

THE GADEFLY

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photo by Kira Anderson

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Interpretation and Accessibility in the Classics

Matt Langhinrichs A'17

At St. John's, all students begin their mathematics education by studying the works of Euclid, generally by studying Heath's translation of the *Elements*. We generally pride ourselves on the originality of our study here at the College—we build from the ground up, and study the Great Books as they were meant to be understood. In the particular case of geometry, however, tradition and ease have led us to settle for an interpretation of our source material, a translation of the *Elements* that strays far from its origins.

Euclid, as a person, may never have existed—unlike most ancient mathematicians

of his period, relatively little is known of him, and his name is rarely used in manuscripts from within a few centuries of his life. Generally, the author we know as Εὐκλείδης (“well-known, renowned”) is referred to as simply “the author of the *Elements*” by contemporaries, and may have even been a group of mathematicians working to compile the geometric knowledge of the time. Whatever their identity, the individual known as Euclid wrote in fairly simple speech, using a handful of basic vocabulary terms and building words where none existed. For example, when they

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New John Donne Poem Discovered!

◆ Manuscripts of this and five other sonnets were found in Donne's cookbook last month, which scholars believe to be “The Holier Sonnets” frequently mentioned by Donne in his correspondence.

Butter My Heart ◆ John Donne

Butter my heart, three-personed portion of
Most tender burger snug 'twixt toasty buns;
Double my lumpy waist: quadruple I's
Be my scale reading—half a tone of love!
Thy voice delicious calls me from above,
Not to heed which were sinful; hungry nuns
And fasting friars heed it: each one runs
Great slabs of meat in swim-drool mouths to shove.
Blessed am I who cheerfully obey
Thy viceroys in me: stomach, gut, and maw;
Prosper me: heap this altar high, I pray,
With choicest cuts, so thick they tire the jaw;
Then let me feast, till my intestines split,
After which I'll eat more, in spite of it.

From the Editors:

It's the end of the world as we know it, Polity, and I (that is, we, the *Gadfly*) feel fine. Until August, no more will our happy content warm the printing presses and brighten the coffee shop. Thoughts, photos, poetry will be carried away on the springtime breeze, swept across College Creek and into the unconquered West. On an unrelated note, does anyone know where I (that is, we, the *Gadfly*) can find a copy of “Hard in Hightown”? It is a publication of a somewhat off-color nature that we need in order to complete our current main quest. This should in no way reflect on the moral discretion and/or quality of the *Gadfly* or its staff. This is strictly a professional interest. If you find a copy of “Hard in Hightown,” please let us know. No need to open it. Just notify us.
-The *Gadfly*

Notes from the Other Side: 10

Sleeping in a Hammock with a Malarial Fever while Everyone Else is Dancing

Judith Seeger TUTOR

If you can call it sleep . . .

Phantasmagoric shadows cast by fires
dip and soar on the towering thatch.
Passing beneath the rope of my hammock
painted dancers set the hammock swinging . . .
Drifting in . . .
Drifting out . . .
I hear fragments of song . . .
Fever dreams take on the rhythm of the dance.

They say that sickness means your spirit has been stolen.
Perhaps it hides among the fish, among the bees, among the trees . . .
Haven't you heard? The whole world sings!
But you must listen carefully . . .
And then perhaps when you return you'll bring a song back too.

My body is aching . . . where is my spirit?
My body is burning . . . where is my song?

BELLS OF MINDFULNESS IN AIX-EN-PROVENCE

Patricia Locke Tutor

Each and every morning of my life in Aix, the cathedral bells sound powerfully, ringing right next to my bed, urging me to arise. I am reverberating with these insistent sounds, as the electromagnetic dimension of each and every molecule I call mine is aligning itself for the day. I'm not headed to the church across la place for 7:30 AM mass, but the bells somehow dedicate the day differently from my usual iPhone chimes, or even my cat, MiaoMiao, coming in to find out why breakfast has not yet been served. Bells like these have been the timekeepers in many towns for centuries (see Tarkovsky's sterling film, *Andrei Rublev*, on bell making).

Along with seasonal changes and the sun's chariot tracks across the sky, humans like to tell time with bells that can be heard throughout the community. Here in Aix, cathedral bells toll for the important divisions of the day: wake up for mass, noon pause in work, evening vigil. On Sundays, they do overtime, tolling out mass-in-ten-minutes for each service. This is distinct from every-hour-on-the-hour: time is not uniform and precise, but is close to our activities. The bells rest when we rest, revive us when it is time to greet the sun. The College bell likewise reminds us of the beginning of classes, for though we may study different things, we are involved in a common activity. After seminar, the bell is silent, because we need not end punctually. We can extend our conversations into the night, or head off to the dreamland where books rewrite themselves.

Here's Proust on the bells of Combray, the ancestral village of his protagonist:

"And I would have liked to be able to sit down and stay there the whole day reading while I listened to the bells; because it was so lovely and tranquil that, when the hour rang, you would have said not that it broke the calm of the day, but that it relieved the day of what it contained and that the steeple, with the indolent, painstaking precision of a person who has nothing else to do, had merely—in order to squeeze out and let fall the few golden drops

which had slowly and naturally collected there in the heat—pressed at the proper moment the fullness of the silence."

Proust's novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, describes multiple selves. Some are social, joining others in a common life, while a deeper self is solitary, cultivated through reading, reflecting, and becoming more aware of the silent natural world given to our senses. Bells show us both the world and our selves. When absorbed in thought, we do not hear the dinner bell, which calls us to join our companions, but we are still connected to them in that suspended state. All layers or aspects of the group I call "myself" can be joined with a transversal line by the sounds of external bells, much like the words of annunciation lettered in gold diagonally spread across a medieval painting.

In a Provençal village, Eguilles, I once had a spectacular evening sitting out on a patio in the dark with friends, eating dinner by candle and star. The bells began to toll out midnight. I was a bit late in counting: was it really midnight? The unseen clock tower seemed to sense my confusion, and again tolled out 12. Oui! Really time for bed, if you want to be up with the chickens. This kindness towards the questioner made the bells seem to be alive and in conversation with me. Do they really ring midnight twice each night? Or was that a magical time, just as fitted that unique night, with food and wine and friends? Or, as one more practiced friend suggested, was it another church tower, answering in turn?

I sometimes forget our College bells, or hear them only faintly on the periphery of consciousness. But when I do hear them, I use them as bells of mindfulness, returning me to my true self, the one who focuses on the class conversation ahead, and lets everything else drop away. Living in the present time and place can be more challenging than it seems, with stray thoughts, fatigue, distractions, or a sense of urgency about tasks that are "time-sensitive." But when I hear the bells, I join others in being human, connected through these bronze sounds. ♦

Researchers Reach a New High

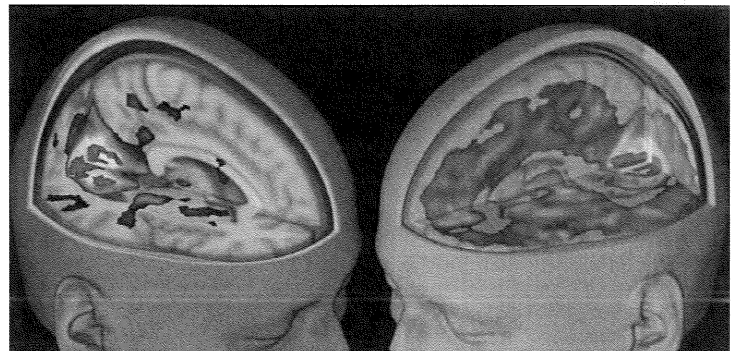
Allison Tretina A'16

Swiss chemist Albert Hoffman accidentally ingested a white powder one Friday afternoon in April, 1943. Spellbound, he deliberately took another dose of the mysterious substance, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), the following Monday. The experience, as he would recall to his psychiatrist years later, was a sort of awakening: "Through my LSD experience and my new picture of reality, I became aware of the wonder of creation, the magnificence of nature and of the animal and plant kingdom."

Yet, more than a mere discovery, the hallucinatory drug for the chemist was a sacred plant, a solution to the "Western world's spiritual crisis," as he describes in his book, *LSD: The Problem Child*. Through its hallucinatory powers, we could finally "shift from the materialistic, dualistic belief that people and their environment are separate, toward a new consciousness of an all-encompassing reality, which embraces the experiencing ego, a reality in which people feel their oneness with animate nature and all of creation."

For the better part of LSD's existence, the effect of the drug on the human brain has been largely ignored. It has not been until recently that drug researchers have found themselves seeking answers to the question that occupied Hoffman on that Friday afternoon in April: How does the hallucinatory drug affect the human consciousness? Now, as of this month, we have for the first time published images of the human brain on LSD. A team of drug researchers from Imperial College London gave LSD to volunteers who had already used the drug, and over an eight-hour timespan took brain scans using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

With the brain scans, the researchers were then able to track how blood flows during the "long trip." A leader in the study, David Nutell, told the website *Nature* in an interview that they found that under LSD, as compared to placebo, disparate regions in the brain communicate with each other when they otherwise would not. In particular, the visual cortex, responsible for processing visual information in the brain, increases its communication, thus explaining the vivid and complex hallucinations experienced under the



drug.

The study also provided insights into the mirroring effects of substance and self. According to Nutell, volunteers reported a disintegration of their sense of self, or ego. They lost their sense of being a singular entity—otherwise known as "ego dissolution"—and instead felt melded into the people and things around them. In correlation with the volunteer's reported experience, the researchers found that in the neuronal networks that fire up when the brain is at rest (also known as the "default mode" network), blood flow reduced. And, the network's neurons that usually would have fired up lost synchronization—something also witnessed with the psychedelic compound psilocybin found in certain mushrooms.

Psychedelic drugs have long been shrouded in mystery and myth. Although surveys have proven that users of LSD and other similar drugs are no more likely to have mental illness than other respondents, many will likely continue to correlate psychedelics with psychosis. And, because the medical benefits of LSD and other psychedelics have yet to be found, government funds may remain sparse. Now, with Imperial College London's new findings, drug research is at an all-time high. The meaning of self and its consciousness is being put to question once again in the neurological portrait of the human being. Hoffman would be proud. ♦

The Barbaric Days When Thinking Was Like a Splash of Color Landing on the Page A Review of William Finnegan; *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*; Penguin Press, 2015

Eva Brann TUTOR

Of the four most appealing off-Program books I've read in the last couple of years, three were sports books. I've reviewed them all in college publications: Daniel Brown, *The Boys in the Boat* (rowing), Kwami Alexander, *Crossover* (basketball) and now *Barbarian Days* (surfing). The fourth, Zia Haider Rahman, *In the Light of What We Know*, is an application to life of Gödel's Incompleteness Proof by two Oxford friends, a Pakistani and a Bangladeshi, who are terminal melancholiacs and brilliant conversationalists; in some aspect that's a sports book too.

In the interest of full disclosure: I haven't played on a team since I was six. After being ejected by the Nazis from the *volksschule* (public school) and transferred to a Jewish private school in my hometown, Berlin, I played a ball game called *völkerball*. At St. John's I owned a little sloop (named Akka after a wise old goose in Selma Lagerlöf's Swedish children's classic, *Niels Holgersson's Wonderful Voyage with the Wild Geese*). I had her rigged with a bungee cord for self-steering and would sail her across our Chesapeake. I would lie in her bottom gazing into the sky, assured by my sailing mentor, a long-dead tutor called Bert Thoms, that by the law of the sea I had the technical right of way over the god-knows-how-many-ton freighters coming down from Baltimore on my port. I survived to play tennis with my colleague, Larry Berns, another deceased tutor, who devised what we called "Jewish tennis": going up to the end and discussing politics. Later on I jogged and walked, but that isn't sport; it's preventive medicine. So I'm entitled to say that my interest in these sports books is purely literary.

Why is it, I ask myself, that those books have so much—unpretentious—style? I think it's because their writers are keenly, viscerally, involved in an activity in which elegance and competence are practically indistinguishable.

The part-quotation of my title, which is from Finnegan's epigraph by Edward St. Aubyn, speaks of thinking landing on the page like a splash of color. I've advised senior essays whose first draft resembled such a drip-painting and urged a more differentiated mode of verbal expression, but for "a surfing life" the simile makes sense. This is a book by a self-critical fanatic, a self-controlled addict, and a body-concentrated esthete. None of these internally contradictory modes are quite articulable. The book is a battle with the ineffable, and the splash on the page—of course far more worked-over than the epigraph lets on—is a not-inadequate solution.

As the book's subtitle, "A Surfing Life," implies, it is an autobiography, but not a normal one: its real subject is not the author but The Wave.

This wave, in its idiosyncratic beauties and its learnable rideability, is the object of a life-consuming, rumor-driven, drop-everything search. This search is of the most acute, concentrated observation, of a slowly developed, mastering intimacy, and the eventual source of ineradicably vivid memorial flashbacks and of searing sadness for its eventual betrayal into promiscuity and ruin by casual crowds of riders and ruthless developers. It is so potent a serial love pursuit that the entranced reader might well be astonished to hear that the author also had love affairs with non-undulant women, the last one ending in a stable marriage and a daughter with a "rascally smile."

Finnegan does not regard himself as a great, a world-class surfer.

He is not among those who figure as the deities of the book. But he must be among surfing's greatest observers and chroniclers. Some of his insights rightly come from self-observation. For, limited though he is by occasional good sense and less than top-notch ability, he comes near to sharing the extremist characteristics of the Olympian surfers. So he is describing this magnificently made tribe when he says:

The newly emerging ideal was solitude, purity, perfect waves far from civilization. Robinson Crusoe, *Endless Summer*. This was a track that led away from citizenship, in the ancient sense of the word, toward a scratched-out frontier where we would live as latter-day barbarians. This was not the day-dream of the happy idler. It went deeper than that. Chasing waves in a dedicated way was both profoundly egocentric and selfless, dynamic and ascetic, radical in its rejection of the values of duty and conventional achievement. (p. 96)

The moral complexity of adherence to this devotional sport gives his book what feels to me like real gravity. Its evidently accurate detailing of the features of waves, the construction of boards, and the techniques of surfers adds the blessing of lovely terminology. For the language of the crafts have a beauty, which the jargon of theory deliberately eschews and the twitter of social media has no time for. Here's a sample—I don't actually understand it, but I love it, as I would love listening in on one initiate of a mystery cult talking to another:

The sets looked smaller than they were, seeming to drift almost aimlessly onto the bar outside the jetty, then suddenly standing up taller and thicker than they should have, hiccupping, and finally unloading in a ferocious series of connectable sections, some of the waves going square with power—the lip threw out that far when it broke. (p. 218)

To me, Finnegan's grappling with the ultimate estheticism of surfing is the chief attraction of *Barbarian Days*. The bible on estheticism, that is, the arduous search for sophisticated sensory pleasure, and its experiential exploitation, is J. K. Huysmans' novel, *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*: "Against the Grain," 1884); it depicts the esthete as the incarnation of artificiality. Finnegan's love is for an awesome natural phenomenon, found not made, respected not exploited. And yet it is—a difficult sort of—estheticism: pure sensory appreciation but obtained by carefully calibrated somatic effort. So also is it a continual incitement to articulation; ever rebuffed by the complex simplicity of the perfect wave and the perfect tide. It is one case when thinking is well-served by being splashed on the page.

Personal addendum: For Finnegan, sailing is a far-down second-best. But fairly recently he found himself sailing with his father into the Delaware River that gives into Delaware Bay, surely the dreariest body of water on the East Coast. There too, long ago, my above-mentioned skipper Bert, usually a leller-perfid sailor, ran us aground—so to speak—at low tide on a dark and stormy night in a stinky mud-meadow of eelgrass. Naturally, the head became inoperative, but we had rubber boots aboard—one man-size pair. ♦

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describe a "flat surface," they use *επιπεδος*, literally meaning 'on the ground' or 'spread flat'; for the comparatively more complex idea of "parallel," they use *παράλληλος*, which is simply "alongside one another" combined into a single word.

To read Euclid's original text was to read a simple treatise, put in layman's terms and building gradually from straightforward foundations. But to read Thomas Heath's translation is another matter entirely. A "flat surface" becomes a "plane surface" before the term 'plane' receives any definition; and a "parallelogram" is never defined at all, because in reading the greek text it would require no definition. Heath's translation turns *λογος* into "ratio," "straight-lined" into "rectilinear," "dull" into "obtuse," and "sharp" into "acute." To a modern reader, this ancient text is transformed and sanitized into a treatise that fits cleanly into modern mathematics; but to the unfamiliar reader, who wishes to explore the origins of mathematics and discover what beauty can be built from

simple conditions, Heath destroys the very essence of Euclid.

Unfortunately, this experience is more common than one would think, especially within the classics. More often than not, venerated figures of the past turn out to be nothing more than historical figments, and the true work behind history is left buried deep in the ruins of time. But the works that history leaves us should not suffer the same fate, to be twisted by history and modernity and turned from their true aims into only what we want them to be. Where Euclid is clean and concise, our translators create complexity; where Aristotle is vague and spiritual, our translators seek pure reason. This is, at least partly, why we study the languages that we do at St. John's, to give us personal insight and not leave our experiences colored by 19th-century translators. But as long as we settle for mediocre translations and rush our way through western civilization, we can find only what interpreters have left for us, with no insight into what they left behind. ♦