

In my most recent books, *Legends of the Slow Explosion* and *Songs from a Voice* I have been intent on exploring the terrain of imagination, where it comes from, how it manages and doesn't manage in this world, what it has to tell us. As the first title indicates, I am interested in the legendary, that which is somehow larger than life, deeper than life and cannot be defined by a series of facts or explanations. In a world beset each hour and day by endless news, a constant pounding of events and people deemed of interest, and in a world beset by endless entertainments of various degrees of mindlessness, the legendary may seem like a remnant of a more credulous era. Yet lives and events, particularly as far as the making of art is concerned, can portend much more than a summary. A look around us at these fields very much tells us that.

Life, as we live it, is, to put it grandly, made up. We are born into the world of time and circumstance and who we are varies wildly according to local conditions. We are mortal creatures with appetites but everything else concerning how we go about our days—our food, our transport, our work, our feelings, how we use our knowledge and what we consider knowledge—is imagined. What may strike anyone is how little we talk about imagination. Perhaps we feel it goes without saying. Or perhaps we don't believe in it. Or perhaps it seems frivolous. Or perhaps it doesn't seem to matter—things are what they are, even if we made them up.

Yet imagination and its close relation, inspiration, are the well springs of our feeling that we are alive not as merely functioning creatures who drive cars, turn on computers and cash paychecks but creatures who have something limitless inside us, something that is attuned to the feeling of love, something inexpressible, something aligned with the silence of sculpture and the sounds that are music, something that we can participate in and be touched by, something that in its quiet, persistent way makes life worth living.

I am making large claims but if you consider the opposite of the two matters I have raised, if you look at the unimaginative and the uninspired, they aren't happy states of being. They speak of the dreary and humdrum, of gray days amid anonymous buildings. They speak of being unappreciative, of going through the motions, of not allowing for joy, of not registering the remarkable thrill of being. For it is this thrill that fuels imagination and makes imagination a vehicle of praise to the end, as the poet Theodore Roethke once put it.

We can and do imagine very terrible things. There is something chillingly neutral in imagination as a quality. Like water it can go anywhere. I take civilization—to introduce a large but important word—to be a sort of tutoring of the imagination in ways that are fruitful,

empathetic and truth-telling. To say that civilization fails frequently in this endeavor goes without saying. It's understandable that one might give up on imagination and inspiration and shrug one's shoulders with resignation and irony at what a friend of mine likes to call "ABI," another bad idea. There certainly has been no shortage of them in human annals. The justifications for various forms of evil—slavery, bondage, mass murder—have never been lacking.

Such social forms subsume individuals, as if a person were merely part of a mass identity, not an individual life. What is precious about individual imagination and about which we cannot remind ourselves enough is that the imagination can nurture our feelings of belonging in this world, that the imagination can literally re-fresh us, make us fresh in a world that inevitably wears us down with routines and habits. When we speak of the creative, we need to recall the word in all its actuality, the sense of life as a perpetual spring-time. Surely that is a marvel of the human spirit, its ability to conjure in countless ways entities that have the savor of springtime, that are fresh.

How this all happens is mysterious and despite the labors of neuro-scientists will remain mysterious. Inevitably, explanations of imagination are reductive, perhaps handy to make people less ill at ease but at a loss when it comes to how something occurs from seemingly nothing. In my most recent book, the full title of which I now will inflict on you—*Songs from a Voice, Being the Recollections, Stanzas and Observations of Abe Runyan, Song Writer and Performer* (I always wanted to write a book with a ridiculously long title)—my main character, Abe Runyan, comes from an American nowhere, a small town out on the northern plains. He grows up in a modest house and goes to schools that don't do much for him. He notes the world around him and sees there is much more to it than meets the eye. Yet there is a thick covering of steady cliché that covers everything, an accustomed dust that at once makes life tolerable and that smothers life.

My character is based on Robert Zimmerman, the artist who renamed himself "Bob Dylan" and who has been notoriously uninterested in explaining anything. More power to him. My book is an evocation and a "speculation," to quote a British reviewer. What attracted me is, of course, the sense of the legendary. How did this enormous welter of song come from such seemingly unremarkable circumstances? Society is all about the hubbub of the right school and the right job and the right neighborhood and the right car and here is a story that isn't about anything like that, that is about someone who simply follows his nose and makes it up, someone who is indifferent to what is "right," who trusted imagination and inspiration.

The issue of trust is enormous. It's very easy, given all the voices telling a young man such as Abe to not believe in himself, to not trust, to follow the approved script rather than toss the script aside and make up his own. Plenty of adults can tell you and are glad to tell you that you can trust and still fail ingloriously. There are no guarantees about how the world-at-large will receive you. Indeed, a degree of indifference, as in "Who are you?" and "What are your credentials?" can be counted on. The world can seem a conspiracy of failed longings and hopeless aspirations. Many an adult voice bears traces of a very weary wisdom.

Yet every day the boat of inspiration is launched in countless ways. The world of what others have created is deeply provoking—as you can see right here at Cold Hollow. The world, in and of itself, is deeply provoking, even when it is manifestly unhappy. The forces of clarity and confusion never tire. Any given moment offers more than a mere human mind can ever encompass. Yet the varied lightning of illumination remains—a sculpture, a song, a poem, a painting, a dance, any instance of embodiment, of making something that wasn't there before. My intent now is to read some from *Songs from a Voice* and introduce you to Abe and what he has to say about being Abe and many other matters. He is the one who imagines and who makes. That is his legend.