

Creating “it”

by Eric Spencer

A museum is, by definition, a collection of creations which are put on display for anyone to experience. It's funny, then, that we should ever leave a museum or gallery feeling like we missed something crucial. Despite this, an intangible (and nearly incomprehensible) “lack” seems to be the product of going to a place already known to many, whether it is a museum or the Grand Canyon, purely for the sake of doing so. As Percy Walker writes in his essay “The Loss of the Creature,” “The thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind” (Percy 459). As such, any encounter with an object or a place which has already been defined is tainted by this “symbolic complex.” Nearly every experience we undergo has preconceived notions linked with it long before the actual occurrence. For instance, many children are afraid to go to the dentist, not because it is an inherently frightening experience, but because their peers (siblings, friends, etc.) have relayed to them a subjective experience of the dentist's office, one which often portrays it in a negative light. Thus, a “symbolic complex” of cruelty, darkness, blood, and fear is forever linked with the word “dentist.” Even if the child never has the displeasure of being victimized by the hygienists, he or she will still remember that it *could have* been much worse. Were the child to be brought there without any prior information, it would have been another adventure, an act of discovery, and it would have allowed for a much broader experience.

In the same way that a child goes to the dentist with a feeling of fear, we go to museums with certain expectations. The museum of contemporary art, for instance, is known to contain contemporary art, so a museum-goer might remember art of a similar genre, or go in expecting to see “strange” art. Obviously we imagine what we might see or hear in the museum based on what we know about it, and so when we finally get to strolling through the halls, we judge each painting based on what we had expected (or hoped) to see. In Percy's essay, he highlights this point by noting, “The sightseer measures his satisfaction by the degree to which [the place] conforms to the preformed complex” (460). Percy stresses this idea to force the reader to look at their experiences from a different perspective, which, instead of being veiled by the complex, allows them to see the memory and the acquired perceptions as not a single unit, but two parallel planes. To view them from the front is to only see the fragments of the memory which peak from behind the network of assumptions, but to view the memory from the back is to do the opposite; the memory lies totally exposed, while the complex is only seen as many individual splinters instead of a whole canvas. Were an experience to perfectly match the preformed complex, I would speculate that a certain satisfaction would follow, but not the satisfaction gained after completing a project; rather, it would be more like an inner voice saying, “I knew it all along.” This is a purely hypothetical situation though, as I find it unlikely that a scene such as the Grand Canyon should “look just like the postcard” (460) as Percy puts it. The chances of someone traveling to a place and seeing the exact picture that was displayed on a “wish you were here” card in Hallmark are obscenely small. Instead, a person viewing the canyon is likely to feel disappointment at their “misfortune” when the portrait in front of them differs from their expectations in any way. Percy uses the example of the tourist at the Grand Canyon to illustrate this strange dissatisfaction as the person's experience simply meets, or misses, the standards which were put forth.

At this point the outlook is bleak; if every experience comes with preconceived notions, and preconceived notions corrupt an experience, then aren't we all enslaved by stories of other's experiences? Percy would disagree. He speaks of a certain "sovereignty" which a knower holds over the known, an unquestionable control that a person can hold over an experience (465). Instead of theorizing that we are trapped by pre-formed complexes, Percy believes that we can reclaim our "sovereignty" by seeing experiences from new angles and addressing the complex and the experience as two separate objects. Once an experience is separated from its preconceived notions, it can be referred to as being an instance, which is "it."

Percy denotes discovery, or rediscovery, of an experience as "it," an ambiguous term that leaves itself up to general interpretation, but hints at defining an experience as fulfilling, gratifying, and generally exceptional (i.e. an experience that results in personal growth), or in his terms being "authentic." But what does it mean for an experience to be "authentic?" Percy refers to the first "discovery" of the Grand Canyon by Garcia Lopez de Cardenas as authentic, and so it seems as though the best way to experience "it" is to become an explorer of some field. But I would define a "discovery" in broader terms, and include the idea of "creation" in the definition. What is creation but discovery, and vice versa? If a child walks into a dentist's office without any information about what he may encounter, then who's to say the doorway into the office wasn't a doorway to a different dimension, one dictated by the child's imagination? For all the child knows, the inside of the building had never existed before he stepped foot inside. Or perhaps the Grand Canyon had never existed until Cardenas stumbled upon it. Science has explained the origins of the canyon in terms of the river that runs through it, but as of this point, it is impossible to prove that there was indeed a gorge there before Cardenas's discovery. Furthermore, if no one ever came across the canyon, what's to say it ever existed? Such a geological phenomenon would have never been conceived or even thought possible to exist. Thus, the act of discovering it manifested the canyon in human history, or as I would define it, created it.

I recently went to the Museum of Fine Art and wandered around; it was the pursuit of killing time in a moderately wholesome way rather than a fascination with the art which brought me there. I wandered aimlessly for close to an hour and a half, viewing artistic renditions from various time periods and locations. Occasionally I was struck by the sheer talent required to craft the pieces (the marble statues, for instance, are mind-blowingly realistic for being carved of stone), but never did I get the sense that being there, among great artistic pieces of history, was enriching or growing me. This is not to say I was disinterested, but rather I just was not lost in the moment as I sometimes become when I love what I'm doing. It was what I would consider a "typical" M.F.A. experience, at least until we walked through the European section on our way out. There, standing five feet from one of the paintings was an older gentleman, not examining the paintings in some particularly exciting way, but painting his own rendition of one of them. The painting he was recreating was of a cliff, with a river flowing at the bottom, and a small town in the distance, set against a blue skyline hardly littered with clouds. The original was composed of very vibrant colors, and most likely used oil paints; the sky a perfect light-blue, and the town with a red-sided building contrasting the rest of the "natural" painting, yet the man's rendition was a watercolor. Black paint outlined the most defining features of the picture—the staircase, the houses, the cliff, the road, and the river, but the black lines contained meek colors and little detail. Watercolor, as a medium, doesn't stand out to me as the most detailed or vibrant

of the paint types, and this was surely no exception, but that was the essence of what made this instance so striking. This man did not view the paintings the way that every other museum-goer did; he viewed it as a creator. His interpretation did not seek to emulate the painting on anything but a basic level. As two artists painting the same scene are likely to have different interpretations, so did this man. As I sat there I wondered is this “it?” Was I experiencing “it?” It was like an example from Percy’s essay. Two tourists go to Mexico, and after trying to escape from all the “touristy” things, they stumble upon an indigenous tribe performing one of their rituals. The couple soon finds themselves wondering, as I did, “is this it? Is this what it means to experience Mexico?” This is a ridiculous idea, though, that people can “experience Mexico” by visiting for a short time, regardless of what they see.

It is not the viewers that are reaping the most of this experience, but the indigenous tribe who they look upon. Not the outliers looking in, but the dancers who perform a ritual which represents the world they live in. In the same way, the painter was the one experiencing “it” while I was merely an onlooker, separated from the gratification of the experience by an intangible barrier. Despite this seemingly impenetrable separation in that specific situation, though, I was not (as you the reader, or any other being on this earth is not) separated from the inherent “it” which I hold on to. I believe that we all are able to develop, create, and explore, and those are the aspects which define an experience as “authentic,” and cause us to make personal advancements.

The ability to create is inherent to human nature, as people have been creating for thousands of years and continue to do so today. Not only that, but every human has the ability to create in a way which is unique on a person-to-person basis. This seems implausible, as many people live their lives without seeming to create, invent, or discover anything, but this doesn’t mean they lack the potential to. Percy attributes this submissiveness to the relatively easy life that many in first world countries live as a result of consumerism. Percy writes, “It is due altogether to the eager surrender of sovereignty by the layman so that he may take up the role not of the person but of the consumer” (Percy 464). It is all too easy to fall into the trap of merely consuming and not generating one’s own experiences. Once in the grave, people are buried by the ideas of what it is to be “successful” and “happy” and are easily smothered by what they perceive to be the world’s expectations of them. Creation, by definition, is a virgin experience; as such, it goes a step beyond freeing itself from the shackles of symbolic complexes and proves itself immune to binding from its inception. Thus, there is no experience in my life which I would choose to revisit in an attempt to free myself from the constraints which prevent it from bettering me. Instead, I would look forward and spend more of my living time on creation—not just creation via painting or sculpting, but creation through writing, invention, and discovery. By creating, we leave parts of ourselves wherever we go, and these parts can have a much greater effect than we expect. When we leave a mark of individuality, it is often seen by others, and though many people are quick to scoff at and criticize people’s efforts, a few may instead be inspired by them. Certainly I have found myself inspired by some of the greatest creators of history such as Thomas Edison and Jimi Hendrix. But, I have also been inspired by much less known people, including Gavin Aung, a comic artist, and my friend Max, who makes it his job to literally climb the tallest mountain in sight. This inspiration wasn’t wrought by some grand *pièce de résistance*, but by a collection of much smaller experiences, attitudes, and perspectives. Every human-to-human interaction results in the formation of ideas which, though some may be considered

negative (i.e. judgments not based in reality), change how we see the world. In this way, every single person that has lived—and will live—has the potential to be a creator rather than a consumer, not through some exemplary piece of work, but by being unique and expressing that. This is more dependent on the latter than the former, as it is impossible to have a lasting effect on anyone if no one is aware of what makes you distinct from anyone else. The most interesting person in the world is just another face if they do not reveal their existence. By the same token, people who believe themselves to be entirely ordinary but are willing to confront and overcome inhibitions about expressing themselves will certainly leave their mark on the people they meet. Often we find ourselves confronted by social complexes, which seem to act against our individuality; yet, they should not be viewed as a blanket meant to smother our existence, but rather a barrier to overcome in the pursuit of personal growth.

Works Cited

Percy, Walker. "The Loss of the Creature." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. By David Bartholomae and Tony Petrosky. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 459-71. Print.