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A Writer's Center: The Relationship Between Roots and Art

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A Writer's Center: The Relationship Between Roots and Art

Being a writer—putting stuff from inside your head out into the world—is scary. It can feel like you're turning yourself inside out; that comes with all kinds of insecurities, one of which being insecurity about our validity, which might also be phrased as insecurity about our roots. For young writers especially—our roots are still small and unsteady—anxiety over where to plant ourselves can stunt the formation of a “writing identity” (what does that even mean?). Writers, no matter who they are or how much they've written, often feel unqualified to be a voice—for their background, their religion, their region, their philosophy... for justice or even for compassion. We have a sophisticated image in our mind of what a “real” writer looks like, and no matter who we are, this image does not look like us. This can lead to imposter syndrome, which feels like being a pretty exterior with no foundation—and it can be paralyzing.

Author Scott Russel Sanders, in his book *Writing From the Center*, writes about his own struggles with authenticity. Myths about what a “real writer” looks like abounded in his life: “writers are supposed to be eccentric,” he says (151). Sanders did the whole ex-pat wanderer-in-darkness thing in Europe that he thought he was supposed to do, but it just wasn't him. He also worried that getting married would keep him from being a fully committed writer: “wasn't that the ideal writer's stance,” he questions, “as Joyce taught by word and example, to stand aloof from the human fray...?” (151). But he settled down—in Indiana, no less. In doing so, he discovered that “family may become your territory for doing the real work—spiritual as well as practical—of being human” (156). Being human, in other words, has to come first. “One's work

grows out of one's entire life," he writes, and that work's meaning depends on a steadfast center rooted in truth, or as he puts it, "the presence of a more-than-personal meaning and power" (167). Sanders challenges fellow writer Richard Hugo's claim that "'You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything.' ...Surely that is an odd disjunction, to set feelings against reality," Sanders responds, "as if the writer's imagination were sealed inside a floating bubble" (158).

But, interestingly enough, Richard Hugo is also exploring the question of "where authentic writing comes from," and I think these searches are not as different as they appear at first (Sanders 149). At first glance Richard Hugo's writing advice seems to be fully transcendentalist, claiming all meaning rests inside of ourselves. But, it's interesting to note that Hugo distinguishes the search for meaning on the page from the search for meaning in life, which he leaves for us to figure out. "Doesn't this (not trying to speak truth) lead finally to amoral and shallow writing? Yes it does, if you are amoral and shallow" (Hugo 16). We must trust our intuition, but our intuition must first be trustworthy. In order to "separat[e] honest from the dishonest" as Sanders writes, we must know what is honest (Sanders 149). In other words, "follow your heart" can be great advice, but our hearts must be oriented towards the good. Hugo also advises us to trust the connections between the things we write: "It is impossible to write meaningless sequences" (Hugo 5). Our words are consistent because, "you said this, and you also said that" (5). Doesn't this pair nicely with Sander's statement that "writing comes out of our whole life?"

There is, however, a philosophical distinction between the two writers: “When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes...,” Hugo writes, “one is that all music must conform to truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music” (3). While Hugo advocates the latter, Sanders would probably agree with the former. For Sanders, authenticity comes from the soil, whereas for Hugo, it comes from the tree, to continue the roots metaphor. But both, I believe, are correct; Hugo presents a false dichotomy—I think that, in a way, truth and music are the same thing. Statements about the nature of art are always fragmented and inadequate, but I think that art is the collision of the personal and extrapersonal spheres—or our roots and the earth, if you will. Just one or the other won’t do. G.K. Chesterton worded it best when he said that “Art is born when the temporary touches the eternal; the shock of beauty is when the irresistible force hits the immovable post.” For me as for Chesterton, and Sanders, “the eternal” is the divine. But however you form your own spirituality, as writers we have to put aside our insecurities and let those spheres collide. We have to both write from our roots and move past them as we’re writing. I think this is the hardest part of being a writer, and by extension, any kind of artist.

Sanders writes that we have to “open the [cluttered] jar [of our mind], or let it be opened, so that a greater reality may come streaming in” (166). This isn’t to say that we should open ourselves to every random whim—craft certainly requires that we trim a good deal of useless stuff—but that we should open ourselves to what we know to be true, let that guide us to the place we are meant to take root—be that in a bloodline or a region or a cause or...—and then trust that we are supposed to be there, even if we feel unqualified. All writing is, in some

ways, a possession of something we don't quite have the right to. Hugo writes that "It is narcissistic, vain, egotistical, unrealistic, selfish, and hateful to assume emotional ownership of a town (meaning a 'place' in a poem, whatever that may be) or a word. It is also essential" (14). (I'm writing about writing, which seems to me the vainest of all). In a sense we have to be humble enough to accept the arrogant nature of writing, because none of us owns the places or times or concepts in which we're rooted. That we could ever own them, or know all there is to know about them, is a myth that we all let ourselves believe at some point. Even Maya Angelou, a powerhouse of literature and life in general, admits imposter syndrome: "I have written eleven books, but each time I think, 'oh no. They're going to find me out.'" All this to say that as vessels of truth, we are all imperfect and unqualified, and I think imposter syndrome, at least my own, can be a form of pride. Art (and truth) comes from within us, but also beyond us, emanating from something greater. And there is a huge element of trust in that. We have to trust in something to ever put ourselves "out there" at all. If I didn't trust that God gave me the gifts and passions He did for a reason, I would likely not be up here right now. So as a writer, maybe I'll stay in Ohio my whole life, or maybe I'll move to LA, and maybe I'll write about the Midwest and maybe it'll never come to play in my work at all. Maybe I'll travel and write about the world, or maybe I'll watch crickets and leaves and write about all the tiny things in life. Maybe I'll write fantasy for a portion of my life and literary fiction another portion. Maybe I'll be a mysterious loner or maybe a stay-at-home mom. All of this is relevant, but it's irrelevant to my authenticity, because a center can be found in any of these. I think there's only one real "rule" for where and how to plant yourself if you want to be a writer and

that's in beauty, which we can find in so many unique places. Sanders exhorts us to "find your way to that ultimate ground, root your work there, and you will have something worth saying" (167). Practice is still paramount, of course: "...to guide us there," Sanders closes, "we have only consciousness, patience, craft" (168). Those are the essential tools for the search—and I truly believe that if we use those and use them well, we'll find that we've planted ourselves in rich and steady soil, and thrived. Then, I think, the phrase "writer's identity" will make sense to me.

Works Cited

- Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010. Print.
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