Heavenly Muse

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"in which a poet vainly seeks inspiration while leaning against this masterly inscription. This preconceived form is superior to the form of the poem I found myself actually writing. I had begun with the line,

So of ten poets seize some passing thought."

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in which a poet vainly seeks inspiration while leaning against this masterly inscription. This preconceived form is superior to the form of the poem I found myself actually writing. I had begun with the line,

So often poets seize some passing thought.

but it was the passing thought that seized me.

One must expect the early drafts of a poem to be an ugly-duckling version of what may later be a worthwhile poem. It will contain a few good lines, and it may have in embryo some good images. The first draft ordinarily resembles a free-verse, impressionistic poem, and one may attain powerful effects by retaining this form. But the theme of this particular poem demanded a more regular form to contrast with the closing lines. The following is a second draft to The Poem:

Poets, I suppose, should never be in search of themes,
But even in sleep, one elbow propped up watches the dreams,
Prepared to deliver over some passing thought,
Some impression, some scene hastily caught,
Something comic-tragic in the tragic-comic part,
To the fine knives and plastic moulds of creative art.

The poet stalks the city street and country lane,
Looking out and looking in, a two-way pane,
Peering under faces and rocks, at children and green leaves,
Reading advertisements and webs the spider weaves,
Sometimes in vain, sometimes a startling pattern to trace,
The sudden connection, the unexpected parallel snapping in place.

But what is seen and felt at either pole,
Reverberates upon the instrument of the inner soul:
Some poor two-stringed guitar that picks out a tune
As self-contained as an Anglo-Saxon rune,
Or a fulsome harp that discovers a symphony.
A synthesis and a perception, the elements a cacophony.
When we are confronted with something like this, it is comforting to know that early versions of poems now famous for their perfection of artistry were equally undistinguished, flat, and awkward. Work and re-work always has been the motto, even of the "spontaneous" Romantics. The fourth stanza wrote itself, despite the fact that it has only one rhyme. But the fifth was the most difficult of all. Should it be something like this?

And yet miss a poem already written there,
Cut in stone by some strong harp of sorrow,
When pain like a stranger took the empty chair;
A loss that said no to all tomorrow;
Simple lines whose fingers reached and bled,

where?

On the deepest rocks of grief's ocean bed,
Upon the jagged floor(s) where seas of grief have fled.
Against the rocky depths where
Against the rough floors
On coral floors

That's the fun of dabbling in poetry: the rewarding pleasure of choosing, refining, searching for the more concrete, balancing rhythms—of replacing

Some impression, some scene hastily caught,

with

Some gesturing star, some silhouette hastily caught.

The sadness of dabbling in poetry is in banishing to exterior darkness such a fine phrase as "coral floors."

The poetic form is one of the given modes of human expression; there are many moods, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that can be conveyed only in that form. Everyone of us has such experiences; for our own relaxation and enjoyment, more of us should try our hand in experimenting with the mode that is natural for giving expression to them. We should become a bit reckless from time to time, throw off the chains of prose, doff our hats in greeting to one of the Muses, and boldly say perchance, "Take a poem, Miss Melpomene."