

Duende Workshop, Push to Publish Conference
Saturday, Oct 10, 2020 (1:15-2:15pm)
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Tracy K. Smith: from “Survival in Two Worlds at Once: Federico Garcia Lorca and Duende” (<https://poets.org/text/survival-two-worlds-once-federico-garcia-lorca-and-duende>):

I love this concept of duende because it supposes that our poems are not things we create in order that a reader might be pleased or impressed (or, if you will, delighted or instructed); we write poems in order to engage in the perilous yet necessary struggle to inhabit ourselves—our real selves, the ones we barely recognize—more completely. It is then that the duende beckons, promising to impart "something newly created, like a miracle," then it winks inscrutably and begins its game of feint and dodge, lunge and parry, goad and shirk; turning its back, nearly disappearing altogether, then materializing again with a bear-hug that drops you to the ground and knocks your wind out. You'll get your miracle, but only if you can decipher the music of the battle, only if you're willing to take risk after risk. Only, in other words, if you survive the effort. For a poet, this kind of survival is tantamount to walking, word by word, onto a ledge of your own making. You must use the tools you brought with you, but in decidedly different and dangerous ways.

If all of this is true, and I believe it is, this struggle is not merely to write well-crafted and surprising poems so much as to survive in two worlds at once: the world we see (the one made of people, and weather, and hard fact) that, for all of its wonders and disappointments, has driven us to the page in the first place; and the world beyond or within this one that, glimpse after glimpse, we attempt to decipher and confirm. Survival in the former is predicated on balance, perspective, rehearsal, breadth of knowledge and experience. It's possible to get by as a poet with those things alone. Many do. A healthy ego doesn't hurt. But for someone fully convinced of the duende, it's the latter world that matters more. The world where madness and abandon often trump reason, and where skill is only useful to the extent that it adds courage and agility to your intuition.

Federico García Lorca: from "Theory and Play of the Duende"

(<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/LorcaDuende.php>):

"Whatever has black sounds has duende." There is no greater truth. These black sounds are the mystery, the roots that probe through the mire that we all know of, and do not understand, but which furnishes us with whatever is sustaining in art. Black sounds: so said the celebrated Spaniard, thereby concurring with Goethe, who, in effect, defined the duende when he said, speaking of Paganini: "A mysterious power that all may feel and no philosophy can explain."

The duende, then, is a power and not a construct, is a struggle and not a concept. I have heard an old guitarist, a true virtuoso, remark, "The duende is not in the throat, the duende comes up from inside, up from the very soles of the feet." That is to say, it is not a question of aptitude, but of a true and viable style - of blood, in other words; of what is oldest in culture: of creation made act.

The Muse arouses the intellect, bearing landscapes of columns and the false taste of laurel; but intellect is oftentimes the foe of poetry because it imitates too much, it elevates the poet to a throne of acute angles and makes him forget that in time the ants can devour him, too, or that a great arsenical locust can fall on his head, against which the Muses who live inside monocles or the lukewarm lacquer roses of insignificant salons, are helpless.

And repel the Angel, too - kick out the Muse and conquer his awe of the fragrance of violets that breathe from the poetry of the eighteenth century, or of the great telescope in whose lenses the Muse dozes off, sick of limits.

"Viva Paris!" As if to say: We are not interested in aptitude or techniques or virtuosity here. We are interested in something else.

Some years ago, in a dancing contest at Jerez de la Frontera, an old lady of eighty, competing against beautiful women and young girls with waists as supple as water, carried off the prize merely by the act of raising her arms, throwing back her head, and stamping the little platform with a blow of her feet; but in the conclave of muses and angels foregathered there - beauties of form and beauties of smile - the dying duende triumphed as it had to, trailing the rusted knife blades of its wings along the ground.

The Duende ... will not approach at all if he does not see the possibility of death, if he is not convinced he will circle death's house, if there is not every assurance he can rustle the branches borne aloft by us all, that neither have, nor may ever have, the power to console.

The magical virtue of poetry lies in the fact that it is always empowered with duende to baptize in dark water all those who behold it ...

We have said that the Duende loves ledges and wounds, that he enters only those areas where form dissolves in a passion transcending any of its visible expressions.

The Duende works on the body of the dancer like the wind works on sand. With magical force, it converts a young girl into a lunar paralytic; or fills with adolescent blushes a ragged old man begging handouts in the wineshops; or suddenly discovers the smell of nocturnal ports in a head of hair, and moment for moment, works on the arms with an expressiveness which is the mother of the dance of all ages.

But it is impossible for him ever to repeat himself - this is interesting and must be underscored. The Duende never repeats himself, any more than the forms of the sea repeat themselves in a storm.

Each art has, by nature, its distinctive Duende of style and form, but all roots join at the point where the black sounds of Manuel Torres issue forth - the ultimate stuff and the common basis, uncontrollable and tremulous, of wood and sound and canvas and word.

Sixth Grade, by Marie Howe

The afternoon the neighborhood boys tied me and Mary Lou Mather
to Donny Ralph's father's garage doors, spread-eagled,
it was the summer they chased us almost every day.

Careening across the lawns they'd mowed for money,
on bikes they threw down, they'd catch us, lie on top of us,
then get up and walk away.

That afternoon Donny's mother wasn't home.
His nine sisters and brothers gone - even Gramps, who lived with them,
gone somewhere - the backyard empty, the big house quiet.

A gang of boys. They pulled the heavy garage doors down,
and tied us to them with clothesline,
and Donny got the deer's leg severed from the buck his dad had killed

the year before, dried up and still fur-covered, and sort of
poked it at us, dancing around the blacktop in his sneakers, laughing.
Then somebody took it from Donny and did it.

And then somebody else, and somebody after him.
Then Donny pulled up Mary Lou's dress and held it up,
and she began to cry, and I became a boy again, and shouted Stop,

and they wouldn't.
Then a girl-boy, calling out to Charlie, my best friend's brother,
who wouldn't look

Charlie! to my brother's friend who knew me
Stop them. And he wouldn't.
And then more softly, and looking directly at him, I said, Charlie.

And he said Stop. And they said What? And he said Stop it.
And they did, quickly untying the ropes, weirdly quiet,
Mary Lou still weeping. And Charlie? Already gone.

from **Song of Myself, 6**, by Walt Whitman

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,

It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,

It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken,

It may be if I had known them I would have loved them, soon out of their mothers' laps,

And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,

Darker than the colorless beards of old men,

Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,

And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,

And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

City That Does Not Sleep (Nightsong of the Brooklyn Bridge), by Federico García Lorca

In the sky there is nobody asleep. Nobody, nobody.
Nobody is asleep.
The creatures of the moon sniff and prowl about their cabins.
The living iguanas will come and bite the men who do not dream,
and the man who rushes out with his spirit broken will meet on the
street corner
the unbelievable alligator quiet beneath the tender protest of the
stars.

Nobody is asleep on earth. Nobody, nobody.
Nobody is asleep.
In a graveyard far off there is a corpse
who has moaned for three years
because of a dry countryside on his knee;
and that boy they buried this morning cried so much
it was necessary to call out the dogs to keep him quiet.

Life is not a dream. Careful! Careful! Careful!
We fall down the stairs in order to eat the moist earth
or we climb to the knife edge of the snow with the voices of the dead
dahlias.
But forgetfulness does not exist, dreams do not exist;
flesh exists. Kisses tie our mouths
in a thicket of new veins,
and whoever his pain pains will feel that pain forever
and whoever is afraid of death will carry it on his shoulders.

One day
the horses will live in the saloons
and the enraged ants
will throw themselves on the yellow skies that take refuge in the
eyes of cows.

Another day
we will watch the preserved butterflies rise from the dead
and still walking through a country of gray sponges and silent boats
we will watch our ring flash and roses spring from our tongue.
Careful! Be careful! Be careful!

The men who still have marks of the claw and the thunderstorm,
and that boy who cries because he has never heard of the invention
of the bridge,
or that dead man who possesses now only his head and a shoe,
we must carry them to the wall where the iguanas and the snakes
are waiting,
where the bear's teeth are waiting,
where the mummified hand of the boy is waiting,
and the hair of the camel stands on end with a violent blue shudder.

Nobody is sleeping in the sky. Nobody, nobody.
Nobody is sleeping.
If someone does close his eyes,
a whip, boys, a whip!
Let there be a landscape of open eyes
and bitter wounds on fire.
No one is sleeping in this world. No one, no one.
I have said it before.

No one is sleeping.
But if someone grows too much moss on his temples during the
night,
open the stage trapdoors so he can see in the moonlight
the lying goblets, and the poison, and the skull of the theaters.

Duende, by Jack Gilbert

I can't remember her name.
It's not as though I've been in bed
with that many women.
The truth is I can't even remember
her face. I kind of know how strong
her thighs were, and her beauty.
But what I won't forget
is the way she tore open
the barbecued chicken with her hands,
and wiped the grease on her breasts.

Some (associated) poetry books you might like:

Lorca, Poet in New York
Marie Howe, What the Living Do
Amiri Baraka, The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader
Tracy K. Smith, Duende
Sylvia Plath, Ariel
Rachel McKibbens, Blut