

# Real Compared to What?

by Claude Wilkinson

Looking at a small lithograph titled *Ploughing It Under* by Thomas Hart Benton brought to mind yet again this notion of “real” work. The image is of a determined black man hunched under his floppy field hat to steady the rickety, tilting plow behind a rawboned mule, its long ears charged straight ahead as man and beast forge through their hardscrabble world. One fleecy cirrus cloud shields little of the brunt of the sun. That mule with its blinders on, bound in its harness and collar, reminds me of when it was time to turn ground in our garden spot for a few rows each of three kinds of greens, always tomatoes, okra, honeydew melons, roasting ears, snap beans, some squash, and purple hull peas.

During those times when we didn’t own a horse, we had to borrow a neighbor’s engine, mostly our cousin Bob’s. He had two lime-white mules called Shorty and Sam—not that the knowledge of mules’ names, especially these two, made much difference. Even a mule you yourself owned wasn’t likely to come scampering like a puppy just because your voice was familiar or you did him the courtesy of using his name—no, not the seasoned ones, the ones who held in that stubborn memory, full days of blazing heat singeing their backs, the sharp pop of a stinging rein on lathered flanks urging their pace, someone shouting at them, “gee” or “haw,” no not those who had felt the bite of bits across the tongue.

To trap these mules, you had to go bearing gifts, rattling a pail of corn kernels or sweet feed through the pasture like priests waving incense before entering the temple of a temperamental

god. The goal was always to catch Shorty first, then maybe Sam, the wilder of the two, would just follow suit. And too, if push came to shove, Shorty could be coaxed to plow alone, whereas Sam’s will was barely malleable even with his harness mate. There was no question it was work as my father teetered, steering his team to mine furrows through caked soil. It was work, as dust and sweat drenched his khakis black. When he cursed in code, because I was in earshot, after stumbling over a hard clod or one of the gumtree roots that had crept under our fence and onto his path, it was out-and-out work. As if haunting still, summer days, even now, I hear his “Hot to mighty knows!” There was no questioning it being work, the way with one eye closed against brain freeze, he guzzled Mason jar after Mason jar of ice water whenever he took a break. Controlling the wills of one and a half mules from morning till dusk in Mississippi heat for something as essential as food, by anybody’s definition, has to be considered real work. But even afterward, near dark, the team also had to be unhitched, watered, maybe fed a little something, and led back to their own pasture.

As for my mother, the only rest I ever saw her get came after her retirement little more than a decade before her death. She taught grade-schoolers for nearly forty years, and then when at home, she cleaned; she doctored; she sewed and patched; she killed, plucked, and stewed the hens she had raised from chicks. Come to think of it, I may have been grown before store-bought biscuits ever entered her house. But after the

pain of walking and standing had gotten so bad that she broke some seemingly unspoken vow to never go to doctors, and finally went to one, he said it seemed her knees were worn out from work. Yet I remember her telling me that while growing up, she had done every kind of work on her family's farm except for plowing, which makes that particular chore sound even more laborious now, and so to my mind, even more the stuff that's real work.

By the time I was tall and strong enough to handle horsepower, as it were, DeSoto County had become much less rural through a flood of city folks escaping their hustle from across the Tennessee state line and from other states as well, and thus expanding our little one house per hill community. By then, we too had moved into a new house with all the amenities of indoor plumbing. We no longer kept any animals to speak of, other than the occasional dog or cats. My father had fallen for one of those new garden tillers, owing to their readiness when fed just a little gasoline. The amiable tiller was indifferent to midday sun and stubborn ground, was ever ready to be brought out for work without any hint of mulishness. True, not having to chase down crazy mules or be on hand to fetch water and whatnot, in retrospect, gave me more time for the solitary acts of drawing, reading, and writing—these things that had always seemed to me as sustaining and indispensable as the blessed taste of our Early Girl and Better Boy tomatoes. And though my young hands proudly bore the red punctures of struggling with rolls of fanged wire for mending fences, though they bore the watery blisters from trying to pound a posthole digger as deep as my twice heavier father, my having not guided a mule to make a landscape of ruler-straight rows for hours on end somehow felt confoundedly like skipping a necessary rite of passage.

Sometimes I recall a favorite Richard Wright

short story titled "Almos' a Man," in which the main character, Dave, doesn't see his plowing as an entrée to manhood, but as a kind of bondage to immaturity and therefore his continued worthlessness. Dave's adolescence takes place in an earlier, more ethnically inequitable time than mine did, so I can also see why he thinks owning a gun, something that could kill anyone regardless of age or skin color, would put him on a par with those who were regarded as having value. Yet much of what stays with me from the story is that Dave was trusted to harness and handle his boss's mule all day long in a field alone, and to get tired and dirty doing it for a product deemed important. Even more than it resurrected my father plowing our garden, the Benton lithograph summoned up Dave, his clothes wet and sagging from hard, honest labor. And for some strange reason, the fact that he despises his job just seems to validate the work's enviable realness to me.

Once while lounging on a former lady friend's sofa after my day's earnest stabs at versifying the oft-called human condition, I asked her to turn the music down. Her retort seemed sharpened and duly aimed. "You go turn it down. I'm tired! I had to go to work today," she let fly like an arrow off a bowstring. I suppose a case can be made that listening to eight hours of customers' complaints about their ringtones and such is more akin to holding an ornery mule in check than say, arranging and revising a sestina's envoy, or if in my studio, scumbling to capture glints on banks of twilight clouds. I think it was Sonny Rollins whom I remembered giving up what many would've considered success in order to start again from scratch to get his music to jibe with his own idea of being tight, and him talking about his wife's unfailing support through the whole, shaky process. During the lady friend's and my breakup the next day, at some point, I felt Sonny Rollins's wife was in a way like the heroine in that Roger Corman film: of her sort,

perhaps, the last woman on earth.

Once when a distant family member, who had retired from a job that sounded much like not more than party-planning in Michigan, spoke of a dancer she knew, and sniped that he should quit auditioning for dance companies and get a real job, it was the proverbial last straw loaded on an already hobbled camel's back. I sometimes wonder if it is really bliss to exist without a clue. If so, let's have a bonfire of all the Brunelleschis with Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Milton for kindling. Probably with only minor remodeling, the Louvre and Metropolitan Museum of Art would make perfect Walmarts. Consider all the potentially pragmatic space that Michelangelo's rock piles have taken up, how ours could be such a roomier world without the useless eyesores of Rembrandt's wasted doodling. That being heartfelt but facetiously said, there's still this nagging thorn of frivolousness that likely plagues other artists as well for not plowing what the masses have deemed practical ground.

I confess that I've never cared much for Kirk Douglas's roles, but when a young Chinese woman on a teaching fellowship in the US asked, if I got "splattered" when I paint, I recalled the actor's garb being smeared with colors as Vincent van Gogh in the 1956 film *Lust for Life*, and how Vincent's frenzied quest for a sense of worth through his work gnawed at him till his end. John Berryman once said, and I'm paraphrasing here, that artists—specifically poets—will never know whether their efforts are any good or not. Though finally, in the seemingly, less tormented deathbed scene, we sense that Vincent feels he's surely failed to leave behind anything of worth. Consequently, when his painting of irises shattered art sales records, selling for some fifty million dollars almost a hundred years after his death, my first emotion was indignation. So why must we never know? Maybe it truly is as jazzman Les McCann sang when he belted out, "They

really got to be some kind of nut . . . Tryin' to make it real—compared to what?," when he questions even the question of what's real for those of us who've gone practically mad. ▲▼▲