

The Creative Impulse

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The first of our IWP panels helped to kick start my thoughts about the Creative Impulse. Listening to the papers then I was struck by the division the speakers proposed: Fantasy and Reality. Both sides of the equation were full of meaning for me. Reality, the real – that seems to me the thing writing must feed from, the realm it should struggle to represent. And in this struggling it would gain its difficult victories. It would go to the real as to its recalcitrant home. It would attempt to render the world – so gloriously and terribly at ease with itself and *in place* – render it into the unstable element of human discourse, and through the spells and conventions of art make another place where the world might abide. Those spells and conventions are what lead me to the second term in that earlier panel’s brief: Fantasy.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge made a distinction between two aspects of the creative mind: between Fancy and Imagination. I take Fantasy to be a version of Coleridge’s Fancy – a faculty that sports with unlikelihood, that uses its material as the potter his/her clay, cuffing it, freely shaping, ordaining form unto shapelessness. It’s what the entertainment industry does; it’s an aspect of that desperate and absolute human sovereignty that has brought us so much world-woe, and so much bad art. I would imagine a person might *decide*, simply, to write out of this faculty – that the mere will can launch Fancy’s products.

The other Coleridgean faculty, of Imagination, is something else again. He coined a word for it: it is an *esemplastic* power, one that shapes in collusion with its material, that sees and artfully frees the figure sleeping in the marble, that carves rather than moulds and casts. So that I think it was when I stopped writing mere word poems, poems molding the empty sufficiency of the *merely* human, that I started writing something half decent. I looked up from the page and found an inexhaustible subject – the world’s body, out of which poems might come. But not as I willed them, not at the behest of mere will, caprice, Fancy, Fantasy.

So way back my hand was stayed by the world. I think it was such staying that Mallarme had in mind when he said that in his work he had tried to raise up a page to the starry heavens; Wallace Stevens too, when he asked that poetry be “the bread of faithful speech.” Such bread is the Real in the deepest and widest sense, and it is what that nervous and fantastical animal Man needs today perhaps more than ever before.