

Literature Vis-à-vis Other Arts

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This may or may not be a new approach---at any rate, my creative experience over the past 30 years demonstrates something that people may forget to notice about creative pluralism. First, among all the modes for expressing feelings and thoughts, speech is the most basic: it is the medium of discourse. Other modes include the written word, dance, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and clothing design. All these modes are vehicles for conveying our inner hearts. These vehicles are tools with various functions which we master. How many tools can each person master?

I believe this has to do with self-development. I think it is possible to master three or four expressive tools, and then a person runs into limits of time and energy. But for several centuries, people have been praising and rewarding the creative types who utilize one tool to an ultimate degree. There is nothing wrong with this, but it ignores the manifold nature of inspiration. What is the manifold nature of inspiration? I mean that the brain produces all kinds of inspiration, and you can't just standardize this variety with the tool of your choice. That is, inspirations produced by one brain require different kinds of expressive tools. Some inspirations are suited to expression in music; some are suited to poems.... If a person only masters one tool, for instance the poetic mode, then his inspirations about color can only be expressed in poems, but not in the more hospitable medium of painting. I don't believe poets who say their inspirations are only expressible in poems, or painters who say they can only be expressed in painting. This is like saying that when a poet has a visual inspiration, somehow he has to express that in a poem, or a painter has to express a musical intuition on canvas. But life is rich and many-faceted, and when you join in cultural events or do some reading, this will stir up your own inspiration. Therefore inspiration is rich and many-faceted too. If you insist that the inspiration stirred by music, painting, reading, and daily life is fodder for the single tool you've mastered, it's inevitable that some inspiration will end up being cast aside or used forcibly.

I'll give an example. You have an inspiration about color and line that was stirred up by a painting, but your specialty is writing poems. You may give up that inspiration, just like that, since you feel you lack the skill to express it. Or you may use a poem to express the painting which takes shape in your mind. The product will probably surely be an interpretation of this painting, not a first-hand creation. It will be shaped forcibly, as a descriptive explanation, because you will be telling people about the painting in your head, which they can't see. If you master some drawing skills along with your poetry, you can express that inspiration directly with a painting. Thus I feel that mastering a few expressive skills lets you utilize more of your inspiration, which will develop your brain activity and make for less waste. However, as I mentioned earlier, there are limits to a person's time and energy. Only a person engaging in full-time creative work can find time and energy for multi-faceted expression. As for a person whose job is unrelated to creative work, just finding time and energy to master one artistic mode is already impressive.

I am lucky, because I've been able to devote every bit of energy to creative pursuits, so I've been able to master several expressive tools. Thus I use fiction, poetry, painting, and photography to express what inspiration I have. For instance, once while doing a painting I had an inspiration about fishhooks, which I found hard to express in painting. The best, most accurate way to express it was in a poem, so I'd like to read the following:

FISHHOOK

After all these years of waiting
This fishhook of mine
In the pond without fish
Starts swimming for itself
Then after more years of swimming
With a look of resignation
It gulps itself down

Can you imagine a painted image of a fishhook swallowing itself? Not wanting to force it, I felt that a poem would express this most precisely. Another example is a painting of mine---a paper fan to which I attached an electric cord. This expresses a historical process that led from paper fans to electric fans, and then air conditioning. When looking at such a painting, do you feel that words or music can express what's in it? The answer is no.

In conclusion, what I've said shows that pluralism of inspiration requires pluralism of expressive vehicles. When dealing with inspirations surging up in my mind, I use stories or poems to express those suited to words; I use painting or photography to express those suited to visible images. As for the ones suited to dance or music, I have to let them go, or perhaps describe them to friends who work in a music or dance medium. Maybe they will be helpful. I have a habit of recording inspiration in words, because inspiration is fleeting. When it surges up, the first thing is to make a record. Then later I see which medium I'll use to expand it: poetry, stories, essays, painting, or photography.

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