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Kent Taylor

THE LILIES OF THE FIELD: A TEACHING AT WORK

Let us put a question to ourselves like a stethoscope. Why are we here? The question, if heard a certain way, could ask us to leave. We could hear it this way: what later, farther place is our real destination? How does our way station here help us reach our true place further on? What skills, tools, broadening experience do we gain to serve us in the coming days of a later life?

See what can happen? We can try to arrive at the goal instantly and from that viewpoint judge ourselves looking backwards from it.

Once more. Why are we here? Can we stay here and ask? If concern for later life kidnaps us from here, we now face a hard demand. Later life may no longer claim us. We have to give up concern about protecting it. Is that easy? To let go of your future and let it fall if it wants to?

To let go of your life seems something only some great teacher could accomplish. We may feel far from that immensity of rigor. Stories tell that Jesus of Nazareth surrendered his life. And that he afterwards got it back. But worry shrinks us. We know we are small next to him. Too small to have hold on any life worth mentioning unless we pay extreme attention.

We have sanctified the body and sweat of that attention. We call it 'work.' We bow down before it.

How can we tell whether it is our undeterrable truth or only a graven golden calf? We know what our habits are. We know what we have been told, in sermon and in example. Do we know the truth?

Again. Why are we here?

If we asked the teacher bigger than we are, he might say, "Do not be anxious about your life. Consider the lilies of the field." Simply, quietly consider.

They bow when the wind touches them. They move with the wind's touch. They go nowhere, yet move with the wind. Soft white flowers over green stems. Holding their own. Holding our attention who consider them. For a moment we belong with the lilies. They give us our place. Only for a moment. But are we ever without such moments?

What about death or the sleep unlit by dreams? Do we not have place there as well, if held only as by an edge?

Do we die? Do we vanish into sleep? Informed opinion assert that we do, each of us. We have known death to take people from us. We have watched others sleep. Can we ourselves be any different? Their case appears to cover us too. Their condition extends into generality. Natural law determines that we will die a death and sleep a sleep we can never witness.

When we clear access to ourselves by the testimony of others, we stand in the spot they occupy. We have lost our place here, and we have abdicated our selves. A general anyone and anywhere has replaced us. You and I have become instances of general law.

The question 'what are we doing here?' vanishes into nonsense. We witness the death of a meaning. Who is still alive, embarrassed by this turn of events? Who doggedly still feels in themselves a one to whom their present place could make sense? Could someone still be asking?

Is it the one considering the lilies of the field? They toil not, neither do they spin. Yet they teach. The master who invokes them lets them carry whatever message is sent. He himself recedes behind their bloom, as if dying from our sight. Neither master nor flowers amass rich achievements for themselves. The lilies gather us in but do not store us up in granaries. They have nothing to show for the work of their teaching. Jesus himself gathers followers to him only as the year gathers its twelve months, ending in the Judas-treachery of December.

The month, it is told, when the master was born.

Dying and living. As different from each other as possible. As different as Judas from Jesus. Opposites. Enemies. How does this teacher seem to melt them into each other? How does he teach love for one's enemies, as if opposition can cease?

Quietly consider the lilies of the field before you, how they grow. Let them grow before you. Perhaps in you somewhere. Names like 'imagination' or 'the mind's eye' merely indicate for passing ships the headlands of a perhaps unsettled continent of us. There are the lilies which you look at and which hold your attention. You and they are together. No opposition. Two are one.

Where are they one? Right here. Nowhere else. Here you are. What are you doing? Quietly considering the lilies. They now grow in you. Nowhere else. You watch them, and inwardly move with them, as they move with their wind. You are in the lilies as the lilies are in the wind. You do not try to place the flowers. They already have their place. You. Now you, moving or resting as the lilies teach, have lost the assured position you had before their teaching dawned. They have said: 'Come. Leave your former occupation. Attend to us. Leave your former life, with its holdings. Die.

Awake to us. In us. For your opening to us is your dying, where your former life has let go.'

Is this work? Or the ultimate, Vagabond's laziness? What do we have to show for our moment's attention? What do we know? What do we command? What useful experience do we gain? What will later life say about our time here?

We may suspect it will be grumpy. We suspect. We cannot know for sure, since we have not reached that stage yet. So we guess. Blocked from direct access, we make theories. If we have ears, we do not listen. Perhaps we grow/grew dull. When the time comes to hear which calling is most truly ours, we might not hear the call. We fall back, maybe, again on theories. We take the most plausible-seeming path. As any hypothesis, it will lend itself to being defended. Many reasons will appear to support it. Adequate hypotheses must be rich in reasons supporting them. They have, after all, nothing else.

No arguments stiffen the defences of the lilies. See how easily they bend? How easily we can uproot one if we want to. They are easy to pick. They do not defend against us. In that spirit we consider them. Our quiet watching does not contend with the flowers. At one with them we listen. No effort at mastery, no stubbornness drives us and them apart. We do not work to fit them anywhere, nor do they cling to being free, independent objects which could resist. We and they do not argue. There is listening.

If we have ears, we listen.

Could the lilies' teaching have arrived at a word to announce? Do they say to us, 'Listen!'?

Attending closely and silently, we may find ourselves and the lilies deeply rooted in each other. Could we listen to another person as silently?

When someone else speaks, can we quietly consider them? Right there with them, we follow their motion. We bend with them as the flowers with the wind. There is contact. We speak with each other. We make one place.

Listening. We become still. Before all commotion of opinions, reasons, habits. We have given these away. We are poor in mind and spirit. Meek. No pride of knowledge left. Only an almost frightening openness.

A hand open to accept another hand, or a nail.

No knowledge to control and resist with. Ignorant unto death.

Will we still ourselves this way? How can we surrender to someone's silliness? Suppose we find ourselves in range of a lunatic's knife. Do we give in and die? Surely this willingness brings on as much danger as the knife. When we meekly follow an inclination or another's invitation with no insurance whatever that we can survive on its path, we invite disaster. Should we remain still and not resist even now? Why should we expose ourselves and others with us to destruction? Why should we frighten ourselves so?

In such humility we feel as lost and exposed and afraid and in real danger as an unprotected child.

"Let the children come unto me," the master said.

We are not children. Fear and doubt keep us grown up. Responsible, we call it.

Our reluctance to open our ears fully, without anywhere holding back, without prior conditions or conceptions, makes us adult. Our years of experience have given us caution and skill. Now, the question. Is this maturity responsible? Our convictions gasp at the very lunacy of asking. Our every sober instinct knows that our maturity is itself responsibility, by very definition. The prior conditions or conceptions we are urged to lay aside

themselves give our protection. We work to guarantee safety for ourselves. Our work brings the food and shelter which insure that we do not starve and freeze. We ward off those threats by defending against them before they arrive. Our work takes place earlier. Prior in the same way are parents. Parents have grown experienced at living before the children come. Their experience gives the children shelter. Without the presence of responsible adults working for them, babies cannot live.

How can we all be babies without adults?

How can we give ourselves away into bottomless listening?

Our mature awareness of needing to work spreads wide. Work gives us the bulwark beforehand against which danger breaks. It makes the condition for our safety which stands prior to any trouble. Conditions for safety must be prior. When our adult experience crystallizes into conceptions, the conceptions must be prior ones. If we so much as try to listen without prior conceptions, we cannot know what we hear. We will be dangerously exposed to being misled. We can be lost in the darkness of not recognizing anything.

Recognition has in it a moment prior to the instant of reception. One of our parents has already worked this out. Remember Plato? Socrates' dialogue with Meno? The paradox of searching? If you have already found, you cannot seek, and if you have not already found, you cannot seek either. Without the goal of your search being already in you, found and familiar, you would not recognize it when you met it. So search must track backward into the distance you have within. Into the distance you are. Inquiry crosses the miles back into that of you which is prior to your present flash of perception. Inquiry's passage bears the name 'recollection.' Every recognition compresses within it a sudden span of inquiry.

Socrates appeals to this work every time he speaks in dialectic. 'Do you yourself perceive what I can only suggest?' he asks. The answer 'Yes, O Socrates' says a yes to perception. Recognizing does the work. Asserting alone could be the performance of any ignorant rhapsode or rhetorician. Socrates by himself is ignorant too, remember.

For us, then, to know what we hear requires earlier knowledge. In us is the structure of parentage. Genealogy. It happens even with language. Another speaks. We listen to the words. When we know the language the person speaks, we understand. The language came to us with our parents. Before we were born, it was there ready to support us. Like the world itself into which we came and in which we find tools for surviving.

Alive, we weave ourselves from yarn already there before us. Our substance has the character of being prior, like parents. Our substance never begins. It was always earlier. As parentage it gives the cradling place into which any moment whatever can be born.

For Socrates in prison, the cradling structure of Athens meant more than saving himself, however radiant he seemed to his disciples. He might have found it odd that so much more attention went to Jesus of Nazareth than to the manger in which as a baby he was laid.

Before, the question arose whether we could avoid abandoning our moment right here in favor of the standpoint called 'later life.' Now, it seems that any present moment disappears into the antecedents which hold it in place. Vanishes into them, as we into sleep. There are no beginnings. Nothing recognizable begins. It already was. Any second something can happen. But what? As what do we recognize it? The 'what' of anything is the form in which it is already familiar to us. The form. A form before any instant of time. Outside of time's spawned moments. Able to recognize, we

have those forms as a steady backdrop against which we notice movement. Our sense of form builds the motionless stage on which one judgment stands in place as the 'same' one. The steady platform links another time's judgment to the first. By means of this platform the conflict of an earlier judgment with a later one shows itself. In sensing the contradiction which proves us confused, we take a stand beyond time.

Freeing ourselves from a confusion, we stand where there are no instants. No suddenness. Where we understand, there are no moments of beginning. Anything not already here cannot be born. There are only parents. No babies can enter. The life of understanding happens in adults. Not children. "Let the children come unto me," the master said. Someone should have told him. There are no children. There is no new birth. Only genealogical or genetic continuity. Somebody should have told him. Did Judas try?

We give others sometimes this message. Sometimes another speaks to us in an unheard of way. The words come not mediated through a family structure of premise and inference. The utterance is immediate. It springs as suddenly as new life, still charged with the exuberance of fertility. It carries a charge of suggestion, as if of still newer life poised to emerge. But we, ready only to recognize, do not keep birth good company. We peer back at the parentage. When its mediation does not occur, we wonder if this baby is legitimate. Wondering whether its credentials are in order, we doubt whether we should receive it. 'We do not understand this,' our hesitation says.

About the speaker we may say, 'Pretty words, but does she understand them?' We find ourselves urging her to speak more discursively. We ask her not to be so sudden and intuitive. Start with the earlier premises, we tell her, and go step by step forward from them. Justify this odd turn of speech you

surprised us with. Don't be so poetic. Until we all understand, the danger remains that you do not say anything. Your words might just be poetry, however beautiful.

Beauty is not truth, truth not beauty. That is all you need to know. Anyone who tries to tell you different is a poet. Probably a young one.

Possibly we feel something young in all poets. Poetic words beat like wings. They open like flowers. They glint and startle. They lack the sturdy trudge of honest labor. We miss the carpentry of Descartes, say, or Kant. These thinkers earn every feature of their ground. Poets, like children, spring theirs on us, unjustified. Even when like Milton they have set themselves the task of justifying. All the thunder of a Shakespeare, the vastness of a Dante fall short of necessity. Their beauty does not touch the unavoidable. It does not teach what lies prior to every occurring instant, the cradling basis for the instant's identity, whatever the identity may be.

Consider the lilies of the field. See them in all their beauty. Can they teach us in it?

Howe can we receive the lesson? We have already found ourselves resisting open welcome to a presence like that of the flowers. In their naked, unprefaced impact they have their beauty. But without protective guarantees we cannot listen. Without prior conditions we cannot surely recognize. The danger of confusion has set us adults apart from children. The two groups are opposed now. In a sense, enemies.

"Love your enemies," the master said.

We now do more than notice opposition objectively in the world. We ourselves engage in the conflict. In the war between adults and children, sanity and lunacy, knowledge and ignorance, safety and danger we take sides. This seemingly peaceful, childlike teacher asks us to ignore the

difference between one thing and another. To reconcile ourselves to something different from ourselves, we would have to overlook the difference. We would have to get confused. No longer recognizing what is what, we blind ourselves. Does the master ask us to put out our eyes?

How can we consider any teaching if we cannot see it? If we cannot discern what it is? The event of perceiving involves distinguishing one thing from another. Without that clear separating, we stay confused. Sight depends on seeing this thing as opposed to anything else contradicting it. Opposition belongs to our perceiving. We cannot give it up.

Ask us anything else, master. Ask us to be pure and patient, obedient and faithful,. But don't ask us to be absurd.

Recognition seems the important achievement for us. Our main work. What, exactly, is its appeal? Why do we feel so sure that we must already have familiarity in order for something to reach us? It is as if we must judge. We make the final decision about an appearance's nature. It stands guilty of being a certain thing, or innocent. We on our magistrate's bench sit and wait for the appearance to present itself before us. We wait for it to come to us. We sit alone waiting. In recognizing what comes for what it is, we work to rule out any deception or distortion. Obviously we cannot rely on the defendant for that. He has not proven himself worthy of our trust until, through our judgment, he is awarded the right to receive it. Something of both judge and jury belongs in our act.

We rely foremost on ourselves alone. We work alone. The appearing thing applying for identity appears before our bench. How can we pass judgment in terms other than our ordinances? From ourselves we issue the decision. Ourselves alone. Our own familiar list of possible categories, statues already in force, determine the allowable contours which the

appearance can choose from. There must be a corpus of law in us. Our perceiving self must be previously drawn up and coded. Otherwise we have nothing to which we relate the thing pleading before us. We cannot decide.

Is it here we find the appeal of thinking that recognizing needs previous acquaintance? Namely, in discovering within ourselves the solitary, waiting judge atop his high seat? The appearance to be judged ranks lower. From this judging alone comes the judgment. The judge's body of applicable law has a necessity which the pleading appearance does not. During trial persons judging and persons pleading can have no ties with each other. The judge must abide in solitude.

How then do we come together with flowers and a master who invites us to learn? When we recognize, we judge. Those judging do not learn. They already know the law which will place the appearances on trial. Nor can they join with those they judge. We stand now mired in a problem. How can we receive a teaching we cannot grasp by recognizing? How do we receive it when we can't know what it is? How do we do the work of learning when we bring forth no knowledge to show for it?

The question exists for us because we so need to recognize. In the perceiving we are solitary. Perhaps the trivial, time-located, appearing person of us disappears into the perfectly general corpus of rational law. All other such persons vanish into it too. Privacy seems gone. Community seems to flourish. But it doesn't. Person do not keep company. There is but one person, now the size of a world. That total person stands alone. Other things —moments of appearance —may come before him, but not together with him.

Why do we feel ourselves so alone? Why does it seem as though our responsibility alone brings about the definition of everything? Ourselves

included. Where does the conviction have its roots that we do our real, adult work by ourselves? Why are we so alone? What cut us off?

Does the question illegitimately take for granted that there used to be some primal community with appearances, now destroyed? We would need proof of that. Of course any such coming together would not be with 'appearances.' Without the solitude we have in judging, there can be no inquiries and no verdicts deciding them. There can be no appearances to probe and no decisions to reach as to their reality. The difference between appearance and reality could never be born.

Was there any original neighborhood? Were there ever, and are there now, any neighbors we could love as ourselves?

By asking, we can begin no inquiry. We have no hope to reach neighbors by recognizing them. Nor could recognizing give us the event which makes us lose their company.

Is there any contact before or beyond acts of recognition? What manner of us would be capable of it?

Where do we feel the manner of ourselves as we are now? How alone are we? To help reach the place of our solitude, let us try a discrimination to end all discriminations. The difference between something and something else is not the same as the difference between something, whatever it is, and nothing at all. Perception and confusion move in the first kind of difference. Perception distinguishes between things, even when it decides whether it views a background containing something further or a background by itself. In each case perception views something. When we ask about being alone, we ask seeing nothing. We have no idea. No alternatives to choose between. We ask where there is nothing yet to promise clarity. We cannot regard our own condition as judge regards defendant. Judges, however skillful, surmise.

We have no skill whatever at being ourselves. We simply are. We can't surmise.

Maybe the word 'alone' does not even describe us accurately. We don't know. The word has been said. Perhaps more in the spirit of a moan. We attempt to be in ourselves. Inside ourselves. With ourselves. Right here.

Why are we here?

What are we doing being ourselves?

This is our cry. A voice crying in the wilderness.

We consider our condition as we considered the lilies of the field. Exactly what the lilies are, we are not sure. Exactly what all we are, we are not sure. Still, it's something, not nothing. Something is here, whatever it is.

Trying to listen, we hear the word 'alone' speaking for us. Speaking as us. We ourselves speak. Our word is our flesh. We put ourselves into the word as we put ourselves into arms we hug with.

We ask now about ourselves who recognize. Why do we feel so thrown back on ourselves alone? ---- No **answer comes**. We stand earlier than perception, asking into the solitude of us in which live perceiving and its work. Around us as we grope is dark wilderness. Nothing familiar.

What can we do? Further feel the heft of us where we stand. No longer judging. We have had to give that up. We have joined with ourselves. "Judge not," the master said, "lest ye be judged." Sitting aloof in judgment destroys neighborhood and the love blooming there. Even our language must surrender any claims to certainty. It renounces its right to identify clearly. When it can label with certainty, its accurate account seizes and holds. It now gives this possession away. Loses. Becomes poor. As we do, who speak this way. We no longer hold firm, ready for the unexpected, careful, cautious, separate as a judge. We begin to let go of a judge's dignity. And of

the reserve in which we keep to ourselves. We have begun giving ourselves away. In confession. Our words confess.

Like fear or pain, our feeling it is it. Is us afraid or suffering. Being right or wrong doesn't matter. Either way is equally us offering ourselves up.

In this spirit we relinquish our grip on anchor lines of inference. We began to hear ourselves in the sense germinating from the word 'alone.' **Do other parts of us neighbor this word which we can find by the same sort of sensation?** As when we probe for feeling in a foot we suspect may have gone to sleep?

Alone we are, in the face of appearances. Other people come before us. So often they act like appearances. From us they seem irretrievably different. They're other people, we recognize. Not us. They go their own way, as we ours. We wonder whether we ever really understand anyone else. How rarely we ever really get through to them. Or they to us. We work with them across a distance. They're difficult to manage. However close we may feel, some clumsy slip on our part can offend them. They withdraw or retaliate. They're a threat. Often we may sense the threat and the constant difficulty of dealing with it. The trouble can weigh too much. We ourselves withdraw, refusing to let others in too close. Kept away, they demand less from us. They make less of a task. We sink back behind a wall ivied with politeness or behind a less hidden, stonier wall of reserve.

Alone.

We're alone even from ourselves. Remember when we thought our being here involved a work preparing for later life? It needs preparing for only if we think of it as hard to cope with. As a large, somehow menacing problem. Our work now seems like effort, similar to the effort of dealing

with other people. Withdrawing from them in fatigue was reserve. Withdrawing from our own encroaching life can look like laziness.

Fundamentally these attitudes grow, like lilies, in the field of a deep solitude.

An odd solitude, because we do not seal ourselves off completely. We have acute sensation of other things' approach. We demand it. Kept to ourselves too long, we get lonely. Tedium sets in. We begin needing company and the stuff with which to fill empty hours. The approach of something to do takes on a luster. Other people glitter as luminously. Though alone we still notice them nearby. In them is astonishing potency. They have the power to infuriate us, frighten us, guarantee us. The fascination they hold demands our gossip.

When we take interest in affairs of the world, do we gather knowledge like gossip's knowledge of other people? Why do we want to know a lot about anything? Why ever a push toward expertise? The convictions of Aristotle or Leibniz. The behavior of cells or of economic value. The character of a novel or a mathematical system. How do such matters concern us? Do they form pieces of that looming city out there which we in solitude hold back from yet feel inescapably exposed to? Which we find ourselves arranging?

Occasionally weary and suffering from the conflict, we tire of the work. At such moments might it surprise us that the lilies of the field do so well with so little toiling? We could wonder at the master of a vineyard who pays without discriminating between great labor and small. Why do we ourselves have to work? Why do we have to deal with so much. Why do we have to put out such effort?

Why are we alone? Do we have to be?

We are more alone now than ever. And smaller. The question we ask takes away all we had. All parents have died. No genealogy of inference can help us. Ideas, concepts in their family tree of coherence, exist no more. We have them no longer. Stricken with poverty, we stand with ourselves alone. In the dark. We see no way on. Lost. Helpless as children.

Where is the way? What truth does our being alone bear witness to? Does any life remain to us?

Being here is like having died, with no friends, no world, no clarity. So much has been let go. So far from every appearing thing do we perhaps now feel. Before us, like parents, is nothing. After us, in any later life, is nothing. We watch ourselves here, feeling as other to our later life as to other people.

We have nothing. We are an empty waiting for something to come. A dark ground in which a seed might begin. If a word came into this void dark unto death, it could bring life. The darkness would hear it saying, 'Let there be light.' It would become in us the flesh of an earth.

In our emptiness we wait to begin.

"Unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die," the master said, "it abides alone. But if it die, it bring forth much fruit."

Here is work. The labor of birth, and the creation it brings.

We wait to be born.

Waiting to grow, like the lilies of the field.

In our emptiness, listening. We, as yet nothing, are nothing but our listening. The stiffness of prudence has relaxed. Fear may blow through us, but we cannot deny it by strategies of defence. Finally, it is destruction we fear, and that has happened. We are destroyed. Broken and empty, we wait.

What we hear, we will not recognize. The already-existing, judging self of us has been surrendered. Given away in confession.

The something which may come to us in a word will grow as we confess to hearing ourselves in it. Could we argue with it? Disagree? How? Who, already there before the word, could argue? There's no one. Nothing.

In this nothing, from deep within it, we listen for ourselves being born. Ready to taste the fruit we bear and are.

In even enemies we look for ourselves. We watch for what we make of them. How do we hear their words? Where do we let them put us, as we respond? It is our own face which turns towards them.

Out of our nothing we feel the touch of our own face, which even an enemy can bring into life. Helping us as Judas helped Jesus deeper into his work. Helping as a neighbor whose love is beneath any recognizable inclination. He or she gives to us from a self earlier than thought. From the flesh and blood of a body.

Do we understand the gift? Do we have any idea how to recognize what the words' flesh' and 'blood' literally, simply refer to? Can we nail them once and for all into position?

We have tried. Our understanding has failed to grasp that body of ourselves which, in solitude, pointed itself toward recognizing. That body of us earlier than any recognition. Which we reached only in confession, the way we reach our own hand. No tomb of an answer could hold the question we became for ourselves.

We listen now. Beyond politeness and before understanding. We listen for our own presence. It blows, like the wind, wherever it pleases. When it sounds, we hear, though we do not know where it came from or where it will go.

We listen, poised for our true work.

Is it beginning?