none too similar to the last. The second reason was my growing appreciation for aphorism. In a more focused series, there is always the sense that each poem must justify itself to every other poem. I appreciate the opportunity that this creates, where a leitmotif of sorts, one that is more specific or concrete than a theme, can be established. However, the natural process of writing does not lend itself to this form, at least for me. This will be easier to explain after discussing further influences on my writing.

To return to the primary textual influences represented in the epigraphs, most of them had to do with a sentiment or general outlook rather than a theory of art. The notable exception to this is

Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which supplied the introductions to two of the series and will be elaborated upon later. The first series borrows the themes of creeping awareness, fascination, premonition, and life-in-death, represented by quotations from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. The second series takes on a sharper awareness of death, but also new life, embodied by Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." Both of these series draw more heavily on personal experience, and the third makes a departure. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is one of the most influential texts in my life, and the series addresses the concepts of guilt, despair, and theodicy, with a somewhat antinatalist thrust. The fourth series bears the incipit of "The Lord's Prayer," and is a rather loose meditation on light, darkness, and time. The fifth series is an ekphrastic one, while the sixth could be considered something of a poetics statement itself, containing ruminations on the process of writing and its purpose. Many of the poems in this series can be tied to concepts discussed in this essay. Both of these series are introduced by Nietzsche, and are named after the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects.

The theory of the Apollonian and Dionysian had a profound impact on my process as it directly addresses the question of content and form. Much of this work set out to be less constrained as an attempt to allow the Dionysian rapture to manifest. To this end, the first series was written with no mind to rhyme or meter, and yet, unconsciously, many of the poems ended up fourteen lines long. This recalled the poem by William Wordsworth "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," which describes the "solace" of the "Sonnet's scanty plot of ground." Upon realizing this, I sought to push myself even further from order, dashing the structure from the next two series. However, in a kind of antithesis, the next series after those ended up being quite rigid. In the final two series, I felt that I had finally achieved a kind of synthesis, where I felt the comfort of my own narrow room, though this no longer strictly referred to rhyme and meter. To me, this was a resolution of the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in which the process had become unconscious. Now, it was no longer tension, with each aspect naturally

tempering the other. The violence could be extracted from the process and subsumed by the poem. *The Birth of Tragedy* influenced another facet of my writing, which is its purpose.

Having described earlier a loss and recovery of the will to create, I have not yet explained what exactly it is that I want to do, what power it is that I hope my poetry can possess. Considering the importance of audience to art, this outward consideration seems important, and may seem as if it should have been addressed earlier. However, I leave it to the last because I have no answer, nor am I particularly interested in discovering one. Nietzsche complained of the stifling presence of reason in art, and I would agree that I appreciate art without moral or didactic purpose. Those tragedies that he so admired speak to me of the unmitigated power of myth, where heroes at times suffer, at times triumph, are at times villains. Where feeling is most immediate, and therefore potent, unfiltered by understanding. How can I say what any poetry, my own included, ought to be or ought to do? My objection to this kind of poetics, taken to its extreme, might result in a rejection of any discussion at all. This would not do, so I will elaborate as best I can, self defeating though it may be. I have felt that though it was meant as a criticism, Plato most accurately described poets, at least the kind of poet that I am, when he wrote in the *Apology of Socrates* that it is “not by wisdom” that they write, and that they “say many fine things but do not understand the meaning of them.” He also mentions that the audience might explain the poem just as well, if not better, than the poet. In his *Republic*, he goes further, making it clear that poets deal in imitation, even deception. He is concerned with the inconstancy of the poets and their indulgence of feeling, feeling that carries away the audience and renders them uncritical. John Keats readily admits to this by writing, in a letter to a friend, “what shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet.” In a phrase that perfectly encapsulates my feelings regarding the matter, Keats continues, “It is a wretched thing to confess; but it is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature - how can it, when I have no nature?” My understanding of

this lack of identity goes further than what Eliot suggests in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” when he states, “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” Eliot describes the artist as a vessel for the past and the present (without shirking novelty), but I would say that this past and present is just another embodiment of the Primordial Unity, as the individual is. In this sense, the extinction of personality is not a sacrifice but a mere reality. And so despite my own reverence for the past, I would not agree with Eliot’s theory that the talent of the individual lies in understanding the past. It is all the same.

A reasonable question to ask at this point would be, why then, is there a common thread to my work? I would answer that it is a matter of convenience, just as the existentialist must live in an at least somewhat consistent manner. The alternative is madness and death. Of course, there is room for a little frenzy, and many of the poems in this thesis have counterparts antithetical in both form and feeling that have been excluded. Juxtaposing these was actually an early concept for the thesis. I understand myself to be honest, and therefore a liar, because I feel in every moment something different, something plural. And so, as much as I admire and imitate figures such as Wordsworth, I necessarily disavow such poetics as described in the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.” I cannot defend or prescribe any subject or language, because I can just as easily, and am just as likely to, attack them. However, this does not mean that I do not treat my work seriously. Emil Cioran described this best upon being asked in an interview about his use of aphorism: “When they read a book of aphorisms, they say, ‘Oh, look what this fellow said ten pages back, now he’s saying the contrary. He’s not serious.’ Me, I can put two aphorisms that are contradictory right next to each other. Aphorisms are also momentary truths. They’re not decrees. And I could tell you in nearly every case why I wrote this or that phrase, and when. It’s always set in motion by an encounter, an incident, a fit of temper, but they all have a cause. It’s not at all gratuitous.” This reinforces my partiality towards aphorism. Most of my poems tend to be brief, which I feel supports my inconstancy. This brevity, as with aphorism, seems well suited

to the moment, and takes advantage of that “fit of temper.” A dear friend of mine also noted that aphoristic forms “leave ample space for the sound they create to echo and permeate.” All of this is in accordance with that key principle of the Dionysian described in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Primordial Unity, before which contradiction and individuation are meaningless. Everything evaporates in the rapture of the moment-become-eternity. The only reason that the works we produce might be intelligible at all is because the alternative, complete absence of the Apollonian, is as always madness and death.

Having said all this, or perhaps nothing, I might venture one claim as to what art ought to be. This sentiment is contained within the poem in the thesis titled “The Ghost Writer.” While perhaps inconspicuous by its length and placement, this is perhaps one of the most important poems that I have written. Whenever I have been exposed to great literature, I felt as if I was near death. Emily Dickinson, as quoted by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, described this best by saying, “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?” Dickinson is a figure underrepresented in my work, considering the incredible influence she has had on me, not only through her poetry and letters, but also by the fantasy of her riddling and extravagant nature. My poetics might therefore be summarized as “good literature is poison.” The nature and composition of this toxin, I leave to the executioner. And, perhaps, when it is my turn to administer the cup, I hope to wound the reader.