

BRIAN JAY STANLEY

In Praise of Passion

1. Reason and Passion

My weight is my love, by it I move wherever I move.

—Saint Augustine

BY THE END OF COLLEGE, every weekend at dinner I ordered a glass of wine. Leave getting drunk to fraternity boys, lying by kegs in pools of vomit, craving female flesh they will scarcely be able to feel. Too much alcohol smothers sensitivity, but a little wakes and sharpens it, for a little merely smothers the day's distractions and swirling worries. These removed, there was only the present moment: the shadows on my friend's face, the shine of my silverware, the muted noise of conversations at other tables. After a week of classes and homework and hurrying around, how pleasurable to pause and taste a tomato on my palate—to pause and taste life! Drunkenness obliterates reason, and I wanted my mind intact to trace my feelings, so that, knowing them more precisely, I could experience them more intensely. That is all the employment I grant to reason, to interpret passion.

Reason had lost its authority in the very temple I once went to worship it in, my college philosophy classes. The philosophers' efforts to squeeze heaven and earth into their syllogisms only convinced me of reason's unreasonableness as a sole guide to truth. One philosopher proved that matter does not exist, the next that matter alone exists, one that space and time are infinite, the next that they are only as big as the human brain, being mental constructs. All contradicted all, their theories sharing only a tendency toward extreme claims. They waged their written wars upon my desk with me in the crossfire, but their impotent spears bounced off me. Epicurus proved that we have nothing to fear from death, because when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not. My reason detected nothing

wrong with the argument, but my common sense smelled sophistry, nor did I leave the classroom at peace with my mortality. Logic imposes a duty to accept any conclusion one cannot refute. But proofs without passion are like law without grace in Christian theology, we know the good but are powerless to do it. Logic proves but cannot convince.

Instead, the poets in my English classes were winning me to their worldviews through beauty's power of persuasion, coaxing instead of coercing my belief. The poets were better philosophers than the philosophers, for their arguments were not flimsy deductions of far-fetched hypotheses but revelations of realities everywhere present but unnoticed. I had gone to philosophy first because it promised truth while literature only offered imagination. But in fact, the philosophers were constructing imaginary worlds of abstraction, while literature's fictions were true to life. These fictions further fueled my pursuit of facts, for the world through literature's lens was so vivid and exciting that I wanted to study it also through history, science, and all the disciplines. And not merely study, but grab the glass of experience and drink it empty.

I attended a large university and knew scarcely anyone my freshman year. There were pretty girls everywhere, and my stomach fluttered for all of them, for any of them, but I was shy so it fluttered in secret. A girl would walk by in the cafeteria, and only my desire would follow after her. Like a star briefly glimpsed between clouds, she would emerge from the great cloud of other students, a new object in my sky, then disappear again forever. By tomorrow I had forgotten her face, but another face appeared, and each new day brought new unrequited loves. Because my passion had a moving target, often my countless crushes coalesced into a single gigantic yearning for the bliss of loving and being loved.

When infants whimper, their mother brings a bottle, breast, or diaper, and all is quickly well. Lacking reason, they think their wishes intrinsically produce their satisfactions, and, though actually helpless, they feel omnipotent like a god. Such an infant my moments of massive passion made of me. The very strength of my yearning seemed to guarantee its fulfillment. My stomach swirled, my insides pounded out *this must be so*, and I was amazed that I could want anything so badly. What was this power blazing through my body like fire in my nerves, focusing my scattered energies into a single wish, consigning all other wishes to indifference, making ash of all objections? Must not the heavens heed such a need and drop my destined beauty down to me this minute? Just as children are shocked to come of age and hear their mother tell them no, I was shocked each time reason told me my longing moved only me, the sun and stars were cold to this cry.

Passion is famous for unhinging judgement and making fools of men. Courtiers plead pathetically to indifferent mistresses, kings give away their kingdoms to fine-figured swindlers, presidents trade honour for a moment of scandalous pleasure. Being shy, I made no outward fool of myself, but God and I know what a fool I was on the inside. Indeed, my shyness was passion's accomplice in my folly. Inside I was storm and motion and melodrama, but on the outside a marble statue, waiting impotently for fate's or chance's help. Often, I took roundabout routes to class in the hope of crossing paths with one of my Helens. Not that I would have talked to her had we met (for I was terrified to seem like a vulgar flirt), but I vaguely hoped that she would drop her papers at my feet or trip into my arms. When a pretty girl sat near me in the library, I became absurdly self-conscious of my gestures and expression, trying to make sure that if her eyes passed across me they would stick. But what expression or action would accomplish this purpose? Any face that would draw attention would be clownish, to laugh or loudly talk would be annoying. Therefore I actively did nothing and tensed my face into the most natural expression possible. For hours I played it cool and she studied unperturbed, oblivious of the act being performed to win her love, two tables over.

College was a time of experimentation and self-discovery. Far from parents and the past, I became the potter of my own clay, free to create myself in any image. In equal measures, I discovered my true self, becoming who I was, and invented myself as I pleased, becoming who I was not, and no matter who I became, no one knew me well enough to say, that is not you. No aspect of my identity was too sacred to erase and rewrite, and none was too insignificant. My clothing, haircut, career path, beliefs, diction, posture, morality, and view of society all went through multiple drafts. The freedom to change was exhilarating, but the speed and violence of the changes made for a wild and careening journey. New possibilities jerked me in contradictory directions. An unfamiliar field of study would burst into my world one semester, I would pour all my free time into it, and my prior life would go dim in my present excitement. The intensity of my new passion convinced me of its longevity, and I wanted to bind myself eternally to this pursuit, wanted to study the subject forever as a career, just as I wanted to say vows with each beautiful girl I passed. The interest would not so much fade as be quickly replaced by a new interest and, with it, a new commitment of my life to something else. Every new passion felt like an epiphany, but most were only whims, gone in a few weeks. Thus I developed this definition: an epiphany is a whim that sticks.

Reason had to save me from the mess of too many passions. Patiently and painstakingly, it heard each passion's petition and rendered verdict among them, admitting as many as could fit into a coherent life, refusing the rest.

Yet the various pitfalls, lies, and complications of passion only attracted me to it more. Reason was reliable and dull like an old man, but passion was a dark seductive lady, and her hook was in my mouth.

2. *Music and Passion*

All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments. —Walt Whitman

When I listen to music, I wonder why I bother to write. If art should impassion, then music is art, and all other arts are music's understudies. Poems and paintings must go through the brain, using thoughts to stir feelings, but music has a backstage pass to the soul. Most cultures' mythologies have given music a divine origin, and what modern headphone-listener could wonder why? How else could arrangements of vibrating air dissolve us into ecstasy? Literature is humanity's best utterance, and painting interprets the world, but music speaks from another world, not from the composer but through the composer, not an interpretation but a revelation.

Though I cannot play the piano, alone with one I will strike a few keys, the first notes in an unknown rhapsody. From nowhere, a flowing, quivering, invisible substance fills the room like liquid, surrounding and saturating me. How can the plain world have so suddenly become so potent? The sound is a reminder of something forgotten, which I do not now remember but only remember that I have forgotten. A desire pierces me—I know not what for, only know that before I desired it I was sleeping, for this is waking. Should I call this new feeling happiness or sadness? Fulfillment and yearning dwell too close to decide—a glimpse of heaven, but from earth. The notes fade, but the room is changed. Washed in the brief gold of the piano's sound, the faded rug, dusty lamps, and worn sofa shimmer with sudden significance.

Often my impressions of nature or society are vague and reticent until appropriate music gives them a voice. Standing atop the Appalachian peaks of my birth, I feel some wordless stirring. But listening in my lawn chair to fiddlers and banjo-pickers on summer nights, I grasp the mountains' meaning in the music, which is their commentary, being old and rugged and sad like them. I think of what the rocks and what the human heart have gone

through, and suddenly this simple evening swims on the depths of man's and nature's past. Like bluegrass to blue-ridged mountains is jazz to city nights. The wandering saxophone gives me eyes to see through every building's walls and windows to the dramas of desire inside—the secret meetings, hushed joys, and anguished betrayals—and thereby the cold, concrete city comes alive with the pulse of a thousand yearnings. Such journeys through time and space without budging my body from the concert or club, for music is the window to these worlds.

Have you never marveled how music possesses you like a spirit? In formal restricted settings, you cannot help tapping your feet, mouthing the words, or drumming your lap to the rhythm. On a dance floor, where natural tendency is given license, music stirs a Dionysian frenzy. Inhibitions melt and shoes fly off. Arms jerk, legs kick, torsos sway, feet step forward then instantly back, progress goes in circles. Bodies move as they do at no other time, purposely without purpose. If one imagines seeing a dance through an outside window without hearing the music, one realizes how oddly music makes us behave. Or, have you ever watched a driver, in an open-windowed car at a stop light, singing his lungs out to his stereo? He must know that other drivers can hear him, but he sings anyway, imagining his music impassions them too and offering his singing as a token of their communion. Instead they laugh and think him a fool, for passion seems foolish to those who do not feel it.

Tribal cultures believed music had magic control over nature, and shamans banged on drums and chanted hymns to call down rains from stingy skies, heal sick bodies, or ferry souls to afterworlds. Such beliefs in the power of music show the power of music over our beliefs. Humankind is ever projecting itself on the world. Then what more natural than believing that music influences nature, seeing how it turns us into putty?

Read on paper, the lyrics of pop songs make poor, unpersuasive poetry. But backed by melody, I feel their truth, live inside them, wear their singer's identity and forget my own, till I forget hers too when the next song starts to play. Sometimes I use music's power of conviction to my purpose. When I move to a new town I look for a church where the mass is sung, for my faith is sickly and sceptical, and I believe canticles better than sermons. If religion would convert the world, it should lay down the sword and suicide bomb, give up guilt, fear, promises, exegesis, and apologetics, and train its missionaries to sing sweeter songs than rock stars or atheists can, and humanity would fall in love with God. What need for religion to argue with science or ask for help from ethics? Conscience and intellect are two cabooses, passion pulls the train.

Would the sixties have won civil rights without a people's movement, and would the people have moved without music's lead? They marched for peace to hymns and folk songs, as soldiers march to war to drums and bugles. As much as the words themselves of Martin Luther King's speeches, his delivery inspired others, less like speaking than like the chanting of a prophet. No formal lecture could have made the masses dreamers or argued them into giving their flesh to billy clubs. Music is the glue of social causes because, while speech appeals vainly to scared and selfish individuals, music taps the collective humanity beneath individuality. Reminded of their true brotherhood, the scattered masses join their dissonant tongues into a great earth-shaking voice.

True, music's power is double-edged. Nazi propagandists wrapped their ideology in music like a sugar-coated poison, distributing radios and beaming nationalistic songs to inspire the homeland pride in which such violence to outsiders lurked. In Euripides's *Bacchae*, wine and music madden a mother into murdering her son in a state of ecstatic frenzy, her return to reason soon revealing the horror of her action. Though I never went mindless for music, I know its antisocial power. Before competing in high-school soccer games I always listened to heavy metal music in my car outside the stadium, letting the guitars and screaming unrepress my buried aggressions to take onto the field. Music tilts us from the average, but equally for better or worse, toward saint or villain. Fearing its darker effects, many church leaders throughout history banned music from their services, and moralists like Plato and Tolstoy cautioned the state against its free use, but in their reproofs I merely hear the proof of music's might.

A few years ago I borrowed from the library several scholarly books about music, as a bug-loving boy gets books on entomology, his passion craving knowledge. Disappointingly, the scholars had scant love to go with their copious expertise, their knowledge scorning passion. Though music is as old and varied as the human species, they pretended that only a few men who lived in the eighteenth century and wore wigs knew how to compose it. They dismissed popular music as simple and its listeners as tasteless. They treated concert halls like laboratories, dissecting symphonies into sounds to measure their balance, complexity, or subtlety. In learning how to judge, they had forgotten how to admire, like some scientists who see a spectrum of refracted light but do not see a rainbow. I tossed their arrogant books aside, convinced that good listening requires deep feelings, not an academic degree.

I admit that strong passion and good taste may conflict. Certainly I have noticed that a few beers with dinner can make almost any music delicious to me, even the off-key singing of local guitarists in a pub. I am

far from mistaking such fellows for Mozarts or Bachs, yet I can feed on their sounds and praise a well-spent evening, not because of their greatness but the greatness of music itself—the divine sacrament of which they are the bumbling priests. Taste is the faculty by which we honour the skill of a musician. Passion is the faculty by which we worship music itself.

Some feed their ears in auditoriums, some in night clubs, some in churches, some around tribal bonfires. Surveying their diversity, I see their unity. They are bees of different flowers, all seeking the same sweet nectar. Taste is a form of limitation, and I kick against limitation. I wish to be at home in any audience, to unite in myself the sophisticate and the philistine. A symphony is more complex than a pop song, but what I crave in both is power. Whether high or low culture moves me, I give thanks that I was moved.

3. *Eloquence and Passion*

Ordinary men will always be sentimentalists: for a sentimentalist is simply a man who has feelings and does not trouble to invent a new way of expressing them. —G.K. Chesterton

One morning while searching the Internet I found an adolescent's diary posted online. Broken-hearted, confused, seeking release of his agony, in chaotic sentences that visibly mirrored his inner turmoil, the diarist poured his pain onto the web page, calling life unfair, despairing of the future, cursing the gods who cursed him, wishing calamity on his rival, because a girl he will scarcely remember in ten years had dumped him, and the world was ending. In a later entry, the violent initial throes of the breakup past, he aimed to elevate his suffering through the grandeur of poetry. Perhaps he now comforted himself that though he was not Casanova, perhaps he was Keats—for might he not have read that genius is tormented, and was he not tormented? *Ergo*, was he not a genius? Beneath the muddled meter, tortured rhymes, and vapid diction, I could scarcely decipher the poem's meaning, but I could clearly decipher the teen's aspiration for greatness, as well as its futility. My pity was tempered by a sense of the absurd. Such a drama does not wrinkle the great world's brow, wins no audience in heaven's court. These were not heroic sufferings but ordinary growing pains, overmagnified and displayed for the public eye. How happy I was, looking on from the calm of adulthood, to be past those embarrassing years! Better than any moral treatise, adolescent passion makes a virtue of self-control.

That afternoon, a chapter in a book I was reading sent me back to review many favorite passages in Shakespeare's plays. In the course of my hour's browsing, I revisited Richard plotting his rise to power, Lear going mad with grief, Othello murdering Desdemona out of love, Shylock swearing vengeance against Antonio, Romeo drinking poison by Juliet's apparent corpse. No matter the play, I met with strong-willed, misbehaving characters loving, hating, hoping, despairing, envying, betraying, forgiving, revenging, repenting—exhibiting with equal ardor every contradictory emotion that can fit in man's ample breast. I swelled in admiration not only for Shakespeare's skill but for the greatness of humanity which he reveals. What is it to live but to feel and act, that is, to have passion? Passion is humanity at its most sensitive and most courageous, its passive and active best, feeling its fated plight in the world yet tirelessly fighting against it. Shutting the lively characters back in their books, my life seemed pale by comparison, and I wished their blood and fire was in me.

So much depends on eloquence. The teenager's diary was a many-paragraphed cliché, yet vented as wildly as if none had ever felt such passions before. Anticipating the thoughts before they were spoken, comprehending them better than their speaker, I had read with the condescension of omniscience. Shakespearean passions are equally commonplace, but their novel wording thwarts omniscience and tricks us into insight, leading us by back roads to familiar places that suddenly, unfamiliarly appear. As well, out of our very excitement at splendid language we supply the lifeless print with the feelings it requires and suggests, but cannot itself contain. To be lively, writing requires a lively reader, whose imagination works the magic, the book being merely a manual instructing what to imagine. Imagination, like a spaceship, flies fast and free in orbit but is hard to get off the ground, and weak sentences, though written passionately, lack the propulsion. Only the intellect coldly reads them and, rejecting their wording, rejects their meaning, burning the wheat of substance with the chaff of style.

Dissecting my attitude, I recanted my injustice toward the diarist. The common teenager's gushing soul is as profound as any poet's. He or she merely lacks genius, which is the skill of turning passion into beauty. I salute the rare mantle of genius on whomever it rests, but I give higher praise to ordinary passion, without which, what is genius but a silver voice with nothing to sing?

4. *Labour and Passion*

Nothing great has been accomplished in the world without passion.

—G.W.F. Hegel

Motivation is a mystery. Some days I can easily write, some days I cannot begin. Words do not come easier on easier days; writing is always hard labor. But some days my back is strong to lift the rough stones of my half-formed thoughts and sentences into place, while other days I hate the effort and feel cold toward the hoped-for reward. The will to write is the humbling variable in my writing's equation, frustrating my neat plans and linear timetables. I can accept my allotment of talent as fate, I can hope to improve my skill through practice, but where can I apply for motivation? Motivation is neither nature's gift nor training's reward, but a spirit that blows where it wills, and when the wind is calm the ship sits idly in harbor.

To rouse myself on lazy days, I go for a walk. Outside, flowers are blooming, dogs are barking, jets are flying, leaves are rustling, cars are driving, children are playing, birds are pecking, storms are building. Unseen, continents are shifting, mountains are rising, volcanoes are spewing, the sea is roaring, supernovas are exploding, planets are spinning, comets are hurtling through space. Can I loaf in this welter of doing? Laziness is a violation of nature's law.

Why do we speak of inanimate nature? Even the rock that lies motionless on a valley floor, though it seems inert, is made of tiny moving particles held in shape by invisible forces, and the valley tugs the rock with gravity or else the rock would wander away. All matter in the universe is animate, and energy is the blood that beats through matter's veins. Matter makes the world, but energy makes the world happen.

What divides living things from so-called nonliving is not energy but the organization of energy. Organic life began when a pulse of radiation, ricocheting off the stars since the dawn of creation, was caught by a globule of matter so shaped to bend its aimless energy into orderly goals. Those goals were growth and reproduction, and over time the first globule grew and reproduced into the army of living organisms seen today—the amoebas, diatoms, mosses, fungi, ferns, conifers, fishes, birds, reptiles, and mammals that have built their world empire on the free labor of solar energy. Wood or fur or skin outside, all living bodies are sunlight inside. Sunlight in the poplar tree pushes out stems and petals and pollen, in the brown bear stalks prey and a mate, directed by unconscious instinct.

Eventually life evolved into human form, and instinctual energy was sublimated into conscious passion. Passion is the architect of civilization and the author of history, moving the times forward. Where would humanity be if our essence were ice instead of fire? We would have no cities, no governments, no technologies, no religions, no arts, no sciences. We would not be primitive but extinct, for survival itself requires the passion of lovemaking. What made a mighty conqueror of Napoleon? His army did not make him fierce, but his ambition made his army fierce, his soldiers being so many muscles clenched by his massive nerve. In the Age of Exploration, some sailed for gold, some for empire, some for trade routes, some for the spread of the church by the sword. Many were ruthless, but none were mediocre, for the mediocre men hugged the homeland. In our time, countless technologies lubricate our lives, and new medicines make life pleasanter and longer, both thanks to passion. Inventors are not so much exceptionally clever as exceptionally curious, passionately tinkering until they stumble upon a solution. And the cold, impartial truths of science would never be known were scientists cold and impartial. DNA's structure was discovered, the human genome was mapped thanks to rivalry and hope of fame. "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another." Though written with disapproval, I read this sentence from Ecclesiastes with admiration, envying envy which has done such good for humanity.

Admittedly, passion is a mighty destroyer as well as creator, like the Hindu god Shiva. Like a child in a sandbox, humanity builds towering cities with one hand then smashes them down with the other, redirecting the passion that made vaccines and electric light bulbs into building bombs and warplanes to reinstate the dark ages. Still, could I wear a hippie flower and wish an end to war? Only if world peace were not won by passion's surrender. But give me any day our tank-building, land-stealing, sorrow-causing species over a race of bloodless angels too kind to quarrel, whose hymns haven't half the ardour of our curses. Pacifists at all costs should work for weakness and mediocrity, for passion's fire will occasionally scorch the earth.

Judging from history and present examples, talent seems less essential to success than perseverance, which is passion stretched over time. Today's winners and world-shakers first worked in obscurity, and only love of their labour kept them from giving up. Before record contracts and Grammys, famous rock bands played for their friends who alone would listen; before IPOs and mansions, computer makers built prototypes in their parents' garages and dreamt of success, until the world caught up with their genius. Not the smartest but the stubbornest bend the stiff world their way by steady pressure, banging their heads against walls—until the walls, not their heads, crumble.

Considering passion's greatness, why does age scowl upon the fervour of youth? The young describe the world in colour as they see it, and the old, seeing only in grey, call them melodramatic. The young stretch for the ideal, and the old, whom the real has whipped weak and submissive, call them pretentious. If passion is youth's error and age brings wisdom, then all great leaders remain youthful throughout their lives, and the wise are ruled by their peers who never grew up.

Similarly, why does an air of aloofness and cool disdain pervade the stylish magazines of the intelligentsia? The highbrow shunning of passion is rooted in intellectual masculinity—an insistence on self-possession, a fear of being affected by outside forces. Passion is weakness, because the passionate are ruled and dictated by their longing. Feeling is feminine, because to feel is to be penetrated by the world. And aspiration makes one vulnerable to failure and scorn. Therefore the fashionable wrap themselves in cynicism as a defense, because while people may dislike cynics, they rarely laugh at them. More than I fear being laughed at, I fear to waste my days in fear of being laughed at. Is a seventy-year role in history's ten-thousand-year drama so trifling that desire and striving are unjustified? There is not enough time not to be earnest. Passion is the awareness of life's importance.

If I lie down on a quilt of sloth, enjoying instead of augmenting civilization, I lie on the prior labours of Alexander, Caesar, Dante, Columbus, Newton, and their peers in greatness who fill encyclopedias. This thought annihilates me yet motivates me. What can my humble efforts show compared to such titans? Nevertheless, at this moment, ordinary billions around the globe, like minor Alexanders, are channeling their passion into their chosen work and taking their real though tiny places in history. Likewise, shall I not add my grain of sand to the mountain of human accomplishment?