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Splitting the Cartesian Hair

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Cover Page Footnote

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Splitting the Cartesian Hair

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It may be useful to think of *doubt* and *belief* as games; it certainly takes the pressure off for those of us who were raised in the old existentialist order. However, they are not games that play very well on the prairie. In the evening of my life as a rhetorician, I am haunted by the voices of two students: first, Sam, who came from a farm in southern Minnesota, who turned up in my first-year composition course. When I asked him to support an argument with several points of evidence, he broke a term's laconic silence to state: "You shouldn't ask a man his reasons. That's insulting. You better assume he has them." Then Arlo, self-identified as a right-wing libertarian, who resisted Rogerian rhetoric, the believing game writ large. I had asked him to lay out a fellow student's position supporting gun control and try to find common ground. He steadily refused. "If I laid out my opponent's argument sympathetically," he said, "I'd be honor-bound to consider changing my mind."

These students haunt me not because their positions are comic, though they are, or unassailable, which they are not, but because they cast the shadow of a kind of black mass in the church of our profession. The anthropologist and philosopher Loren Eiseley, in the later years of his own professional journey, was tormented by a kind of trickster figure, "masked and demonic," which rose up to mock his every pretension. In his essay "The Star Thrower," Eiseley associates this apparition with "the trickster as I have seen his role performed among the remnant of a savage people long ago." Perhaps in southern Minnesota, for all I know. This is how Eiseley characterizes the figure he calls "a joker present at the most devout of ceremonies":

This creature never laughed; he never made a sound. Painted in black, he followed silently behind the officiating priest, mimicking, with the added flourish of a little whip, the gestures of the devout one. His timed and stylized posturings conveyed a derision infinitely more formidable than actual laughter. (175)

Well, I've taught a lot of students who fit that description. Mostly I'm grateful for them. If rhetoric is a game, they don't know where to find the board, or they have gotten mad and turned over the table because they are losing. Or the game is so passionately important to them that no gameboard, no set of pawns, can do it justice.

It is with this final position I wish to linger.

Blaise Pascal, in the eighteenth century, after many years of tearing out his

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hair and worrying about hell, decided that doubt and belief are ultimately a game, what we might now call a social construction. He incarnated this idea in his famous wager. He had more to gain than to lose by believing—believing, in this case, in God and the one true church—than by doubting, which could get him damned to hell. Pascal's reasoning has always struck me as a bit self-interested but no doubt there were aspects to the argument I haven't grasped. I've never believed in hell seriously enough to gamble it away.

Not much later in the French syllabus, Rene Descartes invented the idea of *methodic doubt* to cleanse his palate of a diet of superstition and second-hand knowledge. He determined to approach every idea with the postulate, suppose this is not true. We all know how he worked his way up the chain of being toward the famous cogito, convincing himself that he, for starters, existed. This is a process of intellection lost on the average Midwesterner. I've mentioned a syllabus because I taught these texts in a two-semester course at the University of St. Thomas, taking the troubled young Minnesotan from Plato to T. S. Eliot between September and May of a formative year. We came to Descartes in February. In that cold month, hungry owls fly in from the northern reaches to seek easy prey amongst the Gothic towers of my university. It's a little micro-climate where the mice are not so secure in their icy tunnels, and the owls come to feast. Crows are notorious harriers of owls, so, typically, at 9:15 on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, just as I would launch myself on Descartes, twenty or thirty crows would start to caw outside my classroom window. Painted in black, you might say, and mimicking the gestures of the devout one.

Before me, Rene Descartes, behind me, a tree full of screeching crows. Beyond Descartes, the faces of prairie rectitude and naivete. "So," someone would bravely formulate, "let's see if I have this right: he needed to prove to himself that he existed. . . ."

Caw!

The phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between first and second-order naivete. This concept is a wonderful refuge for those of us who are growing somewhat demented. Ricoeur's is a fancy rendering of the Zen saying: "When I was a child, a tree was a tree and a river was a river and a mountain was a mountain. When I became a man, suddenly a tree was not a tree and river was not a river and a mountain was not a mountain. Now that I am old, a tree is a tree and river is a river and a mountain is a mountain." We in the emeritus stage of an academic career may be permitted to indulge a certain naivete in common with our students.

In between, there is professional life.

In his early work, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton wrote an indictment of Descartes. Merton, some may know, had gone through the French school system with its rigorous Cartesian discipline. *Cogito, ergo sum*, Merton wrote,

is the declaration of an alienated being, in exile from his own spiritual depths, compelled to seek some comfort in a *proof for his own existence* (!) based on the observation that he "thinks."

If his thought is necessary as a medium through which he arrives at the concept of his existence, then he is in fact only moving away from his true being. He is reducing himself to a concept. He is making it impossible for himself to experience, directly

and indirectly, the mystery of his own being. (8, emphasis in original)

In other words, Caw!

Merton wrote *New Seeds of Contemplation* as a relatively recent convert to Catholicism, one who had flung himself whole-hog into the monastic vocation. Merton's text, at this point, runs to italics and exclamation points. It may remind us of certain freshman essays dotting the "i's" with circles or hearts. It's likely that, with the agenda of a young monk in the 1950s, Merton was not being quite fair to Descartes. Yet, all that aside, what I hear in his sentence is a fierce defense of true being and the possibility of experiencing its mystery. Two concepts which may be problematic in the modern academy. Like voice.

Later in professional life, Merton got a bit hyper-sophisticated, and the zeitgeist changed. This is a predictable passage of adult life, and most of us go through it. If we come to college with anything like what is so mechanistically called a belief system, we are certain to find it under assault by Thanksgiving of freshman year. Further along in the process, as young academics with real jobs, we encounter a critique of everything we learned in graduate school. We may be opposed by older colleagues with a case of—speaking optimistically—second order naivete—or by younger colleagues with a new set of unassailable ideas incompatible with our own. The playground of school, from first grade to last, is a landscape for the believing game.

People who play the believing game are people interested in truth, but belief and truth tend to interact with each other like figures in the Feast of Fools, described by Eiseley in "The Star Thrower." Somewhere between my first and second order naivete, I had a conversation with one of those Yoda-figures who enter our lives now and again. To Yoda I confided, in the manner of earnest assistant professors everywhere, that I had no interest in any consoling philosophy which wasn't based on truth. Yoda, smiling in that inscrutable Yoda way, told me that I held two strings in my hand; if I followed the thread of doubt it would lead to despair, and, if I followed the thread of belief, I would be guided by helpful animals and talking trees and other folkloric figures familiar to the journeys of young simpletons.

Yoda was perhaps echoing William Blake:

I give you the end of a golden string
Only wind it into a ball:
It will wind you in at Heavens gate
Built in Jerusalems wall. (231)

When I sat down to write this paper, I put a teapot on the stove. I wrote for about two hours and, after a while, my border collie began to pace the room, trying to tell me the pot had burned down to the grate and the kitchen was ready to catch fire. I am a person who pays attention to talking animals only just in time. In practice, I have held both threads in my hand and tugged now one, now the other. But perhaps this is just as well. It is, anyway, an attitude common to humanities professors of my generation. E. M. Forster puts it best: "The business man who assumes that this life is everything, and the mystic who asserts that it is nothing, fail, on this side and on that, to hit the truth." Truth is not, he goes on to say, somewhere "halfway between . . . No; truth, being alive, was not half way

between anything. It was only to be found by constant excursions into either realm, and though proportion is the final secret, to espouse it at the outset is to insure sterility." Forster believes we must earn the middle way, the path of moderation. "Don't begin with proportion," says one of the characters in *Howards End*; "Only prigs do that" (73).

Loren Eiseley—returning now to "The Star Thrower"—habitually followed the thread of methodic doubt. He was a scientist, and doubt works well in science. It brings him to a condition he describes this way:

[I was] an inhumanly stripped skeleton without voice. I was devoid of pity, because pity implies hope. There was, in this desiccated skull, only an eye, like a pharos light, a beacon, a search beam revolving endlessly in sunless noonday or black night. Ideas like swarms of insects rose to the beam, but the light consumed them. Upon that shore meaning had ceased. There were only the dead skull and the revolving eye. With such an eye, some have said, science looks upon the world. I do not know. I know only that I was the skull of emptiness and the endlessly revolving light without pity. (170)

It is possible to turn out students in this condition, but I am not going to say the predictable thing: that it is our fault. Nor is it the fault of science, or the fault, even, of the misuse of scientific method by ham-handed professors. Eiseley's analysis is far more complicated. I encourage you to find any excuse to assign "The Star Thrower," because it is such a nuanced examination of grief and recovery. Early in the story, Eiseley postulates that Darwin and Freud have driven him to despair. But later he interrogates the condition of his own soul, which has allowed Darwin and Freud to damage him. His personal despair comes from his family and its tragic experience.

When Eiseley—at last—achieves something like a statement of belief, it is hard won. Most of us want to skip the journey and rip off the moral: "Be kind," says the Dalai Lama. When people quote that to me, I want to find a moveable object to hit them with. An aside: I used to teach "The Star Thrower" to a class of M.A. candidates in nonfiction, and I was accustomed to having them come to class bleary-eyed, having been unable to work their way through the dense prose—until the advent of the internet, when students suddenly started coming in with perfect confidence. "Oh, it says, 'be kind.'" Because, if you google *star thrower*, you will find hundreds of distilled stories roughly plagiarizing Eiseley's, while stripping off every bit of intellectual complexity. This is America.

Let's go back to France, to Simone Weil. Weil's quandary was, specifically, the quandary of modernism: *belief* seemed to her inevitably specious because she was so thoroughly trained in *methodic doubt*. But her experience had brought her—raised as a secular Jew—to long for baptism in the Catholic church. A moral quandary. In 1930, she had earned her diploma from the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure with a dissertation on Descartes, so she was well-grounded in Cartesian methodology when she began to depart from it in her writings of the early 1940s. Her essay, usually printed with the title "Spiritual Autobiography," is another I often find an excuse to teach because it is such a closely reasoned, humble, and polite *refusal* of what other late modernists called the "leap of faith." What fascinates me is less her conclusion than her method, and—to shift the context slightly—

what she has to say about belief within a *system of language*. This is always a comfortable space for rhetoricians to hang out.

Here is how Weil puts it, explaining with painful conscientiousness to her evangelical friend, Father Perrin, how carefully she has examined the postulates he has put before her and why she feels compelled to reject them: “I felt that after having said to myself for so many years simply, ‘Perhaps all that is not true,’ I ought, without ceasing to say it very often now—to join it to the opposite formula, namely: ‘Perhaps all that is true,’ and to make them alternate” (73). She has learned to put beside the Cartesian formula of methodic doubt a formula of methodic belief.

Ultimately, Weil’s problem with Catholicism—as she gently implies—is that it does not play sufficiently with doubt. This is, for her, an issue of intellectual honesty. Weil wants to call home the grain of truth inherent in every error, every fallacy, every heresy. She can’t get enough of truth, and in this quest she believes that God is on her side. Even Christ is on her side. She writes, “one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms” (69).

What she can’t stomach in Father Perrin’s position is the totalitarianism of the church’s control of dogma, “the use of the two little words”—as she puts it—“*anathema sit*” (77).

Weil positions herself, though with grave diffidence, on the moral high ground claimed by philosophers like Karl Jung: issues of *belief* are irrelevant because *she knows*. She rejects French education because it refuses to play with belief and Catholicism because it refuses to play with doubt, though Weil would never have *played* with either.

Weil wrote outside the context of American fundamentalism, but her insights on scriptural language bear repeating for those of us who have to thread our way among the various religious discourses impinging on the modern academy. As circumstances demand, she says, the “Spirit of truth” may use collective language. This she calls “the language of the marketplace;” or Spirit may use personal language, “the language of the nuptial chamber” (79-80). “The word of God is the secret word,” she states. “He who has not heard this word, even if he adheres to all the dogmas taught by the Church, has no contact with truth” (80).

Weil did not always express herself with perfect coherence. What I’ve quoted here was tossed off in short letters and essays carried from house to house as she bolted from France to America to England in the last two years of her life. We cannot look to them for a coherent philosophy.

What do I look to them for? For koan. For paradox. For space.

Parker Palmer often speaks of how “to teach is to create a space.” This is a phrase which captivated me throughout my teaching career, although I didn’t always know what I wanted to create a space for, and I worried about what might rush in. The doubting/believing game creates a space. To teach, to think, and finally to live out of a process model protects a space. *Protects* is now the word I would use. Since I spent time in a Buddhist monastery, and more time studying the Christian ascetic tradition, I’ve come to think of this as space as essentially contemplative.

But “contemplative” is a word in danger of being debased, ready to pass into

the realm of spa language, so I want to frame it rather carefully. Lately I've been re-reading the inimitable Allen Ginsberg. It was Ginsberg, Kerouac, and their fellows who began, at least in America, to reinterpret the tradition of Western poetics in terms of a kind of contemplative critique. In his essay "Meditation and Poetics," Ginsberg talked about a "deconditioning of rigidity and unyieldingness" which he said was

parallel with traditional Buddhist ideas of renunciation—renunciation of hand-me-down conditioned conceptions of mind. It's the meditative practice of "letting go of thoughts"—neither pushing them away nor inviting them in, but, as you sit meditating, watching the procession of thought forms pass by, rising, flowering and dissolving, and disowning them, so to speak: you're not responsible any more than you're responsible for the weather, because you can't tell in advance what you're going to think next. Otherwise you'd be able to predict every thought, and that would be sad for you. There are some people whose thoughts are all predictable. (150)

What an interesting cloud of witness we can gather around this idea of protecting contemplative space. I love to imagine Weil on the same bus with Kerouac and Ginsberg. She would haul one of her favorite heretics, Meister Eckhardt, on board. I would nominate Gerard Manley Hopkins. People always scold us process people for never arriving. And this is an honest criticism. We don't want to sit there forever, like Bartleby the Scrivener, saying "I prefer not to."

Most of us teachers, by the time we reach emeritus status, *have* decided to prefer something: it's just that our conclusions are likely not yours and aren't relevant to the central discussion. And it's important for any of us, as teachers, not to allow our beliefs to influence the contemplative space of our students' struggle. Our job is to *protect* the space.

Belief is one of the scariest concepts in the modern academy, but I have lately felt some softening within myself of my fear of the word. I had a conversation with my friend Yoda about it, and he sent me a citation from the Harvard theologian Diana Eck. Eck recalls for us the derivation of the word "belief" from the Anglo-Saxon *beleofan*. *Leofan* means "to love" and the prefix *be* is a kind of intensifier, indicating a prolonged and thorough engagement with the next verb, a construction we see in words like bewitch, bewilder, bewail, betray. In the modern academy, Eck writes, "The word 'believe' has gradually changed its meaning from conveying certainty so deep that I commit my life to it, to conveying uncertainty so unstable that only the 'credulous' would rely on it."

A few weeks later, Yoda, who was reading Marcus Borg, sent this to me:

prior to the year 1600, the verb 'believe' had a very different meaning within Christianity as well as in popular usage. It did not mean believing statements to be true; the object of the verb 'believe' was always a person, not a statement. . . . believing meant believing in and thus a relationship of trust, loyalty, and love. Most simply, to believe meant to *belove*. (20)

It seems important that we retrieve this concept for our students, to return them confidently to scholarship as a *beloving game*. The contemplative space we

must hold for them—and for ourselves—is not one of *credo*. It is a space of imaginative transformation. The question that resonates in this space is: *What would it be like to give yourself to this idea?* Much is at stake, for them, for us. As Ginsberg does, we, as teachers, model a “deconditioning of rigidity and unyieldingness.” As I return to the situation of my student who resisted Rogerian rhetoric, I wish I had been able to give him this gift, though he would not have seen it as a gift. Like the little boy in the famous *New Yorker* cartoon, he might have said, “I say it’s spinach and I say the hell with it.” Well, we might have liked to protect the space in which he could say that.

If this is a game, it is a game of the kind Lorca spoke of in his essay “Play and the Theory of the Duende,” performed upon liminal, threshold space, a classroom where *anything can happen*. “Through the empty archway a [wind of the spirit] enters, blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents . . . announcing the constant baptism of newly created things” (53). ☹

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