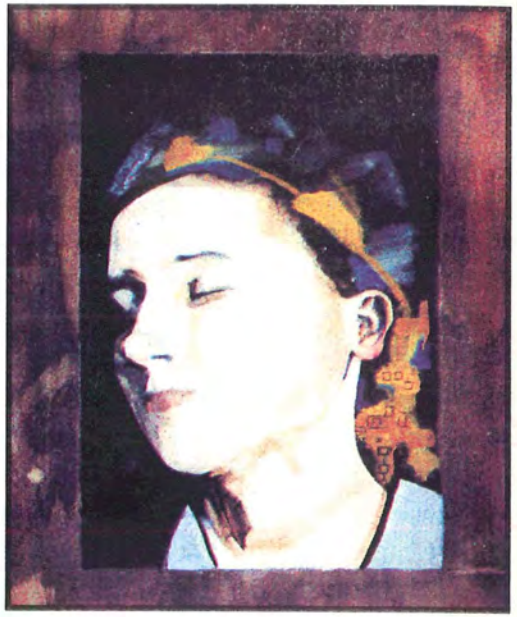

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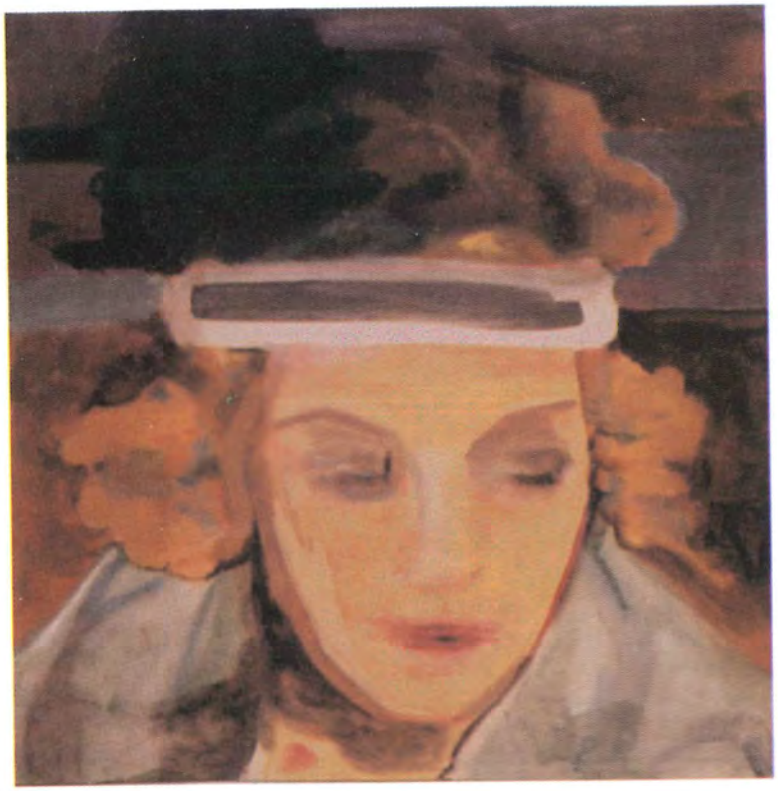

2003

# ENERGEIA

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# The Machine: Pascal's Path to Salvation

**Michelle Paine**

> 'Order.' A letter of exhortation to a friend, to induce him to seek. He will reply: 'But what good will seeking do me? Nothing comes of it.' Answer: 'Do not despair.' Then he in turn would say that he would be happy to find some light, but according to religion itself it would do him no good even if he did thus believe, and so he would just as soon not look.
> Answer: The Machine.
>
> —Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, no. 5[1]

> 'Order.' After the letter urging men to seek God, write the letter about removing obstacles, that is the argument about the Machine, how to prepare it and how to use reason for the search.
>
> —Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, no. 11

"Answer: the Machine." A tiny phrase which, if understood, offers a solution to one of the most distressing questions in theology: how can man, with all of his conflicting urges, approach and reliably achieve a state of faith? The above quotes are the only two instances in the *Pensees* in which Pascal specifically refers to this mysterious Machine. The reader is then obliged to determine from the rest of the work what sort of answer Pascal is providing. This pursuit is pivotal, since a thorough understanding of Pascal's Christianity

[1] this and all subsequent numberings are according to the Lafuma edition.

hinges on an understanding of this concept.

It is important to consider first the audience for whom Pascal is writing the *Pensees*, and his purpose for doing so. The *pensees* themselves are merely the notes for an extensive, unfinished "Defense of Christianity."[2] The book is not meant to enlighten simple believers as to the nature of their faith, nor is it a mere presentation of Pascal's own beliefs. It is entirely evangelical in nature, an uncompromising and polemic answer to those who would attack both the need for faith itself and Christianity as a fulfillment of that need. Pascal's intention is to convert, first by convincing his audience that man has an inescapable need for God, and then by proving that Christianity is the only religion in which that need can be fully met. He has chosen for his intentions the most difficult of targets—those who imagine that they have reasoned their way out of a need for salvation.

The dependency of his audience on reason requires Pascal to use that very faculty in his attempt at conversion. This puts him into a complex situation, wherein he must use reason's own methods to persuade it that it must abandon itself. The fruit of his endeavor is a view of human nature, faith and Christianity that is complicated, subtle, and entirely unique.

In order even to begin his attempt, Pascal must first convince his audience to participate in the endeavor; in other words, he must "induce [them] to seek."[3] He does this by describing the ridiculous circumstances of their current condition.

> 'Diversion.' From childhood on men are made responsible for the care of their honour, their property, their friends, and even of the property and honour of their friends; they are burdened with duties, language-training and exercises, and given to understand that they can never be happy unless their health, their honour, their fortune

[2] Krailsheimer, A.J. 'Introduction,' Pascal's Pensees. London: Penguin Books, 1995.
[3] No. 5





> and those of their friends are in good shape, and that it needs only one thing to go wrong to make them unhappy. So they are given responsibilities and duties which harass them from the first moment of each day. You would only have to take away all their cares, and then they would see themselves and think about what they are, where they come from and where they are going. That is why men cannot be too much occupied or distracted, and that is why, when they have been given so many things to do, if they have some time off they are advised to spend it on diversion and sport, and always to keep themselves fully occupied.
>
> How hollow and foul is the heart of man![4]

In this tactic Pascal is relying on the universality of the human experience. Very few men could deny that they spend their days in such a state; a cursory look at the society around them would confirm the description. Moreover, they could not deny the unease and anxiety which Pascal claims appears when diversion is taken away: "...for nothing could be more wretched than to be intolerably depressed as soon as one is reduced to introspection with no means of diversion."[5]

Though he has forced his audience to admit to this state of restlessness by virtue of their very humanity, Pascal has not yet engendered in them a need to seek salvation *per se*. The vague unease that accompanies lack of diversion is at this point only an amorphous anxiety, an undefined suspicion of a more deeply rooted despair. In order to bring his reader to God, Pascal must force him to explore in detail the foundations of this unnamed dread.

To accomplish this, Pascal compels his now-depressed reader to face another situation completely undeniable to reason: man's proportion, or rather disproportion, to the universe around him.

> For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an

[4] No. 139
[5] No. 36

> understanding of the two extremes; the end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy.[6]

In this *Pensee*, Pascal not only exposes man's insignificance as a finite being against the infinite stretch of the universe; he also reveals the utter inability of man's prize possession, reason, to even address the interminable reaches surrounding him. Thus begins his subtle manipulation of this uniquely human faculty. He appeals to the reader's reason here specifically to show how it is undermined by the very circumstances of its existence:

> Let us then realize our limitations. We are something and we are not everything. Such being as we have conceals from us the knowledge of first principles, which arise from nothingness, and the smallness of our being hides infinity from our sight...
>
> Such is our true state. That is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance. We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state and yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depths of the abyss.[7]

It seems at this point that Pascal has reduced man to a rather dismal condition. The reader must now admit that he is truly a wretched and dejected creature: he spends the majority of his life frantically pursuing petty diversion; when he does force himself to sit still, he is assaulted by persistent ennui and anxiety; and when he finally turns his thoughts to the cause of his condition, he finds that he all but disappears in the scope

[6] No. 199
[7] No. 199





of the universe and that his precious power of comprehension has very little to which it can apply itself and nearly nothing on which it can build.

Pascal cannot leave his audience in this state, however. He has proven only that man is wretched and useless; it remains to be shown that he is at all worthy of the salvation that Pascal urges him to pursue. The way in which Pascal elicits this worth from the depths of man's dejection is one of the most delicate and beautiful processes in the argument.

> Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this.
>
> Thus all our dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time, which we could never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality.[8]

The *pensee* itself is deceptively simple...it masks a breathtakingly subtle and complex move. In little more than one hundred words, Pascal has taken the tortuous ordeal to which he has just subjected his reader—from the first suspicions of foolishness to the terrifying humiliation in the face of infinity—and turned the *entire process* into the redeeming glory of man. Even more astoundingly, the very faculty that he had deemed nearly worthless in the previous *pensee* is suddenly the sole instrument of this redemption.

Pascal is not, however, speaking of a *complete* redemption here. Even though man is more "noble" than the universe when he realizes its advantage over him, the advantage nonetheless exists. And although our dignity lies in knowing our terrifying situation, the concept is no less, and perhaps is much more, distressing as a consequence.

[8] No. 200

The admission of his dual nature does not bring about harmony and balance in man; in fact, it throws his soul into a more acute state of conflict and confusion than ever. The fact that the knowledge of his condition creates in him such misery raises in him the suspicion that he is not altogether meant for this state. Pascal compares it to the misery of a deposed king, for "who indeed would think himself unhappy not to be king except one dispossessed?"[9] It is not just a state of wretchedness, it is a state of humiliation, and the only redeeming faculty which he possesses cannot heal him; it can only reveal the wound. He must seek his salvation elsewhere, yet the only tool at his disposal is that vital but seemingly useless faculty...reason.

Since reason, besides being the seat of man's dignity, is also his only path toward salvation, it is imperative to understand exactly what Pascal means when he refers to it. The nature of knowledge and the ways in which man achieves it are rather complicated areas for Pascal. He first must acknowledge the fact that the thinking capacity manifests itself in different, almost contradictory, ways.

> 'Difference between the mathematical and the intuitive mind.' In the one principles are obvious, but remote from ordinary usage, so that from want of practice we have difficulty turning our heads that way; but once we do turn our heads the principles can be fully seen; and it would take a thoroughly unsound mind to draw false conclusions from principles so patent that they can hardly be missed.
>
> But, with the intuitive mind, the principles are in ordinary usage and there for all to see. There is no need to turn our heads, or strain ourselves: it is a question of good sight, but it must be good; for the principles are so intricate and numerous that it is impossible not to miss some. Now the omission of one principle can lead to error, and so one needs very clear sight because to see all the principles as well as an accurate mind to avoid drawing false conclusions from known principles.[10]

[9] No. 117
[10] No. 512





Pascal has, in fact, appealed to both minds in his argument thus far. In proving man's disproportion to the universe, he relies on an entirely mathematical process. The principle of man's finitude in an infinite universe is obvious; all that is needed is a turning of one's mind towards this solid but unfamiliar principle, and the realization of man's weakness necessarily follows. The understanding of man's greatness embodied in this weakness, however, relies on the intuitive mind. There is nothing mathematically obvious in the idea of weakness containing greatness, or vice versa. Yet the principle is somehow recognizable to us...no mental stretching or logical wrangling is needed to comprehend it. It does, however, require a very delicate intellectual balancing act: if one focuses too much on either the weakness or the greatness involved, the principle slips from view.

Both of the methods of knowledge set forth by Pascal so far are dependent on another, more basic form of comprehension. Though mathematical and intuitive minds rely on different sets of principles, each must have those principles at the start; the principles cannot be acquired by the same method for which they are the basis. Pascal attributes this mysterious but fundamental knowledge of principles to a human faculty that is equally fundamental and mysterious:

> We know truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them... For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, are as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its arguments... Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty though by different means. It is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.[11]

[11] No. 110

Though the heart and reason both provide certainty, Pascal by far prefers the knowledge given by the heart. Reason, while it is accurate insofar as it is applied to a proper subject and used with consistency, is constantly distracted by the senses or sabotaged by the imagination. And, as he has shown, its scope is severely limited. Our inescapable dependence on it frustrates him: "Would to God...that we never needed it and knew everything by instinct and feeling! But nature has refused us this blessing, and has instead given us only very little knowledge of this kind; all other knowledge can be acquired only by reasoning." The heart, on the other hand, can never err in its certainty nor is anything, as Pascal will soon show, beyond its scope.

Pascal has used reason in every step of his argument so far. He has used it mathematically to prove its own limits, and thus our own weakness. He has used it intuitively to show the worth of that same knowledge, and thus our own greatness. He has used it to show the need for a reconciliation of this contradiction. But ahead of him lies the hardest task of all: having revealed the necessity of salvation and having urged man to seek God, Pascal must convince reason, that seat of all of our dignity and worth, to disqualify itself from this highest and most vital pursuit.

His radical approach to this problem and his innovative, if controversial, solution are contained in the crown-jewel of the *Pensees*—No. 418, "The Wager."

> ...Let us now speak according to our natural lights.
>
> If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is. That being so, who would dare to attempt an answer to the question? Certainly not we, who bear no relation to him.
>
> Who then will condemn Christians for being unable to give rational grounds for their belief, professing as they do a religion for which they cannot give rational grounds? They declare that it is a folly, "stultitiam," in expounding it





> to the world, and then you complain that they do not prove it. If they did prove it they would not be keeping their word. It is by being without proof that they show that they are not without sense. 'Yes, but although that excuses those who offer their religion as such, and absolves them from the criticism of producing it without rational grounds, it does not absolve those who accept it.' Let us then examine this point, and let us say: 'Either God is or he is not." But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you chose either, reason cannot prove either wrong...

Pascal has started his wager argument by essentially leveling the playing field. He has neutralized his audience's potential protests against religion by pointing out that, while faith in God may not be a more reasonable choice than other options, it is certainly not a *less* reasonable one. In fact, reason could not possibly direct the choice towards one direction or the other.

Pascal knows, however, that he cannot abandon reason entirely and still achieve his aim. He has already asserted that there are only two ways in which a man can decide something with any certainty: the answer can be revealed through the unquestionable principles of the heart, or it can be reached through the careful application of reason. While the heart is the more desirable of the two options, it cannot choose its topics; if it does not determine a question naturally, it can only be made to do so by supernatural force. "That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate...but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart."[12]

Pascal seems to be stuck at this point. His entire purpose in writing the *Pensees* has been to convince the unbeliever to

[12] No. 110

turn to faith. His only viable avenue, by his own argument, is reason; however, the very nature of his goal precludes reason as deciding factor. What could he possibly do to untie himself from this knot? He could change the question.

This is precisely what he does when he introduces the idea of the wager. No longer is the issue whether or not there *is* a God, but whether or not it is worthwhile to *think* that there is a God. It is a mathematical question, a game of odds, completely and undeniably within the realm of reason.

It seems a sneaky move, and Pascal anticipates the objection:

> ...Do not condemn then as wrong those who have made a choice, for you know nothing about it. 'No, but I will condemn them not for having made this particular choice, but any choice, for, although the one who calls heads and the other one are equally at fault, the fact is they are both at fault: the right thing is not to wager at all.'
>
> Yes, but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed...

Indeed, if the audience has participated in the process this far, they have to admit that they are, in fact, committed. Having been brought to the realization of their contradictory nature, they cannot deny their need for reconciliation—they *must* pursue it. And having been offered God as an option, they cannot escape the fact that they must decide on him one way or another. The game is set, and reason is the rule.

> ...Which will you choose then? Let us see: since a choice must be made, let us see which offers you the least interest. You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your happiness? Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if





> you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then: wager that he does exist. 'That is wonderful. Yes I must wager, but perhaps I am wagering too much..."

Here Pascal has given the reader an overview of the premises of the situation. The game is a coin toss: two options (heads, that God exists; tails, that he doesn't) with equal odds. The bet is that one of these options contains the true and the good and the other does not. You bring to the pot your two most prized possessions, reason and will, the very things which you must use to determine your choice. Reason dictates that you cannot choose the irrational; the will forbids the undesirable. Since it has already been shown that reason cannot prove either choice more or less rational than the other, there only remains to show which can offer the most happiness. If one chooses tails, no happiness is lost in losing nor is any gained in winning. No happiness is lost in losing if one chooses heads, either, but infinite happiness is gained in winning. The most desirable option, then, is clear.

And what of the misgiving concerning magnitude of the risk? It is certainly an understandable one. If one chooses God, one must hand over those two cherished possessions, reason and will, in favor of faith and obedience. It seems like an enormous wager, to give up the only things that give us a sense of happiness and worth in this lifetime for a 50/50 chance of reward. If one chooses tails, however, no such submission is required; reason and will remain safely in our hands, though the hope of reward disappears.

This seems to be a real dilemma. When the bet is considered in light of the reward alone, heads is clearly the better option. When it is viewed only in the light of what's at stake, tails is more desirable. Pascal solves this predicament by once again relying on proportion.

> ...Let us see: since there is an equal chance of gain and loss, if you stood to win only two lives for the one you could still wager, but supposing you stood to win three?
>
> You would have to play (since you must necessarily

play) and it would be unwise of you, once you are obliged to play, not to risk your life in order to win three lives at a game in which there is an equal chance of losing and winning... But here there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you are staking is finite. That leaves no choice; wherever there is infinity and where there are not infinite chances of losing against that of winning, there is no room for hesitation, you must give everything. Since you are obliged to play, you must be renouncing reason if you hoard your life rather that risk it for an infinite gain, just as likely to occur as a loss amounting to nothing...

Thus our argument carries infinite weight, when the stakes are finite in a game where there are even chances of winning and losing and an infinite prize to be won.

This is conclusive and if men are capable of any truth this is it...

And so the game is up; the proof is complete. The mathematical mind has no choice but to admit the truth of this argument. The intuitive mind, when forced to confront the principles at hand, cannot deny it either. In a game of equal chances, when one choice offers infinite reward at finite risk and the other offers no reward at no risk, there is only one desirable and rational move. The reader is forced to watch helplessly as his reason shuts the door on itself. God it must be.

While this seems like a crowning moment for Pascal, his task is not yet fulfilled. He must confront one more objection.

...'Yes, but my hands are tied and my lips are sealed; I am being forced to wager and I am not free; I am being held fast and I am so made that I cannot believe. What do you want me to do then?'—'That is true, but at least get it into your head that, if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so...

Pascal cannot pretend that convincing a man's reason through such an argument engenders the sort of unwavering





faith required for Christian salvation. A man could no more be expected to choose to believe in God than to choose to believe the sky is green, no matter how appealing the reward for doing so. Pascal has not given the doubting man faith through the wager; he has simply shown that it is not unreasonable (indeed, it is decidedly rational) to desire such a faith. How, then, does he propose that one achieve this elusive end?

...[L]earn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile.'

It seems that we have finally entered the world of the mysterious "Machine." Even though reason has been convinced to submit both itself and the will to God, the process is not so simple. Though reason in man is often fickle and undependable, nothing is more foreign to him than its complete abandonment. It is his only source of pride; its desertion would leave man hardly better than the beasts.

This, in fact, is exactly what Pascal claims must happen. Interestingly enough, the word that he chooses to express man's becoming docile ("abetir") has its roots in the word for beast ("bete"). Even so, Pascal does not think this is an *unnatural* process for man to undertake.

For we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind...

[H]abit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it. Who ever proved that it will dawn tomorrow, and that we shall die? And which is more widely believed? It is, then, habit that convinces us and makes so many Christians....

In short, we must resort to habit once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain

ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us.[13]

He seems to be making a startling and somewhat distressing claim here. After acknowledging reason as our only nobility and after using it to such glorious avail, must we really admit that in its nature it has always been a slave to as base a faculty as *habit*? A simple look at ourselves will tell us that this is the case.

The etymology of the word "habit" (from the Latin *habere,* "to have") implies that it is fundamentally a power of possession. One could argue that it is not our only power of possession; in fact, knowledge can only ever be possessed through *reason*, never through habit. While this is true, we are not looking for knowledge in this instance; the only knowledge we could possess concerning this situation was achieved during the wager. We are looking for "belief," that mysterious state in which we act with certainty concerning something which reason could never prove. Ordinarily, our rationality would show this behavior to be unwise, but that poor, bruised faculty has been forced to admit that, in this instance, it is required.

In order to achieve this state now, we must examine how we have achieved it in all of those "unwise" circumstances. When we do investigate those situations, we find that they arise from a sort of trust brought about by consistent results to certain expectations. In the circumstances in which we are habituated unconsciously, we are first exposed to the consistencies, and as a consequence our expectations develop. With every fulfillment of them the expectations become stronger, so that eventually they are at least as powerful as rational certainty. The fact that this takes place, as it undeniably does, is what leads Pascal to label man as much machine as mind.

In the cases where we are responsible for habituating *ourselves*, however, the process is slightly different. Since there is a lack of consistent outside phenomena to begin the habituation for us, we must rely on our reason to start the Machine by

[13] No. 821





convincing us to provide the phenomena ourselves. This is exactly the situation in which we find ourselves concerning faith, and it is the reason that the wager is so important to Pascal's system. This first step relies heavily on the participation of the will, which is why the wager has to prove itself both rational *and* desirable. Once the reason has deemed a certain habituation acceptable, the will sets itself on that course. In this case, the man seeking faith as directed by his reason wills himself to follow the actions of the truly faithful. If the will is steady and provides consistent phenomena, that is, if the man diligently acts as if he were faithful, he begins to expect himself to be faithful, and after a while is convinced that he is. The act of faith becomes faith itself.

If this sounds strangely cold and divorced from divinity, it is because Pascal is not considering faith here as any sort of spiritual relationship between man and God. Faith for Pascal is merely the arena in which this relationship can take place. It is not salvation itself, but it is the work that must be done beforehand; it is the submission of pride and passion, the slow release of the heart from the bonds of vanity so that God in his mercy and at his choosing can turn it towards himself, "without which faith is only human and useless for salvation."[14]

And so it seems we have found the Answer. When man finally humbles his reason and allows himself to be habituated into the manners of true believers, the "Machine" begins its slow but certain work on his soul. Fleeing becomes seeking, fear becomes hope, humility becomes dignity, and the desperate self-love which so hardened his heart against God dissolves in the desire for divine love. If this process is undertaken sincerely and diligently, faith will root itself and salvation is sure to follow. The *Pensees* will have achieved its purpose.

Pascal's system is not appealing to everyone, nor does it address some of the other obstacles that face those searching for faith, such as the apparent weakness of the will in this arena. The *Pensees* do, however, provide even the most ardent

[14] No. 821

rationalist with a blueprint for escaping his own reasoned misery and rendering himself open to and perhaps even worthy of salvation. It is a work of immense scope, subtle method, and radical vision—a provoking and masterful appeal from a brilliant man of faith to the lost but seeking scholar.

> If my words please you and seem cogent, you must know that they come from a man who went down upon his knees before and after to pray this infinite and indivisible being, to whom he submits his own, that he might bring your being also to submit to him for your own good and for his glory; and that strength might thus be reconciled with lowliness.[15]

[15] No. 418



# Like the humbling sunsets of the southwest...

Jessica Alexander

...the memory set my limbs to life, unstrung my knees. Dream life: silver buildings surpass a small sky; the streets are lined with all I've ever known and that is all, a small world where hope and fear fail to hide in time's broad horizon. Waking life: forgotten forms, vague outlines fading like smoke in space. The memory unstrung my knees, like the great humbling sunset of a western sky. I am nothing when I stand on the brink of each abyss. Only the compression of a fantastic illusion marks the beating of a violent heart, as music pulls the pulse beyond our skin and thumps out a heartless rhythm—we leave ourselves to lend it life. Something larger than a life boldly straps us to its curve, gently bends us to its motion. Resist this and you will be broken. Beneath an unobstructed sky—the great dome—the only end is my vision. So, we pulled over on the side of the highway: the earth was a sheet of ice; the snow played tricks on our eyes. We stopped to see if the world would curve before our vision blurred. The sky surpassed every abysmal conception; it unmasked imagination and hung it for fraudulence. Still we failed to see everything stretched endlessly. Shivering, feet frozen to the shoulder, a second, a minute, an hour—I need more than time! On the edge of the mountain a great wind surged through us, everything like Arizona where the roads bend beneath the horizon, the endless stretch of telephone poles and wires, but even then the world appeared to bend so it could come back again...not like that sunset, not like this memory, where space has no curve or division and all I see is a beginning fade into the distance.

*Truck VII*
Kathryn Bush



# Telling the Whole Truth[1]

**Daniel Harrell**

*Part One*

Aristotle is known for saying some remarkably obvious things. Whatever is oily is burnable; whatever gives way is crushable; whatever gets cut is sliceable. These kinds of obvious truth, so obvious as to seem less than the whole truth, were once satirized—by someone French, I think. Whatever makes us sleepy—like this pill—causes sleep in having a soporific power inside.

As far as I can tell, Aristotle would be just as willing to say *that* as he was to say what he said. Willing, that is, if he thought he needed any more examples of what he called *dunamis*, a thought about things best conceived along the line of what makes something dynamic rather than static. *Dunamis* is that feature in things we mean when we say something has a capacity, a capability, a force, a power, a potential, a potency.

If Aristotle *were* to speak of a sleeping pill's potency, however, he might have gone on, as he usually does, to tell an equally obvious truth about the person who took that pill and was soon heard snoring in bed. Whatever is made *sleepy* by soporific things, rather than hyper or comatose, has the power to be put to sleep. So it holds for the complements in the first three cases, and indeed in all such cases. There are things in the world besides, but also in a sense *beside*, the burnable, the crushable, and the sliceable; things having the power to burn, crush, and cut. And when nothing in the world stands between the two, something in the world actually *happens*. And when it does a kind of work gets done. Where there were once two

[1] Delivered as a Summer Lecture at the Annapolis campus of the College on July 2, 2002.

things, one able to act and another to be acted upon, there is now one difference-making event, going to work in the world—whether it be burning, or crushing, or cutting, or sleeping—even for satirists who speak French.

If this is roughly what Aristotle would go on to say in saying such obvious things, we can perhaps see something tellingly closer to the whole truth in the trifling truths he tells. Let's suppose we put what Aristotle meant by potency into an answer we might give to a question we might ask. What would that question be? Satirists will think it was one like this: why do sleeping pills cause sleep?—and then dismiss talk of soporific power, along with Aristotle himself, without a second thought. So will all of us if we think Aristotle's idea of potency is meant to *explain* the world and fall so laughably short of it; as if a word like "foldability" could ever tell how a paper bag can be folded, or "straightliness" or "stiffhood" could ever tell how a table can't. The answers will surely be found not in empty words but rather in the respective fields, whatever their actual names, of paperbagology and table-etics, accounting for the arts of paperbagestry and tablecraft.

The answers, that is, are found in domains of skill surely below Aristotle's range of concern. Any such questions about the potencies in particular things can't be the kind of question Aristotle thought potency itself was the answer to. And to think they were would be to take each example of potency for all that potency means. If he tells so many obvious truths about the potencies in things to illustrate what he means by *potency* as such, then the real question on Aristotle's mind must have been something on so large a scale as this: why does anything in the world *happen* at all? What must the world be like to be the kind of place where things don't exist alone and inert, one after one, but rather, in a sense, side by side, in actual, manifold, and even difference-making relations, where genuine ventures are possible, and what might loosely be called *happenings* are actual? Not just happenings like burning, crushing, cutting, or sleeping, but even happenings that go on all the time unnoticed?





Happenings such as standing, sitting, leaning—even just being, as at least Aristotle himself would have us think? Happenings, in fact, on such a scale to include everything in the world there is, if there is nothing all alone by itself?

What is the one feature, or factor, that any world must possess to be a whole world of happenings everywhere we look? Rather than a different kind of single world in which again there might be any definite number of things, one after one after one, but where no two such things have the power ever to be in any relation, and nothing, as a consequence, ever happens?

Aristotle's answer? Potency. Any world where things can happen at all must be a world with potency. A world that doesn't begin as a spatial whole and then work ever inward but instead begins in actual places that then work ever outward. A world that works, in short, from the inside out, and therefore works in a number of ways. A world with an interior first and an exterior next, rendering both sides necessarily manifold. A world that begins at a certain depth and goes to its end unavoidably divided and differentiated, rather than remaining everywhere simple and entirely on the surface. A world that cannot stand all there, all at once, given where it stands at the start, which makes it a world that cannot stand in some wholesale way of anything happening at all, while ensuring that anything which does happen cannot be some single, ongoing concern. A world in which anything happening means a number of things do.

In other words—a world with definite beings, in particular places, in specific forms of relatedness, possessing certain powers by which these same definite beings can exert themselves together in certain manifest forms of work. A world much like ours.

Aristotle goes on to make certain distinctions that refine and develop this idea of *potency*. But it can become easy to overlook how simply remarkable a first thought it is about how the world finally is. Of any potent world, this one idea

will implicitly capture the whole truth to be told. And this whole truth turns out to comprehend our world in ways we might not expect, rendering that world a less familiar place than we might have thought. In my lecture tonight I will discuss two such ways, deeply related, in which the world will grow less obvious the more potent it proves to be: the first having to do with what things are; the second having to do with what words are. Or more exactly—what words and things aren't. To summarize: in any world that works from the inside out, neither our words nor the things they name will be any more than abstractions from what there is to tell of that world in concrete truth.

For in any potent world, in an important sense, there are no things. Everywhere you look, there is not a single thing to be found. We will be looking for things in a world that works from the inside out, rendering any so-called thing substantially more than simply a thing. For Aristotle, even to be at all is a kind of venture, a way of irrevocably going to work in the world. To be and remain being is not an all-at-once truth given by sight, but something more like an articulated fact for the mind, a state of affairs for the brain, a constituted truth for the head—and in the potent world itself a reality achieved,again from the inside out. Any so-called thing we see, in any potent world, is only there in having a power to face the inherent challenge to *be* something or risk becoming nothing. Which means that even in continuing to exist at all, it is working at holding together rather than giving up and falling apart.

Perhaps encouraged by my rough use of ready-made words, we might have confined our conception of "happening" in such a world to a visible movement like cutting, and our conception of the "relatedness" implicated in such "happening" to a visible proximity like that between the scissors and paper involved in cutting. But the difference potency makes will be radical and absolute, and it compels Aristotle in his own thinking about potency to move dialectically from the obviousness of what moves to a kind of active surprise, akin to motion, to be





discovered in what simply is—described in outline above. Our conception of "happening" in any world full of potency must be expanded beyond, say, cutting, to include what the scissors and paper are doing in remaining what they are in their own right, just as our conception of "relatedness" in such a world must be expanded beyond their proximity for cutting to include what is held together in the scissors and the paper in order for each to be what they are in being anything at all.

What I just said is a mouthful, and perhaps a mouthful that fails to escape the idea of a thing convincingly enough to show how remarkable the very thought of potency really is. One reason why the idea of thing is so difficult to escape is again that we rely so much on our senses, and according to Aristotle take an especial delight in the eyes. In short, we love the shapely. But in any potent world, what it means to *be* cannot be seen, only appreciated. What we actually see is always in an important sense *less* than what we actually get: for what we see is again only what it actually is in working from the inside out—where the inside is necessarily unseen, and the outside is always more, in work, than simply the seen, making a difference in the world beyond mere visibility.

The very obviousness of so-called things, then, ought to be a mark of a kind of obliviousness in the mind that keeps holding to the idea; a clue that we will be led by any notion of "thing" pure and simple *away* from the world rather than further *into* it; a sign that the sheer presence in things—what we might call their "thingishness" or "thingliness"—is, when called forth by the very invocation of thing itself, a way of locating the substantial in nothing more than an easily-formed, readily-handled abstraction of this presence. Thingishness vanishes into the work that something does in one direction, and into the power to do that work in the other. Potency turns even something as tangible, familiar, and easily pointed to as a shoe into a happening beyond indication which only a mouthful of words can tell. What we feel heel to toe is actually a difference-making instrumental work for the foot that moves,

along with a difference-making adorning work for the foot that is seen, through an art-given power for work found in what, in turn, is a certain arrangement of actual parts—the aglet, the cuff, the eyelit, the eyelit tab, the heel, the insole, the instep, the lace, the shank, the sole, the upper, the vamp, and the welt[2]—which are each themselves actual in being ways of working as arranged parts of a shoe, which in turn betrays even further potencies for working as parts that reflect a further arrangement or composition of whatever further actual workings lie inside—which shall go nameless for reasons of ignorance and time. To use one more example: what we call a thing is, in any potent world, either as beneath our five senses as the actual difference in musicianship between the concert pianist and cocktail-bar performer when neither one is at the piano; or as beyond our five senses as this same actual difference in musicianship when both are playing, revealing the kind of distinction in skill that cannot be simply heard, in what of necessity is separately heard. Even senses working overtime can't take everything in of anything in any potent world.

But perhaps it's time I stop trying to dissolve the idea of a thing in so many words. Indeed, for the moment, I want less to convince you of any claim about how things stand with the world and more to show you what sentences can begin to sound like when we try tell a fundamental truth, as best as we can, about any potent world. They tend to become more involved the more they tell, and almost insist on being put together, one after one, for the sake of elaborating what any one of them says rather than moving on to something else. They can become ever more difficult to follow, even when using few words not found in everyday speech—of which the only ones above were the names for the parts of a shoe. But this becomes a telling lapse, for these technical words are no more

[2] Taken, with the exception of "lace", from "The Parts of a Shoe" in Marc McCuthcheon, *Descriptionary: A Thematic Dictionary*, 2d ed. (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000), 82. The subtitle of this volume is worth quoting: "The book for when you know what it is, but not what it's called."





than exact identifications of the very parts of the happening shoe that the sentences meant to dissolve, descriptively, into happenings themselves. There seems a deep link between what we ordinarily call a "thing," and what we ordinarily call "jargon," suggesting that any difficulty in following what I said above is not simply different from the difficulty in understanding the meaning of certain words, but actually so contrary as to be a sign of a remarkable, unfamiliar fact: if our individual words make our sentences hard to grasp, we are likely trying tell a kind of half truth, under a simple conception of thing, about any potent world; while if it be the organization of the sentences themselves making for the difficulty, and each sentence in turn only sustains that difficulty, we are likely trying to tell a kind of *whole* truth about that very same world. And if there be nothing difficult to understand in either word or sentence, we are likely trying to tell no real truth at all. As we shall see, the simply clear will be too obviously true to be of any use in what can be told of a potent world.

The power in the thought of a potent world, at any rate, lies in just how much of our usual ways of thinking about the world become inescapably figurative, and our usual ways of talking unavoidably metaphorical—to whatever extent these ways depend on any notion of thing. Even if a more exact expression of what there is in such a world fails to dissolve the very idea of thing in speech, it keeps that idea at a distance from all the thingly conceptions of the substantial we carry around in our heads and on our tongues(of which the largest such conception is likely that the whole of the world is obviously a whole of things, rather than, more puzzlingly, a whole of something, anything, else).

But there I go again invoking the very idea of thing to dismiss it. And perhaps in my struggle lies a better way of expressing the distance that the very thought of a potent world will put between the idea of a thing and our thingly conceptions of the world. In any impotent world, the question of what a thing *is* can be answered in just the way so many of Socrates'

interlocutors will answer the what-is questions he will raise. All we need do is point to examples: what virtue is can be shown after a fashion by the example of a courageous man, or what the beautiful is by the example of a night-sky full of stars. In an impotent world, what a thing is amounts to no more than the kinds of thing there are. But in a potent world the question of what a thing *is* becomes exactly as distant from any answering examples as those examples of virtue or beauty remain from the question on Socrates' mind when he asks about the virtue and the beautiful in themselves. In an impotent world, in fact, what a thing *is*, is never any *more* than its examples; once potency is put into that world, what a thing *is* becomes inescapably a question, to which no such example is an adequate response.

*Part Two*

I will now put this point in one final way. It will involve me in yet another mouthful, but I hope this mouthful, in which I attempt a kind of deduction, will provoke some reflection on just what our words might be for. The thought of a potent world, as it dissolves the very idea of thing in one way, dissolves the very idea of word in another. In any potent world, in an important sense, there are no words. Telling the whole truth about any potent world will force us to use something other than words.

In any impotent world where there were words for things at all, the following collection would suffice: separate words for each thing there was, another set for each *kind* of thing there was, and a final collective term for each and every kind taken together—a word that corresponds exactly to the common English word "thing." The collection would thus be, in effect, a lexicon of names for what there was. They would each be an adequate answer to the question "what is a thing?" since in a world all there all at once, where what you saw was what you got, there would be no meaningful difference between the question "what is a thing?" and the question "what





is *this* over here?" The question what is a thing? could never take any hold of its own, since there would be nothing in such a world to render any answer false, except, in a specified case, through a simple mistake of identification of what at bottom is still a thing. One could always be correct enough.

Once we put potency into a world, its collection of words would at once be insufficient—for the moment, let us say by at least one word. This one word would be a separate answer to the question "what is a thing?" insofar as potency had rendered this question a different one about things than could ever be asked in an impotent world. "What is a thing?" would not mean "*what* is *this* over here?" but more a mouthful like this: "*why* is *this* over here, in being what it is, anything at all?" Or: "What is it, about this over here, that makes it be something rather than nothing?" Or again: "What makes this over here be the *thing* that it is, rather than the nothing that it isn't?" All these mouthfuls would emerge out of the fact that now, in a potent world, what you see would always be less than what you got, anywhere you looked, since being a thing would now be something achieved, not given. And since the achievement would involve each thing working from the inside out to be a thing, one by one, this new word for "thing" would have to be distributive in its reference rather than collective.

Which means the word "thing" itself could only be put to new use in an equivocal and confusing way. Yet any fabricated word—like "myxptlk"[3]—would inevitably mislead, since the word we want is like "thing" in being a word for things, not as a name for those things all at once, but rather as an address for each, one by one, in terms of what made each be the thing it was. And insofar as every specific word for things in our lexicon would only *name* each one, whether in number or kind, every such word would at best *imply* what we would want a

[3] In our world, the capitalized "Myxptlk," along with a few other vowel-less variations all prefaced by "Mr.", is the proper name of an impish but potent villain of Superman's who hails from the Eighth Dimension. For readers of this lecture, the proper pronunciation of the name, roughly rendered, is "Mix-pi-til-ik."

separate word to *address*; just as the word "shoe," pointing to this over here, only implies rather than addresses what it is that makes this over here into a thing by being a *shoe*, instead of, say, being *brown* or *leather*.

What would be lacking in our lexicon, then, is a domain of words for things with a different purpose: to address rather than name, and thus to locate on the inside of things what is simply pointed to in each thing's name. Our lexicon wouldn't lack words in number, then, but in kind. A book of no more than names, it would be lacking a power of reference we now need. But inventing this entire domain out of some whole-word cloth would again erase any sign of the inherent connection these words have to the words now in use. We would invent new words simply for the sake of putting our current words to a new kind of work.

The difference potency has made to the world seems to be making a corresponding demand on our words. What we want is not the same words, or different words, but altered words. What our potent world seems to demand we do in telling of it, is not make new words up whole cloth, but devise some way of altering the fabric in the words we already have. We must think about how a word might be conceived as a different kind of whole in its syllabic sequence than simply the discreetly pronounceable; a whole that would make each word not simply one, but a one that also has a beginning and an end. We could then arrange letters into new patterns of pronounceable endings and beginnings for words that could make them into forms of address, thus multiplying our current lexicon functionally, rather than substantively.

By this point, you might think I am belaboring and complicating the obvious with yet another mouthful of words. It's obvious what to do—stick a suffix on the word "thing" and make it more substantial-sounding, something like thingitude, thingicity, thingness, or, best of all, thinghood. All such alterations would name what it is that *makes* things be thingly, makes what's substantial be substantial. And so it would work





for every other word in our lexicon, giving us initial answers to the new questions that have now taken hold. What is it about this over here that makes it be something rather than nothing? Shoehood. Or that over there? Scissorhood. Or this right here and now? Tutorhood and Lecturehood and Johnniehood. And so on for every last thing there is, remaining what it is by working at it in some particular way, even by itself being ever shoely, or scissorly, or tutorly, and ever ready in relation to its complements to scissorfy, shoeify, and tutorfy.

All this new-fangled telling, in the power of a mere suffix. And in one way, these are the kinds of made-up words we want, and our lexicon will grow more comprehensive geometrically as our appreciation of any potent world becomes ever more discerning. Perhaps the one positive thing to notice about such coinages is the reason for their origin if the above genealogy is correct. They emerge not for the sake of identifying anything novel or newly noticed in the world, as the jargon in any technical lexicon does. They are rather meant to address a question about things that only arises when things become more than merely things: the question, again, of what it is that makes each such thing, in being the nameable thing it is, be a thing at all. The barbarity in coinages would not be like the vice of sophistication in jargon but more like the first blush of a newfound innocence, born of an impotence felt before a world freshly seen, where the entire collection of words in current use don't quite work any more, and get pressed into a service they'll never be quite fit for. This would be another sign for a possible fact I mentioned before—that any telling of whole truth about a potent world will render our sentences more difficult and involved; and if such sentences can ever be made less involved, any reducing will force a series of coinages to appear that only fold up the difficulty and hold it within. Any manifest coinages or apparent convolution in sentences would then be complementary signs that the telling of truth they convey is *not* growing ever more abstract, but becoming ever more concrete—signs that we are getting ever less thingly

in our telling the truth about things.

But coinages do fold the difficulty up; they compress and nominalize what it seems only a sentence can expand to its proper length. In addressing a world that works from the inside out, these newly minted words work from the outside in. Any such minting is fated, being pressed into service as a single word, to do no *more* than *address* what there is *in light* of how it works—effectively rendering any such term more than a name by making it a name tied to context. We make our names more telling, but none of them really tells.

With the power of the suffix, then, we can generate new telling words out of whatever names we have; but it also true we may come to believe we've now got all our answers about the world. Thus the resulting coinages, left on their own, threaten to drop us again into a world of laughably told truth in which an all-too-ridiculous Aristotle is saying all-too-obvious things to be actually telling the whole truth—except of a world that only some medieval Scholastic in a cartoon could dream up. How things work will be explained by their possession of thinghood, giving them a power to thingify, which keeps them ever thingly, as illustrated by this piece of paper, which possesses paperhood, giving it a power to paperfy that keeps it ever paperly.

But the reason we were looking for a word beyond "thing" was not to invent, through word-magic, the very answer to the question that a potent world made forever distant from any examples. Instead, we wanted to devise a word that addressed each thing in terms of what this now inescapable question is asking for. A coinage like "thinghood" doesn't *explain* what makes a thing a thing, any more than "paperhood" explains what makes paper paper. Or "tutorhood" a tutor. Rather, every such coinage gives a form of address beyond names for what it is, beyond presence, that makes each thing the thing it is. Each is meant to address what it is in the nameable things that *needs* to be more fully told, giving us an entrance into the way a thing stands—not an exit from it. Each one *locates* an





answer rather than embodying it.

A better way to understand how these coinages are meant to work in a locative form is to put them back into the question about a thing as follows: what is it about the way the world is, that makes shoehood a way it can stand? Or paperhood a way it can stand? Or scissorhood? Or tutorhood? Or finally thinghood itself? How must the furniture of the world be arranged to make such ways of standing possible? And how in turn must the work of the world be organized to make those same ways actual?

These formulations of the question perhaps make the answer still to be told sound more otherworldly, in the very invocation of world, than the answer really is. Consider shoehood as a way for the world to stand: the furniture involved would be the shoe parts listed above, and the work involved would be the activity that put each shoe part in whatever spot of the shoe it properly resides in, making for one artful arrangement of the world with the power to go to work in walking without being torn apart. Telling the whole truth about the way the world stands in shoehood would amount to a mouthful of words on the point of the cobbler's art and another on the point of walker's work, along with a passing reference to any subordinate skill and material lurking within—like leather and leatherwork. Thinghood, which looked magically out of any real place in the world as a coinage, vanishes without a trace once the compression in the coinage is expanded—amounting to simply a working organization of what there is in the world on the one hand, and on the other, a corresponding ordering of the words by which what there separately is gets a name, an order of words then put to work to tell how the world more collectively stands.

Although thinghood itself would have its own mouthful of words in the telling—call it the mouthful of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*—the very primacy of the account would *tell* not in the abstraction of how many doctrines a reader retained, or in how Aristotelian he could sound, but rather in the concreteness

of how discerning he might become when he turned to other books, proving wise in becoming known as that someone you ask about a good work on whatever—the shoe, the walker, the musician, the plant, the fish, the soul—and be told of the best or informed of the lack. The whole truth told in the *Metaphysics* would be of a kind to *orient* the reader towards what is substantial in the world, leaving everything there of substance still to be studied.

And in the limits of coinages we discover where mere words fail, and in their own way vanish. In wanting to tell of a potent world we recast what the word was as a whole in order to make each one *alterable*, and in order to put our names to a new kind of work beyond naming. Yet any such recasting of a word confines us to names, even if tied in the alteration to a context. These newly minted terms may locate us on the inside of things, but at that point they abandon us, leaving us to tell any more truth on the inside by facing nothing other than what is already nameably there in that world, as an *organized* whole that can go to work. What a potent world demands of our words, then, is not that they be altered, but somehow ordered—in a way beyond their alphabetical sequence in a lexicon. Our book of words, which seemed to require emendation, actually demands a renovation, one that allows some number of its entries to be organized into larger wholes of words that separately name, but somehow together still tell, and tell what was addressed in coinages. What we need is less a lexicon and more a grammar. Potency has made an absolute difference to words, it seems, by forcing them to stand in a syntax, and become something meaningfully more than merely words. The truth in any potent world escapes capture by mere words just as surely as the truth that this shoe is brown escapes capture in being called "this," or "shoe," or "brown."

But what grammar or syntax is, on this level of my deduction, is not yet clear. How might it be that words which separately name, and in an altered form can address, might together have the power to tell—in this case, to tell what a





thing is in being anything at all? How does what was separately true straightaway in mere names, and in coinages too puzzlingly true to be any more than telling, gain a power to be more significantly true in combination? The most elementary composition of our lexicon to be achieved beyond its given order would be to string the needed entries together, one after one, in just the way I did above, listing the parts of a shoe. But in names these become pieces of a shoe, evicted from their residence and chained to an alphabetical sequence. Their togetherness in a shoe is only implied, and their power to work together at being a shoe remains untold. In putting our names simply together, we have lost the very difference between inside and outside that a word like "shoehood" was coined to address. We need a word that doesn't name but connects, yet does more than simply connect like the conjunction "and." For we need it to conjoin our names yet reflect in that conjoining the difference potency has made to the world to be told. We need, it seems, a word that conjoins and at the same time conveys, carrying us through names not simply, one after one any which way, but rather in light of the very way the world itself works—from the inside out. This new word needs to move us through what it conjoins as if we were going from first to last in going one by one. In the smallest whole of such words, the new linking term will have to stand between one naming word that is not simply first, but meaningfully first, and another naming word meaningfully last.

But what will give our naming words this meaning? How can they be made to stand first to last in standing one to one? In the most elementary form of such words that told of a potent world in the most elementary sense, what stands first would have to be something like what has a power to work, and what stands last something like the work itself. And what it would mean to stand together, first to last, would be with respect to the standing that the word "thinghood" was meant to address. Our naming words will need to be aligned and stood, it seems, on the level where things themselves stand—organized

and at work, from the inside out. But what does this mean? It seems to mean this: our names must stand, first to last, in the light of what makes each so-called thing, separately named, the single thing *meant* once the names are conjoined. As a result, our names must *mean* this single thing by naming it first to last, from an inside out. But this seems to mean, and I'm about to speak a final mouthful, that these names will stand meaningfully first to last, working from the inside out, to tell of a single thing, only if the *kind* of thing in the first name has the power to make the kind of thing in the second name be the thing it now actually is. The names "shoe" and "brown" can be so joined, first to last, to capture that brown shoe that escaped each name separately, *if* "shoe" names the kind of thing with the power to make the kind of thing named by "brown," in other words, color, the *actual* thing it now is—the color brown. And so, in saying that the shoe is brown, I will be effectively telling this: This thing that I see over there, *is* a thing, in being a *shoe*, and because it's a shoe, it's the *brown*-colored thing I see over there as well.

Or something like that. I'm not sure how any of what I just said in mouthfuls actually sounds. Perhaps impossibly obscure, mystifying so simple a thing as what we mean in putting the name "shoe" and the name "brown" together in the sentence "the shoe is brown" to tell the color of this shoe over here, or another such sentence to say the shoe is leather. What we are looking for is in grammatical terms a copula, that little word "is" in English that lurks in every statement we make that has the power to be true, telling that something *is* this way rather than another way—that the shoe *is* brown leather, rather than, say, white canvass. But my mouthful above is meant to render this tiny word "is" remarkably telling, although perhaps at first remarkably puzzling in what or how it tells. What does the word "is" really mean, and why does a word that names no definite thing at all turn out to be at work in every true or false statement about things that we make?

With the tiny word "is," we link our naming words by a





functional word that makes a separate yet indeterminate reference to being. The copula puts the exact distance between being itself and the beings named as the distance we achieved in our coinage "thinghood," between the things themselves and what makes each one be a thing at all—giving a form of address to what was yet to be determined. This distance is laid bare in the copula; so bare, in fact, that it keeps apart what it brings together, seeming to disrupt the very identification intended—for if there are brown and leather things in the world besides shoes, then being brown or being leather is different from being a shoe, and yet here we are in such seeming indifference making what's different be the same, in saying no more than what we happened to notice: that this shoe *is* brown and *is* leather.

To say the shoe was anything but itself, not to mention saying so about the brown and leather things too, would be incoherent in an impotent world. So would one of Aristotle's most beautiful discerning mouthfuls: that two things can be different in being, but the same in number. And here we stand in speech, in apparent recognition of what he told, as we call a shoe a shoe, then take it back by calling the same thing brown or leather, somehow telling that these things are all together in the following way: the brown or leather thing we see over there, is only the thing that is *there* to see in that particular color and material, because at bottom that thing's a shoe. By the above deduction, then, if any statement we make about the world is not simply false through compositional incoherence, it proves to be true through a kind a penetration to the bottom of things—in this case a shoe—that we carry around with us in the tiny word "is".

*Part Three*

Perhaps it's time to begin the end of my lecture. If all that I have just deduced is true, then with baggage as light as the copula, naming no thing at all, comes a heavy burden to bear. We must care beyond words for the truths we tell. We

take the barest notice that *this* is *that*, and yet in putting it into words, in the ordering of names we do, we are forced to stand up and declare, in effect, that should you wish to know what makes that second kind of thing an actual thing, you will have to go to the trouble of discovering what makes it be this first kind of thing first. We are forced, that is, to care for any deeper truth to be told of *why* what we happened to say, of what we happened to see, is true in just the truthful *way* we said it. And this means caring for the truth of how the world can stand first to last, working from the inside out, even in something so small as a shoe of brown leather. We say but this about the world, and can't help but declare, however implicitly, that to know its truth is to grasp how the whole world can sort all its furniture and ways of working out to make an organized stand in shoehood, and be a world in which the flesh of one animal gets wrapped around another animal's foot, time and time again, by the hand of the cobbler, the foot of the walker, and the coin of the shopper, along with every piece of handiwork that happens between.

And with that longer tale of truth about the shoe, so much for the thing named by shoe, so much for the thinghood addressed by shoehood, and so much for our every word being immediately or puzzlingly true. No single word can tell any more than simple truth about what there is in a potent world, forcing us to speak any further of what there is, in mouthfuls. And in speaking any further, we are forced to take the deepest risk. Our words together gain a *power* to be true, by gaining in turn, a power to be false. We tell of a brown leather shoe and so declare it *nothing* else, when in being a thing, it might have been anything else, and in being so much as a shoe, might have been of any other suitable material and accompanying color—again, such as a canvass of white. With every claim we go on to make about the shoe, we multiply the number of things we say it *isn't*, and multiply the number of ways in which our telling escapes falsehood. Potency has not simply made questions real, but rendered answers dangerous, and those who





venture answers courageous. Whosoever dares to tell truth, pronounces any potent world with words, shall take an irreversible step into being something rather than nothing, going irrevocably to work as a teller of truth who constantly risks a nothingness in falsehood, and with ever more telling of truth risks ever more ways to die in the false. This does not mean we risk ever more ways of likely being wrong the more we think we're right. The risk involved is not a matter of ignorance, nor is the challenge involved a matter of being so tidy and correct in speech as to avoid any false-threatening mess. The risk and challenge are exactly the opposite: the unavoidable result of ambition, knowledge, and skill—akin to what the world-class chef in his five-star kitchen can never avoid in being who he is, ever risking the nothingness of the inedible in whipping up his every signature dish, as he escapes all the ways it might be ruined, time and time again, when the safety of simply edible food was as close by as the security of the simpler kinds of truth: on a neatly set table, in a freshly washed bowl, where a recently scrubbed apple might be reached.

But I myself haven't the time left to be so brave about a brown leather shoe; I simply salute the challenge of its shoehood, as the shoe becomes ever more concretely the shoe that it is in a telling that risks ever more ways of being false. Nor have I the time to discuss the geometric expansion that occurs in our simplest tellings of truth when we move from the question of *what* something is to *why*. A pure marvel awaits the Febbies next Spring that goes by the name of "syllogism." Suffice it to say, that in going on to tell why something is so, we will need a word like "thus" or "therefore" to accompany our word "is," in needing a term of conveyance beyond the copula to move us now from first to *middle* to last in whatever series of names then tell—first, middle, and last—how we moved *simply* from first to last in the movement through names we originally made. The *middle* will tell further of the thinghood in the thing meant by the names conjoined, in just the way that leather will tell more about what makes a shoe be brown.

And this, in essence, is what we do to tell why. Astonishingly, the whole truth of this expansion in explanation can be told without telling a single truth about a single thing there is. It seems an inherent yet articulable demand that a potent world makes on *anything* we might say if we mean to tell the truth. And the whole telling of *that* remarkable truth can be found in a series of volumes known as the *Organon*, which Aristotle composed to found, all by himself, the entire liberal art of logic. And every document of this founding, you'll be happy to know, is available at a bookstore near you.

Let this suffice, then, as my conclusion about syntax: on the deduction given above, every functional instrument we use in language to arrange our naming words, from our particles to our punctuation, is most deeply and collectively grasped as a way of conveying us through the separate things named, from a beginning in being a thing at all, to an end in being the one thing meant by those names so conjoined. All such instruments of syntax exist to help us tell why being a thing at all can *mean* being the thing now told. Even the *Iliad* is a syllogistic display in this sense: it tells, from beginning to end, why being a thing at all, can *mean* being a raging Achilles at the walls of Troy. Homer's song takes the mere idea of a such a man and line by inevitable line makes this idea an ever more actual thing in an ever more actual world.

But now that I have reached the end of my lecture, I do want to say a word or two, so to speak, about what any of this should mean to us—assuming of course, we live, as Aristotle thought, in a potent world. The central question, I think, is this: what does it mean to put words together as well as we can in order to get as tellingly close as we can to the whole truth of things? It means something unexpected: excellence with words will be better *accounted* for in a book like Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* than in a book like Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, since the latter will treat our way of composing words as no more than a composition itself, a mere thing, while the former will treat what makes this way of composing the way it





is in being any way at all—and so account for every composition in terms—dare I say it—of its compositionhood. And excellence with words will be more fully *embodied* in a treatise than in an essay, in a soliloquy than in a conversation, in a paper than in a poem, and in an argument than in an aphorism. Not that any of us should put our words to work the one way rather than the other; only that when we tell as much truth about something as we can, on as deep a level as we can reach, the telling will grow to look more like the one than like the other. The sentences that result will certainly increase in number, but they will also get more syntactically involved while demanding they be more systematically connected. And any revision to make them less involved and connected—more elegant, let us say—will render those sentences less actual, telling less of the whole truth than can be told. We will be using more mere words for more mere things, indulging our love of the shapely. Any advice on points of style will guide us towards this sort of abridgment, and so, towards this kind of abstraction. Trying to be simple and direct, or even simply clear and consistent, will involve moving, slowly but surely, from a seven-course meal of a tale to an apple of one.

Then again, how we do love apples. And how hard it is to make any meal of our words the more courses in thought that we articulately try. Given such sinful facts, the deeper lesson in my lecture might lie in how we are to greet the oftentimes very involved tellings of truth tried by the authors we encounter here at the College. The tellings of Aristotle to be sure, but I will speak of Euclid for the moment, since his names for things are, by definition, exact, yet in these definitions, as well as in his theorems and proofs, are found sentences quite difficult to follow. We can encounter the definition of "same ratio" in Book Five, for example, and dismiss it with all the uncomprehending swagger of someone I once heard call it "word-salad," with a chuckle. Better, if the above account is correct, to say "well-put" and get to work thinking what Euclid might have exactly meant in meaning something so involved, a sign of a

potent world told—in this case, a power in ratio that brings ever more furniture of the mathematical world into an alignment of sameness beyond simple equality. This, the kind of deep truth surely expressed, in any elementary terms, only by a mouthful of words. Like the mouthful of words Euclid seems to waste again and again in the theorems of Book II, on something as simple as a single straight line—showing it nowise as simple as we thought. Every great author's most involved formulations should be greeted thus—not simply with respect, but hope, even excitement, that something deep is now being told in the kind of sentence that would ask us to think of the question it aims to answer and begin to see just how much of the world that question holds.

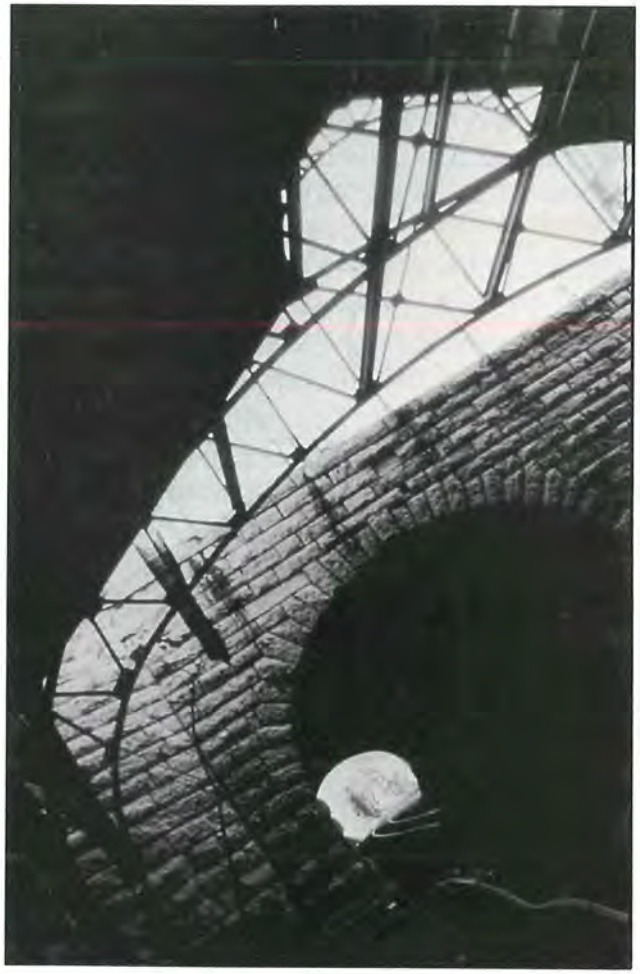
Which brings me to a final word, before the question period, about questions themselves. Only in a potent world do questions seem to take hold; but ironically, they thus become the shallowest way of penetrating the world that there is, even at their best. They always come first—which means they only come first. At their best, they help to locate us where we have to stand to see or think or tell at any depth. But then they abandon us to the declarative form of answers if we are to risk anything at all in speech. Questions are sometimes profound, but they will never be true, because they can never be false. And in this impotence lies a tempting corruption in speech, where we do no more than question, exploiting its primacy to look deep to others while risking nothing ourselves. In this same exploiting way can we even cast a condescending look, from the perch our questions gain us, on any answers offered from below, even those that take the most risks, putting a telling of the whole world in the service of reaching that perch. The famed "what is" questions of Socrates are perhaps the ones most corrupted, where we go deep by digging in our heels and keep what we're asking for at a safe distance even from those answers that try to be better than mere examples—that try, in sum, to tell a whole truth about what is. If Aristotle was right that ours is a potent world, and I am right about his being





right, then the example to follow in asking the question what is, isn't Socrates, but Plato, and the sheer entirety of his textual art that gives such provocative questions such puzzlingly rich surroundings, building an entire world in speech before questions ever get raised. What is virtue? what is justice? what is good?—Plato remakes into a question like this: what must a world be, to make virtue, justice, goodness, everything they can mean? Go out and build that world in words, says Plato, and then you'll know what they are. Then you'll know the truth.

Another example to follow, finally, is Plato's friend, which returns us to our more pedestrian teller of truth, with all the obvious ones he traffics in. Who but Aristotle, or someone close, really *would* ever care to tell the difference between a Socrates sitting and Socrates himself? Telling the whole truth, says his own work with words, is caring for the whole truth in telling as much of it as you care to, and yet this means caring for the kinds of distinction in what you tell that risk being otherwise overlooked. For in the end, it is these kinds of distinction that make all the difference in the world.



*Exit Railway*
Samantha Buker



# Only Briefly Entertained

Joe Hyde

*Wilt thou reach stars because they shine on thee?*

Sofia was kissing my eyelids when I awoke, and Valentino was crying curses through my open window from the street. It was Valentines day, nineteen-something-and-four, a decadent period in the history of Milan, to be sure, but I was an American in Italy, and therefore, life, with the impudent rigor of a mathematical proof, was beautiful. Valentino was my Italian roommate, and the girls he would invariably bring back to our flat, I would invariably fall in love with, even before they disappeared with him behind his green door. It is not to be supposed however that these girls ever preferred me to him, at least not initially, but only that Valentino's tastes were diverse and his attention only briefly entertained. Many-a-time, it did not outlast the night. (Ah, the nights, they came so softly to Milan in those days it would break your heart.) The weeping brunette or exhausted blonde (occasionally a melancholy redhead) would, after having been rudely ejected from the cavernous green doorway, stumble across the bare wood floor and sit dejectedly on the corner of my bed in the anteroom to recover. The slamming door always disturbed my slumbers. (I suspected only many years later that it was out of a vague consideration for me which he rarely demonstrated and never voiced that Valentino forced the poor girl out so loudly). I would rouse myself from sleep to console heaven's rejected angel in the sweating dark. I would begin always the same way, and it became such a custom for me that, not many weeks before the roof caved in and Valentino, drunk again, busted a

constable in the chops and was sent by the Italian Gestapo to God-knows-where beyond the shores of my little world, I could recite my verse even before fully awake. "Hello," I would say in English since I did not then and to this day do not know a word of Italian, "my name is Joseph Marlow. I go where the poor lovers go. I sing them a song and they tell me I'm wrong, but in ways that I won't ever know."

The philosopher David Hume suggests that were a single color missing from the entire spectrum, the observer could isolate and, in some respects, "see" that color, even if he had never seen it before in his life. That's sort of the way I felt during the month and a half that I lived with Valentino, and watched the many girls pass from his room into mine, and from his vigorous bunk into my sleepy berth. If I were a bragging man, I would claim to have seen every kind of rejection: from the hair-tearing angry and screaming, to the disbelieving silence, and all the way to the tragically distraught, weeping all night while her small young body shook in my bed, for the girls Valentino brought home were, until almost the very end, very young and very beautiful. But I could not have claimed to have seen all the shades of rejection until the night before Valentines day, nineteen-something-and-four; and until that night that missing shade was a permanent blur in the corner of my eye, approached like a limit by the other nymphs, but never achieved; like the space left by a missing volume in my collection of books. Gentle reader, if you wonder how it is that Valentino's women always ended up in my bed, and if you are agitated by the very notion that an American, like yourself, could ever stoop so low as to take in the girls cast out by his Italian roommate, do not, I pray, forgo this tale of recollected love, for recollection has a magic all its own, and my story, like the wisdom I gained of love, will answer all your questions in due time. And if you continue in your inquiries and you complain that a tale of many pages could be told more easily in few, then I have no advice to offer and no words of parting either, for your impatience will be rewarded soon enough.





The reason the girls did not leave, did not shuffle discouraged, pulling on their open blouses, out the door and down the rickety wooden steps is that the door to our flat would not open from the inside. I remember fearing, when I had helped the wickedly handsome and rip-roaringly drunk Italian, whom I would come to know as Valentino, home that misty night weeks before, the enthusiastic click of the door locking behind me would mean something much more dangerous than having to sleep on the floor. But Valentino didn't seem to mind that I was curled up on the twisting boards when his door banged open the next morning, sunlight blinding all the room with anticipatory excitement from the window in what would become my chamber. It was the same window which my Valentino, head aching and eyes running, when he pushed past me that warm morning not so many weeks ago, climbed out of, one unsteady leg at a time, onto the terrace, which from the street looked like no more than the grotesque enlargement of a window box, and shimmied down the lilac covered lattice work to the street.

So began my stay with Milan's own temperamental Don Juan. Needless to say, I never understood a word he said to me, so that after a while he stopped talking to me entirely, at least when he was sober; and when he wasn't, it didn't seem to matter how I responded to his shouted songs in the Italian dark, as long as the morning found him behind his green door in our humble flat. I never did see or even hear, as one might expect, the proceedings that went on behind that door, for it was always locked from the inside, so that when I slept in the bed that I had bought with what little traveling money I had left, I was trapped between Valentino's green door and the door to the street, neither of which I could open, and with only the window to provide an escape route, if ever I should need so romantic a thing. I never gave Valentino any money for rent, and I have come to doubt if he paid any kind of rent whatsoever. In my mind, our flat was owned by his father (whom I had never met and had no reason to believe

was even still living) who, in wild desperation, had conceded to allow his reckless and charming son to live there alone, if for no other reason only so that the poor old man's nights might not be further disturbed by his rowdy son's philanderings. It was one of those flats the existence of which are easily forgotten; the only remarkable thing being the doors, one of which was always unlocked, (as long as one were to approach it from the landing of the rickety wooden stairs) and the other of which was the dark green soldier guarding Valentino's chambers. To this day, I have never seen a door more beautiful and terrifying than this one, carved by an ancient hand with angels and demons and overlaid in places with suggestive patches of metal, as slight as seductive lingerie, and just as bewitching. The knob was a single golden orb, dulled into a different color than the rest of the metal by the rubbings of Valentino's eager hand. If it were not for the fact that this door fit so snugly and perfectly into its frame, I would have guessed that Valentino had stolen if from one of the many decomposing churches that peopled Milan's winding streets like beggars. It was into this portal that the girls disappeared, and from this same proud womb that they were pushed not long after, to weep or curse in the sweet shadows that played across the far wall from the window.

I was reading Virgil (in translation) by candle light when Valentino came in that night with Sofia. I had heard him on the stairs below, for it was almost impossible not to hear the creaking boards complain, but I did not wonder why Valentino preferred them to climbing up the flower ladders outside our window, which as far as I could tell, were more sturdy and less likely to collapse. Valentino on the stairs meant that he was not alone. And in my mind, I predicted the girl who was smiling coquettishly at his side. Would this Madonna be my missing shade? I toyed with the possibility. What would rejection look like written across the faces of the world? Had Cleopatra ever been rejected? And to whose less royal bed did she repair to reassemble her defeated forces? There had been no such





rebound bed for Dido, I thought, and this led me to imagining what I would do if this girl tried to throw herself out the window, when the time came. Probably the same thing I did last time one of his paramours had tried: hold her by her naked arms and repeat my verse again and again, until she returned from whatever state of mind one must be in to attempt suicide, and in which I was determined never to find myself. But would that mean...and at this point, the book forgotten on my lap, and my eyes sightlessly watching the shadows on the wall, Valentino entered with this evening's collection. I had never seen a girl so beautiful, from the dark coffee of her hair to the deep mystery in her eyes, her Persian neck curving so many different ways at once and kissed by the light of my candle. Her narrow arms wrapped around Valentino's mighty right arm like the tendrils of the flowers on the scaffolding below. And the color of her skin somewhere between cream and honey reminded me of all the colors at once and I thought, how unfortunate dead people are. I must have been staring, because the girl smiled with the most alluring hint of a smile, and Valentino began speaking in Italian, which I interpreted to be some kind of introduction. Then the most remarkable thing happened. "Oh," she said, "but he does not speak Italian?"

I think Valentino must have been as surprised as I was, if not more so, to hear her speak thus in broken but understandable English. You see, it was rare in those days to find even an Englishman in Italy, if he were not a soldier or a millionaire, neither of which ever approached our forgotten corner of a forgotten city. But to find a girl who spoke English, or who had even been with a man who spoke English, was, at least I would have imagined, impossible. Valentino sensed danger, and rushed the girl into his chambers before I had had time to collect my scattered thoughts and formulate a sentence. She looked over his shoulder as she disappeared, and I saw the candle light dance in her luxurious eyes. The door slammed with uncommon bitterness.

It should be obvious by now that I had seen beauties before.

I had seen so many beautiful women, I sometimes longed for a brute, just for some variety. I had fallen madly in love with each one Valentino had brought, however, indiscriminate to their particular charms. But never before had I been so impatient to have her rejected by my prodigal roommate. It should not be imagined either that I had devoured every creature that crawled into my cave. Though it was not unheard of that one of Valentino's mistresses would feel an immediate desire to redeem her wounded pride by an exhibition of sexual prowess, it was with no less gentleness that on other not so erotic occasions I took them into my bed. Often, the girls just needed a place to spend the night; not that the streets of Milan were particularly dangerous in those days, but only that a soul that has decided not to sleep alone is rarely easily dissuaded, and I myself hated (and to this day still hate, though less passionately) to sleep alone.

Should it be objected upon moral grounds that my welcoming of Valentino's darlings into my bunk was licentious or even sinful, let the objector consider the alternative. It was rarely before the next day, when Valentino himself would emerge from his abode and crawl out the window and down the lattice work, that the poor girl knew how to escape. Sure, there were those who wrestled the night-long battle with the door which they had entered, and collapsed despondent on the floor, as I had done my first night there. There were even those who attacked my person, pleading or furious for flight. There were those whose haunting silence drew from me an explanation of the window and the flower ladders, all of which explanations were incomprehensible to the poor Italian ladies. Once or twice I even tried to demonstrate, but each time, after a look from the window to the street below, and a look back at my grateful bed, the sheets already torn back and the promise of a man's body, however inferior to the lion's behind the now closed green door, breathing beside hers, the girls in question would slump their shoulders, or rub their eyes and plod like sad children, (like children?) like women, to my agreeable bed.





Thus it was that I had tasted, had savored, had nourished myself upon all beauty and still not surfeited my passions since my arrival in Italy not so terribly many months before. Do not, dear reader, imagine however that my appetite could begin to compete with that of Valentino. On the contrary, where mine had been more prone to scan the feminine forms with discretion, even with reluctant moderation, his had been avariciously selective, bringing home these beauties one after the other, like separate dishes in a fine meal of many courses. For, say what one might against desire, call down however many execrations upon its multifarious devilish heads, consider it the root of all vices and the mother of all indignities, yet it remains the engine of genius, and the motor which drives men beyond the petty affairs of the next world into the blissful madness of this one. Valentino was a genius of desire. And like a student operating under the expert tutelage of a practiced hand, I began my researches precisely where Valentino had grown weary of his own. Such students are not uncommon. Visit any school in Europe, or even any one of those fine academies which, blown from the neglected fields of Europe, scatter the Eastern shore of America, and you will discover in the classroom the public beginnings of the love which is consummated in secret within the darkened dorm room. I too had been such a student, had glimpsed the shadow of wisdom departing into the alleys of the past, and I too had suffered longings for her deep into the American nights. So seductive had been her charms that I had left the crumbling classrooms behind to seek this mistress in the land of her conception; had come to find her, and instead found Valentino, her minion and her slave. Long afterwards, I convinced myself that I had come to Valentino with a purpose, that I had sought him out and indentured myself to him, saying: I come from a land that is barren and dry, with a hope beyond hope I might one day descry, in her movements sublime and her stillness complete, the most beautiful one, whom through you I might meet. This introduction, had it in fact been deliv-

ered, would likely not have earned me the hallowed place I eventually occupied in his foyer, certainly not have earned it so surely as my helping Valentino home and falling asleep there did.

His door had slammed, leaving me with silent Virgil in translation. I stared dumbly at Valentino's door. Like the hesitation that comes when you finally sit down to write a letter which you have composed so many times in your imagination that when you actually try to write it, your mind is blank and the page stares back at you with the haunting question: so you are the speaker of English, eh? the poet who in Shakespearean verbiage seeks to transcribe the curious grandeur of his American thoughts? So too, I, the writer, the vacationing American, the pathetic roommate, the dreamer of strange dreams (but never so strange a dream as this!), stared blindly and hopefully at the door which I knew must open again...And at that moment it occurred to me that I must write it all down, must compose this incomposure in a letter as if by speaking the magic words I could open the door with the sound of my voice, as if I held the key in my vocabulary and the trick was not to find the right words—for I had the right words—but to put them together in the proper order. To the bookshelf then through the tepid air I moved and snatched my dog-eared notebook off the shelf much as one would snatch at inspiration from a departing moment. The pages were scribbled over with idle thoughts and incomplete essays, attempts, tries, failures to illustrate by telling what I had meant to show. Was not this beginning destined for another such end? The entire weight of a continent rested on my shoulders, the bone-grindings and nerve endings of all the world concentrated to a point, and that point the end of my little pen working rapidly over the page. Hadn't I abandoned the absurd notion that I could ever join the ranks of such brilliant writers as did then begin to do somersaults in my belly? My own history flared up before me as the work of one failure after another, failure as a student, failure as a scribe, but failures that I then greeted with such





magnanimity in that darkened room that I would not then have traded them for all the mute and maidenly successes of all the poets in all the world. And as I wrote, not knowing what I wrote, the rhythms and the rhymes of all that I had ever read rehearsed melancholy melodies in my mind which I hurried to transcribe. Right then, with the pain of love behind a solid green door, I was a Shakespeare, a Hemingway, a Byron. I was every lover that had wooed too high and won too little, won in place of her delicious body, the immediate eternity of verse. Yes, I was a filthy rodent feeding on the corpses of these artists! I was the scavenger of all that love had used and left behind. Yes, and with such awe had I apprehended each new wonder that I myself had given up the hope of ever joining them outside of the Inferno. But had not I as well consigned my very body to the choices of another? Had not I discipled my very soul to Valentino's love? And I had seen to what great ends we are sometimes led! Sofia had come, and in English too! But Valentino, like an Italian crying in the wilderness, had seen her first. And so I had to wait.

And how should I wait? Did I not have at last some advantage over my tutor? Had not she come to me like an angel prayed for, like Dante's Beatrice? "My name is Joseph Marlow!" I whispered. Never, it must be understood, never had I disturbed Valentino's routine. Seeing the first girls come and go, a system had erected itself, and we, its unconscious creators, had come to take pride in this system, the formulation of which was really more due to chance and circumstance than to our wills; but when chance thus enters the realm of human activity it is often deemed divinity, and understood rightly as such. Divine had been the origin of our procedure, and it would be blasphemy of the worst kind to alter it now. "My name is Joseph Marlow!" I said again, like breaking the holy silence of an Orthodox Mass. The words echoed nervously about the dark little chamber, chaotic with my papers, which was more accustomed to the vigorous animal noises of animal encounters than to intelligent speech. "My name is Joseph

Marlow!" I almost screamed, I hollered, finally I wailed, "I go where the poor lovers go!" No response. "I sing them a song, and they tell me I'm wrong but in ways that I won't ever know!" This last phrase hung in the humid air like the smell of her perfume which still permeated my room.

Valentino's door opened. My candle was blown out. In the dark, I could make out his silhouette, leaning with both arms wide across his open door frame. I wasn't sure whether he was going to throttle me there, or whether he would throw me out the window and commence his operations outside. I was determined not to aggravate the guilt I already felt heavy upon me, so I said nothing. Valentino swung toward my bed. I scooted as far away from him as I could in the small bunk and clutched the sides of my mattress. Down he fell upon the bed, scattering my already disordered papers, crumpling the sheets and my legs beneath him. I must have let out a shriek, for I was convinced he was going to clobber me. But a moment's hesitation convinced me otherwise. Up he staggered from his drunken stupor and moved unsteadily toward the window. First one leg then the other, finally his torso and last his terrific head disappeared. I heard him breathing heavily as he descended to the ground below. In my confusion, I looked again where the door was supposed to be, the green door which was as often closed as Milan's nights were silky, as Milan's women were beautiful, and as Milan's beauties preferred Valentino to me. The door stood open. And framed in that great hollow was the shape of a woman.

"Joseph?" she said, "is that your name?" I couldn't speak. "My name is Sofia," she said sweetly. There was a pause. "Are you an American?" Another pause.

"My name is Joseph Marlow," I whispered, "I come from a land that is barren and dry." Shocked into speech by her tremendous presence, I fell back upon these trite verses to which I had habituated myself in the past. But as is ever the case with such encounters, a new language was slowly forming in my brain, a pidgin by way of which we might communicate;





for lovers always have a language all their own through which that love is known just as surely as it's expressed in the native tongue and private dialect of its two participants.

She just laughed. I heard the pads on her cat feet step carefully to my bed, smelled her coming closer. She sat down. "My name is..."

"No more words," she said, and she kissed me.

Here was the last color of rejection, and it was no rejection at all. Or if a rejection, then a rejection of Valentino himself, the mediator. Had not he left first? Did I not have the recent memory of seeing him depart? Had not that very sight which had covered my body with sweat, the very sweat Sofia was now kissing from my naked limbs, led irrevocably to this sweet moment? "But how..." I found breath to ask.

"I sent him out for Bordeaux," she smiled, "and I happen to know there is not a drop in all Milan. He'll be gone for days."

If I did not then ask why, patient reader, nor should you. Such considerations find their place in anticipating a desired movement that is never made; whereas the gradual progression toward a climax is at last concluded by an unanticipated leap. The sun was just beginning to send its golden envoys through my window when we, after much activity, at last fell asleep, Sofia curled closely next to me. It was Valentines day, nineteen-something-and-four, a decadent period in the history of Milan, to be sure, but I was an American in Italy, and therefore, life, with the impudent rigor of a mathematical proof, was beautiful.

*Falling Sand*
Cassie Sherman



# Just 'Cause Al Green Sing About It Don't Make It True

Sandeep Shekhar Das

Happiness? Happiness?! What *is* this happiness of which you always speak? Sorry, I didn't mean to get excited. Perhaps I have assumed too much in accusing you, my noble reader, that happiness is something of which you speak, but I would wager that it is something you think about, and if you are anything like me, something you think about often. Often often. Too often. Let me rephrase, then, my initial confrontation to more resemble an investigation. What is this happiness we think of? What is this thing toward which we apparently direct our lives without really knowing where it will lead us? What is this thing that transforms us into children, craving something we are told to want without knowledge of what it actually is? To be sure, we have some sort of idea or belief or understanding that (whether it is a state or an end) happiness is good, or at least better. But better than what? Better than being unhappy? Better than where we are right now? Better than where you are? Better than where I am?

Perhaps these are the wrong questions to ask, at least if our semblance of an investigation is not to come to an end before it begins. Perhaps there is another way to approach this elusive entity that won't startle it away before we can at least get a good look at what we are actually chasing after. Now remember, my intrepid reader: no sharp, sudden movements and no loud noises. I think that instead of a frontal assault, we could come at it from the sides where its vision is not quite best. We could, and I think should, look at what happiness

resembles and its relationship(s) to what it resembles. This might help us understand better what the thing itself is, and consequently see if this knowledge in any way quickens us on the path to attaining it—unless of course, those things which resemble happiness are just as elusive as the thing itself, and succeed only in confusing us further—which I confess to you, my trustworthy reader, very well might happen. But as the poet said, "Be bold, and mighty forces shall come to your aid!", and so, we shall.

So. What resembles happiness? What other things in our life do we desire to know without knowing why or how or where, or even what? What other things are we drawn toward with only, at best, a vague sense of their goodness, or betterness? What other things make us mere children in our relation to them? It seems to me that the objects in this category number two: love and God. It is difficult to deny that these two forces, along with the 'pursuit of happiness,' have not only driven Man throughout the course of history but also drive men through the course of their individual lives. God, however (at least in a Christian framework, and I think in other frameworks as well precisely because we cannot empirically know him), must be addressed with the added complication of faith before we can even hope to reap whatever it is we need from him. Therefore, for our purposes at least, I think it would be more fruitful to explore the very mysterious, controversial, and perhaps mythical relationship between love and happiness.

Geoffrey Chaucer, with The Canterbury Tales, has given us rich and fertile terrain upon which to conduct these explorations. Many of these tales deal with aspects of love and situations born from being in it. But in these illustrations, whether explicitly or implicitly, looms the spectre of happiness that is always seemingly connected to love. The question is, is it? or is it all in the seeming? Is there a necessary relationship between love and happiness? Does each one imply the other, and the lack of one the lack of both? Is the connection akin to that between a child and a balloon, in that, to both possess the





balloon and let it fulfill its nature, the child must tie it to a light but lengthy piece of string and then hold on to the other end, with there always the chance it might slip away forever into the atmosphere above? To be sure, the balloon and child could be attached with an iron chain, insuring they would never be separated, but at the same time keeping both from being what they could be. Is it a magnetic connection, with like repelling like and opposites attracting, a balance being struck between the two? Or is it that there is no connection, no attachment at all, and what we are about to undertake is a Ptolomaic endeavor of 'saving the appearances'? Let us begin to dig, and see whether we are physicists, archaeologists or astronomers.

The first tale, *The Knight's Tale*, tells us the tragic story of Arcite, Palamon and Emelye. As we recall, Arcite and Palamon are two knights of the defeated city-state of Thebes and have been imprisoned without hope of reprieve by their conqueror, Theseus, the Duke of Athens. Even before we are introduced to the two knights whose tale this will be, we are given a picture of love in terms of Theseus:

865 What with his wisdom and his chivalrie
He conquered the regne of Femenye

Although the knight is explicitly speaking here of the defeat of the Amazons in Scithia, we cannot help but wonder if this is in any way an echo of the knight's own views of love— that love is to be won like a war, or perhaps that it is itself a war to be won—especially since, immediately following Theseus' victory, he and Hippolyta are wed. It seems that Theseus' marrying is a natural extension of his conquering. This view is only encouraged by the line

881 And how asseged was Ypolita,
The faire, hardy queene of Scithia.

Here it doesn't seem as if there is any difference if we apply the word *asseged* (besieged) to the war Theseus is fighting against

her or his courtship of her. In this case, they are inextricably tied.

But let us leave this knot of love and battle for a while, and return to the plight of Arcite and Palamon. They are friends, cousins and comrades in arms, and yet they sit in prison, alone together, unable to find consolation in each other.

1074 And so bifel, by adventure or cas,
That thurgh a wyndow, thikke of many a barre
Of iren greet and square of any sparre,
He cast his eye upon Emelya,
And therewithal he bleynte and cried, 'A',
As though strogen were unto the herte.

This appears to be the mechanism of Palamon falling in love with Emelye—a chance glance and a piercing of the heart. But even those of us who are hardcore romantics, my starry-eyed reader, must question the truth of the claim, and even of the existence, of 'love at first sight'. It seems a more true and honest explanation to say "I knew I could fall in love with her when I first saw her" than to say "I fell in love with her when I first saw her." Is it not more likely, in this case, that if one is incarcerated (physically or otherwise) and staring at the world through thick iron bars, that one would begin to look for something, anything—perhaps to give your life meaning that you can no longer draw from yourself, perhaps to save you? It is only in this state of longing and desperation that I can see the potentiality and the actuality of love becoming one and the same without any motion, only in this state that the temporal unfolding from 'could be' to 'am' could be collapsed into an instant.

We see evidence of this (to be fair, probably subconscious) manipulation soon again, for when Arcite hears his cousin's cry, he tries to comfort him and says

1084 For Goddes love, taak al in pacience
Oure prisoun, for it may noon oother be.
Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.





To which Palamon replies

1095 This prison caused me nat for to crye,
But I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye
Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.
The fairnesse of that lady that I see
Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
Is the cause of al my criying and my wo

But how accurate can we take Palamon's evaluation of himself to be? Although he tells us otherwise, we are given these three snapshots of Palamon before he ever sees Emelye.

1063 Palamoun, this woeful prisoner
1070 This sorrowful prisoner, this Palamoun
1072 And to himself compleynynge of his wo.
That he was born, ful ofte he seyde, 'allas!'

Palamon was full of woe before Emelye ever entered into his world, perhaps because of his imprisonment, perhaps out of his own disposition. These are not necessarily things, however, he could lament out loud. Definitely not if his woe was due to his disposition (how unchivalrous, unknight-like, and in the end, futile, is it to say "O, I wish I was happy!"), and probably not if it was due to his imprisonment, for although he might wish to be free, he knows already what Arcite will tell him to be true: there is nothing to be done. But when he spies Emelye, a voice is given to his longing, a 'why' to his misery and woe, a tangible reason to his desire to be free, where desire, potentiality and actuality are combined to be "cleped" love.

Well, if this be called love, should we then attempt, my systematic reader, to catalog what type of love this be, agape or eros, divine or mortal? Arcite soon wants to—for his own benefit, as it turns out. Palamon deifies Emelye as Venus incarnate, penitently falling to his knees and asking her for both compassion and deliverance for both he and Arcite, when

1112 ...with that word Arcite gan espye

Wher as this lady romed to and fro,
And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so,
that, if Palamon was wounded sore,
Arcite is hurte as muche as he, or moore.

Of course, when the best of friends fall in love with the same woman, watch out. When Arcite declares his desire for Emelye, Palamon justifiably claims that the bonds of their friendship should preclude Arcite from falling in love with Emelye, and furthermore, that he should instead help Palamon in trying to obtain her. But although Palamon's stance is justifiable, chivalry or no chivalry, it is also quite naive. Arcite's similarly justifiable response is that while Palamon's feeling for Emelye is an "affecctioun of hoolynesse", his own feeling for her "is love, as to a creature", which he constructs as having both more urgency and currency.

Whereas Palamon's error in judgement might be that he is too naive, I think Arcite's error in his justification is that he presumes too much. Why would a holy love have less urgency, and what really is the difference between loving God (I told you, my deceived reader, that I was going to leave God out of this, but, as it is wont to do, love is making a liar of me) and loving a person? If we want to say it is the difference between eros and agape, that love for a person has more claim over eros, is it agape that we feel towards God? If we judge by appearances, I would say it appears more like eros than agape. Perhaps when we love God, we are also in love with Him. Perhaps there is no difference in kind at all, only a difference in object.

If this is true, the question changes to one about the worthiness of the object. Which is more worthy of an intense and deep love: God or another person? and towards which are we more able to have such a love? If this is the question behind Arcite's reasoning, I would be less inclined to disagree with him as to which of them has more claim over Emelye's love. For me, the way to answer this question would not be to ask which object would give us a greater benefit if we inclined





our love towards it, for I believe that if both objects are real and true each could fill the same void equally. I would ask instead which object would gain greater benefit from our love being inclined towards it: another person, who has a void as we do? or God, who, presumably, is whole?

Whatever the answer to that question might be does not change the fact that in the face of love laws and customs are thrown out the window, or at least are hierarchically reordered in such a way that their internal logic ceases to make much sense. If laws or customs are meant to further our happiness, if they represent the surrendering of lesser freedoms in order to attain a greater one, does this mean that when love disorders them it is asserting itself as a better route to happiness than one that has already been established, that it is pointing out a shortcut of sorts? Or does it mean that it is taking its rightful place at the top of the hierarchy, that love itself is the highest freedom of all? Or is it just a destructive force that offers nothing better then that which it destroys except the need to accept on faith that it is better. Arcite tells Palamon:

1165 Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,
Than may be yeve to any erthely man;
And therfore positif lawe and swich decree
Is broken al day for love in ech degree.
A man moot nedes love, maugree his heed.

This passage is more than somewhat confusing to me, not so much because I have a hard time accepting that love might be a greater law, but more because it seems to say yes to more than one of the questions I have above. *Positif lawe*, or law by decree, man's law, seems to be presented as distinct from natural law, and if love has no problem breaking man's law whenever there is a choice between the two, I am drawn to say then that love is a kind of natural law. But then there is the last line, which approximately means "A man must love, in spite of himself." If this is true, then it seems the law of love is in opposition to natural law. There are then three ways to

reconcile love's position as law, if we are to make any sense of it at all. First (in no particular order), we can take the rule of love to be an aspect of man's law, a law by decree that has a stronger decree behind it than any other of man's laws. Second, we could take the rule of love to be an aspect of natural law, and, if a man must love in spite of himself, we are shown through the rule of love that it is part of man's nature to do things in spite of his nature. Third, we could say that the rule of law is transcendent over both man's law and natural law, and what is left is that it is a sort of divine law, whose functionality would then depend on us on having faith in the rule of love and faith that it is best for us to do so, even when it is destructive. Although all three options are plausible, none, to me, presents itself as more probable then the others, and none seem to necessarily point to happiness. I suppose as a child of this Age of Pragmatism, I believe the rule of love to be some combination of all three of these possibilities—but as to percentages, my learned reader, your guess is as good as mine.

Let us go back and consider for a moment the destructive ability of love. Was the strife that love engendered between Arcite and Palamon (not to be reductive) a good thing or a bad thing? More constructive than destructive? Did it shatter the closest and most noble of bonds, or give them both something to live for? Indeed, Arcite tells Palamon when he is released from prison and Palamon is not

1236 Thyn is the victorie of this aventure.
Ful blisfully in prison maistow dure,-
In prison? Certes nay, but in paradys!

Arcite has transformed prison into Paradise by the fact that it is only from prison that he could experience Emelye. Since there was no hope ever to escape, no hope ever to possess her, hope instead became to see her every day, which he could do while incarcerated. In a way, while the two friends were imprisoned, Emelye walked among them, as God did in Eden with Adam and Eve. It was Paradise for Arcite, for he was





given all he could hope for. Freedom, though, came with a price. For Adam and Eve, knowledge, or intellectual freedom, cost them Eden and being with God in the fullest way man could ever be. For Arcite, his parole, or physical freedom, took him out of a state in which he had all he could hope for and placed him in a situation whereby he could hope for much more with no possibility for satisfaction. The following two statements show how love has disordered the natural order so, that it has caused the divorce of freedom and happiness.

1250 Farwel my lyf, my lust, and my gladnesse!
1272 Ther now I am exiled from my wele.

Palamon, on the other hand, views Arcite as being blessed and having the advantage, for with his parole Arcite could return to Thebes, raise an army, and lay siege to Athens—not as retribution for years of unjust punishment, but rather to put himself in a position to gain Emelye as his wife, either by victory or by treaty.

Perhaps this is a way in which love is connected to happiness, but if it is, it is certainly a negative attachment. We can call this the "Grass is Always Greener" factor. When love is withheld from you, you can never be content with where you are, your present situation. This is partially because something which has become essential is now missing, partially because a clear, measured and objective assessment of the present situation, and consequently of what can be done to remedy it, is clouded to such an extent that it doesn't even seem that a remedy is possible, and partially because not being able to fulfill love creates jealousy, which is also an impediment to happiness.

It is at this point in the tale that love fully comes into the inheritance of another aspect of itself which it has been only hinting at so far. Whereas we have seen love earlier either as a sudden violent force, a reason to live, or as an imperious bureaucrat with an almost unfathomable sense of order, it now shows itself to be a malady both chronic and acute. The malady

manifests itself in Arcite by causing him to be not what he is. He is a knight. He should face adversity with valor and courage and with an eye towards gaining victory. Instead, he is weak, enfeebled and broken after his parole. Love creates a separation between who you are and who you are, and "a house divided against itself cannot stand."

Why doesn't Arcite attack Athens? He receives a vision from Mercury that he is to return to Athens and that there his misery is destined to come to an end. Granted, Mercury, among other things, is a god of subterfuge, and this might have suggested to Arcite that he was meant to go to Athens in disguise. But still, he is a knight, straightforward and honest. Mercury is also the messenger of the gods, and could be delivering an oracle of sorts, a message Arcite is meant to interpret. Why then does Arcite interpret it in the way that he does? Has the malady divorced him from his nature to such an extent, or has it gone even one step further, has the illness changed his very nature itself? Even a knight in beggar's clothing should be recognizable as a knight. But

1403 That, sith his face was so disfigured
Of maladye the which he hadde endured,
He myghte wel, if that he bar hym lowe,
Live in Atthenes everemoore unknowe,

The lover's malady has ravaged the landscape of his visage to such an extent that it has rendered him unrecognizable, and, it seems, has not stopped at his face. When he returns to Athens as a free man, he does not return as Arcite the knight, but as a poor laborer who calls himself Philostrate, which means 'conquered (or destroyed) by love'.

After Arcite *qua* Philostrate returns to Athens, the plot, at least, begins to move rather quickly. Arcite has become a trusted servant to the duke, Theseus, allowing him to restore the fulfillment of what was his former hope, to be able to watch Emelye. In the meantime, Palamon has escaped from prison with the intent of doing what he thought Arcite should





have done when he gained his freedom. When they encounter each other in the field where they first spied Emelye, they reprise the roles they had relinquished for so long and once again become chivalrous and courageous knights, ready and willing to fight for what they want; only now, instead of being motivated by honor and glory, they are driven by jealousy and hatred.

Theseus comes upon them, about to destroy each other in some sort of manifestation of natural law, and imposes upon them instead man's law, converting their personal battle into a tournament. Alongside the lists, he erects a temple with three shrines: Venus, to whom Palamon prays, to the east; Diana, to whom Emelye prays, to the north; and Mars, to whom Arcite prays, to the west. Palamon, after asking Venus for Emelye, says:

2254 And if ye wol nat so, my lady sweete
Thanne preye I thee, tomorwe with a spere
That Arcita me thurgh the herte bere.

In this we see, once again, love disordering all laws, for love has made death desirable.

At the temple, we are finally introduced to Emelye firsthand. She prays to Diana:

2304 Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf
I am, thow woost, yet of thy companignye,
A mayde, and love hunting and venerye,
And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe.
Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man.

Where is Emelye's happiness? She says it is not in love, which she seems to view as some sort of entrapment, but rather with her own freedom. Indeed, we are introduced to this idea of love as a prison with Arcite and Palamon, but their ideas of freedom are fulfillment of that love or else death; there can be

no voluntary cessation of it. Emelye ties her happiness in freedom to the fact that she is a maiden and therefore defined as herself, not constructed as a wife or mother. But her disinterest in love also seems attached to her aversion of men, and I am not sure if the reason for this aversion is rooted simply in physical disinterest or if it is also born out of an aversion to being entrapped by anyone.

If I might be allowed to digress for a moment, my gracious reader, there seems to be an interesting discussion on freedom and entrapment in another tale, one which might be applicable here. In the beginning of *The Clerk's Tale,* the marquis, who is unwed, is trying to be convinced by one of his subjects that he should marry. The man says to him

113 Boweth your nekke under that blisful yok
Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse,
Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok.

What is the difference between something having sovereignty over you and being a servant to something? How is it a blissful yolk to have a sovereign? Do we in some way take comfort from someone or something having ultimate power over us? If we do, it seems this comfort would come from the fact we believed or had experience that whatever had sovereignty over us was good, was good for us, would never harm us and would, in fact, nourish and take care of us. A little later, the marquis replies

145 I me rejoysed of my liberte
That selde tyme is founde in marriage.

It seems to me that in this discussion love is being equated with marriage, and so with your permission I will do the same. What is this liberty the marquis speaks of that is seldom found in love? Is it simply the ability to do what he wants? If so, why could he not do what he wants when in love, for don't your wants change when in love? Is it that he does not want to be responsible for anyone or anything other than himself? Well,





that can't be exactly true, for he is the marquis and already responsible to and for his people. Even if this wasn't the case, you cannot float through life being responsible to nothing save yourself and say you are really living. We are born responsible to others: to our parents, our friends, those we work for and those we work with. So what exactly is the freedom that is seldom found in love? It very well might be the love itself, the condition that love puts you in, that takes away your liberty. Not so much that your wants and desires change to coincide with those of the object of your love, but rather that they are replaced by them. If this is the case, the best possibility of love is not that we would be free and flourishing men under a sovereign who would order well those parts of our lives we cannot well order ourselves. Rather, when in love, the best we could hope for is to be a house slave, and most aren't even that. Most in love remain fieldhands, our only solace being the welts across our backs where our love has whipped us into submission, for at least those scars are memories of when our love deigned to touch us.

If this is the condition Emelye is trying to avoid by cherishing her freedom, is there a difference in knowledge of love between Arcite and Palamon, and Emelye? Is Emelye saying it is possible to be without love and be happy? Is she saying it is necessary to be without love to be happy? Or through her fear, is she proving and understanding that when you admit love into your life your happiness becomes mere commentary on the state of your love? I suspect that this is what she understood, which makes it even more curious when she says to Diana

2322 And if so be though wolt nat do me grace,
Of if my destynee be shapen so
That I shall nedes have oon of them two,
As sende me hym that moost desirth me.

If the last thing Emelye wants to do, for whatever reason, is to be a wife or mother, to have the company of a man, why would

she then pray to Diana that if she must be wed or possessed by one of the two, let it be the one who desires her most? Would not she have a better chance at retaining some of her freedom if wed to the one who desired her less? Would she not be in a better position to resist another's love from ruling her own life if it was less strong? Is it out of a sense of fairness? Out of submission? It could be an admission that on some level she does have desire for men, both sexually and emotionally, and perhaps the one who would have the best chance to draw it out of her would be the one with the most desire for her, the one who would have so much desire that she could appropriate some for her own purposes. My own inclination is to think, if we are to take her at her word about her loathing to be possessed by any man, that her prayer is made with the same wisdom of a John of Gaunt, that she understands

> 33 His rash, fierce blaze of riot cannot last,
> For violent fires soon burn out themselves;
> Small show'rs last long, but sudden storms are short;
> (Richard II II, i, 33-35)

I believe that Emelye knows what happens to passionate people, that sooner or later they destroy themselves, and that the sooner this happened, the sooner she would once again have her precious freedom, and once again be in control of her own happiness.

Are we any closer, my patient reader, to understanding what happiness is, or if there is any connection between love and happiness, than we were when we first started this journey? It doesn't appear that we are. We did not even succeed in staying within the parameters of our investigation, for we strayed often towards God and faith. It doesn't seem to me that continuing this investigation to the end of the tale would help us any more than the rest of the investigation has, for even by the end, we see no *evidence* of love being connected to happiness in any positive sense, only *statements*, all with the





same trite gist of "happily ever after." Have we seen on this journey anything at all which might convince us that there are positive aspects to love? Perhaps. We have seen love turn prison into Paradise and turn death into a happy end. We have seen how love can disorder anything that has been previously codified, which, yes, does speak to its destructive nature, but also might say that the rule of law really is the highest law, and if highest, by definition, best. If this is true, then we have no right to judge love by all its seemingly ruinous effects. Indeed, if true we have no right to judge love at all. If true, with respect to love we are all in the position of pilgrims (or servants) to God. Of course, if you don't want to buy that, my discriminating reader, then love and happiness might only ever make sense together retrospectively, only after the happiness offered in the phrase "happily ever after" is accepted and believed, like a noble lie.

In that case, farewell, my exhausted reader, and may you live happily ever after.

# Although Tilted

Casey Moore

Stong as Kevlar—the
threadbare cotton of her sheets
against night's creeping fingers.
Tomorrow she will
clip coupons for chicken legs
under the half-light of sunrise.

Riding on her hip I am
making turnip greens, I am
inheriting ghosts in the silent
ceremony of dusting photographs.
Riding on her hip—
not kangaroo-like with motion coming
somewhere from behind, but
like a second head—
I am watching perpendicular to her eyes.

I am the only child who
picks her blueberries.
Her smell is safer than home.

> Onto the floor now
> she eases me down.
> My fingers slip
> on stocking seams.
> She stands in the hallway
> like a half-empty see-saw,
> one lightened
> hip thrust out to the left.
>
> I could remember her
> this way, tilted, almost
> falling, and believe that I
> had always balanced her,





but in memory this image
transposes itself onto
another, colorless, stained with coffee,

where she stands freshly wed,
straight as a windless field of pines.
Her gaze appears
interrupted—
polite but incredulous—
the gaze of a photographed
soldier—
shocked that anyone
could find time,
in time,
to preserve a moment.

Beside her, he is too heavy
to ride her hip, but he will
tilt her yet, as shade tilts a tree
toward the sun.
As she looks outside of
space, he only pretends
to look at the ground,
refusing to see, crushed
under the weight of
being seen.

> (Old man, the ground you study is now
> your only lover, but although tilted,
> she is in my eyes.
> Riding on her hip,
> I learned to see beyond the wold
> by adding the component of her stare
> to my vector.)

Strong as Kevlar—the
threadbare cotton of her sheets
against night's creeping fingers.

*Anything but Biblical*
C. Muscarella



# The Tyrant's Temperance: Plato's *Charmides**

Eva Brann

I'll begin by telling you when and how I came on this little drama, the *Charmides,* which is not among Plato's most read dialogues. It was during a cold Greek winter in the late fifties, and I was working by myself in the storage rooms of the American excavations at Corinth, the great commercial center of ancient Greece. At night I came back to the guest house where an invisible staff had made a fire and prepared a meal. There was no one there either, but the common room had a complete set of Loeb volumes, the olive and gold edition of all of Greek literature with Greek on the left and English on the right pages. There I conceived and carried out two deeds of intemperance: One was that I got hungry late at night and sneaked into the kitchen and ate a bowl of the far-famed Corinthian yogurt, real goat's-milk yogurt, creamy, with a thick skin, which I topped with mounds of brown sugar. Alas, I had incontinently eaten the starter yogurt, the seed pearl of yogurts, and this famous strain disappeared from the archaeological world forever, to my disgrace. The other conception of hybris was to read my way straight through all of Plato's thirty-six dialogues that winter in Corinth and Athens. As is usually the case with such study plans of overweening ambition, I remembered nothing and yet everything. I certainly remembered the *Charmides* for its intensely charming frame and its forbiddingly dry dialectic. It was the first time I had come on the close juxtaposition of the inflammation of love and the intensity of reason that appears in a number of Socrates' conversations. I might

* Delivered at Middlebury College in October 2002. I thank Paul Dry warmly for his many corrective comments.

have said "the concreteness of passion and the *abstraction* of thought," but I avoid the term "abstract" like the plague when speaking of Socrates' or Plato's thinking. "Abstraction" has to do, literally, with drawing away from the particularities of life and producing mere rational residues. For Socrates, however, what is reached by our thinking has more genuine life, more vibrant being than the particulars of experience which jump-start Socratic conversations. I say this now because in this dialogue there will be someone who does engage in abstraction (*aphairesis*) in that attenuating, rarifying sense, though the word itself wasn't used in that way until Aristotle introduced it into philosophy.

The next time I thought seriously about the dialogue was just this past spring (2002), forty-five years later, when a group of us met for a day in Annapolis to have our own conversation about Socrates' conversation. As happens several times in the Platonic dialogues, there were two brothers in our group of friends; one of them was your own Professor Murray Dry, and the other Paul Dry, who has taught some of you as well. Also present was one of my colleagues, Peter Kalkavage, with whom I've translated some dialogues, and Cecie Dry, Paul's wife, who was probably the least used to reading these works. And again, just as happens in Socratic conversations, from this participant came the tone-setting observation: a sense of unease with the dialogue, a feeling of opaqueness and hidden agendas. We began to look for that hidden agenda, and this talk is really a record of what came to us in our animated talk.

Let me here bring in the subtitle of the *Charmides*. We don't know who supplied it, but it is quite accurate. It says: "Concerning Temperance: Tentative." The dialogue is certainly tentative; it makes an unsuccessful try at discovering the meaning of a term and seems to have purely negative results. But just remember how useful negative results are in all sorts of investigation: They tighten the confines of the positive possibilities.

There is, furthermore, no question that the dialogue has





a single theme: temperance. The Greek word is *sophrosyne*, which means literally "safe-" or "sound-mindedness," just as *Socrates* means "sound power"—but that is pure serendipity, and though I'd like to say later on that Socrates' meaningful name resounds in the dialogue I scarcely dare claim it; Socrates himself will, to be sure, play on his partner's parental name.

*Sophrosyne* is rendered variously as "temperance" (and I've used that in my title, "The Tyrant's Temperance" for the small joy of alliteration), as "modesty," as "moderation," as "self-control," and as "self-possession." All of these are interpretative versions, and it is good to keep them in mind when the effort is to get to the center of this ring of meanings. From now on I'll stick mostly with the literal translation: sound-mindedness.

Still meandering about the outskirts of the dialogue, I now have to raise a problem of the sort called "hermeneutic" by scholars, as follows:

Suppose yourself in conversation with a forceful, clever young man of about twenty-eight, called Slobodan Milošević. You know by a time warp that he will do such atrocious deeds that he will come before an international war crimes tribunal. Will that fact work retroactively, will a curious kind of *ex post facto* indictment taint the present conversation and your perspective of the young man's arguments? I would say it was practically unavoidable.

Well, that's the case for Charmides and Critias, who are Socrates' partners in the conversation (not that I seriously think that the worst Greek tyrant can quite match in style the gross boorishness of a modern Balkan dictator).

We may suppose that the dialogue is an invention of Plato's intellect, though the participants are contributions from the real world. Logicians of fiction call such persons, people who wander from the world of fact into the texts of fiction, "immigrant characters." Let me say as an aside here that I hope we all agree that the real people in their factual world probably never said anything as significant and revealing of truth as

they say in their fictionally revised moments. But if the truth is in the invented conversation, why allow these immigrants into the dialogue at all and so often? After all, Charmides and Critias aren't the only immigrants whose future casts a shadow on their dialogic present. Flagrant Alcibiades, incidentally a close friend of Critias, and iniquitous Meno are two others. It must be, I think, because their lives, known to contemporaries and to us from reports (sometimes from other dialogues), are supposed to be unheard yet shrill descants above the plainsong of the conversation, and we are intended to hear both strains. Now that possibility poses something of a problem for me. At home, at St. John's College, we pride ourselves on going at the text directly and getting out what's in it, and not diverting and distracting ourselves with extraneous knowledge. And here I am about to breach this hermeneutic, that is, this interpretational principle, to draw attention to the latter-day lives of the participants in the *Charmides*. My excuse is that I think the dialogue itself calls for such knowledge to be brought to bear on it. Or to put it somewhat paradoxically: Even someone who knew nothing further of Charmides and Critias could tell, as could the freshest of the members of our reading group in spring, that there was something further to be known, something lurking behind the conversation. What was it?

Critias as master spirit and Charmides as a follower belonged to the regime of the Thirty Tyrants. They put down the democracy of Athens and ruled Athens from fall of 404 to spring of 403 B.C. for eight months of carnage, plunder and sacrilege. Their rage to purge all opposition makes one historian compare their regime to the Reign of Terror that degraded the French Revolution. Here in Athens there seems to have occurred an early, perhaps the earliest, example of ideological purification; all persons even suspected of democratic incliniations were eliminated by judicial murder. More fellow-Athenians were killed by these Athenians in eight months than had died in ten years of the Peloponnesian War. The democratic exiles eventually mounted a battle in which Critias and Charmides died; this happened twenty-nine years after the dialogue we are thinking about had taken place. The Spartans were called in to superintend the end of the Athenian civil war. These are unforgettable facts. I might add that it is reported (Aeschines I 173) that "Socrates the Sophist" was executed—this was in 399 B.C.—"because he educated Critias." We shall see whether Plato thinks that Socrates taught Critias anything or was his mentor. It adds to the poignancy of the setting that all these people are blood kin: Charmides was Plato's maternal uncle, while Critias was Charmides' and Plato's mother's cousin (as well as guardian), and so Plato was Critias's first cousin once removed. It will become problematic whether this dialogue does what some people think: sets an honorable monument to these two monstrous embarrassments to the family, who died when Plato was about twenty-six, not far from Critias' age in the dialogue, and when he was just a few years from giving up the composing of tragedies in favor of writing dialogues celebrating Socrates.





Critias turns up in other dialogues, most significantly in the one named after him. Let me give a most abbreviated version of its contents: Critias describes the old, prehistoric enemy of an Athens that existed long before the historical Athens. This antediluvian Athens (which Socrates' friends pretend was an incarnation of something like that "beautiful city" described in the *Republic*) had to face a terrifying invader, Atlantis. Critias describes this island realm with such relish that to this day people think of it as a lost idyll, submerged in the great flood that also eroded Old Athens. In fact Atlantis is the prototype of a totalitarian state, whose imagined architecture prefigures the Nazi building programs under Hitler's architect and minister of armaments Albert Speer: Its land has been regimented by a geometric abstraction, a great grid; its city is an impregnable nest of concentric circles of deep moats and enormous walls, in whose center bloody sacrifices are performed. By an uncanny coincidence the colored stones used in this building program are the Nazi colors of white, black, and red (*Critias* 116 a). Poseidon, the most resentfully persecutional of all the gods,

fathers the Atlantic kings by a rape. Of all this Critias is the admiring verbal architect. Surely Plato is shuddering at his work.

To my mind it took courage on Plato's part to make this whole brilliantly awful crew turn up in the dialogues devoted to his teacher—but perhaps he thought that one Plato who turned out to be a credit to Socrates could outweigh them all, and that he could show by intimations that Socrates never had any illusions about those of his companions who went to the bad. If our reading group's hunch about this dialogue works out, it will be clear that Plato was never the captive of his clan and class convictions and that any argument that begins "He belonged to an aristocratic family, and therefore he . . ." is apt to be a *non sequitur*. Where there is thinking there are no inadvertent loyalties.

That is enough bumbling about in the outer precincts of the dialogue. Let me plunge into the work itself by setting out a preview of its main features so you'll know where I'm heading. Many Platonic dialogues have this feature: Just as you think you've grasped the subject, you are asked to follow Socrates into something apparently different: The *Phaedrus* begins with love and ends with rhetoric, the *Republic* begins with politics and centers in on liberal education, and the *Charmides* declares itself to be about soundmindedness and slithers off into theory of knowledge, knowing about knowing. We are to apprehend the connection of these apparently disparate matters.

Just as real people take part in this dialogue so it has an exact date. It is 431 B.C., right at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, when Potidea, a city that had abrogated its alliance with Athens, surrendered after more than a year's siege by Athenian troops. Socrates, who had been away for quite a while on this campaign, has returned the night before. Though he is thirty-nine, he probably has no family yet. At any rate, he turns up the very next morning at a wrestling school. There he has a conversation which he tells at some unknown time to an unknown person; perhaps we're supposed to think it is Plato. When Plato wrote the dialogue down we don't know,





nor does it matter, though it's generally thought to be an early work.

Now there are other dialogues, like this one, that Socrates tells, in the first person. One is the *Protagoras*. There the cousins, Charmides and Critias, now a few years older, appear along with Pericles' sons, as well as the wild and beautiful Alcibiades, in the company of Protagoras and several other sophists (315 a). The other famous first-person dialogue is the *Republic*, in which Socrates discusses that very narrational form for writing with respect to its truthfulness (393 f.). There are three forms of narration, he says: An author can candidly stand behind his work, so that we can readily infer his presence. He does that by speaking of his characters in the third person and in indirect discourse. For example: "Socrates came to the wrestling school as soon as he was back from Potidea, and there he met Critias, and Critias said that, etc." Or the author can, like a tragic poet, disappear from our consciousness and make himself into an imitator of each of the characters that are saying their lines in their own personas, hiding himself behind their dramatic masks, in this fashion: Socrates: "Good morning, how has philosophy been faring since I went on campaign? Any interesting boys?" Critias: "Wait till you see my cousin Charmides." Or a writer might mix the candid and the imitational mode.

The *Republic* itself, as well as the *Charmides*, is written in a yet different narrational mode. First, Socrates speaks in his own person, impersonating no one but himself—an honest proceeding. But then, second, he mimics the dialogue of the others—not so honest. And third, Plato is hiding beyond our ken and consciousness in bringing on the stage a Socrates who speaks for himself out of his first-person mask—very shifty. These first-person dialogues, then, in which Plato imitates Socrates directly, contrary to his own canons of candor, betoken tricky business, to my mind. I'll try to show what that tricky business is.

So when Socrates arrives, he is greeted first by a kind of philosophical nut, a histrionic person named Chaerephon, who

has attached himself to Socrates. His presence shows that Socrates has slipped back into his old life, and that not all his followers are very self-controlled; Chaerephon is a kind of immoderate innocent, harmlessly unsound of mind. He brings Socrates to sit down with Critias, who will not be so harmless. They all want to know the news from the field. Socrates reports, evidently modestly saying nothing about his own part in the campaign, which we however hear of from Alcibiades in the dialogue *Symposium* (219 e f.). According to him, Socrates was famous in the camp for his terrific hardiness, his self-control under conditions of wintry cold and hunger, his day-long sieges of standing motionless in the summer sun, rapt in thought, and his heroic rescue of Alcibiades in battle. Clearly Plato is presenting *sophrosyne* incarnate—Socrates is a model of modesty, hardy self-control, and, we'll soon see, of moderation.

Now he asks for the news he cares about: How is philosophy doing, have any of the boys become prominent for wisdom or beauty (in that order) or, what he would evidently welcome most, both together?

At this moment a noisy crowd of fighting fans come in, announcing the celebrity himself, Charmides, who is probably about fourteen, just grown into adolescence; he is called a stripling—a long narrow shape of a boy. You have to read the dialogue to feel the intensity of its charm: the erotically charged atmosphere of the gym, the Dionysiac entrance of the beautiful and well-born boy with his rout of followers, the ludicrous eagerness of the men pushing each other off the benches so he'll sit by them. Since he's Critias' cousin and ward, Critias calls him over on the pretext that Socrates can cure some morning headaches he's been having. Chaerephon has let loose a *bon mot* and is heard from no more: If the boy stripped, he says, you would think he had no face—his beauty of form (*eidos*) is so perfect. Socrates says soberingly: The man—not "boy"—would be impossible to beat in battle if he had one tiny additional thing, a well-grown soul; that soul is





what we should undress. Now Charmides looks at Socrates, and his mantle falls open (or he lets it fall open). Socrates confides something that is rare to the person to whom he's telling this event. We know from other dialogues that he can be passionate for his beliefs, deeply contemptuous of incurable ignorance, and angry with conceited cleverness. But now, just once, he's on fire, burning—so he says—and no longer "in himself"—that is, he is ecstatic and beyond self-control.

I must stop here to say something about that notorious Socratic irony. The Greek word means "pretending, dissembling," in Socrates' case pretending for pedagogical purposes to know a good deal less than he does. The Romantic concept of irony, set out by Kierkegaard in his doctoral dissertation on Socratic irony, makes irony a kind of non-committal hovering above the issue, a deliberate withholding of commitment. I have a feeling that here, in this one dialogue, Socrates comes close to the modern notion: He may well be aroused by a charming boy who is what we vulgarly call "coming on" to him. At the same time he's looking at himself smilingly, ironically, from a safe place beyond.

At any rate he collects himself quickly and admits to the boy (who's been advertised to him as philosophical and also "wholly poetical") that he does have a headache drug, but the guru from the northern provinces who gave it to him also told him that it is ineffective unless accompanied by an incantation. Socrates has taken an oath never to administer the drug without it. At first Charmides wants to take this charm down in writing so as to use it at will; laughingly he agrees to do it only with Socrates' consent. Socrates asks him: "Do you know my name accurately?"—I pointed out before that Socrates means "Sound in power" or some such thing. All this byplay is amusing—and also ominous, as we will see. There's a game and a battle here, in this direct Platonic mime of Socrates.

Now Socrates expounds a theory of treatment which we would call holistic medicine: You can't treat the eyes without the head, the head without the body—and the body without

the soul. The implication is plain to us if not to the boy: His headache betokens that his soul isn't well. You don't have to know the boy's future to conceive a suspicion of this young celebrity.

The incantation consists of beautiful words—dialectic conversation—which will engender soundmindedness. Here the governing word of the dialogue appears. Critias bursts in to say that his nephew outdoes all the other boys in this virtue—never mind that temperance and modesty aren't very good candidates for competitive possession.

Socrates asks Charmides directly if he's so very soundminded, and like a well-bred boy he weasels; he can't, after all, prove his guardian a liar and he won't praise himself.

Here begins the dialectic part of the dialogue. In reading it we must work our way through the arguments, but we don't need to like them. They are often, as here, intended to be refutational, to show people 1. that they hardly know what they're talking about and 2. that they can't even defend the skeletal thoughts they do have from picky and tricky attacks. I think this refutational testing is intended to evoke the intelligent outrage of the alert reader and to drag into the conversation the concatenation of terms needed to carry on the inquiry. You might say that refutational logic is the spinach of the dialectical diet: It's good for you.

Socrates starts with the two necessary conditions for such talk: experience of the thing (we are to think that Charmides has some perception of soundmindedness) and a common language in which to articulate the experience (Charmides speaks Greek). Then Charmides is to say what he thinks soundmindedness is. His first notion is that it is a sort of quietness, a subdued decorousness—a funny perception for a boy who has been led into the gym by a noisy bunch of squabbling kids. Socrates quickly shows that this notion is nowhere near the center of what ought to be, whatever else it is, a good thing, since nervy quickness is often a better mode than elegant languor. Charmides tries again: Soundmindedness





is modesty, bashfulness. This is indeed how upper-class European children used to be brought up: to be shy, seen but not heard, on the hypothesis that an inhibited youth makes for a self-possessed maturity. Socrates points out that shyness is not always a virtue—by an appeal to the *Odyssey*, where Homer has someone say that bashfulness is no good for a needy man.

Charmides has been dialectically driven to the end of his own experience, not because what he says is wrong—in fact, in its ordinary use *sophrosyne* encompasses the features he picks out—but because it comes to him too easily. Now he tries something second-hand. Socrates knows right away that this formula comes from Critias, but both cousins deny it. It's a playful white lie but also something darker: an intrusion of caginess where it is least wanted, in a philosophical inquiry. The formula Charmides remembers is that soundmindedness is "doing one's own thing." Readers of the *Republic* will recall that this is its operative notion of the virtue of justice. In its application to the soul it means knowing oneself, that is, knowing how one's soul is constituted and then letting each capacity do its work, in particular letting the desires reach out for possession, the spirit tense and tone the psychic fabric and the reason issue restraining commands to the whole. In the *Republic* soundmindedness is the harmonious adjustment of these three parts, so in that dialogue justice and soundmindedness are not so easily distinguishable: Justice seems to belong to each capacity in itself; soundmindedness seems to belong to the three in their relation to one another. But out of this psychological context the formula "doing one's own thing" is unintelligible, and Charmides is soon reduced to perplexity. It can't mean, as Socrates suggests, that a scribe is supposed to write only his own name or that you're supposed to make your own shoes. Again Critias explodes. Charmides is garbling what has suddenly become *his* definition and is ruining his reputation.

Socrates switches partners, and from now on he talks to the sophistical and savvy older cousin, Critias, who appeals to the poet Hesiod for some tricky word-mongering of the sort

he has evidently learned in the school of Prodicus the Sophist. The upshot is that "doing your own thing" is now turned into "doing good things." It doesn't mean making your own shoes or scribbling only your own name but doing useful and noble things. But, Socrates pushes him, don't the craftsmen and professionals often get useful, helpful results without quite knowing what they're doing? Yet things done helpfully are done soundmindedly. (Socrates introduces here a term important for later use: *ophelimos*, "helpfully" or "serviceably.") Well, if that's so, couldn't someone be acting soundmindedly without knowing what he was doing? Critias is scandalized: that's impossible.

Critias demonstrates, as he will again later, that ready flexibility in argument can be a token of being fundamentally disengaged. He withdraws his previous claims, and, this time appealing to the famous inscriptions on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, comes up with a new formula: What the god means by "Know thyself!" is "Be soundminded!" By means of some silly sophistry he argues away the other famous inscription on the temple: "Nothing too much."

Two points are to be remarked. Once again Critias feeds back to Socrates formulas that are Socrates' own, but without the Socratic context which gives them meaning. Socrates makes no mystery of what he means by the injunction to self-knowledge. He doesn't mean rummaging around in your own "subjectivity" but getting clear knowledge of your soul's constitution, so that you'll know whether you are a complex monster or a quieter, simpler creature (*Phaedrus* 230 a). Nor does he mean something terrifically abstract, some purely logical self-reflection—as Critias will later on. The second point is that for the moment Socrates lets Critias get away with setting aside the most normal understanding of moderation, the "Nothing too much," that Golden Mean that is for Aristotle (who always takes his departure from normality) the master schema according to which all the virtues are means between extremes. Socrates himself regards such





balanced, steady self-control as the master virtue in the *Gorgias* (507 b f.), and he makes its absence a specific vice of tyrants in the *Republic* (571 ff.). This straightforward moral virtue is the one Critias pushes aside. The translators of my favorite version of the *Charmides*, Thomas and Grace West, note this crucial fact.

Critias wants Socrates to agree to all this derivative cleverness, but Socrates balks. He's trying to mount an inquiry and doesn't know the answer without taking a moment to consider. Socrates is introducing in his own conduct the possibility of knowledgeable ignorance. So here begins the serious dialectic, a difficult but trick-free investigation. It will bring into the world at least two incipient notions with huge futures.

In the Middle Ages one of these will acquire the still current name of *intentionality*. Intentionality means the capacity for "aboutness," and it can be claimed that all thinking possesses it preeminently. I don't know if it can be proved, but I believe that *only* thinking has it, which would mean that wherever there is aboutness there is thought, for instance that feelings which are about something are necessarily thought-imbued. Here is what I mean by aboutness. Thinking always has an intention, an object at which it is directed. Even if you think of nothing, then Nothing becomes your object. When we ask "What was all that about?" we are implying that someone had something in mind. The non-conscious world isn't about anything except by our attribution; for example, we may impute an intention or feeling to nature (which imputation is called the Pathetic Fallacy). In short, to think is to think about something, and to know is to know *something*, and this aboutness is the exclusive mark of thinking.

That's exactly Socrates' next thought. If soundmindedness is knowledge at all, it is knowledge of something. Yes, of itself, says Critias. Well, objects Socrates, how come all the other kinds of knowledge have objects *other* than themselves, as medicine has health?

Critias tells Socrates he is inquiring incorrectly. Geom-

etry for instance has no independent product. But, says Socrates, it does have a separable subject. Now really, what's temperance a knowledge *of*, what is to be known that's different from temperance itself?

Critias blows up again and accuses Socrates, who is now certainly in the inquiring mode, of being in the merely refutational mode. Soundmindedness, he claims, is simply different from all the other kinds of knowledge. It is—not his own term—reflexive, its own object. But Critias slips in an addition to gain not one but many objects for his soundmindedness as well: It is the knowledge of itself *and* of other sciences. Socrates pacifies the beleaguered Critias, who concedes that what Socrates says "observes the *mean*"; he unwittingly uses a term reintroducing the sense of moderation that he had excluded from consideration.

If soundmindedness is a knowledge of itself and of other knowledges, it must also be a knowledge of ignorance. This little addition is a characteristic Socratic ploy; it makes apparently innocuous little shifts that turn out to have large consequences.

So I must stop again to point out that the question of the knowledge of ignorance is really a serious preoccupation for Socrates, for on it depends the possibility of inquiry. The dialogue *Meno* is concerned with this very question: How is discovery of the unknown possible, how do we recognize a new truth, how do we know what it is we do not know? So also Socrates' notorious claim to know that he knows nothing is not a discountable bit of Socratic irony but the formula for a lifelong question: *What* do we know if we know our ignorance? To Socrates soundmindedness is not a set of abstracted impersonal notions. When he summarizes the inquiry so far, he humanizes all the talk of knowledge and self-knowledge and products and subjects: The soundminded human being will know himself and will discern what he knows and doesn't know, and will have some judgment about what others know and don't know.

But again, in the presence of these cousins all the issues





are being stripped of their Socratic pathos and put in the service of a perilously hollow agenda.

For what Critias is formulating is a perfectly self-aware master-knowledge which will give him total control with minimum effort and will, on top of everything, bear the grand name given it by that mythical "law-giver," the originator of names: *sophrosyne*. Whoever possessed *this* virtue, this *power*, could certainly tyrannize the world. Cloaked in the good name of a moderating virtue, he could direct for his own ends and from afar all the work of the world, judging it by a knowledge abstracted from all concrete objects and totally imbued with the sense of its own knowing—a self-certifying knowledge, isolated and impregnable to the influence of human circumstances.

The good old-fashioned tyrants, from those ruling the early Greek city-states to certain Roman emperors, were, it seems, given to sensuality and sadism: Socrates describes the type of the tyrant in the *Republic* as self-tyrannized rather than self-controlled, tyrannized, that is, by his own ravenous appetites. But Critias, as Socrates gets him to reveal himself to us, seems to have in him a hint of a more austere modern type first fully seen, apparently, during the French Terror, a fierce purifier of all opposition and exterminator of all opponents, an ideologue with a master knowledge, a knowledge of knowledge which enables his regime to regulate all knowledges without knowing any of their objects, to judge and censor ignorance or falsehood without knowing how ignorance is possible. More concretely, it is a characteristic of the most destructive modern tyrannies that they are ideological, in the sense that in them one knowledge, one schematic idea—it could be any—certifies itself and all other knowledge as within or without its pale, while human good and bad are mere derivatives of these mental figments. In a word, this knowledge, objectless because indifferent to its object's truth, has one true intention: power. Critias, to my mind, prefigures the modern totalitarian ruler, a creature who rules by

abstractions, an austere ideologue albeit with excessive and inhuman appetites. What I'm saying is a hunch, a speculation, but based on an eerie sense of watching an inchoate evil, one that will emerge more clearly at the end of the dialogue.

Socrates begins the third and last part of his inquiry with Critias. The first part dealt with Critias's claim that soundmindedness was doing one's own thing. The second was the transformation of this borrowed formula into knowledge of itself and of other knowledges and of ignorance. Now Socrates asks whether such a knowledge, a knowledge of nothing other than itself and of other knowledges and non-knowledges, is even possible.

Socrates thinks it is impossible. He cites all kinds of disparate examples of aboutness. Socrates shapes this inquiry as a question concerning the genitive relation, really the preposition "of." "Vision of," "opinion of," "desire of"—none of these can be completed reflexively: vision of vision, opinion of opinion, desire of desire—none of these capacities seem to apply to themselves. But Socrates doesn't trust himself to be up to analyzing this question further. Like an infectious yawn, this perplexity seizes Critias as well.

Here is the second future-fraught issue of the dialogue. We moderns might not agree that these second-level capacities are so unthinkable: "Desire of desire" is a well-known Romantic notion, that of self-excitation. "Opinion of opinion" pretty exactly describes opinion research, a respectable second-level subject in political science. But "knowledge of knowledge," above all, is more than a mere possibility for us, for the chief task philosophers of the 17th and 18th century set themselves was to establish a knowledge of knowledge, even a science of science, and its name was epistemology. Its great aim was not only to certify the discoveries of science and thus to be truly a master-knowledge, but also to set the limits of human knowing, to be a knowledge of ignorance. I name Descartes and Kant to remind you of what I'm speaking about; this epistemological project is checked by Hegel's grand critique of





it in his Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. (I omit the "thought of thought" [*noesis noeseos*] that is the activity of divinity at the apex of Aristotle's world, for it is not reflexive but self-penetrating: It does not turn on itself as an instrument for working on an object, but rather its activity has become identical with its object—the thought of being and the being of thought are at one.) Socrates does not so much deny this reflexivity (which is the turn toward the future) as he finds himself not up to affirming it. No thoughtful person could call the Greek philosophers simple-minded, but they do seem to have a certain soundminded simplicity. I think it appears in the Socratic rejection of reflexive self-intention, the mind's focusing on its own functioning. But I'm far from having thought that out, although it does appear that some things seem hardly possible to Socrates that are a staple of our common opinion. He cannot believe, for example, 1. that anyone should willingly and knowingly choose evil; or 2. that any human thinking can be free of value; or 3. that aboutness in its abstraction should gain independence from and mastery over its original objects. For Socrates, recall, the master knowledge, the knowledge of his philosophizing kings, is not the knowledge of knowledge but the knowledge of the Good (*Republic* 540 a).

Because clever Critias has no great interest in the good that his epistemic soundmindedness might bring, Socrates now calls him by his father's curious name: son of "Callaeschrus," which means "Beautiful-Shameful."

But to help Critias over his shame at appearing inadequate Socrates concedes for the moment that a knowledge of knowledge might be possible (although he finds it in principle unintelligible that knowing should turn on itself when empty of an object). Yet how does such a knowledge help a human being to know *what* one knows or doesn't know? Surely, Critias says, a man who possesses such a reflexive science will be similar to what he has, and thus he will also know himself. Socrates concedes this too, though he can scarcely believe it.

It is, as we would say, too abstract. This reflexive knowledge is not Socratic self-knowledge; just to know knowledge is not to know one's human self. Yet even with this concession, Socrates, who is, as he says, "always the same," still doesn't understand how such knowledge can help him know anything substantial about himself or other subjects. By Critias's knowledge he can only know *that* he knows, not *what* he knows.

Socrates clearly thinks that this is a fairly empty thing to know, but again he is both broaching and rejecting a future doctrine. When Kant establishes the limits of reason in his *Critique of Reason*, he argues repeatedly *that* there are things beyond our experience—he calls them "things in themselves"—but that we are, *ipso facto*, unable to know *what* they are. It is the Socratic formula with a positive sign. For what Socrates considers unintelligible, that we might claim that we know something without a clue to what it is, that the question of existence might be answered without any reference to essence—this very possibility is positively asserted by Kant so that he might be able to delineate the farther side of the limits of human reason.

*If* there were a knowledge—call it soundmindedness—that knew the "what" of all the other knowledges, it would truly be a science for rulers, be they the rulers of homes or city states; soundmindedness would rule so that all that was done was done for the best, because no one would try to do what he was not competent to do, and everyone would let those who knew how to do it better, do it instead.

But this is probably attributing too great a power to soundmindedness, Socrates says, and so our inquiry has found nothing useful. Critias thinks Socrates is saying something very strange. Socrates agrees, using his very own oath: "By the Dog."—The Dog is apparently Anubis, the Egyptian god of the underworld, whence come dreams. So Socrates tells his dream; it may be from the underworld gate of false dreams or of true dreams, he doesn't know. Suppose soundmindedness regulated everything, and there was no pretense in the professions. We would indeed be healthier and safer and have better





utensils. But in always acting knowledgeably, would we necessarily do well and be happy? That's what we haven't yet been able to learn, my dear Critias, he says.

Critias can't really argue that shoemakers and brassworkers and other specialists are particularly happy. Supposing there *were* someone who knew everything. Which of all the things he knows *would* make him happy?—Not prophecy or playing the dice or even health science, they agree.

Critias finally coughs up what Socrates has been after: It is the knowledge of good and bad. Socrates bursts out in pretended indignation—or perhaps rather in a pretense of pretended indignation, for he knows Critias's soul. "You scoundrel!" You've dragged me around in circles, hiding the fact that living knowledgeably does not make us happy, and that *your* soundmindedness is not helpful. Socrates blames himself: If I had been useful to a noble inquiry, then what is agreed by all to be the noblest thing would not have come out seeming unhelpful to us. We've made unwarranted concession after concession: that there was a knowledge of knowledge, that it would know what other knowledges know, and most unreasonably of all, that a man can know what he doesn't know. (Recall here that Socrates in fact has a memorable way of making us believe that we can know what we don't know, set out as the Myth of Recollection in the *Meno*.)

Socrates concludes: Although the inquiry found us so simple-minded and flexible (a euphemistic description of Critias's sophistic slipperiness), it hasn't been able to find the truth but, helped by our agreements and constructions, has "hybristically" shown us the unhelpfulness of what we posited that soundmindedness was; Critias's soundmindedness has no necessary relation to the human good.

With this mention of the tyrant's flaw of *hybris*, "impertinent pride," in conjunction with "unhelpfulness," Socrates ends his passionate summary. The whole conversation has been one of illuminating false starts. Using terminology that is at once anachronistic and appropriate to this future-fraught

conversation, we ourselves might summarize it this way: A value-free consideration of human virtue is going to get us nowhere. It is Socrates' conviction—not a conclusion but rather a point of departure for his more conclusive inquiries—that the Good is the source of all knowledge (*Republic* 507 ff.). Since virtue is knowledge (a proposition argued in some form in many dialogues), it is, of course and even primarily, under the aegis of the Good. Furthermore, "all knowledge divorced . . . from virtue is villainy"—Socrates' word here is *panourgia*, "all-doing" (*Menexenus* 246 e). It is the necessary goodness of all genuine knowledge, and so of the virtue here discussed, that is occulted in this conversation with clever Critias, the prospective "all-doing" tyrant: As he has an empty, if all-encompassing, view of knowledge, so his understanding of temperance is divorced from goodness; it is intended as mere potency.

Here is my last chance to say clearly what is so significantly unusual about Socrates' dialectic in this dialogue. Almost always in other conversations he insists that the discovery of *what* something is, particularly a virtue, what its name signifies, must precede all other inquiries: how it's acquired, what it's good for. Here, in the *Charmides*, he would have reversed the order if Critias would have allowed it. Why? Because, it seems to me, his conversational partners are usually decent-minded if unthinking folks, who, although somewhat clueless about the meaning of the terms they live by, hold them in proper reverence. They know that soundmindedness, self-control, temperance, moderation are good, are what we call "values," whatever they may be. But in Critias Socrates is facing an opponent who seems to have no notion that any understanding of a virtue must include some sense of its making life good. Hence he has to wish to reverse his usual order of inquiry, though without success.

So Socrates turns back to Charmides: In your behalf, Charmides, he says, I am very anxious. That for you who are so remarkable in physical form and so very soundminded in





soul—that for you this soundmindedness should be of no help in your life!—if indeed you have this virtue, which I think is a great good. Socrates manages to concede and deny the virtue to the boy in the same speech. And Charmides picks up this hesitation. I don't know, he says, whether I have it or not. But I do need your incantation. Critias chimes in and unilaterally commits his ward to Socrates' companionship; Charmides will obey his guardian. Evidently they are whispering at this point. Socrates wants to know what they are plotting. The language becomes increasingly political. So you'll take me by force, Socrates says, without even a proper arraignment? I'll use force, Charmides says, since Critias has given the order. And he asks Socrates: What's *your* plan? Here is how Socrates reports the parting words of this ominous conversation.

> Socrates: There's no plan left to me. For once *you* set out to achieve anything by force, not a man can oppose you.
>
> Charmides: Then don't *you* oppose me.
>
> Socrates: Then I won't oppose you.

Some three decades later Charmides was a middle-aged member of that public conspiracy called the Thirty Tyrants. They ordered Socrates, along with four other men, to go and arrest a certain Leon of Salamis whom they wanted to kill. The others went to do it, but Socrates, risking his life, did in fact oppose the tyranny by refusing to execute the order. Instead he just went home (*Apology* 32). And no one dared touch him—at the time. That event is, I think, the ominous subtext of this strange little dialogue with its unwontedly personal setting and its oddly abstract dialectic.

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