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The Transformations of Love

Edward L. Hart

Since time began, human beings have found themselves caught between two converging axioms. The first is that life is sweet; the second is that life is short. The resulting clash pits time against eternity. Our desire for the experience of life is insatiable, but our capacity for satisfaction is contained within the niggardly limits set by time and physical nature.

Traditionally there have been two ways to resolve the dilemma caused by the conflict between the desire to live and the brevity of life. The first solution is proposed by the Stoics, who simply reject the first axiom: the joys of life are denied. Having convinced ourselves that there is nothing to look forward to, death ceases to be dreadful and comes as the termination of boredom. The Epicureans, on the other hand, attack the second axiom, the one that says life is short. Their answer is to rationalize brevity by saying that it is relative. If time flies, said the Romans, seize the day. Andrew Marvell, in the poem "To His Coy Mistress," says that "though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run."¹ But the destination of the lathering horses pulling "Time's winged chariot" is still the grave. So, are we compelled to give up fast living as a solution to the dilemma? At best the fast life is a forlorn hope, though a hope of some kind is better than none. It is certainly better to double our experience of blooming cherry trees by going with A. E. Housman in the winter to see them "hung with snow"² than to move into the Stoic camp and deny the power of their beauty.

An axiom, say the dictionaries, is a statement that is generally accepted as true; and so our two axioms remain facing us in spite of all our fancy footwork aimed at eluding them. Life is sweet and it is short. Philosophy cannot prevent the mortal wound; it can only

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¹Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," *Andrew Marvell: Selected Poetry*, ed. Frank Kermode, Signet Classic Poetry Series, ed. John Hollander (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 77, lines 45-46.

²A. E. Housman, "Loveliest of Trees," *Modern British Poetry*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 95, st. 3, line 4.

apply a salve. Rasselas, visiting the philosopher whose only daughter has just died, asks: "Has wisdom no strength to arm the heart against calamity?" The philosopher replies: "What comfort can truth and reason afford me? Of what effect are they now, but to tell me that my daughter will not be restored."³ It is of mortal life that we are speaking, of course, and the religious promise of immortality leaves us facing the fact that the mortality we love and cling to must end.

One of our greatest regrets, as we contemplate a sweetly savored life passing rapidly away, is that such experiences as we have had should be lost. The contemplation produces a further realization: that most of those experiences are lost even before we die. Surely this realization must have been and must be a profound stimulus for the production of art. Death is defied by keeping something of ourselves alive, a thought voiced by Shakespeare in his eighteenth sonnet: when the mortal person being memorialized is put into the "eternal lines" of the poem, that person then becomes immortal by living as long as the poem lasts.⁴ At the lower end of the scale we begin the reclamation of fading experience by writing diaries, letters, and sketches. Such things capture experience inadequately; but at the upper end of the scale, the true artist succeeds in transforming the raw material of human life into the substance of immortal art.

The process of the transformation of the volatile, the evanescent, and the ephemeral into the enduring, especially as this process has been treated by British and American writers, is the subject I want to dwell on here. It is a subject that has fascinated the minds of great thinkers through the centuries. How does a block of stone become the writhing serpents and the anguished forms of the Laocoon? How do daubs of paint on a piece of canvas become a Rembrandt self-portrait? And how does plain black ink on sheets of plain white paper become the spellbinding experience of "The Tell-Tale Heart"? An explanation of the transformational power is required.

The force at work in art is puzzling to the rational mind because the product always exceeds the sum of the parts. The unaccountable excess, therefore, had to be added somehow during the process of creation. It was unthinkable to Plato that such unaccountable power was an everyday possession of the artist. It had to come from the outside, from the gods. "For all good poets," says Plato in the *Ion*,

³Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas Prince of Abissinia* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1926), p. 64.

⁴William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18, sonnets ed. Douglas Bush, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, Md.: Viking Press, Penguin Books, 1969), p. 1456, line 12.

“compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed.”⁵ This theory of inspiration has served generations of romantics, too many of whom, like E. A. Robinson’s Miniver Cheevy, have “cursed the commonplace”⁶ while waiting to be inspired, forgetting that art begins with the commonplace and transforms it into the uncommon. Through the perception of the Transcendentalists, however, the transcendent reality is both concealed by and revealed in the commonplace appearance.

The power to transform, when not conceived as inspiration, was bound at times to be attributed to magic. In his book *The Power of Satire*, Robert C. Elliott traces the belief of the ancients that the writer of satires possessed a supernatural power that he exercised in righteous indignation for the punishment of vice. Thus satire became a ritual for the exorcism of evil.⁷ The explanation of art as magic naturally extended to that branch of magic known as alchemy. Through supernatural power a base metal was to be transmuted into gold, just as, through analogy, the artist as alchemist transmutes the base materials of ordinary experience into the gold of art. In Yeats, the scene is more the refiner’s fire than the alchemist’s laboratory, though something of magic and of supernatural power remains in his imagery in “Sailing to Byzantium,” in which he asks the “sages standing in God’s holy fire” to “consume [his] heart away” and transform him into “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make.”⁸ The simple analogy of ore going through the refiner’s fire would not do, because that assumes that the gold was present in the ore all the time; but we have already seen that the creation of art results in a product greater than the sum of the parts: an unaccounted-for increment.

A contemporary countryman of Yeats, James Joyce, to the shock and horror of the true believer, compared the transmutation of common experience into art to the transmutation of the wafer into the flesh of Christ through the miracle of the mass. Here again an explanation is provided for the increment added during the process of creation. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus sees himself becoming “a priest of the eternal imagination transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of ever-living life” through the “discharging of a formal rite.”⁹ With Joyce,

⁵Plato, *Ion*, trans. B. Jowett, in *The Great Critics*, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976), p. 5.

⁶Edwin Arlington Robinson, “Miniver Cheevy,” in *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1939), p. 348, st. 6, line 1.

⁷Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 11.

⁸William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” in *Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962), p. 95, st. 3, lines 1, 5; st. 4, line 3.

⁹James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1944), p. 221.

however, the transformational power no longer comes from the old God, but from a new one; for he has made a religion of art with himself as priest. But you notice he has not made himself a god; and so that still leaves as a mystery the source of the power exercised by the priest.

It was not by accident that I mentioned the name of Yeats in connection with the attribution of mystical powers to the artist. Yeats has a good deal to say on the subject in a book called *Ideas of Good and Evil*, in which he gives Blake the credit for making a religion of art. "He announced the religion of art," writes William Butler Yeats about William Blake, "of which no man dreamed in the world about him; and he understood it more perfectly than the thousands of subtle spirits who have received its baptism in the world about us, because, in the beginning of important things . . . there is a moment when we understand more perfectly than we understand again until all is finished."¹⁰

Matthew Arnold is another who made a religion of art, though he arrived at his conclusion by following a different route than that followed by Blake or Yeats. Arnold thought that in his time the old forms of religious worship were failing: "Our religion has materialized itself in the fact . . . , and now the fact is failing it," he quotes himself as saying at the beginning of his essay "The Study of Poetry." And he concludes the quotation by saying, "The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry." The void left by the failure of the old religion is to be filled by the new religion of art. As time goes on, "mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to sustain us."¹¹ Arnold's emphasis has shifted from the creation of poetry to its use as a sacred text by readers; and if this is so, we still have the poet as a priest.

Hart Crane, in our own century, is more in the tradition of Blake and Yeats in centering attention again on the mystic power of the act of creation. In his "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge" from his longer work *The Bridge*, Crane points out that common laborers, not artists, built the bridge, but the bridge itself has become a symbol of spiritual achievement, a shrine: "O harp and altar, of the fury fused, / (How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)"¹² Between the "mere toil" of the workers and the emergence of the bridge as a

¹⁰William Butler Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 3d ed. (London: A. H. Bullen, 1917), p. 168.

¹¹Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry" was first printed as a general introduction to *The English Poets*, ed. T. H. Ward (London, 1880); reprinted in *The Victorian Age*, ed. John Wilson Bowyer and John Lee Brooks (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954), p. 521.

¹²Hart Crane, "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge," *The Bridge*, in *The Collected Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Waldo Frank (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1946), p. 4, st. 8, lines 1-2.

sacred product of art had to come the infusion of a mystical power to accomplish the transformation, just as the secret forces of yeast working in dough, coupled with the Promethean heat of an oven, transform a shapeless lump into the artistic achievement of a loaf of bread.

Being the instrument through which the sacred power was transmitted was an almost unbearable burden to Crane. In his poem "The Broken Tower" he compares himself to the tower holding the bells that perform the mystical function of gathering "God at dawn." And he has no choice but to ring the bells, for he is, as he says, "their sexton slave."¹³ The ringing of the bells is breaking down the tower, just as the effort to create, to be the transmitter of mystical truth, is breaking down the physical frame of the poet.

It is easy to see why the poet as the "sexton slave" required to gather "God at dawn" by ringing his mystical bells would want to facilitate the transmission of the message, always impassioned and preoccupied with ecstasy. Crane used alcohol freely, as others in a similar situation have used drugs. Drugs and magic have always been near allied. Faced with the incomprehensible fact that his daughter Desdemona has run away and married Othello, Brabantio accuses Othello of resorting to "spells and medicines bought of mountebanks."¹⁴ Often the drug was efficacious only because a spell had been placed upon it, though sometimes it was viewed having independent power. In either case, the drug or the spell worked, as did the magic spell of the mass for Joyce, to bring into the process of creation a power beyond that possessed by an ordinary human being. Another possible function of a drug in aiding creation might simply be that of rendering the poet passive so that outside powers could speak through him without the interference of his will. If the subject could be put in a trance without drugs, this would work just as well, as it did for Yeats, for whom the hand wrote automatically what the spirit dictated; this, however, is just another form of magic spell and emphasizes once more the belief that something beyond ordinary human understanding has to be interposed between mortal experience and immortal art.

Up to this point we have considered the facts that life is short and that since it is all we know of existence the preservation of some part of it through art is prized. We have considered also the fact that many poets and critics have concluded that the transformation of experience into art requires the interposition of a power beyond human

¹³Hart Crane, "The Broken Tower," in *ibid.*, p. 135, st. 3, lines 4 and 1.

¹⁴*Othello* I. iii. 61.

capacity. But does it? This is the question to be considered now. Down through history, from Aristotle on, there have been those who have put the emphasis on the craftsmanship of the artist rather than on some form of inspiration. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that poetry has its origins in two instincts: the first for imitation and the second for harmony and rhythm.¹⁵ His emphasis was on probability, structure, and rhetoric. Horace likewise emphasizes the skills of the artist, advocating restraint and advising the poet to put his manuscript away and keep it for nine years before publishing.¹⁶ For Horace, good poetry was the result of a combination of natural gifts and hard work.

In our own day the so-called New Critics carry on the tradition of Aristotle and answer "no" to the question of whether something beyond human power has to be called in for the creation of poetry. To them, the transformation is the result of craftsmanship. Mark Schorer, in an essay called "Technique as Discovery," states the case clearly: "The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique."¹⁷ Cleanth Brooks specifically rules out the substitution of art for religion. One of his "articles of faith" as a formalist critic is "that literature is not a surrogate for religion." It is clear Brooks is aware of the problem we have been concerned with, however, because he states in another article of faith "the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic."¹⁸ But where does that excess beyond logic come from? Can it be accounted for entirely by technique?

In answering the question just posed, I do not intend to probe the whole canon of the New Critics. I brought them into the picture solely to raise a question, and now that it is raised, I propose to pursue the answer without their further help. The propositions that follow, then, along with their order and their interpretation, are my own.

In order to interpret life by transforming its raw materials into art, surely the first thing the artist has to do is observe. Actually, observation is the starting point in all human studies, the sciences as well as the arts. Charles Darwin, studying life forms in the Galapagos Islands, and John Keats, wrenching language into a surprising form by his use of the word *bloom* as a transitive verb in his line from "To

¹⁵Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, in *Great Critics*, p. 31.

¹⁶Horace, *Epistle to the Pisos*, trans. James Harry and Sara Catron Smith, in *ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁷Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," *The Hudson Review*, 1948; reprinted in *The Modern Critical Spectrum*, ed. Gerald Jay and Nancy M. Goldberg (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 70.

¹⁸Cleanth Brooks, "The Formalist Critic," *The Kenyon Review*, 1951; reprinted in *Modern Critical Spectrum*, p. 1.

Autumn’’: “While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day”¹⁹—both achieved their startling results by careful observation and by the careful noting of subtle similarities and differences. The poet and the scientist see through different eyes, observing specific detail significant to each, though at times the two visions converge as they did, for instance, in da Vinci and in Thoreau; and perhaps the convergence is much more frequent than we suspect. An accurate and apt description of nature by a scientist often verges on, or becomes, poetry. A word such as *symmetry* means something quite different to a painter and to a physicist, but it has a deep meaning for both and, traced to the bottom of that depth, the two divergent meanings spring from a common source.

As the myriads of things seen by the artist settle in the memory, they begin to assume patterns of order, patterns that emerge more clearly as a simultaneous activity begins: the selecting of those details relevant to the pattern and the passing over of those details that are not. Or perhaps the process sometimes works in a reversed manner; as certain details—images, rhythms, or whatever—elbow their way into the consciousness, they demand the formation of a pattern to accommodate them. More than likely, as I suggested earlier, the processes of selection and of pattern-making occur simultaneously. At any rate, the two interact. Details are chosen to fit a pattern because they are representative details and enforce on the mind the conviction that the pattern is true; and the pattern itself is a composite of relevant detail.

The interaction of pattern and detail (or form and content) continues into the next phase of our analysis, that of organization or arrangement. In literature, as we read, one thing of necessity comes before another. The order can be one of time or of climax, or it can arise simply out of the effect of a certain juxtaposition. In *Henry IV, Part I*, we have a thematic alternation of two sets of scenes involving shadow and substance. In the first set, there is a real meeting between Hotspur and his wife, followed by an imaginary meeting between them as envisioned by Prince Hal. Soon afterward, in reversed order, there is an imaginary encounter between Prince Hal and his father the king (with Falstaff acting the part of the father), and this is followed shortly by the real meeting between Prince Hal and the king. This example illustrates the use of order in thematic arrangements; and the importance of order is equally obvious as we

¹⁹John Keats, “To Autumn,” in *Major British Writers*, ed. G. B. Harrison, enlarged ed., 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 2:357, st. 3, line 25.

return to a use already cited: the order of climax, which determines not only that there must be a gradual revelation up to the denouement, but that there must have been signposts in the form of foreshadowing all along the trail to build suspense and to tell us at the end that the outcome was inevitable and that we should have seen it from the beginning. By means of order, cause and effect become observable; and by means of order, details are arranged so as to frame each sequence, relate it to others, and make a whole of the unified parts.

The achieved wholeness of a work of art must have something of the intensity that life itself has. Our wonder at seeing and feeling that intensity is part of the surprise of art that gives rise to theories claiming extra-human powers for its creation. But our subject now is technique and an examination of how it contributes to artistic creation, since, to refer to Mark Schorer again, the difference between experience and art is technique. A number of techniques enable a poet to heighten the intensity of a statement. For one thing, the artist can use irony. Demonstrably, by the use of irony we can say two things and be understood to have communicated three. There is Henry Jones, for instance, who gives a stirring Fourth of July speech on patriotism but who fakes a heart condition to avoid the draft. You draw the conclusion yourself that he is a hypocrite, and that fact need not be spoken. In this way and in more subtle forms the writer increases the load of meaning carried by his words. Or take the example of symbols. A symbol is what it is and at the same time it is something else, thus multiplying the weight of meaning in the words. Moby Dick is a real whale, and at the same time he might be a symbol of God, while in another chapter his whiteness might symbolize evil. Thus the Protean shapes which symbols can assume make them capable of almost inexhaustible use. The magic of Prospero, in *The Tempest*, can be made to yield symbolic meaning for any age. For our day, the magic wand has been likened to science with its ability to dazzle us with external displays of wonders. And the forsaking of magic by Prospero symbolizes the recognition that greater wonder exists in ordinary human relations, in love, for instance, than in the launching of a spaceship.²⁰

In addition to irony and symbol, other forms of figurative language are also at the disposal of the literary artist. Metaphor is the most basic, and all the other types that have long Greek names are

²⁰See Harold C. Goddard, "The Meaning of *The Tempest*," in *The Creative Reader*, ed. R. W. Stallman and R. E. Watters (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1954), pp. 633-42.

somewhat in the nature of subdivisions. All involve comparisons of one thing to something that it is not. The two being compared are basically different but have something in common. We can say the steamer churned the water. You cannot make butter with a ship and you cannot go to sea in a churn, but the appearance of the water stirred up by the steamer is similar to that of cream being sloshed in a churn. If we have seen the one and not the other, the comparison has the effect of making the unknown known instantaneously. Or, if one of the things being compared is concrete and the other abstract, the figure has the capacity to make an abstraction immediately and vividly apprehensible by the senses, as happens, for example, when Macbeth says, to describe his anguish, "O, full of scorpions is my mind."²¹ We see and feel nothing on hearing the word *anguish*, but we can certainly see and feel a mind full of scorpions. By these and other devices the feelings as well as the intellect of a reader of literature become engaged so that the work becomes not just a statement about an experience but an experience itself, containing the kinds of intensity associated with real experience. There is an important difference between the experience of art and the daily experiences of life, however; the daily experiences of life fade rapidly and are lost while the experience of art is capable of being recaptured vividly again and again by generation after generation. The addition of technique—or whatever it is—has accomplished a remarkable transformation.

I do not intend to provide a comprehensive treatment of technique here by going on to cover the subjects of diction, word order, sentence structure, connotation, and the various devices of sound and rhythm used in poetry. I hope, rather, that the high points I have already exposed provide a kind of paradigm, enough exposure to enable us to ask again the question posed at the beginning of the discussion of technique.

Is technique by itself enough to explain the process by which raw life is turned into the finished product of art? In answering the question, we have certainly been impressed enough by technique to be able to say that it can do a great deal—and that statement by itself is a technique of irony known as understatement. We can probably say that without technique there can be no art—that technique is an essential ingredient in the transformational process. If this were not so, there would seem to be little justification for classes in creative writing. Browning apparently thought technique alone was not

²¹*Macbeth* III. ii. 36.

enough, for his "faultless painter," Andrea Del Sarto, lacks soul.²² But if the whole process of creation is to be thought of in terms of inspiration, where does one begin to teach it? So let us return to the basic question, is technique alone enough?

Even as we look at the evidence of those who emphasize technique, we encounter some disturbing gaps. Aristotle, for instance, in telling us that poetry has its origin in instincts for imitation and for harmony and rhythm, fails to tell us what instincts are and where they come from. And Horace, in telling us that good poetry is the result of a combination of natural gifts and hard work, leaves us with a similar question: the hard work can be directed toward technique, but where do natural gifts come from? Brooks, likewise, tells us "that the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic";²³ and in that excess we have again an unaccounted-for increment. Finally, in discussing the emergence of pattern, as details are selected during the creative process, we are left wondering where the pattern came from.

We could give one answer as to the origin of patterns, that they come from deep in the memory, from an activity at work in the unconscious mind. Alexander Pope, who came from a tradition emphasizing the importance of technique, should have, if any poet could have, told us that technique is self-sufficient. But he did not tell us that. Quite the contrary. In *An Essay on Criticism*, he says that in poetry "are nameless graces which no methods teach."²⁴ In the same work Pope seems to anticipate the notion that the patterns of art come from a deep unconscious source in the memory; these patterns, he writes, are "something, whose truth convinced at sight we find, / That gives us back the image of our mind."²⁵ This thought of Pope's is echoed by Keats in his well-known statement in a letter to a friend that the truth in poetry comes "almost as a remembrance."²⁶

All of these references to patterns coming into the consciousness of the poet from a deep source in memory are a preface, of course, to a discussion of archetypes. Modern archetypal criticism has two sources: *The Golden Bough* of Sir James George Frazer²⁷ and the

²²Robert Browning, "Andrea Del Sarto," in *Major British Writers*, 2:510-13.

²³Brooks, "The Formalist Critic," p. 1.

²⁴Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, in *Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 204, line 144.

²⁵Ibid., p. 208, lines 99-100.

²⁶John Keats to John Taylor in *Major British Writers*, 2:362.

²⁷James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 13 vols. (1890; reprint ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980). For a shorter version of this work, see James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abr. ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951).

concept of the "collective unconscious" developed by Carl Jung.²⁸ Frazer discovered that patterns of human behavior repeat themselves in myths from cultures widely separated and without contact. Myths, therefore, become keys to an understanding of human behavior. One of the most pervasive of these patterns, or archetypes, for example, is that of the scapegoat; it has existed from time immemorial, as revealed in ancient myth and ritual, and it appears today as widespread as in the past. Whenever an evil is discovered in our midst, our first reaction is to find a guilty person to bear the blame, and by ritually punishing that person we rid ourselves of our collective guilt. Jung explained these archetypal patterns of behavior by saying that the history of the race persists in the unconscious mind of all people. Thus Pope and Keats reached for their patterns of truth into so deep a pool of memory that they cannot explain the origin. And when these same patterns are presented to readers, each reader is stirred by a racial memory that is so deep in the unconscious that he is perplexed to explain why he is stirred. The memory might be of something as seemingly simple as a rhythm or a color, or it might be as complex as a pattern of behavior. For the poet, the important thing is that the "image of our mind" presented in the poem has to be precisely as Pope worded it, an "image of *our* mind," not just of the poet's mind. The universality of the poet's appeal stems from the fact that the author has drawn his image out of the collective unconscious, the world-spirit, or "spiritus mundi," as Yeats called it in "The Second Coming."

The archetypalists present us with an explanation of the source of the transformational power of art to which we should be able to say, here at last is a theory based on natural phenomena: no more magic, no more mystery. But as we look more closely, we cannot say that. We are still left with a mystery as profound as ever, surrounded by questions as unanswerable as ever. The dark unfathomable pool of the unconscious and the artist fishing on its bank in order to draw forth an archetypal fish—this is certainly an image as immersed in magic as that of the alchemist wreathed in fumes from his retorts or that, even further back in history, of the oracles of Delphi stupefying themselves over fumaroles in the temple of Apollo so that their conscious minds cannot interfere with the transmission of the message from the god.

Here we are again, it seems, at the point where we began, still confronting the two axioms, one of which says that we love life and

²⁸Carl Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

the other, that we cannot keep it for long. And art is still there resolving the dilemma to a degree by offering to transform the well-loved but transitory experience of life into the enduring substance of art: but *how* remains the question. Still, we are not quite back where we started in that by now we are convinced there is some kind of power, something beyond technique, an excess beyond logic, required to transmute experience into art. But the power is not outside human life; it is inside it. The power is the power of life itself: grand, awesome, comic, tragic, superb, pitiful—the whole range of adjectives supplied by our vocabularies, and more. Life is too great to be contained in any system, and the forms of art that reflect it have constantly to be reshaped and the old molds redesigned and recast to hold its transcended vision if for only a moment. Whenever something new is added to an existing order, says T. S. Eliot in his well-known essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,”²⁹ the whole order has to be changed to accommodate it; thus the past is altered by the present. Art succeeds for a time in holding life in an expression of it, but life is too powerful, too dynamic, too multifarious to be contained. That same force that compels us to love life in the first place is ample to provide the power for the transformation of its unending manifestations into art. If life itself does not offer mystery enough to satisfy us, it is because we are singularly insensitive.

Resorting to magic as an explanation of the incomprehensible may imply a *deus ex machina* working behind the scenes and pulling hidden wires to achieve contrived effects. But it is hard for us human beings, caught in the experience of human life, to conjure up anything that is really outside or beyond the fabric of our humanness. As a result, our attempts at magical interpretations often become symbolic of forces in life that we cannot understand or do not want to understand. Take as an example the love potion in the Tristram and Iseult legend. The love is a forbidden one. To let it go forward in naturalistic terms would render the participants contemptible, incapable of controlling their passions. But those who invented the legend wanted an explanation that would justify the unlawful play of their own passions, and their unconscious desires were met by a magic potion which deprived the participants of will and hence of guilt or responsibility. Throughout the history of courtly love, this magic was conferred on adulterous passion, conveniently clearing those involved of moral responsibility. In this example, as in most others, we find that magical interpretations may have seemed intended as an escape

²⁹T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Criticism: The Major Statements*, pp. 474–82.

from life but that they double back upon themselves and thrust us once more into the context of the life force. That life force exerted a greater pull upon Yeats than did the magic of the crucible in "Sailing to Byzantium."³⁰ In his later poem "Byzantium," Yeats disavowed the artifice of the gold bird for the "mire and blood" of reality.³¹ Two of Tennyson's creations, the Lady of Shalott³² and Tithonus,³³ chose mortal life over a magical immortality. To human beings the life force exerts a pull no one can escape except through death.

The term *life force* seems pretentious. Let us give the more familiar name *love* to that force which bends us inexorably to life. Defined thus, it is the same term we began our first axiom with: the axiom that we love life. There are so few exceptions to our saying that we love life that the statement remains axiomatic; and being bound fast to life by love the artist tries to come to a full realization of it and thus preserves it through a power that love of life itself confers, enabling the artist to perform the miracle of transmuting the ore of common experience into the gold of art. We have moved from magic to miracles.

It should not surprise us that love performs miracles in art since it performs miracles in so many other areas of life. In a religious sense, it transforms the ugliness of hatred into the beauty of peace through forgiveness. In human growth, it transforms a shriveled soul, locked in the husk of its own ego, into a mature loving and caring man or woman. And even in a biological sense it is the force recognized by Dylan Thomas "that through the green fuse drives the flower,"³⁴ the force that causes a seed to respond to moisture, warmth, and light. And who can say that such a response is not love or that the magnificence of a plant in bloom is not a response of joy to its existence. Some people have found this to be true to the point that they talk to plants, understandable but also unnecessary once we recognize that love is not limited to the brain.

Love takes surprising turns in art, sometimes appearing almost as its opposite, again not surprising since the spectrum of its manifestations is not an arc of one hundred eighty degrees but a full circle in which opposites merge, as illustrated in a modern poem called "Love Song: I and Thou" by Alan Dugan:

³⁰Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in *Selected Poems and Two Plays*, p. 95.

³¹William Butler Yeats, "Byzantium," in *ibid.*, p. 132, st. 3, line 24.

³²Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott," in *Major British Writers*, 2:384-86.

³³Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Tithonus," in *ibid.*, 2:396-97.

³⁴Dylan Thomas, "That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (London: J. N. Dent & Sons, 1952), p. 9, line 1.

Nothing is plumb, level or square:
 the studs are bowed, the joists
 are shaky by nature, no piece fits
 any other piece without a gap
 or pinch, and bent nails
 dance all over the surfacing
 like maggots. By Christ
 I am no carpenter. I built
 the roof for myself, the walls
 for myself, the floors
 for myself, and got
 hung up in it myself. I
 danced with a purple thumb
 at this house-warming, drunk
 with my prime whiskey: rage.
 Oh I spat rage's nails
 into the frame-up of my work:
 it held. It settled plumb,
 level, solid, square and true
 for that great moment. Then
 it screamed and went on through
 skewing as wrong the other way.
 God damned it. This is hell,
 but I planned it, I sawed it,
 I nailed it, and I
 will live in it until it kills me.
 I can nail my left palm
 to the left-hand cross-piece but
 I can't do everything myself.
 I need a hand to nail the right,
 a help, a love, a you, a wife.³⁵

But Dugan cannot deceive us into believing that this is hate. True, in this strangest of love songs he sees life as a cross to which he can nail himself only with a little help—that of a wife to hammer the last nail. But the tenacity with which he clings to life betrays the truth that, in his own words, he is “hung up” on life and that he will live it out until it kills him. There is a fierce clinging here that we have to call love, as the author himself called it in his title: neither

³⁵Alan Dugan, “Love Song: I and Thou,” in *Poems* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 12; reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973), pp. 1037–38. Used by permission.

the mawkish and conventional pose of Keats to "have been half in love with easeful Death"³⁶ nor the denial of Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton that becomes real death, and therefore life, since the only significance death has is given to it by the life that it ends. In addition to the expression of a tenacious clinging to life, Dugan's poem also has a reference to Christ, to being a carpenter, and to being crucified. The speaker does not really compare himself to Christ; but the poem, nevertheless, provides its own kind of redemption in its acceptance of life for its own sake and on its own terms, making the poem itself a transformation achieved through love.

Dugan's poem was perhaps an extreme example of my thesis that love is the transformational power in art: love of life, love of this world, love of the exercise of a craft. To balance the effect, I turn in conclusion to another poem, one more familiar in its approach. The author of this poem is James Wright; the title of his poem is "A Blessing." I have chosen my examples from contemporary American authors to demonstrate that the powers we have been discussing are neither dead nor asleep. Here is "A Blessing":

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
 Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
 And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
 Darken with kindness.
 They have come gladly out of the willows
 To welcome my friend and me.
 We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
 Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
 They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
 That we have come.
 They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
 There is no loneliness like theirs.
 At home once more,
 They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
 I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
 For she has walked over to me
 And nuzzled my left hand.
 She is black and white,
 Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
 And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
 That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

³⁶John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," in *Major British Writers*, 2:344, st. 6, line 52.

Suddenly I realize
 That if I stepped out of my body I would break
 Into blossom.³⁷

The miracle is performed. That which was an ordinary experience of stopping to look at the horses has been transmuted into a lasting experience capable of moving us and those who will replace us. There is no doubt but that the experience has undergone sea changes during the process of transmutation. Such sea changes are the mark and the stamp of that mysterious power in life that wants to save something of itself from annihilation and so touches a plain object and, out of love, confers on it immortality. The transformational power of love manifest in art is miraculous because life is a miracle.

³⁷James Wright, "A Blessing," in *Poetry* 97 (October 1960–March 1961): 343; reprinted in *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, pp. 1180–81. Used by permission.