



Colloquy

FALL 2024

On Being

Colloquy is an academic journal and biannual publication of the Graduate Student Council and St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland featuring the works of students, tutors, and alumni of the St. John's Graduate Institute. The journal is free of charge.

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Cover: Vanity with Two Mirrors - Amelia Taylor Wolfe
oil on canvas panel 8x8"

Colloquy

Issue 15 Fall 2024

On Being

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Graduate Institute Community,

This is the third themed issue of Colloquy. Last fall we had 'on creation' then 'on character' in the spring. For this semester, 'on being' was a popular choice with our editorial board, though it was not without its contenders. I was drawn to 'on wonder' and 'on passion' as well, topics that might inspire students all kinds of beautiful and dramatic pieces. However, I wanted to keep this semester's theme broad.

While theme can inspire creators, it can also dissuade them if they don't see a strong enough connection to their work. Like many things, the proper balance must be found. Theme is worth having because it unites pieces and can encourage readers to find connections between pieces in a way that grants insights, those Aha! moments when these links are discovered.



Almost anything can tie back to the idea of 'being.' Within these pages are oil paintings, still-lifes which capture the essence of everyday objects. There's a meditative quality about them, how one can study a subject and find the lines to represent it, not as it is precisely but through a new created form of representation. It's the same with the lithographs and prints, but with people as subjects there seem to be many untold stories that might begin to reveal themselves in a single pose or expression.

Within these pages, there are essays that address education, the formation of a student and what it means to be human. There are philosophical quandaries exploring the idea of being itself. There are poems which deal with the nature of time, and how it changes us. Throughout the journal, there are numerous inquiries and all on some level related to being.

Finally, there is the journal as an image and physical object. There is the balance between the ink on the pages forming words and ideas, and the blank spaces, the non-being. It is in some of these spaces, I've found small homes for some of my own sketches and drawings, occasionally inspired by the poetry of the page. For Chaucer's prologue, I took inspiration from the Ellesmere manuscript. Others are based on the world around me and my own imagination. I hope they, along with the rest of the work here, bring you delight.

Sincerely,
Bucca

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Poetry & Musings



Dog Patch, 17x21" lithograph - Jesse Wood

Wednesday Morning

Rachel Brown

A toadstool
White as a new-turned leaf
Sprang up last night
While I was sleeping.

This empty space
Will always be the hallowed place
Where a toadstool
Fleeting as a dream
Fresh as a stream of sunlight
Alighted one morning to
Grace for a day
The ground below my windowsill
That never felt empty before
And will ever feel full
Of a fragile strength
A slim silent speaking presence
Raised from darkness into life
Overnight
An extravagant, lavish
Testament to joy
Like wine pouring over from
Jugs of water
Pouring and pooling in
Thirsty goblets.

A toadstool like an inverted goblet
Poured out for me
Is new and newly baptized
Clean by sparkling morning dewdrops into
An innocence of grief.

Meditation the First

Aaron Knight

Big D beside the fire—anyone else here from 2024?
After all, even more? This more here more there more.
Right now nothing really matters, literally anymore.
Doesn't it seem painfully unreal?
Like snow? Like a snowball?
Just under the ear in front of the pineal gland say?
One's rightful place among bugs and dust and supernovas –
Inventories of perception, liquid in the vessel.
Celebrating the cosmos.
Expand, fit myself inside
A grotesquely offensive form – I won't stand out as much if
All continuous or infinitely discrete
Horns and graffiti and rain (so much rain), can claim membership too.
(I really couldn't care less – just take the spotlight off me.)
So I'm awake? Not so sure about that.
Prove it.
Bundled up for winter
I fear you'll see a black hole on your starboard,
(A compulsion to prevail and monetize is a favorite).
Shame and spite more than thought, prove existence,
I would say, if asked by a Deceiving God.
That my feeling insides,
Speechless, and that howling sound we hear in our ears –
You told me you heard it too – quieter silence but still loud.
(The eternal alarm of intrusion never goes silent?)
But whenever I say it never will –
Fools rush in and all that,
Commands and directives, metaphysics and epistemology
And ontological limits of signifiers –
Little Daddy Roughbones tonight folks,
Straight to bed when the sun goes down –
Let me tell you that I never signed up for this here thing –
I just know that I woke up at age 4 and realized I wasn't 3 anymore –
Still my most profound insight.

Gerund is Easier than Noun

Stafford Wood

Speaking is easier than being a speaker
Leading is easier than being a leader
Fighting is easier than being a fighter
Writing is easier than being a writer
Teaching is easier than being a teacher
Preaching is easier than being a preacher
Loving is easier than being a lover
Mothering is easier than being a mother



Old Willow Man

Stephen Borsum

Old willow man,
Breath of eternity in your swaying branches,
Delicate pod leaves drift,
Floating like snow to land upon sturdy earth,

Age creaks in your branches,
Like the moans of old bones,
And the sighing caught among the leaves,
Like the sigh of wakefulness erupting from slumber,

Usher in the onset of winter
When your bark sleeps like death,
Veiling hope of renewing spring,

Old willow man as you are now,
You are magnificent,
A host of things great and small,
And your heart beats like the thrum of Earth,

As you are now you will be then,
Then to come and under your branches,
In the shade by some cool pool,
There is the rich smell of life,

Have many days passed,
Between your seed sprouting,
And your leaves unfurling,
Or as you were the seed,

Were your branches bursting forth,
Even then upon the sturdy earth,
Old Willow man,
I see you sleep and wake,

I am Part of All That I have Been

Laszlo J. Boesze

“I am a part of all that I have seen...”
Tennyson, “Ulysses”

In different carriers,
I exist in parts -
Coiled in a mysterious way -
That joined grow in a primordial ooze,
Take shape and find limbs and senses anew
And screaming face the world again:
Alive, a whole, and brand-new I
That is as old as from whence I sprang.

Wanted or not, I have sprung forth,
Demand my right to be,
And be cared for,
Till I can fend alone
And have parts of me form a new I.

And when I leave -
Blood-soaked or shriveled up -
What trace of me do I leave behind?

Am I a monumental tomb
Remembered better that I
Who left my bones in a sea of peat?
Did either me an impact make
In a world I cannot comprehend?

Still, I am a part of all
That was, that is, will be,
In ways I shall never know.

Orange Sunset & Olive Pits

George Kalandadze

In a decade or two, will the firmament blush cerulean?
Will the vesper sky still bleed orange?
Will it remain California, amidst epochs unfurling?
The ocean whispers serenity, yet the crags are your natal
sanctuary.

Women's rights repose on your nightstand still,
A scalpel, a sentinel beside it.
Do you yet possess that Kodachrome,
Those protracted hours in the sanctum of shadows,
forsaking lessons,
Olive Pits adrift in the development liquid?

Have you looked at the album of magnolia imprints?
or have the sketches succumbed to oblivion?
I've been ruminating on those tangerine dusks,
incessantly,
There lies a fragment of home I yearn to reclaim.

Thus, are the heavens now cerulean? Will the gloaming
still glow saffron?
In a decade or two.



Corrales II, 16x22.5" lithograph - Jesse Wood

Champion Challenger

Michael Vigil

Work through challenges like any man would.

—

By crying out to father; Father, forgive me, for I know not what I have done.

—

Seeking mother's touch. To Mother; caress my body in Myrrh, once laid to rest.

—

In a world of devotion, imitation, idolization, instant gratification. Seek a hand of grace, not one of cruelty, seek the place where a babes cry, meets mother's coo.

—

Present is a place, void of spirit, a babes cry, rings out; to no echo. To no warm embrace. Dirty, soiled, bad-tempered; mother's ears are deaf, to this babies falsetto.

No hand of grace, no mother's touch, only torment; only whimpers.

—

Tears tread down narrow, undulating, swollen eyes; cradled in hollowed bones.

Down, down, tapping, dripping, dropping. Drooling onto dirty soiled frame,
hollowed by hatred, hallowed by shame.

—

Tread, tread, tread. Blop, drip, drop, tear, tear, tears. Travel the tunnel of birth.

A crap shoot of probabilities. Popped from the space between urine and feces.

Plopped upon the crap-table, arrival, unhappy, a-being, unexpected.

—

Confront the Law, not natural law; the law of averages. To a serpents hiss, affronted by a woman's whis-per, "you are departing unhappy." Heel bruised, fork tongue, slithers off, affronted.

—

Making out, then making off. Flicking classic movie poster post cards, from index finger. Flicking an ear, to disturb a friend. "Dare I disturb the universe?"

—

Keeping time, not natural time, whistling "Giant steps" like a type of syncopated jazz aves, barreling Geary ave. Gunning for the coast, rebelling, Jim and Buzz, screaming, "let's see who chicken!"

—
The buzz fades, sipping whiskey, from a worn leather, stuffed in the side pocket,
tucked next to a Faulkner, novel. Not understanding my worries, limping,
strolling Geary ave.

—
Trimming the top off parking meters, I tread, the sulfur surface, and use the
change to tear out pages from newspaper dispensers. Disturbed by the mendacity.
Perturbed to trepidation. Tear drops, soak, wear through the pulp, diffusing the
ink, exposing the truth.

—
I tread through life on hot summer pavement, worn down, like a used tire.
Rotating round the circumference, axle grease spews out the hubcap like a boxer
spitting a tooth.

—
Racing down Columbus Ave., wailing “a love supreme”, speeding past a statue of
St. Francis of Assisi. Touched by stigmata, and a revelation; a truth, I sped through
life, heaven seeking, hell bound.

—
Tires bald, worn down, the psst of a nail wound, puncturing through a thin
layer. No more rotations, to a force greater than my own, strewn upon the cold
pavement, as my breath hisses into the aether.

—
Father forgives me, for he knows what I have done.

—
Crack of polyurethane window pane, under foot, Fanny, a flower, sprung on the
sidewalk adjoint the Café Trieste. An on looker, in Illumination (as dew turns to
mist) says, “The pane broke so well.”

—
Mother caress my body in Frankincense, once laid to rest.

—
Amen

Achelous

Travis Kyker

The first time we were there,
That river.
Water going by like silence, like silver,
God's diamonds—
Mystery too beautiful to name.
All the precious moments
Dissolved there
Tumbled in dark time,
Churning to dust
Before our eyes.
You took my hand
And we knelt with the faith of fools
Praying hopelessly.

The next time,
We walked our little way
Stumbling up like vagrants
Seeking the coals of comfort,
Prodding burnished ashes,
Listening into the dark
And shedding the rags of day.
I doubted then,
But learned how to cast it away.
Eyes, uplifted from afar,
Made us fervently glad
Unwitting worshipers
Beneath a cathedral of stars.

But at last,
Young and weeping
The road tore past our feet.
Backwards, rushing wrong,
Into a holy defeat,
A secret home, a fathom-call;
Up to the mouth of the father
Whose hungry love makes children of us all.

Yoked - Jesse Wood
14.5x10.5 inraglio print with monotype and aquatint

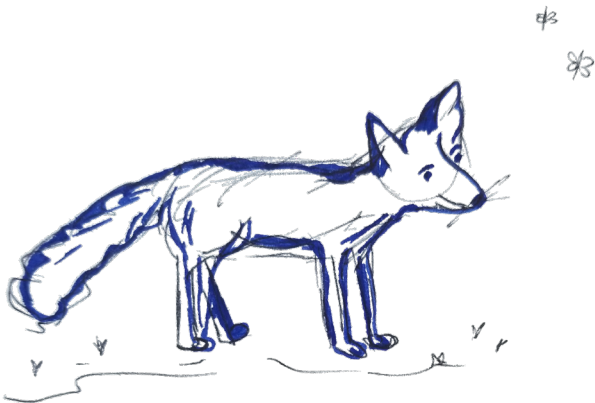


The Fox

Travis Kyker

Red fox rampant, eyes aloft—
Autumn is good for him.
A swath of crimson samite all-encompassed, lost
Amid the sea of swirling bronze admits
No gaze of lesser beasts
Who garrison the land with fearful watch.

Look! whisper of life—
The careless message races to its lord.
Spires of black ears prick up
As paws splash down,
The dew-drop scatters
Patterning a crystal ring about
His gallery of shining claws.
They sink into the earth to launch
A swift assault
And hammer to the ground
A speeding thunder, secret fire,
Racing through sun-spears
That dash across his pelt like beams
Of luminary shadow.



Is this the fox thou lovest? Yes—
His splendor's course to all men's hearts doth run.
For he is as a law unto himself,
The law of will and hunger so endowed
That need, for him, and want together
Always bleed as one,
And rightful prize is always all that simple might beclaims.
But here he reads the scroll of nature's heart—
A subtle work which guards its secrets well—
And fancies it admissible to deem
The plainest and true meaning as the same,
As a great king cruel and strong beholds
The wonder of his crown
And plunges without mercy on his liege.

For if war fathers all, and fire
Penetrates the very soul of life,
The bíos and the bow are truly one,
And nature's song enchants itself
Upon a flash of white not long unstained,
Descending in a vicious revelation.
And now as red flows into red,
Behold thy saving truth:
The many into one resolved
Upon a tangle of dead roots,
A new whole self-engulfed emergent
Writhing on the forest floor—
Becoming is itself undone in this
Vermilion ouroboros.

I Wish I Was

Tova Gannana

The men wear hats, the women wear glasses. The elevator has bare bulbs and buttons that jam, no one wants to get on. Astronauts get off on the right floor. Three lamps to a room, a good start. People awake with blankets laundered, kettles and cups of tea, women in long cloth coats, too much fabric, and men in short jackets, blue walls like the sea and white ceilings like sails, a tuxedo on a chair with someone inside. The dryer on high heat or air? Tiles in a bathroom or a bath outside? Who to this place willingly goes? No address, no star with a door, no artist of dressing, the halls vacant like after the bell. I fashion a closet out of plastic.

—

I'm in a helpful mood, I wait at crosswalks, I greet my elders. People are rolling through to the next stage. Glory and beauty, call it charm, simple can also be fatal. I weigh myself for the amount but also the time. I'm home and away. I join with whatever I take in. I'm fishing or I'm lying about where I've gone.

—

You got to be upbeat, snow on frozen fields, tape decks, a few trees. I live two blocks from you, pick me up and drive me to the movies. Snow packed on snow trails, trees still grow. I put a soda on the table, before you, my jeans can never be too tight, we want the good life. I get ahead, I walk through the junkyards and see only flowers. I'm fun to be around, I make sure. The graveyard is a stage, gray skies and bare trees, I put a smile on my face. Decay in the winter, both cars and men, warm in their houses, warm thinking of spring.



Lady of the Canyon, 11x15" monotype - Jesse Wood

Obituary

George Kalandadze

Lights filter through the urban veins of 5th Ave.

He's inhaling shadows again.

Vapor ghosts; ghost vapor
whispers through the streets again.

They saw him yesterday, drifting –
self-conscious, untethered, disoriented,
a phantom of fear

Today, he's a fractured statue. Eye contact
with the asphalt, his bruised soul
too weary to bleed.

These suited specters don't know what it means
to be intimate with the earth's skin. Yet his hemorrhaged
face
only dreams of the cold embrace of Penn Station marble.

He will rise – tomorrow.
Not walking; crawling,
Seeking another rendezvous with infinity.
He will glide on the L train,
chasing the light at the tunnel's end,
a beacon of hope.

And as he draws near, the light will recede.
He'll hear echoes around – clamoring.

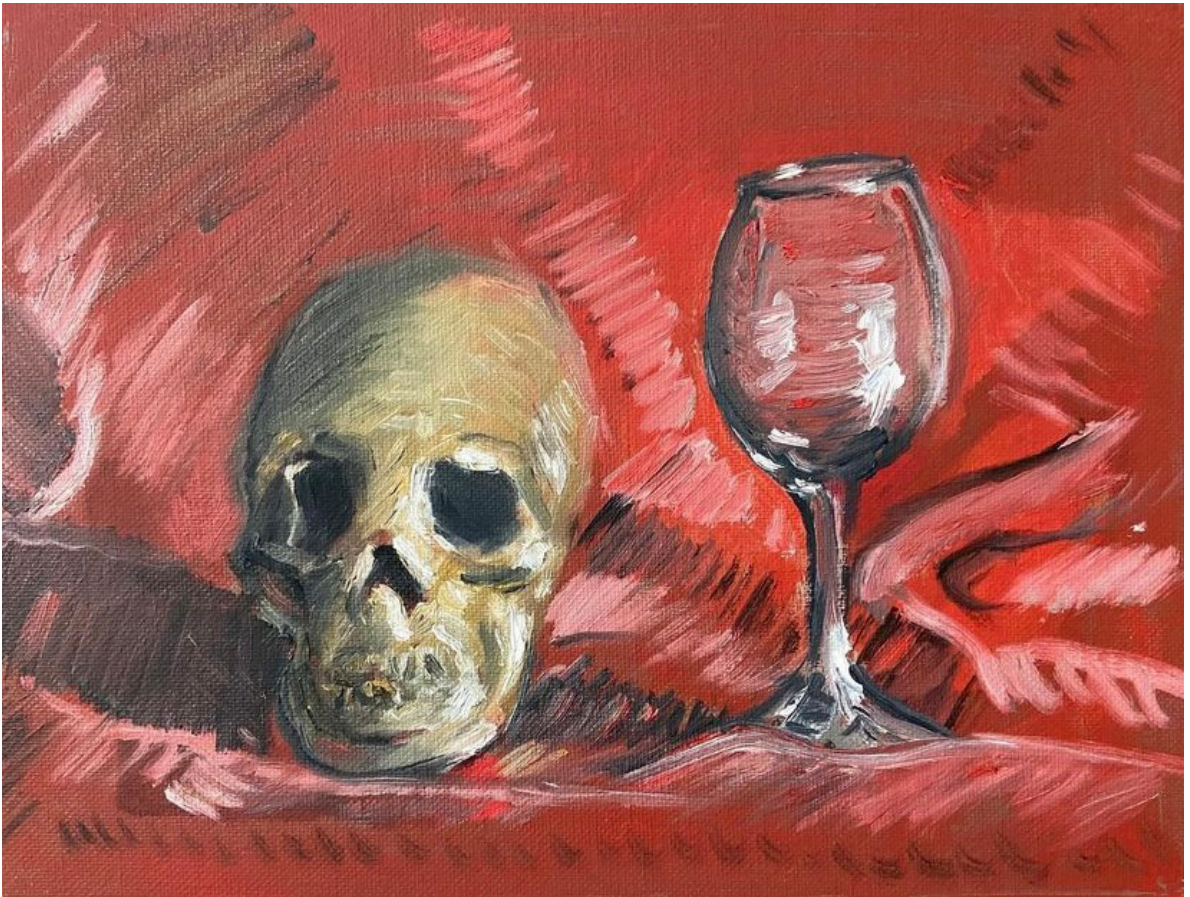
But he's relieved; relieved to whisper
Goodbye – I tried.

Storage

James Paul Rogers

I love the light of southern sunsets as
It lathes through the boughs of the red-oak trees,
Casting bars of bright and dark on the fields.
Such sights will ever mean home to me: the
Gentle hills rolling down toward the river
Crowned with maple and hickory; local
Lanes all swathed in shadow from the forests'
Graceful eaves; quiet river ripples lit
At evening from the west while waterbirds
Take silent flight, calling softly, toward the
East. Though I have seen a thousand thousand
Evening skies blushing lovely in the fall,
Each one retains the power to enchant,
Reminding me to be glad to be, to
Live yet one more day where fleeting beauties
Lie in wait for those with eyes to find them.

Short Stories & Translations



Clay Skull and Wineglass - Amelia Taylor Wolfe
oil on canvas panel 9x12"



Canterbury Tales

First 18 lines of Geoffrey Chaucer's General Prologue

Cynthia Crane

When April with sweet rain has sought	Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote	
And pierced the roots of March's drought,	The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,	
And bathed every vine in that liquor	And bathed every veyne in swich licour	
That sires by nature every flower,	Of which vertu engendred is the flour;	
When Zephyr with his breath 's beguiled	Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth	5
On farmer's land and in heather wild	Inspired hath in every holt and heeth	
First fragile crops, and the young sun	The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne	
Half through Aries' course has run	Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,	
And little birds make melodies,	And smale foweles maken melodye,	
And sleep all night with open eyes —	That slepen al the nyght with open ye	10
So Nature pricks up people's courage	(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),	
Til they long to go on pilgrimage,	Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,	
And those who pray seek routes unclear	And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,	
to distant shrines known far and near;	To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;	
And especially from every county's side	And specially from every shires ende	15
Of England to Canterbury they ride,	Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,	
Seeking the sainted martyr's way	The hooly blisful martir for to seke,	
That helped when they were sick with plague.	That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.	



The House on Fargo Street

Deana Moss

I take a deep breath. I stand under the overgrown tree, facing the long, narrow driveway that feels like a forgotten path stretching into eternity. The gravel crunches underfoot, but the sound is swallowed by the eerie stillness. The air carries a weight, thick and oppressive, pressing down with each step. I sighed, why did we even live here? The house stands hidden, shrouded in the shadow of another, as if deliberately concealing itself from the world. It was the result of necessary downsizing. A rental home that was never meant to be permanent, simply a bridge between what we thought would be our forever home to what ended up becoming my sole inheritance.

As I move closer, I see flickers in the periphery of my vision—familiar, yet out of place. There, darting along the driveway, is the ghost of my younger self, her laughter silent but vivid, her bike wheels spinning in an endless loop. A soft smile etched itself across my face. I saved up every penny I had to my name to buy that purple bike with tinsel hanging off the handlebars. The image vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving behind an ache so sharp it feels real.

The house looms ahead, unassuming yet suffused with an unshakable melancholy. Its facade seems to sag under the weight of time, and the windows, dark and opaque, offer no reflection, only void. As I approach, a wave of sadness crashes over me, cold and suffocating, as though the house itself mourns its place in my story. Each step toward the door feels heavier, the pull of the past growing stronger, and I can't tell if it's the house or my own heart that's whispering, *Why have you come back?*

Tears welled in my eyes, as if I was about to sneeze—but the sneeze never came. The house stands like a shadow of its former self,

its once light, inviting exterior now cloaked in a somber, weathered brown. The vibrant energy that once filled its halls has faded, replaced by an unsettling quiet. The carpet that once cushioned playful steps is gone, stripped away and replaced by dark, polished hardwood that seems to groan underfoot as if mourning the past.

The space where laughter used to echo—my childhood sanctuary of games and imagination—has been transformed into a cold, sterile dining area. The table in the center is tiny compared to the hardwood table that belonged to a young pilot. The walls are devoid of the warmth one would expect to go along with the sentiments that the words on the wall seem to be expressing. The chairs are stiff, their angles too precise, and the air feels heavy, as though joy itself has been exiled from the room. Shadows pool in the corners, stretching longer than they should, as if the house itself resents its transformation.

It feels as though the walls are watching, bearing witness to the life that was once here, now stifled by this chilling refinement. This is no longer a home; it is a memory gone hollow. But, as I look around, I remember, this was never my home. This was temporary. This house was a meaningless fling. It was a rental, it was never meant to be permanent—so why do I feel this way?

It's just a house.

It's just a house.

It's just—but why do I feel like this?

The corridor leading to the master bedroom stretches ahead, narrow and claustrophobic, its walls pressing inward as though eager to trap me. The air feels thick, stale, as if the house itself is holding its breath. I reach the bedroom, but it is not the room I remember.

This was once a space I reluctantly shared, filled with the chaos of three lives jostling for room. Now, it feels eerily orderly and unfamiliar—its transformation erasing even the faintest echoes of what it once was. The sound of two young girls and their mother sharing a room have now been replaced by the rustle of trees in the backyard, scraping against the window.

I turn toward the closet, the one place that had been mine, hoping to feel the solace I felt when I was a child. It was a windowless room. Spacious, even when it was filled with clothes and photo albums. Stepping inside, I am swallowed by its shadows. This was my sanctuary, a haven where I could be unapologetically myself. Here, I had felt invincible, untouchable by the rules and expectations that waited outside the door. I would look through all of my mother's hidden treasures, this was the place I discovered my mother was the tooth fairy and Santa Clause. As I stand and look up to the high ceiling, the air is heavy, cloying, and the ceiling seems to close in.

A tightness grips my chest, sharp and unyielding, each breath shallow and strained as if the air itself refuses to enter my lungs. My pulse pounds in my ears, louder and faster, drowning out every rational thought. My hands tremble, my palms slick with sweat, and the room feels impossibly small, spinning and tilting like a ship in a storm. My mind screams for escape, but my legs feel leaden, rooted to the floor.

Finally, with a desperate lunge, I turn and push the door open. Cool air rushes in, and I stagger out, gasping as if I've been underwater for too long. My heart begins to slow, but the ache of the loss remains.

I can't stay in this house a moment longer. The walls seem to close in, each step down the corridor echoing louder, mocking my escape. I run, my breath ragged, my legs trembling as I race through the suffocating space. At last, I stumble into the living room and stop, my eyes drawn to the fireplace. Its

soot-streaked bricks bearing silent witness to all that was lost here.

I collapse to my knees, the weight of the house pressing down as if it is alive, feeding off my despair. My sobs wrack my body, raw and unrelenting, as memories pour out unbidden. The Christmas I refused to help decorate—such a small act of defiance—looms large in my mind, a symbol of everything I pushed away, everything I let slip through my fingers. The sorrow washes over me like a tidal wave, drowning me in its cold embrace.

What was once warm and alive has become hollow, corrupted by its own emptiness. It feels as though the house mourns too, though not for me. It mourns the spark of life it smothered until it was gone. Having no other being to consume, it consumed itself. As I kneel before the cold hearth, I feel something behind me. I turned; it was the breeze coming in through the door I left open.



Being in Lisbon

Stephen Borsum



The city is beautiful, but in some ways more so sleeping than when it's awake. The port in my glass is sweet but bold, complemented by the slow burn of a rich cigarette. It was a short morning of strolling through a museum of antique arts, remnants of Portugal's famous discoveries, but really they were just old paintings of Jesus and the martyrs, which the occasional piece of Chinese pottery interjected itself between. I searched the shops for nothing in particular, but seeking

something beyond another drink or another cup of espresso. Another drag from the cigarette, another sip of port. To my left is the sprawling mass of building-topped hills and rolling green spaces, colors fade together like an impressionist's field of wildflowers. All of this is interrupted by the church renovation happening below, where workers in their hard hats operate a crane that occasionally obstructs my view of the city. Towards the river, some gaudy multi-story office build-

ing for a corporation breaks the otherwise inviting skyline, interestingly blocking my view of the massive statue of Jesus. The port finished, I meander through a district that I now realize is only a tourist trap, and isn't to be taken as the true heart of Lisbon's artist culture. That's in the aged stone occasionally covered with graffiti. Or the street performers. Or the hand-placed stone sidewalks with black and white bricks interweaving into various shapes, sometimes purposeful but others chaotic. Perhaps the truest art of the city is the flowers still blooming in late-November, but I won't ask the locals such a question. I don't mean to render their city knowable like some blog post. What is least interesting is surface level. Like the Catholic references and churches on nearly every block. So many built on destroyed mosques.

The return walk to my destination is all uphill, but thankfully this area of Lisbon is not so steep. Still, I don't resist stopping by the pastelaria, the bakery across the street for another glass of port and a pastel de nata, when the desire to take a break comes over me. Each time I try the little custard tart I like it more, and even though it's nearly the noon-hour, I see hungover Lisboans rising for breakfast at the cafes around. With some I can practice just enough Portuguese to not be an asshole,

but quickly have to ask if we can switch to English as their own tongue flows so easily through them and immediately becomes ungraspable to my ears. I find myself enjoying this port more than the others, but I've only tried the red and for some reason won't try the white. Ignorance I presume. Still, I finish my glass and strike another cigarette, the brand I found here is dangerously smooth. And continuing my walk I finally find what I was looking for without knowing. A simple shop, where a Japanese man watches YouTube while waiting for tourists to wander in. He's selling sunglasses, and I desperately need a new pair.

I return to the studio where we are planning to enjoy the evening. The proprietor greets me, and we discuss tattoos, his collection of them and my lack of one. We drink what seems to be the only beer people have a preference for in Lisbon, Super Bock, and talk about life in America and the animals in Montana, namely the great many of them that can kill you. The studio opens for the evening and artists suddenly pour in, the space awakens from contemplative to lively, letting bloom an energy in the room that I've already spent for the day walking the many streets. And I remember the warm sun and the port and cigarette from earlier in the day.

Essays



Precarious – Amelia Taylor Wolfe
12x16" oil on canvas panel

Emile at the Place for Learning

Rousseau and Oakeshott in College Campus Duet

Charles Edward Chapin

I. Orchestration

The teenage education of “Emile” described by Jean-Jacque Rousseau in the work’s third book, and the college described in Michael Oakeshott’s “A Place of Learning” present an opportunity for exploring dissonance and harmony in these two approaches to young adult education. Will the Rousseauian mantra, “What good is that for?”¹, doom Emile’s journey through the hypothetical halls of Oakeshott College, where faculty and students abjure “the use which may be made of the conclusions of their inquiries?”²

A student has been tutored to reject scholarship. The tutor of his youth, himself an eminent scholar, guided him instead to favor practical applications of his lessons, and to sustain his financial independence as a craftsman. Now eighteen years old and somewhere in twentieth century America, he decides to attend a secluded liberal arts college to pursue deeper meaning in life. How might his childhood tutor’s views interact with the pedagogical design of this campus, where, in favor of intellectually productive leisure, “instrumental arts” are distanced from “liberal learning?”

To encourage this dialogue, I make

a few choices. First, Emile has a disposition and maturity that matches this hypothetical college. Readers may quibble with this premise, arguing that Rousseau’s Emile would see higher learning as pointless.³ On the other hand, the character has a pensiveness that lends itself to honest inquiry, and perhaps his attraction to liberal arts is inevitable. In any case, let us give him a chance to go to college. Second, the Oakeshott faculty prefer dialectic pedagogy and are oriented toward the individual flourishing of students. Emile’s training in experimentation and self-led discovery will not, therefore, cause conflict in this setting. This choice allows us to focus more exclusively on the concept of utility in education, rather than pedagogical process. Finally, when Emile is faced with conflict between Rousseau and Oakeshott, he chooses a path that prioritizes interaction between them, rather than retreating to one side or the other.

II. Melody

Oakeshott College stands before him, an isolated, walled campus rimmed by mountains of green and blue. “Adventures in Human Self-Understanding,” (Oakeshott 15)

¹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. “Emile: or On Education.” Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979. p. 179

² Oakeshott, Michael. “A Place of Learning.” In *What Is History? and Other Essays*, edited by Luke O’Sullivan, 1–34. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004. p. 22

³ Indeed, our reading focused exclusively on Book III, which takes place between Emile’s 12th and 15th year.

proclaim the banners on the lampposts. This motto of the college's founder and namesake is what drew Emile here. He seeks adventure and wants to understand.

The nearest town is two miles away through dense woods, and to preserve the intellectual purity of the college environment, students travel only on foot. Two miles through the woods is an easy navigation problem for Emile on a sunny day or a starry night, but he is not here to escape. He is Robinson Crusoe, marooned anew, on an island with uncharted possibilities. Earlier that day, he had sold his craftsman's tools for pens and paper, then had saved the rest for books.

The tutor and friend of his early teens, Mr. Rousseau, had never intended for him to choose this path, or indeed any path that involved so many books. He had been permitted to read, of course, and especially those books that provided inspiration for martialing the resources necessary to find his way in the world (Rousseau 184). But to study humanities at a small, secluded college? It would have seemed foolish to Mr. Rousseau. "It is by their palpable relation to his utility, his security, his preservation, and his well-being," Mr. Rousseau had once advised, "that he ought to appraise all the bodies of nature and all the works of men. Thus, iron ought to be much more valuable in his eyes than gold, and glass than diamonds" (Rousseau 187). Emile can imagine how the people in the market would roll their eyes at the utility of prioritizing humanities and isolating oneself from the *hic et nunc* ("Here and now" Oakeshott 10-11), two of Oakeshott's precepts. As he hears their voices in his mind's ear, He zips his jacket against the

wind and pulls down his simple cap.

He wonders now if Mr. Rousseau ever fully understood that he has chosen this path not in spite of his tutor but because of him; Mr. Rousseau's seeds of worldly, practical knowledge had sprouted into a growing sense that these sorts of books were of greater use than he had previously been told. Emile had become accustomed to allowing objects and information to appear in front of him, without demanding answers from them. Now, at eighteen, his own life had presented itself as one of these objects of curiosity. He had studied it with his characteristic pensiveness and curiosity, but the essence of the thing, the meaning of life, had eluded him. Self-sufficiency and creative instrumentation had begun to seem like virtues, not meaning. They were a way to live a good life, a means to an end. But now, when he asks of life, "What good is that for," (Rousseau 179) who is he asking? He lacked the instruments to form an answer. The search for these tools is what brings Emile to Oakeshott College.

And what an adventure it could be! Mr. Rousseau and Mr. Oakeshott had this attitude in common. Both had described life as a process of exploration that gave depth to one's existence. Mr. Rousseau may have preferred a more individualistic, hands-on approach and Mr. Oakeshott a more Socratic, theoretical one, but surely there is room at the Oakeshott seminar table for a student who likes to work with his hands?

Besides, Emile's love of testing things fit in well with the study of natural science, which was respected at Oakeshott. He under-

stands that too much science is frowned upon at the college, but Mr. Rousseau had shared this view: “Not to teach him the sciences but to give him the taste for loving them,” (Rousseau 172) he had prescribed. There was an apparent danger in going too far into one field and losing sight of the big picture. Even if Mr. Rousseau had made that argument based on utility, it was rooted in a respect for balance between natural science and other concepts. Oakeshott College would do the same. In fact, the Oakeshott curriculum prohibited students from concentrating their studies in natural science.⁴

Incidentally, Oakeshott College also prohibited students from being employed and being distracted by “the instrumental arts,” (Oakeshott 13) as marketable skills were called. Emile has an affinity for his craft, but he is willing to take a break from it to pursue life’s deeper meaning. Sacrificing his craft is not a rejection of his Rousseauian values but rather an embrace of them; he is making a trade. Mr. Rousseau might have argued that it was not worth what he was paying, since “it is by money that goods of various kinds become commensurable and can be compared,” (Rousseau 190) and since his time at Oakeshott would not produce more money. But Emile had decided that money was just a representation of value, and that understanding how to live a meaningful life simply had a higher personal value than practicing his trade for four years.

Besides, study was a kind of work, and he knew how to find love in his work by

doing it well and letting it speak for itself. He feels sometimes like two people: an aspiring philosopher, and an aspiring master craftsman. This is by his tutor’s design: “In all that he will see, in all that he will do, he will want to know everything; he will want to learn the reason for everything. From instrument to instrument he will want always to go back to the first; he will accept no assumption” (Rousseau 188–189). Well, Mr. Rousseau, he thinks, I am here to go back to the very first questions. Why am I here? Why are we here?

He knows his former tutor and the founder of this college had their differences, but he thinks the foundations are similar enough to allow for an experience of great personal significance. He enters campus through a large gate in the wall. It shuts behind him with a definitive click.

II. Countermelody

Emile sits at the corner of his seminar table. “The Life of the Mind” is a required discussion group for all first-year students. Two months have passed since he last heard the click of the gate. The readings have been stimulating, but the wind is no longer at his back on his expedition. He stays engaged, but he sometimes wonders why his peers seem content to just talk.

There is a term they keep using, “the conversation” (Oakeshott 16, 30, 34). It seems like an accepted end in itself, this conversation, a kind of proper noun without a clear delineation. He is not always sure whether he is

⁴ Oakeshott 22. Since I am building a hypothetical college on Oakeshott’s writing, I choose to imagine that the college has translated the spirit of his writing into academic policy.

in “the” conversation or just “a” conversation. The ideas that come up in these discussions are wonderful. Yet whenever he tries to offer an opportunity to test them out after class, like the time he proposes a system for measuring “soul” as a ratio like health, his peers seem embarrassed and hesitant. Is this the limit of learning at Oakeshott? The students seem like cartographers who draw maps from descriptions but never travel, never measure the land with their eyes.

The tutor, Ms. Vendredi, sits just to his right, at the end of the table. She reads from an essay by the founder of the college. “Oakeshott wrote that ‘Liberal learning is a difficult engagement’” (Oakeshott 30). She pauses. “It depends upon an understanding of itself which is always imperfect; even those who presided over its emergence hardly knew what they were doing. And it depends upon a self-confidence which is easily shaken and not least by continual self-examination’ (Oakeshott 30). So,” continues Ms. Vendredi, “What perplexes me is... What is it that we are learning in such a difficult way?”

“Human self-understanding,” offers a fellow student at the end of the table, reminding everyone of the school motto. “It is inseparable from learning to participate in what is called a ‘culture’” (Oakeshott 16). She refers to the text by Oakeshott. Emile writes this down carefully. He finds satisfaction in the careful script of his hand and the even flow of ink from a well-designed pen. He thinks about his craftsman tools. It helps him feel valuable to make things that people pay him for, to re-

mind him that he can find his way through a problem with his own wits. His compensation has been a source of self-confidence. How are students compensated in their culture of learning? By grades? By affirmations at the seminar table?

He is momentarily distracted, thinking of the instruments of the seminar. Pens, printed texts on paper, the table, the chairs, all invisible to his peers but designed by experts to be perfectly invisible to their users. A pair of glasses perches on his tutor’s nose, calibrated by an optician. A lamp above the table holds the light of engagement at a standardized level of lumens, using a predictable number of watts. Are these instruments not part of our culture here at Oakeshott? He wonders how the college community fails to acknowledge that the craftsmanship of its physical environment is part of its culture. Isn’t the tutor’s optician participating in the seminar, indirectly?

Ms. Vendredi seems to have caught him staring at her glasses. Her eyes, distorted by the lenses, remind him of a lesson from Mr. Rousseau about the refraction of light and how a stick will appear to bend in water. She invites him to share what is on his mind.

“Is this idea of culture measurable?” he asks. “What could one use to determine whether it is even real? And if it is, how might participants in the culture know when or if they are participating? And in the context of learning about human understanding, surely the economic output resulting from that understanding must be considered?”⁵

⁵ A hypothetical point of view, imagined based on a synthesis of Rousseau’s emphasis of instrumentation in the education of Emile. See Rousseau 169, 176, 184, 188–189

A classmate across from him responds. “I see what you’re saying. Maybe the measurement of learning is what you could use to show how culture is developing, and then furthermore how learning impacts local trade. Consider this passage in the text: ‘A large part of human conduct is, and always has been, concerned with exploiting the resources of the earth for the satisfaction of human wants, and much of human learning is concerned, directly or indirectly, with this endlessly proliferating intelligent engagement....’ (Oakeshott 11-12).

In the context of a culture of learning about human self-understanding, she nods, Oakeshott would agree that, “This certainly is genuine learning” (Oakeshott 12).

Another peer to his left jumps in, “I think that economic output might be considered as a voice in the culture, but not the culture itself.” He wonders what she means by “voice.” Voices have ranges and are heard in pitches. They emit sounds in octaves. They can be transcribed onto staves of treble and bass clefs with precision. That is not what she means. She is talking about the conversation again. She cites Oakeshott, “Perhaps we may think of these components of a culture as voices... Each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in a conversation” (Oakeshott 30).

He does not quite follow. “Are you saying that the mere existence of the conversation itself is the value? Well, what is that conversation good for (Rousseau 179).

His peers appear non-plussed. A man across the table retorts with a raised eyebrow, “I mean, that’s kind of the whole point here at Oakeshott. If you’re not here for the conversation,” he then looks around the table for reactions, “then what are we even doing here, guys?”

Emile tries to explain what he means. “The idea of this conversation as ‘culture’ needs to have some utility and purpose that helps us toward self-understanding. It needs some property that allows one to use it to measure progress towards that self-understanding. Like it says on the lampposts...” He trails off and feels like he’s losing them. “Ok, just imagine it like this.” He finds himself proposing the development of a series of measurements, and then a data collection plan, for extrapolating the relative influence each “voice” might have on the outcome of self-understanding. One could develop an entire curriculum around this way of measuring impact, train experts in program management, advise governments on how to manage grants effectively, change the world...⁶ He stops, seeing a mix of bemusement around the table. Has he departed from the text again?⁷

Another peer to his left chimes in, challenging him. “I feel like your idea matches what Oakeshott called ‘the relic of a dis-

⁶ A hypothetical train of thought, based on a description of Emile’s training in following his curiosity. See Rousseau’s anecdotes about magnetism, navigation, and optics.

⁷ I imagine this feeling would come up frequently, given his training in applying concepts that are not contained in his inspirational texts.

position' to value sciences 'in terms of the use which may be made of the conclusions of their inquiries.' An attitude like this 'has sometimes led to a proliferation of what may be called semisciences - organizations of information in terms of the use which may be made of it'" (Oakeshott 22). Emile can sense that he is being cautioned against falling into the rabbit hole of applied science.

"Ok, well call them what you will, but these 'semisciences' sound important." He encourages the seminar to think differently. "Surely there is a need for instrumenting these contributors to learning, these voices, especially given their potential impact on human understanding. The development of such tools, or instruments, for advancing our goal of self-understanding could drive entirely new ways of thinking. It is not a betrayal of liberal learning to use tools," he asserts, "if they are being invented as part of the learning experience. My old tutor used to say, 'With every tool I use, I do not fail to ask myself, "If I did not have this tool, how would I go about making one like it or doing without it?"' (Rousseau 188-189). In this way, instrumenting the culture and conversation would be in service to Oakeshott's ideals, not a distraction by an instrumental art."

Another peer across the table disagrees. "The focus should be on the general learning experience, not an obsession with its mechanisms. Oakeshott wrote that, 'What comes into view is not merely an extension of the field of instrumental learning but an altogether different engagement of critical self-understanding in which we relate ourselves, not to our inheritance of instrumental

arts, but to the continuous intellectual adventure in which human beings have sought to identify and to understand themselves' (Oakeshott 13). So, if you let people get dragged into the tooling side of the learning process, you'd never have the intellectual adventure. You'd be so focused on the mechanics that you'd lose the plot about the purpose of those tools."

He ponders this response, more than a little disappointed, and he starts to wonder if he made a mistake by coming here. Oakeshott College had seemed to have the same foundations of intellectual adventure as his tutor Rousseau, but he had not expected instrumentation to be so undervalued by his peers.

Ms. Vendredi brings the conversation back to center. "Oakeshott's focus was that 'Liberal learning is learning to respond to the invitations of the great intellectual adventures in which human beings have come to display their various understandings of the world and of themselves' (Oakeshott 22). She might have noticed Emile's furrowed brow and the beginnings of a doodle emerging from his pen. Isn't the development of tools just such an intellectual adventure? He wonders. Is Oakeshott - both the college and its namesake - denying him an invitation to allow his own craftsmanship into the conversation? He sketches an isometric drawing of a pair of glasses next to the words "self-understanding" and "relic."

III. Dissonance

Twenty-six months have passed since the click of the gate. Twenty-year-old Emile

sits in an empty natural science laboratory, his mind caught in a wrestling match between Rousseau and Oakeshott.

His first year has been stimulating, different from his life before college. Even when he finds himself at odds with the college's approach to learning, he could tolerate the difference as novel. Just as Mr. Oakeshott had written, the "voice" of the college was indeed just part of the conversation (Oakeshott 30). It was the loudest voice on campus, but he still had Mr. Rousseau's voice in his memory.

But now, a microscope is on the counter in front of him, and he is furious. The instrument has been simple enough to learn how to use. He has regretted, even, not having had one earlier in his tutelage. What infuriates him now is not the device itself, but the memory of his peers' attitudes toward the microscope during the lab earlier that day. They were given precise instructions on how to operate the scope and what to look for through its lenses. They each followed the instructions to the best of their ability. And that was all.

Alone now, he pulls out a discarded pair of glasses he has recovered from a campus trash can. One lens has been cracked, but the other is perfectly intact. They were simple reading glasses. He could see, in his mind, how the lens could be removed from the glasses, then how it could be edged to fit a new component that could be placed over the eyepiece. With the right angle, a mirror, and with enough light from below, he might be

able to project the contents of the microscope slide onto a screen. Students could share the same experiences with one microscope, seeing the same things under the microscope at the same time, instead of requiring multiple microscopes and making students take turns. As his mind wanders, he wonders if he could find an old telescope, then try adding a layer of magnitude to the projection without altering the microscope lens.⁸

What bothers him now is that his peers took no interest in the microscope itself, only the contents of the slide. Indeed, he felt like the college itself took no interest in the microscope. Mr. Oakeshott himself would have relegated it to the domain of the "instrumental arts."⁹ And yet, the instrument had been so critical in the learning experience for developing self-understanding among the students. The achievement of learning was directly proportional to the precision of the instrument. The inextricable link between instruments and learning meant that instrumental arts were the *sine qua non* of liberal arts. Emile could see all the unrealized potential blocked by this prejudice against tooling. Of course, the microscope was "just an instrument" to the single-minded goal of learning, but in understanding how the instrument was designed in the first place, Emile could imagine better instruments, better insights, better learning experiences. His frustration building, he begins feeling trapped on campus.

In their sophomore year, many of the Oakeshott students have behaved less like curious peers and more like the arrogant buy-

⁸ Inspired by Rousseau 201

⁹ A hypothetical conclusion inspired by Oakeshott 30

ers he used to see visiting the craftsmen in the market. Being students at the college had become their source of dignity and self-perceived status. Their isolation and rejection of the instrumental arts marks their self-perceived intellectual purity. For people like this, modifying a microscope would mean temporarily leaving their blessed journey of liberating their souls from ignorance.¹⁰ Let the craftsmen worry about such things, he could imagine them saying.

Now in his junior year, Emile clenches his fist around the discarded glasses thinking about the attitudes of his peers. Honest labor had been a defining part of his life's meaning before Oakeshott. Mr. Rousseau had said, "To work is therefore an indispensable duty for social man. Rich or poor, powerful or weak, every idle citizen is a rascal" (Rousseau 195). The easygoing veneer of youth has worn off for him and his peers, and now he confronts the social experience of living among people with no work experience, no sense of what it feels like to translate ideas into reality and then to receive the most concrete feedback: a market-based compensation. Despondence replaces Emile's outrage. What is his place here?

He begins to feel the walls of the secluded campus stifling his instincts and deadening his voice. The dignity of work being stripped from this campus society, he notices dignity instead being assigned in other ways: the signaling of erudition with classroom performance, the carefree attitude towards life outside class, the adaptation of speech and dress to match the place and time and audi-

ence, and the exhibition of enlightened viewpoints ringing like an insistent bell in the hallways. Mr. Oakeshott had not written about this culture of the young and the learned. Yet here it was, the product of a secluded campus that rejected the tempering influence of the instrumental arts.

His peers from last year's Life of the Mind seminar have continued to cite Mr. Oakeshott as the way to learn liberally, but they have shared an unspoken consensus behind their eyes: that "liberal learning" is the key to avoiding an unimportant life. He had come to college to examine life's meaning. His peers were now habitually examining whether anything they encountered rose to a level of sufficient prestige.

He can sense that what he is experiencing is not necessarily what Mr. Oakeshott had intended, but it was nevertheless precisely the kind of society that Mr. Rousseau had cautioned him against. These students were chasing the gold and diamonds of the benighted aristocrats, and he had been taught to never forget the surpassing value of iron and glass among the noble craftsmen, whose art truly liberates. Mr. Oakeshott had sought to create a campus protected from the corrupting influence of the *hic et nunc*, but in so doing, he had exacerbated the corrupting influence of endless leisure or of promoting liberal learning as preferential to labor. Mr. Rousseau had taught him to integrate learning and labor. He could see now that his tutor had driven him to innovate, to invent, and to disrupt what he sees as ineffective or inefficient relics of institutional inertia.

¹⁰ A hypothetical conclusion based on Oakeshott 22, 31, 34

He wants to shout to his peers in an editorial, or surreptitiously post a call for change on the campus walls. They have misunderstood Rousseauian utility! “What is that good for?” is not a relic of a disposition toward utility but rather a call to virtue, a conviction of consciousness, not with the aim of economic impact but with the simple concept that ideas should make a difference. “This is now the sacred word,” he quotes Mr. Rousseau in his mind, “the decisive word between and me in all the actions of our life” (Rousseau 179).

Here in the lab, without his craftsman’s tools, and with haughty judgments about instrumental arts clouding his self-esteem, the target of his despondence transfers. The disappointment is not with the college but with himself. Mr. Rousseau had warned him against the path of books. Mr. Oakeshott would never have wanted him here with his love of instruments and invention.

He wants to flee, to climb over the walls. Or stage an insurrection, block the doors, make threats. But he has made a commitment to himself to finish this adventure. “No book other than the world, no instruction other than the facts,” (Rousseau 168). he recalls from Mr. Rousseau. This campus, the secluded world of liberal learning, is forcing him to question the value of a community that produces no goods and elicits no feedback from the outside world. He resents himself for studying here and yearns for the tools he sold over two years ago.

He deftly pops the good lens out of the glasses.

IV. Harmony

It is the second term of his junior year, and Ms. Vendredi has invited Emile for a private conference. He notices the absence of her glasses, then sees the faintest outline of contact lenses around her green-blue irises. Apparently people do try new things at Oakeshott. He wonders if the light, bouncing off the mountains outside her window, refracts differently into her pupils than it did through her glasses over two years ago.

“Would you mind if I read aloud?” begins Ms. Vendredi. He politely consents. She nods and raises the text to her eyes. “The art of the master consists in never letting his pupil’s observations dwell on minutiae which lead nowhere but in bringing him ever closer to the great relations he must know one day in order to judge well of the good and bad order of civil society” (Rousseau 190). She pauses, looking at him over her page. A slight smile grows at the corner of her mouth.

Emile feels a touch of familiarity. He frowns, then returns a flicker of a smile, like a shaft of light through storm clouds, noticed only by one looking for sun. Ms. Vendredi goes on, her own smile growing, “One must know how to match the conversations with which one entertains him to the turn of mind he has been given” (Rousseau 190). She puts down the page.

“How do you come to know the writings of my former tutor, Mr. Rousseau?” he asks. His eyes are soft, nostalgic. Hers are kind, with cordial distance, like an aunt who knows better than her nephew.

She corrects him gently and with a wink, “Surely, you must mean my former tutor.” Emile is stunned. Mr. Rousseau was her tutor, too? A mist forms at the edge of her eyes. They share a common history.

She explains how she herself had come to bridge the views of her Rousseauian tutelage with the call of Oakeshott College, at least two decades before he arrived. She had her own journey from the market to the secluded campus. “Mr. Rousseau and Mr. Oakeshott did not agree, but that does not mean you must choose one or the other. Will you indulge me with one more reading, this one from Mr. Oakeshott?” He consents, gladly. She picks up a separate page. “[C]hoosing wants to satisfy is also something that has to be learned, and [...] the conditions to be subscribed to in making such choices are not the terms of the instrumental arts and practices in which chosen wants may be conveniently satisfied” (Oakeshott 13).

“You see,” she prods Emile, “the desire to innovate and to invent, to challenge and disrupt and improve, this is a want you must learn when and whether to satisfy. It is not the deeper meaning you are seeking but a discipline, valuable in finding that meaning. It is a desire that you can use your instrumental arts to fulfill when the time is right. But!” She pauses and holds up a finger: a teaching moment. “The time is not always right! There are times when you must learn to concentrate on the simple fact of “being,” not what could be.”

Emile observes her skeptically. “Ms. Vendredi,” he asks, “I think I understand

your advice, but where do you see this in Mr. Oakeshott’s text?”

“Ah,” she nods, “let me continue. “What comes into view is not merely an extension of the field of instrumental learning but an altogether different engagement of critical self-understanding in which we relate ourselves, not to our inheritance of instrumental arts, but to the continuous intellectual adventure in which human beings have sought to identify and to understand themselves” (Oakeshott 13).

“Do you see?” she asks. “Your ability to create instruments is a heritage, just like your current adventure of liberal learning is a heritage, passed down through generations and inviting those who cannot help but feel like there is something deeper to life. They exist side-by-side, instruments and critical learning. But you must also learn that there is benefit in setting one aside to focus on the other.”

“So,” Emile asks, “do you mean to say that Mr. Oakeshott was not abjuring the instrumental arts but simply deferring them?”

“Well...” Ms. Vendredi looks down and smiles at the question. When she looks up again, her smile is framed by a warm frown. “Maybe not. Oakeshott’s text keeps the instrumental arts at a distance from the liberal arts. I can’t say that my own conclusions are also his. And yet,” she added, “my experience of the two arts is that their differences are complementary.”

She continues. “There are plenty of voices at Oakeshott College, if you learn to

discern them. I sense that you have been hearing one dominant voice, the voice that devalues the instrumental arts, rather too loudly. I don't think that voice is Mr. Oakeshott's. He knew the instrumental arts had value. In fact, their value was so great to the *hic et nunc* that it might crush the flourishing of liberal arts among students and faculty. Whether instrumental arts were to be abjured or deferred among students of the liberal arts might depend on what the student does after graduating. But before that moment, he did argue that they would be distracting."

Emile begins to see her point. This new interpretation allows for the warring voices in his mind to coexist, without forcing them to agree, and without accepting one at the expense of the other.

"Please remember," adds Ms. Vendredi, "that you have a voice as well. And we all need you to use it – judiciously, of course, and respectfully, as we all must learn to do, even in discord. But use it you must, or else the chorus lacks harmony." With this, she pauses, looking at her bookshelf. He follows her gaze to a well-worn copy of Robinson Crusoe. On faded paper, a map drawn by the hand of a child is folded up next to Defoe. Emile clears his throat and quotes their tutor.

"The goal is not that he know exactly the topography of the region, but that he know the means of learning about it. It is of little importance that he have maps in his head, provided that he is able to get a good conception of what they represent, and that he has a distinct idea of the art which serves to draw them. See the difference there already is

between your pupils' knowledge and mine's ignorance! They know maps, and he makes them" (Rousseau 171).

She nods in agreement, encouraging him to reflect. He ponders. "Is this feeling of being out-of-step with my classmates, of being ignorant, or being inferior... Is this just how it feels to draw your own map when everyone else already knows how to read one?"

"Emile," she says, "everyone at Oakeshott College is creating their map. And yes, some people already have fine calligraphy whereas you can create your own pens from scratch. But eventually, everyone has to cobble together their own map for themselves when they realize that there's a quieter voice leading them into new territory. In the efficient market of the world outside, it's tempting to assume that the rational system of compensation dictates real value. But there is a dominant melody of appetite there, drowning out the voice that calls for deeper meaning and greater value that does not attract compensation. Having heard that voice and, like me, found your way here, you can learn to discern the topography and listen to quieter voices, then join their harmony. Rousseau's voice is here at Oakeshott, just not the dominant melody.

"Now I hope," she adds, standing up, "you will continue this conversation with me as you complete your journey here at Oakeshott. You know, you can have more than one mentor, and our Mr. Rousseau was just the first of many voices whose melodies you can recite simultaneously, in a lively interplay of harmony and dissonance. Learning to accept

their invitation to listen, and sometimes to sing, is part of the process.” She smiles again.

He looks out the window at the mountains, thinking how shallow they would be without the contrast of blue and green.

V. The Instrument

Emile is now twenty-one, a senior at Oakeshott. He is not yet thinking about his plan after graduation, but neither is he worried about whether he fits in. Even without the freedom to innovate and invent, he is experiencing an active world of experimentation in dialogue, in writing, and is finding sanctuary in the willingness of some tutors and peers to at least hear his ideas without judgment.

The aspiring philosopher within him grows, happily, into a new kind of craftsman. In so doing, this philosopher also admonishes him to accept his own limits. There is indeed more to be learned by developing empirical instruments, but his mind is its own instrument, one that can only be made more precise after first being acknowledged. As he walks pensively along the perimeter of the campus, his hand trailing along the walls, he feels cheeky. Mr. Oakeshott’s “place of learning” may require him to defer his instrumental arts, but if the mind itself is an instrument, Rousseau may be having the last laugh.

Emile remembers another of his tutor’s lines. “The surest means of raising oneself above prejudices and ordering one’s judgments about the true relations of things is to put oneself in the place of an isolated man and to judge everything as this man himself ought

to judge of it with respect to his own utility.” Here among the mountains of blue and green, his own mind under the metaphorical microscope, he has found and raised himself above his own prejudices. Has he seen the true relations of things? That would depend on how well the microscope was instrumented! He laughs to himself. Every seminar is a way of calibrating that microscope.

With Rousseau and Oakeshott in harmony, he hears their voices fueling a surge of self-confidence for the remainder of his adventure in self-understanding. Rousseau, in baritone: “Emile has a mind that is universal not by its learning but by its faculty to acquire learning; a mind that is open, intelligent, ready for everything, and, as Montaigne says, if not instructed, at least able to be instructed” (Rousseau 207). And Oakeshott, in tenor: “To be human, to have wants and to try to satisfy them, is, then, to have the use of particular skills, instrumental practices and relationships. There is no action which is not a subscription to some art, and utterance is impossible without a language” (Oakeshott 12). He is a human, a self, on an adventure related to his particular skills, ready for everything.

He hums along absentmindedly, fingering a lens in one pocket and a pen in the other, as the lamppost banners ripple in the wind.



Time, 8x8" oil on canvas panel - Amelia Taylor Wolfe

It is what it is,
Our sweet tautology—
A phrase so worn and tattered,
It's seared in memory.
You have no metaphysics
When you say sweet nothings.
Easy to ignore the Ever Present,
The one and only True Being.

Joey Jekel



Image, Imaginary, and Ignorance of Real Being

The Myth of Narcissus in Plotinus' Enneads and Anna Kornbluh's Immediacy

Gus Kraus

When we look into a mirror and say that we see 'ourselves', we casually assume an identity between an image and that of which it is an image. This assumption, however, obscures the medium by which we face 'ourselves': the mirror. In fact, what we find is not at all what we sought, but only an appearance. Generalizing from this example, we may question the 'given' of the broader data of sense-perception: by what medium do we encounter reality? That is, not the image but the real thing, which causes the image?

In pursuing this question, it may appear odd to pair a late Antique mystic "embarrassed about having a body"¹ and a Jamesonian critic of "contemporary cultural aesthetics."² However, the intersections of Marxism and Psychoanalysis are no stranger to Ancient Literature: with "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment", Adorno and Horkheimer offered³ their own contribution to a field of research in which Plotinus' student, Porphyry, labored over a millenia before (eg. *On the Cave of the Nymphs*). This is to say nothing of Freud's own reception of Sophocles' Theban plays or, apropos of Plato, his tripartite division of the psyche (Greek for "soul"). In this respect, Anna Kornbluh's 2023 *Immediacy: Or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* carries on a well established tradition of both Critical Theory in particular and of Philosophy generally. Despite writing in different philosophical and historical contexts, Kornbluh rather interestingly parallels Plotinus in analogizing and allegorizing myth, specifically that of Narcissus, in order to critique a cultural ignorance of mediating and symbolic layers between a given image and reality.

Narcissus in Critique of 'Immediacy'

Kornbluh's investigation of the Image and the Imaginary is one component in a broader project of aesthetic critique. She designates "Immediacy" as a contemporary cultural style that undertakes a "reification of what merely appears" (Kornbluh 190). This culturally dominant style demands immersion and eschews any form of mediating or representational interference. Rather than the cynicism and self-awareness of postmodernity calling attention to the work of art qua art (the object of Frederic Jameson's seminal critique, which Kornbluh considers the cultural logic of an earlier period (Kornbluh 12-13), Immediacy blurs formal delineations like media or genres to cultivate supposedly unmediated, authentic experience as art's unquestionable *raison d'être*. It thus extols, in both form and content, effortless flow, or as Kornbluh describes, "#NoFilter" (Kornbluh 6). Hoping to ground us, contra Immediacy style, she calls our attention to one of its inherent contradictions: "[t]he paradox of immediacy is a cultural style that imagines itself unstyled" (Kornbluh 11). Amidst the swirling sense of immediate urgency and aesthetic flux, wherein "representation is slackening ... [m]edium dissolves, extremes effulge, exposure streams," (Kornbluh 1) she discovers an economic basis of this cultural aesthetic, as a project of stylizing of the "intensification of circulation" (Kornbluh 44) of capital.

Kornbluh uses this analysis of the material, objective basis of Immediacy to begin an investigation of the cultural style's subjective effects, among which is a kind of Narcissism. Linking a Debordian account of this intensified circulation, where commod-

¹ "On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books". *The Enneads*. Tr. Boys-Stones, George et al. Ed. Gerson, Lloyd. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 17.

² Kornbluh, Anna. *Immediacy: Or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism*. Verso, 2023. 1.

³ Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Tr. Jephcott, Edmund. Ed. Noerr, Gunzelin Schmid. Stanford University Press, 2002. 35.

ities develop into spectacles⁴, to a Lacanian ‘reframing’ of psychological phenomena as topoi of social critique⁵, she makes the move from the Image to the Imaginary: “Too late capitalism’s circulation-centricity expedites a historical contingent inflation of the image, and arguably, the subjective corollary is the inflation of the imaginary” (Kornbluh 47). Kornbluh explores prior attempts to account for this “subjective corollary” in the the ‘trend’ of pop psychologizing today’s culture as abundantly narcissistic (Kornbluh 46) However, to interrogate this supposed “epidemic” of egocentricity within the image-economy “with a lens other than moral panic,” (Kornbluh 53) she recounts a psycho-analytic retelling of the myth of Narcissus:

“When this ordinary entrance into the symbolic [as the “terrain of alterity”] is obstructed, the subject remains too much in the imaginary – the specular state we commonly recognize as “narcissism.” [...] The name comes from the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, a young man who found his own reflection in a pool so captivating that he could not tear himself away from water’s edge and literally wasted away into death. [...] Narcissism fundamentally pertains to the image; the subject invests libidinally not in a substantiality like “ego” but in a speculative effect of the technology of the mirror. In the ancient myth, the image floats on water and might

therefore be construed as naturally occurring. But in Lacan’s retelling, the mirror function encompasses glass, photography, screens. Narcissism becomes qualified as an attachment to the ego qua effect of the mirror [...] Conditioning the very existence of the narcissist, mirroring also composes their primal demand: the reflection must be repeated. One selfie is never enough. [...] An economy that prizes the circulation of images, human capital entrepreneurs, and the data-fication of everything into endless counting of the homogenized same realizes in plasma the mythic promise of the fluid screen. Narcissus’s mirror is industrially ordained” (Kornbluh 51-52).

Kornbluh’s critique of Immediacy’s psychological impact centers on how the hyper-circulation of images creates a relationship between the subject and those images analogous to that of Narcissus as his reflection. The subject, gazing into a screen as a bottomless sea of spectacles, takes as substantial, unmediated and real what, when subjected to critique (only possible via the Symbolic), is in fact contingent, mediated and imaginary. Kornbluh advocates for the mediating power of critical theory as a way to overcome this assumption of identity born of ignorance.

⁴ “‘Drowning in a deluge of images without context, words without meaning, information without distinction - this is the subjective experience in an economy of immediacy. [...] A society of the spectacle in which sociality transpires through eyes, it can often seem to individuals as though our work is the production of our own image ...’” *ibid* 45, 56; cf. “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles* [...] The spectacles is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.” Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Tr. Knabb, Ken. *Bureau of Public Secrets*, 2014. Theses 1, 4.

⁵ “The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan posits the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real as three distinct but interdependent orders of psychic experience. These reframe Sigmund Freud’s topography of the ego, the superego and the id, respectively, elucidating that the domains of the subject are also objective realms of the social.” Kornbluh 48.

Narcissus in Inquiry into Beauty

Plotinus wrote two different tractates concerning Beauty. According to his student, Porphyry, the first treatise he had ever written was I.6 “On Beauty”; years later, he revisited the topic in V.9 “On the Intelligible Beauty”⁶. Despite this gap between their composition, both make recourse to the myth of Narcissus to illustrate the transcendent and noetic qualities of Beauty.

Following his dialectic method, Plotinus begins his inquiry into Beauty with a question: “[w]hat, then indeed, that has actually made us to imagine bodies to be beautiful ... what is this beauty?”⁷ The possibility that Beauty emerges from the material substrate of bodies (Boys-Stones et al. (1.6.1.10-15)) or our perception of them is quickly dismissed. For Plotinus, it would be an impossibility, insofar that he is searching for Beauty as an existent and has said elsewhere that “matter does not even have existence [...] rather, we say that ‘existence’ is said of it equivocally ...” (Boys-Stones et al. (1.8.5.10-15) 114). Instead, Plotinus establishes that the really-existent and immaterial Soul recognizes in a material body something else substantial, intelligible, “to which it has kinship” (Boys-Stones et al. (1.6.2.10) 94). A material body becomes beautiful only by participation in an undivided Form, in the real existent, in Beauty itself (Boys-Stones et al. (1.6.2.25; 1.6.3.5-10) 95). The distinction between real ‘existence’ and the colloquial use of the word allows him later, in analyzing immaterial virtues as beauties, to connect Beauty to the real: “what does ‘real Beings’ mean? In fact, it means that they are beautiful Beings” (Boys-Stones et al. (1.6.5.15-20) 97).

Plotinus uses the myth of

Narcissus as an exhortation to pursue this real, intelligible Beauty. Because Plotinus argues such a simple Form subsists in the noetic, (Boys-Stones et al. (1.6.9.40) 103) the apprehension of beauty becomes a cognitive act by the beholder. However, when we depend on our sense-perception rather than our intellect, we are unaware of the role our cognition plays in aesthetic judgements. Plotinus notes that we habitually “pursue external[beauties], being ignorant of the fact that it is the internal that moves us. It is as if someone, looking at his own image, and being ignorant of where it came from, were to pursue it” (Boys-Stones et al. (5.8.2.34-35) 612; Emphasis mine). This shorter mythic allusion emphasizes the noetic quality of the Form in which external Beauties pursue, and analogizes our ignorance of this fact to Narcissus not knowing what causes the image on the surface.

In I.6 “On Beauty”, Plotinus recounts the story in more detail, and calls attention to own analogical readings. He enjoins the viewer that

“...when he does see beauty in bodies, he should not run after them, but realize that they are images and traces and shadows, and flee towards that of which they are images. For if someone runs towards the image, wanting to grasp it as something true, like someone wanting to grasp a beautiful reflection in water – as a certain story (μῦθος) has it, hinting (αἰνιττεται) at something else, in an enigmatic way, I think, who falls into the water and disappears – in the identical manner, someone who holds on to beautiful

⁶ “On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books”. *The Enneads*. Tr. Boys-Stones, George et al. Ed. Gerson, Lloyd. *Cambridge University Press*, 2018. 20-21.

⁷ *The Enneads* (1.6.1.5-10). Boys-Stones et al, 92.

bodies does not let them go plunges down, not with his body but with his soul, into the depths, where there is no joy for an intellect, and where he stays, blind in Hades [...]"⁸

"[H]inting at something else" implies a meaning for the story which is not immediately apparent. Plotinus posits a need for interpretation: the myth's *ainittetai* ('riddling', intimating, or hinting⁹) beckons the reader to decode its *ainigmata* ("riddles", whence English 'enigma'¹⁰). But further, by retelling the myth in a self-referential way which calls attention to himself as an interpreter ("... I think..."). Following Plotinus' lead, we may say that the myth of Narcissus does not merely portray a youth who chases not after the beautiful but its image; the story presents itself as an image, signifying some other meaning. The image discloses this hidden meaning only when we "flee towards that of which [it is an] image..." Plotinus uses the myth as a practical example the semiotic approach to material beauties he advocates, building on 'Diotima's Ladder' from the Symposium¹¹ as a hermeneutics of sense-experience via inward contemplation (*theoria*).

An Intriguing Echo

The Nymph, Echo, spurned by Narcissus, loses her bodily form and becomes merely a "voice"¹². So too does a sound echoing through a cave mutate as it bounces from one surface to another. In the same way, the echo of the myth in its retellings changes through its successive receptions. Kornbluh, whose primary references concerning Narcissus and narcissism are Lacan and Freud, makes no indication of a noetic essence of Beauty. Furthermore, Plotinus would not

find much "to which [the Soul] has kinship" in Kornbluh's materialist analysis of commodity circulation, which in a Marxist and Lacanian sense makes up an objective, social basis for the subject; thus, the outline of economic shifts necessarily prefigures her study of an inflated imaginary as their "subjective corollary". But despite these retellings appearing within two discourses which could not be more at odds in principles, they share a stunningly similar rhetorical structure.

The viewing subject catches sight of its reflection, and becomes erotically attached to this sensual datum (in a Plotinian sense, out of pursuit for the body and 'plunging' into matter; for Kornbluh, out of libidinal overinvestment). Despite the object reflected appearing 'real', the growing obsession obfuscates the role of the medium in constructing the object: as Kornbluh says, the ["imaged real" is not the real, but the effect of the mirror], much like Plotinus who distinguishes the image for that which causes the image and that the body is merely matter participating in form. Both Kornbluh and Plotinus turn from telling the myth as a portrayal of narcissistic self-deception to telling the myth as moral, blending the descriptive and prescriptive. Therefore, both make a similar prescription: the subject must strengthen their awareness of symbolic mediation (via theoretical critique, via exegesis of the 'enigmatic'). The myth thus retains a coherent, rhetorical effect despite striking differences in philosophical context.

⁸ Boys-Stones et al. (1.6.8.6-16) 101; Emphasis mine. For the Greek text, Henry, Paul, and Schwyzler, Hans-Rudolf. *Plotini Opera I. Tomus I: Pophyrii Vita Plotini, Enneades I-III*. Oxford Classical Texts, 1964. 102.

⁹ Lidell and Scott. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford, 1889. 21.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 211b-c

¹² "Corpus adhuc Echo, non vox erat..." Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.359. *Ovid III Metamorphoses I*. Loeb Classical Library, 1916. 3.359. 148.



Doors and Windows of Mexico City - Aaron Knight

There once was a thing in the void
 Its predecessor's been destroyed
 Of being it's not
 Becoming's its lot
 It's hard for the thing to stay joyed

Amelia Wolfe



~ Paul Harland-White

Root to Rise

Attachment in Xunzi

Haley Prickett

Xunzi opens the first chapter, “An Exhortation to Learning,” rooting himself in Confucius (through the invocation of something a gentleman says): “Learning must never stop... The gentleman learns broadly and examines himself thrice daily, and then his knowledge is clear and his conduct is without fault.”¹ This is a particularly curious beginning that sets the stage for a project that is ongoing. Learning (the very subject being exhorted) cannot be finished, and must never stop. This suggests to me that the root—or the heart of this project Xunzi is undertaking—is likewise something eternal, and constant.² I am perplexed by what learning is for Xunzi, and how the initial natural images make that less perplexing. Xunzi writes:

Blue dye derives from the indigo plant, and yet it is bluer than the plant. Ice comes from water, and yet it is colder than water. Through steaming and bending, you can make the wood as straight as an ink-line into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight again, because likewise the steaming and bending have made it a certain way. Likewise, when wood comes under the ink-line, it becomes straight, and when metal is brought to the whetstone, it becomes sharp.³

Is natural learning different from education? I am understanding natural learning to

be the knowledge gained through survival and getting older, a learning through experience—like that if you go underwater you cannot breathe, or if you touch fire you will get burned. Is Xunzi pointing us to a version of learning that is environmental learning? Do the people and the landscape among which one lives provide a parallel (but distinct) path of continuous learning that is not natural? This active learning, that the gentleman must never stop is growth in the present tense. So, I wonder: what is the root of this active learning and how is it possible to find any sort of footing, foundation, or stability with something that is constantly, by definition, in progress? I suspect that the images we are given of trees (those natural beings who transform, yet stand fixed and firm in their community) will be helpful.

Two things Xunzi thinks about humanity seem initially clear: one, humans are not just born, humans are made, and two, we can only know what we see and hear. If you never climb a high mountain, visit a deep ravine, nor hear the wisdom of former kings, then you will never know the height of Heaven, the depth of the Earth, nor the magnificence of learning.⁴ He writes (not in the words of a gentleman): “Children of [all] peoples cry with the same sound at birth, but when grown they have different customs, because teaching makes them thus.”⁵ I think I agree with him on this; people become what they are taught. But, then we have to

¹ Eric Hutton, . Xunzi, “An Exhortation on Learning”. Princeton University Press, 2014. p. 1

² This notion seems to check out for me, as a human who truly values learning and growth, learning does not have an end, learning is a way of being; learning is a continual process that must (in the imperative) continue. Otherwise... otherwise, what? There is no purpose to living? That seems extreme, but perhaps not too far off the mark. There is no growth? I think that is right, and supported by the images we are given of roots throughout this chapter. There is no transformation? That makes me wonder if transformation is a different sort of growth – one that requires intention, or cultivation.

³ Xunzi, p. 1

⁴ Xunzi, p. 1

⁵ Xunzi, p. 1

wonder, what does it mean to be taught, and what should the content of the learning be? How does Xunzi use the examples of inanimate things that grow (and root and transform) to help us understand how the process (and product) of learning that underlies everything actually works. Learning is an ever ongoing event for Xunzi.

In its continuity and cyclicity, nature provides a mirror for us to understand the proper form and purpose of ritual. Xunzi writes, in “The Rule of a True King” about the cosmic order: “Heaven and Earth are the beginning of life. Ritual and yi⁶ are the beginning of order. The gentleman is the beginning of ritual and yi.”⁷ By making ritual and yi his default, and learning to follow the form, the gentleman begins to accumulate virtue through his habits. The order of Heaven and Earth rely upon the “unifying guide” of gentlemen who tap into the “great root”⁸ through the practice of ritual. In this way, humanity gains cosmic relevance. The consistency that ritual provides creates a fixity. The ongoing practice of ritual solidifies and connects, across space and time, humanity. Ritual is a sort of glue that keeps us in connection with our ancestors, and in dialogue with future generations.

Since reading Xunzi for the first time, I have been unable to forget his use of plants (silent, though living) to illustrate learning. As a self-taught botanist, the natural imagery of plants resonates, and I am interested to spend some time digging in (hah! pun intended) to the way they function within Xunzi’s project. In this essay, I will examine closely the images we are given of plants (things with roots) to clarify for myself (and ideally my reader) the way in which Xunzi uses the natural world to illustrate a truth about the human experience of learning. Before exploring further, it will be helpful to put the passage in question on the page:

In the south there is a bird called the meng jiu. It makes its nest from feathers, weaving it together with hair, and attaches it to the slender branch of a reed. When the wind comes along, the branch snaps, the eggs break, and its young perish. This happens not because the nest itself is flawed, but rather because of what it is attached to. In the west there is a plant called the ye gan. Its stem is four inches long, and it grows on the top of high mountains, so that it overlooks ravines a hundred yards deep. It has this view not because its stem can grow long, but rather because of where it stands.

Likewise, when the peng vine grows among hemp plants, it goes straight up without being stood upright. The root of the lan huai plant is sweet-smelling angelica, but if you soak it in foul water then the gentleman will not draw near it, and the common people will not wear it. This happens not because the original material is not fragrant, but rather because of what it is soaked in. Therefore, the gentleman is sure to select carefully the village where he dwells, and he is sure to associate with well-bred men when he travels. This is how he avoids corruption and draws near to what is correct.⁹

The images presented are seemingly different: 1. The reed where the meng jiu bird builds its nest “fails” because of what it is attached to. 2. Seeing everything, the little plant (ye gan) “triumphs” because of where it stands. 3. The peng vine, growing upright, likewise “triumphs” because of where it stands. 4. The once sweet smelling roots of the lan huai plant, becoming foul, “fails” because of what it is soaked in. How do these metaphors illustrate something about learn-

⁶ Since Hutton left yi untranslated, I shall do the same. It is worth noting what he says about the senses of the meaning. It can mean ethical standards (duty), the proper way to act (virtue), or righteousness.

⁷ Xunzi, “The Rule of a True King,” p. 75

⁸ Xunzi, “The Rule of a True King,” p. 75

⁹ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 2-3

ing, and are the images consistent or distinct ideas? I suspect it is a both/and situation; they are both connected (there is consistency in the purpose of the image), and distinct—each has a unique nugget of wisdom. Each example deserves detailed observation.

1. The flimsy reed

It is striking to me here that Xunzi first uses an example of a bird attaching to a plant. Birds can fly, they do not have roots or the limits of gravity in the same way, yet they demonstrate something crucial. Despite the fact that the meng jiu bird has some questionable parenting choices, the bird is not extinct (or at least not yet). Using the nearby reeds as a point of attachment, despite the nest being well built (in its own form, as a nest), the nest will ultimately render itself useless. When a strong wind comes along it is extremely likely, though not inevitable, that the baby birds will die. inevitably (and invariably) causes the nest to break and the baby birds to die. Are we to say, ‘what a dumb bird, how could it be so careless?’ I think no, the bird simply did what was natural, attached itself (and its future) to what it was surrounded by. Though, I do think we can wonder: ‘what a short-sighted bird, how could it not see the reed would not support the nest.’ This seems to be a pretty brutal example (unborn birds falling to their death before they even live), but also a pretty clear message about parenting 101—pay attention to the things you use to support your family. If they are not sturdy, rooted, and fixed (like virtue, or the Way), then there is no hope for your family. It could also be a warning about who you choose to surround yourself with—if they are reed-like, and flimsy, then death/failure to thrive of the children will follow. They will not leave the nest and fly (as baby birds, or as students off to college) if your village lacks virtue.

I cannot ignore the ambiguity of how it could be possible for this bird species to continue if it inevitably follows this same

pattern?¹⁰ However, I think Xunzi is trying to illustrate the importance of being prepared for the wind, and attaching ourselves to things that are firmly rooted, and stable, otherwise we are sure to lose our footing, or our children! The nature of the reed is that it is flimsy, and not suited to support a nest. Since the meng jiu bird is not extinct, and the other metaphors in this passage are of plants, is the image actually about the reed?

The reed (knowingly, maybe) allows the nest to become attached, for the time being. When the nest falls, the reed is unaffected. It simply continues its reed life, firmly rooted. Reeds are simultaneously flimsy and rigid. If foreign objects are attached to their stalks, if they are weighed down by something, then they do not panic and change their own course. They wait patiently for a strong enough wind to snap the “tumor” (nest) off. The reed is both shaky and solid. It is not capable of supporting life beyond its own being, in the same way a redwood tree might be.

2. The little ye gan

The little plant is circumstantially favored—it is on a big mountain, it has a great view... but it does not ever get to be too tall, or too useful for that matter. It just lives out its little four inch life looking into the deep valleys, “because of where it stands.” This image of a tiny plant (smaller than the palm of your hand) with the view of the whole world from the top of a mountain makes me wonder if Xunzi is (with extreme subtlety) making a commentary on society.

The little plants are fortunate; they have been born on a mountain top (perhaps this is like the nobility, or the family of the emperor—people who are born into “privilege” in society). Xunzi writes, “The gentleman is exceptional not by birth, but rather by being good at making use of things.”¹¹ The ye gan, through no merit of its own root system, have been afforded the luxury

¹⁰ This is a potentially WILD turn of events, but what if this example of the bird is commenting on generational trauma... it will continue to shape those who do survive (invisibly) as they will either die out early, and continue the cycle generationally, or they will break the cycle and attach their nest elsewhere.

¹¹ Xunzi, p. 2

of an unobstructed view. They need not rely on anything beside their origins to see completely, or become educated through learning. The gentleman becomes exceptional because he is aware of what might be useful, not because he was born that way. The gentleman is made through learning.

3. The upright peng vine

It grows straight (not through any virtue of its own root system) because it is supported by the hemp plant. Yet, because of the sturdy and reinforcing hemp plant, the vine can attain height. Like the ye gan, where the plant stands, where its roots are, is relevant. The peng vine (AMONG hemp plants) does not need to be stood up because it grows straight. The straight growth is the result of what is around, not necessarily any virtue of its own root system. It is the proximity in space to something else (something notably different from it) that enables it to climb.

The direct physical proximity provides the foundation; the habitat determines the direction. If I am right, and this metaphor is a social commentary, does that mean where one is born in society determines where one's learning begins? There is still no end to learning, but perhaps this is illustrating where one must start, from the perspective of a commoner (born without a title); one must learn from a teacher. The hemp plant guides the peng straight. Through learning, the vine climbs and is made straight, much like a commoner who goes on to become emperor (like everybody's favorite emperor Shun, or Yu, the craftsman of the rivers), or any commoner who happens to be attached to the right teacher and learns the proper use of ritual. In fact, Xunzi concludes the chapter "Human Nature is Bad," by twice exclaiming: "Everything depends on what you rub up against!"¹² What we attach ourselves to, will dictate everything that follows.

The little plant and the upright plant are connected "likewise," suggesting similarity between the two images. Initially, I thought that the function of these images in-

cluded explaining what it means to be rooted, or the "virtue" of being rooted. But, it is notable that they are "successful" as plants, more despite than because of their root systems. Yes, it is due to external circumstances that they are successful: the little plants have the best view because of their "home" on a mountain, and the vines grow straight because of the "village" of hemp plants supporting them. Potentially these two images serve to amplify what is possible for plants in a community, as opposed to relying entirely on oneself. The importance of community is not to be overlooked. In fact, Xunzi claims that if humans do not have social order, chaos will follow: "If there is chaos then they will disband. If they disband then they will be weak. If they are weak then they cannot overcome the animals. And so they will not get to live in homes and palaces. This is the meaning of saying that 'one must not let go of ritual and yi even for a moment.'"¹³ This sets the direction Xunzi is going.

So far, the examples have brought the danger (or advantage) of attachment and position to the forefront. The nests attached to the reeds that fall, the four inch plants that grew on the top of a mountain, the help provided by the hemp plant encourages a supported and upright vine. The final example though is different, it is only after the roots are no longer rooted that they become relevant for the metaphor.

4. Smells like Teen Spirit

While rooted, the fragrance of the lan huai is dormant. When uprooted the smell is delightful. When soaked in something foul, the fragrance of the roots transforms—everyone now keeps their distance. This image presents unrooted roots "soaked" in something foul. Which makes me wonder why one would expect something marinated in something to smell anything but likewise foul. It is possible there is something important about the contrast between pre-soaked roots (a delight to the nostrils) losing their fragrance when soaked, and absorbing a different, and horrible odor (an offense to the olfactory system). There is a transforma-

¹² Xunzi, "Human Nature is Bad," p. 257

¹³ Xunzi, "The Rule of a True King," p. 77

tion, a material change, that happens when it is detached from its origins.¹⁴ Is being rooted in a place and being uprooted and soaked elsewhere really helping us understand the same thing? Upon reflection, I think yes.

What we connect ourselves to, our roots, what we hold dear, what we deem of value does shape and transform us. Likewise, what we allow to permeate us, will transform us. Much depends on the nature of what we are being soaked in; if it is good, we will become good. If we study the ancients and practice ritual, the wealth of things to learn is infinite. If we gamble, and seek pleasure, and hang around with foul smelling people, we will be transformed and have a foul smell that repulses commoner and nobleman alike. Both being rooted, and being uprooted (both attaching to and detaching from) are examples of the external world influencing the internal. Does Xunzi think the “virtue” of a thing (plant or person) is nearly inseparable from the roots it has? Or is he pointing us to consider the circumstances as the real linchpin? Circumstances will always change; adaptability is crucial. It seems pertinent that plants do grow towards light. There is a natural inclination to use the energy being offered by the sun, the gentleman is likewise resourceful.

5. Roots as a Metaphor/The Secret Life of a Plant Parent—An Interlude

All plants rely on their root systems to sustain their life and encourage new growth. They are in most cases subterranean (although air plants are a thing, and plants do have ‘aerial roots’), providing invisible stability; in all cases, roots are crucial to the health of a plant. Roots are what we connect ourselves to. Roots do not consider the profit to be gained by growing, they grow by instinct. Plants are different from us, yet they have much to teach us about how to live (and maybe, how to learn!) and how to make more life. In the plant world, people have “propagation stations” which consist of cuttings from other plants in water (or sometimes moss). As the cutting soaks in

the water, it miraculously (though naturally) grows roots. You can keep some plants in water for a long time—years if you want to! It’s fascinating to see the root systems develop. It is also easy to notice if the roots are healthy or not (more so than you can when they are in soil, obviously); roots will turn brown and soggy when they have rotted; rotten roots are fatal. Trimming the rotten roots will help the plant grow healthier and potentially save the plant’s life. By observing the health of roots, it is possible to discern the natural growth pattern.

If we consider roots metaphorically it seems only natural to think of where one comes from. The two most influential forces in shaping minds are (I think): family and education. What do family and education provide a person with? That feels like a loaded question, but I think in an ideal world, they provide the soil – where virtues are cultivated. Thus, if the values are rotten, the plant (and the person) will become likewise, rotten. If I live a life rooted in honesty, I will become an honest person. Not only what roots are, but also where the roots are, is relevant in shaping the future. Xunzi is asking us to look at the people around us, and if we see that they are flimsy and unsupportive, then we need to move! Or, we need to find a teacher, because we (and all of our future generations) are doomed otherwise. Now, (because I do not suppose that Xunzi’s intention was for me, thousands of years later, to use his ideas to explore my own understanding of roots as a plant parent), I will return to the text explicitly, with the question of how these images help the reader understand learning.

6. What to Do? Where to Next? It’s a Jungle Out There!

The conclusion of the image reveals that the plants serve to explain that one must exercise discernment in selecting one’s community. Xunzi corroborates: “the gentleman is sure to select carefully the village where he dwells, and he is sure to associate with well-bred men when he travels. This is how he

¹⁴ I have a hunch that the opening images of dye, freezing, and an uncarved block (being made straight or round) might be a mirror for these images of roots and trees.

avoids corruption and draws near to what is correct.”¹⁵ The duality of motion (towards what is right and away from what degrades) requires a double awareness—what will be to our benefit, and what will be to our detriment. Plants already know this inherently; they move towards the sun. The physical rootedness of plants (in the soil) limits their ability to move away from corruption. Luckily, we metaphorically rooted humans have more sovereignty. With this sovereignty also comes an infinite number of possibilities and choices. How are we supposed to know what is correct?

Based on the poem¹⁶ that follows, the suggested technique for discerning what we should seek lies in building our foundation. What we build upon will dictate what is created. Just like in the natural world, bugs are generated from “rotten meat,” and maggots come from “fish that’s spoiled,” so too in human society. Ruin and misfortune emerge from “lazy, haughty men who forget their place.”¹⁷ If the foundation within (the roots) are corrupt, anything built on top will be building towards hatred. So, this makes clear, the uncorrupt path would build towards yi.¹⁸

Xunzi expounds upon this poem with more natural imagery. He writes, “You may spread out firewood as though all of the same kind, but fire will still seek out the dry pieces. You may level out the earth so that it appears all even, but water will still seek out the wet places... Wherever trees create shade, flocks of birds will rest. Wherever something turns sour, flies will gather.”¹⁹ Here, the emphasis is not on things that are rooted, but unrooted things that can move! Though the purpose of the metaphors is linked (nature can teach us about virtue), it feels like an in-

version from the four images of plants I have been focusing on.

If not an inversion, it is certainly a change in perspective. The idea that fire will be able to perceive which wood is dry (and therefore good for food and growth), and likewise that water will be able to seek its nature seems vital. If what is beneficial is visible, this image is useless. I think the point is that despite the effort made to disrupt what appears (spread out firewood, as if you are testing fire to see if it knows what it ought to attach to), it will not disrupt the natural course of things. It is biologically fundamental that birds and creatures on foot will flock towards the place where there is shade, and food. Xunzi declares: “Likewise, there are words that summon misfortune, and there is conduct that beckons disgrace, so the gentleman is careful about where he takes his stand.”²⁰ I am struck by the fact that in order to know where to stand, there are words and actions that are to be avoided (but not a clear prescription of what is to be searched for). This furthers Xunzi’s opening thought that learning is unending. It is not just knowing what there is to know; it is also being able to build upon that foundation.

If you can accumulate enough earth, you can make mountain (bringing wind and rain!). If you can accumulate enough water, you can create a pool (bringing the dragons to live!). Xunzi boldly follows these two natural examples in an axiomatic way: “If you accumulate enough goodness to achieve virtue, then you will naturally attain to spirit-like powers and enlightenment, and the heart of the sage is complete therein.”²¹ The transition here is profound. If you live a good life, the “natural” progression appears

¹⁵ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 3

¹⁶ Ode? It’s unclear the source of the passage, but it is set off, suggesting it belongs to a different source that Xunzi is using to build his argument.

¹⁷ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 3

¹⁸ It is not obvious what the antonym of hatred would be in this context. Perhaps yi is the closest? That would fit nicely with the emphasis Xunzi places on the combination of ritual and yi. However, I think if we read it as love, that would also be a reasonable articulation of the antithesis.

¹⁹ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 3

²⁰ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 3

²¹ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 3

to be a categorical transformation towards a higher self. It is with this enlightenment that the heart of the sage is perfected. Wow! Talk about a product of learning—"spirit-like powers"!

This makes me wonder, how many plants would it take to make the inside space an "outside" space? Is there a quantifiable way to distinguish that a place is more like a jungle than an apartment? I wonder this because, it looks like there is a change of state that happens to the person who achieves these "spirit-like powers and enlightenment." This appears to echo the opening images—ice being colder than water (its original state), and the indigo dye being bluer than the plant (in its original state). However, unlike the wood that has been made straight or curved will not revert in the sun. Yet, if the process of accumulating virtue and goodness stops, a regression is possible. Is this transformation of the heart a change of state for the person?

Accumulating knowledge of plants requires continual and consistent effort (you must learn about your plants, care about your plants—water, fertilize, make sure your plants are getting enough light; you sometimes have to deal with pests, or clean up spilled dirt in the house, etc.) The parallel lines I see between how learning is being understood by Xunzi and my unending plant journey is helpful. The layers and layers built on top of one another are an accumulation of knowledge, there is always more to learn, but in the learning there is (indeed) a transformation. Perhaps if I were a sage, and studying ritual and not plants, my heart would not just transform, but also complete!

Xunzi proceeds to explain that he is not talking about anything easy; the lazy and distracted will not triumph. He offers the example of a carver. If he first tries to carve rotten wood, he will not know how. But if he is single minded, and practices, one day he will be able to "engrave even metal and stone."²² By analogy Xunzi compares an earthworm and a crab. The legless earthworm is single-minded, its focus is unwavering; by contrast, the multi-limbed crab is

frenetic and relies on the snakes and eels for finding water. By taking one step at a time, with full focus, the next step will be easier. In repeated action, behavior solidifies. It is by means of consistent words that one's character becomes trustworthy. It is by continued propagation and care of my plants that approaching "jungle" status in my apartment can even present itself as a possibility. It does not come as a surprise Xunzi moves from this idea of accumulation to ritual.

7. Ritual = the G.o.A.T. Root

The world around us repeats visibly each year. As a Californian, I see the sun set in the west over the Pacific. There are no deciduous trees that announce the fall, though there is a subtle movement in where the sun sets on the horizon. In autumn, the sun gets closer in alignment with the view I have from the beach, where I'm standing. After the winter solstice, the sun slowly moves farther to the northwest. Similarly, trees lose their leaves in brilliant fashion, only to have them return again in the spring. Both are a form of ritual. They are a visible expression of action. Nature is a sort of ritual. The expression of it will vary, but the root of it will remain constant.

Ritual as a root provides a clear method, though little room for creativity. This rigidity provides something to hold on to, and something to build upon. The roots of ritual extend far beyond the present moment and offer an outline of what is "proper." You do not need to discern whether or not it is "beneficial" for you—it has stood the test of time. But, it is possible you could accumulate virtue, but not have the proper clothing, or offering or item needed to perform the ritual perfectly. The prescriptiveness of ritual certainly complicates things. Luckily, Xunzi reassures us not to despair and gives us an analogy with sound. The ancients remark on how animals draw near to music and that all sounds are heard. Xunzi reassures us there are no sounds "so small as not to be heard. There is no action so subtle as not to be manifest... If you do good, will it not accumulate? How could it be that none hear of it?"²³ Even the

²² Xunzi, "An Exhortation," p. 5

²³ Xunzi, "An Exhortation," p. 5

smallest step towards goodness, and virtue, is a step closer. The only “wrong” thing to do is to not take a step.

9. The “End” of this Essay

One must remember that the opening claim of Xunzi was that learning must not stop. However, this essay must end, eventually. Yet, what the path of learning looks like, or how one is to know if she is going in the right direction or not, is still ambiguous. Anticipating a good student would wonder this, Xunzi rhetorically asks the beginning and end of learning, only to introduce a parallel distinction between order and purpose. The order of learning begins by reciting the classics, and the end is the study of ritual. In other words the end is an activity—an ongoing effort. Next Xunzi explains the purpose “begins with becoming a well-bred man, and ends with becoming a sage.”²⁴ It is only after knowing the order that the purpose is illuminated. Xunzi provocatively concludes: “to pursue it is to be human, to give it up is to be a beast.”²⁵ In every moment we are alive, the purpose is in the present tense. The pursuit of wisdom is what makes us more than human. Learning is not something that

happens to us; it is a life-long task. If we do not spend our lives continually learning, we forsake our humanity. Could the stakes get higher than that? There is not an “end” to learning; there is death, which stops learning, and there is ritual, where learning stops. The difference between a limit (or a stopping point) and an end is subtle, but significant. It is in this way that Xunzi can logically make learning a continual way forward, inseparable from ritual. The vision of learning Xunzi gives us is not pessimistic and offers a relatively clear direction for the most expedient way to learn: “draw near to the right person... And exalting ritual comes second.”²⁶ Who we surround ourselves with, who we “draw near” and “imitate” will determine who we become. Our attachments are paramount; where we are rooted is where we will rise from.

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²⁴ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 5

²⁵ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 5

²⁶ Xunzi, “An Exhortation,” p. 6

Interviews & Toasts



Vanity with Globe - Amelia Taylor Wolfe
5x5" oil on wood

Meet Tutor, Mr André Barbera

Shirely Quo



6 December 2024

Mr André Barbera hails from Connecticut where he studied at Wesleyan University. He completed his PhD in 1980 at the University of North Carolina. The title of his thesis was ‘The Persistence of Pythagorean Mathematics in Ancient Musical Thought’. He taught at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana before coming to St John’s College in 1990 to teach at its Annapolis campus.

Recently, Mr Barbera completed his latest book, ‘Original Sin and Time’ which explores the idea that God is not bound by time. It is written from a Judeo-Christian perspective. His new book will be available in early 2025. The following blurb was kindly provided by Mr Barbera:

We generally don’t like to talk about sin, and we especially don’t like to talk about original sin, a sin for which we deny re-

sponsibility. But if we are not responsible, i.e., blameworthy, how can it be sin? Sin implies culpability, and so we seem to be suffering the consequences, indeed the punishment for something that we didn’t do.

Why must we be descendants of Adam and Eve? Why couldn’t our first parents have been obedient and blameless? We never asked to be descended from Adam and Eve.

St. Augustine asserts: “be a man guilty of unbelief, or a perfect believer, he does not in either case beget faithful children, but sinners; in the same way that the seeds, not only of a wild olive, but also of a cultivated one, produce not cultivated olives, but wild ones.” (On Original Sin, ch. 45)

The vast majority of biblical exegesis, commentary, and preaching on original sin attempts to temper the apparent harshness of this notion. We rush to contextualize the condemnation, historically, psychologically, and spiritually. Things aren’t that bad.

But what if they are? This book explores the possibility that each and every one of us is guilty for all misery and woe, for our willful transgressions, for the cruelty of others, and for so-called natural disasters such as earthquakes. We commit the sin of self-reference, we say “I,” and thereby we temporalize ourselves. Original sin and time are the same thing.

Although it is a standalone book, it continues a discussion about Augustine which he began in his previous book called ‘On Faith, Works, Eternity, and the Creatures We Are’. In that book, which forms part of a series, Reading Augustine, Mr Barbera considered

the question of faith, how an individual may act faithfully, and what good (if any) is faithful action. Drawing on the letters of the Apostle Paul and the work of philosophical thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Mr Barbera explored numerous aspects of faithful living, from religion, original sin, and tests of faith, to the power of prayer, and even the concept of atheism. Mr Barbera formulated a postulate drawn from Augustine's Confessions: God is not bound by time. The person of faith, however, is enslaved by time.

Mr Barbera has been a tutor at St John's College for more than 30 years. He teaches in both the undergraduate and graduate program although he is more familiar with the former. He says that it is easier to teach undergraduates because the majority of the students come from similar backgrounds and have similar knowledge whereas the graduate students come from many different backgrounds and different life experiences. However, the undergraduate program is more technically demanding. He completed his PhD in ancient music theory and used to play the piano although he says that he stopped playing the piano because he realised that he was doing it for procrastination rather than enjoyment.

In comparison to other colleges and universities, St John's College does not require tutors to undertake research and publish schol-

arly books or journal articles. However, the purpose of a sabbatical is not so much compensatory but preparatory, i.e., to come back refreshed for another teaching year.

St. John's tutors are expected to teach all subjects, regardless of their formal academic backgrounds. This includes classic works in philosophy, literature, political science, psychology, history, religion, economics, mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology, astronomy, music and language. Unlike the graduate program, undergraduates take a class called "laboratory" where they discuss scientific texts in biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and genetics, and then recreate iconic experiments in the Junior laboratory. The laboratory is about modern classical physics, e.g., Galileo, Newton etc. Mr Barbera says that there has always been a question mark about whether the laboratory should be part of a traditional liberal arts education but it has been a St John's tradition ever since the Great Books Program was adopted in 1937.

In addition to teaching Mathematics and Natural Science this semester in the graduate program, Mr Barbera is also teaching a preceptorial on Augustine and the City of God in the undergraduate program.

Becoming a Reader

Toast to the Tutors (Fall 2024)

Charmaine D'Souza

To begin, I need to say a couple of things aloud.

I did not consider myself a reader, especially not of the Great Books, before arriving at St. John's. While some of the undergrads are known to call the GIs "half-Johnnies" based on how much of the Program we read, I consider myself more like **10% Johnny**.

That said, I think this judgment by these undergrads is a bit cruel. So, I would like to leave this place giving my peers a new title:

GI Johnnies.

It is a true and fitting title for most here and aspirational for someone like me.

A second note: I haven't conferred with my graduating peers while preparing for this speech, but I hope my words are a reflection of yours as well.

Now, with that said...

Most people in my circles back home try to resolve their midlife crisis by purchasing a luxury motorcycle or a weekend at a 7-star resort. I feel fortunate that the lockdown, though under unfortunate circumstances, gave me the chance to pause, take stock, and realize that those sources of instant gratification and/or bandages would not give me my answers. I needed to step away from the noise and contemplate what it truly means to live a well-lived life.

When Mr. Boyle asked me to raise a toast to our tutors a couple of days ago, I was deeply grateful for the opportunity to express my appreciation. Thank you, Mr. Boyle!

And then, in the dark stillness of my bedroom, just before going to sleep that night, I panicked. I love one-to-one conversations and those around the seminar table, but

this—standing in front of people—not so much.

In my panic, but knowing I have an incredible family, I sent them a one-word message: **HELP!**

The next morning, my dad responded with a quote:

"I must be willing to let go of what I am in order to become what I will be."

Attributions to this source are unclear.

Einstein or Lao Tzu—whoever said it—had a point. My dad knows me well. He had a point, too.

As I reflected on this quote, I recollected that transformation often requires sacrifice. I had forgotten that for a long time.

To become who I am today, I had to let go of the comfort of who I was.

To become who I am meant to be, I must let go of the comfort of who I am now.

Letting go hasn't meant abandoning my identity; instead, it's been about unearthing and letting go of outdated beliefs that no longer serve me—allowing them to wash away. Holding too tightly to principles—like Creon—or to ideas of my current self, including my habits, fears, and even my successes, had become invisible traps.

Today, I see I am better for the letting go.

What felt like a sacrifice isn't truly lost; instead, it has become the foundation of my becoming—the beginning of knowledge—of an education.

This journey has required trust. This journey required faith in myself, confidence in my adaptability, and reliance on our community of learners and teachers. To all my peers in the classroom and at the GI, from Kashya Boretsky, a classmate in my first semester to her spouse, Stephen Borsum, a classmate in my last one, thank you!

As for the teachers, they have appeared in the form of each book and every tutor here at St. John's.

Mr. Jeffrey Smith's contagious enthusiasm at our Politics & Society tutorial table ignited my passion for Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Please remember that was my first tutorial. Aristotle. The Ethics. What a start to a master's program for a non-reader! Through our sessions, I realized that society begins with the self, then family, followed by neighbors, the city, and beyond. I learned I had no business trying to change the world if I couldn't get the first three—self, family, and neighbor—right.

Euclid with Mr. Crockett taught me that the difference between things being *equal* and *congruent* isn't just foundational in mathematics but also in life. Discerning when something needs to align perfectly with my expectations, goals, and desires, and when *equal* is good enough, is invaluable in the pursuit of a well-lived life.

And then, there is Mr. Braithwaite.

In the wise words of *Kung Fu Panda*, "*When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.*"

We began this semester with me embodying the role of the stubborn, ignorant comrade in *Hipparchus*. May I say, I played that role exceptionally well. But that's not why I came to St. John's. My hope is that I have let go enough to now resemble the comrade in *Minos*—still flawed, still learning, but a work in progress.

A quick side note: Over Thanksgiving a couple of weeks ago, I visited Seneca Rocks in West Virginia. At one of the local stores there, I came across a souvenir mallet with the words etched on the handle: "**Hillbilly Attitude Adjuster.**"

Mr. Braithwaite, thank you for being my very own "attitude adjuster." Much needed and deeply appreciated.

"When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. When the student is truly ready, the teacher will disappear."

I must admit—I am not truly ready. I feel as though my education has only just begun.

But life moves forward. That's the world we live in. Undergraduate studies is four years and Masters two. We quantify it with grades and a certificate and call it education.

I can't. I choose not to. I must see my time at **St. John's as a primer—a foundation for a lifetime of learning.** Today's seminar table can turn into tomorrow's laptop screen. Not congruent, perhaps, but metaphorically equal.

Whether we came here to reflect on life, learn from the Greats, or earn a degree, St. John's has been our catalyst. While the soul of this college is the Program and the great lives and wisdom we read through it, the beating heart is undoubtedly our tutors.

To our tutors, the primers of our education. Cheers!



Like Alyosha

Toast to the Tutors (Summer 2024)

Emily Price

I have spent some time, in the last few weeks, thinking about what it means to say goodbye and how to do it well—the closing of a chapter. At the start of a journey, we need the courage to begin. When we meet obstacles, we muster courage to face them. But saying goodbye takes courage as well.

St. John's has been a haven for me—for many of us. A golden hour—sunlight illuminating the world, showing us its glory for a few sacred moments. On this campus, pretense is disposed with. Careful reading is expected. Sincerity is rewarded. We are learners, listeners. St. John's is a world we hoped might exist, somewhere. But which of us dared to hope we'd find it? Or that we'd be invited inside?

In such a place you could linger forever. I wish I could. But, like Alyosha, most of us cannot stay within these walls. We're sent back into the world. Monday morning comes, and our lives and our work stretch out before us. To say goodbye takes courage.

My St. John's education is gift. I cannot demand it continue beyond its bounds. I cannot grudge the rest of you for continuing

on without me. If I clench my fist around this gift, I will lose what I have, it will slip through my fingers. It is a thing to be held with an open palm.

Whoever teaches us how to orient to things as beautiful and delicate as a goodbye?

It is you, dear tutors, who have taught me this. For a seminar is just such a beautiful, delicate thing, and you are masters at holding it gently. How easy it would be to have an agenda, to demand a particular outcome. To give the equation or spoil the ending. But you know that each of us must see for herself, and so you content yourselves with a subtle task—balancing the ecosystem of the classroom. You nudge rather than mandate. You redirect by modeling inquiry. With self-restraint you allow a conversation to fumble its way toward insight. And because of your work—your forbearance and humility—you preserve a space where students like me may come to meet the great minds of the past for ourselves.

Thank you for offering me this gift. I will treasure it and try to hold it with an open palm.



What's a Eureka Moment you had in class?

selected responses from students

Reading Aristotle's Ethics, I was appreciating the balance and symmetry he was describing between virtues and vices, but was worried that often referring to "how a virtuous man would do it" was either tautological, or at least left the reader at sea. But at some point I considered that this wasn't (only) a philosophical treatise to be understood or judged on its logical coherence, but as Aristotle said, something to aid us in actually becoming more virtuous. When I considered his model as a guide to iterative consideration of my actions and desires, I realized that I have always had the experience of having a chance of being a 'good man.' And now I had a way to consider and refine, over time, what the content of a 'virtuous person' was. I also realized that it's being dependent on, and also something greater than the sum of individual virtues, meshed with a sense I've always had, but had never put into words.

Alexander Bram, MALA, Both Campuses

Day 1 attending class I remember thinking, "...so they actually want to know what I think?". Day 2 was, "...am I actually thinking about this right?" and Day 3 thinking, "...it doesn't matter what I think as long as I'm thinking about it!". Doing geometry without numbers was a major aha! moment as well.

Joseph Griego, MALA, Santa Fe

My entire career here has been a series of aha! moments, such that the totality is more in view now and specific moments recede. To no longer worry that I don't know, to feel a joy in seizing with others on a delicate moment to find something new, to hear those possibilities and to help birth them, that is thing I live for.

Ned Walpin, EC, Santa Fe

In Lobschevski's 18th theorem: He rotates an angle that, once moved, maintains its original inclination. This ability to move while staying equal was predicted in a previous essay of mine, so when I got to Theorem 18 I was doing backflips.

Amelia Wolfe, MALA, Annapolis

By giving very short and (at longest) relatively short reading assignments, the GI program encourages rereading. I sometimes read passages three times before class. It took many readings - but eventually, sitting there and reading yet again, I finally understood what Lobachevski must have meant by asserting that the sum of the angles of a triangle MAY be less than π .

Peter Daub, MALA, Annapolis

I took a Preceptorial over TS Eliot's poetry. It wasn't a particular moment, but rather a collection of moments when I would pause in the middle of class and wonder at the fact that we had already talked about a poem for more than an hour and there was still so much more to say.

Stacey Rains, MALA, Both Campuses

I can describe one of my first experiences of this. It was a comment Ms. Schwartz made during a discussion of the Iliad that had to do with the rejection of one's own humiliation or shame and how that is the genesis of so much conflict, confusion, and even war.

Karen Kohut, MALA, Low Residency, Santa Fe

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