

Marvin VICTOR

The Day I Killed the Muse

First off, I build my characters, taking notes on them in little notebooks I carry with me wherever I go. Then I let myself be worked over by them while I myself work on them. I tame them, causing them to bend under the action of time – and under my own time, making them ageless, immortal – I become at once their master and their accomplice, which means understanding the farthest reaches of their dreams, their ways of being, of inhabiting the world. For my characters, who one might well believe have no history, are as often as not called forth by the tiny details that point back to their negation.

Between thirteen and seventeen I wanted to write like a mad dog, without stopping, in one single jet, a single breath, like a stream, believing that this was where my salvation lay, given that I had from my very early years aimed at becoming a great writer. Unfortunately though, if that sort of thing works for others, it didn't for me. I was obsessed by the figure of the Muse, hoping she would help me find, somehow, a facility, a power, a gift for writing. What I didn't know, however, was that the word "inspiration" has its roots in the Latin *in spiritum*, meaning, literally, "to have God inside you"; nor did I know that this belief, widespread in antiquity, implied that artistic inspiration poured forth from Heavens, which would in my case be a form of imposture, a joke, especially when I think about the authors of bad books, that is to say the Devil who would dwell in them all...

Bye Bye *In Spiritum*

Having made the discovery of this definition, I realized that the figure of the Muse was nothing but a mix-up, an illusion, certainly the dream of a child afraid to enter the stirring and sleepless nights of literary creation. This made me sad, thinking I was a good-for-nothing, not made for this sort of thing, that I didn't have the gift of speech that would allow me to become a *beau parleur*, a good speaker, or at least a storyteller, having always been envious of people who were masters of words, who had syntax, metaphors, proverbs, rare quotes, beautiful figures of speech at their fingertips – in other words, the heart of a language.

The Breath of My Masters

And then I stopped dreaming—though I didn't give up on the dream, but only took it further along, killing the Muse. I had become convinced by the idea that books are born from books and that there is no such thing as a spontaneous writer. So I started to read, and today I still can say that my writer rules are founded on my literary memory, and while I never succeeded in writing like a mad dog, for all my dreams, I instead came to write slowly, painfully, to the point of sometimes doubting my true vocation, until the moment when the completed work finally proves me wrong.

To me, each book demands from me a new apprenticeship to writing, and I don't need to reinvent my methods but to find a new language, even though I suspect that every one of my books is no more than a rewrite of one I have already written, like in the myth of the first love in which one searches for the same person in each new encounter. That very memory stops me from finding anything clever in my poor sentences, paragraphs and chapters, which I work and rework without rest, and in which there is no trace of genius, only a slight gloss of intelligent lies, to others

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 23, 2011:

Kevin Bloom (S. Africa), Fabienne Kanor (France), Kgebetli Moele (S. Africa),
Usha K.R. (India), Moshe Sakal (Israel), Marvin Victor (Haiti), and Zhang Yueran (China)

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and to myself, and of my inner thoughts, which I owe only to my capacity to observe both human bitchiness and the beauty of life at the same time, thanks to continuous refining and burnishing, unless - and this seems most plausible - it is thanks to the breath of my masters whom I love to the point of being, at times, on the verge of tears. Those books whose pages whisper in my head like the voice of a mother, or rather a lover, comforting me in the middle of a dark night. To be in the company of these paper beings, that is to say, the phantoms I prefer to my fellow human beings, or in any case in whom I have so much more confidence: yes, the writers (Proust, Faulkner, Jacques Stephen Alexis, Balzac, Tolstoy, Kundera, Dos Passos, Henry Miller, Marquez, Céline, Borges, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Pessoa, Kawabata, and others), the writers who have joyously taken over the place of the murdered Muse, sacrificed on the altar of the Time I've spent building my literary memory, and whose existence has proven as unlikely as fairy tales for children. Yes, by their force, their quality, and the beauty of their sentences, they reinforced my sense of literature, a feeling I think every writer must have: that very same shiver in our flesh and our blood that approaches the experience of a truly great love.

Translated from the French by Nataša Ďurovičová