

Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

The Nature of Innovation

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It's the side of "innovation" that doesn't know itself to be confident, bold, striking that's most alive to me. It's the wobbly, jittery "trying out," the responsiveness to an itch, and not a plan of action or intentional map that feels most authentic. The stumbly attempts, not manifestos. Nudges, not projects.

I'm here talking about innovation because our hosts at Welcome Table Press welcomed me to the conference to do so. This must have something to do with my work. I'm honored. "Innovative" sounds like a cool thing to be. I am, however, not really so hip, am rather hovering at the other end of the spectrum where I know my impulse is to be way more blank and dumb than my role as representative of "innovation" would suggest.

Though I'm weighing in on the side of the speculative, I'll try on some bold, manifestolike sentences for kicks: The innovative is not to be courted! The innovative is born of listening and responding to the necessities a moment calls forth. The innovative suspects that other responses have missed something roiling up on the horizon, and so it starts sniffing around. I do not believe the innovative can be an a priori stance, but instead is one that unfurls only after the fact as such. As architect Louis Sullivan wrote, "A proper building grows naturally, logically, and poetically out of all its conditions."

Let me build this idea a little more and deepen it. I'll share with you one of my favorite Hasidic tales, translated by Martin Buber, and then do a little commentary on it after.

A woman came to Rabbi Israel, the great *maggid* (teacher) in Koznitz, and told him, with many tears, that she had been married a dozen years and still had not borne a child. "What are you willing to do about it?" he asked her. She did not know what to say. "My mother, too," the *maggid* told her, "was aging and still had no child. Then she heard that the holy Baal Shem was stopping over in Apt in the course of a journey. She hurried to his inn and begged him to pray that she

might bear a child. ‘What are you willing to do about it?’ he asked. ‘My husband is a poor book binder,’ she replied, ‘but I do have one fine thing that I shall give you.’ She went home as fast as she could and fetched her good cape, her *katinka*, which was carefully stowed away in a chest. But when she returned to the inn with it, she heard the Baal Shem had already left for Mezbizh. She immediately set off after him, and since she had no money to ride, she walked from town to town with her *katinka* until she came to Mezbizh. The Baal Shem took the cape and hung it on the wall. ‘It is well,’ he said. A year later, I was born.”

“I, too,” cried the woman, “will bring you a cape of mine so that I may get a child.”

“That won’t work,” said the *maggid*. “You heard the story. My mother had no story to go by.”

This might seem like a straight-up tale promoting “innovative thinking,” and certainly it suggests that following a path cleared by another won’t work. Okay. But what interests me most in the story is a very small moment. Right after Rabbi Israel asks the woman “What are you willing to do about it?” the story tells us this: “she did not know what to say”. That brief, silent moment is what really holds me. That moment of unknowingness, or loss, where she must have been skittering around for a response, and *before* she hears the story of the successful woman who thought to give the Baal Shem her *katinka* in exchange for good prayers: that’s the place from which the truly new bursts forth. That’s the moment the woman seeking after the Baal Shem entered when she improvised and thought up or found her solution with the *katinka*. What works is precisely having no story to go on, and then bumbling around, in response to a singular moment. Using a method created by another can’t work, the story teaches, because your situation—even the situation of wanting a child, a very common situation—is unlike anyone else’s and requires your very own response. It’s really a tricky little story. For instance, why does the rabbi ask the woman what she’s planning to do and then immediately interrupt her thought process to tell her the story, which he then says she cannot use? Is this a Rabbinical warning against clichés, the cliché being the overuse of a once-successful creative response?

Faced with wanting something you have no idea how to get, consider another solution, also embedded in the words of the rabbi,

when he asks “what are you willing to do about it?” He does not ask, “What are you willing to give up?” (Sacrifice as an option was already taken.) And he doesn’t ask, “What do you think you should do?” (This isn’t about theory or intellect.) He asks instead, “What are you willing to *do*?” The field of responses is wide open. The field is wide open, but the only way through is by attending to the moment.

So, what are the preconditions for authentic/new creative response? Well, consider Keats’s famous description of the state of receptivity required to truly write. He lays it out in his 1817 letter to his brother (which you likely all know, but I’ll briefly refresh you):

At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability—that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

There it is again, the precondition for true creation: sitting with a form of loss of bearings and not ignoring, dismissing, resisting, or veering at the first sign of blankness, onto an easily conjured path or another’s path.

Keats calls the receptive one a “Man of Achievement.” Let me layer in another very similar perspective. Guiseppe Verdi is grouchier than Keats but maintains a strikingly similar stance towards artistic openness. In a letter to a critic in 1872, Verdi wrote:

I have just read a few words in the Omnibus which displease me... You are, I repeat, very pompous with your “Italian” music. No, no, there is no “Italian” music, nor “German” music, nor “Turkish”: but there is MUSIC. Don’t tire me with all these definitions: it is useless. I write as I please and as I feel. I don’t believe in the past nor in the present; I detest all schools, because all lead to conventionalism. I don’t idolize any individual, but I love beautiful music, whoever wrote it. “Progress of Art” is another senseless phrase. It is obvious. If the author is a man of genius, he will add to the progress of art without seeking to, nor desiring to.

I don't mean to emphasize here that genius is what it takes to crack things open, but rather that Verdi is on to something when he talks about "adding to the progress of art without seeking or desiring to." And that writing "as one pleases/feels," locating that response, is more likely than anything to produce work that is not "conventional."

The same bird—a gull, for instance—will cry differently in different parts of the country, picking up the dopplery timbres of ambulances and car alarms in, say, New York, but softening up and sounding romantically plaintive in, say, Virginia Beach. What is interesting or instructive about adaptation? Adaptation is responsive to the landscape. A righting of one's self within it. A response forged from local materials. Powerful enough to change the idea of what is "natural" to a gull or, even better, to suggest that what is most natural is the capacity to vary responses to your present. An apple tree growing between two larger pines will bend to seek the patch of sun available to it. It hadn't intended to grow crooked or interestingly but did so because it was called to change plans according to necessity. It literally grew out of its conditions. There it is, in our backyard, a crooked but healthy tree. I always do a double take at its crookedness—it seems lopsided, and then it doesn't. I have to rearrange the conditions surrounding it in order to see its rightness.

Here's another, more direct example of responding, this time to an internal need (call it *temperament* or *sensibility*, terms that have fallen largely out of use which I'd like to reinstate). Virginia Woolf wrote her long autobiographical essay "Moments of Being" during the war and in between frustrating bouts with her biography of Roger Fry. She wrote, during bombing raids in London, in her neighborhood. Her choice to ignore the war literally outside her door strikes me as a temperamental and not a tactical or strategic choice.

As we sat down to lunch two days ago...John came in, looked white about the gills, his pale eyes paler than usual, and said the French have stopped fighting. Today the dictators dictate their terms to France. Meanwhile, on the very hot morning, with a blue bottle buzzing...I sit in my room at 37 Mecklenburgh Square and turn to my father...Yesterday...five German raiders passed so close over Monks House that they brushed the tree at the gate.

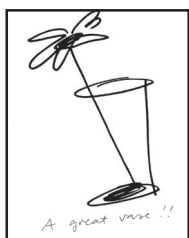
But being alive today, and having a waste hour on my hands...I will go on with this story.

You could call her single-minded, sure, as well as any number of other things: obsessive, irresponsible, self-centered. You could say she wasn't being a good citizen, was refusing to witness the reality of her times. It's my premise that attention to temperament—or better yet, simply succumbing to it—is often what bears forth new methods, suggests new modes of composition, brings certain pressures to the table to work with or against. It's not the other way around: a new method conjured first and *then* applied in order to bring about new work. For example, let's see what kind of prose I produce sitting here under these bombs and writing instead about childhood. The sequence I'm talking about (temperament led and not method guided) is Woolf's sensibility. It expresses her ferocity about the interior, unspoken, barely worded life and it serves up a new kind of writing—"life writing," as she called it. I don't think she meant it in a niche-marketing kind of way. I think she meant more that she was "writing for her life."

We live in a time that's crazy about innovation for all kinds of reasons, reasons that reinforce classic American ideals of ingenuity, verve, energy, economic ambition, and so on. "Innovation" puts people to work, sells stuff, creates desires that are then fulfilled by acquisitions. But the desire for the new, the default inclination toward "newness," sometimes backfires in incredibly simple ways. Here's an example: if you were asked to design a system to provide people with fresh, cold, easily accessible water, and it had to be free and it had to be public, what would you invent? The water fountain. But instead, we overrode an already great solution, decided not to build on it further and gave ourselves bottled water, an innovation that continues to provide us with landfill nightmares, is often falsely advertised, and for which we willingly pay dearly. Another misadventure in innovation: automatically flushing toilets. These are, at least in women's bathrooms, wildly oversensitive, and they waste a lot of water. Automatic faucets run long after I'm finished washing—though that may reflect only on my bad habits—and often get stuck in the On position. Not only are these labor-saving devices wasteful, but in adopting them we are losing the basic gestures of an autonomous human being: push a lever, turn a faucet, crank a

handle. The innovative here is indeed new, but the response it engenders—waving and swishing and weird lateral slashings—are degraded responses that reduce the human body’s functionality and sever a basic sense of cause and effect between our own bodies and our tools.

One more object lesson before my final point: I have to tell you about this little vase. A vase seems pretty simple as a concept and thus invites all kinds of lovely embellishment. But this little vase completely



transforms the idea of a vase. This one minimalizes the most basic elements of a vase in order to maximize the flower. It shows me something new that a vase can do: get out of the way of the flower, not hold or contain it but prop it, let it lean. It completely delights me and offers a sense of previously undiscovered rightness asleep in the form. It shows me that one of the most traditional concepts out there—vase as container—can be reconceived and its

component parts reconsidered until a new gesture comes forth.

This leads to my final thought: How awful is the expression “one-trick-pony?” Even as a kid it wrecked me to think of a pony that is trained to do just one thing. Nothing else. Currently, there’s a dog I know that makes me sad in this way. He’s a champion Bouvier and has won all sorts of prizes. But he’s so well behaved that he’s completely drained of his doggyness. He’s a blank. He could be a turtle, a sock, a bowl of oatmeal. He has a set of responses that make him easy to be around—sits when meeting others, no moving, no licking, no barking—but he’s so obedient that as an independent, quirky creature, he disappears, which is the strangest sensation because he’s really huge. I always feel, when I am around him, his hollowness. A wave of disappointment starts building in me whenever I see him coming down the street. I wish he’d sniff me or use his substantially big nose to nudge a pat. Sometimes I think about pinching his delicious nose a little—not hard, just enough to wake him up to his own doggyness. Forget Cesar Milan and his pack-leader approach, forget being a famous “dog whisperer.” I think we need more dog pinchers.