

*Adam of mud,
Not a clay doll: a metaphor.
To see the world is to spell it.
Mirror of words: where was I?
My words watch me from the puddle
Of my memory . . .
--Octavio Paz
"A Draft of Shadows"*

As sister to rhetoric, the language of poetry, too, has the power to play upon the hearts of those who engage with her. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, defines all poetry as an imitation of life, as mimetic art. While his precept (upon which theories of language and literature have been built for millennia) carries with it some truth, its apodictic attempt to characterize this discipline and art misses the special knowledge under which poets have always worked their craft. It is the awareness that the words of poetry -- of the poem itself and within the great body of poetry that spans time -- are not and cannot be mere symbols to which a particular significance is meted out. They escape such manipulation and categorization with their tricks and guises of metaphor and conceit, paronym, double entendre, innuendo, cacozelon, metonymy, irony, hyperbole, exergasia, wit, and so forth. But more than that, these words occupy a space in which they breathe, move, change shape. Dylan Thomas recognizes their power and capacity with his eloquent musing: "They [the words of poetry] were seemingly lifeless, made only of black and white, but out of them, out of their own being, came love and terror and pity and pain and wonder and all the other vague abstractions that make our lives dangerous, great, and bearable" (168-9).

In rhetoric and poetry, more than any other mode of language and knowledge, we are treated to the charisma of words, their influence, their qualities of adumbration, their ability to seduce, their "mysterious power which everyone feels and no philosopher can explain"; what Federico Garcia Lorca describes as their "duende":

The arrival of duende always presupposes a radical transformation on every plane . . . All art is capable of duende. But the place that it naturally occurs is in music, dance, or spoken poetry because they require a living body for interpretation and because they are forms that perpetually live and die, their contours are raised upon an exact presence" (165).

To the arts that Lorca lists, I would add the language of rhetoric as well, for, as Rex Olson has pointed out in this issue's editorial, the soulfulness of rhetoric, arising from "concrete, embodied images that claim us," emerges in the space *in between* word and mind. Like the undercurrents of energy in the poem, the semantic attributes of rhetoric can move finely within the strange liminal area between what is spoken (or written)

and what is heard, and then imagined and apprehended. This is the composition of the "living body" of the language of rhetoric and poetry alike: the words themselves, the myriad and complex images they conjure, the participation of the speaker and the audience, the beginning and end of the speech, in space, in time.

The space that both disciplines of rhetoric and poetry provide in our understanding of language offers an unveiling of our relationship with words: that they are not mere tools belonging to us, but our constant companions, living a symbiotic existence with us. As often as we ascribe meaning to words, words impart meaning to us (or obscure it from us) as well. Their duende flavors our expression with clarity and with subtle nuance; it infuses our communication with qualities of tone, pathos, rhythm. How else can we apprehend, imagine, give credence to our perception, experiences, reason, and feelings of our respective worlds? For ourselves and to each other? Indeed, "Where word breaks off no thing may be," as Michael Sipiora, in his essay, quotes the poem, "The Word" by Stefan Georg. And this last line of the poem emphasizes the marriage of words with things in the world. In the poems that follow, we are made witness to the different human worlds of the body, the city, the sky, the exquisite, rivers, love affairs, rawness, the passing of time. With the sublime power in the being of these words, we are endowed with a knowledge that runs in the heart of things.

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Sources

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