

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

Ronald Fink

THE QUESTION

THE QUESTION AROSE ANEW IN THE STUDIO of my increasingly wizened friend, as he insisted again that he does not know why he paints.

“Why do I do this?” he said. “Why have I done this all my life?”

He paused to stare again at the series of expressionistic ink-on-paper drawings on the far wall, mostly of misshapen figures in sharply contrasting light and shadow along with semi-coherent strings of words drawn from his journals. “I don’t really know.”

I offered up various possible answers, none especially serious, based on my own decades of writing, ranging from such impulses as the metaphorical “to scratch an itch” and the existential “to find meaning” to the boredom-countering “to fill the time.”

In truth, it seemed as if we both preferred to labor in ignorance.

I had come to pick up a print he’d made of a portrait he’d painted of Osip Mandelstam, the Russian poet who died in 1938 of typhus at age 47 in a Soviet transit camp for daring to criticize Stalin. A 122-word epigram that never actually named the dictator had sent him away. The portrait was part of a series my friend had produced to memorialize worthy but largely forgotten historical figures. Now there was a reason to paint or write. Yet neither of us drew the obvious connection. Social relevance was or at least had been an aesthetic taboo for our passing generation.

So why had I offered to buy the painting and upon my friend’s resistance to parting with it accepted his offer to make a print of it for me instead? And why had I waited so long to arrange to pick up the print once he’d made it? I had no ready answers for those questions either. I’d procrastinated and was lackadaisical in certain respects. And my friend wasn’t one to press the issue. Yet now that I think about it there’s another, more precisely apt word for the trait in question that escapes me, involving hesitancy and inaction, and the inability to summon the exact word is a growing old-age tendency that my friend and I share and discussed.

He had trouble with the word, “Muscadet,” for example. I had trouble with “shingles” and “shallots.” But neither of us was inclined to Google missing words such as these, preferring instead to let them come to us willy nilly, without effort, out of the blue, and be briefly reassured when they did.

In the end, however, there was something about the painting and the commitment I had made to it that saw me eventually make good on our plan. Mandelstam’s obscure martyrdom appealed to me, as did my friend’s loose rendering of his bedraggled countenance along with the printing of his name and prisoner number in rough-hewn block letters. Art reversing the defeat of art designed to defeat tyranny? Yes, of course, but crucially without tendentious intent. But also, for a change, without irony. A small, quiet victory in the endless battle against the forces of darkness. Again, as worthy a cause as any. And yet as if out of embarrassment there was a reluctance on our part—to take small liberty with the poem—to “hear our words at ten paces” in open discussion of the issue.

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I left the studio late that afternoon amid the darkening January sky, snow somehow still white in the industrial street off the windswept mouth of the East River. A cold, wintry day drawing to another early end in Sunset Park. But nowhere near Siberia.

I still can't bring to mind the word I'd forgotten. But I didn't hesitate to frame the Mandelstam portrait and place it on my apartment wall.