



Creative Wordshops

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Writing Newsletter

March 2020

re-story, re-
create and re-
imagine your life
and work

Read this letter on dorianhaarhoffblog.co.za courtesy of Dominic Haarhoff

See 'what's on' for wordshops, retreats and ongoing opportunities

Dear seeker of word and images

Midrash, Rilke, Apollo and Us

Many candles can be kindled from one candle without diminishing its light



Midrash involves Biblical interpretation. It's about elaborating and asking questions about a text. Why did Eve engage with the snake? Why did Lots' wife turn around? For me, midrash allows the imagination to flesh the bones of a skeletal story and participate in a text, lifting personal

meaning from between the lines. And such a meaning changes with each encounter for yesterday's reader is not the reader facing today's page.

When we studied poetry at University a recurring question frustrated me – Rather than being asked 'How does the poem speak to you?' we were asked 'What is the poet's intention?' I feel a little like my three and a half year old granddaughter, Mia. When her father recently asked her 'What would mommy say I asked her if you had been grumpy today?' Her response? 'I don't know. I'm not mommy.'

In this letter i wish to suggest how midrash can prompt and illuminate our written responses. We'll look at Rilke's poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. Apollo in Greek mythology, son of Zeus, was the god of healing, medicine, archery, music, poetry and plague. Leader of the Muses. A god of prophecy via his Oracle at Delphi. God of Light, he daily drew the sun across the sky in his 4-horse chariot. Apollo has bestowed his name on countless ventures. - e.g Apollo 11 was the space craft that first landed humans on the Moon. Here is Rilke's poem:



We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,
gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Enough here to respond to through the months to come. What stirs for you? Where does the poem touch your guts, skin and heartbeat? Here are a few of many responses that set me quivering at the mystery. Posed as questions.

What have Apollo's attributes and responsibilities to say to me this morning? As I age how do I light up inside the skull and skin so the fire in the belly and eyes shines into the world? The metaphor 'ripening fruit?' Eyes as aspects of nature? I recall Neruda's 'I want to do to you what spring does to the cherry tree.' How do hips and thighs still smile? Smiling at what, when where, who and why? How do I break through self-imposed borders? And from the line 'no place that does not see you' a story rises.

A guru has twenty disciples, one of whom is the favourite. One day the other nineteen challenge their leader, 'Why is this one the favourite?' The guru responds, 'Go into the forest everybody and bring back a chicken.' All twenty disciples return with a chicken clutched under their arms.

The guru issues his second instruction. 'Now, go where nobody can see you and kill the chicken.' The disciples disappear and return shortly. They have all killed the chicken except the favourite. The chicken is still flapping under his arm.

The leader asks the favourite. 'Why did you not carry out my instructions?' The favourite responds 'I did carry them out. You said go where nobody can see you. Now there is no such place. So I did not kill the chicken.'

The leader turns to the other nineteen. 'That is why this one is the favourite.'

And yes, what of Rilke's sudden last five-word instruction? You must change your life. How do I do that today. Now? ...And and and....



Another story rises to converse with Rilke and these musings, one I shared in blessing a recent wedding celebration. **Ovid's Tale**

Zeus and Hermes came disguised as ordinary peasants to a village asking for a place to sleep that night. Everybody rejected them so *wicked were the people of that land*. At last they came upon a rustic cottage of a long-married couple, Baucis and Philemon. Though the couple was poor, their generosity far surpassed that of their rich neighbors, among whom the gods found *doors bolted and no word of kindness*.

After serving their two guests food and wine, Baucis noticed that, although she kept refilling her guest's beech wood cups, the pitcher was remained filled to the brim. Realising that their guests were gods, she and her husband *raised their hands in supplication and implored indulgence for their simple home and fare*. Philemon wanted to kill and cook the goose that guarded their house but the creature sought safety in Zeus's lap. Zeus stayed their hands.

The gods led Baucis and Philemon up the mountain. At the summit, climbing as *far as an arrow could shoot in one pull*, Baucis and Philemon looked back. A flood had destroyed the village. One home remained. Zeus had turned their cottage into a temple.

The Gods granted them two wishes. They spoke to each other and asked to be guardians of the temple. They also asked that when time came for one to die, that the other would die as well. So they lived on. Upon their death, the couple were changed into an intertwining pair of trees, one oak and one linden, standing in the deserted boggy terrain.

For they had honoured hospitality, theoxenia, the ritualized guest-friendship between gods and human beings. Ovid end the tale. Those whom the god's love become gods themselves.

So how can we midrash? How can we invoke the archetype Apollo and his calling?

Dorian