

The Artist's Affliction

Taney Roniger

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Concerning artists and the various mythologies surrounding them, few notions can be more tired or more loathsome than that of the "suffering artist." We are all familiar with the image: the pale and disheveled, black-clad and angst-ridden professional sufferer whose genius is directly proportional to the degree of his inner torment. The implication of this sorry image of the artist is, of course, that one needs to be "tortured by demons," to be destitute and anguished, to make great works of art. And further, that should the artist dare to experience joy, or exuberance, or ecstatic thrill, or anything else on that side of the spectrum of human emotion, his entire identity will dissolve into nothingness, his creative genius gone with it.

To be sure, there are many among us who have occasionally indulged in this readymade image. But by and large these episodes of conspicuous misery are little more than spasms of a defiant narcissism fabricated to mask other things (insecurity about one's work, to name just one). Anyone who has ever experienced the gut-wrenching pain of real depression, or the desperate existential panic of real anxiety, or the debilitating whole-body fatigue of real grief, knows that in these circumstances there is nothing further from one's mind than the creation of great works of art. For pain consumes every bit of energy one has—creative and otherwise—and shrinks one's world until there is nothing left but itself. Genuine psychological distress is simply not conducive to good work and should forever be divorced from ideas about creativity.

That said, the artist does suffer. But the ways in which he does are more subtle, more private, and more deeply internal than anything that could be conveyed through histrionics. First, setting aside the very real but ultimately less significant fact of career suffering—the chronic sense of anxiety the artist carries around with him in the absence of external success, and that same anxiety when he manages to achieve it, only now for different reasons—there is a certain intense loneliness inherent in what the artist does that can be neither avoided nor overcome. Because this loneliness is so fundamental to the artist's being an artist, it seems to constitute a category of suffering all its own. While it is true that much of the artist's activities require that he be literally alone—in the studio, for hours and days on end—the real loneliness is in the nature of his "vision" or "voice." For his work comes from a place so deep inside himself that very often even he does not fully understand it. In spite of this—or perhaps because of it—he spends his life striving to articulate this vision as best he can, more often failing than succeeding, and always with the knowledge that no matter how much his work may be appreciated from without, the entirety of his vision—whole, unarticulated—will always remain unseen and unknown to the outside world.

Another kind of suffering with which the artist is intimately familiar is the kind relating to what may be called the life sacrifices. These consist in the forsaking of a whole host of things: usually of general luxury; often of family; more often of things like health insurance and access to good medical care; and almost always of financial security. In short, the artist exchanges all the things that would by conventional standards constitute "the good life" for an alternate life, one that

consists largely in working alone inside a room, day after day, for the sole purpose of articulating a vision which, even if finally articulable, the world could almost certainly do without.

The fact that there are and have always been artists—especially in today's culture, whose mainstream values run directly counter to the values espoused by most artists—would seem to obviate the need to ask the question: Is it worth it? Is being an artist worth all the loneliness, the privation, the sacrifices, and the risks attached to this strange occupation? But the question is worth asking, because it seems the answer is somewhat more complex than we might have anticipated—that it is in fact two-tiered rather than singular. On the immediate level, the answer given by most artists would no doubt be an emphatic *yes*: Indeed the rewards of being an artist are greater than the various kinds of suffering it entails. This is not surprising. In fact, it would not even be surprising to find many of those answering in the affirmative also admitting to having had certain transcendent moments in which the sheer absurdity of what they do became glaringly evident, and in which this absurdity—and their moment of rascalian delight in it—felt like a vindication of sorts over society's scorn for the uselessness of their activities.

The higher aspect of the answer brings us to the artist's affliction, which is categorically separate from his suffering and vastly more interesting. In contrast to the suffering, which is a function of the artist's sense of alienation from the rest of the world, the affliction arises from a relationship that is far less easily defined and less clearly binary than self-versus-world. The affliction begins when the artist recognizes that he is not entirely in control of his life—that he seems, in fact, to be driven toward his work by a force somehow *other* than himself. For many artists, this awareness does not come all at once, but gradually, and often it is most clearly present in times of acute difficulty, when one is mired in artistic problems and complications for which no solution is foreseeable. For these are the moments in which one is most apt to ask oneself: *Why this life? Why is it that I spend my days creating difficult problems for myself so I can agonize over their solutions? Surely there are better ways to conduct a life.* Nevertheless, one finds oneself going back to the studio, back into the self-generated problems, with a determination that seems to have a mind of its own. And with each of these returns, the knowledge sinks deeper into the bones: one is not really master of one's own house; one is not the driver but the driven.

Further, whatever it is that fuels the artist's obsessive preoccupation with his work knows nothing of consummation or closure. No amount of successes—either private or publicly acknowledged—can convince it to cease and desist, for notions like accomplishment and completion and culmination are foreign to it. Failure, too, seems to leave it curiously undaunted; whole months and even years can pass during which there is little else but failure for the artist on all fronts, and yet, miraculously, the drive to continue on—to keep generating problems and agonizing over their solutions—remains entirely intact, as charged with urgency as ever. To be driven is to be possessed of an insatiable hunger whose constant gnawing steers the body toward the means of its satisfaction, only to find those means forever inadequate to fill its infinite void.

The artist might try at some point to fight this drive of his by any number of means at his disposal. He might decide, for example, to attempt its full suppression by standing up against it and defiantly committing himself to the pursuit of more sensible things. If he is sufficiently skilled, he might even try to force a redirection of his obsessive nature by becoming wholly absorbed in another kind of work—one, perhaps, for which he is sure to receive the manic applause of all of society. But for one natively endowed with a drive to create, these efforts will only plunge him into a deeper order of suffering. Sooner or later he is sure to recognize that the

rewards of a career in advertising (or marketing, or accounting), no matter how abundant, amount in his hands to little more than the cardboard real estate one wins in a cheap board game. Though he may be the envy of his fellow players, the internal emptiness he feels will only be deepened each day by the uncomprehending eyes with which his despair is met by them.

One way or another, the artist returns to his work—and begins to accept that he is possessed of an internal necessity that demands it. For most, it is a long and often tortuous process in which the illusion of having so many choices is eroded, little by little, until one is left with only one choice: to pursue one's work, or to be miserable. There is scant room left for negotiation at this point, all conceivable attempts at bargaining having proven futile. In the end, the choice is easy.

But being driven by a kind of force ulterior to oneself, menacing as it may be, does not by itself constitute the affliction. The dis-ease with which the artist is afflicted is a kind of cognitive split or perpetual interior dissonance in which the drivenness plays one of two parts. On the other side of the split, in diametrical opposition to the drive, is the force exerted by the artist's self-concept: his sense of himself as an individual agent acting in and on the world. While it is generally this aspect of the artist—his ego—that is held responsible for his notoriously strong (read: difficult) personality, very little acknowledgement is made of the interior context in which this ego operates—namely, that of a sustained and unrelenting contradiction. For while the artist's ego tells him one thing—that he creates, that he makes work worthy of a career, that his "vision" is the expression of his intelligence and his unique character—he knows that in fact things are otherwise. In spite of his ego, he knows that the things he creates come not from that ego but from that *other*, from the ulterior voice doing the driving. Further, he knows that this is more than a simple case of distorted attribution—of the ego being given (or seizing) credit for things it had only a bystander's role in doing—but that in truth it is only in the ego's total absence that his work is made possible.

A brief elaboration of what is here being called the artist's ego will further illuminate the situation. The ego of the artist differs only in degree and not kind from that of the non-artist. Both have their roots in a concept no less basic to our cultural inheritance* than the primacy of the individual, and this is the Cartesian self-concept. As a culture we tend, in form true to Descartes' dictum, to affirm our existence by thinking, and to place the self in that aspect or function in us which does the thinking. Thus located, everything to which one attaches the concept "I"—one's entire identity—is identified with the thinking authority inside the head, the voice that issues orders, makes judgements, and provides a running commentary on one's world. Anything falling outside the confines of this self-designated center is deemed non-self and therefore subject to the ego's commands. So the thinking self begins by thinking it is lord and master of the self, and from there it is but a small step into further delusions of grandeur. Ego-centric to begin with, the ego of the artist becomes all the more grandiose when the artist commits himself to a life of making art. For although there is an argument to be made for the notion that the artist's exorbitant narcissism precedes his becoming an artist—that it is more primary than his artistry—there is indeed something about artmaking that is inherently narcissistic which fuels and further enlarges his ego.

What is it that the artist does that so further disfigures his ego? In the simplest of terms, the artist creates things that did not before exist out of things that did. Chronically dissatisfied with the

* I speak only for those of us of Western heritage. For artists in non-Occidental cultures the situation is almost certain to differ.

current arrangement of things, the artist reorders, reconfigures, and remakes the world into arrangements he deems superior to the prior state of things. Because, among other reasons, he remakes rather than makes (I cannot think of a single instance in which an artist has *literally* made something out of nothing), he is not God, but he can certainly feel that he is. For there is indeed something God-like about what the artist does: he creates things, and at the end of each day he stands back to behold them. And, on a good day, he sees that they are very good...

But perhaps alchemy is a better metaphor for what the artist does. Beginning with materials that are in themselves worthless, the artist subjects his chosen matter to a series of perturbations—it is mixed, brushed, pushed, twisted, turned, exposed to irritants, etc.—until the desired transmutation has occurred; the base matter has been spun into gold. The same holds for those artists whose primary medium is immaterial (e.g., light, sound, etc.); here too the artist begins with perfectly mundane phenomena which, when subjected to his rearrangements, undergo the alchemical transformation and become works of precious rarity and great value.

Nothing affirms the quasi-magical quality of the creative act more clearly than when it is cursedly reversed on the artist—when a piece that had been going well, a piece in which he had invested much time and energy, begins to turn south. It can happen gradually or suddenly, but by whatever process that unmistakable point is reached where it is clear that nothing more can be done to save the piece from failure. The feeling can be uncanny, for now this concoction in the center of the room which had once shone with such radiant promise has turned, as if by reverse alchemy, into an aggregate of matter as base and as worthless as the original materials with which it was constructed. But the negative serves to affirm the positive; the sublimity of a successful piece is every bit as miraculous, every bit as seemingly impossible, as the wretched reversal undergone by a failure.

Given that it is the artist's daily business to conduct these feats, it is no wonder at all that his ego swells. And there is much in contemporary society to reinforce the disfigurement. Especially in America, where the cult of personality saturates every stratum of culture (not excluding the "high culture" domains of the art world and academia), it has become commonplace to be celebrated not for anything one really does or is but solely for the power of one's image, for the representation of self manufactured by the ego and broadcast for all to see. The complicity of the Cartesian thinker in creating this climate of image-centrism is undeniable; obsessed with defining itself, with rendering itself distinct from the rest of the world, its full-time job is to maintain an image of its own power and mastery convincing enough to sustain its existence. In other words, after thinking itself into existence, the thinker assigns itself the task of ceaseless self-perpetuation, and indeed there is no better way to affirm one's existence than to cast it outward and have it reflected back in the eyes of admiring beholders.

The artist's ego, swimming in a sea of encouragement from without, becomes all the more intransigent if the artist manages to achieve any kind of public success—and more still when this means that his work is worth money. For as a matter of course, any applause the artist receives for his work will be taken by the ego as further evidence of its regal status: *its* creative genius willed things into existence, *its* body followed *its* commands, and now the external world recognizes *its* achievements.

But with or without the higher fortress of external success, the ego conceals the artist's uncomfortable secret. Just behind its facade lurks another reality, which is the knowledge of a

kind of power with which all the ego's bravado and all its claims of self-importance are fundamentally irreconcilable. But what is invisible from the outside is not merely a tension between two internal authorities—the immediate voice of the ego and the ulterior voice that is the driver and the source of the artist's creativity—but indeed something far more dramatic. For art is not born of the tension between two symmetrical powers but of a kind of opening that emerges after the complete eclipsing of the lesser by the greater.

In order for anything worthy of being called art to come into being, the thinker must be silenced. This is no small feat, as anyone who has ever tried meditation knows all too well. The thinker is nothing if not persistent—and devious, shrewd, and cunning. It will spare no expense to stay alive, survival being the name of its game. *Cogito ergo sum*: the logic encapsulated in the dictum necessitates this desperation, the implication being that if the thinker stops thinking, the self will cease to exist. But the logic is as impeccable as it is wrong, for outside the tiny point that is the thinker lies a vast ocean of selfhood containing everything that thought is not. Outside that tiny point lies all one's unconscious material, all the internal autonomic processes, the so-called primary processes of perception, the higher-order intellect that is the source of insight and intuition, and the ever-changing field of environmental information which partially shapes and re-shapes the self with each passing moment. Although ever-present, this expanded self—be it called "mind" or anything else—is only accessible to awareness when the thinker is absent. And since it is the ground from which art arises, a curious act of self-annihilation must be performed each time the artist is to make art.

The artist's life, then, is in some sense a life of multiple, repeated, usually silent and largely uncelebrated suicides. The act takes place within the confines of the artist's sanctum, his studio, so it bears no witnesses. It begins when, upon entering the room each day, the artist finds himself surrounded by a grand affirmation of his artishood: all the familiar props and tools, the stacks and piles of raw materials, the finished and unfinished pieces. The evidence is conclusive: here is a place where creation happens, and now the actor—the individual whose agency makes things happen—has arrived. But the ego's initial thrill is short-lived, for the Cartesian thinker is also raging. Very quickly the critical questions set in: *Does all this justify my existence? Does it meet the soaring standards of my narcissism? What would others think of it? What would the art world think? Is my newer work better than my older? Is it original, or is it too mired in its influences? A piece in progress one had felt elated about the day before suddenly seems awkward, wrong. Another piece, a finished one, bears a flaw one had until now failed to notice. And how is it that in that lifeless stack of matter over in the corner one could have only yesterday foreseen an exciting new piece? Nothing is right anymore, and everything calls out for the actor to act.*

Determined to set things right, the actor begins—somewhere, anywhere. Anxious, eager to gain control, and acutely self-conscious, the thinker proceeds with its analyses and criticisms, for its pride is at stake here; it cannot accept wrong things being attached to it, and everything that happens in this room is an extension of itself and a part of its image. Actions proceed, and time passes. With each overly controlled move it makes, the ego becomes more frustrated; it becomes clear that the ego's stranglehold on the problems is only pushing their solutions further out of sight. Soon the artist finds himself locked outside his own work; it is as though the work were not his at all belonged to somebody with talents far superior to his own. But since clearly it *is* his work (if not *his*, then whose?), there is nothing to do but forge onward. Then, slowly, something else begins to emerge, and as its presence grows the volume of the raging voice begins to diminish. As things are arranged and rearranged, the awareness sets in that it is now the ulterior

voice that is guiding the artist's moves and assessing their value, and that although still protesting violently, the thinker has been pushed backstage. Finally, if all the intangibles are in place, the point is reached where nothing more can be heard from the thinker. The corpse is removed from the theatre, and now the real drama can begin.

None of this is to suggest that thought *per se* does not participate in artistic creation, for clearly it does. Once the self has been wrest apart from the thinker, thought becomes but another tool at the self's disposal. The issue is really one of identification; with the self no longer identified with or attached to thought, it is freed to become identified with sources of knowledge of which the ego is ignorant. With the dethroning of the thinker, the self is dislocated from inside the tiny point that constitutes thought and projected outward, into a space much vaster, more diffuse, and far more intelligent than thought. The movement is centrifugal—and also ecstatic (literally, standing outside). It is an experience of ecstasy in which one loses oneself and gains everything else.

Who—or what—is this *other* in whose presence the Cartesian thinker is dissolved? To those so inclined, it is none other than God, whose presence can only be apprehended in moments when the self has been emptied of itself. But there are alternate ways of understanding it. To those of us otherwise inclined, this "force" or "entity" is not other in the theological sense—whether immanent or transcendent—but is perhaps a kind of reification of the fundamental interconnectedness of self and environment, or self and world, to which we are ordinarily oblivious. Perhaps, then, the ulterior voice that guides and informs the artist *as if from without* is not other at all but is itself the invisible pattern of relations, the fluid field of interactions, that constitutes the self on a level to which we do not have full conscious access. For if the ego's first fallacy is to believe itself to be separate from the rest of the world—a solo agent bound on all sides by a hard membrane separating internal from external—then the move into an awareness of the self's total ecology will be experienced by that ego as a crossing, a moving from self into other. Perhaps it is not a crossing at all but the dissolution of the threshold itself.

Seen in this light, the artist is essentially someone endowed, for whatever reason, with an especially strong need to return to the larger whole from which his ego wrests him apart. He is also, however, someone in whom the ego is so powerful that this move is made exceedingly difficult. The carrier of both an urgent need and a violent resistance against it, the artist lives with a curious condition indeed. Duly wary of the perils inherent in this undeniably schizogenic situation, he adapts by settling into a life of continuous oscillation between two directions in which he is pulled. Each day requires a willful turning away from the vortex that is his ego, and then a gradual returning as the ego pulls the artist back into its fold. In light of this model, another possibility emerges: perhaps the artist's narcissism is not merely a by-product of his peculiar occupation but is rather a necessary counterweight to his ecstatic tendency. Perhaps it serves as a tether of sorts, or an anchor, that keeps the artist from drifting off, irretrievably, into a permanent flight that would leave him unable to function in the world. Surely no ordinary narcissism would hold any weight against the centrifugal force of his ecstasy. But whatever the case, pity not the artist; he bears his affliction with all the enthusiasm of one possessed, all the dignity of one who has accepted a fate he might not have chosen, and all the gratitude of one upon whom a great gift has been bestowed.