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We Are, Nonetheless, Cartesians: A Prodigal Johnnie Reports Back
Antón Barba-Kay

I fancy that every speculative thinker, however solid he may believe the grounds of his thinking to be, does harbor, somewhere deep down in him, a skeptic—a skeptic to whom the history of philosophy looks rather like the solemn setting up of rows of ninepins, so that they may be neatly knocked down! That way of looking at things is tempting, no more; it is tempting, and for philosophy it is in a sense the temptation—just as for man in general suicide is that. It is a kind of suicide, too.

—Gabriel Marcel

It is said that philosophy makes no progress—that its history is a series of footnotes to Plato, say, or that it is an ever-renewed attempt to find a beginning that cannot be known by being taken for granted. The remark is sometimes made to rouge over our blushes at the fact—striking to newcomers—that philosophers have not been known to settle any fundamental questions once and for all to everyone’s satisfaction. And yet there is at least one point to which just about every modern thinker subscribes predictably and monotonously: I mean that Cartesian philosophy has got it all very wrong.

Descartes was wrong that philosophy should be founded on a closed set of first principles, wrong to think he could subtract himself from the world, wrong to imagine himself as a pure

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monadic subject, wrong to conceive of his consciousness as an impartial spectator, wrong that we have privileged access to immediate self-knowledge, wrong about *qualia* making up the stuff of perception, wrong to try to demonstrate God’s existence on purely rational grounds, wrong about the separability of mind from body, wrong in reducing organisms to mechanisms, and wrong to think that mastery and possession should be our proper disposition toward nature. There would seem to be a whole buffet of wrongheadedness on offer here, such that any observer surveying the past three hundred years of philosophical writing at a glance would be forced to conclude that Descartes was so wrong about so many things that there could be nothing worth talking about anymore—at least insofar as it isn’t clear whether there is anyone still standing who is in need of being disabused.

The *reductio ad Cartesium* is as characteristic of twentieth-century phenomenology (which acknowledges Descartes as its awkward stepfather), as it is of Frankfurt School and post-Heideggerian thinkers who have taken special issue with Descartes’s Enlightenment view of the unadulterated, monological *cogito*. But this anti-Cartesian impulse has been even more evident in Anglophone philosophy, taking its cues as it does from late Wittgenstein, who directs so much of his laconic ingenuity against what is usually identified as the Cartesian view of consciousness. There is virtually no one writing about philosophy of language or philosophy of mind who disagrees with the substance of Wittgenstein’s criticisms. And yet one opens up just about any subsequent book in this vein—by Sellars, or Rorty, or Dennett, or Ryle, or Nagel, or Searle, or McDowell—and sure enough the doornail has been resurrected, the dead horse is propped up and flogged with relish as if for the very first time. Attend almost any academic conference on an epistemological theme, and you will hear Descartes mentioned as a foil to the true view being advanced with a frequency that would make for a decent game of bingo, if it did not partake of the regularity of law. I add to this, finally, that I have been surprised by the animus with which most of my students treat Descartes. They tend to find him smug, glib, and bratty, almost always returning the favor by letting him have
it in the most peevish and conceited manner. Or rather, I would be surprised if I did not take care to remember the hysteric falsetto that I felt myself adopting toward him when I first read him at St. John’s. Bacon was a magnanimous humanitarian, Machiavelli inspired giddy admiration, Montaigne had his salty candor, but Descartes I held responsible for every modern perversion. My question, then, is why this is so, what is it about Descartes that gets our goat? Why can’t we get over him?

Now, there are of course many ways of being wrong. There are authors whom we honor with perennial disagreement; we remain interested in their mistakes because we acknowledge that being dead wrong is harder than being half right. And so, Anaxagoras or Lucretius or Spinoza will continue to have a home among our philosophical counterfactuals, as thinkers who have staked out a wrong—but nonetheless basically and fundamentally wrong—position, a fixed Charybdis with respect to which all other positions must navigate. Philosophers are, on the whole, trying to stake out the middle ground of justice between extreme positions, and so those who have argued that there is no such thing as middle ground (between the mind and the body, say) cannot but continue to figure in such discussions. Our disagreement with Descartes has something to do with this, but I don’t think it’s enough to account for the allergic obsession with which we seem to return to him. I have known no one to get his or her dander up on account of Anaxagoras.

Descartes also figures disproportionately in our imagination because we understand him to be one of the fathers of the modern scientific method. Any throat-clearing prefatory to discussing the history of science and technology therefore feels compelled to take its bearings by him—just as any book on the history of painting starts flexing its erudition with those obligatory couple of paragraphs about the caves at Lascaux. What’s more, by routinely taking Descartes to be such a father figure, we acknowledge how much of his practical project has gone exactly according to plan. No one disputes the fact that he was a gobsmackingly gifted mathematician, for instance, or that his mechanical, anti-teleological interpretation of nature proved a necessary condition of
modern industrialization. We only worry about the scientific mastery and possession of nature because it is a \textit{fait accompli} and it is no great strain to see the trade-offs. All the same, it is both as scientists and as philosophers that we continue to try to worry his views out of ours; and if this is so, then I want to say that it is for parallel reasons—that despite our best efforts to refute his philosophical views, we remain, nonetheless, and in decisive respects, Cartesians. As Wittgenstein says: it is as if a certain picture of the world holds us captive.

But before saying what I take to be the most distinctive aspects of this picture and why we can’t seem to exorcise it from consideration, here is my (very un-Johnnie-like) disclaimer: I will be more concerned in what follows with relatively conventional Cartesian views—views routinely ascribed to Descartes—than with scrupulous attribution to his work, because part of what I take to be most remarkable about our widespread view of Cartesianism is how impervious it is to questions about what the historical Descartes might have actually thought. It seems at least likely, to take one example, that Descartes was not the grossest kind of mind/body substance dualist—I have seen many diligent, knowledgeable scholars at pains to argue so. And yet this is treated as irrelevant outside such localized discussions: as soon as anyone brings up dualism, you can brace yourself for the requisite, tendentious summary of Descartes’ views. This will annoy anyone who has taken some trouble over his words, of course, but it should also alert us to the fact that Cartesianism has a sort of life of its own. I do not say that Cartesianism has nothing to do with the texts of Descartes. But we should be interested in the fact that its mistakes have not been straightforwardly rectified by quoting chapter and verse. It is because Cartesianism does not (exactly) exist, that, for some reason, we have had to invent it.

In what respects, then, is Cartesianism still intimately ours? The clearest way in which Descartes continues to have a hold on our thinking is that he is the first philosopher to insist on reasoning as an individual dislocated from a tradition of thought. He is the first to make the claim that everything worth knowing can be
worked out methodically and self-evidently by the projected light of one’s own analysis. Any thinker amounting to anything has of course found him or herself somehow at odds with tradition. But Descartes’s discussion in the *Discourse* of his teachers and the academic curriculum at La Flèche is not so much an argument with tradition, or a criticism or purification of standing opinions, as an out of hand dismissal of the possibility that convention could have any bearing on the task of knowing the truth. Poetic fables, he says, are full of exaggerations, oratory is nothing but the prettification of rigorous thought, the moral writings of the ancient pagans are “magnificent palaces that were built on nothing but sand and mud” (5),¹ and theology is pointless because salvation is either available to all without study or beyond anything that any amount of study could hope to establish. All of this is striking less for what Descartes says than for what he thinks goes without saying. When he then says of philosophy that “there is still nothing in it about which there is not some dispute, and consequently nothing that is not doubtful;” he does not even feel the need to defend the glorious havoc contained in that single *consequently*. The same goes for the habits and customs which he purposes to extirpate from his mind: “the mere fact of the diversity that exists among them suffices to assure one that many do have imperfections” (8), there being “one truth with respect to each thing” (12). That these are breathtaking non-sequiturs should not obscure the fact that they are hugely attractive ones, and that we risk misunderstanding both Descartes and ourselves so long as we do not acknowledge the full strength of that attraction, and continue to look for its sources.

Surely what is most attractive about his position is its promise of original and pristine certainty, his adoption of a stance anterior to and abstracted from any particular context of experience from which to judge truth or falsity. Let me begin by saying what I take to be insightful about this direction of approach. The main

¹. Page numbers are keyed to *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).
questions of the *Meditations* are the programmatic questions of modern philosophy. What can I know, and how can I be sure of it? What difference do I make to the objects of my experience and thought? I open my eyes and the world seems to show up effortlessly, a spectacle articulate and whole. Descartes’s experiment in doubt is meant, on the contrary, to call attention to the sense in which what I witness is not simply self-standing, but something that can only take place where I freely work to sustain it. I must be party to my experience in order for it to be constituted as experience at all. Everything that lies in my thinking must be doubtful—subject to the possibility of being doubted—because it is a condition of its being thought that I own and affirm it. Experiencing something thus means that I am in some sense at work at implicating things in, and explicating them according to, a woven whole of conscious expectation. Descartes goes so far as to doubt the most basic truths of mathematics, not because there is any real likelihood that they are false in themselves, but because it is not inconceivable that I may slip up every time I add two to three (61), which is meant to emphasize that even the most basic arithmetical operations work out by being kept in mind. To the extent that I can then imagine willfully abstaining from the activity of discriminating and articulating the world as mine, to the extent that I can hold all of my experience in abeyance, the world collapses in on itself, an abyss opens up beneath my feet. The malevolent genie personifies this possibility of existential vertigo, in which doubt unfixes all things because there is nothing not affirmed by me that could steady them. The one intact, unshakable point that cannot even be subject to doubt is therefore that very activity of my conscious intending. I am a thing unlike any other because in some sense I carry the very weight on which I stand, I bear the full weight of the world—even if I can only be sure of myself so long as I continue to catch myself in the act.

This thought experiment undeniably shows us several aspects of what it means for us to have the world in view. It throws into relief that objects of experience are only fully realized because I mind them; that my attention lends a hand to constituting the tissue of ordinary experience; and that the thought of a world must
always be coupled to the thought of its nothingness. But Descartes’s errand is more ambitious than this, since, once he has taken it apart, he then aims to piece the world back together on his own terms, which is to say, in no uncertain terms. The connection between what can be absolutely evident to me and what is self-evident is crucial here. The one discipline that impresses Descartes at school is mathematics—less for what it has achieved, he says, than for the kind of certainty it promises; the clarity and certainty that are supposed to govern his inquiry in the Meditations are therefore cast with an eye to that peculiar pattern. Since mathematics has always been regarded as the learnable and knowable discipline par excellence, this could hardly be called a bad choice. For mathematical clarity to be our wholesale guide to knowing as such, however, Descartes must conflate what is knowable with what is self-contained in its own deduction—that is, with what I am always in the position to recognize as self-evident. To set all of our knowledge on such footing, we must each of us take up a position in which everything must be knowable in advance of our experience, in which to know means to be certain, and in which what is not certain is demoted to arbitrary and optional. I am asked to take up an autonomous position, a vantage beyond belief, before which the objects of my thinking are arrayed and assessed, before being assented to. My knowledge is the absence of mind—nowhere and no one in a position to see it all.

It is this flattering affinity between what I am always in the position to know and mathematical clarity that underpins the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity that has made up our epistemic bread and butter ever since. These are not Descartes’s explicit terms, but this casual and widespread way of approaching inquiry undeniably has roots in something like the Cartesian identification of truth with a specific experience of certainty. What is objective is what cannot be denied without contradiction, what would be the case if I did not know it, what is valid for all times and places, and so what must be impersonally assessable and deducible. It is the realm of necessity, best exemplified by our usual deferential attitude toward mathematics and
the sciences; it is the knowable as such that leaves no room for
doubt. Outside this impersonal I, however, there is a subjective
remainder—ambivalently understood as a domain of arbitrary
preference and convention, but also as a domain of pure privacy
and inner freedom, a place sealed and secret, from which I cannot
be shaken and to which I may always retreat, if I should be so
minded. It is the disengaged mental retina, the fixed point from
which I invest what is not objective with my own meanings, and
at which every man is for himself and on his own.

This is an admittedly unsophisticated and flat-footed version
of a picture that I find to be widely prevalent among my students,
though I also think that one need not squint too hard to see vari-
ations on this theme as the common guiding thread of modern phi-
losophy. Whether in the form of Spinoza’s distinction between
natura naturans and naturata, or in Hume’s between relations of
ideas and matters of fact, or in Kant’s scission of nature from free-
dom, or Hegel’s counterpoint between what is ‘in itself’ and what
is ‘for itself,’ or more proximately in the Nietzschean or Weberian
opposition of facts to values, it is clear that the attempt to render
philosophy into a quasi-scientific a priori body of knowledge has
had the effect of sharpening under its pressure a corresponding
view of our inner freedom as a naked power of self-possessed
willing lying beyond the appeal of ordinary, shared reasons. For
every Descartes, there has then followed a Pascal.

This is an imprecise generalization, of course, but if anything
like this dialectic between necessity and freedom underlies our
picture of the world, then it would help to explain why our think-
ing somehow continues to circle back to Descartes. Perhaps the
most striking feature of the Cartesian project—which is to estab-
lish the full truth to one’s own satisfaction—is that it has the ef-
effect of forcing all its opponents to adopt it. Once Descartes has
withdrawn from the premises of ordinary shared experience, the
only strategies for flushing him out are to question the soundness
of his premises, to note the ways in which his position does not
itself acknowledge its historical debts, or to point out all the ways
in which his position of radical doubt would be incoherent in
practice. These might, in fact, be the only logical responses open
to us. But they are responses that, Gorgon-like, turn us into the kind of skeptic that we take ourselves to be trying to undermine, because we feel we must turn to a priori thinking and presuppo-
sitionless logical analysis in order to refute him. This is what I have found most striking in the classroom: because Descartes has denied or removed the shared bases of ordinary experience, we feel forced to take up a position somewhere on the unmediated poles of subjectivity and objectivity—both of which in fact take for granted the Cartesian picture of a fully self-constituting and autonomous beginning to knowledge. We find ourselves having to reason at him rather than with him, because we tacitly accept his opening claim that there is no we who could reason in com-
mon. It is half way through Meditation III, only after Descartes has established the existence of God, that he claims to prove that he is not alone in the world (74), but it is a strange discovery for him to make, since he has addressed his spiritual exercises to us all along. Cartesian thinking is cinematic: it is a condition of our witnessing it that we be excluded from its proceedings.

In what sense can objectivity be a Cartesian innovation, though? It is clear that philosophy has always and everywhere sought to describe what is permanently and universally true—as Nietzsche put it, philosophy’s demand of itself is that it become timeless. But it is equally clear that other analogous distinc-
tions—between human and divine knowledge, say, or between convention (nomos) and nature (physis)—are by no means con-
gruent with the way in which we contrast subjectivity to objec-
tivity. To take up the second example: physis in ancient philosophy is something like a transpolitical domain subtending, and prior to, any particular human arrangement. But it refers, on the one hand, to a reality that is found variously embodied in (rather than separated from) those arrangements, and, on the other hand, to an ordered whole that is neither apodictically reducible to, or immediately transparent to, discursive analysis. As Plato shows in the Timaeus, the attempt to generate the order of the world from the measurement of harmonious ratios results in a leftover interval that balks the intellect’s designs to tidy it up. Physis hides. She will not fully yield herself to logos.
That this can no longer be our picture of the world—that our universe is no longer cosmic, so to speak—should not prevent us from realizing that communal friendship held a central place in pre-modern philosophy, the very absence of which marks our own somewhat impoverished oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity. The Platonic Socrates is entirely at home using the most cynical maneuvers of logical jujitsu, but he usually reserves those moves for his arguments with the sophists. In his discussions with more generous interlocutors, he tries to establish the kinds of philosophical affection (both for the truth and for his fellows in speech) that distinguish him from the sophists he otherwise so much resembles. Similarly, we can hardly underestimate the importance of the first person plural in Aristotle. He understands that the deepest truths are somehow already present within his students’ ways of speaking and acting; starting from shared conceptions, he works to deepen their understanding. When he notes near the beginning of the Ethics that mathematical exactness is not an appropriate standard for ethical investigations because different inquiries are measured by different kinds of precision, we register our distance from him by his deadpan indifference to justifying this assertion. And yet what kind of Cartesian argument could ever sufficiently establish such an assumption? It is exactly at this point that we are hostage to the demand for clarity and certainty, because the latter criteria are always in the position to undercut any such shared understanding.

It is Descartes’s innovation, then, to deny any implicit “we”—a first person plural opening up upon the world—as a necessary or helpful middle term between my thinking and the objects of experience. His project is to dissociate friendship from reason and to seek knowledge without community. Mathematical precision is therefore paradigmatic of its aspirations for good reason: it seems to admit no ambiguity, seems to be independent of historical circumstances, and seems to proceed on premises that cannot be denied without contradiction. Agreement or disagreement do not seem to touch its truth. Mathematics is no respecter of persons (you may depend on it). And again, mathematics is bewitching to the extent that it promises to take the measure of
the world prior to encountering it—hence the notion of a *method* or an *instrument* of investigation that, once established, will be able to generate results algorithmically and impartially. The mathematization of nature gives us mastery over it—it affords us vast powers of prediction and control even as it narrows the scope of what we care to attend to. But applying such a common denominator to philosophical inquiry reduces it to only two areas of discussion—that to which I am forced to acquiesce and that which I am free to dispute. To the extent that I insist on being a pure subject, I also insist on making the world purely subject to me. If, however, there are forms of knowledge we can only know by holding things in common—as we do in friendship or faith or trust or loyalty or love—and if we take their pledges seriously as more than private stimuli, then there is a whole set of goods that are unavailable to Cartesian thinking, forms of knowledge whose inside-out, rather than outside-in, character is checked from the outset by the Cartesian demand for certainty. There may be strength in numbers, but it is a strength that can lift you no higher than yourself.

I want to indicate here—too hastily, perhaps—some of the ways in which the Cartesian fascination for impregnable speech has shaped modern philosophy. If it is the promise of disembodied speech to settle matters somehow in advance of knowing them, then it cannot be surprising if there has been special hell to pay in political and moral reasoning. The very project of the classical contract theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—attempts to deduce the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a certain state of affairs by specifying the beginning point of all possible human arrangements—obeys a Cartesian impulse to project a point of fixed certainty into the world (although in this domain it is Hobbes rather than Descartes who counts as the first Cartesian). The state of nature served as a quasi-geometrical postulate from which, once accepted, certain prescriptive conclusions could be drawn. With some contemporary exceptions (like Rawls), it is true that this approach was later abandoned under pressure from historicist criticism. But nineteenth- and twentieth-century historicism itself obeys a neo-Kantian, and so quasi-
scientific, impulse to read our historical formation as an a priori schema governing all possible human experience. Historicism is also Cartesian, therefore, in the sense of attempting to settle the fundamental, constraining forms of human knowledge in advance of any particular experience of them.

But if the issue of historicism has lost some of its urgency since the end of the Cold War, I would ask you to consider what we mean by morality. The term, understood as a system of prescriptions stipulating right conduct, is a modern one, itself a result of the Enlightenment attempt to bring mathematical precision to bear on our conception of the good. Aristotle’s *Ethics* and its medieval appropriations are not systems of morals (like Kant’s and Mill’s), because they do not conceive their project as establishing the goodness of certain practices and habits from a position outside of themselves. Nothing in Aristotle answers to this description. Our contemporary notion of morality, on the other hand, aims at scientific rigor precisely to the extent that it purports to deduce our duties from infallible rules—in other words, to specify how we ought to act regardless of our particular attachments and responsibilities.

This apparent rigor has done very little to win the kind of widespread consensus that might have been expected from it. Moreover, it funnels ethical conversation into an adversarial, winner-take-all pattern. Most of my class discussions on ethical matters take the form of a predictable tug-of-war between “you’re bad for judging others” and “I am entitled to my opinion that others are bad,” because everyone has independently realized that the best strategy is to ask one’s opponent to define his or her terms, and then to disparage those definitions in order to stalemate whatever may be supposed to follow from them. This strategy is not good enough to win any arguments, but it is a surefire way not to lose any either. (The expectation of absolute moral certainty thus goes hand-in-hand with relativism.) The underlying Cartesian assumption is that a winning argument is one that no one could reasonably find fault with, when in fact the predictable outcome of such reasoning is dilemmatic casuistry about, for in-
stance, how many innocent people to rescue from hypothetical runaway trains. Even where we do share a general postulate—say, that human beings are ends in themselves—it is by no means clear that a notion of such generality could univocally help us make an a priori judgment between competing kinds of goods. In addition, Hume’s, Kant’s, and Mill’s moral visions continue to rely on, in more or less obvious ways, the sensibilities of decent, Protestant, liberal citizens: that is to say, they all claim to give contextless grounds for already existing forms of conduct.

This reliance is even clearer in Descartes’s list of practical maxims in the Discourse—don’t mess with the law, stick to your guns, control your desires, play to your strengths—which sound little better than the avuncular therapy of self-control offered by Polonius when contrasted with the rigor that Descartes otherwise brings to bear on scientific matters. It is true that he presents his maxims as provisional; they are designed to be cast off once he has built his system of knowledge from the ground up. But his subsequent silence on this point is therefore eloquent, as is his affinity (along with that of many modern moralists) to ancient Stoicism, which was the first philosophical school to preach withdrawal from the world and a steady diet of sour grapes as the means of attaining happiness. Again, if to know is to be certain, then I can be certain of my own pleasure (as Descartes might say) or perhaps even of my duty (as Kant might say), but it is precisely the character of this certainty that prevents my thinking from taking place somewhere in particular or inhibits my attending to common cares and thoughts. So long as I try to reason my own way into the world, I will not know exactly what to do with you.

I realize that I am myself running the risk of sounding reductionist and skeptical, since I might seem to be asserting that there is no such thing as truth in moral matters except through some sort of wishful or willful consensus. But that is precisely the shape that Cartesian certainty forces on us, whereas I am trying to call attention to differences between Cartesian and other forms of disagreement. Neither antiquity nor the Middle Ages were conspicuous for their concord, respect, and unanimity—in philoso-
phy or in any other area of life. It may be that the very opposite is true and that quarrels are fiercest among brothers, as Aristotle says. But it is also clear that most of the ferociously sectarian disputes about philosophical principles in Europe and the Near East up to, and perhaps even including, the Reformation were understood as differences within and about a shared conception of the world. And I am tempted to call this a kind of friendship—a commitment to common goods of thought. It is, in contrast, one of the marks of our continuing dependence on Cartesianism that we feel the need to reason from scratch, and that this need in turn shapes the forms of speech that are available to us. Such forms are by no means inadequate in all respects. Like a searing fire, they dissolve and clarify, even if they cannot establish or sustain. But so long as we understand philosophy as clinically disengaged thought, we will continue to prize guarded and ungenerous forms of speech that pretend to a scientific certainty they cannot achieve (e.g., scholarship), we will continue to disagree about first principles erratically and without end, we will continue to excel only at the philosophical genre of critique, we will continue to be tempted toward forms of irrationality as the only exits from a stifling objectivity, and we will continue to find ourselves stuck at Cartesian square one. Square one is no doubt a fine square. But if a conversation is such that I can always undercut an argument by refusing my agreement—if that is the exemplary form of critical thinking—then no conversation can exceed my current view of how things stand. You are only right for all I know.

Accusing contemporary philosophy of solipsism will perhaps seem strange, since the theme of intersubjectivity has been all the rage for two centuries and counting. But I take this to be yet another case in point—and a good example of how Cartesianism unleashed caustic powers of analysis that we have not been able to put back in the bottle. Descartes was the first to formulate what has since been called the “problem of other minds” at the end of Meditation II, in a passage where he looks out on a busy street and questions his usual assumption that those moving figures are people. They might, he says, be no more than automata draped in hats and coats. Following Descartes’s lead, the “problem” of
other minds has been understood as this: How can I justify my inference that you have a mind no different from mine when it’s clear that no amount of raw sense data could ever sufficiently warrant it? It is worth noting that Descartes does not even register this as a special problem, nor did any major philosopher in history up to and including Kant. The deduction and explanation of intersubjectivity has, by contrast, been one of the main preoccupations of every single major post-Kantian thinker—from Fichte through Husserl and Wittgenstein and Habermas—all of whom have sought to establish intersubjectivity as a distinctly non-Cartesian form of knowledge.

I do not say that we have learned nothing of value from these attempts, but it may be that what we have learned has been in the way of hungry people reasoning about bread. In other words, it is worth asking what we think we have to prove, or why we continue to feel as if there is a problem that needs addressing, when no one seemed to feel such a need until the mid-1790s and when even now there is almost no one arguing the contrary. The very term ‘intersubjectivity’—a barbarous neologism for what used to be called philia—suggests that our solution only replicates the problem, insofar as it represents an attempt to maintain an attitude of impersonal detachment in my description of the most personal of experiences—namely, what you mean to me. ‘Intersubjectivity’ has become a bit of fashionable jargon in philosophy much like ‘interdisciplinarity’ is in education: both words elicit a buzz of self-congratulation all around, even as they affirm the terms that cause the very problem they are supposed to overcome. Both of them take for granted from the outset a situation in which subjects or disciplines are atomic units in need of combination. And yet, if your recipe calls for oil and water, chances are you will never end up with a solution. Intersubjectivity promises to be an endless though limited subject of discussion for philosophy not simply because we have discovered in ourselves over the past two centuries unprecedented capacities for alienation and loneliness, but also because we formulate the discussion in the wrong kind of speech for the experience it purports to get at. We expound in monologue on the great benefits of dialogue. Said an-
other way: the problem of other minds is not a problem except when it is formulated in terms that assume a fundamental difference between what is absolutely certain (my mind) and what is qualitatively less certain (you out there), so that, like most other problems of a Cartesian pedigree—like the relation of mind and world, mind and body, reason and experience, freedom and nature, and so forth—it can neither overcome nor be satisfied by the dualistic terms in which it is asked.

One recurring feature that vitiates from the outset Cartesian questions such as these is the accompanying sense that the question proscribes a personal middle term between the proposed extremes, a term that, before Descartes, constituted the common ground I inhabit with others because we share a world. Just as Descartes prizes mathematics because it admits of no shades of certainty, so too the criteria of clarity and certainty mute the sense that I should accept common practices and concerns as the best starting point for my thought. As Descartes says in Meditation IV: “I have been so constituted as a kind of middle ground between God and nothingness, or between the supreme being and non-being” (82): that is, there is nothing outside me to break the fall between certainty and ignorance. The absence of this middle term then finds literal, and striking, expression in Descartes’s view of the soul.

I am not sure whether Descartes is rightly called a dualist—certainly there are passages in the Meditations and in his correspondence with Elizabeth that suggest he was aware of the difficulties entailed by the view that thinking things are substantially different from extended ones, and that the two may also interact. (Of course, realizing that you have a problem and wishing that you did not have it don’t add up to not having it.) What seems true of both the Cartesian picture and of its Kantian successor it is that the mind/body distinction is produced under the pressure of locating the certainty that I am intelligent and free within the certainty that there is no object of experience that is not material. This is no longer the same kind of question that generates the parts of the soul in Aristotelian or Platonic psychology or in their Christian descendants. Many of these earlier views include a third part of the soul between reason and desire—a part that is charac-
teristically human by virtue of being responsive both to reason and desire, a part that is also (and not incidentally) represented as the seat of our social spirit, the power of soul by which we can take things personally. It is precisely this third, mediating part—the part by which we are understood to be attached to others—that is done away with by the Cartesian picture of the soul. The distinction between mind and body is thus the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity concretely instantiated within our own selves.

A final passing note on how this missing personal middle has affected even the most rarefied metaphysical questions: One would think that if anything is objectively the case, it is questions about being as such. And yet it is owing to Descartes’s polarization of subjectivity and objectivity that the notion of epistemology as a specialized, delimited discipline exists in contrast to ontology. It was the Cartesian inspiration of early modern epistemology to focus more precisely on the conditions of possible experience by surrendering the assumption that the world is intelligible in itself. This approach gave us what is valuable in Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, while simultaneously making inescapable the question, In what sense can things be said to be both knowable and “outside” the mind? Ancient and medieval metaphysics were by no means widely shared social attitudes, and yet their stance toward their objects of inquiry was nonetheless personal, both because they understood inquiry into being also as inquiry into the divine, and because knowledge of the whole was understood as a kind of communion within which that whole knew itself to be completed.

I have doubtless already said too much, or tried to. My main point has been that our continued attraction to being repelled by Descartes has less to do with the fact of his having formulated some set of terms or themes or questions that we are still concerned with, and more with his having established a certain stance toward philosophical speech that continues to reassert itself within our attempts to deny it. Quasi-scientific speech—contextless speech treating philosophical questions as problems to be mastered once and for all from an ex ante position—is in fact
a form of deeply skeptical speech, and so long as we understand it as the only mode of philosophical speech, then we will continue to fall back into the reductive, dualistic terms of the questions framed by Descartes. It can be no accident that it has been one of modern philosophy’s main post-Cartesian aims to mortify skepticism once and for all. Indeed, it is only in modern philosophy that skepticism has been felt to be a real threat, rather than a crank position held by unwashed men living in barrels. Fear of skepticism is a sure mark that you have set out to reason on your own: as you tighten the demands of certainty, you are gripped by doubt. As you sharpen the light of clarity and distinctness, the shadow of doubt lengthens and lengthens; and if you will be guided only by your own self-evident terms, if there is no middle term between absolute certainty and error, then any misstep threatens to bring the world crashing down, and you will surely encounter skepticism at every turn.

Skepticism’s lesson, however, is that the truth is more than a matter of words, since it is not in speech that the most aggressive skeptic will meet his match. The cure for skepticism has always been the same. You provoke the skeptic to act—you ask him to go outside for some fresh air or, if you must, beat him with a stick—in order to show him that he is incoherent in deed and so to ask him to rejoin a common world larger than his way of thinking can conceive. This is sometimes felt to be a kind of concession of defeat on philosophy’s part—as if the need for action here showed that reasons just come to an end—whereas it should help us realize that reasons may sometimes outstrip arguments. If, that is, what is most distinctive about Cartesianism is its posture of voluntary neutrality, its attempt to specify the only kind of answer that would satisfy it from the outset, and if that feature thereby marks it as skeptical, then we should also not expect for it to yield to strictly theoretical answers. Heidegger may help us see how Cartesianism is merely one historical episode within a larger philosophical arc, and Wittgenstein may convince us that if only we talked long enough about Cartesianism we would be cured from the supposition that there is anything left to talk about. And yet so long as we think the limitation
involved is logical or discursive, we do not possess the right kind of response.

For this reason I do not take Cartesianism to be exclusively—and perhaps not even primarily—a theoretical problem or error. A first step in escaping its attraction is to rediscover forms of reasoning in common, to realize that friendship is essential to clear thinking. The kinds of goods that Cartesianism cannot see—goods requiring belief, trust, and shared conviction—are not ersatz reasons, nor do they lend themselves to proof if we do not lend ourselves to abiding by and in them. It is true they are subject to groupthink abuses to which we are highly sensitive. But they are goods of knowledge, knowledge of a sort that is the only point from which to break the tenacious hold that Cartesianism continues to have on philosophical thought at large—perhaps beginning with the thought that there is any such thing as philosophical thought at large. The goods of friendship are distinguished, in contrast to Cartesianism, by the relinquishment of a particular kind of certainty, in order to make room for a greater one. We acknowledge our dependence on the given context and circumstances within which we serve to make the good in common with others—a set of books and questions and friends and places and tasks—in sum, on a tradition. We accept this tradition not as a bias clouding our view of a more universal knowledge, but as an anchor deepening our thought and lending truth a voice in time. That is, we acknowledge the partiality of our position not as a reason for undermining it, but, like the acknowledgment of our mortality, as a condition of our taking root. Unlike Cartesian knowledge, the goods of friendship are never available from the outset. They are at once retrospective and prospective. Friendship is a vow that I do not know everything, and so a way of holding myself in readiness. It is the knowledge that my words may only be generous where we own something in common, and that the weight and resonance of their shared truth goes beyond what could be called their correctness. Cartesianism’s denial of this dimension makes it difficult to change the question, as I’ve noted, since all attempts to reason in terms of certainty flatten everything else to their level. It is friendship’s
promise, on the other hand, that we can compass the whole by knowing it to be wider than our thinking, that it is because the world exceeds our single grasp that we are capable of having it in common reach.

If I have ventured these thoughts aloud here, it is because I found one such community of learners in St. John’s, and because, having been away some years, I realize now how few and far between are such settings for friendship. As Tocqueville noted, Americans seem to be Cartesians from the cradle—there are always so many different competing views of the pursuit of happiness, that we tend to equate truth proper with what is outside the scope of democratic contradiction. Because of this, Cartesianism and American egalitarianism are apparent (though only apparent) relatives. But the pressure of world-historical forces should not prevent us from attending to the kinds of conversations concretely available to us. Nor should it prevent us from seeing that, so long as we conflate the rigor of philosophy with the rigor of mathematics, we will continue to be haunted by Descartes, the first to speak the singular idiom of such a possibility. Perhaps it is no longer possible to speak of public reason in the terms I’m suggesting; but philosophy, after all, has never been comfortable in public, and approaching it as a quasi-technical discipline has only subordinated it further to the natural sciences.

There was once a man, the first philosopher of all, who, upon being asked his name under duress, gave it out as Noman. At that moment, he realized something each of us must discover for ourselves as adolescents: that reason is always in some sense slipping out of the bonds of the particular, that it cannot be fully fixed in place, that our thinking runs out beyond our station and our term of life. Intelligence draws lines, but in doing so it always manages to straddle both sides of them; it can contain every multitude. It is outlandish—as Carl Page likes to say; there is no resting place it cannot quit. But Noman did not stop at that. He recognized the anonymity of his cunning as an episode within the larger story of the restoration of his name, which would only be fully fleshed out as the name of a father, a son, a husband, a king belonging to his land, a friend to a dog and to the pear trees
he had planted in the orchard as a boy. In the same way, while we are trying to squirm out from under the depthless vision of the Cyclops, anonymity is our best and only protection. But so long as that insight is not then relocated within the task of making speech personal, of giving speech a way of dwelling in the world, then our words cannot have place, cannot take root, and cannot thrive. We will remain Cartesians.
Jacob Klein: European Scholar and American Teacher

Eva Brann

The subtitle of my talk might be “Liberal Education: Program and/or Pedagogy?” The reason is that I think of Jacob Klein’s life as being an embodiment of that slash, “and/or” and therefore an occasion for asking what seems to me a question the answer to which determines the success—I mean the lively and secure survival—of liberal education.

There is the much more often debated converse to the question: “Is there a specific pedagogy for liberal education?” This is the question: “Is there a specific curriculum for liberal education which goes with the kind of teaching you might call “liberal?” I won’t dwell on the answer today, except insofar as it bears on particular aspects of teaching. I’ll just say that I think the answer is that almost anything can be taught liberally—to a point. In particular, the shop crafts are germane enough to the liberal arts (which form one part of liberal education, as I’ll spell out later) to serve as a suitable complementary curriculum. To prove it, there’s that wonderful book by Matthew Crawford, who is both a student of philosophy and a motorcycle mechanic: it is called Shop Class as Soulcraft (and is the much worthier successor of that cult classic, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance); it shows how fixing things forms souls, just as reading books does.

Let me give my answer to the topic question up front. I’m not a great believer in that mode of talking to my colleagues which attempts to make a whodunit of the telling so that they get to learn my resolution to the inquiry only when they’re mostly long adrift in mind.

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I am persuaded, even with a certain passion, that Liberal Education does have its most appropriate program, its preferable matter, and that this matter particularly calls for its own pedagogy. Concisely and thus a little too peremptorily put: You cannot achieve liberal education in the mode of a specialized teaching authority, a professor. That is by no means to say that professors who know their stuff inside-out can’t sometimes teach liberally—but it will be, I think, in an alternative style for them: Ex cathedra, “from the podium” will have to become “in the trenches,” on a chair around the table with the other human souls.

I was one of that diminutive number of refugees for whom that little devil Mephistopheles’ shamelessly candid admission held: “I am a part of that power that ever seeks evil and ever accomplished good.” (It comes from Goethe’s Faust which no German-born person can live through a year without citing thrice.) The Nazi persecution brought me to America where, with some practical know-how and some luck, anyone who knows how to be happy, can be happy, and to St. John’s College, where several of my older colleagues were refugees. I came very young and grew very old in Annapolis, so this band of my seniors, including Victor Zuckerkandl, a well-known Viennese musician, and Simon Kaplan, a Kant scholar, who came in middle age, are all gone. Jacob Klein, called Jasha by us all, including by some cheeky students (who are supposed to accord each other and their tutors, as I will do, the honorific “Mr., Mrs., Miss” and later “Ms.”), was among them. As far as I could tell—and I observed avidly—they were well appreciated, even well loved by their American hosts who, in their gracious naïveté, admired them for their thorough learning and marveled at them for their pronounced personalities. But Jasha held a special place.

All the refugees that I’ve known or read of who were fully adult when they emigrated led a cleft life—a European formation and an American re-formation. Mr. Klein grew up and studied in Slavic and central Europe and fled to the Anglophone West, from the Nazis’ politically, but psychologically also from an antically tyrannical father. This ogre, however, also came to the States and made Sonoma County, where he turned grapes into raisins, unsafe for habitation. Among the many stories about him that Jasha told me was that of his wedding gift to Jasha and Dodo. Dodo
Tammann was the divorced wife of Edmund Husserl’s son, and she became a powerful presence at St. John’s. The wedding gift was a smallish bag of these raisins.

The years of Mr. Klein’s life were split almost exactly between Europe and America: from his birth in 1899 to 1938, his arrival in America—thirty-nine years, and from 1938, his arrival in Annapolis, to 1978, his death while still teaching—forty years. (Winfree Smith, in *A Search For The Liberal College* [1983], gives an indispensable account of Mr. Klein’s early years at St. John’s, ending with his deanship.)

To me there is, in my mythifying mood, something providential in this half-and-half life. For in Europe Mr. Klein was a private scholar without institutional bonds. He studied, conducted private seminars and above all, wrote his principal book, entitled in English, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (1934-36). It is a work of enormous scholarship, drawing from primary and secondary works in all the modern and classical languages—oddly not Hebrew; this visibly Jewish man governed by a Jewish fate didn’t, as far as I could tell, have a Jewish bone in his body. Let me interject here my understanding of this apostasy. It was not the ordinary assimilation of convenience, still so hotly debated when I was young, but an allegiance that trumped everything, even his love for Russian novels, namely his deep affinity for the Greeks—not the esthetic Greeks captured in the formula “Noble naïveté, quiet grandeur” which appeared in the first and greatest history of antique art, that of Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768) and which dominated that famous German philhellenism.—I myself grew up under its aegis. What drew Mr. Klein to the Greeks was—let me joyfully risk some political incorrectness—a very masculine view of that Greek grace as sober soundness, as, so to speak, the apotheosis of good sense, a virtue which the Greeks call *sophrosyne*—literally, soundmindedness. It was a glory that I, who had spent my post-graduate years as a Greek archaeologist, had never suspected—that behind all those canonical great books, there might be a very specific intellectually handsome togetherness.

Since I’ve begun to understand something of the *Origin of Algebra*, I’ve thought that its doctrine was a, perhaps the, principal example of this sense of Greek soundness. The book, after
all, traces out a loss, the loss of just this whole-heartedness. Not that Mr. Klein was a modernity-basher. Far from it—he had studied physics and found the revolution on which he was reporting and its modernity (plus, I should say, its extreme realization in post-modernity) irresistibly interesting, and so his account of our condition seemed to me far deeper and more persuasive than the socio-political explanations I was given as a history major in Brooklyn College. There was, furthermore, I learned in time, nothing Heideggerian in his approach to the mode of this loss, no call for the *Dekstruktion* (mitigatingly translated as “de-construction”) for the sake of recovering a pre-traditional ontological origin. But, it seems to me, there might actually be large, sensibly practical consequences from a propagation of the thesis of the *Origin of Algebra*.

Obviously, I should now say as concisely as possible what this thesis, this teaching, seems to me to be. The very subtle, very reliable paragraph by paragraph exposition of the thesis in all its complexity is to be found in Burt Hopkin’s *Origin of the Logic of Symbolic Mathematics* (2011). I see it, more simply, in this way: The Greeks, meaning the relevant written texts we have (but I think the artifacts harmonize), had a direct, an immediate approach, to beings of thought, what might be called a first innocence, and if you like, even a naiveté, perhaps after all, even of a noble sort. Their direct intellectual sight accorded those beings a fullness, a meaning-fraught concreteness. Their way of regarding numbers is a prime example and probably the most illuminating case—negatively, because for mathematics the psychological element is much reduced so that the intellectual mode stands out, positively because the loss of this immediacy enabled the principal science at the foundation of our epoch, astronomical and terrestrial physics. Greek numbers, *arithmoids*, are collections of *things*, a counting-up of them, in German, *Anzahl*. These counted-up assemblage-numbers undergo, in a long-breathed conversion traced in the book, a reduction to mere symbols, completed by Vieta and Descartes. In the helpful medieval language, they are transformed from *first to second intentions*, meaning that a word that once reached for a thing now reaches for the thought-belabored abstraction of the thing. This second-intentionality dominates so much of modern discourse as to be practically a signature of
modernity. My favorite example is this: Socrates follows a way, in Greek a *methodos*, “a way gone after” (a good example: *Republic* 596a). We tend to have not a “method” but a “methodology,” not a jigged way, but the conception of the jigged way. We talk, very often, in concepts rather than objects. Mr. Klein, a most natural and, I might say, earthy person—and I might also say, like most flesh-and-blood people full of student-delighting singularities—kookiness in plain language—had a gut-aversion to this world of abstractions. He used to expend himself in trying to persuade Johnnies that Socrates’ forms, the *eide*, were not “abstractions,” literally “drawn-off,” life-deprived, thought-ghosts, but full of attractive being.

That brings me to the second half of Mr. Klein’s life, the American part, spent almost entirely at St. John’s College. He did, to be sure, write two more books in this epoch. The first was *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno* (1965). The *Meno* is to St. John’s College something like what the *Declaration of Independence* is to the *United States*, the condition of its possibility; it is our enabling work for freedom from academicism. The *Meno* shows under what conditions learning by inquiry, as distinct from knowledgeableness by study, is possible. Like the Algebra book (as it is, ridiculously, known at home) the *Meno* book contains some unforgettable insights—unforgettable because as soon as you’ve read them you think you’ve always known them. This was the kind of mental plagiarism Mr. Klein chucked over as a mark of his insights having been understood and adopted. My particular pick is his discovery that the capacity of “image-recognition” (*eikasia: not* “imagining” or “imagination”) attached to the lowest section of the divided line presented in the *Republic* (509 ff., the commentary on the *Meno* mines other dialogues for relevant illuminations) ranges through all the divisions to the highest, because imaging is the generating principle of the world that flourishes under the “Idea of the Good.” Thus our lowest capacity is also our most encompassing. These assimilable insights are life-changing; I’ll refrain from personal testimonials, but you can see that at the least the thought of an imagination-ontology will affect your way of reflecting.

The second late book, *Plato’s Trilogy*, on the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* (1977), I could never take to. It is written
in a mode that seems to belong to old age: It paraphrases the text with the intention that the reader will extract a commentary from the emphases and deviations. David Lachterman’s review of the book\(^1\) helped me to see its accomplishments, one of which is that it really functions as a sort of provocation to reflection on texts left intact by the interpreter. (I might say here that David was, to my knowledge, the most universally learned student who ever came out of St. John’s; he carried on Mr. Klein’s projects in his own competently ingenious way.)

Most of Mr. Klein’s writing was for lectures directed to our students, and these, insofar as they were recoverable, were edited by Robert Williamson and Elliot Zuckerman and published by the college. They have that same quality that he saw in the Greek authors: simultaneously with having grasped it, it grasps you: it sits naturally in the intellect—mine, at least, and many of my colleagues’.

But these published works are not what dominated the second part of his life. In fact, he was almost comically inimical to publication. When I came in 1957 for my appointment interview, he placed me in a chair and, so to speak, danced around me, holding the two pot-publications I had proudly sent with my application—I was then an archaeologist—between thumb and index finger as if they were some loathsome matter and then tossed them back to me. (Publication wasn’t and still isn’t a criterion for appointment or tenure at St. John’s.) Taking his aversion to publication seriously, I translated the algebra book in secret and confessed only late, because I had questions to ask. Then, however, with splendid inconsistency, he was eager for it to come out into the world, where it first languished, only to emerge slowly and steadily into some fame and influence, particularly of course, under Burt Hopkins’s energetic shepherding.

So now to the point. If the first half of his life, the European part, was under the aegis of learning and scholarly production, the second, American half was predominantly a teaching life, be it as a tutor (our replacement of the title “professor,” though it’s not used in address) or as dean of the college (1949-1958). As

for the latter function, I remember vividly that when the end-of-
class bell rang he would issue from his office to stand at the bot-
tom of the stairs of our main building and scan the faces of
descending students for signs of life. Once he caught me coming
down, maneuvered me into his office, and chided me for having
threatened with bodily harm a student who had not been able to
inflect the Greek verb “to be.”

Here is the serious aspect of Mr. Klein as a teacher in an in-
stitution whose faculty had bound itself to an all-required, coher-
ent plan of liberal education, with the consequent abolition of
electives for students and specialization for teachers and the re-
placement of the ways of learning and modes of teaching then,
and even more now, current in universities and colleges—less in
the latter since some of these ways are functions of size and con-
sequently of—phantasized—economies of scale.

In my young and ardent years as a tutor I saw in Mr. Klein
the incarnation of a teacher in a program which was conceived
by its founders, Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan, as a con-
temporary re-animation of the traditional liberal education that
was first set out in the seventh book of Plato’s Republic and in
the eighth book of Aristotle’s Politics (where the word liberal,
“belonging to the free” [eletherion] is, as far as I know, first
used to distinguish this upbringing from the vocational, utilitarian
sort). For Rome, the guiding text was Quintilian’s Teaching Pro-
gram for Oratory, and in the Middle Ages, Hugh of St. Victor’s
Didascalicon and John of Salisbury’s Metalogicon (which is,
however, concerned only with the verbal arts). These works, to
be sure, often concentrate on the specific liberal arts, the skills
of learning, rather than on liberal education, which relies on texts
for reflection.

Indeed, when Mr. Klein arrived in late 1938, for the second
year of the college’s New Program, it was already fixed in its
broad organization into tutorials for the exercise of the liberal
arts and seminars for the discussion of great books. The liberal
arts were exactly the trivium, the three-way of words: grammar,
logic and rhetoric, their correctness, validity and persuasiveness,
and the quadrivium, the four-way of things: arithmetic, geometry,
astronomy and music, their countability, extendedness, regular
motions and attendant harmonies. The program of tutorials stuck
quite closely to this scheme—reducing it to language and mathematics classes with the modern addition of laboratory. Rumor has it that in the library of those early days, physics books were catalogued under music, the study of bodies in ratio relations. Learnedness was required to find the finest working examples for exercises in these arts, taken from the most highly regarded works of language, mathematics, and science. The early faculty had put enticing tutorials together by the time Jasha arrived.

What he also found was a particularly felicitous modern fusion, instigated by Buchanan, of the so-called Great Books with the Liberal Arts, which had long been regarded as ancillary, particularly to the exegesis of Scripture. Canon-establishing lists of Great Books go back to antiquity and forward into our times, so our founders were well-supplied (especially: Ernst Robert Curtius, Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter, 1948; Jonathan Rose, The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes, 2011). As it seems to me, Mr. Klein’s function with respect to the Program’s teaching matter was largely to add an additional element of competence and, most importantly, to undergird the programmatic sequence with an intellectual history that put the dawn of modernity found in the mathematical writers of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century at the center of the drama of a break between antiquity and modernity. It was a break mirrored roughly in the discontinuity of our sophomore and junior years; its pathos is that of a great loss of human substance and a huge gain of human power.

Buchanan himself was what is called a charismatic figure, evidently (I didn’t know him) full of pedagogically energizing outrageousness—very much the memorable master teacher dominating and drawing the college together—just what it needed in its uncertain youngest years.

I must say here that the view I am about to offer of Mr. Klein as presenting a model, perhaps the model, of teaching best fitting a stable community of liberal learning is my own, perhaps to my colleagues more of a construction than it ought to be, but very plausible to me. It goes along with the conviction to which I’ve confessed that a liberal education which is mindful of its tradition and works pretty well day-to-day, with semi-frequent ascents into sheer glory, has its own, proper teaching mode. I think that the
delineation that follows fits not only a program of liberal education that has its own institution but also more partial, more tentative efforts. But I should report here that our founders emphatically asserted that the program they were instituting was not a curricular experiment. I think that attitude was crucial to our holding together over the years: We thought—how shall I put it?—that if this didn’t work out, then there was something wrong with the world, not with the Program. And contrary to all pious preaching about not being too inward-turned but more accommodating to reality, that passionate sense of being, for all our flaws, on the right path turned out to be intensely practical. As I recall him, Mr. Klein had a sovereign sense of being in a place that had it right. I might add that I’ve visited a number of schools where they did things quite differently but had the same sense of “having got it right,” and the consequent affect between us was immediate sympathy and potential friendship.

To begin with, then, he had the right temperament—a bit of a gourmand (he, who despised academic grading would grade Dodo’s uniformly delectable cuisine at every meal), a little indolent, pipe-puffing (a horrible weed called Balkan Sobranie), amusedly tolerant toward all signs of intellectual effort in the young and overtly repelled by adult intellectualism. In fact, he took delight, not always fairly distributed, in the eager naïveté and good-natured hijinks of the student generation of his first arrival; he had a special affection (which I’ve inherited) for the scamps. (Our students of the present day, I might say, are more experientially sophisticated and thus more psychologically fraught—but none the wiser for it.)

I say “the right temperament,” but I mean a temperament; all teachers in the liberal mode need a bit of a personality, both to attract willing attention and to repel a too easy familiarity. Mr. Klein had a lot of the appurtenances of personality, for example, the ability to draw perfect circles on the board while facing the class by pivoting his arm behind his back—a source of delight to students studying Ptolemy. But these are gifts that you ape at your peril.

Then there were other traits that were not a gift of nature but the fruit of time. Older, more experienced teachers tend to carry their authority with less strain and more élan, to maintain their
repose and to intervene with aplomb, even when a learning occasion goes embarrassingly wrong—well mostly. These ways you acquire more by keeping at it than by having a hero.

Then there were the bread-and-butter virtues of any teacher in an institution, enforcing some discipline by mundane means—calling on the silent, administering quizzes, requiring and attending to projects to be handed in. This dutiful fulfillment of institutional requirements ought to be supervised by those in charge, in our case that is the dean. Mr. Klein learned meticulous dutifulness, as his wife told me, on the job; his pre-dean nature was to let such things—such mere necessities—go in favor of spontaneous life.

So far I’ve described a teacher at once too distinctively himself and too ordinarily dutiful to be a very imageable model. I’ll now try to say how he came to be the paradigm of a teacher in a school devoted to liberal education.

Let me begin by forfending the imputation that he followed something called “the Socratic Method.” Neither Mr. Klein nor we, the epigonoi as the Greek say, the successors, do any such thing. On the one hand, it’s a contradiction in terms: Socrates had, as I’ve said, a way, a pursuit, but not a method in the Cartesian sense of a set of jigged procedures for following an inquiry. Mr. Klein used to say that each dialogue was its own world, and in each conversation Socrates goes about his search in a different way, taking into account the character of his conversational partners and of the object in question. So Socrates has his ways which are not a method, and in that respect he is the very incarnation of liberal teaching and our super-model. Yet, on the other hand, this Socrates of the Platonic dialogues is, after all, Plato’s marionette, who does as he’s told, which means he knows, or Plato knows for him, exactly where he’s going. And that we never do know—and we manage to rejoice in that fact.

And here finally begins my positive delineation of a pedagogy specific to liberal education and to Jasha Klein’s embodiment of it. It presupposes that liberal education, in its most specific sense, is realized in a curriculum of texts handed to us by the tradition, be they verbal, musical, visual. These works are primary in the order of making or finding and prime in the ranking of quality or worth. Confronted with such works a teacher
does well to recede into equality with the students, to inquire along with them, and yet to be the safekeeper, the tutor of the enterprise. Mr. Klein was a master of the somewhat mysterious art of leading from behind—by solicitous listening, by intimating questions, even by expectant silence. He himself particularly admired a colleague, Richard Scofield, a gentleman of the old American type, for his elegant tacitness.

This reticence had its infuriating aspects: The more a young fellow-tutor wanted to be initiated into the deep lore we were sure he possessed, the less forthcoming he was—sometimes, I discovered, because he didn’t actually know, but more often because he was terminally disciple-proof; he would tolerantly respond to the admiring affection of beguiled students but would not bind them to him by an inside teaching. It was part of that soundness of his, which did have a Socratic look about it. His most consequential discoveries fit, as I’ve said, into our own intellects as if there’d always been a place ready for them. Of course, in time the insufficiencies emerged, not such as to undo the insights, but such as to make them the center of a second sort of attention, critical attention.

Playfulness, another Socratic element, is of the essence in liberal learning—playfulness in making the most of the misfiring of the inquiring intellect, playful exploitation of felicitous coincidences and other fortuities, playful extraction of sense from nonsense, playful pinpointing of students’ personal ways—the sort that feels to them not like offensive denigration but like gratifying spot-lighting. Playfulness, after all, goes with laughter, and surprised laughter is the physical analogue to wonder, the beginning of philosophy. We young tutors, who had just emerged from post-graduate studies, learned something wonderful: Learning has a human face, and a teacher who can’t laugh, can’t be serious.

Seriousness is naturally next. Seriousness is opposed in one respect to levity, for example a leaning some bright students evince toward easily distractible intellectual gadgeteering. In another respect, seriousness is opposed to earnestness, dead earnestness, such as rigidly relentless industriousness. Both evade entering into the “seriousness of the concept” (as Hegel terms it; “Preface” 4, Phenomenology). “Seriousness” here means not be-
laboring a thought but letting it work on you, not willfully grasping for insights but letting them come, by giving them room or—as I like to put it—by futzing around. Time-taking patience and messing-about belong to liberal learning, because these works don’t open up to strategic invasions.

Serious teachers who join their students in dithering purposefully and procrastinating concentratedly must also sometimes appear in a formidable aspect. Socrates, for example, appears thus formidable just once that I know of, though that leaves its daunting impression: When confronted with a young life going seriously wrong, here that of Callicles, he concludes with an impassioned speech in a tone devoid of any tint of parity or playfulness: He says that he will follow his own account for a life of virtue and bids Callicles and his crowd follow the same rationale of conduct. “For,” he ends, “yours is worth nothing” (Gorgias, end). On rare occasions I’ve heard that tone from Mr. Klein, a tone utterly distinct from that of powerlessly querulous righteousness sometimes adopted by academics when great perturbations are caused by small differences. These were moments when the stakes were high—our students’ souls or our school’s survival, particularly its resolute non-careerism—for this is, as I’ve said, what the word “liberal” in “liberal education” originally betokens.

That brings me to the protection of the exchanges that are the life of learning from dangers both within and without the classroom. Of these there are many, of which I’ll mention only one: the corruption of conversation into debate, into argument, and even into discussion, into all the modes of human communication in which the passion of competition outweighs the desire for illumination. Mr. Klein practiced a pedagogy that incited in students the desire to shine but damped their impulse to outshine each other. I think what made it work was his own sense that some of the greatness of the works we were grappling with magnified us, but also that in the face of this grandeur our gradations, natural or acquired, were minimized. But there was some kindly cunning in it as well: to pretend in the face of much contrary evidence that everyone was genuinely at work and really up to it and to keep pretending it until it—sometimes—came true.
Perhaps I’ll mention one more vulnerability of any serious community of young learners: the excitation of friendships formed in the face of deep questions and difficult texts displaces proper preparation and solid learning. For young teachers that somewhat vacuous intensity wears out with time, but some of our students do graduate having had more experience of the love of learning than of learning. Characters like that hung around Socrates, and, as I recall, Mr. Klein didn’t know what to do about them either. However, to my mind there are worse ways to waste one’s time.

I have not at all exhausted the pedagogical lessons that many of my colleagues and I myself learned from Jacob Klein. Since I can’t recall his ever mentioning to me a living model for himself, this conclusion may be justified: What shaped the soundly ingenious scholar of intellectual history that he was in the first half of his life, into the devoted teacher’s teacher of liberal learning that he became in the second half, was a tiny college, St. John’s, with an unadulterated program of liberal education, seated in the continent-wide American republic, with a continuous tradition of enabling liberty.—This half-European was as American as they come.

I’ll finish with a little anecdote to show how Jasha was my teacher and my model. When, after his death, Dodo was disposing of his library, she told me to take whatever I wanted. I was simply paralyzed by the prospect of suddenly owning a lot of irreplaceable books. So I went minimal. I chose only his Greek Plato in the Teubner and Oxford editions, multiple volumes, falling apart with use and heavily underlined as well as annotated in his tiny, legible script. Then, nearly two-score years ago, I bound all the volumes up in a broad golden ribbon and never looked inside them again until I was writing this talk. He would have chuckled.
On Negation: Other Possibilities in Wallace Stevens’s *Parts of a World*

Jason Menzin

*After the final no there comes a yes*

*And on that yes the future world depends.*

—Wallace Stevens

“The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”

In three poems from *Parts of a World* (1942)—“Of Modern Poetry,” “Landscape with Boat,” and “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”—Wallace Stevens reflects on the idea that poetry enables human life, and on the idea that the poet’s fictions can console us, compensating to some extent for the loss of older ideas of order. This perspective is a shift in tone and sensibility from the sharp irony, cool distance, and florid diction characteristic of *Harmonium* (1923). *Parts of a World* seems to seek a solution to the problem of Crispin in *Harmonium’s* “Comedian as the Letter C,” who is “washed away by magnitude,” overwhelmed by the violence of untamed reality:

[CRISPIN] now beheld himself,
A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass.
What word split up in clickering syllables
And storming under multitudinous tones
Was name for this short-shanks in all that brunt?
Crispin was washed away by magnitude.


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“Of Modern Poetry” is a short, self-referential poem in the *ars poetica* tradition. It enacts what it describes, pointing to itself at its beginning and end:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding  
What will suffice. It has not always had  
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what  
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed  
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

It must  
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may  
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman  
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.4

This “poem of the mind” is mainly the imaginative act of the poet in the process of creating. But for Stevens, the poem of the mind is also a more expansive metaphor for all imaginative activities, from faith and philosophy to history, literature, and science. It stands for all fictive acts, all human attempts to find coherence in the chaos of the world outside themselves. “The act of finding / What will suffice” is this imaginative project, which is rooted in the need for order, meaning, beauty, joy, play, and pleasure.

The “Modern” in the poem’s title indicates that the imagination faces new challenges. Poetry must adapt to contemporary needs. In the past, the mind “has not always had / To find” because “the scene was set”; it merely “repeated what / Was in the script.” The poet could borrow freely from religious, philosophical, political, economic, moral, and artistic certainties. But the script of a scriptwriter God not only controls reality’s radical contingency, it also constrains the imagination’s possibilities. God’s scripted world unfolds from birth to death with logical, or at least dramatically plausible, necessity among thoughts and feelings. Belief in such a coherent narrative could once, perhaps, have provided a sense of stability.

4. Ibid., 218-19.
But Stevens signals the transformation of the world with a line break—“then the theater was changed”—suggestively enjambing “To something else.” The broken line mimics a fracture in the world, while the enjambment underscores the urgency of transitioning to a new order. The gap between the first and second sections of the poem, across which the enjambment moves, mirrors the imaginative leap required if the poet is to cross from one structure of meaning to another.

When the scene changes, the past becomes merely a “souvenir”—a stale memento—and the poet must renovate the theatre of human meaning.5 For Stevens, the poet must step into the gap of feeling and meaning created by the collapse of the old verities. The imagination

... has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice.6

It cannot any longer repeat God’s script, but must meet the new realities head-on, connect to contemporary people and places, even “think about war.” It must leave Romanticism behind and search out reality in plain language. “And it has to find what will suffice.”

But what is the sense of sufficiency? In essence, it is a response that matches a need. In physics, it is the equal and opposite reaction to an action. It is not, however, an answer or a final resolution, but a reaction that reestablishes balance. It is, for a time, enough.

“Of Modern Poetry” presents Stevens’s thinking about the voice of the poet, written in Stevens’s own voice, without the eva-

sions of irony. The first lines of the poem are expressed in short strokes with simple diction. The word it and its declined variations occur fifteen times, and the whole of the piece lacks the sharp tone in much of Harmonium. Despite the spare language, the governing metaphor of the opening section is theatrics—plays and playing in the theatre of the world. The image of poetry is a performance before an audience. Play and performance run through the whole poem, from a theatre with a set-scene, to an insatiable script-less actor on stage, to a guitar-twangling metaphysician in the dark, to a man skating, to a woman dancing. Play is part of a living being’s response to the pressures of life, but it is also a self-sufficient act, done for its own sake, a good in itself.

But if there is play, there is also work. And since “it,” the mind of the poet, “has to find what will suffice” in a world where “the theatre was changed,” the imagination must “construct a new stage.” Stevens knows, as Nietzsche knew, that the death of God means the loss of old givens. Several years after “Of Modern Poetry,” Stevens will echo Nietzsche, re-announcing that “the death of one God is the death of all.” But Stevens also knows, with Sartre, that human beings—and poets in particular—have the artistic capacity to build a world out of their own experience. The mind’s construction of a new stage is part of the poet’s construction of reality. This is Sartre’s existentialism compressed and transmuted into the language of poetic creation.

Having constructed the new stage of poetic reality, Stevens sets a single, long and complex sentence across the mid-point of “Of Modern Poetry”:

It has to be on that stage,
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 329.
Of which, an invisible audience listens,  
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed  
In an emotion as of two people, as of two  
Emotions becoming one.9

The imaginative mind not only develops new forms through which reality may be understood, it also, “like an insatiable actor,” plays at playing a role, and speaks words to the world. These are the two complementary halves of the poetic whole: a created stage-world and a fictive performance. But as with the woman singing by the sea at Key West, the relationship between creator, creature, and spectator is not simple. And here Stevens insists that the poet must speak carefully, “slowly and with meditation,” the words that suffice.

Stevens’s figure for sufficiency is consonance, like words that rhyme: the echo of “ear” in “hear,” the repetition of “ear” and “ear.” The sounds of rhyme, expectation and fulfillment, imitate the poem’s broader ability to satisfy a psychic need. It is first the sound, not the sense, of his words that triggers a response in the actor-poet’s invisible audience. It is the sound that prompts the audience to turn inward, to feel an internal response, listening “not to the play, but to itself.” This is the mystery of poetry. A bridge of words, of sense and sound, emerging from nowhere and crossing the gap between poet and audience. This is sufficiency, a temporary unity of feeling, “expressed / In an emotion as of two people, as of two / Emotions becoming one.” It is through this unity, when it happens, that the poet changes the world.

Stevens not only fuses feelings—unifying people and emotions—but also transmutes the mind poetically. At the poem’s beginning, the mind is an actor in the world-as-theater. When “the theater was changed,” the mind becomes an insatiable actor who “has to be on that stage.” Then, allowing the analogy to disappear, mind as actor becomes musical metaphysician. The fictive personae merge, echoing in poetic form the fusion of “two / Emotions

9. Ibid., 219.
becoming one.” Actor-mind, now reconstituted as instrumentalist, continues to make sounds:

The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.¹⁰

In a poem about poetry, Stevens inserts an image of a philosopher, one who lacks a Platonic sun, lacks the light of reason—a metaphysician making music in the dark. And the sounds that issue from his guitar are sounds of the imagination.

But why does he “twang”? And why on one string instead of several? Again, the sound of words first moves the audience toward emotion. “Twang” is sensibly onomatopoetic, vibrating in the mouth as a string vibrates in the air. The single string reflects his harmonization of distinctions; his music briefly unifies minds. From the sounds of the wiry string a new formulation of “what will suffice” emerges. Moments of “sudden rightnesses” flash into existence and create a temporary equilibrium of feeling, a womb-like sense of containment, a nearly unimaginable fullness of satisfaction: “wholly / Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend, / Beyond which it has no will to rise.” This is not the permanence of a set-scene, nor the eternal verities of old metaphysicians, but a moment of passing human integritas.

The poem closes with brief sketches of simple scenes from human life:

It must
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.¹¹

¹⁰. Ibid.
¹¹. Ibid.
Gone is the metaphorical stage, the actor, and the musical meta-
physician. What remain are simple figures of play and motion
and gentleness: “a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman / Combing.” Prefiguring the tone in much of Stevens’s late poetry,
these are quiet, transient, and lonely images of sufficiency. Like
the poem itself, these are instances of what might suffice, “the
poem of the act of the mind.”

† † †

Unlike his practice in much of *Harmonium*, Stevens employs
irony in *Parts of a World* not merely to mock, but also to clear
an imaginative space upon which to frame new possibilities.
“Landscape with Boat,” a poem with a painterly title about an
artist, reflects this development in Stevens’s ironic sensibility.

First published in the autumn of 1940, “Landscape with
Boat” has four main sections, each with its own distinct focus
and tone: the first, like the “Snow Man” of *Harmonium*, is largely
descriptive; the second is critical; the third revelatory; the fourth
calmly reflective. Moreover, the poem has two halves—the first
framing the life and art of an ascetic figure, the second exploring
the sense of other possibilities.

“Landscape with Boat” begins with a deceptively simple line:

An anti-master-man, floribund ascetic.

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
And not be touched by blue. He wanted to know,
A naked man who regarded himself in the glass
Of air, who looked for the world beneath the blue,
Without blue, without any turquoise hint or phase,
Any azure under-side or after-color. Nabob
Of bones, he rejected, he denied, to arrive
At the neutral center, the ominous element,
The single-colored, colorless, primitive.\(^\text{12}\)

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12. Ibid., 220.
The opening—“An anti-master man, floribund ascetic”—is a sentence fragment, an extended noun, a label, language that might appear on a small card beneath a painting on the wall of a museum. It signals the poem’s subject matter without incorporating the living action and motion of a verb. The syntax of this phrase—the indefinite article, the negation, the missing verb—hints at the meaning of the figure Stevens has introduced. The anti-master man is defined in part by inversion. He is by being what he is not. He is neither Nietzsche’s master man nor Hitler’s; he is not even the anti-master man. He is merely an indefinite “an.” But he is also a “floribund ascetic.” “Floribund,” a neologism, clearly suggests “florid,” probably also “abundant,” and therefore forms an oxymoron with “ascetic.”13 Although “floribund” is not a word in English, floribunda, “many-flowering” in Latin, is a species of rose popularized at the 1939 World’s Fair. With some or all of this in mind, Stevens characterizes the anti-master man as an ironic paradox of empty-fullness, a man of self-denial and roses.

But what is this floribund ascetic? He is an artist, a peculiar abstractionist, who removes elements from a painted canvas: “He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds, / Then the colossal illusion of heaven.” This painter is both poetic imaginer as well as ambiguously broom-brush-wielding artist. Thunder is sound, not shape. The illusion of heaven is idea, not image. Neither can literally be “brushed away.” But the ascetic artist does brush them away, removing both the real and the imagined sky, the thunder and clouds as well as heaven, the stale ideas of order and coherence lost to the modern world. This inverse painting, the brushing of negation, is a necessarily imperfect, incompletable process. The painter who removes all color from a canvas ceases to produce painting. This ultimate abstractionist would succeed in his end only by failing as an artist. And just so, despite his brushing

away, “Yet still / The sky was blue.” The ascetic may succeed in removing images and ideas, but he cannot brush away the blue of the imagination.

But who is this anti-master man, this floribund ascetic? Is this Stevens himself? The rich connoisseur of food and art and flowers and books, living alone in a small upstairs room at home in Connecticut? Is he the idea of a modern artist, a poet-painter who denies the world and life to achieve a truth beyond the real? Is it an echo of Nietzsche’s conception of the ascetic? A mockery and critique of the poet? A critique of critique?

What is this abstractionist trying to do? What does he want? What does it mean to take blue away from the imagination? Like a refigured image of the earlier “snow man” of Harmonium, the abstractionist tends toward negation and nothingness. He must, in other words, “have a mind of winter” and “have been cold a long time”\(^\text{14}\) to want “imperceptible air,” to want to see with a single, cyclopean “eye” and not be touched by the blueness of feeling and imagination. He would see with Homer’s monster’s eye, without the depth of emotion, without color, half-blind, in an almost perspective-less perspective without human sense—an urge not for the chaos of senseless nonsense but for the bare, “naked” barrenness of non-sense. He is also, perhaps, a figure for the twentieth-century physicist, peeling back the surface of both the world and the mind to find a colorless absence as the ultimate object beneath. Or, more comically, he is the poet carried away by critique and the poetic reassessment of old ideas of coherence. He is Stevens critiquing himself and his own poems about poetry, parodying the act of tossing too many things onto the dump heap.\(^\text{15}\)

This ascetic artist, a figure of negation, is “Nabob / Of bones,” a non-man, shorn of everything but his internal frame. “He rejected, he denied,” brushing away his painting, his world, and his

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self, in an effort “to arrive / At the neutral center, the ominous element.” The danger of this kind of abstraction is acute. It turns a man into a skeleton, pulls clouds from the sky, rejects, denies, and destroys. It is the search for the “ominous” center, something non-human, sub-human, and impossible: “The single colored, colorless primitive.” The primitive, like the artist’s “eye,” is singular, so that the form of the seeker here matches the form of the thing sought. It, like the artist figured in the poem’s opening line, is oxymoronic, colored colorlessness, and, like the artist himself, is a thing of negation, neither this, nor that, but “neutral.”

   It was not as if the truth lay where he thought,  
   Like a phantom, in an uncreated night.  
   It was easier to think it lay there. If  
   It was nowhere else, it was there and because  
   It was nowhere else, its place had to be supposed,  
   Itself had to be supposed, a thing supposed  
   In a place supposed, a thing that he reached  
   In a place that he reached, by rejecting what he saw  
   And denying what he heard. He would arrive.  
   He had only not to live, to walk in the dark,  
   To be projected by one void into  
   Another. 16

This unsympathetic, comic-tragic figure’s effort fails, however, because lifeless life is not life but death, which is the end of possibilities: “It was not as if the truth lay where he thought, / Like a phantom, in an uncreated night.” There is finally no colorless color to find, no human experience beyond human feeling and human thought. Unreality, however, does not prevent its supposition. The abstractionist is not only ascetic, but also paradoxically floribund. He seeks a truth beyond the imagination by means of supposing, by imagining. And within Stevens’s poetics, this seeming inconsistency makes perfect sense, since “the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined.” 17

Hypothetically, if the truth beyond the imagination were “nowhere else,” then it would be “there.” But this truth is not only not the twice-repeated “nowhere else,” it is also not even “there.” It is non-truth. It is only “nowhere” because it is an experience of nothing. The negated, brushed away world and the mind of ultimate rejection and denial does not exist. Or, if this non-truth does exist, it has no sense for the living human being. It would be “a thing that he reached / In a place that he reached, by rejecting what he saw / And denying what he heard.” Nevertheless, Nabob perseveres in his efforts; despite obstacles and impossibilities, “He would arrive.” But at what ridiculous, tragic cost: “He had only not to live, to walk in the dark.” Perhaps the floribund ascetic is not only florid and abundant, but also florid and moribund, flowery and dead, since his is a poetics of death.

In a remarkable use of enjambment, Stevens both uncovers the heart of the ascetic painter-poet and figures his inevitable end, explaining that Nabob had only “To be projected by one void into / Another.” At the exact mid-point of the poem, a position which here signals the ascetic’s central emptiness, he is projected by one void—himself—into the blankness of the unfinished sentence at the end of the poetic line. He is thrown into the nothingness beyond the poem, a senseless non-existence beyond human meaning. Strongly paralleling the “nothing” of the “Snow Man” in *Harmonium*, the ascetic is projected by one void, the nothing that he is, into another void, the nothing of the non-world that he seeks.\(^\text{18}\)

Had Stevens concluded the poem at this point, it would merely be an ironic recasting of the “snow man” into the figure of an inhuman poet-artist—from snow man to no man. The continuation of the poem reveals an important aspect of Stevens’s poetic development.

The third section opens with a continued reflection on the ascetic artist in much the same tone as before:

It was his nature to suppose,
To receive what others had supposed, without
Accepting. He received what he denied.
But as truth to be accepted, he supposed
A truth beyond all truths. 19

These five lines form a bridge between the second and third sections of the poem. They recapitulate the opening half of the poem, reminding the reader of the abstractionist’s practice of un-painting. The metaphor of brushing away images is here made plain—the ascetic artist receives ideas and images from “others” “without accepting” them, supposing without believing, inheriting and denying his inheritance. Nabob is a figure of critique, whose only affirmative supposition is “a truth beyond all truths,” a nothing-truth of emptiness, a metaphysics of non-.

Stevens uses repetition in the bridge-section to create expectation and emotional force. The empty suppositions of the ascetic, reiterated by the repetition of “suppose” in the five lines of the bridge passage, are finally overwhelmed by a new supposing, the powerful revelation of other possibilities of life through creative figuring:

He never supposed
That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
That the things that he rejected might be part
And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue
Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
Parts, and more things, parts. 20

With a complete shift in poetic tone, Stevens undoes the ascetic artist’s opening act of de-creation. The return of the world, with language that feels like air and sunlight overwhelming desolation, is beyond the abstractionist’s supposing. And although carefully couched in the subjunctive “might” and the conditional

“if,” the feeling of these lines, especially as it contrasts with the sense of a world brushed away in the poem’s first half, contains romantic—nearly biblical—force. The negating ascetic, of course, “never supposed / That he might be truth, or part of it.” And with the pulse-like repetition of “part,” Stevens brings back the parts of a world brushed away by the ascetic in the poem’s opening section. Stevens brings back the “turquoise tint”—now “irregular”; the “blue”—now no longer the “imperceptible air” of the ascetic, but “perceptible,” “grown denser”; the “clouds”—now playful on the eye; the “thunder”—now magnifying the ear. The painting of the poem’s opening has been restored, renewed, with all but the “colossal illusion of heaven” reinstated. And even that illusion, perhaps necessarily left off the canvas in modernity, is transmuted in a second and final, restorative supposition:

He never supposed divine
Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.21

Echoing “Sunday Morning,”22 where divinity lives within the self and within scenes of earthly emotion, this second supposition projects the possibility of a new kind of divinity. Here the ascetic is inverted. The thing sought is not nothing, but everything: the world itself, the parts of a whole. This everything is not under the canvas, not beneath the blue, or beyond, but here and now and as things actually are. As in the flight of the angel in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and that poem’s “expressible bliss,” here differences are collapsed, like a mystical epiphany, and truth is seen everywhere.23

But surely this goes too far. Stevens’s skepticism and his poetics of sufficiency is not a poetics of totality. And indeed, all of

21. Ibid., 221.
22. Ibid., 53-56.
23. Ibid., 349.
this would be too sentimental, too romantic for belief, if not for the qualifying conditionals, the uncertainty of “might,” the indefiniteness of “suppose.” These are not assertions of certainty, but expressions of possibilities, contrapuntal potentialities to the ascetic artist’s negations. Yet even these evasions fit into the orchestrated whole of Stevens’s own poem. This suggests, if only obliquely, that the two abstractions—one of negation, one of totality—are not equally plausible or equally human.

In “Landscape with Boat,” artistic repetition, not mere repetitiousness, signals the potential for actual order—both in the poem and in the world. Even as “suppose” is repeated several times in this section, the word “he” is repeated seven times in the opening section, “it” eight times in the second, and “part” seven times in the third. After the repetition of “it” in the second section, “he” is repeated six times. Before the repetition of “part” in the third, “he” is again repeated six times. These symmetries of repetition provide cohesion to the poem both in sense and sound. They are like a pulse within the poem, from the ascetic “he” to the non-truth of “it” to the revelatory “part.” The existence of these parts of the poem themselves enact the “parts” described within the poem. If artistically shaped patterns, structures of poetic repetition, point to the possibility of parts in the world, then there may be a concordance between poem and cosmos. The poem may make possible a belief in the possibility of parts, a belief in the possibility of a whole defined not by inversion but by life itself.

Within the shape of this whole, Stevens completes the poem with a reflective voice, moving into the warmth of sunlight, air, and water. He ends with a “better” supposing, a life of motion and sound and warmth:

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
A yellow wine and follow a steamer’s track
And say, “The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime.”

Here, with the appearance of the steamer’s track, is a refreshed “Landscape with Boat”—not the landscape brushed away by the abstractionist, but a rich place, an image of what might be, of what “might . . . might . . . might” be, of possible poetry and possible life. Here in the south of Europe a better painter, a man alive to the scene before him, sits at rest on a sofa on a balcony overlooking the play of light and water on the Mediterranean. Unlike the abstractionist—a void becoming void—this artist, like the sea before him, is perhaps an “emerald / Becoming emeralds,” the green jewels that are the parts of reality. This greater artist observes rather than destroys, and, instead of brushing away thunder and clouds, watches palms flap leaves like green ears that can hear a world in the warm air. This possible poet observes the liquid pleasure of wine and the liquid of the sea. He sees in the water a “steamer’s track,” a relic of motion, a hint of the boat of the poem’s title, an affirmation that this moment itself, this lived moment from the balcony above the sea, is the landscape with boat. In the midst of this renewed world, the poet reflects in spoken words on the sense of his own poetry: “The thing I hum appears to be the rhythm of this celestial pantomime.” In harmony with the poetics of the poem’s second half, this better poet feels his poetry fitting into the rhythm of the world. He feels the rhythm of his own language to be a sound of concord, a thing that might reflect the greater poetry of a cosmos of moving parts.

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In “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” another short poem with a painterly title, Stevens continues to work through themes and ideas from “Of Modern Poetry” and “Landscape with Boat.” Unlike the latter poem, however, with its two distinct halves, “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard” consists of a body and tail, a single stanza of sixteen lines and a one-line coda.

24. Ibid., 221
After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.
No was the night. Yes is this present sun.
If the rejected things, the things denied,
Slid over the western cataract, yet one,
One only, one thing that was firm, even
No greater than a cricket’s horn, no more
Than a thought to be rehearsed all day, a speech
Of the self that must sustain itself on speech,
One thing remaining, infallible, would be
Enough. Ah! douce campagna of that thing!
Ah! douce campagna, honey in the heart,
Green in the body, out of a petty phrase,
Out of a thing believed, a thing affirmed:
The form on the pillow humming while one sleeps,
The aureole above the humming house . . .

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.25

On initial reading, the negative conclusion of the poem’s
coda seems strangely paired with the humming affirmations that
end the main stanza. Perhaps a closer examination can help clar-
ify the relationship between the coda and the whole.

The opening line is a compressed version of the two halves
of “Landscape with Boat,” in which the first half involves the
negations of the ascetic artist, while the second half makes affir-
mations that re-create the world. Similarly, this poem begins with
the recognition of a “no,” before moving to the affirmation of a
“yes”: “After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the
future world depends.” This sentence is obscure because “no”
and “yes” are not responses to particular questions, but instead
they express psychological polarities or even cosmic antitheses.
The “final no” is the end. It is death, rejection, perfection, and
apocalypse. This final no echoes the artistic purpose of the ascetic
painter-poet in the earlier poem. Here again, the “no” is not
merely an ironic negation, but rather an idea that clears the
ground for something else and greater—a “yes.”26

25. Ibid., 224.
26. Cf. the final line of Joyce’s Ulysses.
Once the last “no” is spoken or thought, there is not nothing, not silence, but the advent of a Christ-like “yes.” This “yes” is the actuality of affirmation beyond negation. It is the basis of a whole “future world.” “No” is the night, the absence of the world in sleep; “yes” is the sun, the light of seeing, the world seen, the imagination’s possibilities. “No was,” in the negation of past time and non-existence, while “yes is” in the actuality of the evanescent present.

The long, dense conditional sentence that follows contains the poem’s central imagery and points to the possibilities of a “yes.” As in “Of Modern Poetry,” Stevens is again in search of what will suffice—here the possibility of finding one thing that “would be / Enough.” The skeleton of this sentence—“If the rejected things slid over the western cataract, one thing remaining would be enough”—echoes the structure of the poem’s opening line: from no to yes. The protasis opens with negation—“the rejected things, the things denied”—while the apodosis points to the potential for something more, something “remaining,” that is sufficient. This pattern, in small, suggests the whole of “Landscape with Boat,” the possibility of moving from abstract negation to discovering meaning to reclaiming a whole world. Stevens emphasizes the conclusion of the apodosis through enjambment in the last line, pointing from the potentiality of “would be” to the sufficiency of a suggestively lonely “enough.”

Water passing over a cataract is an irreversible moment of loss. The “western cataract” is the poem’s own “final no.” It is the horizon of the setting sun, a spatialization of death. Like the musty theatre from the opening of “Of Modern Poetry,” the rejected things that pass beyond are exhausted fictions, empty ideas incapable of engendering meaning in the modern heart. But if not every idea slides over the western cataract, if—in a remarkable quadruple expression of singularity—“one, / One only, one thing” should remain, then that “would be / Enough.” Even if the one thing were physically infinitesimal, “no greater than a cricket’s horn,” even if the one thing were intellectually insignificant, “no more / Than a thought to be rehearsed all day,” it would be enough because it would be something.
The one thing, no matter how small, that survives the decimation of time is actual and therefore powerful. The cricket’s horn suggests both small size and enormous sound wholly disproportionate to the insect’s physical magnitude. This disproportion indicates the power of the one thing preserved from the cataract’s eclipse. “[N]o more / than a thought,” rehearsed in the mind (as if for a play on the stage in “Of Modern Poetry”), the one thing remaining points to a passage on repetition in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:  
One of the vast repetitions final in  
Themselves and, therefore, good.27

The one thing, rehearsed and repeated, final in itself, is poetic expression, the power of words to change the world. Echoing the actor and the metaphysician in “Of Modern Poetry,” both of whom use sound to move their audiences, the thing that suffices here is “a speech / Of the self that must sustain itself on speech.” As much as bread and water, the right words may sustain life.28

To complement the “better” supposing in the second half of “Landscape with Boat,” here the idea that something might survive oblivion provides pleasure, even to the point of eliciting exclamations. The “douce campagna” blends with the sweetness of “honey in the heart” and the vigorous receptivity of “green in the body.” This is a place of peace and pleasure brought on by words that are enough. The “douce campagna” is a dream-like belief, “a thing affirmed,” a ghostly energy humming in the night—like crickets—where the human being sleeps and dwells.

But what is the meaning of the coda, “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never”? Is Stevens undercutting the possibility of encountering and experiencing the “douce campagna”? Is this an

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28. Cf. the final stanza of “Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction”: “How simply the fictive hero becomes the real; / How gladly with proper words the soldier dies, / If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.” Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 352.
anti-romantic backlash against the apparent sentimentality of the poem? Is this the speech that ends possibilities? As with the conditionals and evasions in the revelatory third section of “Landscape with Boat,” it is reasonable to remember that Stevens disdains the falsifying voice of naïve idealism. But perhaps there is also more. Perhaps the coda is itself an instance of the “final no” from the opening line of the poem. Perhaps the one thing that survives the “western cataract” is the poem itself or the “petty phrase” that is the poem’s opening line. By the poetic logic of “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” after the “final no” there comes a “yes.” And if this is true, then the reader must feel the inevitability of an as-yet-unspoken “yes” coming after the poem’s final “never.” If the opening line is to be believed, then the end of the poem is not the end. Despite the emphatic negations “never . . . never,” which point to the impossibility of permanent satisfaction, “yes” implies an unending process of poetic refiguring, a never-ending poetic response to a never-ending human need for something real.

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Stevens’s shifting usage of terms of negation is a critical clue to a change in his poetic sensibility between the publications of Harmonium and Parts of a World. In Harmonium, negation is characterized, on the one hand, by desolation, as in the impossibly icy mind of a snow man who, “nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,”29 and, on the other hand, by the half-mockery of Mon Oncle’s opening address, in which “[t]here is not nothing, no, no, never nothing, / Like the clashed edges of two words that kill.”30 But in Parts of a World, despite the apparent similarity of expression, negation begets new and potentially endless possibilities. In “Of Modern Poetry,” “sudden rightnesses” create an emotional space for the mind “below which it cannot descend, / Beyond which it has no will to rise,”31 signalling not the inability of the mind to progress, but

29. Stevens, Collected Poetry and Prose, 8.
30. Ibid., 10.
31. Ibid., 219.
the temporary bliss of sufficiency. In “Landscape with Boat,” the ascetic “never supposed / That he might be truth,”32 signalling not another layer of artistic demolition, but the opening of a new vista on life. And in “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” that “it can never be satisfied, the mind, never,”33 signals not the end, but the never-ending need for poetry. “Never” and “not” and “no” in Parts of a World signify affirmation rather than despondency. They point away from the precipice of the “western cataract” and toward the solid ground of meaning, feeling, and expression offered by a supreme fiction.34

32. Ibid., 220.
33. Ibid., 224.
34. The difference in Stevens’s understanding of negation in Harmonium and Parts of a World might well be compared to the final “no” in Rev. 6:8 (“And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth”) and the “yes” of a future cosmos in Rev. 21:1 (“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea”).
“The Student,” by Anton Chekhov: A Story Told and Glanced At

Louis Petrich

We students take our pleasure in stories. We students love stories that lift us to the light of meaning and fill us with confidence to face life’s elements on friendly terms. We are nevertheless engaged in a precarious undertaking. The meaning and strength we obtain may be shared and the stories proclaimed universal; or they may be unshared—opposed to each other—their stories indeterminate and parochial. In this second case the meaning and strength that we happen to find may appear to others as the desperate attempts of a literate organism to keep its skin warm and its way lit in the local cold and dark. It may not be possible to tell the difference in truth between these two kinds of meaning and strength.

I would like to tell you a story now, written in 1894 by Anton Chekhov, called “The Student.” It is a multi-layered story, but very short—about three and a half pages—taking twelve minutes to tell. If you are reading this lecture, please try to hear the words of the story, here included, as if they were being told to you for the very first time.

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The Student
Anton Chekhov

The weather was fair at first and still. The blackbirds were calling and a creature in the nearby swamps plaintively hooting as if blowing into

1. Translated by Michael Heim. Used by the kind permission of The Estate of Michael Heim.

Louis Petrich is a tutor at St. John’s College in Annapolis, where this lecture was first delivered on November 3, 2017. It is dedicated to Amy Kass (1940-2015) and her husband, Leon (b. 1939). Like many others, the author was a student in their light of reflection for some years.
an empty bottle. A woodcock flew past, and a shot boomed out merrily in the spring air. But when the woods grew dark, an inauspiciously cold, piercing wind blew in from the east, and silence fell. Needles of ice stretched over the puddles, and the woods became disagreeable, godforsaken, hostile. Winter was in the air.

Ivan Velikopolsky, a seminary student and deacon’s son, was on his way home from a hunt, following a path through a water meadow. His fingers were numb, and his face burned in the wind. He felt that the sudden blast of cold had violated the order and harmony of things, that nature herself was terrified and so the dark of evening had come on more quickly than necessary. Desolation was everywhere, and it was somehow particularly gloomy. The only light came from the widows’ vegetable gardens by the river; otherwise everything far and wide, all the way to the village four versts off, was submerged in the cold evening mist. The student remembered that when leaving the house he had seen his mother sitting barefoot on the floor in the entryway polishing the samovar and his father lying on the stove coughing. It was Good Friday, so cooking was forbidden and he was terribly hungry. And now, stooped with the cold, he thought how the same wind had blown in the days of Rurik and Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great and there had been the same crippling poverty and hunger, the same leaky thatched roofs and benighted, miserable people, the same emptiness everywhere and darkness and oppressive grief, and all these horrors had been and were and would be and even the passing of a thousand years would make life no better. And he had no desire to go home.

The gardens were called the widows’ gardens because they were tended by two widows, mother and daughter. The crackling fire gave off great heat and lit up the surrounding plowlands. The widow Vasilisa, a tall, plump old woman wearing a man’s sheepskin coat, stood nearby, staring into it pensively; her daughter Lukerya, who was short, pockmarked, and had a slightly stupid face, sat on the ground washing a pot and spoons. They must have just finished supper. Men’s voices came up from the river, local farmhands watering their horses.

“Well, winter’s back,” said the student, going up to the fire. “Hello there.”

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2. The Lenten fast that lasts for forty days calls for varying degrees of abstinence from meat, dairy, fish, olive oil, and alcohol; on Good Friday, the somber anniversary of Christ’s crucifixion, Orthodox Christians observe the strictest fast of the year and are meant to eat nothing at all.
Vasilisqa started but then saw who he was and put on a welcoming smile.

“I didn’t recognize you,” she said. “God be with you and make you rich.”

They talked. Vasilisqa had been in the world: she had worked for the gentry first as a wet nurse and later as a nanny, and she had a dainty way of speaking and a gentle, stately smile that never left her lips; her daughter Lukerya, a product of the village and her husband’s beatings, merely squinted at the student in silence with the strange look of a deaf-mute.

“Peter the Apostle[^4] warmed himself at a fire just like this on one cold night,” the student said, holding out his hands to the flames. “It was cold then too. And oh, what a terrible night it was. An exceedingly long and doleful night.”

He looked around at the darkness, gave his head a convulsive shake, and said, “You’ve been to the Twelve Apostles service;[^5] haven’t you?”

“I have,” Vasilisqa responded.

“Remember when Peter says to Jesus during the Last Supper,[^6] ‘I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death’ and the Lord says, ‘I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me’? When the supper was over, Jesus, grieving unto death, prayed in the garden, and poor Peter, weary of soul and weak, his eyes heavy, could not fight off sleep. And sleep he did. Later that night Judas kissed Jesus and betrayed him to

[^3]: Rurik: semi-legendary Viking hero of the Russian Primary Chronicle (1200), who conquered in the ninth century and whose dynasty ruled the area occupied by Kievan Rus until the sixteenth century. Ivan the Terrible: Grand Prince of Moscow 1533-84, first ruler to be crowned Tsar, feared for his power and traditionally associated with cruelty. Peter the Great: Peter I, Tsar 1682-1725, first to assume title of emperor; most famous for his efforts to modernize Russia by westernizing it.

[^4]: One of Jesus’s twelve original apostles, who plays a large role in the Gospel events.

[^5]: Twelve Apostles: Also called “Twelve Gospels” or the “Lord’s Passion”; the service conducted on the evening of Holy Thursday consisting of twelve readings drawn from all four Gospels, leading up to and including the Crucifixion. The passages Ivan cites are a combination of verses from Luke 22, John 18, and Matthew 26.

[^6]: The final meal Jesus shares with the twelve apostles just before he is taken into custody and crucified.
his torturers. He was bound and taken off to the high priest and beaten while Peter—exhausted (he’d hardly slept, after all), plagued by anguish and trepidation, sensing something dreadful was about to happen on earth—watched from afar . . . He loved him passionately, to distraction, and could now see them beating him . . .”

Lukerya laid down the spoons and trained her fixed gaze on the student.

“Having arrived at the high priest’s house,” he continued, “they began questioning Jesus, and the servants kindled a fire in the midst of the courtyard, for it was cold and they wished to warm themselves. And Peter stood at the fire with them, and he too warmed himself, as I am doing now. And a certain maid saw him and said, ‘This man was also with Jesus,’ meaning that he too should be taken for questioning. And all the servants standing by the fire must have looked at him with suspicion and severity because he grew flustered and said, ‘I know him not.’ And when shortly thereafter another recognized him as one of Jesus’ disciples, saying, ‘Thou art also of them,’ he again denied it. Then a third time someone turned to him and said, ‘Was it not thou I saw with him in the garden today?’ and he denied it a third time, whereupon the cock immediately crew, and Peter, gazing from afar at Jesus, recalled the words he had said to him at supper . . . And having recalled them, he pulled himself together, left the courtyard, and shed bitter, bitter tears. The Gospel says: ‘And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.’ I can picture it now: the garden, all still and dark, and a muffled, all but inaudible sobbing in the stillness . . .”

The student sighed and grew pensive. Still smiling, Vasilisa suddenly burst into sobs herself, and tears, large and abundant, rolled down her cheeks, and she shielded her face from the fire as if ashamed of them, and Lukerya, her eyes still fixed on the student, flushed, and the look on her face grew heavy and tense like that of a person holding back great pain.

The farmhands were returning from the river, and one of them, on horseback, was close enough so that the firelight flickered over him. The student bade the widows good-night and moved on. And again it was dark, and his hands began to freeze. A cruel wind was blowing—winter had indeed returned—and it did not seem possible that the day after next would be Easter.

The student’s thoughts turned to Vasilisa: if she wept, it meant the things that happened to Peter on that terrible night had some relevance for her . . .
He glanced back. The lone fire glimmered peacefully in the dark, and there were no longer any people near it. Again he thought that if Vasilisa wept and her daughter was flustered then clearly what he’d just told them about events taking place nineteen centuries earlier was relevant to the present—to both women and probably to this backwater village, to himself, and to everyone on earth. If the old woman wept, it was not because he was a moving storyteller but because Peter was close to her and her whole being was concerned with what was going on in Peter’s soul.

And all at once he felt a stirring of joy in his soul and even paused for a moment to catch his breath. The past, he thought, is tied to the present in an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of the other. And he felt he had just seen both ends of that chain: he had touched one end and the other had moved.

And when ferrying across the river and later climbing the hill he gazed at his native village and to the west of it, where a narrow strip of cold, crimson twilight still shone, he kept thinking of how the truth and beauty guiding human life back there in the garden and the high priest’s courtyard carried on unceasingly to this day and had in all likelihood and at all times been the essence of human life and everything on earth, and a feeling of youth, health, strength—he was only twenty-two—and an ineffably sweet anticipation of happiness, unknown and mysterious, gradually took possession of him, and life appeared wondrous, marvelous, and filled with lofty meaning.

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So what should we do now? Is the story not sufficient in its telling? The student glances back to see if meaning adheres to what his listeners outwardly felt by that fire. Let us do that, we movers-on: glance back with me to the outward-looking first paragraph, and let us creatively accompany the author as we wonder about felt meanings.

The weather was fair at first and still. I wonder why authors bother to describe the weather. Is it merely to assist our imaginations in making the story seem vividly real? Or does the weather, as banal a subject as they come, determine our recognition of things, profoundly, not merely superficially? We like it to remain fair, but we know it always changes, never quite predictably, like lines of verse that obey a form but surprise us at each step. Any attempt to describe the weather must therefore be qualified with
Chekhov’s: “at first.” The word “still” that follows “at first” and earns its momentary stop is a favorite of his. It captures the punctual motion and rest that we would feel as hearers of his musically made stories if we knew Russian. The weather, when “still,” feels poised, selfsame, and we can almost rest our hope in its authorized continuity. But this lovely stillness, because it is “at first,” feels ready to tip over, betray its promises, despoil its fair face, and move unplotted toward no home of rest. So begins the story Chekhov called his most perfect. Perfection lacks nothing, contains everything that belongs to its life and form. For a story to be perfect, should it not be the first story told, yet poised to bend, alter, and pour itself out as someone else’s?

The blackbirds were calling and a creature in the nearby swamps plaintively hooting as if blowing into an empty bottle.

There is, at first, a “calling” sound, and we recognize the source—blackbirds, but Chekhov does not tell us the meaning of their calling. Shall we tell ourselves as co-authors that they are calling each other to fulfill the wondrous and marvelous biological yearning to make life on earth reproduce itself always and everywhere? It is good to recognize a call out there and feel uplifted by strong purposes, rather than to face the silence of nothing or the cacophony of chaos. At the center of this story is the call of a particular bird at a precise time. It is not uplifting to its intended hearer, at first.

Appearing second in this sentence, without even a comma of pause (so quickly the weather changes), is a hooting sound of complaint from some unknown “creature,” implying a creator if we take the word literally. (Do you take the word “creature” literally? I shall answer that for myself, at least, at the end.) The hooting sound, issuing from nearby swamps, places of growth and decay, reminds the storyteller of the blowing one makes into an empty bottle, the origin of music and poetry, perhaps. It reminds me that the pains of creaturely life must be relieved, for even the righteous who survive the floods of annihilation take to emptying the bottle afterwards, as the Bible tells, whose story of creation begins with an almighty poetic blowing upon the original chaos and emptiness. Calls to life and complaints of death that
sound together in a chord: take them as the telltale sounding of this particular author, Chekhov. Do the birds and other creatures display the signs of a certain kind of author? I shall answer that as well, twice over, in proper time.

_A woodcock flew past, and a shot boomed out merrily in the spring air._ Another bird is recognized in the atmosphere of spring: a cock of the woods, now here—boom!—now gone. Supper is being provided with that merry shot. The hunter may now go home to fulfill family desires and rest.

_But when the woods grew dark, an inauspiciously cold, piercing wind blew in from the east, and silence fell._ The weather changes, as we knew it would, and the former blowing into bottled emptiness to make sounding motion arise from stillness, now pierces to silence the calling birds of spring. Darkness spreads its cold wings. That supper of woodcock may be the last, for some time.

_Needles of ice stretched over the puddles, and the woods became disagreeable, godforsaken, hostile. Winter was in the air._ The puddles of swamp, from which life, they say, arises, adapts to air, and returns at last to mud are now become icy needles to sting and pierce the touch. Who is responsible for the infliction of sharp pain on sensory life? He whose breath once hovered over the empty deep and spoke things into being from nothing by naming them has forsaken the woods, and the air of speech belongs to the winter wind. Whose name is pronounced from out of that disagreeable, hostile air?

The name we hear at once, at the start of the next sentence of a new paragraph, is “Ivan.” This name is common in Russian history and literature, but there is one Ivan among them all who is particularly relevant (note that word, please). 7 Ivan Karamazov faces the question of whether to stay close to home to protect his dissolute father from the threat of murder. Ivan Karamazov, after much deliberation, decides not to remain near home, and thus he is complicit in his father’s murder. By denying practical relation

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7. Chekhov often instigates comparison with his literary masters, in this case, Dostoevsky, author of _The Brothers Karamazov_ (1880).
to a person existentially connected to him, he negates the existence of that person and puts his own in question. Ivan Velikopolsky faces the same question: whether to return home to a father coughing his life away on the stove while his mother sits barefoot on the dirty floor polishing the samovar, or to leave them there, cold and stooping in the dust.  

While we are at it, let us consider the names of the two widows. Vasilisa is a common Russian name found in fairy tales for a peasant or housekeeper who by elevation of marriage becomes a princess (think Cinderella). Our Vasilisa has imitated her storied namesakes by working among the gentry, learning to speak daintily, and smiling in a stately fashion determined to live happily ever after. The thought of her, by name, makes the despairing student turn back to the fire at which she stared, the light of which inspires his spiritual elevation. But by its connection to a character whose storied smiles turn to sobs, his elevation by that light is associated in our minds with fairy tales.

Let us pause over the image of light to do a little theology, shall we? Recall that in the beginning of John’s Gospel, the light goes unrecognized by the world, though the world came to be through that light, and the dark never masters it. To those who do see the light, there is given the right to become children of God, not born of the “fleshly desire of a human father, but offspring of God himself.” This is elevation to an absolute love and happiness of the highest order. Is this elevation by means of the light, seen and recognized, a fairy tale? It ends, true enough, with “a narrow strip of cold, crimson twilight” still shining in the west, not yet mastered by darkness. But after we hear that exhilarating, final (one long sentence) paragraph, built on this twilight image: do we see and recognize any light as master illuminator of our diminishing turning pages? Calls and complaints,

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8. Ivan Karamazov, in consideration for the suffering of innocent children, frames his position to his younger brother in terms of a ticketed earth traveler: “It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.” Without a ticket to the divine harmony of things at the end of time, there is only the present, in which all things, according to Ivan, are permissible.

fullness and emptiness turn, as leaves do, into the fading colors of the persistent past. But who authors them and gives meaning to their turnings?

Our consideration of Vasilisa’s name tasks us to *pull together* our dispersed attention to fairy tales, John’s Gospel of light, a storyteller’s poeticized feelings, and the miserable facts of nature and society. Will we be elevated or broken down by our task? We have one more name to consider before testing the outcomes.

Lukerya is so named to direct our attention to the Gospel of Luke, who is said to have been a physician, like Chekhov, and more *relevant* to the poor and oppressed than the other three evangelists. Luke’s telling of Peter’s denial contains unique details seized by Chekhov for their dramatic interest. The maid who first identifies Peter does so in Luke by *staring* at his face and figure, not by his Galilean dialect. Lukerya lays down her spoons and *stares fixedly* at the student’s face, as if, like the maid, she were finding out his relation to a victim of torture, in order to ask him something. Does he know and love that victim actively, or does he merely preach? Is he pierced by the *present* look of suffering, more than by the icy wind on his skin? Lukerya does not once look into the face of her mother, who by living among the gentry distanced herself from her daughter’s cries of pain. She holds in those cries like a deaf-mute, while staring open the storytelling soul of the student for purpose of recognition. We, too, shall stare open his soul, our souls, all of them.

To undertake which, recall this tremendously helpful insight into the summoning power of storied words. Luke tells how Peter and Jesus, the one uttering his third denial while the other is being beaten by his guards, hear the cock crow (a new day!) and turn their faces to meet and remember the words at the Last Supper; so fantastical at the time of utterance, those words now become scripted history. And only then, as a character in a story,

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10. The last paragraph, a single sentence of prolonged poetic mastery, elevates painful facts in thought and feeling to a realm of beautifully expressed meanings, without the possibility, in a second sentence, of contradiction.


does Peter (in the student’s telling) “pull himself together.” Previously, he was dispersed, the input of his eyes denied by his tongue relation to the history of his ears. Lukerya, tongue-tied and stupidly staring, still waits for the crowing sound that will summon recognition of her pain and give her the strength to pull herself together as a character in a bigger story than her own, but one that she can co-author.

The word “relevant” that I asked you to note often arises in discussions of Chekhov. He was sharply criticized in his own time for not writing relevant stories—that is, for not taking a position and prescribing a cure for Russia’s social and political ailments. He claimed that his only duty as a writer was to present the truth of human life, as lived by late nineteenth-century Russians, as simply as he could, not to advocate particular reforms. He honored Tolstoy as his master in truth-speaking letters, but he had this to say of Russia’s bearded prophet of reform: “There’s more love for mankind shown in electricity and steam engines than in chastity and vegetarianism.” Chekhov puts the conflict of purpose between relevance and truth at the heart of his story. The student reaches for truth of the highest, most encompassing kind, after he leaves the widows in their pain with nothing more than a “good night.” While thinking of the meaning of the tears of Vasilisa, not of their comfort or remedy, he stares back to see the fire glimmer “peacefully in the dark,” with no people near it. That solitary fire inspires his felt discovery of the truth and beauty guiding the events of history. This was Tolstoy’s concern in 1500 pages of War and Peace. The student gets the truth of history in three and a half pages. But that is the art of Chekhov, a writer trained by empirical facts as a physician to the discipline of brevity. Can truth ever be relevant unless it accommodates our brevity of breath? Chekhov understood the answer to be obvious. He left relevance, as understood by his critics, to the secret workings on each soul of his briefly measured, immediately felt, simple words.

Perhaps you find no conflict between relevance and truth even under pressure of mortality. For students as such are always young, while they seek as lovers to meet the face of truth, like
sea kissing sky at the horizon. Let us grant this fine sentiment to
ourselves—I think Socrates would. Three questions remain. Are
the truths met by the student credible? Do they justify the suffer-
ing that their instigation augments in the widows? And is growing
wise as the cock crows worth the bitter tears of heartbreak when
love of the dear old self is found facing you with a kiss at the
horizon? Let us try out two sets of answers to these questions,
which will, in turn, settle our earlier question about nature’s au-
thor. First, in sympathy with the student, let us glance back some
more (second paragraph).

The student is on his way home from a hunt on Good Friday.
He feels that the “sudden blast of cold”—like a shot from a gun—
has “violated the order and harmony of things.” But Good Friday
is supposed to be especially mortifying, and a seminary student,
no matter how cold his hands, ought to recognize the priority of
spirit over mere elements. In the Gospels, darkness covers the
land while Jesus expires on the cross mid-day, and an earthquake
splits rocks open when he breathes his last. But our student,
Ivan, remembers not these disordered phenomena, only the dis-
cordant postures of his earthly parents: his mother sitting barefoot
on the floor and his father lying on the stove. How hard it must
be to hold Gospel truths in mind before the uncouth suffering of
one’s dearest relations. As he moves homeward, he has a vision
of history inspired by the weather and his parents’ conditions.
The same wind always blows in your face—that is a fact of na-
ture—and despite all proud conquest, unification, and modern-
ization, Russians still squander the light stupidly, polishing their
silver samovars under leaky roofs, coldly coughing, downward
grieving, always dying. There is “the same emptiness every-
where,” which is also a fact of nature, scientifically understood
not to contain meaning in its dust. “All these horrors had been
and were and would be and even the passing of a thousand years
would make life no better.” The student has acquired a Biblical
prophetic cadence, but he has no good news to deliver, “no desire
to go home” to the ones he loves and cannot help.

But what is most oppressive, we jaunty Americans might especially feel, is the tedium of all that Russian moaning and groaning. This native feeling of ours has received precise critical formulation. In addition to being called “irrelevant,” Chekhov was accused of indulging the “banalities” of useless complaint and fantasies of hope. This criticism is easiest to appreciate in his plays: while one character, stage left, let us say, is tearing her life to shreds and another, stage right, is costuming hers in silk, inevitably a household servant from out of memory limps on stage, trying not to spill a large samovar, and announces that it is time to clear the table and drink some tea. That peasant woman, with her insistence on commonplace reality, is sitting expectantly in the background of this story: the student’s mother. When her son arrives at home, full of the loftiest revelations of meaning, she will be ready to serve the tea *center stage* and talk about the weather and the proverbial world, for that is how people *really* relate. Chekhov, you understand, did not go for those Tolstoyan episodes of being thrown to the ground half dead and looking up at the infinite sky to encounter the life-altering repository of Truth, ever solicitous of our human happiness. He thought, rather, that the truth about *relevance* (another word for which is *relationship*, or in the positive sense, *love*), is often a banal truth: you meet the right person for mutual love and happiness, but at the wrong stage of development, and the discordance of years or of readiness to recognize each other’s *relevance* cannot usually be rectified by the dramatic realigning of motions and ends, as Tolstoy performs for Natasha and Pierre or Kitty and Levin.\(^\text{14}\) Nevertheless, it is not too late in a Chekhov story, as in life, to make the best of bad timing by constant improvisation and large stores of quiet laughter and watery eyes. When these fail and emptiness massages the heart, resort from dread is taken in repetitions of phrase or gesture, which like the polished samovar of tea punctuate the weary days and awful nights with something familiar, shining, and collective.

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\(^\text{14}\) The first couple are major characters in *War and Peace*, the second, in *Anna Karenina*. 
of people who seek warmth in the drink and light of life from the banal superfluities of plaintive or fantastically hopeful speech.

Now to continue in sympathy with our student: as he first approaches the fire, the presence of the women being *irrelevant* to his desire for warmth, he says “Well, winter’s back,” and he gets no response. He then adds, “Hello there,” to which Vasilisa starts, as one always jumps a little when something appears out of nothing. Then, seeing who he is, she puts on a welcoming smile, for a student is good company to a woman who has learned to talk above her station, and she says, “I didn’t recognize you. God be with you, and make you rich.” Otherwise, what comes into being out of nothing may quickly return to nothing. Her proverbial words have an ultimate relevance, which Luke and John, in their gospels, emphasize. They report, as instances of Peter’s denial, these words, “I am not,” which are the precise negation of Jesus’ *thrice* repeated answer to the cohort who come to arrest him in the garden, “I am he,” at which they fall to the ground, from whose dust man first came into being.\(^\text{15}\) The student, like Peter, puts his existence as a creature to question by approaching the fire for bodily warmth while his soul at first goes unrecognized, as if empty of riches, that is, of love. For take note of this: Peter’s love for Jesus, which our translator describes with three words, “passionately, to distraction,” is in Russian two words, *bez pamjati*, meaning literally, “without memory,” as if it were uncaused, always there. To deny such a love, to empty it out at the moment of trial, is to subject something timeless to historical criteria, according to which things without cause and memory go unwritten.

The student, recognized in memory, finds his existence as a creature fortified when the widow invokes love without memory in the proverb: “God be with you and make you rich.” She gives evidence of the existential potency of these words by appearing, like Peter in the courtyard, distracted by something always there. She is wearing a man’s heavy coat, presumably her dead husband’s, and standing clean of dirt she stares into the fire pen-

sively. Chekhov does not say if she is distracted by her husband, for what doctor knows where dead people go to occupy themselves, or what living people are thinking when they look occupied? No living men are present, though at any moment the farmhands may appear from the river and change everything. The daughter sits on the cold ground, ugly, stupid-looking, and washes a pot and spoons. Who can tell what she is thinking? Maybe we should consult the historical record of people who have felt the same cold and terror of the dark. That is the student’s approach to the mystery of three souls, who from out of all time and space have become opaquely present to each other in bodies lit by a fire in a garden on a particularly “doleful” night.

Peter, as we are told by Matthew and the student, follows Jesus into the High Priest’s courtyard to watch from afar and see the end of it all.\textsuperscript{16} Remember the empty bottle of the second sentence, which the student feels everywhere on his way home as the condition of life. That emptiness, harboring potentials of sound to creators, Peter will feel inside Jesus’ tomb. The end of it all, which he would like to watch from afar, on the outside of events, he must experience up close, from the inside. Our student also sees afar in the past Peter’s bitter tears, but touches inside the present the widows’ emotions.\textsuperscript{17} These two-sided aspects of the “end of it all”—seen and touched, past and present, outside and inside—are thematic in much of what follows.

In all four Gospels, it is a serving maid who first questions Peter in the High Priest’s courtyard. The student adds dramatic body to this verbal moment: the maid’s assertion of his identity, “This man was also with Jesus,” lingers a few beats unanswered, causing the other servants, \textit{men included} (in John’s account, the arresting police loom conspicuously),\textsuperscript{18} to look at Peter “with suspicion and severity.” Their hard looks “fluster” him into saying,

\textsuperscript{16} Matthew 26: 58.
\textsuperscript{17} The student is a Thomas who does not come up short on our modern demand to test the veracity of past appearances by probing their present wounds.
\textsuperscript{18} John 18: 18.
“I know him not.” The flusterling indicates that he begins not to recognize himself inside as the recipient of those outside looks. Who knows what Peter might have answered if only women were present, without men to raise fears of what men do to each other and to women? 19 If Peter had answered the maid honestly, thence to be hauled away by those severe men, we would recognize him today as another self-made hero of friendship (like those in Homer and Virgil), rather than a runner to the empty tomb who enters it alone and learns to fill it with the sounds of life.

That is something new, born of three denials, which we students practice all the time in three forms, for three worthy purposes of our own.20

I deny that a story is all about me for the purposes of sanity and objectivity. I deny that I am free of past teachings and newly elevated by present ones for the purposes of continuity and commonality. And I deny that it is art that moves me to imitate proud combative heroes for the purpose of giving greater influence to humble truth.

In practicing these three denials, I follow Peter, who points every good student the way. First, he denies that Jesus’s ques-

19. Recall that it is the boasting of Peter in a group of men, each feeling superior to verbal challenges as they compete for honor in the presence of their beloved Jesus, which brings forth the prediction of his three denials and the crowing of the cock. The future is caused by a present when both are understood as parts of one plot, whose characters serve action, not speech—so cheaply uttered much of the time.
20. It was Chekhov’s story that made me attend to the richness in the four Gospel accounts of Peter’s denials. His words of denial are not identical, and neither are the questions they answer. They are three distinct replies to three different inquiries. Moreover, to fully understand their meanings, we must remain aware of all seven layers of the story: the Hebrew scriptures; the historical events and personages; the four Gospel accounts of those events as fulfilling the scriptures; the student’s retelling of Peter’s denials to the widows; Vasilisa’s attention to this same story during the Twelve Apostles service the previous night; Chekhov’s story of the student’s telling; and finally my telling to you, this Friday evening, November 3, 2017, Chekhov’s story.
tioning has everything to do with him personally. This gets him admitted by the maid to the courtyard of objective seeing and discussion, with love kept safely impersonal. Second, he denies that he is another, “of them,” loosed from the past and a newly authored beginning, rather than a conforming Jew. This keeps him close to the fire of the ancient teachings. And third, he denies that he is the *memorable* one from the garden, moved by a heroic image appropriated from epic stories of martial friendship to draw his sword and lop off the enemy’s ear. This denial keeps him free from the suspicion that he comes, not in peace and civility, but wielding a sword.21 Without the practice of these three denials, especially the third, there is no learning as we students practice it here.

But then the cock crows, and Peter undergoes three distinct responses, which successively undo the three denials. First, as told by the student, he gazes at Jesus from afar, same scene as before, but the questioning is entirely about him now. Second, their faces meet and he *recalls* in the words said at supper that he is one of *them* in character, people who associate and speak differently, elevated but answerable to authority. And third, he pulls himself together, leaves the courtyard, and weeps bitterly for his beautiful, heroic image, emptied out for ease of breath and freedom from pain. This third undoing, the most important, lets the truth about Simon, the humble fisherman prone to sinking and weeping, become the new fairness and stillness of human nature. We students, like Peter, undergo these same three motions when we hear the cock crow and feel *undone* in our previously objective, conformist, and anti-theatrical reading of stories.

What happens next? *The Student sighed and grew pensive.* That sigh forces a little pause in the flow of events, where freedom is to be found. In that free pause, Vasilisa bursts into sobs and hides her face, while Lukerya, still fixed on the student,

21. Matthew 10:34. Peter strikes at the ear (John 18:10) so that we might recognize the meaning of this third denial: by it he escapes having to suffer the priesthood’s violence, born like his from pride in its own severe agency, awarded precedence over the ear’s hearing of the Word.
grows heavy and tense, “like a person holding back great pain.” This would seem like a good time for the student to perform a kind outward act, or, since he is pensive, to ask the obvious question: “What is going on inside your soul?” But instead, at the approach of the male “farmhands,” the opportunity to “move on” he quickly takes. Since we are in sympathy with him, we shall say that he bravely risks his spirit to solitary thought in the cold and dark.

The reflection of light off the farmhands makes the outer world of men’s affairs touch the inner one being stared opened by women. It is like the crowing of the cock that instigates Peter’s going out to stir the stillness of the world with tears, detesting what he knows about his inside in relation to outside questions and cruelties. The student knows that he has made an old woman cry and her daughter much upset. He goes out from them into a world whose facts deny the coming of Easter. But he makes Easter happen in himself. How does he perform this transformation?

He performs it in three stages of physical and mental action. First Stage: his thoughts turn to Vasilisa; her “abundant” weeping and its shame he interprets from afar this way: “if she wept, it meant…[Peter’s] relevance for her”; but this conclusion, without external support, is forced by his inner hunger; so he dares to glance back for evidence, and for that glance we must praise him; he sees the fire glimmering peacefully in the dark, absent of people; again he thinks of Vasilisa—and also of her daughter—and again he thinks, more confidently now, that those events narrated from long ago must “clearly” have relevance to both women and “probably” to “everyone on earth;” and this is so not because of the universal art of storytelling that he has mastered—he is a modest student in that regard—but owing to the “whole being” of the old woman taken by concern for Peter’s soul, as if he were her present child;22 for souls feel intimate with each other across time and space by means of repeated words and common gestures issuing from similar bodies. Second Stage: the soul of the student stirs with joy, as the stillness of the freezing hour flows towards

22. Mark 12: 30-33.
ends he sees and touches; he pauses to catch his breath, as the former sigh of his spirit’s slow death is reversed in a quickening of life; history he now thinks of as an unbroken chain of events that conducts motions from end to end, not as a circle does, always repeating the same misery, but as a satisfying linear progression from beginning to ending, like a story told by a master—but what kind of story? **Third Stage:** he crosses the river—we hear nothing of the painful ice needles now; he climbs the hill—nothing is felt of the biting wind now; he gazes upon the village of his birth—no glimpse of the beatings and cringing of life; he sees the last bit of crimson sunset, and again the light encourages him with supreme confidence to find what he has been seeking—the truth and beauty guiding human life in gardens and courtyards past and present; “in all likelihood and at all times” they form “the essence of human life and everything on earth”; and finally, life appears to him “wondrous, marvelous, and filled with lofty meaning.”

The first sentence of the first stage is the key to all the rest: “The student’s thoughts turned to Vasilisa: if she wept, it meant the things that happened to Peter on that terrible night had some relevance for her . . .” This sentence ends in the Russian with the word, *otnoshenie*, translated by Michael Heim as “relevance.” (Literally, it means “relation” or “relationship.”) This word is followed by an ellipsis that makes it linger critically in our thoughts. The new paragraph answers at once to criticism: “He glanced back.” The concern for relevance turns the head of the student to see the light of the fire, which he first approaches in order to warm his hands, but at which he stays to tell a well-known story to two differently staring widows. It is not the warmth, but the light of the storyteller’s truth—the fire that gives inspired voice to the face—that the student and Chekhov insist on delivering. The widows go home deeply moved by that voice and face. The student, as we just witnessed, moves on to three revelations: universal relevance and intimacy of souls; the pulsing chain of interconnected events; and their guidance by truth and beauty,

23. 1 Peter 3: 18.
always and everywhere. We can take these three stages and revelations as demonstrative of how the mysterious words that begin John’s gospel actually operate in human beings: all that comes to be is sensitive to the Word, and the relevance of the Word to all the living is as light, which shines in the dark, and is never mastered by the dark.\(^4\) Of course, as a reminder, our present glances at the story are precisely those that sympathizers with a seminary student would be expected to take.

But there is another story to tell about our relation to this story. Just as Matthew reminds us in his Gospel that another story is told among the Jews about the empty tomb of Jesus—that the body was stolen, not raised—so there are another set of answers, in the negative, to the three questions we asked earlier.\(^5\) Are the student’s truths credible? Are the sufferings of the widows justified? And is the love at the horizon ever other than of self? Matthew discredits the thieving story as a Jewish conspiracy. Chekhov lets us relate to his story unhindered by his authorial elbows. Here follows the negative relation to Chekhov’s story, no less probable to thought and feeling, I think, than the positive one we just experienced.

Let us begin by repeating two impressive words from the first stage of the student’s transformation: “whole being.”\(^6\) Now recall the two great commandments taught by Jesus in keeping with scripture: to love the Lord your God, who is the one and only God, with your whole being—all your heart, all soul, all mind, and all strength; and, \textit{like the first}, to love your neighbor as yourself.\(^7\) The student fails to obey the second command to turn self-love outward, to make it relevant, and this failure to be relevant undermines his adherence to the first command to identify entirely with the truth of the \textit{ever present living} God—living, therefore, in the widows, presently. Let me now give standing to these claims.

\(^4\) John 1: 3-5.
\(^5\) Matthew 28: 11-15.
\(^6\) “Peter was close to her and her whole being was concerned with what was going on in Peter’s soul.”
\(^7\) Mark 12: 30-31; Matthew 22:39.
In the garden, Jesus asks his three closest friends, Peter included, to stay awake with him. That is not a lot to ask, but the love of self, rooted in bodily needs, overmasters their willing spirits. The student is a sleeper of a much deeper kind, a waking dreamer who loves life in the abstract, far from miserable people, malleable to the hungers of his thought. Consider the characters again. Lukerya is the innocent victim of her husband’s beatings. She fixes her gaze upon the student, holding in the great pain that his picturing power aggravates; but he walks away suddenly, without a word of recognition, just as her husband inexplicably died one day, leaving her unrecoverable, with “the strange look of a deaf-mute.” Vasilisa, bettered by conformity to high society, denies present relation to her dirty daughter by hiding her face in shame not of her tears, as the student conveniently thinks, but of her whole being, whose career has entailed denial of child for the sake of worldly gains. Ivan treats both women not as neighbors to be loved by command as a suffering of unlovely particulars, but as characters to be drawn into making his dreary return home part of a story that he wants to end triumphantly, without any upsetting questions. He catches his breath from their sobs and flusters.

This alternative understanding of character accords with the following re-interpretation of the three denials. The student first denies that he and the widows are concerned wholly with what is going on in their own souls, not with the goings-on in Peter’s soul. The wholeness of their beings they do not give away to anyone. Second, the student denies that history is open-ended, plotless, free to become better, worse, or incomparably different from the past, not auto-progressively chained to it. Third, the student denies that life is guided by ego and chance much of the time, not by truth and beauty. (You might want to roll up your sleeves—we’re going to push hard now.) What truth makes Vasilisa smile all the time? It is the ego of a social climber. What truth

28. Ironically, his retelling of Peter’s story contains his own creative additions, in which he ought to recognize his freedom to occupy a better or worse state of mind.
makes her shield her face as she sobs by the fire? The shame of happiness found out as pretense. What truth makes her sob so abundantly? The fact that ego and its pretensions require ongoing sacrifice of the one you love. Lukerya is guided by what solicitude? The chance that the husband who beats her may die sooner rather than later. What beauty is there in a face that squints to see things in the dark, is stupidly silent for fear of another beating, and becomes fixed in a stare, heavy and tense, when the pain calls her back unrelieved? Ivan Karamazov would applaud her insistence on the right of suffering innocence to hold back from brokered Easter reconciliations. Here, then, is the truth, if you really want it relevant to modernity: try to better yourself by abandoning the dear ones who would otherwise keep you stuck in their dull care, or by hoping for the early death of a painful relation, until fortune can be mastered to achieve those ends. And if you glance back, consider not the human wreckage, only the golden, solitary fire. New days call for new gods and horizons of riches. All this ugliness the student denies, though it is plain and ordinary to see (and points the way to necessary social reforms), because at the age of twenty-two he cannot help standing closer to birth than death. Still healthy, strong, able to give his head “a convulsive shake” to throw off the encompassing dark, ferry the cold river, and climb with ample breath the hill to see the last rays of light shine upon his place of nativity, of course he feels, in the days of egotistical youth, that everything on earth is guided by similar motions of self-fulfilling vitality.

The student gets his Easter going by freely misconstruing what is terrible and ugly in the souls of the widows, and moving on from them. Their Easter is still hostage to shame and anger in the day of desolation. Perhaps we cannot do better than to practice, like him, the denials that get us, in despite of others, the way home from emptiness. But should we not try to hear the cock crow after every twilight seminar song, like a gunshot?

Apropos of that question, I have to tell you something about Chekhov’s acoustic tastes. He liked gunshots a lot. A year after he wrote “The Student,” he was finishing his first major successful play, The Seagull. It contains a mother—an actress who lives
entirely for herself in art—and it ends with her son’s suicide by gunshot. Chekhov’s subtitle: *A Comedy in Four Acts*. Its opening in St. Petersburg was a fiasco, and Chekhov was dismayed by an art that gave its form over to the freedom of actors and audience to misconstrue by their unlovely particular contributions. But when *The Seagull* was staged a few years later by Stanislavsky and the new Moscow Art Theatre it was a triumph, and Chekhov’s name was on the way to becoming an adjective of reality—“Chekhovian.” The Moscow players knew how to let the cock crow in the silent beats of the comedy, and so the minor keys in its music were heard, and its mutually incomprehensible characters, whose talking substitutes for plot, were *pulled together* by an audience properly concerned with the complicated simplicities of their own knotted relations of love. Anyway, that is what I meant a moment ago: we have to hear the cock crow if we want to triumph in our egotistical comedies of living and dying.

I am almost done talking, not improperly I hope. Jesus, you know, was executed for talking very improperly: “blasphemy,” his crime was called, which is the opposite of empty, unplotted talk. To blaspheme, as you students know from the Greek, is to *injure* the relations among men, women, and God by *speech*. Peter denies knowing the accused blasphemer because he is rightly afraid of the power of speech to make hate happen. In fact, his second and third denials (in two of the gospels) become vehement; he even curses his questioners for not believing him, though cursing is itself a kind of blasphemy. 29 Here, in miniature, we witness the degeneration of speech from having lethal power over the devotional lives of people, to self-contradiction, incredulity, bitterness of failure, and over time to empty talk and shallow feelings that make nothing happen and no one takes seriously. The student follows Luke and John by leaving *out* from his story the anger and cursing of Peter, and he follows Matthew and Mark by leaving *in* the weeping. We may suspect that he lacks the instinct for righteous anger, while possessing the pity

29. Matthew 26: 72-74; Mark 14: 71.
of a young heart. Chekhov, too, lacks anger, his critics would say, while he waters the eyes too much. He does not know the blasphemer, they would say, for he is a connoisseur of empty talk who honestly shows us the vanity of literary pretensions. That is why he points out at the end of this most perfect of his stories that the storyteller is only twenty-two: all his transformational thinking and feeling are but the workings of his youthful metabolism, which throws off the impertinent assaults of winter when it is that time in the calendar—no more significant than a change in the weather.

But wait a minute. If Chekhov has the honesty to admit that the weather and chemistry are the powers that either kill or resurrect the sick soul, then is his admission not justly called by us “blasphemy”? Try the question out this way: Chekhov, a doctor who writes about ailing people denies relation to higher sources of meaning in the names of applied biology and meteorology. This injures the respect owed to his literary art—to speech itself—by making storytelling a pre-scientific substitute for drug-taking and social revolution. The making of love then loses its articulate way and people become incomprehensible bodies one to another. That denial of relation to higher meanings, with those consequences, should sound like blasphemy to the priesthood of letters and its seminar students, I think.

But wait one last minute, please. Remember that Chekhov showed signs of tuberculosis in his twenties, but denied for years the implications. He wrote “The Student” at the age of thirty-four, while coughing up blood. During the ten years of worsening health that remained, he devoted much precious time to playwriting, and he married an actress, Olga Knipper, whom he made love to mostly from afar in the form of wonderfully articulate letters. He stopped practicing medicine. I think, in the end, he was trying to pull together in new dramatic forms the movements of bodies much given to dispersive talk by denials of love and death. Have we not seen how his student, Ivan, needs the expressive bodies of the widows for him to call Biblical characters into presence to speak, as in a theater, into the outer darkness of the world, to test the light of words? Remember also that the outer
plot revealed by Jesus requires only that Peter deny him three times before the cock crows. The anger or weeping is Peter’s free contribution, or rather, a creative act by the particular storyteller. And that act makes all the difference to the soul. Our student does not get angry, does not weep, as Lukerya and Vasilisa do; yet all three respond freely in body and soul to the same story. There are many ways to deny that the cold and dark are curable; yet the student still seeks, by the last glimmers of light, the way home to the unlikely love that gave him improbable birth. When he arrives, a young man still, but older than he was, he will drink tea with his parents, his mother soon also to become a widow, and I like to imagine that he will continue his story, taking note of the weather and its changes, which he is learning to read.

And what about the widows? I myself would learn from Lukerya’s fixed face to beware the anger born of suffering that feels betrayed and trapped by the egotism of love, for what is more prone to hate than misery of heart that hears itself as the only story being told? And from Vasilisa’s career I would beware of guilt that relieves its burden in self-pity, hidden from the fire and faces of the injured, turned to the stately world of swelling speeches and fairy-tale smiles. And finally, speaking as I began, let us students remember our creators in the days of our youth, before the songbirds fall silent and the guardians of the house stoop to dust.30

Thank you for listening to Chekhov’s story of the student, and my attempt to show how much, and little, there is to tell.

Tetrastichs
Elliott Zuckerman

Preludes have long since ceased
to promise Fugues. What’s here—
each time after a silence—is yet another
interruption of uncertainty.

Meanings will spread, as when a loaded brush
touches some cotton-wool too wet
to limit bleeding. Etymons
will crawl along the fibers.

I think you will particularly like
Siberia. Let us all know
about the customs and the cold.
Think of us on holidays.

Do not say that Sometimes
it is only a cigar.
The point is not
to denigrate cigars.

The plaster hand, the portrait of Busoni,
all music put aside to try again
to stop the wrist from getting stiff:
What was this a lesson in?

Elliott Zuckerman is a tutor emeritus at St. John’s College in Annapo-
lis, Maryland. These forty tetrastichs have been selected from a col-
lection of 120. Each quatrain is meant to be a separate poem.
A love potion? There is no need for one. Just dramatize a double suicide and leave the poison out. It can be done with lemonade.

There was a different tenor in each act. She sang her song of rapt transfiguration and in her tones of ecstasy made clear that she was ready to take on three more.

In the closing pages of your lecture, you can take your leap. They’ll say you haven’t proved you got there step by step. There were no steps—the lecture started there.

Let’s celebrate the woman who was tired of trees. No longer to be reasoned with, no longer listening, it’s one way to be old.

Your face is next to mine, and even lingers— the warm surprise of graceful lankiness, my prince factotum.

After a thousand and three in Spain alone, what clearer signs of drawing to an end than throwing parties for the peasantry and asking almost anyone to dinner?
The trees themselves
sensing how much space they need
plotted their equidistance
like dancers with extended arms.

I’d like the actor who agrees
that he must get inside the role he plays
to tell me what he tries to feel when he
portrays hypocrisy.

Hers were not hymn-tunes,
square in meter and in rhyme.
Her dashes represent
unmeasured time.

I’m happy that the Shropshire Lad
has his own pad.
I used to think that he
lived here with me.

I cannot hear the pipe unless
the shepherd blows it.
How can I tell the music
from the music?

At the doorpost of the tenement
I studied densities of old enamel:
pastel maps,
an opaque residue of smell.
After the concert, she told the other ladies
the pianist had a memorable *rubato*.
The ladies took it that the two of them
had spent the night together.

There is an elf
who charms me at the root of being.
Yet elfhood serves
no evolutionary purpose.

One must be
an artist
not to find
a food one likes.

Can one do in words a vast expanse
of every possible hue and shade of green
with somewhere a small patch of cadmium red?
Has it just been done?

The seven types of ambiguity
are not so clearly differentiated
as the seven
deadly sins.

The man who asks us
to excuse his pun
fears that we
may overlook his wit.
When rhetoric already lies
we cannot tell
whether what lies beneath the cant
is lying.

Imagine a garden without any toads
but the birds are real
and named by their song: two cuckoos, a quail,
and a nightingale.

It was hard to accept him as half of a pair
and the girl couldn’t hide her victorious air;
I tried not to stare at the hand on the knee
and acted a plausible copy of me.

I slice and sculpt and sand what happened till
an anecdote redecorates my past.
Such labor is the compliment
that humor pays to truth.

Someone says that wit began
with not the word but laughter alone.
It follows perhaps that early man
wept before the cause was known.

What if everything that came to mind
arrived with (so to say) a grade from God?
Little would change, for half the world would wonder
whether God was good at giving grades.
Elders who are troubled all their lives
by doubts that they’ve gone deep enough,
may want to test the thickness now
that so much surface has worn off.

Have I condemned nostalgia? It is the source
Of aching loveliness, maligned because
we had to wait for it, and at its dawn
it gave scant notice that it might return.

Nausicaa washing at the water
was grace itself.
But follow the line of her white arm
to reach the hand of merely human gesture.

The irises were cream and indigo,
a lazy bird prepared herself for flying—
and in the middle distance: Lo
and behold! the silver gateway of implying.

At ninety she retained the girlish charm
they taught her and she took to at sixteen—
a habit long impervious to reform,
no longer fired by flesh but baked in bone.

This castle runs on wheels, with makeshift brakes.
It inches on, headed askew. It leaks,
sudden, burning. The royalty worship the days—
Good morning, Good afternoon—and clutch their keys.
I used to say that song need not be sounded.
Now pitches are distorted in the treble.
No doubt the tones I hear have been confounded
by some didactic Muse, to cause me trouble.

Americans with European souls
need not restrict their comedy to manners.
The question of what continent we’re born on
takes second place to why we’re born at all.

Faces are plaster masks, egg-white, cream, and gray.
Silenus, spent, will hobble down the hall.
Three actions are complete: the quest, the crux, the fall.
Old age is not a coda, but a satyr-play.

When once again you tell that anecdote,
acquire a gurgle as you near the end.
They’ll think that you’ve just found renewed delight
in the climactic phrase already planned.

A musical trick was employed by the muscular Icarus
when inventing the famous lament about flying too high.
His appoggiaturas brought tears to a cynical eye
while his anapests lent the lament their precipitancy.