

The Muse of Self-Absorption

THE AUTHOR *dictates*:

Imagine a Muse whom no voice any longer invokes. Her art—dithyramb, suppose we make it—at no time exactly a crowd-pleaser, is losing ground fast, as its practitioners, the poor, good “dizzy ramblers” (as she is accustomed to nickname her singers in her thoughts), seek out fresh paths.

To find oneself no longer called up or called in—could aught sadder befall a Muse?, you might ask. Yet for the girl herself, at least on her better days, the situation did not lack charm. For, after all, was it not “something” to have brought one’s art to the point where (at least for now) things could go no further, to have inspired a whole course of development to run its course?

Still, the afternoons are long; and the question of how one was to fill the hours of the “Great Disuse” (as this era of dithyrambic downturn has come to be known) grows hourly more acute. She makes the rounds, offering her services here and there, but predictably the takers are few. For among singers of other stripes, rare was the bard who could manage to hear in dithyramb—that one-string, non-dramatic offshoot of drama—a voice speaking to him.

Just to keep her hand in, the Muse tried rallying the sun to shine and the breeze to blow, but, alas, to ever-diminishing effect. The day she couldn't inspire a river to chafe against its banks, she knew it was time to be moving on. Not for her the twilight existence of an archaic survival; she would re-group, re-train, return as the goddess of something else, as something else than a goddess

But the more the unsung Muse pondered her options, the plainer her course appeared. She knew only the writing dyad; it was script or be scripted, be written or be written off. So, partly to view the damage from a fresh angle, but chiefly for want of other resource, she began to set down some impressions, to scribble some views, to—as at some point it no longer availed to hold off naming it—well, to write.

“And what more natural for a Muse?” you may think. But think again! A Muse, after all—has no Muse! (Note-to-self: be sure and do something here with self-invocation: “Who’s the goddess supposed to hail in—herself?”, etc.) Then, too, authors are told to “write from experience,” and a Muse, being a pure source, won't have had what you or I would call experiences—other than the experience of coming before an author, and that is more a position than an experience.

Worst of all, the girl had ever to struggle against the conviction that nothing was so far beneath her as writing—make that: *lower* than writing. For, after all,

seen from the Muse's end of the transaction, the literary life is only so much *cocking an ear*, and, as such, is best left to those without a whole heck of a lot to say for themselves or to others (our girl had plenty). In fact, from where the goddess sits, "writing" resembles nothing so much as . . . *taking dictation*, a resemblance that no doubt explains the mirth of her fellow-muses—whose springs, unlike the fountains of dithyramb, as yet ran clear—upon word of our friend's new line reaching them. "What a comedown!" exclaimed the Sister Arts (to employ our heroine's little private name for her colleagues): "From Muse to Stenographer!"—and laughed till it hurt.

To which, for all reply, our lass only hunkered down deeper over the waiting page, and entered: "*To write* is no longer to distinguish the Muse from the Stenographer in oneself"—a tableau that inspired Onemene, Muse of Dismissive Characterizations, to one of her best efforts: "Ladies, I give you . . . Autohymnia" (Note-to-self: That's *autos*, "self," plus "*hymné*," "singer" or "song"—am I on firm ground here?) "a.k.a., The Muse of Self-Absorption." At which, the laughter of the Muses broke forth anew, producing sudden but welcome infusions of comic energy into all the genres over which these sisters presided—a big improvement, in most cases, it was felt. The newly crowned Muse went on writing; the new-minted name, as Onemene's coinages tended to do, stuck, reprised as it was at every return

of the sisters—oh, and they were forever popping in with a taunt: “Goddess! A worshipper!” they’d cry, setting an old votive mirror before her; or, “In what is Our Lady of Self-Absorption currently absorbed? Wait, don’t tell me, it’s coming,” and so on. To the point where the Muse was driven to seek refuge in some unfrequented copse or fane where she might scribble away in peace—at least for a time, for the Sister Arts always did run her to earth eventually, such a *sixth sense* have Muses in these matters.

And in what fields of song did our new-fledged aspirant to the lyre now raise voice? Not, you may be sure, in her proper genre of dithyramb: *you* try whispering in your own ear! And not in any of the other going verse-forms, either. For, let her essay praise-poem, threnody, whatever, and infallibly it would bring the appropriate Sister Art shimmering in, who, the identity of the dabbler once known, took up the teasing afresh—and there went another grove you could scratch off the list.

No, for now—at least till such time as some wholly new way of working should drop from the clouds (a secret hope)—our Muse, like many a young woman before and since, must content herself with reflections, jottings—the “Eternal Notebook,” as she more and more found herself naming it in her thoughts, of which herewith a sampling:

From the Muse's Notebook, First Series, 8-point Hellenic Wide, sans serif,
indent-left. No—center. No—flush right.

~A certain Muse rambled and rambled.
One day she decided she'd like to listen
for a while—and perhaps make some notes.

~A certain Muse kept back all her best
ideas for herself. Such self-reliance proved
an inspiration to all who knew her.

~A certain poet, feeling garrulous and
overextended, besought his Muse for
silence. She found she lacked the words
in which to reply to so strange a request.

~Unsparing fecundity: why *this* and not
this other? “From experience!” goes up
the cry. But, of course, a Muse has *had*
no experiences, other than the experience
of coming before an author—and that is
more a position than an experience.

From which it may be seen that I have plundered the Muse's notebook to tell her
story—and that, neither for the first nor last time.

~The Muse who inspired scant
confidence.

~The Muse who made her poet believe
it was all *his* idea.

~The Muse who—

~I set each down as it presents itself;
then, stunned by the possibilities, exert a
second, more harrying attention. I discover,
in the courses of that attention, my true
subject. I write my attention.

~“Alone at last!” cries a voice in the great
silence of writing.

One afternoon, the Poet Whose Muse Had Departed sat on a bench at a turning of the Allée, brooding over the desertion of his one-time helper and friend. Was ever such perfidy? For see! Eleven labors into his big Hercules poem, off she had flown, leaving him with his crowning labor yet to invent (not for this genius the traditional twelve). And for all pretext—what? Had he made difficulties, pressed her beyond

her strength, or even—as those wild-cards the dithyrambists were rumored to have done with *their* girl—turned from her voice, thereby bringing on the “Great Disuse,” of which I earlier sung? But no such thing! All his offense was to have urged a slight and, to his way of thinking, highly positive alteration in their working arrangement. “Suppose, for a bit, *I* tried putting it to *you*,” he’d ventured. “Or better still: what if we were *to take it by turns*—you know, more in the way of a *conversation*.” To which, his vexed patroness: “In other words, it would now be *you* who dictates the terms of the relationship. Well, let me tell you, that’s not how it works with a Muse”—and so pronouncing, flung from the room; Hercules’ last labor could just invent itself.

What follows in outline: Poet at first given to making light of his loss.

Comments along the lines of: “Projects of her own . . . these self-willed collaborators.” And on in that vein. But, for all that, is stuck, dismused, a stream without a source.

And so, many a sunset found him, as now, slumped on a bench, at a turning of the Allée, his notebook weightless on his knee, about to put paid to the incompleteness of the day, when all at once there strikes his eye, across the Allée, a young woman seated on a bench like his own, facing off into the sunset and, to all appearances (so far as can be told from behind), shaken by sobs. (Note-to-self: Describe the little movements about the gathers of her waistband, the shudders propagated, like a wave in medium, down the side-seam of her skirt Better: describe the difficulties of such a description.)

And suddenly, himself shaken as never yet, the stilled poet *entered upon the life* of this unknown trembling before him. He imagined her sorrows, imagined her heart—and therewith found himself once more imagining. Whereupon, re-opening the long-disused notebook, he set about composing at altogether another pitch than had hitherto attended his labors. For hours, it seemed, the girl, facing away into the sunset, continued to tremble, the poet continued to write, and when at last he lifts away pen, he holds in his hands lines that, for all they shall find no place in the eventual song, represent a departure.

His heart full, the restored singer longs to embrace his benefactress—is, indeed, already on his feet to do so—when suddenly the girl faces round toward him, and there on her lap he makes out a notebook, near-cousin to his own, aslant whose darkening leaves she drives her pen along in the last of light, seeking, ere vision fade, to leave her mark upon the blackening page. It is this raining down of quick stabs that has set her body atremble. And it is this trembling, seen wrong way round, of which our poet has made so much. Seen, now, aright, *her “trembling” has been writing.*

Well! Let it have been jack-hammering, he can't afford to let the trembler slip away—and he'll have to act fast: the girl is already packing up her things.

At a bound, he is with her, explaining how having her there toiling away before him has somehow made all the difference to his own efforts, and offering a deal. Clearly, she could do with some fairer scene than a park-bench to pursue her labors; while he—well, he could scarcely do better than the sight of her. Suppose she were to come to him . . . oh, as a kind of “secretary,” they might agree to call it; though in fact her sole duty would be to go on, as today, writing in his presence—and always, as today, *facing off*: so that, whatever it was in the spectacle of her toiling with averted eye that so held him, he might henceforth hold ever in view.

The Muse of Self-Absorption—for, of course, it was she—had not been so long out of the game but that she recognized an Invocation to the Muse when she heard one; and frankly, it felt like a throwback: if there was one laurel she no longer cared to garner, it was “inspiration to all and some.” Still, she *did* need a sister-proof refuge—only yesterday, Endemia, Muse of Ill-Judged Persistence, had been sighted over the treetops of the Allée—where one might hope to write away in the absence of (correction, make that: “write away the absence of”) every passing Muse. So, for reasons which she imagined to be hard-nosed in the extreme—but, listen, who knows, maybe also a little because she missed her “dizzy ramblers”—home with the singer she hires and sets up shop in the window-seat of his work-room, facing ever away. (Note-to-self: wouldn’t she want to know what type of thing she was being brought in to inspire? No; *I’d* think of that, *she’d* never think of that.)

At first, the resemblance of the arrangement to her old way of life—a blocked author, she hovering about, the hope of the situation—played havoc with her concentration. And especially, this perpetual *facing off*, which struck her as an unacknowledged borrowing from the Orpheus material (Muses *hate* borrowings), got on her nerves. Soon, though, she forgot where she was or what she was in the presence of—this, too, is characteristic of Muses—and, drawing forth the “Eternal Notebook,” went back to putting down her reflections as before. (Note-to-self: Do I want to hint at something sexual between them? Trust to the overtones of the language to do my work here.)

Well, so here is “the successor Muse”—as her singer (strictly in jest!) delights to hail her—settled by the window-seat: do we now enter a period of unexampled fecundity? Alas, in his euphoria, our poet had (rather comically, it may seem) forgotten something: *he now knew*—knew, that is, that what trembled away there in the window was not a suffering heart but merely *writing with its eye elsewhere*. Had he seriously expected the power of the spectacle to survive the comedy of its unmasking? If so, he soon learned better: for, strive as he might to regard the girl as a source, he found he could only manage to regard her as the source of a misunderstanding—*seen into the life of things? one had no more than seen around writing!*—and, under the circumstances, to continue writing was only to continue to misunderstand.

And then one day the balked poet made a chance discovery that changed everything. Happening (by what Muse inspired, I know not) to rest his gaze on the girl—faced, as ever, away; writing, as ever, away—he conceived the fancy that what she was setting down in her notebook at that instant was the next turn in his long-since-abandoned Hercules poem. Whereupon—

This final toil: to devise a final toil

—there it was: the next turn in his long-since-abandoned Hercules poem, suddenly present to thought: Hercules' Last Labor—to invent himself one! Dazzled, he looks away from the scribbling girl for a moment; dazzled, looks back, and—

Labor that alone shows all the Twelve what Twelve they are

Bless me if it is not the turn after that, if it is not . . . the stilled song in motion once more!

Joy floods him—to which, however, a dark thought succeeds: Could the girl just now *actually have been writing* the words he had imagined her as writing—which she then, somehow, *telegraphed across*? And might it not—dreadful-thought!—have been even some such telegraphy went forward that afternoon in the Allée, the girl not so much evoking or eliciting as flat-out conferring, the whole transaction no more than *a message sent and received*? Could it be *his poetic output* with which that notebook of hers, virtually (it only now strikes him) indistinguishable from his own, steadily fills? He has got to see what is in that notebook! So from that hour

his watching the girl “for inspiration” assumed more and more the character of *watching one’s moment*.

For a long while no path into the young woman’s pages presented. And then one afternoon, the toiling girl mistook a glimmer at the window for Deorama, Muse of Scenography. It was, in fact, a particularly drastic sunset. But Autohymnia, accustomed to take no chances when sisterly overflights threatened, promptly sought the seclusion of an inner chamber, leaving all her materials where they lay. Here was the poet’s chance!

In a bound, he is upon the notebook, outwardly so like his, and in brief space has made its contents his own. Imagine his relief to come upon nothing remotely resembling any lines by him written or projected, indeed, no finished work of any kind, but merely . . . a jumble of *dicta*:

From the Muse’s Notebook, Second Series, 2-point Avenir Roman, flush-right.

The Unstilled: Fragments
of a Colloquy Between a Voice
and its Faltering

“This tale I bear—”

—Why adduce? Why so much as a mention
in the formalist memoir of one’s dealings
therewith?

“They come before me—”

—They come to be written. Therefore,
mark their every move; catch their every
cry; see them in a whole new light.

Feel free to make notes.

“I would relate—”

—Writing is not a relation, but a
self-relation. To have *arrived at the telling*
is already to have gone too far.

“And the ‘great human themes’?”

—O experience of writing, ever and anon
taken for experience!

“And all the various scene—?”

—Of writing.

“Unthinkable to abide cheerfully within—”

—The impulse to depart from writing must
also be written; or rather, what is “writing”
but a shorthand in which to render that
departure?

“Brought, for all subject, down—?”
 —To a silence-upon-subjects, badly kept;
 to a fall-into-silence some otherwise told
 than as a falling still.

The Muse herself, meanwhile, confident that she has by now outstayed her scenic sib, cautiously forsakes her hiding-place and steals back into the room. Imagine her outrage to come upon this virtual stranger fluttering her leaves. She was of half a mind to vanish forthwith—her lips, indeed, were already parted in farewell—when it came over her: *was this not more or less what one had sought from the first? . . .* and her lips fell shut. So it was that The Muse of Self-Absorption acquired her first reader. Of course, with mere readers the Muse will not long abide, so forth from his presence she stole; nor was the matter at any future time alluded to between them.

When next the singer fell to his song, it was as one reborn. The sheer unlikeness of every word in the Muse’s notebook to all present or likely utterance of his gave him back hope that he had, after all, in the spectacle of a writing-that-withholds-its-face, learned to make out his own: it asked only a touch of . . . autosuggestion. So, now, taking up his post to windward of the Muse as she writes, he whispers himself: “it is my own goes forward there”; and—

And the trick holds! Now as erst, he finds he has only to imagine the girl writing away at his poem to be imagining his poem. Naturally now no further thought was given to packing off her who made all this possible. Peaceably, the two authors scribbled away side by side.

So things went on till the day Deeorama, Muse of Scenography, having at last tracked our lass to her lair, came by to call. Caught, this once, without lead-time or hiding-place, Autohymnia braced herself for a round of the usual heavy-handed teasing—such having always hitherto been the aim of these sisterly fly-bys—but, no, Deeorama, it seemed, needed to talk. *Her* genre, too, apparently, was now on the skids, and she took the view that The Muse of Self-Absorption must drop everything and condole, even though, when the shoe was on the other foot, Deeorama herself had proved something less than the ideal confidante. (Indeed, only Realia, Muse of Surface Plausibility, had had crueller things to say on the subject of their sister's new path.) Yet now here was the scenic Muse running on about “how it must have been for you,” “only now did one grasp,” and much else in that vein; to all which our heroine—like most muses, something shy of the perfect listener—gave but half her mind, until a chance remark of her sister's brought her up short: “Of course,” sighed Deeorama, “your field and mine have always flourished each at the expense of the other. So, from the recent comeback dithyramb seems to be making, any halfway knowledgeable observer might have predicted the downturn in scenic art.”

Thus it was that Autohymnia first learned her old genre was enjoying—as, listen, in time the most outworn of genres will enjoy—a revival. Or at least, many *wished* to see it revived: how exactly to compass this when, as was plain to all, “the Muse had departed,” none could well say.

On hearing this news, The Muse of Self-Absorption (as Our Lady of Dithyramb had long since got in the way of thinking of herself—if not, indeed, as having simply gone over from “muse” to “author” altogether) felt herself torn. Her first reaction was: “Let them go fish! It could decline without me, it can resurge without me—I’m a working writer now!” In point of fact, though, never had she felt *less* the writer than in this brusque disregard of her fellow-scribes’ plight. Well, but (she thought), make it a question of what one “owed” authors, and wasn’t she more than holding up her end right here by the window-seat? *Never more the Muse than when given up to one’s musing*—there was a speculation worthy of the name, yet one which, she could not help but feel, sank of its own weight. For if “the singers came first,” there could be no real question *which* singers: who if not her own poor “dizzy ramblers” (as ever in her thoughts she named them) held prior claim?

Deeorama, meanwhile, with a vague sense of having dropped she knew not what bombshell, marveled afresh at her sister’s boundless capacity for drifting out of conversations; and, pronouncing her “unresponsive today, even for you,” stole from the scene.

When next the poet came to his task, he found the Muse to all appearances—so far, at least, as might be judged from that quivering back—already at work. But when, suddenly, she turned, as never yet, her face full upon him, her face was bright with tears: this one time, it seems, *her “writing” had been trembling*. She was, moreover, dressed for travel with a packed bag at her feet.

“Not leave me now?” burst from the bard, “so near labors’ end!”—and followed it up with frantic offers to expiate on the spot whatever fault or ill-usage now prompts her flight. But for all answer she raised a hand in farewell and flung from the room.

So now back into circulation comes the Muse, albeit under the distinct impression of having *nothing* to say to *anyone*—a conviction only strengthened the first time she plunks down before one of the old dithyrambic crew, opens her lips to speak, and brings forth—nothing! Silence! Imagine, then, her astonishment when, even as her jaw fell shut, the hand of her dithyrambist falls to the page, writing, writing—in a perfect frenzy he writes. And she, glancing over his shoulder as he works, sees dropping from the pen of this rather fourth-rate practitioner what it is little enough to call his best work, but lines reminiscent of her art’s highest flowering in the era before the “Great Disuse.”

(Note-to-self: Do I actually *write* this stuff? As verse? In summary? Best keep to a kind of translationese.)

4-point Lucida Sans, verse-extract, center:

Long I labored at your voice;
 So that, when you first fell silent,
 “Speak!” I could only think to cry.
 Of the silence that now met me
 I could make but little till the hour
 When—as by custom long instructed
 In aught of thy bestowing—
 I gave it out upon the page:
 Your silence as erst your song.

 O well-kept silence of the written,
 That transcribes the tacit Muse’s,
 In your blest refusal to be uttered
 I came on matter of utterance;
 In giving heed to your silence
 I first gave voice to my own.

At which, the goddess can but marvel: Whence this new knack? Was it her long vigil at the window-seat that had, somehow, conferred this power of *inspiring in silence*?

Or had such ever been the nature of the excitation, always till now more volubly imparted than need was? And, strangest of all, how came it that in thus falling silent before the other, she only first truly felt herself “the writer of the pair”—the very status from which, by all rights, silence should have debarred her? Such musings as these filled many quires of the “Eternal Notebook,” to which, need I say, the Muse remained a faithful contributor all the while she was helping dithyramb fall silent once more, this time for good.

Fine for it! Fine for her! But what about—?

The Singer of the Allée; post second Muse’s flight; the picture in outline:
Is stunned by the desertion. Grows silent in his turn. Either cannot go on or, what comes to the same thing, *imagines* that he cannot. Ruefully notes: the tendency of all writing in her absence to become *writing her absence*; all imagining, so much *imagining the worst*.

Well, of Muses it has been truly said: *by their absences ye shall know them*; and as the unwritten days heaped round, the truth grew too plain to ignore. His goddess flown, nothing came in, nothing went out. Pen hung becalmed over page. The Herakleian pile broke off in air, always that labor shy; and its deviser once more knew himself as “the Poet Whose Muse Had Departed,” this time for good.

From this hour the poet shuns human haunts. Not, be it said, from any aversion to his kind; it is only that, unable to write himself, the prospect of writing has grown unbearable to him—all those sentences going effortlessly forward!—and these days everyone is a writer.

To hold at bay the spectacle of a pen in act, he keeps him far from anything approaching a lettered place. Cafés, printshops, bibliothecas—all vanish off the map of his unwritten and unwritable world.

And then one day, swerving into an alley to blot from view some letter-shaped clouds overhead, he is suddenly face-to-face with the transaction dreaded as none. There, before the stall of a professional letter-writer, a black-shawled old mother goes up and down, confiding the vehemencies of her unlettered heart to a hand that skips and runs.

Now, if from all occasions of writing a fugitive, of none more than any such *outpouring to a hand* does he go in fear; for how should this fail to be reminiscent of, how not evoke—? Well, it is the encounter he must ever flee; has, indeed, already turned to flee, when—

Figure of the Poet, Herakles, you, penning,

For a final toil, the tale of every other

—there it was: the long-sought finish to his Hercules poem—Labor Last: the Venturer Writes his Ventures—suddenly *given in the hand* of this common scrivener, working along other lines.

But now a wild hope dawns: if from such a hand, *from what hand not?*

The singer burns to make trial of the first scribbling to present; and bang out of the alley, he happens upon: a tout marking up a scratch sheet, a kid chalking putdowns on a gate, and, of course, always, those eluded letter-forms in the clouds. And at sight of each, on the verse comes!

So, then, it was true! Well might there be—little enough to say: other views of writing that conferred writing, but scarcely such a thing as one that did not. By nothing had that scene in the Allée been distinguished save as the occasion when one woke to the power of every such scene. Nor never let me hear of any “miracles” by the window-seat: all that pother of coming to look on other writing as “one’s own, but, somehow, inexplicably, confoundedly . . .”—*one had but to look on other writing*, set oneself down before the deed to find oneself setting down indeed. Bring me where a scribbler muses, and you have brought the scribbler his muse.

He now plunged as never before into the world of his time, “all the various scene” (as he was wont to name it) “of writing.” He sought out public meetings for the minutes-taking, scriptoria for the copying-fair . . . in short, wherever a sign was to be given, or a mark made, he made one. Not since that hour in the Allée when he first fashioned to trembling had he felt himself so “gone” in the human material.

He was a writer, no act of human inscription was alien to him—leastways, not till the hour it dawned on him (and O Friend, how should there not have struck such an hour?): “If I everywhere look out on my own, why look out at all?” One had but, he reflected, to hold the mirror up to writing. Whereupon, propping up a small votive mirror, forgotten of the Muse, just north of his writing hand, he now proceeds to—
No. Stop at the mirror.

In a word, he had learned . . . if not precisely to do without The Muse of Self-Absorption, at least *to hear her voice everywhere*; correction, make that *to see her hand in everything*. Let her be hence, she was nigh. Let her fall mute, she whispered him out of every act of writing he had in view. And knowing himself thus addressed on every hand, it grew so he could trace, in the turns of the script at any moment before him, the figure of the departed one; could hail in writing itself a Muse to writing, which finds in itself, which finds itself to be, all that it needs to write on.