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Sages, Seers, and Saints: Creativity and Liminality in British Romantic Prose

Darlene Leifson

Western intellectual and cultural tradition frequently characterizes creativity in seemingly contradictory ways. The artist, for instance, is often depicted as simultaneously alienated from, and deeply connected to, the larger world. Creative work is also portrayed as both startlingly novel and profoundly resonant with familiar, even universal, truths. While Plato decried poets as subversive to the social order and banned them from his fictional republic, Friedrich Nietzsche blamed excessive poetic inhibition for the death of sublime tragedy among the Greeks. Indeed, despite narratives describing the transgressive, amoral, or personally tragic lifestyles of artists there remains an equally strong tradition in the West of viewing art as beneficial to society, and artists as creating to satisfy a moral obligation to their fellow beings. As psychologist Albert Rothenberg writes in *The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science, and Other Fields*:

Society and creative people tend to be ambivalent toward each other. On the one hand, society rewards creations with its highest honors and holds creators in awe and esteem. On the other hand, there is a tendency to suspiciousness and even fear because of the creator's deviance from the rules and his emphasis on the new. Sometimes widespread jealousy of the immensity of an individual's achievement even operates. Creative people, in their right, tend to feel strongly about society. They tend to have strong positive feelings of concern for other human beings and strong personal idealism. From their point of view, severe criticism of a particular convention or of a factor of social order arises from such positive devotion to other people. While they sometimes seek change or novelty for its

own sake and sometimes feel resentful about being unrewarded and unrecognized, they experience a severe discrepancy between their attachment for society and its reaction to them. (7)

These seeming contradictions reveal artistic creativity's essential neither/nor-ness, or in other words, creativity's inherent liminality. Creativity and creators often inhabit dual worlds simultaneously, and as such, reside at a threshold, at both the "centre and circumference" of life, to borrow a phrase from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1795). Several prose writings by the British Romantics—specifically, William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*—are replete with such liminal characterizations of artistic creativity. For example, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley each locate the poet and the poetic faculty at the margins of society by virtue of their superior gifts or the poet's revolutionary work; at the same time, these authors also characterize the poet and his or her work as indispensable to society, and tend to locate artistic creativity at the center of all that is good and beautiful. These apparent paradoxes initially suggest that the British Romantics (indeed, many Western artists and philosophers) are either confused or ambivalent about the function of art and the role of the artist in society. Acknowledging, however, that artistic creativity may be better understood as an inherently liminal phenomenon may allow us important insights into why creators frequently depict their lives and work in such contradictory terms. Indeed, creators may prefer to emphasize the neither/nor-ness of their processes because there is freedom in creativity's very indeterminateness, to flout convention or to speak difficult truths. In order to bear up under intense scrutiny, to find the courage to share one's work the face of opposition—in short, in order to create—artists may frequently describe creative endeavor in ways that provide them

with significant personal validation for embracing a creative life. For the British Romantics in particular, this means fashioning the poet/creator as the threshold figure of a sage, seer, or saint.

In his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* William Wordsworth summarizes his philosophy of the aims of poetic creation and the character and function of the poet in society. He states that his purpose for writing a preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is to first address the “impropriety” of introducing to the public poetry “so materially different from those, upon which general approbation is at present bestowed” (595). Wordsworth explains that *Lyrical Ballads* represents a revolutionary break from the poetry of the past—poetry that strikes out in new, unconventional directions. By emphasizing his work’s novelty Wordsworth describes his poetry’s transgressive position in comparison with the work of his predecessors. (We might also understand his statements to be a kind of acknowledgement of the lack of approbation his transgressive poetry has, to this point, engendered.) Paradoxically, Wordsworth goes on to assert that his poetry derives chiefly from the “rustic,” “common,” and “plainer” language used by those around him (595-596). The radical break Wordsworth makes therefore is to reject the artifice—the “gaudiness and inane phraseology” of other writers—in favor of more natural expression (595). His view, in fact, is that commonplace language and themes provide a more direct, concrete, and accurate vehicle for authentic poetic expression than the artificial language of earlier poets. In making these dual claims for his poetic creations Wordsworth renders them both separate (by creating materially novel work) and connected to every day experience (by employing commonplace language), in typically liminal fashion.

Wordsworth goes on to identify one of the “best services” to which a poet may apply, that is, to increase the human mind’s capacity for subtle discrimination. Indeed, he finds that the perils of modernity—the “great national event” of urbanization he sees around him—has tended

to “blunt the discriminating powers of the mind” and that the poet, in particular, must function as an opposing force to this trend. Wordsworth laments his own “feeble” efforts with which he has thus far fought against the “outrageous stimulation” provided by modern life and literature (598). In taking up this position Wordsworth rejects the urbanizing tendency of his time, again locating himself at the margins of society, while simultaneously urging himself and others to act in the best interest of society by countering this same trend through poetry. This liminal characterization of poetic creativity and the poet as at once separated from, and deeply concerned with, the world at large seems integral to the proper functioning of the poet and his or her art, in Wordsworth’s view; the poet must distance him- or herself from the social and intellectual trends of the day in order to be of greatest service to his or her fellow beings.

The strongest indication of this idea in the *Preface* occurs when Wordsworth undertakes to define the poet. He asks, “What is meant by the word poet? What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him?” (601). He answers that the poet “is a man speaking to men” but that the poet is nonetheless

Endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed by common among mankind; a man . . . who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; . . . To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; . . . he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels. (601-602)

These statements are a succinct expression of the artist’s typical neither/nor-ness: poets are necessarily human, but are also endowed with greater gifts than the average person. The poet

sees more, comprehends more, and is better equipped to articulate his or her vision than others; nonetheless, humanity remains the poet's primary audience. Indeed, poet/creators must desire to be so much a part of their social-cultural milieu that "it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes . . . and even confound and identify his own feelings with others" (602). Poets thus choose to descend from a vantage point of superior intuition to meld their identity with others in order to be of greatest worth to their fellow beings. Wordsworth writes, ". . . the poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion"; "the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth" (604). The poet's superior gifts stand above humanity in order to unite humanity, yet the poet does so as a human being: "Among the qualities which I have enumerated as principally conducing to form a poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree." "But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men." "The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of men" (605). Finally: "poets do not write for poets alone, but for men. . . . The poet must descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves" (606). The ability of the poet to liminally inhabit dual worlds—to be both separate from and integral to the society in which the poet lives—appears to Wordsworth to be indispensable to his or her functioning *as* a poet. Indeed, as Wordsworth goes on to explain, this liminal, threshold capability places the poet "in the situation of a translator" (602). Envisioning themselves as translators of truth provides a powerful, personal rationale for living a creative life, and shifts the function of poet from mere wordsmith to sage. To satisfy his or her

role as translator/sage the poet must, of necessity, inhabit dual worlds simultaneously—the world of common, human interaction and the world of superior insight.

While Samuel Taylor Coleridge takes issue with some of Wordsworth's literary philosophies in *Biographia Literaria*, and while much of Coleridge's criticism focuses on his development of a philosophy of organicism in literary art, he shares with Wordsworth a similarly liminal characterization of poetic creativity. He agrees, for example, that Wordsworth's poetry represents a transgressive break from the past. As Coleridge reports, Wordsworth's "original poetic genius" sparked significant controversy among his readers, leading critics to initially dismiss his work (641, 646). The burden of innovation as a hallmark of creative genius has a long history in Western culture and did not necessarily originate with the British Romantics, although the Romantics may have done much to influence subsequent views of artistic creativity in the West (Becker 45). Indeed, Coleridge's essay highlights the transgressive nature of Wordsworth's poetry by describing how it inspired dismissal by his critics as well as an almost religious zeal among his followers (646). The controversial nature of creative innovation contributes significantly to a view of artists in Western culture as liminal figures whose revolutionary work both annoys and delights, and remains a principal reason why we tend to view artists as both subversive tricksters and wise sages. Paradoxically, by virtue of revolutionary art's neither/nor-ness, that is, by one's work being seen as both better and worse than what has come before, artists may find an authentic freedom to experiment with style, tone, and form, as Coleridge suggests Wordsworth did (643, 645).

For Coleridge, however, authentic poetic genius does not equate with simple innovation, nor with mere revolutionary form. For a work of poetry to be considered genius it must marry novelty with a faithful adherence "to the truth of nature"; it must endow the quotidian with the

gift of profound “imagination” (645). Wordsworth is for Coleridge a poetic genius because Wordsworth has a unique capacity for infusing imaginative insight to everyday, universal truths—in other words, to make the familiar, unfamiliar. Indeed, this was to be Wordsworth’s special challenge for his *Lyrical Ballads*:

Mr. Wordsworth . . . was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, we see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. (645)

Poetic genius for Coleridge, then, resides at the threshold between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the dull, quotidian, realities of everyday life and the unseen, imagined, truths hiding just below the surface, beneath typical human perception. In this sense the poet inhabits a dual world in much the same way as Wordsworth articulates in his *Preface*: he or she sees both surface realities, and, by special providence or gift, the unseen truths inherent in them. He or she seeks out the quotidian—the low, rustic, common events Wordsworth speaks of—but for the purposes of seeing hidden truths in the everyday world. Coleridge’s theory of organicism begins here, with an organic fusion of nature and imagination, and the true poet, for him, is the person who is capable of this kind of artistic unity. Coleridge writes,

[The poet] diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends, and (as it were) *fuses* each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action

by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed control . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (649)

This characterization of poetry and poetic genius is profoundly liminal, despite its references to organic unity. Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge's poetic genius consists of nothing less than the simultaneous and continuous habitation of the dual worlds of physical reality and poetic imagination.

We must note that Coleridge's theory of organicism argues for art that remains profoundly integral with nature, in an Aristotelian sense: Coleridge approves of Aristotle's idea in the *Poetics* that nature embodies the ideal, and that the highest aim of the poet is to intuit that ideal and embody it creatively in poetic form. Thus Coleridge's censure for the artificial poets of his day is reserved specifically for their failure to write this kind of organic poetry. Of Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, for example, Coleridge writes that Pope's diction seemed to him "characterized not so much by poetic thoughts, as by thoughts *translated* into the language of poetry" (639). There is no organic unity of ideal truth and form in the work of past poets, and yet for Coleridge this is the poet's highest charge, by virtue of their superior powers of

observation and intuition: they are minds that “feel the riddle of the world” (643). Thus, while poets possess a deeper, more authentic perception of the world they are nonetheless bound by the inherent laws of nature and truth. For Coleridge, an artist is not free to express his or her own subjective view of reality. The artist is free only to embody in physical form what is ideally and naturally true about the subject. If, for Wordsworth, a rationale for the creative life derives from the poet’s threshold position as a sage—being both among others and having greater sensibilities than others—then for Coleridge this rationale derives from the poet’s ability to both see the dual nature of the world and to embody that reality organically in poetic form. In Coleridge’s view, the capacity for simultaneously *seeing* and *doing* are the liminal qualities that validate the efforts of the poet/creator. Wordsworth’s sage becomes, in Coleridge’s formulation, a seer.

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* touches on many of the same themes as do Wordsworth and Coleridge in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* and *Biographia Literaria*. Shelley’s conception of the poet not only shares similar liminal characteristics with these two other writers, his view of poetry also encompasses all of creative endeavor. When Shelley writes that “poetry . . . may be defined as ‘the expression of the imagination’” and “connate with the origin of man,” he is, in effect, broadly defining creativity itself—that is, any imaginatively expressive act (748). For Shelley, anyone who possesses the “faculty of approximation to the beautiful” is a poet, “in the most universal sense of the word” (747). Shelley’s conception of poetry includes a multitude of creative activities: “[It resides in] the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true . . .” (747-748). Here the poetic faculty is equated with creative behavior in all its various manifestations.

All creators, in Shelley's view, share with Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poets similar characteristics, many of which locate them, again, outside mainstream society. First, the creator/poet is associated with god-like capabilities: "A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one"; "poetry is indeed something divine" (748, 758). The poet/creator intuits the truths of nature: "[Poetry is the] creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds" (748). Creators possess exceptional gifts and abilities, even refined moral acuity: "These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire" (759). The poet's gifts remain unappreciated by his fellow beings: "no living poet ever arrived at the fullness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers" (749). Finally, a creator's contemporaries may not fully understand his or her work: "a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty"; "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (749, 762).

Shelley complicates this conception, however, by dwelling simultaneously on poetry's beneficial "effects upon society" (749). In this view, the poet/creator's marginalized role is inverted and he/she is portrayed, not at the edge of society, but as essential to society's growth and progress. The poet's may even be unaware that his/her influence is a directing force for good: "A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (749). Here Shelley's imagery

reveals another aspect of the poet's liminal role: the creator "sits in darkness," delighting in his/her own "solitude," while simultaneously "enlightening" and "moving" his/her audience. The work the poet creates in seeming solitude for personal satisfaction alone also moves the world. Creativity is also associated with superior morality. Indeed, Shelley asserts that "the presence or absence of poetry in its most perfect and universal form, has been found to be connected with good and evil in conduct and habit" (751). Like Wordsworth, Shelley also inverts the poet's marginalized position in society to one of complete identification with his or her social milieu: "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own" (750). Thus the poet/creator has the capacity for moral good inasmuch as the creator is capable, as Wordsworth also noted, of identifying profoundly with others.

Shelley also agrees with Wordsworth that creativity has the capacity to combat the ills of a society overrun by undesirable forces: "we want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception" (755). For Shelley, it is the poetic/creative faculty which grants freedom to the oppressed:

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionately circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty . . . is to be

attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labour, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind? (755)

Shelley rejects what he terms the “calculating” faculty of his age and even goes so far as to blame “the mechanical arts” and the “calculating faculty” for enslaving humankind and blunting the development of an “internal world.” For Shelley, creativity is the ultimate act of freedom, and a poet is never more needed than when that freedom is threatened by the “accumulation of the materials of external life” or when poetry is dismissed as obsolete or irrelevant (755). We must note that Shelley wrote *A Defence of Poetry* to answer Thomas Love Peacock’s assertion in *The Four Ages of Poetry* that poetry would become irrelevant in an increasingly industrialized society. Shelley rejects this view, not by arguing for poetry’s practical or utilitarian qualities but by insisting that creative energy remains a vital balancing force to the “calculating faculty.” Poetic inspiration functions as a necessary guide to direct our practical inventions toward beneficial uses (757). Compare Shelley’s view with that of Charles Lamb, as expressed in his essay *Sanity of True Genius*. The association of poets with madness has a long and storied history in Western culture, originating, perhaps, with Plato’s observation in *Ion* that poets can only compose when “not in their right minds” (1128). Like Shelley, Lamb argues against marginalizing creators and their work by asserting that poets, far from being “possessed” are, in fact, in complete control of their reason. Poets are endowed instead with “the greatest of wit . . . the true poet . . . is not possessed by his subject, but has dominion over it” (687). Like Shelley, Lamb’s true geniuses are more capable, more balanced, and saner than the average person. In Lamb’s words, the poet “ascends the empyrean heaven, and is not intoxicated” (687). Both of these writers, then, reject society’s marginalizing of the creative person, either through irrelevance or pathology, by claiming that creative processes are more necessary and more

rational than the world would otherwise suggest. Additionally, both of these writers characterize poets as marginal through their exceptional abilities, and not because poets are irrelevant or irrational. In doing so Shelley and Lamb portray poets as liminal, threshold figures who are capable of creative expression precisely because they inhabit dual roles: they are both exceptional beings who stand apart from the rest of humanity, whose work is nonetheless essential to moral and social progress. It appears that, for these writers, the freedom inherent in the liminal situation remains of paramount importance to them; it is not simply that poet/creators inhabit the fringes of society, but that they must be free to reject the trends of the world in order to save it.

The creator envisioned by Shelley also shares with Coleridge the view that poets intuit “the rhythm and order [of the world] which may be called the beautiful and the good” (758). As does Coleridge, Shelley believes in the poet’s capacity to see the underlying patterns beneath the surface of reality, and believes also, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, that the poet is a liminal figure who stands at the threshold of these dual worlds in order to translate those visions into formal poetry. But Shelley’s liminal conception of poetry/creativity pushes this duality even further. He writes:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips

the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms. (759)

Here Shelley makes claims for creativity beyond that of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Poets/creators are more than the threshold sages and seers of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's formulations. They are, in Shelley's view, saints. Shelley's conception that "poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in Man" attributes a god-like quality to the creative faculty; creators possess the power to redeem humanity from moral degeneracy and decay (759). Shelley's creator is a threshold figure who inhabits the dual worlds of mortality and divinity—they are priests ("hierophants") who expound the sacred mysteries (762). Indeed, his bold statement that "*Non merita nomen di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta* [no one deserves the name of creator save only God and the poet]" reveals the extent to which the British Romantics, and Shelley in particular, threw off the constricting notion that poets were mere crafters of words and were, instead, liminal figures at once removed from yet essential to society (760).

The saint-like creator envisioned by Shelley is not simply all-powerful in his or her redemptive ability, but functions also as a conduit for inspiration which comes and goes according to its own dictates. As such the poet/creator is a medium for the expression of something that is essentially unknowable, unconscious, and mysterious: "A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, . . . and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure" (758). Shelley here articulates another liminal characteristic of the creator/saint: while all-powerful, the poet yet remains an empty vessel to be filled by divine inspiration. Indeed, the poet him- or herself may corrupt this divine

communication through the very act of seizing upon it: “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet” (758). Again, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley’s creator/saint functions as a translator between poetic inspiration and the suffering world. In his or her role as saint the creator best functions when self-effaced and self-sacrificing. The poet, in Shelley’s view, is an obedient servant of creativity’s mysterious, even divine, Muse. Shelley’s liminal characterization of the poet/creator as simultaneously all-powerful and completely self-effacing remains the boldest and most extravagant claim for creative endeavor of all three of these writers. Indeed, Charles Lamb was reluctant to go this far in his depiction of the poet as the sanest of persons: for him the possessed person was “passive” while the true poet creates, “which implies shaping and consistency” (688). Lamb’s poet remains after all a shaper of words, even though he inverts the role of poet from insane to exalted being. In depicting the creator as a saint—categorizing the creator as he does with the archetypes of shamans, wise men, and prophets—Shelley not only elevates the function of the poet far beyond mere artisan, he creates a significant and powerful rationale for the creator’s perseverance through exceptionally difficult but ennobling creative work.

The British Romantics’ view of artistic creativity persists in our own day and time (Becker 45). Creators still self-identify strongly as threshold figures who, by virtue of their gifts or sense of higher calling strive to serve humanity through their creative work. Paradoxically, these same artists, by virtue of lifestyle or self-identification, prefer also to reside at the margins of society. Such characterizations of artists have become almost stereotypical in western culture, and many of these characterizations derive from artists’ own reports of their lives and work. This complicated, even paradoxical relationship between the artist/creator and his or her social-

cultural milieu appears to provide many creators—the British Romantics included—with a significant source of validation for living a creative life. In the liminal role of sage, seer, or saint the creator finds abundant freedom through indeterminateness and neither/nor-ness to define him- or herself and to break with the past through innovation. Similarly, creators' strong identification with these roles also provides significant support for the extremely difficult work of surviving persecution and criticism, persevering through creative blocks and challenges, and sharing the fruits of their labors with the world. The very real need creators have to frame their lives and work in such terms allows us to acknowledge, as does performance scholar Victor Turner, that performances possess incredible power to shape identity, reaffirm or alter human experience, and move us to action. Indeed, Turner saw creativity as emerging precisely from such liminal spaces:

Postmodern theory would see in the very flaws, hesitations, personal factors, incomplete, elliptical, context-dependent, situational components of performance, clues to the very nature of human process itself, and would also perceive genuine novelty, creativeness, as able to emerge from the freedom of the performance situation (77).

The tendency to view performance as an empty fiction, then, may itself be a fiction. The performance space that creators choose to inhabit may instead provide them with the requisite freedom and support for sublime creativity. Indeed, we may argue that the most cherished artifacts in Western culture arise precisely from the liminal situation that is creative endeavor.

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