CRISIS & CONSOLATION

LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

EDITED BY
TUAN HOANG

AND
JAY LUTZ
TAYLOR CYR
ANNALISE DEVRIES
EDWARD WEINTRAUT
LEJLA MARIJAM IBRAHIMBEGOVIC

CRISIS AND CONSOLATION LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Selected Papers from the Twenty-Sixth Annual Conference of the Association for Core Texts and Courses Online, April 12–16, 2021

Edited by
Tuan Hoang

and
Jay Lutz
Taylor Cyr
Annalise Devries
Edward Weintraut
Lejla Marijam Ibrahimbegovic

Association for Core Texts and Courses
ACTC Liberal Arts Institute
2025

Contents

Introduction v
Tuan Hoang

CORE TEXTS SPURRED BY THE PANDEMIC
Human Nature in Thucydides' Account of the Plague
Daniel Palm 1

Honey in the Coffin: The Disaster that Inseminated the *Talmud*
Peter C. Brown 9

When Sickness is not Sickness: The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* in a Time of Pandemic
Michael D. Nichols 19

At the Foot of the Mount: A Meditation on Dante's *Purgatorio* as a Pandemic *Vade mecum*
June-Ann Greeley 25

Julian of Norwich: A Medieval Perspective on Solitude and Suffering
Jamie Boulding 41

Moral Evil: Lessons from Rousseau and the Lisbon Earthquake
Peter Diamond 47

Dostoevsky's Underground Man on Sickness, Plagues, and Isolation
Jay Lutz 57

The Misinformed Dying: Reading *A Prayer for the Dying* during Coronavirus
Elizabeth Zak 63

CORE TEXTS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC
Questioning Common Sense: Teaching Delbanco, Homer, and Greek Tragedy in a Seminar on the Liberal Arts
James Roney 75

King Lear, James Baldwin, and the Freedom of Tragedy
Julianne Sandberg 89

Diversifying the Core: Finding a Place for Women's Voices and Gender Issues in a Great Books Course
Edward J. Weintraut 95

The United States Constitution: An Unevenly Destabilized Text
Michael Ditmore 105

Frederick Douglass on Liberal Education: Learning the True Meaning of Freedom
Dustin Gish 119

Contextualizing Injustice in Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*
Lisa Jennings 131

CLOSING: STUDENTS AND COVID-19
"A joy it will be one day, perhaps, to remember even this": Resilient Students and the Power of Transformative Texts
Jody Taylor Watkins 143

Introduction

"To read," W. H. Auden once wrote, "is to translate, for no two persons' experiences are the same." Auden's insight applies well to the act of reading under normal circumstances, when different minds are affected by different things to "translate" a reading into different meanings and emphases. But how about reading under unusual or extreme circumstances? What was it like, for example, for Poles in Warsaw to be reading anti-Nazi poetry in secret under the brutal German occupation in the Second World War? Or for Chinese in Beijing to be reading banned books in the midst of the Cultural Revolution? Auden was no doubt correct in saying that no two persons could share the same experience. Under certain extremities, however, wouldn't the commonality of extremities lead different readers to frame their reading materials in a similar framework though, of course, not identical?

Without knowing Auden's response to the questions above, we can say that there were a number of commonalities (and differences) among readers of core texts (and teachers of core texts) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The commonest experience was isolation and separation; another close one was illnesses and pains caused by the coronavirus. No two experiences, again, were identical. Yet the differences only helped to heighten the common experiences. For readers and teachers such as members of the Association for Core Texts and Courses (ACTC), they also helped bringing together the interests on reading and interpreting many core texts about illnesses, diseases, and natural disasters such as plagues and pandemics throughout the history of humanity.

The essays in this book were initially presented at the only annual conference in the history of ACTC that took place online, whose theme was "Crisis and Consolation: Liberal Education in the Time of COVID-19." Nine of the essays had been inspired and spurred by the experiences of the pandemic. With one exception, they appear in the first section. At the same time, ACTC members read and presented on all kinds of texts, not only those on diseases, pandemics, and natural

disasters. This experience is reflected by six chapters in second section. If nothing else, this book is a small record of the inquisitive and probing resourcefulness among members of ACTC. And a testimony to the resilience among readers and teachers and students (the focus of the last chapter) who reflected upon core texts and drew insights, consolation, even solace.

Tuan Hoang
Pepperdine University

CORE TEXTS SPURRED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Human Nature in Thucydides' Account of the Plague

Daniel Palm
Azusa Pacific University

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* includes the author's famous observations and reflections on human behavior and emotions during wartime, most notably his observation about fear, interest, and honor as the three great motivations for conflict. In this paper we consider a significant non-military event, though certainly related to the war, involving the democratic population of Athens, namely, his discussion of the 430 BCE plague in Athens in Book II. Within his account, one sees a range of emotions and behaviors similar—sometimes identical—to those of the Athenians at war. We inquire what we might gain from considering Thucydides' vocabulary and observations about Athenian democracy and about human nature.

Thucydides' account of the plague in Athens follows immediately after the conclusion of Perikles' funeral oration. He writes about it thematically, in several identifiable sections, divided by translators into separate paragraphs. Our author begins by noting its outbreak, and the stark rapidity with which it claimed the lives both of those stricken and the physicians who attended to them. No human action proved helpful, and supplications to the gods declined until at last the Athenians, overwhelmed by the size and scope of the disaster ended their appeals (ανθρωπεια τεχνη) (2.47.4). A second brief segment mentions the plague's suspected origin as Ethiopia, which lay above Egypt from the Athenian perspective, but concludes with Thucydides admitting that he will avoid speculating about its origin and causes, suggesting that identifying the starting point of this great "disturbance" may not be possible. What he can do, having experienced the disease firsthand, is to explain its nature and its symptoms, reminding his readers that his intention with this work is not merely to record history, but to instruct.

From this point Thucydides proceeds to offer an extended and detailed description of the plague's effects on the human body, with the disease causing, for most of its victims, a prolonged and miserable death. Is the plague, in effect, nature waging war on human beings? It was, he writes, "almost too grievous for human nature to endure" (ανθρωπειαν φυσιν) (2.50.1). There is something at least baffling and extraordinary about it—an apparent unnaturalness—distinguishing it from the ordinary disorders that result in fatality, as evidenced in the scavenger birds abstaining from eating the plague victims' corpses as they would unburied battlefield casualties, and eventually disappearing altogether from the region. And yet, he has stated that the disease has a nature. Its victims die reliably on schedule, "on the seventh or eighth day" (2.49.6). Its progress through the body follows a pattern, felt first in the head, thence proceeding through the body. It has specific identifiable effects that can be observed and described, and that, with some minor variations, are seen repeatedly among its victims.

In a fourth segment Thucydides details the emotions and behaviors he observed among the Athenians during the plague. Most terrible, he writes, was the dejection and despair of the victims when they realized their condition, their resistance to the disease disappearing, bringing on a more rapid death. Add to this "the awful spectacle of men dying like sheep through having caught the infection in nursing each other" (2.51.4). And despite their fear—a word that appears several times in this section—Athenians were still drawn to assist their dying neighbors, honor causing them to be "unsparing of themselves in their attendance in their friends' houses" (2.51.5). There is compassion as well, but it is a compassion connected to a sense of honor, with the greatest compassion offered by those who had recovered from the disease and would not be affected a second time, at least not fatally. Thucydides notes these survivors' elation, with some becoming unnaturally overly confident, "half entertaining the vain hope that they were for the future safe from any disease whatsoever" (2.51.6).

Thucydides returns, in a fifth segment, to treatment of the dead, already referenced in the third section. The high infection and mortality rate results in the bodies of the dead and the dying lying side by side, in homes, on streets, and in the sacred places. Burial rites were ignored, with some resorting to "the most shameless modes of burial" (2.52.4). With respect to living and dead, the plague removes all social constraints and barriers, "for the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane" (2.52.3).

In a sixth and final segment, Thucydides describes lawless behavior owing to the plague, with men doing now "just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner" (2.53.1), living and spending as if there were no tomorrow. About their property, their tangible interests, they no longer care. Strikingly, honor was in the terrible moment redefined, upended—"it was settled that present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it, was both honorable and useful" (2.53.3). And finally, the plague removed fear among the Athenians—not the fear of death, but since death appeared inevitable, the ordinary fears of the gods and their city's laws have disappeared: Thucydides explains that, "fear of gods or law of man there was none" (2.53.4). If "fear, honor, and interest" are "three of the strongest motives" of human action (1.76.2), the plague in Thucydides' eyes eliminated or removed from the Athenians' consideration each of the three, with people informed and motivated by their passions alone. During the months of the plague, Athens is, more or less, governed neither by law nor piety, but by the human passions.

Thucydides concludes his account with a reference to a poem, "which the old men said had long ago been uttered: 'A Dorian war shall come and with it pestilence'" (2.54.2). But there arose a dispute as to whether the word was famine (*limos*) or pestilence (*loimos*), with Thucydides observing that the people chose the latter term, making "their recollection fit in with their sufferings" (2.54.3). To this point, he adds that if another Dorian war should come accompanied by famine, "the

verse will probably be read accordingly" (2.54.3). It is the one skeptical comment in this section about his Athenian countrymen.

One notes in this discussion that while Thucydides hints at the plague seeming almost supernatural—and causing at least some Athenians who had survived to imagine they have been endowed with a supernatural guarantee of good health—he does not take these seriously. There is a natural world, and while highly unusual, the plague is one element of it. In the end, respect and fear for law and social conventions, care for one's own interests, good citizenship, piety, each will return when the plague has run its course, and the passions will again be put in their place, ruled by men rather than ruling them.

Thucydides says nothing in his account to suggest that democratic Athenians reacted differently than would the citizens of a non-democratic regime, but he appears to have recognized something of the health risks that come with urban life. While the plague was most damaging to the citizens of Athens, it terrorized others of the more populous cities, but did not affect the more widely dispersed Spartans and peoples of the Peloponnesus, "at least not to an extent worth noticing" (2.54.5). So for all the economic, cultural, and political benefits enjoyed by Athens, he is aware that the crowded conditions of a city under siege allowed the plague to spread more quickly. But his analysis is remarkable for its democratic character, taking little if any note of class distinctions among plague victims, and including no references to distinctions among citizens, slaves, or foreigners.

Would an oligarchy or tyranny handle plague any better than democratic Athens? Thucydides' awareness of its rapid spread throughout the Mediterranean world's various regimes suggests not. The plague is indeed a great leveler, any human in its path is a potential victim, regardless of regime, and there is no escape from death. He would have us understand that it is the enclosure of the besieged population rather than the nature of the regime that led the Athenians' vulnerability to disease. The plague's victims are casualties of war.

While he does not refer to the plague as causing people to descend into complete barbarism, we may infer that the behaviors the plague brings amount to the temporary disappearance of civilization. The polis offers individual people the safety afforded by a well-governed regime, with gods, traditions, and laws in place to restrain, guide and govern the human passions. But as human beings learn time and again, beneath our civilized veneer lie hard truths about the human condition that pandemic, like war, can and will reveal.

In due time the plague has run its course, the city's population that survived having developed resistance. Thucydides' conclusion to the plague narrative is decisive, and he returns to his focus on the Athenians' military action, and we know from his record of events that follow that the city's population has returned to its standard laws, political life, religious practices, and prosecution of the war.

Works Cited

Thucydides. *Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Richard Crawley. Topostext, Perseus Project, https://topostext.org/work/52; accessed March 15, 2021.

Honey in the Coffin:
The Disaster that Inseminated the *Talmud*

Peter C. Brown
Mercer University

Like the *Talmud* itself, this paper has its twists and turns. So, perhaps, I should spell out its conclusion at the beginning and work backward to it. *Disaster may unexpectedly bring renewal—a crisis may not be the evil it seems at first.* It is the providential inverse to Greek tragedy, a gracious reward for daring humility rather than the inevitable punishment for hubris.

Completed at the end of the 5th-century CE after three centuries of collaborative labor, the Babylonian *Talmud* or compilation of the Oral Torah is one of the core texts of Judaism. Its finely detailed ethical and legal distinctions together with debates about their rationales are unparalleled in any literature. It is also one of the most open-ended of narratives, with alternative arguments preserved at almost every point, laced with internal cross-references and studded with fascinating digressions. It is philosophical, devotional, dialectical, and deeply humane. Its form is both a text, the *Mishnah*, and an interpolated commentary, the *Gemara*. Since the 16th-century, it has been printed with additional facing marginal commentaries by the 11th-century Rabbi Scholmo Yitzchaki or Rashi and by two centuries of elaborations by his disciples, the *Tosafot*. It consists of sixty-three tractates, grouped around six themes: Agriculture, Holy Days, Women, Rights and Wrongs, the Sacred, and Purity and Health—a total of 2,711 folio pages as printed.

How in the world could something like this be incorporated into a liberal arts curriculum? (See the Teaching Note below for one approach.) Why should we even try? Let's see. My example focuses on the *Talmud*'s origin story, as narrated in a passage from "Tractate Gittin" (56a-b), the tractate dealing with divorce. It memorializes a great

moment of crisis in the national history of Israel and in the ritual practice of Judaism. The setting is a period of intense conflict, a Jewish rebellion against Rome with rival factions of religious Zealots contending with each other for supremacy and ranged against the religious and civil authorities who seek peace with Rome. The Roman siege of Jerusalem is particularly savage, and within the city a breakaway faction, the Sicarii or "dagger-men," act as domestic terrorists, mingling with festival crowds to strike down Jewish collaborators with knives hidden in their cloaks. Flavius Josephus, a captured rebel and slave who became an advisor to Vespasian, the eventual emperor, wrote in his history of *The Wars of the Jews* that all Judea was filled with the effects of their madness: "no sooner were these disorders reduced than the inflammation, as in a sick man's body, broke out again in another quarter…. And thus the flame was every day more and more blown up, till it came to a direct war" (Book II, Ch. 13). It was a plague of violence and betrayal.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai (or acronymically "Ribaz") is the hero of the story. After the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the Destruction of Herod's Great Temple by Vespasian's son Titus, he expanded his school of rabbinic instruction in Yavne to become the location for the re-established Sanhedrin, the rabbinical council that eventually replaced the vanished Temple priests in interpreting the Law. The existence of the Exilic Rabbinate—and its *Talmud*—owes as much to him as to anyone. How did it happen?

Bar Kamza, that troublemaker, was outraged that he'd been treated disrespectfully by a fellow Jew. It was all a mix-up. A certain man held a feast and invited his friend Kamza; by mistake his sworn enemy bar Kamza (apparently a notorious backbiter and tale teller) got invited by the man's servant instead. Pleased that bygones were bygones, so he thought, bar Kamza went to the party. His host was outraged to see him there and told him in front of all the guests to get out. In spite of his repeated efforts to make amends, the host threw him out—in view of all the rabbis there. The *Talmud* tells us that shaming a man is worse than murdering him. Swearing revenge on everyone who had witnessed

his shame, bar Kamza went to Nero to spill the beans that Zealots were fomenting rebellion. In his vindictiveness, he slightly blemishes the sacrificial calf that Nero sends to test the Jews' loyalty. It was nothing that the Romans would have counted as a "blemish." In Jerusalem, the rabbis spotted it right off—non-kosher. However, their first pragmatic instinct was to go ahead and offer the "blemished" animal on the altar. However, one of their number, Zechariah ben Abkilas, a rabbi present at that original party and silent then about the host's abuse of bar Kamza, scrupled to do so. Then they proposed killing bar Kamza to keep the word of their "insult" from getting back to Nero. Ben Abkilas again had his scruples; the Law did not require death for those who blemished a sacrificial animal. As the Gemara laments, his literalness "destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and exiled us from our land." (Amongst the Pharisees, or advocates of the Oral Torah, ben Abkilas was an adherent of the House of Shammai—known for their stringencies of interpretation—while Ribaz was a student of the House of Hillel—known for their interpretive leniencies for the benefit of the people.)

When Vespasian arrived to lay waste to the rebellious Jews, Jerusalem had enough stores of wheat, barley, oil, wine, salt, and wood to last for twenty-one years. The Sicarii—fearing peace—took matters into their own hands and destroyed the food stuffs to force the Jews out to fight. Facing disaster, Ribaz went to his nephew, one of the leaders of the Zealots, and asked permission to leave the city, so that perhaps something could be saved. The nephew dared not, his fellow rebels would kill him. But he proposed a clever stratagem: "Let it be known that you are deathly ill and everybody will come to ask about you. Take a stinking object and keep it by you, so that they will say that you have died. Let your students bear you, and let no other man bear you." They fool the guards, and the "dead" rabbi is spirited out of the doomed city.

Then the story gets really interesting. Outside the city walls, the Rabbi goes to Vespasian and hails him as king. Vespasian rounds on him and pronounces a death sentence, twice over. First of all, I am not

King. Second, why have you not come to me before now? Quoting Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Deuteronomy, the Rabbi assures him that—posed to destroy Jerusalem—he indeed will be King. He also explains that the rebels would not have permitted him to come earlier (a bit of a fudge). Sensing that Ribaz was about to ask him to spare the Temple, Vespasian responds with a question: "If there is a jug of honey and a serpent is coiled upon it, do they not break the jug in order to kill the snake? I am forced to destroy the city of Jerusalem in order to kill the zealots barricaded within it." For reasons unclear to the rabbis commenting on the story, Ribaz makes no answer to this question.

There is a suggestive riddle hidden in Vespasian's question that opens up our inquiry. It is a riddle that goes to the very roots of Jewish sacred history and is uninterpretable because it shifts the context *beyond* the realm of partisanship, *beyond* Zealot versus priest, *beyond* Roman versus Jew. Rabbi Akiva, the great architect of Talmudic hermeneutics, insists that Ribaz *should have* responded to Vespasian: "We take tongs and grip the snake and kill it, and the jug we may retain for ourselves." Ribaz didn't say that because he couldn't. He had no answer for Vespasian's riddle, which was: "How do you tell a good Jew from a bad Jew?" How do you tell an uncle from a nephew? The rabbis from the rebels? The scrupulous from the nit-picking? The terrorists from the righteous? The snake from the honey? From beginning to end, the frame tale of the host and bar Kamza (those quarrelsome Jews) asks this question and fails to answer it—because only God can tell the difference.

Like Samson's famous riddle in *Judges*, the groomsmen/rabbis will never guess the answer because they are not privy to the perspective necessary to answer it. Samson's fatal riddle posed to his groomsmen at his wedding to a Philistine maiden is the only explicit riddle in the Hebrew Bible: "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet" (*Judges* 14.14). It refers to the young lion Samson tore apart with his bare hands, to later discover a swarm of bees and their honey in the carcass. Happenstances only he knew. The groomsmen's patent inability to solve the riddle triggers a series of

intimate betrayals that justify—more or less—Samson's rampages against the Philistines.

Analogy is one of the fundamentals of Rabbinic hermeneutic. Honey within the rib cage of a lion—honey in the coils of a serpent. "The sweet out of the strong." *The clever rabbi out of the stinking coffin.* "Out of the eater something to eat." *Out of Vespasian, Rabbinic Judaism.* The analogical allusion to Samson is the clue that we're dealing with an (unanswerable) riddle here, a riddle that is a provocation rather than a puzzle. Samson uses it to excuse his attacks against the ruling Philistines (his erstwhile in-laws), Vespasian his destruction of the Temple (in spite of his son's love for the Jewish queen Berenice, Herod's great-granddaughter), Ribaz his abandonment of Jerusalem and the Temple (to the dismay of the rabbis composing the Mishnah).

At the very moment that Ribaz is speechless before the image of the serpent and the jug of honey, a messenger arrives with the news that Vespasian has been named Caesar by his troops. Wow. Ribaz called it. (It was the year of four Emperors, following Nero's suicide). Vespasian is a little wobbly getting the good news. For some reason, the new Emperor has only one shoe on. Now, in his excitement he tries to put the other one on and it won't go on. So, then he tries to take the other one off—it won't come off. "What the hell?!?" Ribaz seizes the moment. Don't be troubled, King-O. Good news makes the bones fat (quoting *Proverbs*). "Dang, who knew! So, whadda I gotta do to put on my shoe?" Having reduced the King to pure nursery rhyme childishness—and with a straight face—Ribaz says, "have someone you don't like walk by and the bones will shrink." On goes the shoe (maybe in his excitement, he held it backwards the first time). Now, we get straight vaudeville: "[Vespasian] said to him, 'And now that you are so smart, why did you not come to see me until now?' [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] said to him, 'Did I not tell you?' [Vespasian] said to him, 'I also answered you.'" Vespasian has regained his dignity in an adolescent "You're another" while being led by the nose by Ribaz. So, whadda'ya

want, Vespasian asks him? I want Yavne and its teachers; I want Gamaliel and all his Jerusalem rabbis. I want the unknowable future.

The story of Samson and his riddle in *Judges* typologically reveals the deep structure of the Kamza and bar Kamza story. It is a story of crisis and renewal writ large across the whole of Jewish sacred history. Samson's intemperate debasement of the judgeship and the Twelve Tribes' subsequent decay and hiatus leads to Samuel's anointing of Saul as King and, thus, to the establishment of the nation of Israel and the building of the First Temple. Similarly, the Talmudic story projects the contemporary crisis of the Judean War into a redemptive future. The Jews' mutual betrayal of one another and Vespasian's destruction of the Second Temple leads to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's seeding the Exilic Rabbinate through his Beit Midrash at Yavne and its eventual fruit, the *Talmud*, the sacral replacement for Temple sacrifice.

The unsolvable riddle at the heart of this crisis suggests that we can never know the true significance of our most critical choices because their larger context escapes us. The partisanship that drives our passions will be obliterated in the eventual consequences, for good and ill, that attend them. As we face our own crises of partisanship, even a pandemic politicized, winning may be losing and disaster may be renewal. How do you—in the passing moment—tell the honey from the snake, a patriot from a terrorist, history's winner from the moment's loser? Is our contemporary cultural bafflement a providential provocation, rather than a problem to be solved or an ideology to be enforced? Is this a time to double down on our wavering certainties or to hold onto our hats and plunge into an unanticipated future? God only knows.

Teaching Note

Introduction. I would begin our reading in *Tractate Gitten* with folio pages 55a-57b (the *William Davidson Talmud* is readily available online) and general discussion of what's there and how it hangs together or doesn't. Then I would return to the Kamza/bar Kanza story (56a-b) for close reading. It is immediately interesting and lends itself

to the Socratic approach typical of Great Books inquiry, which can then spiral outward into the much more digressive context of the larger Talmudic disputation. The leading questions might be:

Why didn't Rabbi ben Zakkai reply to Vespasian's question?

What does this story have to do with the Torah law regarding divorce?

Background. For contemporary settings of the Kamza/bar Kamza story, I would have students watch an animated version *The Rise of Yavneh* and read the Hugh Nissenson short story: "Forcing the End" from the collection *The Elephant and My Jewish Problem*. To surface the arc of sacred history of which it is a type, students could read *Judges* 13-21 and *First Samuel* 1-12 followed by *Isaiah* 1-11: defeat, crisis, and renewal. Finally, to establish the Halachic foundation for Tractate Gittin, they would read *Deuteronomy* 22-24.

Themes. The primary theme explores the intersection of a very general moral/legal question: what degree of coercion is compatible with the acquisition of a legitimate benefit? The immediate example is a divorce decree, which determines a married woman's future social/sexual status (she is an adulteress and any subsequent children are illegitimate if she goes with another man without the divorce decree— unlike a man who can have sexual relations with unmarried women and claim any resultant children as legitimate, whether he is married or not.) In investigating this question, the rabbis trace it into two seemingly very different realms: redemption from sin and title to land.

Because divorce was easy for men to get and impossible for women to obtain independently, the *get* or official written notice of divorce was hedged about with restrictions (most notably, that it had to be provably the free will of the man and physically accepted by the woman). This unequal status raised issues of possible coercion as to the terms of a divorce, particularly when it came to the property rights of the wife. Unlike Anglo-Saxon common law (where a wife's property became the husband's upon marriage), Talmudic law preserved the wife's property rights. Her *ketubah* or marriage contract established property rights in

the husband's estate upon his death or divorce. She also retained any assets she brought to the marriage, including the *mohar* or purchase price paid her father by the groom. Profits on her investments and other assets acquired by the wife in the marriage, as well as any inheritances she might have received, remained in her name. Thus, a husband could possibly take advantage of his wife if she wanted the divorce, by insisting on favorable terms before he would give it to her—forcing her to buy her way out of the marriage. The problem becomes how to set limits on this power of coercion that were nevertheless compatible with the man's sole right religiously to decide to terminate the marriage? The Law is the Law, but justice also has its claim.

The rabbis relied on two analogous situations to guide their reasoning. First, is a stolen sin-offering still redemptive? (See *Leviticus* 4.1-5.13 for the description of sin offerings for inadvertent sins.) Second, is a title to land extorted by threat in a civil war still good when later transferred? The specific situation referenced in this latter case is Sicarii terror and the disorder of the Roman siege, which brings us then to the story of Rabbi ben Zakkai. (If desired, contemporary issues of reparations for African-American slavery and "Jim Crow" segregation in the U.S. could be introduced through these examples of benefitting from previous coercive actions. For example, what if anything does a university founded with the profits from slavery owe to the descendants of those slaves?)

A meta-theme throughout the text is the tension between the stringencies of Torah law and the leniencies of rabbinic rulings in the Oral Torah. The story of Rabbi ben Zakkai brings these questions of hermeneutics to the fore. How do we figure out what God and the Law require of us in any given circumstance? How do we handle conflicting judgements? (It would be useful to watch the short animation *Hillel and Shammai: Disagreements for the Sake of Heaven*. Our own highly polarized civil and political culture offers many possible examples for exploration.) Ribaz's story is followed by two wonder stories, another annulus of the circle of inquiry. They are stories of a rooster and a hen

and of a wagon tongue and the disasters they caused because Jews were too attached to local customs—because they were excessively partisan. Yet these stories also introduce extraordinary invective against the Romans (and Jesus)—as if partisanship matters only within a group, not between groups. (If you are brave enough, you might raise the issue of modern Israel and the Palestinians they rule over—with its background in the Holocaust and its genocides.)

Along the way, the Tractate returns again and again to situations of deceptive divorce and its humane limits: within the Torah Law but allowing for complexity. Complexity is the great antidote to partisan narrowness. The Talmud and the injunction to continually study it is one of the greatest exemplars of complexity.

Conclusion. At this point, I would return to the heart of the story and ask which

Jew is most at fault for the Destruction of the Temple: the host of the party, bar Kamza,

Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkilas, the Zealots, the Sicarii, or—even—Ribaz? The students could convene their own rabbinical court and hear the cases made, mediate differences of opinion, and vote.

Works Cited

"Hillel and Shammai: Disagreements for the Sake of Heaven." Bim-Bam. January 7, 2015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL9pok2a41o; accessed May 25, 2021.

Josephus, Flavius. "*The Wars of the Jews*." Translated by William Whiston. Project Gutenberg. Released January 10, 2009, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2850/2850h/2850-h.htm#link2HCH0001; accessed May 25, 2021.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Edited by Michael D. Coogan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Nissenson, Hugh. *The Elephant and My Jewish Problem*. New York: HarperCollins, 1988.

"Talmud Tales: The Rise of Yavneh: Kamza, Bar Kamza & the Destruction of the Second Temple." BimBam. December 19, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6t3Zm7nMTg; accessed May 25, 2021.
"*Talmud* The William Davidson Edition." Sefaria. https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Talmud; accessed May 25, 2021.

When Sickness is not Sickness: the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* in a Time of Pandemic

Michael D. Nichols
Purdue University

From Buddhism's earliest period in ancient India, the fact of illness and disease has been of critical importance. According to stories of Siddhartha Gautama's life, in texts such as the *Nidānakathā* and *Buddhacarita*, it was the sights of old age, sickness, and death that compelled the young prince to leave his sheltered palace life and seek out a remedy for life's disease. After achieving awakening as the "Buddha," the centrality of disease is enshrined in the first of the "Four Noble Truths": *sarvam dukkham*—all is pain and suffering. From this perspective, life is so shot through with impermanence, sickness, and disease as to make stable happiness naught but an illusion or fairy tale we tell ourselves.

Though stemming from approximately twenty-five centuries in the past, these teachings of Buddhism seem entirely prescient for a time of pandemic and disruption such as we are experiencing now, with millions infected, sickened, and perished from COVID-19 across the globe. The teaching that sickness is the prevalent aspect of the human condition would not seem a tough sell in this environment. Yet, Buddhist tradition is multitudinous and as it branched into new forms and sects, alternate views—even of cardinal principles like the concept of *sarvam dukkham*—began to emerge, particularly with the schools of the Mahāyāna. That movement was characterized by such teachings as non-duality, the emptiness of all phenomena, the preeminence of the Bodhisattva path (where awakened beings vow continued rebirth until all beings are similarly awakened), and the decreased importance of monastic vows in favor of lay practice. So extensive was the shift in ideas between earlier Buddhism and the Mahāyāna that it has been

termed the "second turning of the wheel of the dharma," a true revolution in Buddhist teaching.

One key text of the Mahāyāna is the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Composed between the first and third centuries of the common era, Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit versions of this text survive and have been translated by scholars such as Thomas Cleary, Etienne Lamotte, John McRae, Robert Thurman, and Burton Watson. For sheer influence among later Buddhist traditions, particularly East Asian forms of the religion, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* ranks among other Buddhist classics such as the *Lotus* and *Diamond Sūtra*s, delivering stunning discourses on the meanings of non-duality and emptiness especially. As such, the text revisits, redraws, and re-imagines certain binaries, most particularly between the supposed opposites of health and sickness. By reading this text, a core text within the span of Buddhist and Asian religions in general, I offer the lessons of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* on sickness as a reminder (in the midst of a pandemic) of ways to respond to disease that transcend words and even actions.

As the title of the work suggests, the text is positioned as the teaching of Vimalakīrti, a householder who has attained awakening and comprehends the meaning of non-duality to such a degree that he eschews previously held Buddhist notions of monastic refinement and purity. He marries and has a family, partakes of alcohol and rich foods, and visits bars and brothels, all to the end of realizing the inescapable conclusion that if all phenomena are interdependent and empty, there can be no distinction between nirvana (the extinction of desires) and the world of desire itself. Believing that the Buddha's various monastic followers are not sufficiently trained in this truth, Vimalakīrti determines to impart this teaching to them. His perfect mastery of non-duality allowing Vimalakīrti to assume any state he wishes, he manifests himself as sick, knowing that the Buddha's followers will be compelled to visit him in his convalescence.

The Buddha immediately perceives Vimalakīrti's state and asks his attendants to visit the householder. One after another refuses, however,

giving instances in the past when Vimalakīrti's superior understanding of the dharma has embarrassed or otherwise left them at a loss for words. Eventually, the disciple Mañjuśrī, despite his own misgivings, decides to take up the task of visiting Vimalakīrti, at which time he is followed by a retinue of other Buddhists and divine beings, who anticipate the revelation of a superb teaching. Upon arriving, Mañjuśrī asks Vimalakīrti about the nature of his sickness. The householder replies that his ailment stems from ignorance itself, but more so the fact that other living beings—all of them, in fact—are sick. He goes on to say that if other living beings were not sick, he also would be free from sickness. This is likened to how parents may share sympathetically in the illness of their children, which speaks (as Vimalakīrti explains) directly to the Mahāyāna's bodhisattva path: "Just so, the bodhisattva loves all living beings as if each were his only child. He becomes sick when they are sick and is cured when they are cured. You ask me whence comes my sickness; the sicknesses of the bodhisattva come from great compassion" (Thurman, 43).

Following up on this exchange, Mañjuśrī probes further on the exact nature of Vimalakīrti's sickness and even inquires as to how to provide consolation for an ill bodhisattva. Vimalakīrti replies that a bodhisattva should use his own sickness as a means to cultivate and amplify empathy for all living beings, to realize the truth that all beings are connected through suffering. This will ultimately allow the bodhisattva, Vimalakīrti again explains, "to manifest the roots of virtue, to maintain the primal purity and the lack of craving, and thus to always strive to become the king of healers, who can cure all sicknesses" (Thurman, 44).

To this point, the conversation between the two figures has skirted an issue which soon becomes central: given the teaching of non-duality, is sickness even real? Mañjuśrī provokes that discussion by asking how a bodhisattva ought to deal with his illness, to which Vimalakīrti replies that the elimination of sickness comes about when one eliminates egoism and possessiveness, which can be done through realizing

nonduality, that "both self and non-self are void and neither is established in reality…one who sees such equality makes no difference between sickness and voidness; his sickness is itself voidness, and that sickness as voidness is itself void" (Thurman, 45). In a way, this conclusion, as with many teachings of Mahāyāna texts, follows logically from earlier Buddhist insights. Principal among these is the early Buddhist precept of *anatman* or "no-self," that due to the constantly changing nature of physical and mental forms, there is no permanent soul or "I" to which one can cling. Without an "I," there is no ego, and without an ego, there is no "I" to support the statement "I am sick." All beings are sick and all beings are well, for both states are void (or empty) of permanent reality.

During a pandemic where millions have been struck with COVID-19, other millions have died, and the spread of the disease has caused economic downturns resulting in ripples of further distress, the rhetoric that ultimately sickness is unreal and can be rendered void by a shift in one's perception is not likely to be greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm. However, even while layered around an uncompromising commitment to the truth of the non-duality and emptiness of all phenomena, the text's approach to sickness is in fact subtle and practical enough to provide lessons for responding to the pandemic. First, there is great worth in focusing on Vimalakīrti's declaration that if one being is sick, the bodhisattva shall be also. From this point of view, sickness is not an event that happens to one, but instead happens to all: the illness of one being should be experienced as an illness that afflicts us all. Consequently, the more inclusive view of illness that this perspective lends itself to would lead to more pronounced collective efforts to promote healing.

Second, as we saw, Vimalakīrti speaks of considering one's own illness as the root of empathy for the illness of others. Far from rendering sickness as unreal, it provides a way for disease, even potentially catastrophic disease, to be the foundation for training and understanding, of a way to live in deep compassion for the plight of other beings.

In this way, sickness may not be conquered or rendered irrelevant, but possibly transcended as one uses it to develop a more profound, interconnected understanding. Finally, though not related specifically to the text's dialogues explicitly on sickness, there is a passage later in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* that reveals yet another lesson we can nevertheless take away on dealing with illness or the illnesses of others in a challenging time. The passage focuses on non-duality, where the attendants of the Buddha who have followed Mañjuśrī to his session with Vimalakīrti take turns attempting to define non-duality. Padmavyūha, for instance, argues that "absence of ideation is the entrance into non-duality." Candrottara determines that it is rather "the entrance into equanimity." Mañjuśrī, who has had the benefit of special instruction with Vimalakīrti, chides the others for giving explanations that are themselves dualistic, saying instead that, "to indicate nothing and to designate nothing—that is the entrance into non-duality." Prompted by this exchange, they ask Vimalakīrti to assess their views of non-duality and offer his own perspective. In response, Vimalakīrti, "kept his silence, saying nothing at all" (Thurman, 77).

As the text has repeatedly tied sickness with non-duality, we can take this incident as yet another possible lesson for dealing with disease. Unlike the other acolytes of the Buddha, Vimalakīrti demonstrates that any words or commentary in this instance represent a descent into the world of dualism and binaries. Instead, the only proper response is silence, but, importantly, not absence. His silent presence—like voidness or emptiness itself—among his fellow Buddhists is not negative, but affirmative of their union, of their solidarity. When confronted with the anguish and terror of sickness, either as a society or with an individual stricken by illness, sometimes there are no words. Vimalakīrti's silence shows that we need not have the right words to say, but that sometimes a quiet presence can be just as comforting and enlightening.

Works Cited

Thurman, A. F. Robert, ed. and trans. *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*: *A Mahāyāna Scripture*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003.

At the Foot of the Mount: A Meditation on Dante's *Purgatorio* as a Pandemic *Vade mecum*

June-Ann Greeley
Sacred Heart University

Dorothy Sayers, the British medievalist, Dante scholar, and sometime mystery writer, once wrote that of the three books of the *Commedia*, the *Purgatorio* is, for English readers, the least known, the least quoted—and the most beloved…the *Inferno* may fill one with only an appalled fascination, and the *Paradiso* may daunt one by its intellectual severity; but if one is drawn to the *Purgatorio* at all, it is by the cords of love…(*Purgatorio* is the) tenderest, subtlest and most human section of the *Comedy* (Sayers, 9).

Similarly, Helmut Hatzfeld, a celebrated German scholar of late medieval and early modern European literature wrote, if somewhat begrudgingly, that the art of (*Purgatorio*) consists in the creation of a very human, magic myth, including the poetization of theology, spiritual life, human relations, liturgy, landscapes, actions and situations…modern readers…cannot help feeling…the thread sewing their envious eyes and the heavy stone destined to curb their pride (Hatzfeld, 86–87).

I begin with these appraisals of Dante's *Purgatorio* to underscore the fact that the literary consensus about the *cantica*—that is it of the entire *Divine Comedy* the most intimate, spiritual and human/humane—does not lighten the burden that *Purgatorio* levies on both teacher and student alike, segments of sober contemplation and philosophical reflection as well as difficult truths about our reality. *Purgatorio* is the *cantica* in which Dante most deliberately ruminates about the immense and difficult questions of the human condition because it is the *cantica* that is most concerned with the actual matter of human life

on earth and how best to live, i.e., how to live gently, humbly, justly, honestly—in a word, virtuously. The questions Dante raises in *Purgatorio* offer no easy responses but confront the reader with persistent inquiries about the constitutive dimensions of a meaningful and purposeful life on earth which for some is the preparation for the blessing of salvation and for others the way to human flourishing. Thus, as Hatzfeld suggests, *Purgatorio* is Dante's unblinking glare at each one of us, demanding that we look now (not later) to the condition of our individual souls as well as be more readily aware of the moral condition of others, that we each accept now (not later) our personal agency in the road to salvation—or, for the unbelieving, our agency in the creation of a just society directed toward a common good—and that we each recognize now the measure of self-awareness and self-understanding that is necessary for the fulfillment of such agency *Purgatorio* is Dante's cautionary counsel that, not devils but, crucial elements of salvation/human flourishing are in the details of each human life.

However, it is true that for 21st-century, post-millennial students, even those who claim adherence to the Roman Catholic faith, Purgatory is either too abstracted a concept to be justifiable or it is simply an indefensible one: the inclusion of such a seemingly extensive prolongation of final salvation thwarts the simple binary possibility of being saved or not and so seems to make the whole matter of salvation less efficient and less attainable. For the non-religious student, any doctrine related to life after death—any idea of an afterlife, Heaven, Hell or Purgatory—is simply irrelevant in its implausibility. Moreover, in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the human condition is so fraught with ambiguity and vulnerability, the notion of judgment at death, when so many unanticipated deaths have been so prominent as to question whether there is any moral arc to the universe, seems inappropriate, even impertinent…and yet beguiling. The pandemic has caused us to "hit pause" and offered us space to become more reflective, more introspective, about our individual lives and even about our collective agency in sustaining the communities that have been rent from

us. Thus, the question now might be not just how should we live but whether it even matters?

Purgatorio can be an appealing study for any student because it is, as Sayers attested, the 'most human' *cantica* of the Great Poem. In its inherent optimism (we must remember that Dante's journey through Purgatory is an ascension), *Purgatorio* explores a range of consequential questions about the human condition (but that does not require belief or dogmatic instruction to contemplate): Is there meaning in human existence? Is there free will? What is the nature of the human soul (is there a soul)? What is the nature of sin/ego-centric will? Is there forgiveness? What is it to be a virtuous person? What does it mean to love another person? to love God? to love? As humans, can we ever truly 'cleanse' ourselves of our faults? Does it matter? Are we to live according to the rule of justice or the criterion of mercy? Why, and how? *Purgatorio* affords students a common space for personal reflection as well as an evolving narration for class discussion on any several of those many questions, and this interlude of the pandemic—as well as the "post" pandemic era toward which we are creeping steadily—has made those questions more vital than ever in directing students (all of us, really) toward answers that might become adhesives for increasingly fragmented and fractured lives.

Teaching *Purgatorio* I: Purgatory in Dante's time

While time will not allow a thorough review of the development of the idea and doctrine of Purgatory in Church history, it may still be enlightening for students to learn something about the lively concern of the Church Fathers (and later theologians) for the condition of the human soul after mortal death, and from there to discuss anxious questions about meaning in the human journey and possibilities of an afterlife.

Throughout the early Middle Ages, a Patristic vision of a kind of intermediary stage in the process of salvation persisted in theological writings but also in a range of visionary accounts and spiritual

narratives of soul-journeys to fantastic realms of beauty and wonder as well as penalty and purgation. However, some scholars have argued that it was not really until the 12th and early 13th centuries that scholastic theologians and an emerging community of humanist scholars began to apply themselves seriously to the complicated question of *purgatorium* (a term that becomes part of the common parlance in the latter 12th century) and the nature and signification of purgatorial punishment.[1] The 12th century "renaissance" was the cultural and intellectual re-ordering of society in which the place and meaning of the individual become more prominent, as did the vicissitudes of earthly existence, and so questions about the path to salvation became less abstracted and concerned themselves more with the damaging yet unavoidable fluctuations of daily life on earth that could imperil the personal journey of the individual soul. Dante penned the *cantica Purgatorio* in the early 14th century, a time when, as a result of plagues and wars and countless others variables of an evolving society and global outreach, concerns arose about how best to order increasingly pluralistic societies. With what mechanisms or orders of ideas could such societies secure wholeness and promote justice? How best to integrate the (increasingly important) individual into those societies for the flourishing of self and of others, and how best to understand human failings while remaining optimistic for an eternal life of tranquility after physical death?

There is no question that the systematic organization of *Purgatorio*, its serene order and carefully layered ascent to Paradise, its tone of hope and possibility, and its voice of reason and revelation, all demonstrate Dante's optimism that champions both a collective and singular capacity to ascend out of and beyond the condemnation of chaos and despair, darkness and damnation—or, again with regard to our students, the anxiety, isolation and confusion that the pandemic has wrought. It is important for students to realize the confidence of Dante's vision and the positive movement of the entire *cantica*: Dante

[1] For details and some of the debate, see Barbara Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen and the 'Birth of Purgatory,'" *Mystics Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1993): 90-91.

and Virgil walk out of the depths of Hell, they ascend steadily up the mount of Purgatory which is a locus of cleansing and enlightenment for all the souls who are there and have been saved pending their purgative process, until Dante achieves the summit of the earthly paradise that is the gateway into heaven (joy, awakening). The energy of hope that suffuses the entire *cantica* acts like a balm for our students since so many of them teeter on the verge of despair after young lifetimes of school shootings, economic collapses, terrorist threats and global health crises. Dante's narrative, howsoever fictive and creative, heartens students with hope but also urges them to recognize that it is not enough just to emerge from the dark place: one must understand and act according to a better, more virtuous, model of human behavior. *Purgatorio* presents them a kind of roadmap for the sanctified journey of transformative integration and human flourishing.

Purgatorio as *Vade mecum*

When teaching *Purgatorio*, then, it is crucial to remind students that the souls in Purgatory are already 'saved,' albeit in a protracted ascension to the light, and so are distinct from the unchanging and unchangeable damned in *Inferno* (as well as the rarified elect in *Paradiso*), which tends to be the *cantica* of the *Comedy* most familiar to students and which then becomes for them, unfortunately the main narrative of the poem, a binary challenge of only damnation or salvation. *Purgatorio* restores a sense of possibility and balance. Dante opens *Purgatorio* with some of the most joyous verses of deliverance in late medieval poetry: these are essential for an appreciation for the second *cantica* and the progress of Dante's pilgrimage:

> To run through better waters the little bark
> of my indwelling powers raises her sails,
> and leaves behind that sea so cruel and dark.
> Now I shall sing of that second kingdom given
> the soul of man wherein to purge its guilt

and so grow worthy to ascend to Heaven...
Sweet azure of the sapphire of the east
was gathering on the serene horizon
its pure and perfect radiance—a feast
to my glad eyes, reborn to their delight,
as soon as I passed from the dead air
which had oppressed my soul and dimmed my sight…
(1.1–5, 13–18; Ciardi, 286–287).[2]

It is dawn on Easter Sunday, the first light of a new world at the time of the resurrection of the Christ and the beginning of a new poem, with a new sensibility flooding the verses. What could be more hopeful than Easter Sunday? There is renewal and regeneration in the soul of Dante-pilgrim, in the place of the new "kingdom" and in the heart of the reader, even after so dense and deep a time of corrosion and deterioration. Dante speaks now of "waters," the cleansing streams of redemption that now carry him, as poet, on "the little bark of my indwelling powers," away from the cruel and noxious "sea" of *Inferno*. The dead and frozen world of the utter abyss of hell is now replaced by the "better"—flowing—waters of the space he and Virgil are entering amid the glint of illumination. Dante alludes to the "resurrection" of his poetic sensibility ("let dead poetry rise up again", l. 8) on the dawning of the day of the resurrection of Christ, a perfect conflation of Dante-pilgrim with Dante-poet. Through Christ's salvific act, Dante as the poet senses his creative energies being revived and Dante as pilgrim can now bear witness to the blaze of light and color ("sapphire") he espies, hear the lucid harmonies and catch a cleansing breath in the new realm.

The noted Dante scholar, Giuseppe Mazzotta, makes much of the comparative adjective "better" in the opening stanzas (as in "better waters") and it is a point worth noting for students: Dante uses "better"

[2] Unless it is indicated otherwise, all citations of *Purgatorio* come from the translation by John Ciardi.

not only to emphasize that he no longer tarries in the toxic wasteland of *Inferno* but also that his ascent to the "light," as it were, is a gradual process, a continuum (bad-better-best). Mazzotta encourages readers to consider "the use of a comparative adjective here, the 'better waters.'" "This is Dante's emphasis on the journey," explains Mazzotta, "as a comparatively good one. It is not the best of waters; it is not the worst of waters; these are better waters. We are really on the way to better things" (Mazzotta, 118). The journey through *Purgatorio*, as throughout the movement of the *Divine Comedy*, is a gradual process, a continuum, the increment of gaining virtue (and shedding vice) in order to become "worthy to ascend to Heaven." In this regard, Dante agreed with Thomas Aquinas (who learned it from Aristotle) that virtue is a power of the soul that, curated and cultivated consistently by understanding and action over time, can establish the penitent along the path of salvation in an ascent to the heavenly kingdom.[3] To put it in more familiar secular terms for students, one must nurture virtue in thought and deed until it becomes almost habitual: at that juncture of becoming like a habit, the individual may realize some condition of flourishing and happiness, both for the self and for the wider community and, indeed, the world.

The movement of the pilgrim in *Purgatorio* is a steady progression of enlightenment—moral, intellectual, and spiritual—a form of the gaining of virtue in cumulative stages. However, the process cannot be just movement forward. Rather, Dante argues, the process must involve reflection and contemplation of previous or past behaviors, decisions, and choices, an honest review of those occasions when disordered or insufficient love so afflicted the soul as to cause corrupt behaviors or iniquitous acts, broadly categorized as the seven "deadly" sins and their corruption of love. Of course, during the pandemic our students—all of us—"paused" (willingly or otherwise) and while some might have taken time to assess where they had been and where they might be

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, Q. 55-56. https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2055.htm; accessed September 19, 2022.

going, many people, young and old, were almost too anxious to endeavor such work, particularly if it had to be accomplished alone. Everyone needed or needs a Virgil, a guide and confidant for the journey back and forward. Thus, in a fitting recalibration, I suggest that Dante's text can become the "Virgil", a companion and ally, for personal contemplation and instruction, a private *vade mecum.*

The structure of the purgatorial process, as Dante envisioned it, is unlike that of the *Inferno* in which intractable dramas of condemnation and punishment define each level of descent. In *Purgatorio,* Dante initiates each level of the ascent up the Mount with exemplars of the relevant virtue against the specific sin (or vice), in an effort to emphasize what constitutes the better path of living, rather than to focus on what mistakes have been made. In *Purgatorio*, Dante usually incorporates scenes from the life of the Virgin and other known historical or literary figures as the exemplars of the virtue, and only after those figures bore witness to their exemplification of the specific virtue are examples of the sin/vice itself then presented. As such, the ascent of Mount Purgatory offers a persistent continuance of soul-growth through moral discernment: how to become the best of oneself but always in reference to the benefit of the common good.

Time will not permit a thorough examination of each of the seven "deadlies" or categories of disordered love as Dante has presented them in *Purgatorio*, so this essay will explore only one of the seven, envy. That "sin" (or kind of iniquity) is the sin that students readily identify as the most remorseless and destructive of all the seven "deadlies" and one which they acknowledge as a pervasive presence in their communities, notably as a consequence of the inescapable influence of social media and other virtual agents in their daily reality.

Envy in Purgatorio

Dante defined envy, along with pride and wrath, as the worst perversion of Christian love (and thus one of the worst sins): it is a disordered devotion to the self that deflates any humane behavior through the

vagaries of malice and resentment. The medieval world regarded envy (*invidia*) as an exceptionally malevolent sin because of its especially insidious and malicious nature. Envy is not simply jealousy over what another has, or greed for another's profit, or anger at another's success, or lust for another's accomplishment: rather, envy is a pernicious witch's brew of all those sins hardened by deep-seated feelings of bitterness, indignation, and antipathy that combine to inspire a yearning (the essence of envy) that the other person be injured or suffer some harm. Based on his reading of Aristotle, Aquinas identified envy as a mortal sin and capital vice because it is most contrary to *caritas*, or Christian love, which gives life to the human soul and animates the human spirit toward God and the good and toward one's neighbor.[4] Envy was the compulsion that goaded the pride of Lucifer to defy God; envy was the root of the wrath that Cain inflicted upon Abel. Envy truly is at the core of all sin.

In Canto 13, Dante and Virgil ascend to the cornice of Envy and, as a contemporary Dante scholar explains, "Here we see another reminder that the job of the mountain of Purgatory is to perform a kind of aggressive cognitive behavioral therapy, with the goal of dishabituating us from vice, the inclination toward sin" (Barolini). The canto opens with a description of the cornice of envy:

> …the terrace circles the entire ascent

In much the same way as the one below…,

> Then
> There were no spirits, no carvings there,
> bare was the cliff-face, bare the level path.
> The rock of both was livid, dark and bare...
> (XIII, 1–2, 7–9; Ciardi, 391).

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, Q.36, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3036.htm; accessed September 19, 2022.

The terrace of Envy is dull and pallid as stone, "livid, dark and bare", and, because in life the envious fueled their fire of want and resentment initially through their vision, on the terrace of envy there is nothing to see, no visual ("no effigy" and the path is "naked") on the terraced cornice. Rather, when Dante and Virgil first come upon the scene, they *hear* haunting voices:

> ...we began to hear in the air above
> invisible spirits who flew toward us speaking
> sweet invitations to the feast of love.
> The first voice that flew past rang to the sky:
> 'Vinum non habent'. And from far behind us
> We heard it fade repeating the same cry…
> (XIII, 25–30; Ciardi, 392).

Then another voice then proclaims, "I am Orestes!" (33) and a third voice is heard to intone deeply, "Love your enemies" (36). Those airy words of greeting explain to Dante-pilgrim and Virgil (and the reader) that the intent of the ascent up the Mount of Purgatory is to actualize each successive virtue that most effectively counteracts the "sin": here, it is envy and the genuine practice of love/ *caritas* diminishes, even eradicates, its influence. "Love is the lash that scourges" (39) the malevolence of envy, Virgil explains to Dante-pilgrim.

The first acquaintance of the region of Envy that the travelers experienced was aural, the voices of those who had displayed true *caritas* in their lives. "We do not have wine" was a plea from Mary to Jesus, beseeching him to help find wine for the wedding at Cana, to ensure the joy of the celebration; the shout of "I am Orestes!" was a line from Cicero's *De Amicitia*, the moment when Orestes, the complicated son of Agamemnon, attempted to stand in for his friend Pylades who is destined to be killed (as he had previously stood in for Orestes)—the scene also evoking John 15:13, *Greater love has no man than this, that*

he lay down his life for his friends)—and, finally, Jesus' own teaching from the Sermon on the Mount to love not just neighbors but enemies as well (note: this is the only place in the whole *cantica* that quotes the actual words/paraphrases of Jesus). The three statements do not merely define *caritas* for the two pilgrims (and for us, the readers): they offer models of behavior with others in the world that correct the acquisitive and malevolent taint of envy: generosity and compassion for the needs of others; sincerity and gratitude for what has been received from others and to return the same, and humility and benevolence beyond self-regard. Again, Dante wants to encourage his audience to move beyond the superficiality of words to actual acts of love and forgiveness and kindness, and it should be noted that the examples of *caritas* that are cited in this and subsequent verses often excite animated conversations among students, especially during the intimidating pandemic and otherwise politically raucous times, when "love" of an enemy or caring about the well-being of another might be not only unwelcome, but seemingly ill-advised.

As Dante and Virgil continue on, they encounter souls on the ledge of Envy, fated to make amends for their sins, although they are ultimately saved (as are all souls in Purgatory). An indication of what separates the envious in Purgatory from the envious in Hell is the cry of the souls on the ledge, "O Mary, pray for us" (50): the souls in Purgatory had led lives on earth marked by pernicious envy, but at some point, they recognized that error and so began to transform their behaviors for the better. Thus, they cry in Purgatory for universal ("us"), not simply personal, salvation. The souls are enrobed in haircloth (58) and they sit huddled together, pressing against the cold stone wall, unable to see because their eyelids have been sewn shut with iron wire (70–72). Their eyes had been the initial entry points, as has been mentioned, for their envious obsessions, and so now they exist without vision and must rely on their other senses— and each other. It is helpful at this juncture also to remind students that the souls in Purgatory are sinful and are experiencing a kind of retribution for each kind of sin;

yet, in the midst of their failure and recompense, they are still, ultimately, saved. Salvation is not dependent upon perfection.

The experience of Dante-pilgrim in his encounters with the souls in *Purgatorio* is distinct from his adventures in the *Inferno*: while the populations of the damned whom Dante-pilgrim encountered in hell were the souls of those still contaminated by their sinfulness because they always refused and continue to refuse to be accountable for their own wickedness or can imagine no other condition of being, the sinners in Purgatory did manifest some repentance for sins while still alive and are still willing, as they experience moral growth through cleansing, to realize both what could be lost without acknowledgement of past wrongs (God/the human family) and what must be accomplished (petitions for forgiveness and virtuous actions) in order to move closer to God (and each other): that is, the souls in Purgatory, unlike the souls in the *Inferno*, are self-aware, remorseful, and accountable. As one denizen of the ledge of Envy, a Sienese woman named Sapia, explains to Dante-pilgrim, she "found more joy in the bad luck of others/than in the good that fell to my own lot" (110–111), but at the very end of her life, she repented her misguided choices and "did turn back to God" (125). Yet, Sapia also recognized that salvation is not a private matter: she insists to Dante-pilgrim that penance alone would not have been sufficient and she recounts how the prayers of intercession on her behalf from a Sienese friend, Pier Pettinaio, supported her in her effort to atone for her sins. Sapia thus exemplifies the souls of the penitent in Purgatory: she acknowledged her sinfulness, her hope of God's grace and her own inability to ascend to God without divine mercy. Her "confession" recognizes her own personal failing (and not another's), unlike the souls in the *Inferno* who remain defiant in their refusal to be accountable for their iniquitous lives on earth. Again, the matter of personal accountability and responsibility is a beguiling topic for many students, as is the concomitant process of a healthy self-awareness and progressive integration of the whole self.

The *Purgatorio* reveals another aspect of salvation or steps toward human flourishing (whatever is relevant to each student) that argues some relevance for students: salvation—or recovery from loss or from depression, or any ideation aimed at human growth—is not, for Dante, a solo venture: one does not go it alone. As Dante insists throughout the *Divine Comedy* but especially in *Purgatorio*, life at its best is a relational journey, most fully realized in human connection and with Christian love/compassion for one another. That truth Dante of course typified with his own partnered ascent from hell to Paradise, accompanied by first Virgil, then Beatrice, and finally St. Bernard. As Dante exemplified in the case of Sapia, by her own admission, her own journey would have been quite different had not another (Peter the combseller) "accompanied" her: that is, in Christian terms, her own personal penitence was not sufficient, and human mercy and forgiveness, or the spiritual connection with others, were also essential aspects of the path to redemption (or, in secular terms, wholeness). Sapia thus bears witness to Dante's belief that humanity will thrive and flourish only through human compassion and sincere concern, one for another, even in the worst times.

Conclusion: What Students May Gain from *Purgatorio*

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a bountiful source for classroom discussion and ethical debate, as anachronistic as some aspects of the poem might seem. The richness of the *Comedia* is its universality and its prodigious content that instructors "accompanying" their students can explore fruitfully even without dallying over obscure names, unfamiliar places and discrete historical data. The *Comedia*, particularly *Purgatorio*, offers the contemporary audience a journey into the torn and stained fabric of human life with its errant passions, lamentable tempers, cruel hubris and wayward resentments, as well as alarming moments of anguish and confusion, and yet it is a journey that does not, in the end, abide the

darkness. It is a comedy, after all, and so the narration trends to the light—hope—that lingers at the end of the journey. Nor is it a vain hope, or a facile positivity. The images and voices that Dante presents in his great work offer students the opportunity to reflect on themselves in relation to themselves, personally, as well as in community with others; to regard the pervasive consequences of their actions (positive and negative) on themselves and others, but also their attitudes of being and to consider thus the social or communal nature of every human life. The voices in *Purgatorio* especially invite readers/our students to begin their own journey of reflection about what makes for a good and just and holy—or happy—life. Students may not agree with Dante on any score but his work challenges them to begin to ask the great and significant questions of life: what is it to be human? Are human flaws (sins, weakness) irrevocable? Can humanity emerge from and even transcend its imperfections? Does it matter? Amid all the timeless existential questions of life, moreover, Dante prods the reader to reflect on each life as a mark of moral agency, to understand that actions and behaviors have physical, spiritual, emotional, social and ethical consequences that often far exceed the temporal moment of the event. For each action, every behavior, each of us is responsible, Dante argues, and the degree to which each of us accepts such responsibility and holds oneself accountable, not just to one's self, or to God, but daily to each other, may very well determine the course of individual as well as collective human history. It remains, however, a choice each person is free to make.

Works Cited

Barolini, Teodolinda. "*Purgatorio* 13: Eyes Sewn Shut." *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2014. https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-13/; accessed September 19, 2022.

Ciardi, John, trans. *The Divine Comedy.* New York: New American Library, 2003.

Hatzfeld, Helmut. "The Art of Dante's *Purgatorio."* In *American Critical Essays on The Divine Comedy.* Edited by Robert Clements. New York: New York University Press, 1967.

Mazzotta, Giuseppe. *Reading Dante.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Sayers, Dorothy, trans. *The Divine Comedy, Volum 2: Purgatorio*. New York: Penguin, 1975.

Julian of Norwich:
A Medieval Perspective on Solitude and Suffering

Jamie Boulding
Seton Hall University

Julian of Norwich (1343–1416) is a central figure in the medieval Christian mystical tradition. In 1373, while severely ill and believing herself to be on her deathbed, she experienced a series of intense visions of Jesus Christ. The visions began upon her receiving the sacrament of extreme unction, or last rites, and they continued until she recovered from her illness. In 1393, she wrote a theological exploration of the meaning of these visions, which provided the basis for her *Revelations of Divine Love* that is believed to be the first book written in the English language by a woman. Throughout the text, Julian demonstrated deep knowledge of theological issues such as God's nature, creation, the Trinity, and sin, as well as a capacity for strikingly original theological reflection, including her discussion of the idea of Christ as a mother, or one who embodies the qualities of motherhood. In this paper, I will discuss the contemporary relevance of Julian's theological vision within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will examine her response to solitude and isolation, which she understood as an opportunity to turn inward to find God. I will also consider the ways in which she found meaning in Christ's suffering and death within the context of the pandemic of her own time. Finally, I will offer reflections on the value of teaching this core text to students during the COVID-19 pandemic today.

First, in terms of the solitude and isolation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated social distancing restrictions, lockdowns, quarantines, and other public health interventions, we might consider the example of Julian, who lived a life of solitude, devoted to prayer and contemplation. In 1394, she became an anchoress,

or someone who withdraws from secular society and enters into an enclosed solitary life in a fixed place in order to focus on prayer and attaining greater spiritual perfection. This practice, emphasizing individual forms of devotion, became increasingly popular in late medieval England. To that end, Julian lived in a cell attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich, a city in the East of England that played host to the highest recorded number of anchorites and hermits. Contrary to the modern assumption that this way of life amounts to a form of escapism or perhaps a flight from responsibility, the purpose of living as an anchorite was to enter *more fully* into life by focusing solely and entirely and lovingly on God, from whom life is received as a gift.

In Julian's own setting of extreme isolation, she turned inward to find God.[1] She divided the human self into two parts: the outward side, which is our physical nature, and the inward side, which is "a high, blessed state of being, full of peace and love" (Julian of Norwich, 69–70). Though more mysterious than the material outward part that suffers pain and grief, our inward side is superior, since its goal is eternally set on being united to Christ. She explained that the inward side governs the outward side so that by the power of God both might be made one. In this sense, Julian's work illustrates how we might think of the solitude associated with the pandemic as an opportunity to cultivate one's interior life of prayer, contemplation, and spirituality, with the goal of deepening one's relationship with God. More broadly, and from the perspective of liberal education today, this shift in perspective need not be applied strictly in terms of religious belief. We might consider that the interiority encouraged—or perhaps enforced—by solitude, isolation, and quarantine is an opportunity for constructive and focused personal growth and development, broadly understood.

[1] Here we might note that the inward turn to God is not unusual in Christian theology. In his *Confessions*, Augustine describes his own inward search for God. What distinguishes Julian's emphasis on interiority is her choice to occupy an environment of physical isolation.

Second, we might consider the related question of suffering. To date, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated an immense degree of suffering on a global scale, with illness, death, loss, and grief compounded by the broader social and economic disruption. As of May 2021, over 3.5 million deaths worldwide and close to 600,000 deaths in the United States have been attributed to Covid-19, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in history. In light of these tragic contemporary developments, we might consider that Julian lived during the worst pandemic in human history, the Black Death of 1348–1350, a bubonic plague pandemic which is estimated to have killed 40 to 60 percent of the population of England. During the pandemic of her own time, she recorded in *Revelations* that she prayed for three things: knowledge of Christ's passion, bodily sickness, and to receive three "wounds" or gifts—contrition, compassion, and longing for God.

Throughout *Revelations*, Julian explored the significance of Christ's redemptive suffering and death, and the text is replete with vivid descriptions of his face and body, including the suffering he endured and imagery of his blood and wounds. This imagery is central to her distinctive vision of God as inseparable from man and woman—radically transcendent, but also bodily incarnate and therefore intimately connected to his creation. In particular, Julian was profoundly moved by the key Christian paradox that "he who is highest and most majestic was brought lowest and most utterly despised" (Julian of Norwich, 70). She believed that Christ's suffering, which he chose willingly and meekly, surpasses anything that we must endure in our lives and ultimately means that our own suffering will be turned into "supreme and everlasting joys" (Julian of Norwich, 71). She explained that Christ suffers for the purpose of raising us higher with him in eternity so that in return for the relatively "little pain we suffer here on earth we shall have an exalted, endless knowledge of God, which we could never have without that. And the worse pain we have suffered with him on his cross, the greater the glory we shall enjoy with him in his kingdom" (Julian of Norwich, 72).

In this way, Julian offered a familiar Christian explanation of what is often described as the problem of evil—the dilemma of reconciling suffering and death with a loving and all-powerful God—within the particular context of her own pain and isolation. In light of the pain that Christ suffered and the prospect of the redemption of our own suffering and the promise of eternal bliss, Julian sought to put our own suffering on earth in its proper perspective. As with our previous consideration of solitude, this approach might be generalized beyond religious considerations, in line with the core insight that shifting one's perspective and seeking to identify greater meaning or purpose might provide some degree of relief from immediate experiences of suffering. As such, Julian's example might encourage those outside the Christian faith to reflect on the extent to which it is possible to put short-term setbacks in the context of longer-term hopes or goals. Similarly, those who do not share her religious views or who would not wish to emulate her way of life might be prompted to consider their own strategies for building resilience and maintaining optimism, perhaps drawing encouragement from Julian's ability to persevere in challenging circumstances.

Having considered Julian's approaches to the questions of solitude and suffering, it might be instructive to conclude with brief reflections on the value of *Revelations of Divine Love* to liberal education in the time of COVID-19. Since the text imaginatively and powerfully explores themes of solitude and suffering, I believe that Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* is a particularly meaningful and compelling core text to teach during a pandemic. Her reflections on the meaning of solitude and suffering are at once distinctively medieval and highly applicable to our own times. This is true even for students who might not share her religious perspective, and who might benefit from a teaching approach that explicitly relates Julian's experiences to more modern and secular concerns. For example, her decision to live as an anchoress in a cell could be seen as a sort of medieval version of Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own," a space in which a woman could find privacy and

scope for personal growth that might not be possible in other environments. Indeed, Julian's text provides rich opportunities for students to consider more general questions, beyond the scope of the pandemic, related to freedom and autonomy, as well as intellectual and spiritual development.

In my own experience of teaching the text to Samford undergraduates in the 2020–2021 academic year, I found that they were highly receptive to the relevance of her life and work to our pandemic experience. As the purpose of liberal education in general and the value of core texts in particular continue to be the subject of academic and popular debate, it is encouraging to encounter a text that is so clearly and directly applicable to the pandemic, and expressed with such remarkable clarity of language and originality of thought. If, as Cornel West and Jeremy Tate have argued in defense of core texts, education is "the maturation and cultivation of spiritually intact and morally equipped human beings" (West and Tate), then Julian's work might demonstrate the extent to which medieval Christian mysticism can provide moral and spiritual illumination within the context of modern concerns regarding solitude and suffering. Finally, I found that the students were moved and inspired by Julian's fundamentally optimistic vision of hope and redemption amid widespread solitude and suffering. For students who have endured unusually challenging educational experiences throughout the pandemic, this is a compelling message. It is also one that transcends specific places and times. As the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdock has put it, "Julian of Norwich's showings are for all humanity" (Murdock, 73).

Works Cited

Julian of Norwich. *Revelations of Divine Love*. Translated by Elizabeth Spearing. London: Penguin Books, 1998.

Murdoch, Iris. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Vintage, 2003.

West, Cornell, and Jeremy Tate. "Howard University's removal of classics is a spiritual catastrophe." *Washington Post* (April 19, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/19/cornel-west-howard-classics/; accessed May 31, 2021.

Moral Evil: Lessons from Rousseau and the Lisbon Earthquake

Peter Diamond
New York University

Nowadays there is a clear consensus in the field of disaster research that, despite its persistence in popular parlance, the term "natural disaster" is misleading, since such events occur squarely within societies, rather than in nature, and are inevitably understood in cultural and political terms (Oliver-Smith, 181). This characteristically modern understanding of disasters emerged in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose contributions to contemporary debates over the meaning of the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 set the terms for all subsequent discussion of such phenomena. And yet, despite this insight, attempts to deflect responsibility for such events, even to the point of denying their very existence, continue to shape debate over how we understand and deal with disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I shall argue that Rousseau's understanding of humans' response to natural events, as revealed in his correspondence with Voltaire about the Lisbon earthquake, and subsequently developed in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, or *Second Discourse*, serves as a salutary reminder of our moral and political responsibilities in the face of catastrophe.

Fifty years before Lisbon, an earthquake destroyed Port Royal, Jamaica. From a conceptual standpoint, it hardly created a stir. Indeed, a contemporary pamphleteer proclaimed that Jamaica, like Sodom, deserved whatever destruction it got (Neiman, 241). But Lisbon was no more deserving of destruction than any other European city, and sufficiently like them to provoke widespread alarm. Enlightenment

philosophes, who were convinced that the natural world was perfectly ordered by God's justice, were now left to ponder whether this was, as Leibniz had argued, the best of all possible worlds. For it was now apparent that disaster could strike the just and the unjust alike.

Lisbon in 1755 was the fourth largest city in Europe. Commerce had made it one of the world's wealthier cities. A busy port with a large foreign population was an ideal place from which to broadcast a message to the rest of the world—which confirmed many observers' belief that the messenger must have been God. The earthquake occurred on November 1st, All Saints' Day, when many of the city's residents were at mass. It lasted about ten minutes, long enough to destroy a vast number of buildings in the city's center, burying thousands of people in the ruins. The quake was soon followed by fires that raged throughout the city, killing many of the poorer inhabitants. As fires burned, a series of tidal waves struck the port, drowning hundreds of people who had sought shelter on the coast. Estimates of the total number of lives lost varied tremendously, some reaching 70,000 (Dynes, 99).

Religious thinkers were in no doubt that the earthquake was a sign from God.

They argued that the disaster was caused by God's anger over the sinfulness of the Lisboans (Udías and López Arroyo, 8-13).[1] For years, orthodox theologians had battled deists who had tried to explain the world in natural terms alone, or in terms of the general Providence they took for granted. Having long pondered the problem of evil, men of

[1] The prominent Jesuit, Gabriel Malagrida, preached and later published a series of sermons in the wake of the prominent Jesuit, Gabriel Malagrida, preached and later published a series of sermons in the wake of the earthquake, urging the Lisboans to repent of their many sins. He thereby incurred the wrath of Portugal's prime minister, the Marquis of Pombal, who was determined to rebuild Lisbon despite Malagrida's interference. A longstanding opponent of the Jesuit and his order's mission in the Amazon, Pombal was shrewd enough to realize that disasters are also political opportunities. He appointed his brother chief inquisitor, who promptly arranged Malagrida's execution as a heretic (Lee, 69).

faith understood that bad things happen to good people. Orthodox religion was not unnerved by disaster; it customarily welcomed it.

Even serious philosophers could think about Lisbon and continue to think about the world much as they had done before. Immanuel Kant wrote three essays on the earthquake in 1756 to show that the ensuing devastation was not to be viewed as an unspeakable evil inconsistent with God's existence and the perfection of the world, or as an act of divine vengeance for the decadent behavior of Lisboans. Instead, he sought to show that earthquakes have purely physical causes and that they should therefore not incite fear, which was, in any case, a very weak motive for virtuous behavior. He went on to argue that such events ought to provoke careful thought about how best to control their effects—by engaging in thoughtful urban planning, for example. In his second essay devoted to the quake, Kant argued that apparent evils can have good effects. The creation of mineral springs with healing properties was one such benefit, though the greatest gift of Lisbon was the knowledge that the world is not made for our advantage (Kant, 327). In these early essays, Kant sounds a lot like Voltaire's Pangloss. Thus, the premodern world experienced earthquakes with fear and apprehension that not only did not threaten religion but often enhanced it.

What the earthquake did shatter over the second half of the eighteenth century were optimistic views about the miracle and wonder of nature itself. Leibnitz's 1710 work, *Theodicy*, had set the terms of the debate when he set out to defend God's justice in the face of apparent evil. He argued that faith in God was consistent with reason and that the world is good, indeed the best of all possible worlds since it was chosen by an all wise, all good Creator. "Supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best"; if God is to be what revelation proclaims and faith accepts, the actual universe must be the best among all possible worlds. This can be true only if details are judged from the point of view of the whole, for nothing exists or has significance by itself (Leibniz, 129). There are, it is

true, apparent evils on earth. God sends us unhappiness, as a result of original sin our vices surpass our virtues, and "one single Caligula, one Nero, has caused more evil than an earthquake" (139). But whatever the sorrows or the sins of humanity, faith remains unaffected, for "it is enough where God is concerned that there is incomparably more good than evil in the universe" (288). By mid-century, Leibnizian optimism suffused polite society throughout Europe, thanks in large measure to Alexander Pope's popular *Essay on Man*, which concluded by reaffirming the limits of reason in understanding God's plan and arguing that nature's aberrations, whether natural evils such earthquakes, or moral evils embodied by "a Borgia or a Cataline" (line 156) do not undermine the notion of a reasonable God. "All nature is but art unknown to thee," wrote Pope, "And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite / One truth is clear, Whatever is, is RIGHT" (lines 293–4).

To a Europe "taught thus to be smugly content with everything in spite of anything," in Edgar Brightman's well-turned phrase (503), the Lisbon earthquake was more than a little unsettling. As Voltaire wrote in the Preface to his *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*, completed a month and a half after the earthquake struck,

If the question concerning physical evil ever deserves the attention of men, it is in those melancholy events which put us in mind of the weakness of our nature.... The maxim, 'whatever is, is right', appears somewhat extraordinary to those who have been eye-witnesses of such calamities. All things are doubtless arranged and set in order by Providence, but it has long been too evident, that its superintending power has not disposed them in such a manner as to promote our temporal happiness" (Voltaire and Fleming, 184).

Voltaire explained that he was not attacking Pope, whose great poem had quite considerable practical moral value insofar as it promoted "reverence for the Deity" and a "spirit of toleration" but was only warning against an abuse of Pope's maxim, "Whatever is, is right" (184). For if philosophers had said to those who escaped from Lisbon's ruins, "'all this is productive of general good; the heirs of those who

have perished will increase their fortune; masons will earn money by rebuilding the houses, beasts will feed on the carcasses buried under the ruins...your particular misfortune is nothing, it contributes to universal good', such a harangue would doubtless have been as cruel as the earthquake was fatal" (185).

Voltaire's poem was received as a masterpiece of despair, which is not surprising, since it offers a critique for which he provided no resolution. From his standpoint, the earthquake had no value whatsoever, for it produced only pain and misery. What Pope had condemned as pride, Voltaire reckoned to be the basis of all value: "When man groans under such a load of woe, / He is not proud, he only feels the blow" (187). And what Pope had regarded as the basis of all value—the optimistic belief that "whatever is, is best"—Voltaire scorned as a misleading piece of cruelty.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's response to the earthquake, which was triggered by Voltaire's poem, was pragmatic, and, for the first time, it introduced what has become a social scientific view of disaster. In a letter to Voltaire, written not long after he had received a copy of the latter's poem from a mutual friend, Rousseau wrote that he was disappointed by Voltaire's effort. "I expected from it effects worthier of the humanity that seems to have inspired it," wrote Rousseau. "You so greatly magnify the picture of our miseries that you heighten our sense of them; instead of the solace I had hoped for, you only distress me. It is as if you feared that I might not see clearly enough how unhappy I am" ("Letter from J. J. Rousseau to M. de Voltaire," *Discourses*, 232–233). Rousseau genuinely wanted to improve the world, and doing so meant taking as much evil and misery as possible out of God's hands and putting them into our own. "I do not see that one can seek the source of moral evil anywhere but in man, free, perfected, hence corrupted.... Moreover...except for death, which is an evil almost solely because of the preparations made in anticipation of it, most of our physical evils are also of our own making." He went on to point out that "nature" had not constructed 2,000 six or seven-story houses in

the middle of Lisbon. If people had been more widely dispersed and more simply lodged, the damage would have been minimal. But the inhabitants of the city "were set on staying, on stubbornly standing by hovels, on risking further shocks, because what they would have left behind was worth more than what they could take with them. How many unfortunates perished in this disaster for wanting to take, one his clothes, another his papers, a third his money?" (234).

Rousseau's response was callous, and fully in keeping with the sentiments expressed in his first publication, the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. If only people had stayed in the country where they belonged, they would have been better off in the first place. But we should not allow Rousseau's willingness to blame the victims to obscure what is truly noteworthy in his objection to the optimism of Leibniz and Pope. Namely, if evils are merely apparent, and everything is the best that it could be, then there is no need to do anything about them ("Letter by J. J. Rousseau to M. Philopolis," *Discourses*, 226). "You would have wished," he said to Voltaire, "that the quake had happened in the depths of a wilderness rather than in Lisbon. Can there be any doubt that there also are quakes in wildernesses? But we do not talk about them because they do no harm to City Gentlemen, *the only men of whom we take any notice*" ("Letter from J. J. Rousseau to M. de Voltaire," *Discourses*, 234, emphasis added). Rousseau concluded his letter with an ad hominem attack on Voltaire that would prefigure the message of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*:

I cannot help, Sir, noting...a rather odd contrast between yourself and myself on the subject of this letter. Replete with glory...you live free in the midst of abundance; assured of immortality, you philosophize serenely about the nature of the soul; and if the body or the heart suffers, you have Tronchin for physician and friend: yet you find only evil on earth. And I, obscure, poor, and racked by an incurable disease, I meditate with pleasure in my retreat, and find that all is well. Where do these apparent contradictions come from? You yourself have given

the explanation: you enjoy; but I hope, and hope embellishes everything (246).

For Rousseau, Voltaire's *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* was a feckless response to a disaster that would not have occurred, but for the inequality that polite society had learned to take for granted. Voltaire's despairing tone was self-indulgent, a manifestation of the corrupting effects of luxury on our capacity for moral and civic virtue. Unencumbered by superfluities, Rousseau was able to hope that humans might one day live according to their nature as independent and self-reliant beings, but that would require stripping away the changes produced by our "progress" and seeing ourselves as nature formed us. Thus, in his *Second Discourse* Rousseau offered a conjectural history, a speculative account of the evolution of social life that was simultaneously an account of humanity's transformation of its own habitat. He explained how humans began as purely physical beings, that is, possessed solely of the instincts, passions, and faculties with which they are endowed by nature. As such, they were primarily sentient creatures and only secondarily rational ones. As purely physical beings, humans lacked any moral sensibility: they were innocents whose desires did not exceed their needs, and who lived, consequently, in harmony with the natural world. "Barren years, long and sharp winters, scorching summers," events that Rousseau's contemporaries would have considered "natural evils" were nothing of the sort for "infant man," who learned to adapt to nature's demands. "On the seashore and the banks of rivers, they invented the hook and line, and became fishermen and eaters of fish.... The lightning, a volcano, or some lucky chance acquainted them with fire, a new resource against the rigours of winter" (*Discourses* 207–8).

As long as humans were content to lead relatively simple and solitary lives, "they lived free, healthy, honest and happy lives, so long as their nature allowed" (214). Men's talents do not manifest themselves in the state of nature, nor do they matter. But when they congregate and they learn to adapt to changes in their circumstances—what Rousseau calls their "perfectibility"—differences in their natural endowment

become significant. Newly acquired skills and needs bring on the division of labor, mutual dependence, and accumulation of possessions. Men who were once free and independent are now "in consequence of a multiplicity of new wants, brought into subjection, as it were, to all nature, and particularly to one another; and each became in some degree a slave even in becoming the master of other men: if rich, they stood in need of the services other others; if poor, of their assistance; and even a middle condition did not enable them to do without one another." This new state of affairs causes him to become "sly and artful in his behaviour to some, and imperious and cruel to others; being under a kind of necessity to ill-use all the persons of whom he stood in need, when he could not frighten them into compliance, and did not judge it his interest to be useful to them" (218). Thus, Rousseau hypothesized our original condition and the process by which it was transformed to show that the moral evils that beset us in "civilized" society are by no means inevitable. Indeed, his portrait of natural man was intended to be useful as a model for the reformation of society. Through education and political reform, Rousseau thought we could reshape most things that now look natural.

Thus, in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau effectively eliminated the distinction between "natural" and "moral" evil in favor of the latter. He thereby hoped to show his contemporaries that the hardships they took to be a "natural" part of the lives of the poor and powerless were by no means inevitable, provided they were willing and able to see them as of their own making. Our ability to alter nature has blurred the distinction between what is properly regarded as "natural" and what is "human," as is the case with the COVID-19 virus, whose origin remains a matter of debate. Nevertheless, this should not deter us from taking moral and political responsibility for outcomes over which we do have a measure of control. Disasters are social and hence, inevitably, political phenomena. But that should not absolve us of the responsibility for anticipating and mitigating their human costs. Modern students of disaster have, understandably though regrettably, abandoned the term

"evil" to describe such outcomes. For when human heedlessness gives rise to disaster, then leaves the world's poorest at its mercy, it isn't merely unfortunate, it's evil.

Works Cited

Brightman, Edgar. "The Lisbon Earthquake: A Study in Religious Valuation." *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1919): 500–18.

Dynes, Russell R. "The Emergence of a Social Science View." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2000): 97–115.

Kant, Immanuel. *Kant: Natural Science*. Edited by Eric Watkins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Theodicy*. Edited by Austin Farrar. Translated by E. M. Huggard. Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1985.

Lee, J. Patrick. "The Condemnation of Fanaticism in Voltaire's Sermon du Rabbin Akib." *Rousseau and L'Infâme: Religion, Toleration, and Fanaticism in the Age of Enlightenment.* Edited by Ourida Mostefai and John T. Scott. Brill, 2009. Pp. 67–76.

Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Oliver-Smith, Anthony. "Global Changes and the Definition of Disaster." *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on the Question*. Edited by E. L. Quarantelli. London: Routledge, 1998. Pp. 177–94.

Pope, Alexander. *Essay on Man and Other Poems*. Ed Henry Morley. London: Cassell & Company, 1891.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Ed. Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

———. *The Social Contract and Discourses by Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Translated by G. D. H. Cole. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1923.

Udías, Agustin and López Arroyo, Alfonso. "The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 in Spanish Contemporary Authors." *The 1755 Lisbon Earthquake: Revisited*. Edited by João Azevedo, et al. Springer Netherlands, 2009. Pp. 7–24.

Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet and William F. Fleming. "The Lisbon Earthquake." *New England Review*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2005): 183–193.

Dostoevsky's Underground Man on Sickness, Plagues, and Isolation

Jay Lutz
Oglethorpe University

During the academic year 2020–2021, I found myself avoiding specific reference to the pandemic and our remote online environment in discussion of texts in Oglethorpe University's first-year Core Curriculum course Narratives of the Self. It seemed healthier for myself and my students rather to engage in reflection on a variety of texts without having to make reference to the challenging environment we all were facing. Class became a kind of intellectual oasis where we could return to some kind of normalcy in our work of unpacking and analyzing texts. This worked quite well for most of the year, but I decided to make an attempt to incorporate issues related to the pandemic in the last book we read for the spring semester, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

It occurred to me that the environment described by Dostoevsky's man writing from underground had some commonality with the effects of lockdown, isolation, mental health issues and the definition of illness associated with our pandemic experience. It is only through a very selective reading of the Underground Man's experiences that one can extricate this kind of interpretation, but the result may be enlightening both for interpreting Dostoevsky and for analyzing the situation during the pandemic. This initiative succeeded in providing for stimulating discussions in class, and my students chose to make connections to the pandemic in their assigned analytical papers. I ended up focusing on the second part of the novel which describes the "adventures" of the story's recluse who explains himself in the first part in a discourse which takes place after the events in the second part. This surprised me because I had initially thought that the first part would be more

applicable. There is, nonetheless, a reason for Dostoevsky prefacing the "adventures" with the reflective and theoretical first part, thus making some discussion of the first part also essential.

One of the clear common elements between the text and the pandemic is the notion of boredom, something which frequently surfaced in response to the enforced containment at home during the lockdown of the first weeks. This, of course, has notable connections to a literary trope throughout the nineteenth century, not only in Dostoevsky but in the "ennui" of someone like Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary. For many, the lack of activity and home confinement imposed by the pandemic involved more reading, if not television viewing. For the Underground Man, he fought off boredom with reading in a way that evokes Don Quixote's obsessive involvement with fiction and the loosening of the contours between imagination and reality. Underground Man calls it "bookishness" or refers to something "literary" in his approach and that of his generation.

So how does Underground Man cope with this oppressive situation? At first, he reverts to the realm of romanticism, a movement that Dostoevsky will highly criticize as having been an unsuccessful antidote for his generation in the 1840s. It is, however, the panacea of the moment for the text's speaker:

> I would dream for three months at a time, shrinking into my corner, and, believe me, in those moments I bore no resemblance to that gentleman who, in the panic of his chicken heart, sat sewing a German beaver to the collar of his overcoat. I'd suddenly become a hero. (56)

The reference to the "gentleman" is to himself, and the overcoat concerns Underground Man's sartorial preparations for confronting the officer whom he considers to have insulted him in the pool hall, a call to action for the protagonist in the text. The dreaming leads to the assumption of being a hero of sorts, a notion applied to health care workers in the first part of the pandemic, perhaps as something of an

exception given a general sense of little personal heroism at the time. By the end of Dostoevsky's work, the person assumed to be writing will however present himself not as heroic, but rather as an anti-hero, a notion perhaps first evoked by Dostoevsky and later to be key in modernist writing and thinking.

The trouble for this writer is that three months is pretty much the maximum that he can keep the dream status going, and thus his role as hero and its soothing consequences for him. Instead, he finds himself in need of action. Retreating from his dreams, Underground Man describes a need to reach out. We may not all be inveterate loners like Dostoevsky's character, but the need for in-person human contact, any human contact, after living virtually behind and with an electronic screen for months was a common reaction. One could also relate to Underground Man's willingness to meet just about anyone at all, in fact he wants to embrace "the whole of mankind" at this point, just as in-person encounters took on renewed significance for isolated individuals during the lockdown period.

Underground Man, unable to endure his solitude, chooses to visit Simonov, a former schoolmate whom he never liked all that much. On the way to see the former schoolmate, he wonders why he is renewing a friendship which will almost inevitably be less than satisfactory. Simonov happens to have other fellow students as guests at the time, and the discussion turns to organizing a farewell party for Zverkof, one of their number who is about to leave for a prestigious government civil service assignment, something that the narrator himself a civil servant does not respect in the slightest. Underground Man nonetheless gets himself invited to the dinner party in a private room in a restaurant where everything goes very badly for the protagonist with the assumed writer of the novel being completely ostracized by the others and ending up pacing the room on his own while the others talk. "They all dropped me, and I sat crushed and annihilated" (75). One of my students observed in an analysis of this section that Underground Man at this point becomes concerned about his attire: "Oh, cursed trousers!

Zverkov [the departing civil servant] has already noticed the yellow spot on the knee" (75). The student then went on to note how those connecting only remotely may well have stopped taking their dress choices into consideration, often with the result of turning their cameras off. There are therefore aspects of this situation which would be difficult to identify with today, but we could all perhaps relate with the disappointment and clumsiness of taking up relationships in-person again after months of isolation having more or less surfaced from something akin to Underground Man's dream world.

The former schoolmates, in good nineteenth-century literary (and masculine) fashion, go off to a brothel to conclude the evening. They leave Underground Man behind for lack of funds, but he is able to borrow from Simonov in a condescending gesture and thereby able to eventually join the others after they have departed. This shows how our protagonist is drawn to go along against his will having no real desire to join the others after the disastrous dinner. So much so that he has the carriage driver taking him to the brothel stop so that our writer can get out and reflect as the wet snow falls, an encompassing notion for the second part of the novel entitled "Apropos of the Wet Snow." The outside reality is no better for our protagonist than his inside isolation, and everything has the feel of being preordained. In the countries of the north, like Russia, snow is often a menacing trope in literature and film and not the soft symbol of purity it can represent farther south. The lack of personal control here, both inside and outside, is perhaps something else to which pandemic survivors could relate.

The Underground Man even attempts to force a duel with the schoolmate who was being honored due to what the writer experienced as an unforgivable insult. (We are in nineteenth century Russia.) It is to be noted, however, that this does not happen, the rejected writer not even having met the others once he arrives at the brothel. Instead, he develops a relationship with Liza, the prostitute whose customer he is, and attempts to dissuade her from her questionable profession in what turns out to be a "bookish" game for him of one-upmanship. Just like

the brothel itself, this is a commonplace in Russian literature of the time. It also shows up notably in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the Dostoevsky work which would have been a better companion volume for the course but was not feasible due to its length and density.

The Underground Man then commits an action he comes to immediately regret. He gives Liza his address, and she comes to visit him to tell him that she is leaving the brothel and returning to her fiancé in Riga. This completely stuns Underground Man and renders him tearful, and perhaps remorseful, with a change of roles as Liza becomes the comforter and her former mentor the victim (in another common literary trope of the time): "I was the same crushed and humiliated creature as she had been before me that night—four days ago" (124). Underground Man then becomes concerned for his dress and how it doesn't conform to the image of hero. He says to Lisa, "I will never forgive you for having found me in this wretched dressing gown…. The resurrector, the former hero, flinging himself like a mangy, shaggy mutt at his lackey, who just laughs at him" (122)! The lackey is the narrator's servant Apollo. The novel's assumed writer manages, however, to humiliate Liza again by placing a crumpled ruble bill in her hand as if for services rendered as she flees. He then does another about face and follows her out onto the street but to no avail. Here, the interior and the exterior collide in concluding the narrative in a way reminiscent of the tension between interior and exterior during the lockdown.

Underground Man concludes by reflecting upon the choice to write about his situation and about bookishness. He wonders whether he should be writing at all as he addresses "the gentlemen," that is the utopian rationalists to whom he has been speaking throughout in opposition, describing his generation as "stillborn" (129). This can perhaps have a curious resonance for us with emerging from the constraints of the pandemic and deciding to not necessarily return to the way things were but unsure about how to construct some kind of "new norm."

There is much in this text that does not coincide with life under COVID-19, but the feelings of isolation, inertia and nostalgia for the past, the loss of personal choice and dignity may nonetheless be able to speak to aspects of life during a pandemic. Dostoevsky, one of the first modernist authors of importance, almost two centuries ago was ahead of his time in many ways and may still be. In the novel, once Underground Man seems to have had the last word, Dostoevsky appears himself as the omniscient narrator in the final paragraph with what may also be a way to conclude relevant to our situation. He tells us that the "notes" of the "paradoxalist" continued, but this may be as good a place as any at which to stop (130).

Work Cited

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*, Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage, 1993.

The Misinformed Dying: Reading *A Prayer for the Dying* during Coronavirus

Elizabeth Zak
University of Iowa

Reading Stewart O'Nan's *A Prayer for the Dying* through a lens of misinformation allows us to see the lies we tell both ourselves and others. *A Prayer for the Dying* explores plague and quarantine in a very small town named Friendship. However, when diphtheria spreads through the town despite the quarantine, the survivors eventually abandon it. This automatically presents similarities to the coronavirus pandemic: disease as the great equalizer, and masculinity as immunity. Understanding the parallels between literature and reality can serve as both a fantasy and a mirror. We understand reality through the context of fiction and vice versa. In this specific case, rereading *A Prayer for the Dying* allows us to juxtapose this reality of coronavirus and people's actions between the town of Friendship and their handling of diphtheria. In this paper, I argue that this misinformation serves as a direct detriment toward the people it is meant to protect. Specifically, this misinformation results in the spread of the virus and the deaths of vulnerable people.

A Prayer for the Dying explores plague and quarantine in a small Wisconsin town: Friendship. When an unexpected rise in illness and death occurs in the population due to diphtheria, the protagonist, Jacob, who serves as Friendship's sheriff, undertaker and pastor, works with the town doctor to limit its spread. Initially, Jacob and the doctor set a quarantine: although those currently living in Friendship are permitted to move freely throughout the town, no one enters Friendship, and no one leaves. Jacob and the doctor assume that in two weeks, the

diphtheria will run its course. This minor, two-week quarantine will allow people to live their everyday lives; however, people still complain about its inconvenience. Unfortunately, the diphtheria spreads through the town quicker than anticipated, attacking a number of townspeople, including Jacob's wife, Marta, and their daughter, Amelia. Initial efforts to limit the spread in the population are therefore unsuccessful. Jacob then turns to less transparent means of containment. He turns away a local circus fleeing wildfire, locks the infected in their homes, and burns the houses of the dead. Unfortunately, the diphtheria continues to spread, infecting and killing even more people. In the end, a handful of remaining townspeople decide to allow the surrounding wildfires to consume Friendship. They pack their belongings and abandon Friendship. Before joining them, Jacob realizes that he has been the diphtheria's carrier; he has been the primary agent in spreading the diphtheria through his contact with everyone who has died, and upon properly burying Marta and Amelia, he walks back toward the town to die.

Although there are a number of similarities between O' Nan's plague description and the COVID-19 pandemic, I will focus on two similarities pertaining to misinformation. Misinformation is defined as "false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead" (Dictionary.com, n.d.). In contrast, disinformation is defined as "deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda" (Dictionary.com, n.d.). The major differentiating factor between the misinformation and disinformation is intent: misinformation is not intended to deceive while disinformation is explicitly intended to deceive. Two key similarities between misinformation in *A Prayer for the Dying* and in our current pandemic include viewing disease as an equalizer, and masculinity as immunity.

Viewing Disease as an Equalizer

Many people die in *A Prayer for the Dying* regardless of age and physical ability. Initially, the townspeople don't know what to think about the diphtheria that slowly spreads throughout Friendship; their ignorance

comes at a great cost. Although the disease is shown to affect anyone, all bodies are not treated equally. The first person who dies of the disease is an unnamed soldier. After his death, the town doctor encourages Jacob to bury the body, telling Jacob to "just get him in the ground. And be damned careful how you handle him" (O'Nan 2009, 26). Rather than giving the soldier the typical burial treatment in which organs are removed to prevent infection of the living, Jacob buries the body intact. Likewise, when Jacob visits the Holy Colony, a group of polygamists, Marta tells him to be careful, explaining that "That whole place could be diseased the way they live" (O'Nan 2009, 33). In both cases, external stigma precedes basic human empathy. This recurs when Jacob is dismissive of Sarah Ramsay's sons while they are alive, yet later acknowledges their humanity after their deaths, telling himself, "You've always thought of them as mean, even evil children, and now, ashamed, forgive them everything. Just wild boys, high-spirited" (O'Nan 2009, 136). Later, when Jacob burns down a house of someone who had diphtheria at the doctor's request, he realizes that there is still someone inside, thinking to himself, "you all saw the figure in the attic window, in the invalid room, banging at the glass with her frail bare arms until it fell and shattered on the porch roof. The slow aunt from Eau Claire, you'd all forgotten her" (O'Nan 2009, 153). Rather than trying to save her, Jacob and his compatriots choose to let her die. Each of these people is an outsider in the eyes of the town, be it either due to distance in the case of the soldier and the aunt, or gossip in the case of the Holy Colony inhabitants and Lydia Flynn's sons. Due to this stigma, their suffering is treated with less and less reverence until Jacob and the men actively cause someone's death.

At the beginning of the pandemic, coronavirus was a relatively unknown disease. Here again, stigma precedes humanity in too many cases. Many factors can contribute to someone's chances of contracting coronavirus. When understanding the risk of contracting coronavirus, "men's risk of developing and dying from SARS-CoV2 is markedly increased depending on their socio-economic status" (White, 2021, 19).

Eberhardt et al. published a report identifying those who are most affected by coronavirus. Specifically, socio-economic status is a factor: "Approximately 78 percent of high-poverty neighborhoods are highly vulnerable to the economic effects of the crisis, compared to 15 percent of low-poverty neighborhoods that are highly vulnerable" (Eberhardt, 2020). However, race is a great factor as well, since "90 percent of high-poverty neighborhoods whose residents are primarily people of color are highly vulnerable, while only 56 percent of high-poverty tracts that are at least 50 percent white are highly vulnerable" (Eberhardt, 2020). Furthermore, children are also affected by the socio-economic disparity beyond the coronavirus disease's ailments. Specifically, this can influence student learning. Agostinelli et al. learned that high school students in poor neighborhoods are negatively impacted with a learning loss of .4 standard deviations, while their rich neighborhood counterparts are not impacted.

Unfortunately, academic issues are paired with social problems. Specifically, Agostinelli et al. explain that "Because neighborhoods are more segregated than schools, the peer environment deteriorates for children living in poorer neighborhoods and improves for those living in richer neighborhoods" (Agostinelli, 2020). Each of these factors: gender, socio-economic status, race and age corresponds to a possible difference in contraction and treatment of the coronavirus. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic exacerbates the differences created by these factors. Perhaps death, rather than coronavirus or diphtheria, is the great equalizer.

We see a parallel between diphtheria and coronavirus in *A Prayer for the Dying*. In *A Prayer for the Dying*, Jacob ignores people's suffering, choosing to view them with humanity once they have died. Choosing to view others with stigma rather than helping them results in painful deaths for those involved. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, celebrities and ordinary people alike called coronavirus the great equalizer. However, this directly ignores the various identities that can contribute to a higher risk of contracting coronavirus-identities that are

already systematically disadvantaged. Furthermore, the non-illness results of the coronavirus pandemic, disproportionately negatively affect the working class. Therefore, understanding illness as an equalizer is an example of misinformation.

Masculinity as Immunity

Masculinity is synonymous with immunity in *A Prayer for the Dying*. The men view women as inherently weak. Instead of working with the men, Friendship's women are largely relegated to their homes. Jacob and the various men of the town ignore basic safety and hygienic guidelines. However, they impose these guidelines on the others in the village. Rather than being viewed as equal partners within Friendship's society, the men treat the women with derision. Jacob passes judgement on others he deems lesser than himself, considering "the woman in the field, how some form of madness must accompany the sickness. Is that diphtheria?" (O'Nan 2009, 48). He allows the idea of difference to affect his own initial conceptualization of the virus. Although inaccurate, this coloring persists in his mindset. When he sees Sarah Ramsay, a single mother whose children have contracted diphtheria, he considers her own bad luck with judgement, thinking "she's gone through two husbands, both drinkers, and lives off the insurance money" (O'Nan 2009, 91). Although Sarah has led a hard life, Jacob cannot offer her sympathy. Instead, he considers her lazy. Jacob later bars Sarah Ramsay up in her home but justifies it by explaining "there's nothing anyone can do; at least this will keep other people safe" (O'Nan 2009, 144). However, there are alternatives. Jacob also allows other men to ignore basic safety: He later sees that the town doctor's "hand is swollen, his fingers puffy and discolored" (O'Nan 2009, 144). This is in fact, a physical sign of diphtheria, one that the two men have seen previously. However, Jacob ignores this, choosing to believe that Sarah Ramsay attacked the doctor rather than the reality of the diphtheria, even when "you could see his fingers were puffed with infection" (O'Nan 2009, 153). Jacob and the doctor both treat Sarah Ramsay as an aggressor

rather than a victim of the diphtheria. Revisiting Jacob's decision to let the aunt in the burning house die presents another example of masculinity as immunity. Although they know she is in the house, they choose not to save her. Instead, both Jacob and the doctor use her panic as proof that they set the fire effectively. Finally, when Jacob sees the doctor again, the doctor confirms that he has diphtheria and has been hiding the infection. Rather than showing concern for his friend, Jacob is disappointed, considering that "He made it so long you thought he was like you, that he couldn't get it" (O'Nan 2009, 155). Jacob assumes he is immune to the diphtheria, although there has been no evidence of this immunity.

Another example of this toxic masculinity is Jacob's treatment of Marta. Jacob implicitly believes he is immune to the virus. When he first learns of the disease, he is "mostly ignorant. It kills, that's enough." (O'Nan 2009, 26). When Marta suggests leaving the town, Jacob discourages her, encouraging her to stay with him. Rather than listening to her, he chooses to believe that everything will be fine, eventually convincing her to stay. Even when Amelia is sick, he refuses to acknowledge her physical symptoms, stating that "There's the proof, irrefutable. And though you know what it means, you can't understand it" (O'Nan 2009, 88). Jacob is unable to accept Amelia's illness and only buries her when Marta insists that he must. Later, when Marta dies, he is unable to bury her. Instead, he dresses her and continues to behave as if she is alive, choosing to "kiss her deeply, run your hands over her cool, perfect skin. Firm and then soft. There, and there. Take her face in your hands. Finally you rise up and make love to her" (O'Nan 2009, 147). Jacob's decision not to bury his wife spreads the virus. At the end of the novel, Jacob realizes that "So it is you, it's been you the whole time. All of them—Marta, Doc, Sarah Ramsay. It must have been the soldier or Lydia Flynn, then no one but you" (O'Nan 2009, 191). However, this realization is far too late: the town is burning up, and Jacob has inadvertently killed his family and friends. He has no one to blame but himself: he has ignored the guidelines placed on

others and flaunted his own so-called "immunity." In fact, Jacob is the one who has been spreading the virus throughout the town.

Similarly, men are more likely than women to ignore coronavirus precautions. Capraro and Barcelo found that men are less likely than women to wear a face mask, and that men more so than women feel uncomfortable when wearing a face covering (Capraro, 2020). Although the CDC reports that more men than women are dying of coronavirus, a Kaiser family foundation article explained that only 11% of men had bought a mask (March 2020) (Frederickson, 2021). Although the Kaiser family foundation's paper was published in March 2020, this trend of men ignoring the coronavirus has continued. In August 2020, Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2020) reported that "men have been consistently less likely to report wearing a protective face mask"

(Cassino, 2020). This decision may be a form of toxic masculinity, as Palmer and Peterson (2020) found that "masculine toughness is consistently related to higher negative feelings and lower positive feelings about mask wearing" (Palmer, 2020). Likewise, Howard (2021) discovered that "men were more likely to perceive face masks as infringing on their independence" (Howard, 2021). Similarly, ignoring a mask is only one of the preventative measures that men choose to eschew: "irresponsible attitude among men reversibly affect(s) their undertaking of preventive measures such as frequent handwashing, wearing of face mask, and stay at home orders." (Bwire, 2020). These men still expected other people to conduct these preventative measures, acknowledging their importance. This decision to ignore preventative measures may extend into the future. Even though the vaccine has proven to be largely successful, 49% of Republican men have reported that they will not be getting it (CDC, 2020., Kitchener, 2021). Pivonello et al. (2021) conducted a study in which they found that elderly men were more susceptible to COVID-19 than elderly women due to their higher predisposition to infections and a weaker immune system. Masculinity seems a sufficient protection, though factually this is not the case. Women have been disproportionately financially affected by the

COVID-19 pandemic: women were more likely to lose their jobs or receive a lower income than men (Dang, 2021). Women have also reported a voluntary reduction in work hours, while their partners have not reduced their work hours (Zamarro, 2020). Rather than being viewed as partners in work and finances, women are expected to fulfill a caretaker role.

Toxic masculinity presents in both *A Prayer for the Dying* and the COVID-19 pandemic with similar results. The men of Friendship view women as inferior and inherently dirty. Although COVID-19 precautions are effective, men choose to ignore these precautions while expecting others to obey them. In both instances, men choose to ignore basic hygienic and safety guidelines. However, in doing so, they inadvertently spread the disease. Jacob's inability to bury his wife and daughter spreads the diphtheria throughout the town. Similarly, some men's decision to forgo wearing masks can spread coronavirus germs. Ignoring the coronavirus vaccine can prevent herd immunity. Although none of these actions are ill-intentioned, they still result in hurting innocent people by spreading the virus. Jacob's decision to dismiss Marta's concern and insist that she obey him is similar to the expectation that contemporary women forgo financial stability in favor of domestic labor.

A Prayer for the Dying is a horror novel. However, reality has surpassed this horror on a national level. While today, we can view *A Prayer for the Dying* as an omen of the coronavirus, its initial writing was a bleak examination of humanity. Today's climate of misinformation presents new challenges. Mask wearing and contact tracing are two new developments in combatting a novel virus. Unfortunately, the death toll is still incredibly high. One of the novel's most timeless themes is dismissal of women and inherent sexism. The men view the women as disease-ridden while they themselves are spreading the disease. This dismissal of women's domestic and occupational skills is still present. In both the cases of mask-wearing and vaccination, women are far more willing to adopt precautions than men. Unfortunately, once

again, male participants choose to ignore these precautions. Women currently face financial hardship and increased caretaking expectations due to toxic masculinity. While there are certainly differences between the diphtheria outbreak and the coronavirus pandemic, we see that some lies are timeless. Although the town of Friendship is eventually destroyed, we can only hope that the vaccine and future will result in a much less incendiary cleansing.

Works Cited

Agostinelli, Francesco et al. "When the Great Equalizer Shuts Down: Schools, Peers, and Parents in Pandemic Times." National Bureau of Economic Research (December 28, 2020): https://www.nber.org/papers/w28264.

Bwire, George M. "Coronavirus: Why Men are More Vulnerable to COVID-19 than Women?." *SN Comprehensive Clinical Medicine*, vol. 2, no. 7 (June 2020): 874–876.

Capraro, Valerio and Barcelo, Hélène. "The Effect of Messaging and Gender on Intentions to Wear a Face Covering to Slow Down COVID-19 Transmission." *Journal of Behavioral Economics for Policy,* vol. 4, COVID-19 Special Issue 2 (2020): 45–55.

Cassino, Dan and Besen-Cassino, Yasemin. "Of Masks and Men? Gender, Sex, and Protective Measures during COVID-19." *Politics & Gender*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2020): 1052–1062.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Men and COVID-19: A Biopsychosocial Approach to Understanding Sex Differences in Mortality and Recommendations for Practice and Policy Interventions." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (July 16, 2020): https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2020/20_0247a.htm.

Dang, Hai-Anh H. and Nguyen, Cuong Viet (2021). "Gender Inequality during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Income, Expenditure, Savings, and Job Loss. *World Development*, vol 140 (April 2021), Article 105296.

Frederiksen, Brittni, et al. *Coronavirus: A Look at Gender Differences in Awareness and Actions* (March 20, 2020): KFF: https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/coronavirus-alook-at-gender-differences-in-awareness-and-actions/.

Howard, Matt C. "Gender, Face Mask Perceptions, and Face Mask Wearing: Are Men Being Dangerous during the COVID-19 Pandemic?" *Personality and Individual Differences*, 170 (February 2021), article 110417.

Kitchener, Caroline. "49 percent of Republican men won't get vaccinated. These women are trying to change their mind." Media Well (March 24, 2021): https://mediawell.ssrc.org/2021/03/24/49-percent-of-republican-men-wont-get-vaccinated-these-women-are-trying-to-change-their-minds-the-lily/?pdf=65176.

"Misinformation" vs. "Disinformation": Get Informed On The ... (n.d.). https://www.dictionary.com/e/misinformation-vs-disinformation-get-informed-on-thedifference/.

O'Nan, Stewart. *A Prayer for the Dying*. New York: Picador, 2009.

Palmer, Carl L. and Peterson, Rolfe D. "Toxic Mask-ulinity: The Link between Masculine Toughness and Affective Reactions to Mask Wearing in the COVID-19 Era." *Politics & Gender*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2020): 1044–1051.

Pivonello, Rosario, et al. "Sex disparities in COVID-19 severity and outcome: are men weaker or women stronger?" *Neuroendocrinology*, vol. 111, no. 11 (2021): 1066–1085.

White, Alan. "Men and COVID-19: the Aftermath." *Postgraduate Medicine*, vol. 132, sup. 4 (December 2020): 18–27.

Zamarro, Gema et al. "Gender Differences in the Impact of COVID-19." KTLA Los Angeles (2020): https://ktla.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/06/ZamarroGenderDiffImpactCOVID-19_061820-2.pdf.

CORE TEXTS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

Questioning Common Sense: Teaching Delbanco, Homer, and Greek Tragedy in a Seminar on the Liberal Arts

James Roney
Juniata College

"Why should we make students read books they don't understand that were written by privileged men who did not even know the natural and social sciences?" "Why reinforce the prejudices of the past by continuing to read and study the so-called 'great books'?" Most of us hear similar questions while serving on faculty committees and teaching required courses. I heard them when I taught a first-year seminar on Ancient Greek writers as part of a new curriculum at Juniata College, a small liberal arts college in Central Pennsylvania. The writings of Andrew Delbanco, the Alexander Hamilton Professor of American Studies at Columbia University and president of the Teagle Foundation, provided us with one means of addressing such complaints. Excerpts from his book *College: What It Is, Was, and Should Be* provoked questions on the nature of the liberal arts that motivated students to develop a description of their own beliefs. The seminar then explored Greek epic, tragedy, philosophy, and comedy to discover how Greek writers differed from one another, from us, and from our sometimes simplistic image of them. In this essay, I will only talk about epic and tragedy. I will first describe the account of contemporary common sense we developed in response to Delbanco before saying how selected Greek tragedies challenge that same common sense. Then I will describe the list of the questions we developed at the end of the seminar, the asking of which proves the value of engaging Greek tragic thought for taking the first step toward the goal Delbanco sets for college.

Delbanco's ideas on the history, current state, and purpose of college lead students to explore their own views on human nature and the purposes of education and life. Delbanco argues that colleges should strive to serve as "an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others" (Delbanco, 9). He provides economic, political, and personal arguments for the value of college: College increases both national economic productivity and individual employability and lifetime earnings. College provides the skills and knowledge that a democratic citizenry needs to exercise sovereignty through civic action and representative government, including a "bullshit meter" (29). College deepens the meaning of individual lives by giving them a hedge against the utilitarian values of the market, deepening and broadening their sense of fun, and encouraging them to explore the "best that has been thought and said in the world" (33).

The college where I teach developed these ideas into the claim that a liberal arts education should enable students to pursue fulfilling careers, to practice engaged citizenship, and to lead meaningful lives. The choice of the normative adjectives "fulfilling," "engaged," and "meaningful" reveals that most of the faculty, like Delbanco, believe, although our practice often belies it, that the third purpose is the most important one: College should be a place for self-reflection on the purpose of one's life and for actions in the world that test possible purposes in experience. However, it is precisely the third purpose which causes the most student objections: Who can say that another person's life is not meaningful? How can you, or anyone, tell me, an autonomous person, what my goals in life should be? Who is to say that some cultural products and some activities are better or worse than others? Students spend three weeks articulating the assumptions underlying those objections and debating the common-sense worldview that supports them. We then contrast their initial unexamined faith in individual autonomy and confidence in our ability to know and control the laws of the social

and natural worlds with the tragic world view found in Homer and the Greek tragedians.

Most Americans are socialized to think of themselves as autonomous individuals living in an ordered society with rational institutions. Autonomy has become American common sense, even as the social sciences have expanded to encompass the study and control of the human. This process is described in Charles Taylor's writings on the philosophical development of the idea of the autonomous self (*Sources*) and the changing grounds of morality (*Secular*) and in the writings of Bruno LaTour, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben on the development of the social sciences and their role in modern liberal societies. Delbanco's book on the purpose of college was written in response to the resulting marginalization of humanist inquiry. Citizens of modern liberal democracies imagine themselves as biological beings, animals with reason, who choose the best means to realize our preferences, given the objective reality of the world and society in which we live.

For such citizens, the just society is one that most efficiently enables us to realize our preferences. Confidence in human progress rests on a belief that history is the story of how we have overcome prejudice to include more people in the economic institutions of free markets and the political institutions of representative democracy. Pandemic, social inequity, and political disagreements only mean that we must work harder to overcome negative thoughts and a lack of faith in progress and community. This is the story most students want to believe. However, sustained classroom debate reveals, first, the contradiction between autonomy and order and, second, the gap between such a positive story and both their own personal experiences and what they know about the history of their own and other countries.

Homer and Greek tragedy confront students with stories that undermine confidence in the three conditions for individual autonomy that, according to Robert Pippin, supported the humanist inheritance which remains the implicit source of their common sense: self-knowledge (you can know yourself, including what you want and what

you should want); meaningful choice (you have alternatives, can know the likely results of choosing each, and can give reasons for the choices you make); and causal control (you have the ability to carry out the actions you choose and oversee the results). Tragic Greek characters lack such agency because uncontrollable necessity and chance shape human lives and limit human actions (Williams, 103–105). Human knowledge is limited and uncertain.

In tragic plots, individuals are mortal rather than autonomous. They must act in situations in which action reveals the limits of human will both because they can neither know nor control themselves and because they cannot control the order, as in Aeschylus and Sophocles, or disorder, as in Euripides, of the universe. In Greek tragedy, some values lead to tragic choices because they cannot be reconciled with each other and because the gods do not have a single intention within the Greek polytheistic cosmos. The recognition tragic heroes experience and the mixture of awe and intense empathy they inspire involve a realization that there are irresistible forces that maintain a cosmic order not dependent on human preferences. The public ritual of the performance of oral poetry or tragic plays reenacted and renewed the dynamic equilibrium which linked individual, polis, and cosmos. Engaging these works requires students to understand a culture that is profoundly different from the unexamined mixture of market utilitarianism, liberal autonomy, and Christian humility that is our common sense.

Understanding tragedy also reveals the contradiction in how we think about free will as described by Tolstoy in his comments on history in *War and Peace*. As individuals, we like to believe we are in control of our own actions and desires and are free (autonomous in the root sense of being able to create our own customs or laws). But, when we view ourselves from the third-person perspective provided by social science and tragedy, our actions seem to be determined rather than free. The pandemic has made us all aware of how this contradiction hurts public health in debates over measures that place restrictions on

individual choice for the good of the larger group. We want to believe both that we are autonomous and can do what we want and that we are rational actors whose choices are determined by biology, society, and cultural identity. The tragic universe reveals how hard it is to know the world and have agency in it and that the price of such knowledge might be to acknowledge we are not as free as we sometimes like to think. The rest of this essay discusses how Greek tragic works provide different models of living with an awareness of this contradiction and how students respond by attempting to reconcile their understandings of Delbanco and the Greeks with their own worldviews.

Homer's *Iliad* centers on "Achilles' rage…that cost the Greeks Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls into Hades' dark and left their bodies to rot as feasts, For dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done" (1.1–6). The rage, or *menis*, of Achilles, is a semidivine state that makes him a complete embodiment of whatever purpose has consumed him: battle lust, recognition of his accomplishments by Agamemnon, mourning the death of a lost friend, revenge against Hector. Enraged, he does things that have unforeseen consequences. His anger with Agamemnon over unjust treatment and his demand for proper recognition lead to the destruction of much of the Greek army and the death of Patroclus. Achilles' battle frenzy leads him to kill the young suppliant he would normally have ransomed and causes the river he has clogged with corpses to revolt against him. His desecration of Hector's remains leads to the intervention of the gods and to his scene with Priam and the ritual burial ceremonies for Patroclus and the Trojan dead with which the plot and his rage end.

Diomedes, Patroclus, Agamemnon, Hector, Andromache, and Achilles all have moments when the gods make them acknowledge the limits of their mortality or social position. Even Zeus has to admit that the other gods and fate limit his choices. When Achilles returns Hector to Priam, Achilles admires the iron heart of the man who could kiss the hands of his son's murderer, and the two grieve their personal losses and acknowledge "the gods have woven pain into mortal lives" (564).

However, Achilles still worries that one false step might trigger the rage that could cause him to kill Priam. The divine rage which shapes the plot of *Iliad* both makes Achilles who he is and is a state that is not completely under his control.

Achilles' heroic status is not an autonomy existing apart from the world but an engagement with the states and people on whom it depends and on whose future actions it will depend. The "best of the Achaeans" (Nagy) comes to know himself and the human situation and to realize that the glory in song (*kleos*) he was destined to choose over a happy domestic life involved a tragic choice: "A man's life cannot be won back once his breath has passed beyond his clenched teeth" (9.421–2). During his conversation with Odysseus in *Odyssey, Book 11*, Achilles' ghost confirms his doubts, which, paradoxically, place more value on the glory of others' performance of his song and of his son's achievements than on any reward in an afterlife. The performance of the Homeric poems maintains the *kleos* of an ancestor whose continuing presence in hero cults sustains the *polis*. Each performance, each individual life, renews and changes the traditions that give it meaning to the extent to which it engages those traditions. Greek heroes actively contest the world, creating what Dreyfus and Kelly described as states of shining excellence. Justified pride and the will that accompanies it are not faults but virtues when they do not become a reckless hubris that threatens to disrupt the order of things.

Sophocles' Oedipus is heroic when he appears at the height of his power as a self-made king. He thinks he knows who he is, suffers for his people, and has already taken a series of steps to solve the problem of the plague. However, we view his actions and pursuit of knowledge with tragic irony since he actually knows neither who he is nor what he has done. As a result, his actions are necessary for the *polis* and the cosmos but destroy his sense of identity. Chance or the necessity of a family destiny have linked him to the fatal prophecy. Every step he takes to avoid his destiny makes it happen. Every step he takes to

discover the source of the pollution that is causing the plague leads him to a horrifying self-knowledge.

My students find Oedipus' fate fundamentally unfair from the point of view of the modern, liberal common sense and understanding of justice described above. Oedipus had no clear agency. He did not intend to commit the crimes. An entire city is being destroyed to make a prophecy come true. If we assume that individuals can only be held responsible for what they do knowingly or for an act of criminal negligence that makes harm to others likely, then the arguments for Oedipus' guilt fall apart. Any claim that Oedipus commits a sin of pride by his behavior reveals the difference between a Greek and a modern sense of justice. The actions in the play are about discovering what has been done, not about doing it in the first place. His active engagement with others is admirable in a Greek hero: "I beseech the god never to abolish the strife that benefits the city" (878–880). His actions are heroic even after he switches from trying to find the culprit to trying to find out who he is and even when he blinds himself.

However, Oedipus is acting in a tragic universe in which responsibility does not require guilt in the modern sense, and his acknowledgment of responsibility is necessary to the order of things. His actions and those of Jocasta have undermined the social stability that prophecy provides for the *polis*: "No longer will I go in reverence to the navel of earth…if these prophecies do not come true for all men to recognize…they are wiping them out…religion has perished" (897–910). Oedipus lives in a world in which human action must unfold against the background of a dynamic stasis linking humans, the city, the laws, and the gods. Morality does not come from human decisions; it is grounded in the order of things: "Reverence whose laws are made to stride on high, sired in the heavenly ether,…the mortal nature of men had no share in their birth" (865–870). In his speech after gouging out his eyes, he both accepts responsibility for his unintended actions, which Apollo made him do, and argues that he has blinded himself because he refuses to see an unacceptable world. His intentionality and

autonomy are ritually sacrificed to sustain cosmic and social order. He both contests this sacrifice and accepts it knowingly while trying to dictate the terms of that acceptance. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, he is purged of his contamination by his wandering and becomes, like Achilles, a cult hero.

When discussing Oedipus' fate and the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon over the fate of Briseis in Book One of *Iliad*, students raise questions not only about individual justice but also about the justice of excluding some groups from full participation in the *polis*. They criticize the *polis* as a political community of male citizens that denies the agency of those who are denied full participation: other social classes, women, foreigners, and all those who fulfill subordinate functions in the civilized life depicted on Achilles' shield and in the colonizing aura of Odysseus' visit to the Cyclops, whose customs lack the marks of civilization as the Greeks understood it: agriculture, navigation, fine wine, and the laws and customs of hospitality. The chorus on humanity in *Antigone* links this civilization to the hubris displayed by Creon in his conflict with Antigone. Humanity is both wonderful and terrifying (*deinos*) because agriculture, navigation, law, politics, and the taming of animals have allowed humans to dominate the world itself. This very domination makes the willful violence and arrogant pride of hubris the kind of threat to the world that the chorus feared in *Oedipus.* Students draw clear parallels with climate change and pandemic. Modern autonomy would terrify some Greeks as a rebellious threat to cosmic order; however, Greek political order seems elitist and exclusionary to many moderns.

The conflict in Sophocles' *Antigone* presents the tension described above as a gendered tragic choice over how to deal with a dead traitor to the *polis*. Creon, a male ruler, claims a divine sanction for the values of civic order that define the remains of Polyneices as a traitor's body, while Antigone, his sister, claims that the gods want all humans buried and that she must fulfill her gender role of burying her brother's body. Antigone and Ismene argue about whether women can act in public

life. Ismene says women cannot contend with men and must accept a decree even if it is unjust; Antigone says she will do the right thing even if it means her death. Creon first issues a rash command to refuse burial and then hubristically asserts both male and paternal authority: He rules the city, a man must rule a woman, and children must obey parents. As Hegel famously argued (Billings 168–177), Creon is not wrong about the need for order to sustain the *polis* and about the danger of anarchy, but he lacks practical wisdom, and his inflexible hubris leads to the destruction of his family because he does not understand the situation in which he is choosing state over family. His fate leads to student discussions about the nature of political order and the authority that supports it. Order is necessary to Hoplite warfare, the trireme, and the *polis*. Hubris or individual autonomy could lead to chaos. However, a hubristic assertion of order fails to hear the voices of Antigone and Haemon and itself disrupts the dynamic equilibrium of the world. Creon's and Antigone's fates reveal the necessity and danger of political order, in this case, male political order.

Euripides' *Medea* raises further questions about agency and the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and political power. Medea is not Greek. She is treated like an exotic figure, using poison and desiring revenge in the most passionate ways. She and Jason left the support of their home cities to be together and, at least in her eyes, are committed to each other. Jason ignores their private ceremony and abandons her to marry the king's daughter and get social status in a new city. He argues that the social order demands changes to their personal bonds. She views his explanations as rationalizations and vows a furious revenge, poisoning the bride and killing her own children to leave Jason alone with what he has done. The gods facilitate her escape at the end in the chariot they have given her while a befuddled Jason still doesn't get it. He is not tragic because his rationalizations reveal an inability to recognize what he has done. Medea leaves the order in which she was never included. Although many students cannot accept that she had no alternative, they have real empathy for the terrifying woman whose awe-

inspiring will overcomes her own maternal instincts to carry out a plan for revenge against those who wronged her. They recognize contemporary realities in Euripides' vision of a Greek world that is both attracted and repulsed by the Other that resides within the city but is not fully included in the *polis*. They also discuss the role of resentment in personal and political life.

In comparison with Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides introduces a strong element of irrationality to the world. His gods do not maintain the order of the cosmos and the polis but act as contingent forces whose desires cannot be resisted; rather than having a higher moral purpose, his gods simply are. The orgiastic scenes in *Bacchae* and the escape of Medea, even though she killed her children, shock students. The fundamental irrationality of the world of Euripides' tragedies acts as a strong contrast to Plato's rationalism and challenges the common-sense optimism of faith in autonomy, science, and progress. Like Plato, students question the morality of the tragic works and the passions they evoke. However, pandemic, global warming, and political upheavals make them respond favorably to the tragic vision even if they would prefer to believe the self is autonomous and the world is ordered, knowable, and manageable.

Rather than being autonomous selves acting within the rational space of a social contract designed to maximize preference satisfaction, the Greek tragic heroes are limited by their own mortality and act in a world shaped by necessity and chance. Choices and even life itself are limited by a cosmic order, or dynamic equilibrium, maintained by the gods and by the need to sustain the *polis* as a human political community. In Homer's *Iliad*, rage is both a human capacity and a threat to the order of the community that must be accepted and ritually purified. Homeric heroes contest their own nature and the demands of a world they cannot entirely control but can endure and temporarily master. If properly waged, those struggles lead to moments of excellence that live on in song. In early tragedies such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the rage and vengeance of the Furies becomes the ordered justice of the Eumenides;

necessity governs the inclusion of the irrational in the rational *polis*, which they then help sustain. Sophocles' Oedipus, Creon, and Antigone all accept responsibility for actions that pursue values that are essential but can threaten the order they sustain. Limits on human autonomy are needed to maintain the equilibrium of things. By the time of Euripides, chance governs the external world, whether in the form of encounters with people from other cultures or in the form of a god like Dionysus in *Bacchae* demanding we acknowledge his ceremonies in the irrational dance of anarchy. Seriously engaging with these tragic alternatives reveals unexamined faith in autonomy to be a modern social convention supported by powerful contemporary social institutions whose stability and universality might be illusory. A short, first-year seminar or a short essay cannot fully explore that insight, but the Greek tragedies can play a decisive role in posing essential questions to students at the start of their studies.

The encounter with Greek tragedies leads to sustained discussion about contemporary beliefs and causes students to pose difficult questions about career, citizenship, and individual purpose, building on their discussion of Delbanco. Are career choices primarily about accepting an existing economic order and adjusting our preferences to it, or should we contest that order like the tragic heroes and attempt to shape it to our sense of justice and the future? What do we owe to the state and to each other as citizens? Are other values, such as loyalty to family or humanity, also important? How can we change a democratic system that, like the *polis*, excludes many from equal participation and treats women and foreigners as exotic Others? How can white male power avoid the fate of Creon? Is there an alternative to Antigone or Medea? Can future Medeas live in a society in which they are treated equitably as full participants? Is the alternative violence? Finally, are there events in our past and levels to our individual selves that will remain mysterious to us? Does a meaningful, happy life in a just, sustainable world require a flexibility that avoids hubris by accepting the uncertainty of our knowledge of self and world? Is a life that asks these

questions with answers that lead only to tragic choices and new questions more meaningful than one, however prosperous and contented, that does not engage them?

The lesson from discussing the Greek tragedies with engaged students is that there are no final answers to such questions. We end the course by reconsidering Delbanco in light of Plato's depiction of Socrates as a different kind of hero, one who believes an unexamined life is not a fit one for a human and asserts he only knows that he knows nothing. If the purpose of college is to lead students to reflect on how "to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others" (Delbanco, 9), then college should produce leaders who are fully aware of how our abilities to act are limited by our own uncertainty and by the inevitability of tragic choices between diverse values and cultures. The fact that no institution will ever have complete success at this is not a reason for not setting it as a goal, even as the Greek heroes pursued the good as they understood it while knowing that failure was a real possibility. Indeed, the Greek tragedies are essential to any modern reflection on life because they provide powerful alternatives to modern certainties and make us question what we mean by self, justice, and responsibility as we interrogate our own limits, evaluate our desires, and embrace our uncertainties about the order or disorder of the world.

Works Cited

"Aeschylus." "Eumenides." Translated by Sarah Ruden. In *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*. Edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm. New York: Modern Library, 2016. Pp. 143–177.

Agamben, Giorgio. Homo *Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Goazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Billings, Joshua. *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

Dreyfus, Herbert, and Sean Dorrance Kelly. *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics in a Secular Age*. New York: Free Press, 2011.

Delbanco, Andrew. *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

"Euripides." "Bacchae." Translated by Emily Wilson. *In The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*. Edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm. New York: Modern Library, 2016. Pp. 741–85.

———. "Medea." Translated by Rachel Kitzinger. In *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*. Edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm. New York: Modern Library, 2016. Pp. 487–532.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

Homer. *Iliad*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Nagy, Gregory. *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Revised ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Pippin, Robert. "Participants and Spectators." *On the Human*. National Center for the Humanities, 19 Apr. 2010, nationalhumanitiescenter.org/on-thehuman/2010/04/participants_and_spectators/; accessed May 31, 2021.

"Sophocles." "Antigone." Translated by Frank Nisetich. In *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*. Edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm. New York: Modern Library, 2016. Pp. 279–325.

———. "Oedipus the King." Translated by Frank Nisetich. In *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*.

Edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm. New York: Modern Library, 2016. Pp. 225–274.
Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap, 2007.
———. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage, 2008.
Williams, Bernard. *Shame and Necessity*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008.

King Lear, James Baldwin, and the Freedom of Tragedy

Julianne Sandberg
Samford University

Novelist and activist James Baldwin wrote, in 1964, that "Every writer in the English language […] has at some point hated Shakespeare." In a sentiment echoed today in both academic and popular circles, he goes on to explain, "I condemned him as one of the authors and architects of my oppression" ("Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," 65). But as Baldwin suggests, in explaining why he later changed his mind about Shakespeare, this accusation fundamentally misunderstands the playwright and overlooks the cultural work his plays can generate. For Baldwin, the foundation of Shakespeare's influence was his ability to recognize that "whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him" (65). While this claim could be mistaken as a general platitude about the importance of empathy, Baldwin means something far more literal and incisive. For Baldwin, human beings are, in fact, bound together because neither joy nor suffering exists in a vacuum. Our lives meaningfully, and sometimes tragically, involve each other, even as we so often pursue the isolation and separation that propel the myth of our independence. According to Baldwin, Shakespeare's understanding of this reality fueled his plays and helps explain their capacity to reach across cultural and temporal divides. As both Baldwin and Shakespeare attest, tragedy ruptures the myth of the lone and liberated self and cultivates the wisdom of dependence, which paradoxically brings liberation, first for the self and then for the larger community.

The play *King Lear* invites—or rather, forces—the audience to spend three long hours watching sorrow layered upon sorrow. True to the nature of suffering, this staged pain is neither equitable nor

explainable. In fact, Shakespeare deliberately exacerbates this suffering by diverging from his source texts and killing Cordelia in the last scene rather than having her ascend the throne as the virtuous heroine. The final stanza of the play leaves the audience, like the characters, not with a sense of redemption or order, but grappling with our grief: "The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel not what we ought to say" (5.3.325–326). While such suffering is not always legible, the play does suggest that the experience of suffering is clarifying, even if its origin or purpose remain a mystery.

As Lear rages into madness, he paradoxically captures glimpses of his true self, a truth that is at once terrifying and freeing. One of the first flickers of clarity comes as he

wanders through the storm and begins to imagine those "poor naked wretches" whose "houseless heads and unfed sides" leave them vulnerable to the elements (3.4.28, 30). For Lear, this recognition immediately implicates him in their suffering:

> O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just (3.4.32–36).

When he says, "take physic, pomp," he gestures to two origins of his neglect, both of which require "physic," or medicine. First, "pomp" signals ostentatious display, with the word "superflux" suggesting that this spectacle is one of material wealth. As king, Lear had long enjoyed excess resources but apparently failed to distribute them kindly. Second, "pomp" suggests pride, indicating that his failure is not just one of inaction but of faulty character. And thus, the solution is not merely to give his wealth away but "to feel what wretches feel," to embody a state of suffering that would prove medicinal to the pompous soul.

As the scene proceeds, Lear's glimpse into another's experience invites him to seek wisdom from those he had previously ignored. As he rides out the storm in a hovel, he looks to Poor Tom (Edgar disguised as a mad beggar) whom he calls a "learned Theban" (3.4.145), a "noble philosopher" (3.4.160), and a "good Athenian" (3.4.168). Applying these titles to one who, as Edgar claims, looks like "the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury in contempt of man / Brought near to beast" (2.3.7–9) signifies Lear's descent into madness, but it also suggests his newfound willingness to receive instruction. In the opening scene, he had rashly rejected the wisdom of Kent and, in Act 2, resisted the Fool's attempt to help him see himself clearly. But here, having confronted his own suffering and the suffering of others, he seems willing, for the first time, to listen to the wisdom of one he would previously have ignored. This journey toward wisdom demands that he see himself differently. From the beginning, his problem has been one of flawed sight. Kent pleads in the first scene, "See better, Lear" (1.1.156). While the sight Lear gains across the play takes many forms, his self-recognition is perhaps the most important. He realizes, for instance, that he is "not ague-proof" (4.6.105). Literally, "ague" means "fever" or "disease," and Lear uses it here to name his proclivity toward frailty. While wealth, power, and flattery may have protected him from seeing his vulnerability, he discovers that he is, in fact, fragile.

This movement from myopic pride to the wisdom of dependence is one that Baldwin, too, traces in his discussion of suffering. In his extended essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind," Baldwin suggests that white Americans are, on the whole, prone to seeing the world and their nation in very optimistic terms. And in so doing, they deny "reality—the fact that life is tragic. Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time" (105). The ability to see and not turn from this reality is the mark of a free self. "Renewal," he says, "becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to

chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope—the entire possibility—of freedom disappears" (106). While Baldwin advocates across his life and work for the liberation of black Americans, he here exposes the captivity of white Americans, whose spiritual and psychological bondage is seen in how tightly they cling to safety, money, and power as buttresses against the tragic. To be sure, they do not suffer the trauma of racial injustice or its manifold tragedies, but Baldwin names flawed sight as another kind of tragedy, tragic insofar as it breeds isolation and cultivates oppression. In their attempt to fortify the myth of independence, white Americans reify systems of inequity that perpetuate the bondage and harm of black Americans.

As Baldwin sees it, the "physic" for this problem is for white people to look at themselves rightly, not as exemplars of goodness and virtue who can protect and stabilize their lives and their world, but as tragic figures themselves. To gain this kind of self-clarity, the white American must dispossess himself of the myth of independence, the myth of invincibility, and acquire "new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being" ("Letter from a Region in My Mind," 111). This self-recognition is dependent, Baldwin says, on seeing their black neighbors not as needy subjects but as fellow sufferers who embody the "spiritual resilience" forged from the fires of suffering: "I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. […] If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne" ("Letter from a Region in My Mind," 112–113).

Baldwin invites white Americans to witness the suffering and endurance of black Americans so as to see themselves rightly and thus fuel their own psychological liberation which could then propel the social and economic freedom of others. Tragic drama mirrors this very process as it invites an audience to witness another's suffering. As Adrian

Poole advises, "We should attend closely to the way within tragedies that people witness each other's pain," because we, like all of the "bystanders, advisors, and counsellors" that abound on the stage, are also watching this pain unfold (66). Similarly, Jennifer Wallace suggests that "The source of tragedy lies in its capacity to elicit the audience's response. Indeed, this is why tragedy has traditionally been contemplated in the theatre, since this is the place where licensed witness takes places and is positively demanded" (3–4).

To be sure, this viewing of suffering is neither easy nor passive. Tragedy, as Louise Cowan puts it, "is a kind of *leitourgeia*, a liturgy, a public ceremony." It is communal, a labor of the people that evokes healing, a "purgative remedy that discharges the poisons afflicting the psyche." This catharsis may or may not happen to the characters on the stage, but it can, for the audience, "effect a cleansing of the soul and a regeneration of the *polis*" (15). This is the ancient work of tragedy: in cleansing the self, we cleanse the city. The centering of the polis parallels Baldwin's argument that the future of the nation depends on the willingness of white Americans to recognize suffering as integral to their own selves. This is why, he says, "we, the white and the black deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women" ("Letter from a Region in My Mind," 111).

As my students confront Shakespeare's tragedies, especially when they read several back-to-back, some become fatigued by the genre. They wonder why they are being asked to read such sad, grotesque, gut-wrenching sagas; they want to return to comedy, where the stories resolve into harmony and sadness gives way to delight. As I ask them to linger in the discomfort, I found it easier to explain the necessity of this genre during a year of pandemic. My students have been inundated with images of suffering, disease, insurrection, racial injustice, and political protest. And they sense what is at stake if they turn away from this suffering, if they ignore it and pretend it doesn't exist or isn't as bad or doesn't affect them. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of

Canterbury, explores the religious and spiritual implications of tragedy in his book *The Tragic Imagination* in which he writes, "The denial of fundamental disease and non-resolution is an intensifying of our sickness. […] [W]hat we do not name or confront, what we refuse to know, becomes the greater danger" (3, 17). Healing this sickness or blindness—whether personal or cultural, spiritual or political—depends on a clear-eyed encounter with the tragic. At its best, the genre of tragedy helps us do this. It teaches us to look at suffering, to confront the vulnerabilities that produce it, and to experience the power of naming and grieving it together. As Poole attests, tragedy "is a way of honouring and allaying ghosts collective as well as personal […] a means of freeing the future from the past" (35–36). In this regard, tragedy moves us forward, individually as well as collectively. Both Shakespeare and Baldwin illustrate this. To the extent that our own past, like Lear's, is characterized by the myth of immunity and the myth of independence, it is a past that can, through the tragic, give way to wisdom.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "Letter From a Region in My Mind." *The Fire Next Time*. New York: The Dial Press, 1963.

———. "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare." *The Cross of My Redemption: Uncollected Writings.* New York: Vintage Books, 2010.

Cowan, Louise. "Introduction." *The Tragic Abyss.* Edited by Glenn Arbery. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003.

Poole, Adrian. *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton. 2008.

Wallace, Jennifer. *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Williams, Rowan. *The Tragic Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Diversifying the Core: Finding a Place for Women's Voices and Gender Issues in a Great Books Course

Edward J. Weintraut
Mercer University

Mercer University inaugurated its Great Books program in 1983 as one of two tracks in the Foundational Studies component of our general education requirements. The mission of the program is to engage students in conversations shaped by great books in the Western intellectual tradition. Currently, the program consists of seven courses, the fifth of which comprises seminal works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This course is entitled "Reason and Revolution."

I have been teaching "Reason and Revolution" frequently since the turn of the century. The first three times I confined myself largely to works required for this course by our curriculum. The semester started off with Kant's essays "What is Enlightenment?" and "Ideas for a University History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View"—essays that reflect on the two themes identified in the title of the course: Reason and Revolution. Variations on these themes play themselves out in the works to be read in the course: Goethe's *Faust I and II*; Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*; Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*; Kant's *Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals*; Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence"; Hamilton and Madison's *Federalist Papers*; a sampling of Romantic poets; de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*; Thoreau, *Walden*; Dickens' *Hard Times;* Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto;* and Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

I had thought that these works traced the trajectory of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses in exemplary fashion. However,

while preparing for the fourth iteration of the course, I realized that this reading list did not account for one of the pivotal events of the eighteenth-century: the French Revolution. More importantly, in the two prior classes students alerted me to another shortcoming. As I reviewed my syllabus on the first day of class, several students grumbled: "Great, another Great Books course without any female writers!" The same criticism found its way into written student evaluations of the course at the end of each semester.

For the fourth iteration of the course, then, I resolved to address both of these shortcomings. In the following paragraphs I will describe how the most recent (ninth) iteration of my course allows for female voices to be heard, both directly and indirectly. Directly, because I have enriched the reading list with poems by Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld as well as essays by Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft—works that that discuss slavery, women's rights, and the French Revolution. Indirectly, because I have replaced Dickens' novel with Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*—a work that might be considered a litmus test for the thoughts and feelings of the female authors mentioned above, even though it is written by a man. I have also added poems by Josef von Eichendorff and Charles Baudelaire that explore gender relations pointedly.

Let me explain the rationale for having selected works that had not (yet) attained canonical status and the way in which I integrated them into my syllabus. First, the poems. In the first half of this past semester we read all the works up to and including the *Federalist Papers.* The 42nd and 54th *Federalist* installments treat the thorny issue of slavery. This provides an opening to introduce Hannah More's impassioned condemnation of this evil practice in her lengthy poem *Slavery* of 1787. After confessing that "whenever to Africa's shores I turn my eyes, / Horrors of deepest, deadliest guilt arise," More asks indignantly:

> Was it decreed, fair Freedom! at thy birth,
> That thou should never irradiate *all* the earth?

While Britain basks in thy full blaze of light,
Why lies sad Africa quenched in total night?

At the end of the poem, she implores the divinity to
Look down in mercy in thy chosen time,
With equal eye on Africa's suffering clime:
Disperse her shades of intellectual night,
Repeat thy high behest—Let there be light!

More admonishes her contemporaries for betraying the celebrated virtues of the Enlightenment, yet holds out hope that compassion may remedy the situation: "though few can reason, all mankind can feel."

More's sympathy for marginalized peoples is shared by Anna Laetitia Barbauld in her poem *The Rights of Women* of 1792. Rather than making an appeal to a divinity, Barbauld exhorts females to reclaim rights arrogated by "treacherous Man":

Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!
Woman! too long degraded, scorned, oppressed …
Go, bid proud Man his boasted rule resign,
And kiss the golden scepter of thy reign.

Barbauld submits that the "grace" and "soft melting tones" that women have cultivated over centuries of subjugation should be used as "thundering canon" in their battle with men over rights. Echoing sentiments expressed by her contemporaries de Gouges and Wollstonecraft, she questions the integrity of marriage: "separate rights are lost in mutual love."

Aside from slaves and women, another marginalized cohort suffering from the betrayal or abuse of Reason were French émigrés to England. In her epic poem *The Emigrants* (1792–1793) Charlotte Turner Smith reflects on her disillusionment with the French Revolution and her sympathy for those fleeing its excesses. She regrets that

…those years
Have taught me so much sorrow, that my soul
Feels not the joy reviving Nature brings.

Whatever hopes she had harbored were soon dashed:

the Temple, which they fondly hoped
Reason would raise to Liberty, [was not only] destroyed
By ruffian hands
[…]
[but] War, wide-ravaging, annihilates
The hope of cultivation.

These verses anticipate sentiments expressed later in my course by Friedrich Schiller (*Ode on the Start of a New Century)* and William Wordsworth (*The World is Too Much with Us).*

These poems by More, Barbauld, and Smith provide sufficient context for discussing two of the major works I introduced into my course (while sacrificing de Tocqueville): Olympe de Gouges' "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen" and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman.*

Olympe de Gouges was arguably the most passionate advocate for women's rights in revolutionary France. Born in 1748, in her 30s and 40s she wrote over two dozen plays (including the first French drama to portray a Black slave as a protagonist) and, in the wake of the French Revolution, she authored over 70 pamphlets on a variety of social, cultural, and political issues, such as the abolition of slavery and the death penalty, and the need for civil rights of illegitimate children and unmarried mothers. In her most noteworthy work, de Gouges took issue with the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" promulgated by an assembly of males in August 1789. Over the next two years this declaration underwent several amendments, such as extending civil and political rights to Jews and to Blacks in the colonies, but it continued to neglect

the interests of half the population: women. In response to this oversight, in 1791 de Gouges published her "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen" in which she excoriated men for being "bizarre, blind, bloated with learning, and degenerated into the crassest ignorance in this century of enlightenment and wisdom" (Cole, 30)—a much more confrontational critique than that offered by More. In her dedication to Marie-Antoinette, de Gouges urged the queen to use her influence to advance women's rights, stating: "the Revolution will be achieved only when all women are convinced of their deplorable lot and of the rights that they have lost in society" (Cole, 29). In the body of this pamphlet de Gouges amended the male declaration in such a way that would bring an end to the exploitation and marginalization of half of humanity. She concluded by exhorting women to "Wake up! The [alarm bell] of reason is heard throughout the universe: Know your rights!" (Cole, 34). Admittedly, the strident, indignant tone that permeates this declaration lacks philosophical rigor or rhetorical sophistication, but it is the first and only pamphlet of the French Revolution to champion so uncompromisingly the rights of women. Due to her deference to the monarchy and her "seditious" pamphlets, de Gouges fell victim to the guillotine in 1793, a punishment that purportedly "was in part for forgetting her proper place and proper role as a woman."[1] When discussing de Gouges' pamphlet in class, I prepare a handout in which the original "Declaration of the Rights of Man" is displayed in the left-hand column, whereas de Gouges' pamphlet appears in the right-hand column. This facilitates a comparison of the two declarations, after which students debate the merits of de Gouges' appended *Social Contract between the Man and the Woman.* Immediately after discussing the import of de Gouges' declaration, we'd move on to Mary Wollstonecraft.

[1] Mirella Patzer, "Olympe de Gouges." History and Women. Women of Passion and Intrigue. 18 February 2011. https://www.historyandwomen.com/2011/02/olympe-de-gouges.html#:~:text; accessed 17 February 2018.

Wollstonecraft, born in 1759, had decided before turning thirty to abandon her employment as a governess and to pursue a career as a full-time writer. Her first book on the education of women was followed by two volumes, each of which emerges from her keen interest in the developments of the French Revolution: A *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). There is no evidence that she had read or was even aware of de Gouges' "Declaration," even though she had moved to Paris in 1792 and had remained there until 1795. The impetus for her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) came from a different Frenchman: Talleyrand, the politician and diplomat who was instrumental in shaping the "Declaration of the Rights of Man." Wollstonecraft dedicated her book to Talleyrand, taking issue with his defense of a society in which "women are to be excluded, without having a voice" and laments that this flaw in the new French constitution "will ever shew that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant, and tyranny, in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front, will ever undermine morality" (Wollstonecraft, 23). What follows is a masterful analysis of the shortcomings of contemporary patriarchal society, in which Wollstonecraft admonishes her contemporaries for their immaturity and childish behaviors while promoting the virtues of reason, friendship, and modesty. She hopes that "the divine rights of husbands, like the divine rights of kings… may in this enlightened age be contested without danger" (67), and implores men to "snap the chains and be content with [the] rational fellowship [of women] instead of slavish obedience" (179). Her arguments culminate in the call for women to exercise their reason: "it is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make [women]…labor by reforming themselves to reform the world" (71)—a call that is tempered by her concession that she does not wish women "to have power over men, but over themselves" (90).

Our discussion of these takes at least four days, during which students are keen to identify moments of blindness and insight as they

compare and contrast between the male and female writers they have just encountered. The import of de Gouges' and Wollstonecraft in particular continues to be heard over subsequent weeks. When exploring Romantic poetry, I include a remarkable poem by Joseph von Eichendorff, entitled "Yearning" ["Sehnsucht"]. In this poem an unnamed speaker sits by a window at night, listening to two wandering apprentices singing about the natural and manmade phenomena they have encountered on their travels. The speaker has one fervent wish:

> My heart burns with longing to wander,
> And wondered with secret delight—
> Oh! I wish I could be with them yonder
> in the glorious summer night!

Admittedly, and perhaps justifiably, Eichendorff does not enjoy the same prominence as Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, but this particular poem complements well the gender-related issues foregrounded in particular by Wollstonecraft. "Yearning" features a common trope of German Romanticism (gleeful men wandering through nature, singing about their experiences), but it is the final strophe that merits special attention. Here, the men sing about "windows where fair maidens listen / when the tones of the lute invite." The poem is thus about women standing at a window who listen to wandering men singing about women who stand at a window who listen to men sing about women.

Structurally, the poem turns in on itself. What makes this poem significant in my reading is that the narrator of the poem is a girl who is evidently unable to leave the domestic sphere (notice: she thinks "with *secret* delight") and who is vicariously enthralled about the experiences that men are able to enjoy.[2] The window is thus something that

[2] The first strophe does not explicitly identify the speaking persona as a woman, but the context in which the poem appears in Eichendorff's 1834 novel (*Dichter und ihre Gesellen)* makes this reading more than plausible. The poem is, after all, sung by

confines as well as invites: a seemingly porous barrier between the domestic and the public realms. It is also an image that bridges our discussion of de Gouges, Wollstonecraft, and the Romantics to Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert.

At the risk of endorsing a suspect periodization, Baudelaire occupies an uneasy position between Romanticism and Realism. In his prose poem "The Eyes of the Poor" he uses window imagery to comment on the incommensurability of relations between genders and socio-economic classes. A man and a woman close a long day together—the man felt it was short—by sitting down "at a new café at the corner of a new boulevard, still full of stripped plaster but already gloriously presenting its unfinished splendor" (51). Through a window they see a poor family marveling at the opulence of the café. The man was "touched by this family of eyes" and "felt a bit shamed of our glasses and pitchers" (52), perhaps embarrassed at "the whole of mythology put to the service of gluttony" (51). Yet the woman is bothered by the presence of the poor family and wants the head waiter to send them away. The poem ends with the man reflecting on "how difficult understanding is…and how thought is incommunicable, even between lovers" (52). This prose poem lends itself to a number of interpretations, since it is not clear whether one should identify with the man or the woman, if either.

In *Madame Bovary* there are roughly three dozen instances of window imagery. Emma Bovary is often portrayed standing at a window, musing about what she has either lost or what she wishes she could obtain. As the narrator notes, "a window, in the country, takes the place of a theater or a public walk" (Flaubert, 111). Emma's life as a young married "was as cold as an attic with a north-facing window" (Flaubert, 38). Her persistent complaints about the limitations of being a woman, and her increasing predilection to adopt masculine behaviors and clothing, illuminate the societal and cultural problems that both de

---

Marchioness Fiametta shortly before the well-traveled Baron Fortunat rescues her and accompanies her to her beloved Italy, where they are married.

Gouges and Wollstonecraft highlight. Students are conflicted in their assessment of Madame Bovary, that is, the three women who bear this name *as well as* the "Madame Bovary" complex that affects the lives of the men around them. Students are quick to make insightful connections to works discussed earlier in the semester: the use of window imagery accentuates the gulf between male and female, rich and poor that they saw in Baudelaire's prose poem; many characters in the novel seem to confirm

Kant's hope for man's emergence from self-imposed immaturity has not come to fruition; Wollstonecraft's warning about the pernicious effect of romance novels on impressionable young women is painfully evident; and so on. Invariably one student will question whether Flaubert, a male author, can persuasively and accurately do justice to the situation of women in 19th-century France and their response to its socio-cultural expectations—a question that seldom fails to prompt a lively discussion. Several students have suggested that *Madame Bovary* is a litmus test for the hopes and fears of de Gouges and Wollstonecraft, and in their final term papers students frequently explore gender relations in the works discussed above and in those encountered previously in the Great Books curriculum, such as Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*, the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Montague's *Turkish Embassy Letters*.

In essence, students have welcomed the opportunity to trace the trajectory of Reason from Kant through Darwin and to understand the origin and consequences of the American and the French Revolutions. More than anything, though, they appreciate the inclusion of female voices into the Great Book curriculum, voices that challenge and rectify the dominant male discourse—be these voices heard directly from de Gouges and Wollstonecraft or indirectly through male authors such as Eichendorff and Flaubert.

To end this chapter symmetrically, I will note that the directors of the Great Books Program at Mercer University recently created faculty work groups to explore ways of making the entire curriculum more

inclusive, i.e. including voices of women and other minorities. The approach described here is but one viable approach to attain this goal.

Works Cited

Barbauld, Anna Laetitia. *The Rights of Women*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43615/the-rights-of-women; accessed January 25, 2025.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Paris Spleen: little poems in prose*. Translated by Keith Waldrop. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009.

Cole, John R. *Between the Queen and the Cabby: Olympe de Gouges' Rights of Woman*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Translated by Lydia Davis. New York: Penguin, 2010.

More, Hannah. *Slavery.* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51885/slavery; accessed January 25, 2025.

Smith, Charlotte. *The Emigrants*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52295/the-emigrants-a-poem; accessed January 25, 2025.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Edited by Eileen Hunt Rotting. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014.

The United States Constitution: An Unevenly Destabilized Text

Michael Ditmore
Pepperdine University

It is a pedagogical truism that teachers strive to defamiliarize the familiar and familiarize the unfamiliar; critical conversation cannot happen otherwise. As to the latter, some students simply have had no prior acquaintance with, say, Voltaire, Aristophanes, Woolf, or Kierkegaard. But defamiliarization of not only known but even principles-encrusted, hallowed, and all-*too*-familiar texts may be the more daunting task, for teachers and students alike. This essay considers how a close reading (with supplementary sources) of Article V of the United States Constitution and its initial implementation in 1789–91—a text definitely all-*too*-familiar but also barely read or readable—can yield an estranged experience of one of the most potent of all political documents. Students and teachers alike will need to grapple with the implications and consequences, simultaneously visible and invisible, fostered by the drafters and implementors, who, as it turned out in two influential personages, were identical.

That the United States Constitution qualifies as a core text hardly needs stating, even though we might note that it is somewhat *sui generis* as a core text. To describe it as fundamental and ubiquitous seems silly to say; more than a "core" text, it is an absolutely essential and existential text in its reach. But it also reads like an instruction manual; it is easy for discussion to slip the text altogether for the sake of the abstract structure/machine it constructs and operates, and with the text alone, they often jump extratextual principles. In short, readers often confuse the constitutional order with the Constitution, and focus only on the former even when only the text is immediately before them. It is also a

text that tempts readers into believing that it is so publicly accessible that its understanding requires no history or help.

But what *kind* of core text is it? What kinds of reading does its text require or permit? There are two very basic concepts for core texts: one is that they are endlessly discussable; another is that they require (and replenish) innumerable re-readings. Both concepts imply that core texts have inexhaustible complexities and depths, but they also imply a third tacit rule: that the texts themselves remain stable—in wording, sequence, and structure—as changed readers and discussants return, and re-engage and labor over them. The meaning moves while the text remains inert.[1] While the themes and ideas may fluctuate, such texts are *not* a Heraclitean flow. They are presumed to be the exact opposite: stable to the point of being static, *so that* we can revisit from multiple angles (perspectives, shadings, seasons) while experiencing the same object. In one regard, the Constitution's text quite neatly comports with this rule, since its wording and structure have remained entirely unchanged (except for added amendments) since its first appearance in 1787: seven articles, plus (now) 27 (or 28?) supplemented amendments; the seven articles are subdivided into sections and clauses, for ease of citation. With core texts, we expect a recognizable continuity of textual identity, across generations, geographies, even languages and cultures—our great conversation with Plato's *Republic*, just to give an instance, we believe to overlap with all those preceding and with all those to come.

But from another angle, that is not exactly the case with the Constitution at all, either in its fundamental design or even its more seemingly accidental re-design. For all of its textual continuity since 1787, in different ways it simply is not a stable or a static text, even when it superficially is. How, then, might we "read" the Constitution with consideration for its built-in potential instabilities as an integral part of the

[1] Just consider: the pronouns of the Constitution's text make it inarguably clear that no woman can serve in the House of Representatives or the Senate, or as President or Vice President. And yet.

discussion itself? Since a close reading/discussion of the Constitution should go beyond stale cliches and familiar principles, it will be worthwhile not only to examine the implications of its historical malleability but especially to consider how it got that way from the beginning—and, much more, importantly, to consider cataclysmic changes in the Constitution's meaning that have been masked by its placid textual continuities.

There are at least two ways we might proceed. First, we might approach the Constitution not as a *descriptive* text but as a *prescriptive* or *prospective* text, as with a blueprint, recipe, framework—or instruction manual. Although it certainly *feels* exactly like a descriptive text now, there was no government precisely as such in 1787, although the government in 2022 might well seem to fit more or less well within its guardrails (depending on one's political leaning). And so, the Constitution by its very bareness and directiveness opened ways for all three branches of government to establish itself/themselves (in a trinitarian, ambition counteracting ambition way), in sometimes foreseen ways (judiciary) and in other entirely unforeseen ways (the United States

Space Force)—the 1787 Constitution could tell us there would be a President elected in 2020, for instance, but it could not give us a name (or a party, or a scandalous controversy associated with it). But second, the Constitution is unique in both aiming to limit the nation's constitutionality to this exact and incontrovertible textualization[2] and at the same time in Article V expressly to regulate the processes for its own amendment (and thus re-textualization and even potential destabilization). If written constitutions are valued for their stabilizing power, it is also true that one of the prime attractive features is amend-

[2] This is an enormously broad generalization, one that is as about as true as it is not. On the one hand, there has never been any authorized provision for modifying any of the Constitution's text or formatting; on the other hand, the Constitution from the get-go has been a public domain document whose textual integrity has been entirely dependent on the professional accountability of editors and printers. As a result, textually acceptable versions are cheaply and universally available.

ability, or, in a different way, instability. (In architectural terms, we might regard such instability, or flexibility, as a guard against structural brittleness.) How do constitutions internally plan for and adapt to amendments (especially transformational ones), and how can core readers track and register such changes? This essay considers, in various ways, the Constitution's textual stabilities and instabilities, particularly by considering the brief, unnoticed crisis over the first amendments (later known as the Bill of Rights), a matter in itself a somewhat unstable compound of textual and non-textual matters.

Hermeneutic Conundrums

The text—or "the" text—of the United States Constitution, considered more or less stringently *as* a "text"—poses hermeneutic conundrums. Here's one: on the one hand, the Constitution is universally celebrated for being a written/printed, publicly accessible single document (everything anyone needs to know about the Federal government is right there); on the other hand, its own text—in Article V—carefully describes multiple procedures for formally modifying "the text itself," with the result that there can be multiple, indefinite, temporary successive Constitution texts (either 17 or 27, or maybe 28, at present, depending on how one counts), each one presumably requiring different collective and/or institutional part/whole adjustments—all without ever modifying the existing text itself but only by adding *more* text.[3] We would be going only a little too far, I'd say, were we to characterize the Constitution metaphorically as a "choose your own adventure" text, closed in one way and open-ended indefinitely in another.

A second hermeneutic conundrum concerns the means and meanings of "reading" the Constitution text. On the one hand the Constitution was—I believe—deliberately designed to be easily decoded by anyone fluent in the formatting of English language print orthopraxies prevalent in 1787—i.e., the same literacy and skills required to decode

[3] Let's consider this a provisional characterization.

any other text—from a recipe for boiling eggs to (later) *Finnegans Wake*—are transferrable. On the other hand, the Constitution is hardly one more text among other texts; at least in certain contexts and applications, its authoritative "reading" can have profound existential implications, locally, nationally, globally, and generationally (in short, the Anti-Federalists, who scrutinized the text quite closely and seriously). What, then, might *we* as teachers expect when we assign our students to "read" the Constitution, from cover to cover? What does such reading operationalize? How possible is it to read so familiar a text "for the first time"? What edition do we select? Students (like Congresspeople, in my estimation) will stumble over certain words/concepts (*emolument*, *letters of marque*, *corruption of blood*) and are likely to skip past others (lack of qualifications for justices); more importantly, they are especially likely to struggle with relating the various amendments to the Constitution (and the constitutional order). They are likely to regard the text *qua* text, except for the Preamble, as entirely uninteresting, and even antiquated in syntax and wording; the very concept of a written constitution will be too much taken for granted; they're unlikely to see ways that perhaps the Constitution quarrels with itself. Our challenge as instructors is to instill authentic controversy into a text for which most students will accept controversy only as something that concluded a long time ago or for which there's a built-in solution—or for which there's no real controversy because anyone who disagrees is automatically wrong. Bear in mind that some elements of the Constitution's text do indeed "read" like recipes or instruction manuals, which we don't typically assign for close interpretation (because there is little textual room for controversy when it comes to the number of federal legislative chambers, or qualifications for members of Congress), while others—say, the elastic "necessary and proper" clause—might be wildly controversial, but classroom discussions also, even when game-ified, have zero existential entailment, regardless of how hot or out of hand they get.

Article V and the First Amending

Let's attend briefly to Article V, the article that in a single punctuation-welded-together 142-word sentence provides for the Constitution's own (limited) mutation (or metamorphosis, if one is progressive). Most discussions of Article V focus squarely on procedural issues or abstractions like unamendability or about more concrete problems like differing amendment modalities, but I'd like to offer two points. The first is limited strictly to "the text itself," and the second goes to the very first amendment practices in 1789 (which is in no way part of the text, and so requires our venturing into another but not core text).

As to "the text itself": it might not be especially difficult to map the Article V procedures (and in fact, they would be easier to understand *as* a map or schema—quite literally): two modes of proposal (either by two-thirds of Congress "or, on the Application of the Legislatures of two-thirds of the several States"); two modes of ratification (three-fourths of state legislatures, or three-fourths of state conventions), resulting in four possible combinations; then two exceptions, one temporary and the other permanent. (We'll simply note further that, one, of the four proposal-ratification options, only one—two-thirds Congress plus three-fourths state legislatures—has been followed, with one exception [when the 21st Amendment repealed the 18th]; and two, the 1808 exception regarding slave importation has in fact expired, leaving only equal suffrage in the Senate). And it so happens that this Article V description has functionally worked as designed—if it *were* a recipe for, say, cornbread, we could say "let's butter it up" —except for those who dispute its design, i.e., that it's supermajoritarian requirements are simply too difficult to meet, even though easier than for the Articles of Confederation. And yet, any exactingly *close* reader—the kind that follows recipes or instruction manuals, exactingly and step by step—should be able to tell us that Article V is needlessly contorted in legalese syntax and is woefully incomplete in several regards, not just from ambiguity or vagueness but simply

because it is incomplete:[4] (1) Article V does not explicitly describe the form(s) that amendments might take, and (2) Article V does not describe explicitly, as we will see, what should happen editorially with legitimately ratified amendments.

As to the first, absurd as it sounds, could an amendment take the form of a rebus or a wordless diagram? A gesture, a bird call, or a joke? A poem—a haiku, for instance—or a story? A recipe or an instruction manual? Could it be written in French or Swahili (or a combination of the two)? Could it be a sculpture or a piece of jewelry or an etching? Could it be on YouTube? Could it be an NFT? Etc. In short, why *can't* we have a psychedelic Dadaist Constitution? Of course not, we know—but *why*? Perhaps the most basic reason is an inescapably originalist one, that in 1787 the word "amendment" (which was borrowed for the document) among lawyers and legislators (a closed company) referred to alterations made in legislative documents and other legal instruments *in the same medium, format, and stylistic "law language"* of the original document (all without it ever having to be said so), with some variability; an amendment generally had come to be regarded as a particular chain or block of text in emulation *and* correction of the document that it amended, so that there would be a textual seamlessness. (At the same time, though, although it would never happen, there's nothing to prevent two-thirds of Congress and three-fourths of state legislatures in a sustained period of ebullient levity of approving, say, the Lincoln Memorial as an amendment to the Constitution. We the People, after all.) And really, it could be a fun classroom exercise: what absolutely *could not* amend the Constitution?

But the second question is more consternating. Supposing we know (as we've established) the form of an amendment and suppose we are in a position of acknowledged constitutional authority and have one stray legitimately ratified amendment laying around, a small one

[4] See Pozen and Schmidt, "The Puzzles and Possibilities of Article V," 2329–2332 (and *passim*) a brief close scrutiny of language-level problems, apart from incompleteness.

will do…*then* what? What do we do *with* it? Mustn't it be seen as somehow physically contiguous and trailing the present Constitution text? Does the closest possible reading of Article V provide explicit directions, guidance, or instructions? To get at this question, let me hypothesize two especially adept close readers, so close in fact that they were present together at the creation of Article V. For the sake of simplicity, I'll designate, Dr. Seuss-like the first reader as "James Madison" —that should be easy to remember, but the second, "Roger Sherman," is less so. Let me further stipulate that not only are they adept close readers, but also that they are so intimately familiar with the Constitution's text as to have both been present at almost the entirety of the Philadelphia convention in the summer of 1787 *and* were signers of the final submitted document *and* even promoters of its adoption; moreover, we can also pinpoint instances in which each made contributions to Article V's wording and meaning "Madison" revised much of the language [*Records* 559]; "Sherman" proposed equal suffrage in the Senate [*Records* 630–31]). What two close readers could have been better positioned—except for their antagonism—to know exactly what to do with our stray amendment?[5]

For instance, would a legitimately ratified document *have* to be physically included with the rest of the physical document each time it was physically reproduced? Is the United States decidedly committed to a "four corners" Constitution, even if literally the corners typically run to four or five sets of "four corners"—i.e., the "single document" is rarely reproduced on a single page; its original engrossed version runs to four sheets, without any amendments? But would it have to be formatted consistently and uniformly? Could the new amendment be in a different font, font size, or ink color? Could it be printed in italics or sideways or diagonally or upside down?

[5] See Robertson, "Madison's Opponents and Constitutional Design" *passim* for a meticulous analysis of clashes between Madison and Sherman during the Philadelphia convention. Sherman generally came out ahead.

Now *we* (the People) *know* the answer. All we have to do is take out the pocket Constitution from one our own pockets, and we will surely see the very same formatting arrangement we think we've *always* seen in *every* copy we've *ever* consulted. Even so, will we as close readers be able to provide exact textual support for this state of affairs? Failing that, though, can we as close readers provide *extra*-textual support, in the form, say, of necessary inference? And really, is extra-textual support permissible? After all, we *could* amend Article V to make it clearer.

But let's imagine, wildly now, that "Madison" and "Sherman" don't know what *we* know and take to be both legitimate and natural. And they have much, much else on their plates (like getting constitutional legs under this new government). What, then? For those unfamiliar with *this* story: "Madison," feeling obligated to shepherd amendments through in order to attain ratification, assumed from the get-go that the proposed amendments he'd culled should, first, be formatted and stylized in emulation of the original *and* that they should be "interwoven" or integrated seamlessly into the existing text in very specific ways, to the point of adding a prefix to the Preamble and also removing some text and replacing it with other text altogether, all of which he presented and detailed before the House of Representatives on June 8, 1789 (*Creating,* 11–14)—and, in fact, the specifics of that proposal were published in the New York *Daily Advertiser* of June 12, 1789 (*Creating,* 11–14) and other newspapers: it was now a matter of public print discourse. Things dragged on unapproved, however, and by late July the proposal was went to a select committee that included, yes, "Madison" and "Sherman," which reported back on July 28 with 100 printed copies (*Creating,* 6).

On Thursday, August 13, as the House of Representatives resumed consideration and formed into a Committee of the Whole to engage the proposal more carefully, "Sherman"—a fellow Federalist (but not *Federalist*) with "Madison"—immediately objected to the editorial placement (as well as to the modality of ratification) and so moved, to drop "Madison's" prefix to the Preamble and then to append the

proposed amendments as a separate list (but still part of the whole document). Perhaps this was merely a disingenuous delaying tactic, given "Sherman's" opposition to what he viewed as unnecessary amendments, or perhaps Sherman simply aimed to expose a previously undetected flaw, but it certainly triggered an extended, complicated delay as representatives lined up on either side of the issue(s), like politicians famished for something to disagree and declaim about, despite each claiming *form* to be more trivial than *substance*—and also despite refusing to budge much on the matter. "Sherman's" motion failed, and the discussion moved on (*Creating* 117–28). As the House continued to debate the proposal for the next week, "Madison's" "interwoven" mode stood as they debated issues and particulars and began wordsmithing and chipping away—until the next Wednesday, when "Sherman" again introduced the motion to "supplement" rather than to "interweave" —and somehow won this time, although there's virtually no record of the debate that day (*Creating* 197–98). The die, so to speak, was cast.

The Constitution We Have

That is, the Constitution we have *for now.*

Although it need not have been, it was that: from that moment on, the amending process for the United States Constitution has followed this (mostly unstated, almost unrecorded) editorial precedent. All properly ratified amendments would be neatly packaged, numbered, and appended sequentially after the 1787 text, fostering a single visual *gestalt*. Many commentators have reflected on some of the consequences and implications of this congressional agreement (which, by the way, did not require full-on or really any Article V processing).[6] As Kenneth Bowling put it: "Actually the change set a precedent for isolating amendments, broadened their role in constitutional law, and

[6] For a brilliant, mindbending counterhistorical experiment, see Edward Hartnett's attempt to construct the Constitution as "Madison" envisioned it.

made it possible to point to a body of amendments known as the federal Bill of Rights" (242)—all because of a *post facto* editorial decision proposed by "Sherman," perhaps to suggest the amendments' belated and secondary status. *Contra* Bowling, though, it is also the case that the longer the list of amendments becomes, the more complicated it may be for readers of any kind to determine, individually and collectively, just how the later amendments fit in, particularly the more transformative 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Just as the Constitution does not contain within itself specific rules for its own reading or interpretation, neither does it anywhere expressly contain rules for how to deal with amendments, either editorially or interpretively, other than Article V's declaration that properly ratified amendments "shall be valid to all Intents and Purposes, as Part of this Constitution." But also "Sherman's" supplemental method potentially puts readers in the position of historicizing the timeless document, in chronologically considering each new amendment, its motivation and the adjustments required thereby.

It could be exceedingly difficult, I believe, to notice this editorial disparity on a purely close reading of the Constitution's text, unless readers bring a strong comparative constitutionalism context with them, even though readers are likely to trip over internal textual contradictions and puzzles as a result.[7] As it happens, the supplemental, or appendative, method of textually including formally ratified amendments within an existing single document is only one of four possibilities, and as Richard Albert has observed, "the appendative approach yields obsolete and even outright incorrect text" (241).[8] But readers are likelier to take the Constitution text for granted as a static object, even

[7] The 18th and 21st Amendments simply occupy inoperational textual space, as a cautionary reminder of an experiment gone wrong.

[8] Albert notes four amendment models: appendative, disaggregative, integrative, and invisible

(229–40); his observation is accurate with regard to the practice of the United States Constitution, but that need not be the case *if* affected or obsolete text were removed or typographically marked/footnoted with each new ratified amendment.

though one fixed in 1787, and focus instead on principles, structural designs, phrasings, and philosophical substance as a consistent and present theory. But given the Constitution's unique status as a text that internally and formally licenses its own mutation without erasure, and which in fact has had transformative moments masked somewhat by the flattening effect of editorial consistency and continuity, more attention should be given to its diachronic accretions across 230 years of collective documentary textuality. And of course, the Constitution is never merely a matter of text. As with its political theory, the Constitution's style and form indicate, as well its historical and existential ratifications, socially and politically—in opportunity and in restriction. The United States is as committed to the principles of the Constitution—checks and balances, separation of powers, rule of law, popular sovereignty, etc.—as it is to its documentary verbalization in a manner by which all Americans can hold each other accountable.

If I may add a closing supplement myself: there's one other textual matter left to consider, one as far as I can see entirely overlooked by commentators. First, the precedent set by this 1789 House vote to supplement rather than to interweave amendments does not appear to be any more binding than any number of other precedents that might be overturned. It simply established a custom, a habit. In the case of the first ten amendments, supplementation made a certain amount of sense because they did not necessarily directly address particular textual elements within the existing document. But the next two amendments, the 11th (1795) and 12th (1804), did exactly that—and within 15 years of the first ten. In short, the editorial precedent is forceful but not necessarily binding, more on the order of *obiter dictum* than *stare decisis*. This leads to a second point: in none of the amending process has there ever been a motion to clean up or modify any of the existing wording of the Constitution, no matter how much a latter amendment may nullify or repeal a particular provision, or even how much its literal

wording is just silently re-purposed.[9] And thus, "readers" of all kinds in some cases are in the peculiarly complex hermeneutic position of seesawing back and forth between "original" and "amended" wording at greater/lesser distances for what is most currently operational and authorized.

We cannot—and definitely should not—aim to turn students into quibbling fine print lawyers, but goading them to grapple with the flexibilities of so inflexible, and so familiar and influential, a political document models, the kind of close textual examination necessary for the critical weighing of democratic values and the good society.

Works Cited

Albert, Richard. *Constitutional Amendments: Making, Breaking, and Changing Constitutions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Bowling, Kenneth R. "'A Tub to the Whale': The Founding Fathers and Adoption of the Federal Bill of Rights." *Journal of the Early Republic* vol. 8 (Fall 1988): 223–251.

Congressional Record, vol. 157, no. 2 (Jan. 6, 2011).

Creating the Bill of Rights: The Documentary Record from the First Federal Congress. Ed. Helen E. Veit, Kenneth R. Bowling, and Charlene Bangs Bickford. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Gonzalez, Carlos E. "Representational Structures Through Which We the People Ratify Constitutions: The Troubling Original Understanding of the Constitution's Ratification Clauses." *U.C. Davis Law Review,* vol. 18 (2005): 1373–1504.

Hartnett, Edward A. "A 'Uniform and Entire' Constitution; Or, What If Madison Had Won?" Constitutional Commentary, vol. 15, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 251–300.

[9] See note 1.

Payandeh, Mehrdad. "Constitutional Aesthetics: Appending Amendments to the United States Constitution." *BYU Journal of Public Law*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2011): 87–130.

Pozen, David E. and Thomas P. Schmidt. "The Puzzles and Possibilities of Article V." *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 121, no. 8 (Dec. 2021): 2317–95.

The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787. Edited by Max Farrand. 3 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911.

Robertson, David Brian. "Madison's Opponents and Constitutional Design." *American Political Science Review*, vol. 99, no. 2 (May 2005): 225–243.

Frederick Douglass on Liberal Education: Learning the True Meaning of Freedom

Dustin Gish

University of Houston

> All human beings by nature desire to know.[1]
> One who thinks himself to be the master of others
> does not fail to be more of a slave than they.[2]
>
> As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.
> This expresses my idea of democracy.[3]

Interpretations of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* frequently propose as a thesis that literacy is the path to freedom.[4] Frederick's determination to learn to read and write does indeed run as a persistent theme through his writings, and it is particularly notable in his account of his escape. Douglass not only vividly narrates and exposes the horrors and atrocities of slavery for readers; he also subtly conveys the path to freedom. That path, Douglass maintains, begins with literacy. The determination of young Frederick to learn to read and write sets him on a course of liberation. His literacy is essential to acquiring the knowledge that would prove instrumental in forging and eventually fulfilling his desire to be free. But this reading of the *Narrative* does not go quite far

[1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.i.

[2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract* I.i.

[3] Abraham Lincoln, private memorandum (no date).

[4] See "Introduction," to Gates 2012, xii. All quotations in this chapter are taken from Douglass 2003, and Douglass' chapters are indicated in Roman numerals, followed by page numbers in that edition.

enough to disclose the author's reflections on the corrosiveness of slavery or the meaning of freedom. By revealing the dark, insidious ways that slavery corrupts both slaves and slaveholders, the *Narrative* shows that human freedom or liberty, rightly understood, depends on having a free soul and mind as well as a free body. Douglass demonstrates, in his carefully structured narrative, how he learned what it means to be genuinely free—even before he resolved to free himself of his enslaving chains.

The first eight chapters of Douglass' *Narrative* constitute a decisive epoch in his early life. Chapter I begins with the unhappiness and injustice felt by young Frederick because of his lack of knowledge about his age, a tactic employed by enslavers to "keep their slaves ignorant" (I.17). Even worse, even "the means of knowing," that is, of being able to ask questions or "make any inquiries," was also denied to him. For "all such inquiries on the part of a slave" were deemed "improper and impertinent" by masters, "and evidence of a restless spirit" (I.17). Even as a child, Frederick sensed that being kept "ignorant" of his age and his origins was a kind of outrage.[5] The withholding of knowledge and suppression of the desire to learn are Douglass' first proofs of the degradation committed by masters on slaves. This cruelty, however, does not assault the body, but puts imperceptible shackles on the souls of slaves, thus impeding their pursuit of knowledge and imprisoning them "in mental darkness" (VII.43).[6] Ignorance afflicts the souls of the enslaved, even before the tyranny of their enforced labor, lack of sleep, extreme hunger, and lashes from the whip conspire to torture their bodies.

The binding of the mind and soul of the enslaved with which Douglass opens his *Narrative* precedes his account of the first outrage

[5] See Douglass' Letter to his Former Master, Thomas Auld, dated 3 September 1848, the 10th anniversary of his liberation; published in *The Liberator*, 22 September 1848.

[6] Douglass returns explicitly to this theme of "mental darkness" later (see X.75).

witnessed by Frederick as a child.[7] The "terrible spectacle" and "horrible exhibition"—which Douglass names "the bloodstained gate, [and] the entrance to the hell of slavery"—was the vicious whipping of his aunt by her enslaver, "a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding" (I.20). Most readers will be moved by his terrifying account of that "bloody transaction" (I.21) to feel great pity for the innocent woman, to condemn slavery, and think the master is nothing but a beast. The horrible image that Douglass' rhetoric conjures in our imagination speaks more loudly than words about the horrors of slavery.

But there is also a nuance to his tale which deserves attention. Like the young Frederick in Chapter II, who does not fully comprehend the "wild" slave songs he has heard, the reader too runs the risk of overlooking in that first haunting image "the deep meaning" of what is being recounted by Douglass. He writes: "I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy" (II.26). No less than the profound and tragically ironic "tale of woe" expressed in every tone of the wild slave songs, every detail in Douglass' tale serves as "a testimony against slavery" (II.26). But while the author can trace his own "first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing" and "soul-killing effects of slavery" to his sustained reflection on these songs (II.26), we should reflect on Douglass' first explicit account of the hell which is slavery. To do so, we must wonder how his words in Chapter II apply to Chapter I.

When we recall "the bloody transaction recorded in the first chapter," which we ourselves have been called to "witness" by reading Douglass' narration (II.22), we must ask ourselves: How does this disgustingly cruel beating of the slave's body effect the "killing" of her soul? It is absurd to believe that those who are enslaved become less

[7] A close reading of the text requires that we notice the outward form that shapes the work. Douglass, as an author, structures the text as a "narrative" rather than as autobiography – and that narrative belongs to the enslaved person who is the subject within it (at times a child, at other times a young man).

human on account of crimes that are perpetrated against them by their enslavers. Whose soul is in jeopardy of being dehumanized? Our initial sense of moral outrage at the physical cruelty committed by the master against the slave must be attended by reflection on all the insidious effects of slavery. Without ever turning our eyes away from the unspeakable brutality and the savage injustice of the master's cruelty toward his aunt, Douglass also points to the depravity inflicted by slavery on the slaveholder. Enraged more by his jealousy of an enslaved woman than he is by her disobedience, the slave-holder's all-consuming passion coupled with absolute power causes him to disfigure the "noble form" and "graceful proportions" of the very woman whose "presence" he in fact desires (I.20). What he as a child cannot fully comprehend, Douglass articulates in his *Narrative*: slavery always violates the human rights of those people who are enslaved, but it also destroys the souls of the slaveholders who cruelly abuse and torture the enslaved. Barbaric masters and "fiendish" overseers, Douglass argues, are the ones who are losing—or perhaps have already lost—their humanity.[8] This insight into the "soul-killing effects of slavery" on the enslavers Douglass once again highlights in his account of the miserable condition of enslaved women who are raped and forced to bear the offspring of slaveholders, the story that precedes "the entrance to hell." Here again we note how Douglass links the physical abuse of the bodies of the enslaved to the depravity of their enslavers' souls. Having already gratified their "wicked desires" (lust and greed), the slaveholders who know and feel "the dictate of humanity" are confronted with a harsh internal dilemma (I.19).[9] For their enslaved children, as they grow older, "invariably suffer greater hardships" due to the hatred of the slaveholder's wife, to

[8] The "rightly named" overseer Mr. Severe manifests in both his miserable life and equally miserable death the devastating effects of slavery upon the soul; his animal-like cruelty and profanity is as much an offense to the Divine as it is to human beings (II.24).

[9] Douglass refers in other places to the dictates of "humanity" (or "conscience") which even slaveholders are able to recognize (see e.g. VI.42).

whom they must always be, as reminders, an insufferable offense. To appease her, a slaveholder must whip his own children or watch in pitiful silence as his legitimate sons "ply the gory lash" on his enslaved sons. In order to avoid this, and to salvage a remnant of his humanity, he must "sell his own [slave] children to human flesh-mongers" (I.19). Either way, the inhumanity of this tragic situation cannot be escaped. Dominated by illicit passion, lawless in their conduct, and thus forced to violate the most natural of human attachments, slaveholders degrade their own minds and souls, thus rendering themselves less human. Their descent into inhumanity is the inevitable result of their "savage barbarity," violence, unrestrained passions, and brutal actions.

The "miserable condition" of the enslaved and their enslavers differs—as much as suffering injustice differs from committing injustice—but neither the enslaved person nor the slave-holder escapes from the depravity that slavery inflicts on human beings. Douglass constantly stresses the dehumanizing and "the soul-killing effects" of slavery on slave-holders and overseers, a poignant and often over-looked theme that in fact recurs throughout the *Narrative*.[10] The ruthless treatment of Douglass' aged grandmother, as part of a systematic "valuation of property" that outright denies her humanity, served for him more than anything else to "deepen [his] conviction of the infernal character of slavery" (VIII.51).[11] Too old to have "value" any longer, her owners removed her to a hut in the woods, "virtually turning her out to die" alone. Such "base ingratitude and fiendish barbarity" allowed Douglass to see "more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder" (VIII.49). The pitiless hearts of her owners, who could act so inhumanely toward such a woman, who had nursed her master and been "the source of all his wealth" in that despicable

[10] Prior even to the brutality inflicted by Covey: see, for example, I.19, II.26, III.31, IV.33, VI.40, VII.43, VIII.49, VIII.52, IX.56.

[11] Consider the terrible combination of savageness and cold-heartedness in the despicable, and again aptly named, Mr. Gore (IV.330).

slave economy, only confirmed for Douglass the "degraded condition" of both slaveholders and those they enslaved.

Douglass shows the corruption of a slaveholder's soul in his portrait of Sophia Auld, his mistress. Slavery had "effected a disastrous change" in her (VIII.52). For the "infernal character of slavery" and its influence transformed her, in the eyes of Frederick, from an angelic savior into a demon. Initially "preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery," she had begun to teach the young Frederick to read, until her husband angrily forbade it: slaves must be kept illiterate and ignorant, he explained, in order to be made "fit" for slavery. She ceased teaching Frederick, having become depraved from this "instruction" in the "infernal work" of slavery. But young Frederick, who overheard his master's argument, thought this to be a "revelation," for it taught him "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (VI.41). His resolve to become literate led him eventually to discover the meaning of "abolition" and "emancipation," as well as how to articulate "a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights." These arguments soon inspired in him a desire for freedom. As for his mistress, who had once been good and virtuous, Douglass remarks: "Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me" (VII.43). She never suffered the bodily injustice that Frederick was forced to endure, yet her soul nonetheless had been corrupted with the infernal influence of slavery. Drinking in "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" and succumbing to her own lawless passions, she had become less human and less free (VI.40). Her (failed) efforts to prevent Frederick from becoming literate and thus imprison him in "mental darkness" mark the depths of her depravity.

Slavery undeniably imposes a "wretched condition" on slaves (VII.45-46). Douglass' narrative makes this absolutely clear. He detests slaveholders for the savage outrages they commit, and he condemns the violation of human rights that holding slaves always entails. But his narrative also exposes the corrosive and soul-killing effect of slavery upon slaveholders. Their tyrannical mastery of other human beings

betrays the enslavement of their own souls to lawless passions and the abuse of unbound power; in this way, slavery also corrupts and enslaves slaveholders, by rendering them, not those whose rights they abuse, less human. Learning how we must govern ourselves—learning to restrain our passions with reason, to respect the rights of others as a limit on our actions, and to hear the dictates of humanity—is the task of liberal education. For human beings only attain freedom through mastery of themselves, that is, by self-government. Lincoln's poignant aphorism on the idea of democracy and the meaning of freedom, cited in the epigram to this chapter, is especially instructive here. A close reading of Douglass' *Narrative* offers just such an education in liberal education and liberty, by vividly exposing the absolute hell of slavery (as it was intended to do by the abolitionists who had sponsored its publication) and (as Douglass had himself intended) by teaching us what it means to be genuinely free.

The knowledge that Douglass acquires through literacy is not, strictly speaking, his path to freedom, that is, the means necessary to flee his masters and escape from bondage. What young Frederick acquires, first of all by virtue of his reading *The Columbian Orator*, and later through his own youthful reflections on his condition and the condition of the other human beings (enslaving and enslaved around him), is a special kind of knowledge, namely, self-knowledge, and the knowledge of his enslaved condition as a violation of his natural rights as a human being. The liberation of his mind from the shackles of ignorance and darkness precedes his desire to escape from slavery. An escape from mental darkness and the enlightening of his mind through the elevation of his thoughts animate his resolve to be a man and to be free. The young Frederick comes to know himself as he begins to grasp that his worth as a human being is irreconcilable with his enslavement—and not only because his body is being treated brutally (the living conditions in the Auld household, we recall, are relatively "good" compared to the plantation slaves, and even some poor white boys in

the neighborhood). The emancipation of young Frederick's mind opens "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (VI.41).

This liberal education, the liberation of his mind from bondage, prompts Douglass' first "turn" towards freedom in the *Narrative*. Once he set free his mind, young Frederick is determined to free his body. But to free himself from physical bondage, the young man would have to recognize the miserable shackles which bound him physically as a result of Mr. Covey's brutality in Chapter X. After a few months of Covey's cruel and unusual "discipline," Frederick found that he had been beaten down and "tamed." He had become a slave in soul and spirit, as well as body: his intellect languished, the light of his mind died, and the dark night of slavery closed in upon him. The "dark night of slavery closed in upon me" for the first time— "behold a man transformed into a brute" (X.63)! He was transformed into a mere animal, or nearly so. Words revived him.[12] He prayed to God but spoke to himself. Rather than wait for God to save him, Frederick resolved that he would not allow himself to "live and die a slave." "You have seen how a man was made a slave; [now] you shall see how a slave was made a man" (X.64). In order to resist Covey, Frederick not only had to refuse to be treated "like a brute," but he also had to overcome his fear of death. Once he escaped from the shackles of self-preservation that had taught him to endure the miseries of slavery for the sake of the body at the expense of his very soul, Frederick boldly declared his independence from Covey's tyranny. He fought not for his life, but for his freedom: "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom" (X.69). He broke the natural chains of fear and desire for self-preservation, inspiring in him once more a determination to be free, in other words, to free himself, even if it meant dying in order to do so.[13]

---

[12] Aristotle, Politics I.2, 1253a2–18.

[13] Unlike the enslaved man "Demby," Douglass seems to have calculated rightly that, as brutal as he indeed was, Covey would not actually kill him for being disobedient. Covey was neither Douglass' "master" (legally his possessor as property) nor

Embracing his willingness to accept death in defending the freedom of his soul, Douglass experienced another "turning-point" in his life. The "embers of freedom" in his soul were rekindled; he "resolved that, however long [he] might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when [he] could be a slave in fact." This "glorious resurrection" of his soul raised Frederick from the "tomb of slavery" and set him back on the pathway to freedom. While yet still held in his *external* condition by "the bloody arms of slavery," Frederick escaped the brutal hell of *internal* enslavement; he had freed his mind and soul once more and re-turned himself to "the heaven of freedom" and genuine liberty. But in his career as a young man freed from tyranny, Frederick had yet other "turns" to make on his path to freedom. Even under the relative liberty provided by the man with whom he was sent to live after Covey, Frederick had to remember his liberal education. In the face this time not of extreme pain but of pleasure—the "great days of my soul" (X.75), teaching other enslaved people how to read and write, Frederick had to recall to mind his purpose: "I will give Mr. Freeland the credit of being the best master I ever had," receiving not one punishment, not even "a single blow" while in his possession, Frederick knew that he was only "the best master I ever had, *till I became my own master*" (X.76, original italics).[14] Even after a year in this decent condition, his mind could not be confined to enjoying present benefits. His thoughts were roused to secure his liberty: "I began to want to live *upon free land* as well as *with Freeland*." Frederick turned his mind back towards thoughts of how to escape—not his shackles or his misery but the "stern reality" of enslavement—and thus finally secure his freedom.

---

even his master's overseer (tasked with maintaining obedience among the enslaved population). As a white farmer, Covey had a cruel reputation for breaking certain the enslaved men of others, but he did not 'own' Douglass, and so could not simply kill him out of revenge or anger without financial and legal repercussions.

[14] The name of the "master" is again evocative: see notes 8 and 10. See also, Lincoln's epigraph, above.

With the freedom of his mind and soul recovered, and his maturity of manhood fast approaching (his 18th birthday), Frederick prepared himself for "the final struggle," namely, to abandon his Hamlet-like speculations on the prospect of dying (fear of which makes us "rather bear those ills we had, / Than fly to others, that we know not of"). Taking on the mantle of a revolutionary independence, Frederick reached a "fixed determination to run away" and undertake "the noble effort" to escape from bondage: even more so than Patrick Henry, when "he resolved upon liberty or death," Frederick decided to live free or die. (X.76–78) Even the relative freedom he enjoyed in working for wages in the ship-yard of Mr. Gardner and Mr. Price (where he learned the value of free labor) could not seduce Frederick's reason into persuading himself to forget, ultimately, his desire to be free.

In his final reflections of this pivotal chapter, Douglass observes "that whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me thinking of plans to gain my freedom. I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason" (X.87). In understanding his self-evident natural "right" to be free, "to be a man," Douglass' reason never wavered. He turned then, once more in his life, towards liberation, to "clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery" in all their varied forms, and to possess in full the rights that nature and justice had bestowed upon him as a moral and intellectual human being (XI.88). One final "step towards freedom" Frederick resolved to take in order to leave behind his "chains" for good and strive towards liberation, a journey that would carry him away from the evils of slavery that he had "endured" and allow him to embrace not only the "care and anxiety" of labor that he had "suffered" but also all "the responsibilities of a freeman" in reality—the blessed burdens associated with being his own master, his own man (XI.90–92).

In his *Narrative*, Douglass teaches us the liberation of the mind or intellect from darkness through education, specifically the language of natural rights, and the liberation of the body from oppressive tyranny through principled resistance. Basic literacy first enabled Frederick Douglass to discover his mind, and thereafter to construct and define himself as he became the author of the story of himself in the self-portrait he painted in the words of his *Narrative*. By freeing his mind from its shackles and bringing light into darkness, Douglass embraced his equality in being human; then, in his awareness that tyranny must be resisted at any cost, he discovered the lesson that every free person must learn, lest we risk losing our soul in order to save our body. The freedom of his mind from the fear of death, and the recognition that his soul as well as his body could be broken (either by the brutal horrors of cruelty or the pleasant temptations of limited autonomy), assisted Douglass at every turn in rousing his thoughts and reviving himself through resistance to seek out freedom. His liberal education made him free: ownership of his own mind awakened him to the exclusive right to possess his own body, and literally to possess and own the fruits of his free labor. Students at every level of liberal education must learn similar lessons, though (hopefully) they are not compelled to do so under anything like the tragic and traumatic circumstances associated with Douglass' own journey to freedom. The illuminating sense of a free mind gave him the courage to face down against the brutal and soul-killing effects of slavery and to stand up for his natural right to be recognized as a man, as a person of dignity, of moral worth, and of intellect. In the *Narrative* of Douglass, we learn how liberal education freed Frederick from the shackles of mental darkness and guided his soul towards a new land genuinely worthy of the free man he had already become. We all—as self-taught human beings, whose liberation of mind depends upon our own willingness to rise up from the dark cave of unexamined opinions and ascend into the light (see Plato, *Republic* 514a–5118c)—must strive to take inspiration from Douglass' portrait in his *Narrative*.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Signet, 2012.

Contextualizing Injustice in Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Lisa Jennings
Valparaiso University

This year during our university's annual commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr., a phrase from the famous speech on the Washington Mall in 1963 caught my attention. King's poignant call to recognize the "fierce urgency of now" is tragically no less imperative today than when he uttered those words fifty-eight years ago. The 2021 ACTC Annual Conference theme highlights liberal education's role in our attempts to navigate our "now": a global pandemic, significant economic challenges, and a national reckoning with racism, sexism, xenophobia, and violence that has laid bare the seams of a troubled society. Given the alarming recent rise in anti-Asian hate crimes which have deep roots in the culture and politics of this nation, attention to this history is an important part of such a reckoning. Julie Otsuka's widely acclaimed debut *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) is a novel of historical fiction concerning the 1942–1945 Japanese-American internment, or—more accurately—incarceration.

Contextualizing the injustice of the incarceration involves referencing the historical backdrop of the nineteenth century, understanding the immediate political context of the novel which begins in spring 1942, and inviting dialogue about the ways the lingering past intersects with ongoing struggles for justice. Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* has been part of the curriculum for the past three years in Valparaiso University's Core Program, and because we collaborate on teaching ideas, I am indebted to the insights of my colleagues in my

approach to the novel.[1] As I outline a strategy to read and teach Otsuka's novel in conjunction with primary documents, I will suggest that in the liberal arts classroom, the interaction of history and literature is a symbiotic process: historical documents provide the necessary context for the novel while the novel's artistry illuminates and provides a pathway into understanding the historical record.

Exposing students to crucial historical documents starting well before the 1940s gives context to the novel's abrupt beginning and helps students grasp how present-day events have long histories.[2] Students can research the pre-1940s historical record starting with various exclusion movements in the nineteenth century. Historian Mieko Matsumoto describes how a wave of Chinese immigration, both voluntary and coerced, brought an influx of laborers to the U.S. in the mid-1800s. She draws a connection to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the U.S., establishing a race- and class-based immigration policy. According to historian Moon-Ho Jung, the Act set the precedent for U.S. immigration policy from the nineteenth century onward (Jung, 13). Matsumoto notes that although the law allowed for exceptions in theory for merchants, students, teachers, and diplomats, it was extended several times and made permanent in 1902. She observes that the dearth of Chinese laborers set up the mass migration of Japanese laborers to the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1885, and many of these laborers journeyed on to the

[1] In particular, I would like to thank the following colleagues for the ways that they broadened my approach to teaching the novel: Amy Atchison, Joe Goss, Renu Juneja, Aaron Preston, and especially John Ruff.

[2] While information on the relevant history is available from a range of sources, I have found the *Densho Encyclopedia* particularly useful for student exploration of the issues raised by Otsuka's book and other related topics. Individual students or small groups can research the context and present it to their classmates. The *Encyclopedia* of the award-winning organization Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project is funded by the Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program, administered by the National Park Service and by the California State Library through the California Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, with additional funding from the Department of the Interior, National Park Service.

continental U.S. west coast. Historian Emily Anderson argues that groups that had agitated against Chinese immigration now turned their efforts to banning Japanese immigration and fanning anti-Asian rhetoric such as the "yellow peril" and concomitant white paranoia. The exclusion movement, while focused on legislation to prohibit immigration, also actively promoted an environment in which cultural, social, political, and economic discrimination against Asians was acceptable (Anderson). The National Immigration Act of 1924, which included the Asian Exclusion Act and the National Origins Act, established national quotas for immigration along discriminatory lines, virtually banning all Asian immigration and severely limiting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe (Imai).

In addition to the long historical record of injustice, students may also need to refresh their knowledge of the novel's immediate past in order to understand the real-world references as well as critical events not mentioned in the book. Following the surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese military on Dec. 7, 1941, the U.S. acted swiftly. Historian Tetsuden Kashima explains that the Custodial Retention List gave the FBI a ready register of approximately 1,000 suspicious persons—including heads of organizations or principals of Japanese language schools, for example—who were arrested within days of Pearl Harbor and detained without charges. In addition to these immediate arrests, Executive Order 9066 issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Feb. 19, 1942 gave the army power to exclude whomever it saw fit under the guise of military "necessity" (Executive Order 9066). General John DeWitt, head of the army's Western Defense Command, called for the removal of all Japanese-Americans from the West Coast, a population of more than 120,000, during the spring and summer of 1942 in a series of exclusion orders, such as the one from the Western Defense Command and Fourth Army Wartime Control Civil Administration dated Apr. 24, 1942 ("Instructions") [see Appendix A].

"The sign had appeared overnight" reads the opening sentence of Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* (3). Otsuka uses the sign as an entry point into the story and as a marker of her characters' new, all-encompassing reality: "It was stapled to the door of the municipal court and nailed, at eye level, to every telephone pole along University Avenue" (3). The first chapter, titled "Evacuation Order No. 19," is narrated from the perspective of an unnamed woman, whose sense of place in the world is immediately reoriented to the sign's literal and figurative authority. Students can read the Evacuation Order, as the character does, from "top to bottom" and down to the "small and dark print" (3). When prompted to read for significant details in the Order, students often notice the silverware that evacuees were required to bring along, and that no pets were allowed, a point that is devastatingly important in the first chapter of the novel.

To help students conceive of the enormity of the effort to displace a population of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans, a majority of whom were American citizens (Niiya), a map depicting the exclusion zone and the location of the so-called "Assembly Centers" and "Relocation Centers" creates a powerful visual image (Burton) [see Appendix B]. The map's key also begs the question of the power of language to conceal injustice. How do words such as "assembly and relocation centers," and even the word "internment," used so frequently to describe this moment in history, euphemize the reality? Students can consider how we would view this history if we used the terms detention centers, concentration camps, and incarceration, terms that Japanese American organizations employ, to describe this experience. As we learn many times over in Core classes, words matter.

The U.S. military also attempted to parse the words of Japanese Americans with a series of questions issued in a survey in February 1943, aiming in part to determine who might volunteer for service (Otsuka, 99). Versions of this "loyalty questionnaire" were handed out to adults in camps as a litmus test for fealty, with the last two questions deeply troubling to Japanese Americans, according to a recent *Los*

Angeles Times article (Po et al.). Questions 27 and 28 come up verbatim in Otsuka's novel: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered? [...] Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?" (99).[3] I've asked my students to wrestle with these questions, what they meant, how they would answer them, how they might answer them in the shoes of the family in Otsuka's novel, and whether the questions were fair in a time of war. Are you a traitor if you answer no? Are you a traitor to your heritage if you answer yes? The aforementioned *LA Times* article interviews survivors who "failed" this loyalty test by answering "no" and were incarcerated with other "disloyals" in Tule Lake, a high-security prison camp in Northern California (Po et al.). Students can compare these consequences with those of the mother in Otsuka's novel, who "did not want to cause trouble […] or be labeled disloyal. She did not want to be sent back to Japan. […] She answered yes" (99).

Up to this point, I have been suggesting that historical documents provide necessary context for the novel and help explain otherwise likely obscure real-world references. At the dynamic intersection of fiction and history, we can also ask how the lyrical achievements of the novel illuminate the historical record. As I explore below, Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* is terse, both in length and in language, a novel of historical fiction that employs multivalent narration and recurring tropes and symbolism to memorable effect. Such strategies allow students to enter into multiple characters' paths through the imagination, an act that my colleague Renu Juneja calls "narrative empathy."

[3] Po et al. clarify that "women were asked to volunteer as Army nurses or support staff. Those born in Japan, who could not become U.S. citizens, were initially asked to give up their Japanese citizenship. The question was later amended to ask whether they would abide by U.S. laws and not interfere with the war effort."

Multivalent narration in the novel gives readers insights into five perspectives within one Japanese American family's experience of incarceration. When prompted to watch for the changes in narrative perspective, students are intrigued and can analyze it as a meaningful rhetorical choice made by the author. The family members remain unnamed throughout the novel and are referred to as the mother, the boy, the girl, the father. This device allows readers the chance to walk alongside all the characters: the mother as she makes difficult choices preparing for evacuation in the first chapter; the sassy teenage daughter seeking moments of independence during the train trip to the camp in Topaz, Utah in chapter two; the younger brother's experience of loss in the camp and his necessity-driven development as a care-giver in chapter three; chapter four's homecoming after three and a half years of incarceration narrated in the plural "we" of the children, a homecoming to a society that pretends that nothing has happened while their father is an utterly distorted version of the parent they once knew; and finally the only first-person narrative of the novel in chapter five, the father's wrenching "confession."

This final chapter is perhaps the most challenging for students to make sense of because the father utters falsehoods about Japanese Americans that the white society believed, or wanted to believe, in order to justify the incarceration. "Everything you have heard is true," he begins,

> I admit it. I lied. You were right. You were always right. It was me. I did it. I poisoned your reservoirs. I sprinkled your food with insecticide. […] I planted sticks of dynamite alongside your railroads. […] I spied on your airfields" (140). He speaks to his audience: "Who am I? You know who I am. Or you think you do. […] I'm the slant-eyed sniper in the trees. […] I'm the stranger at the gate. I'm the traitor in your own backyard" (142–143).

This chapter forces students to encounter another strategy of the author and has prompted some of the most engaged student responses to the novel: Why would the father confess to every false accusation? Why would Otsuka choose to end her novel this way? In my experience, some students will conclude that the final chapter is the father's real confession, and may have a difficult time considering alternate ways of reading the end of the novel. Such moments can lead to some fruitful discussions. Fiction's elasticity and rhetorical power can be considered alongside historical context yet again, for example the May 20, 2011 U.S. Department of Justice's "Confession of Error," written by Neal Katyal, Acting Solicitor General of the United States, in which he labels as a mistake the 1940s suppression of the Ringle Report findings about the low risk of sabotage by Japanese Americans.

In addition to the unique narrative presentation of the story, recurring tropes and symbols beg for deep analysis: the boy's troubling and recurring memory of his father's arrest in his slippers and bathrobe, the family pets, the tulip bulb that the boy names Gloria, the state of their home when they return, to name just a few. Other details are blatantly, dispassionately crystalized; describing the return to school, for instance, the children explain: "We spoke softly and did not raise our hands, not even when we knew the answers. We followed the rules. We took tests…. Always, we were polite.… When our teachers asked us if everything was all right we nodded our heads and said, yes, of course, everything was fine" (122). The novel thus reveals not only the experience of physical incarceration but the psychological effects of the experience as the characters navigate the post-incarceration period.

The memorable, haunting, striking imagery of the novel crafted in precisely honed language is a consistent theme in the critics' reviews, in responses from my faculty colleagues, and in the impressions of our students. This holds even as we note the real-world references and lay bare the novel's structure. However apparent the author's rhetorical devices may be to us—in Otsuka's case multiple points of view,

symbolism, recurring tropes—they engage our imaginations and allow us to enter the context alongside the characters.

With this level of investment in the topic, students can also critically engage the subsequent historical record including debates on reparations and the belated presidential apologies issued by Reagan, the elder Bush, and Clinton. They may also come to appreciate other creative expressions of this era including photography by Teresa Tamura, art installations by Wendy Maruyama, or the artwork of Roger Shimomura. They can grasp the significance of Dorothea Lange's censored photographs from the 1940s. In my experience teaching this novel, students gain historical knowledge, skills in rhetorical analysis and the use of primary documents, and a deeper appreciation of the insights rendered through creative depictions of moments of turmoil. Students can begin to see how current struggles—the border crisis, the Covid lockdowns, current threats to democracy and to human dignity—relate to past injustices, an awareness that invites dialogue and, ultimately, empathy. Fostering an empathetic understanding of today's crises, the liberal arts can contribute to consolation and, perhaps, healing.[4]

Works Cited

Anderson, Emily. "Anti-Japanese Exclusion Movement." *Densho Encyclopedia,* October 8, 2020: encyclopedia.densho.org/Anti-Japanese%20exclusion%20movement; accessed April 6, 2021.

Burton, Jeffrey F. et al. "Figure 1.1." *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites.* Western Archeological and Conservation Center, National Park

[4] A note from spring semester 2024: As we wrapped up our discussion of Otsuka's text, I let the class know that in the summer of 2022, twenty years after the publication of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, a Wisconsin school district removed the award-winning novel from the curriculum, calling the book "one-sided, too 'diverse' and 'too sad'" (Lueders). My students were appalled.

Service, U.S. Department of the Interior: www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/anthropology74/ce1.htm; accessed April 6, 2021.

Executive Order 1066. *Our Documents.* February 19, 1942: www.ourdocuments.gov/print_friendly.php?flash=false&page=transcript&doc= 74&title=Transcript+of+Executive+Order+9066%3A++Resulting+in+the+Relocat ion+of+Japanese+%281942%29; accessed April 6, 2021.

Imai, Shiho. "Immigration Act of 1924." *Densho Encyclopedia*, March 19, 2013: encyclopedia.densho.org/Immigration_Act_of_1924/#cite_ref-ftnt_ref6_6-0; accessed April 6, 2021.

"'Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry,' Apr. 24, 1942, posted in Seattle, Washington." *Densho Encyclopedia*, Courtesy of the Yamada Collection, July 17, 2015: encyclopedia.densho.org/sources/en-denshopd-p25-00049-1/; accessed April 6, 2021.

Juneja, Renu. "Cultivating Narrative Empathy." Core Keynote Lecture, Valparaiso Core Program, September 19, 2019: www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6vv7IMgyPQ; accessed April 6, 2021.

Jung, Moon-Ho. *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Kashimi, Tetsuden. "Custodial Detention/ A-B-C List." *Densho Encyclopedia*, 22 July 2020: https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Custodial_detention_/_A-B-C_list/; accessed April 6, 2021.

Katyal, Neal. "Confession of Error: The Solicitor General's Mistakes During the Japanese-American Internment Crisis." *United States Department of Justice Archives.* May 20, 2011: www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/confession-errorsolicitor-generals-mistakes-during-japanese-american-internment-cases.

King, Martin Luther. "I Have a Dream." August 28, 1963. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*. New York: Harper, 1986.

Lueders, Bill. "Wisconsin school district rejects novel about Japanese internment." *Wisconsin Examiner*, June 22, 2022: https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2022/06/22/wisconsin-school-district-rejects-book-about-japanese-internment/; accessed April 23, 2024.

Matsumoko, Mieko. "Chinese Exclusion Act." *Densho Encyclopedia*. June 16, 2020: encyclopedia.densho.org/Chinese%20Exclusion%20Act; accessed April 6, 2021.

Niiya, Brian. "Executive Order 9066." *Densho Encyclopedia*, August 24. 2020: encyclopedia.densho.org/Executive%20Order%209066; accessed April 6, 2021.

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine: A Novel.* New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

Po, Phi, et al. "The 'No-Nos' of Tule Lake." *Los Angeles Times* (March 30, 2021): www.latimes.com/projects/japanese-americans-incarcerated-usworld-war-ii-camp-speak-out/; accessed April 6, 2021.

CLOSING
STUDENTS AND COVID-19

"A joy it will be one day, perhaps, to remember even this": Resilient Students and the Power of Transformative Texts

Jody Taylor Watkins
Purdue University

> My comrades, hardly strangers to pain before now,
> we all have weathered worse… Call up your courage
> again. Dismiss your grief and fear. A joy it will be
> one day, perhaps, to remember even this.
>
> Virgil, *The Aeneid* (trans. Robert Fagles)

When Aeneas spoke the words in the quote above, he was trying to console the exhausted Trojans after they had been blown off course by a brutal storm that had been whipped up at the urging of the goddess Juno. Only seven of their ships remained after the storm; the rest of the fleet—and those on board—disappeared beneath the waves. It was a tremendous loss of supplies certainly, but more importantly of human lives, of co-travelers on this perilous journey to find a new homeland after their home in Troy was sacked and destroyed by the Greeks as the last act of the Trojan War. As the leader fated to help the Trojan people find that new home, it fell to Aeneas to address them in their sorrow and fatigue: to urge them to pick themselves up, to be willing to keep moving forward, and to believe that a peaceful new homeland was reachable. Hope and resilience. These were always crucial for the homeless Trojans and would continue to be so. The storm was, after all, only the latest obstacle in their journey. They had, as Aeneas reminded them, already come through so much. They needed to continue to be the resilient people they had already proven themselves to be.

The COVID-19 pandemic has asked that we all find our own ways of cultivating hope and resilience. This article reports on a special

project in the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program at Purdue University (Zook). It invited students to share their own pandemic journey, and how literature has helped them understand and respond to that experience. This account provides a glimpse of just some of the insights to emerge about young lives disrupted, and the literature that helped give voice to their struggles and triumphs.

It Begins with a Contest: Articulating Crisis and Its Consolations

In the Fall of 2020, one of my students drew upon Aeneas' words from ancient literature as he analyzed his experience during the pandemic, most notably in terms of how people navigate lives that have been quickly and drastically transformed. The specific context for his musings was a contest sponsored by Purdue's Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program. The contest, entitled "The Pandemic: Our World Transformed," was the second contest sponsored by Cornerstone that focused on the pandemic, the first coming in the disrupted Spring 2020 semester. That initial contest— "My Quarantine Story" —asked students to respond to their new situation of isolating at home and finishing the semester online, all while being separated from their other "home" at Purdue. In their article "Stranded on Calypso's Island," Amanda Mayes,

Visiting Assistant Professor in Cornerstone, and Melinda Zook, Germaine Seelye Oesterle Professor of History and Director of Cornerstone, provided an extensive account of the students' stories in that first contest, and how notable literature helped them address some of the changes they were experiencing in real time.

The second contest, coming as students returned to campus, invited them to take a longer view of the pandemic and its impact, using the journey motif. Students enrolled in the two foundational Transformative Texts courses (SCLA 101 and 102) submitted original essays, poetry, artwork, videos and other material that reflected both their

personal pandemic journeys as well as how their texts could help them think through the many transformations accompanying that journey. Nearly 70 students responded, and their responses were optimistic, angry, heart-breaking, and heartwarming, but collectively they revealed incredible wells of resilience. Their use of course texts to help them express emotions and experiences was creative and gratifying.

While one would expect in their essays descriptions of the hardships imposed by COVID-19 as it upended their lives, the number of students who were able to derive various forms of happiness, or at least a measure of contentment, from the experience was significant too. The student who reflected on the crisis facing Aeneas as an entrée to examining his own situation, admitted that the pandemic meant longing to go back to what was once considered normal, as the Trojans must have fervently wished that they could do. However, the time of struggle also meant new friendships, experiences and lessons that may not have been possible in a different context. Many of the essays echoed a similar theme that the pandemic had engendered frustration and loss, but also invaluable new insights and personal change for the better: consolation in the midst of crisis. These consolations ranged from a renewed appreciation for the people in their lives to the sudden availability of more time to develop or hone skills, find new hobbies and indulge a variety of interests. What the majority of students collectively showed me in their contest essays was a creative resilience that is far more than simply grappling with and surviving struggle; it is finding energy to let struggle transform you in positive ways.

Many of my students were already resilient by the time they arrived in my classroom in the Fall 2020 semester. Among the blows that they had suffered were loss of family members to the pandemic; having to live out of a car while still in high school; being unable, due to COVID restrictions, to be at the side of a brother who had been shot; racial incidents experienced by both Black and Asian students; and surgeries for a serious pre-existing health condition. These are on top of the seemingly smaller, but still emotionally draining, loss of those

important and anticipated rites of passage marking the transition out of high school. During the course of that Fall semester, the hits kept coming: positive tests for COVID for some students; a father who was just getting his life on track after a series of difficulties, being badly injured in a car accident; and serious mental health stresses and sense of isolation for some as they navigated a college experience that in no way resembled the image of that experience they had always carried with them.

Great literature gave these students new words and ways to articulate the impact of the recent upheaval in their lives. It is important to note that the texts in my four classes were not deliberately taught with the pandemic as a major focus and application point. Yet inherent in the concept of transformative texts is their potential to address a wide array of human experiences, to provide readers with new insights while challenging established understandings, and to reach across time and geographical distance to reveal, as it notes in the official course description of the Transformative Texts classes, "the pleasures and pains of being human." The contest, therefore, was an invitation for them to *revisit* their texts with an eye to drawing out of that literature specific wisdom about how to meet and respond to crisis. There were a great many important insights in their contest essays, but this article will focus on just two of the more prominent ones among my students specifically, and the voice that texts gave them to express those insights. They are simple—obvious really—but no less profound for that.

A Social Support System in Difficult Times

"'Two boats lashed together will never sink. A three-ply rope is not easily broken.' If we help each other and fight side by side, what harm can come to us?" (Mitchell). This line from the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* comes as Gilgamesh pleads with his friend, Enkidu, to help him in his quest to kill Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest. It is a statement about how support from someone else can make all the difference when facing hardships. The idea that a social

support system makes resilience easier to develop is well known. An article in the *Guardian* newspaper a few years ago that explored what makes some people more resilient than others, quotes a psychiatrist, Dennis Charney, as saying that "when individuals feel that someone's covering their back, they tend to use more active coping and problem-solving strategies for their distress" (Cox).

The transformative friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu—which helped to soften Gilgamesh's arrogant and tyrannical behavior—was particularly inspirational for many students. Theirs is a relationship that exemplifies the power of friendship to overcome obstacles, whether providing reinforcement on the road to kill a forest monster or helping one another become better versions of themselves. Several students in their contest essays referenced the friendship between these characters as a model through which to express how important friends, family and community members had been to their ability to cope with and overcome the many disappointments of the pandemic. This includes the simple and sweet story of a young man who got to know his future sister-in-law well as she quarantined with his family, how she helped him study for his AP exams, and how she is now one of his closest friends and the first person he texts when something is going on at Purdue. And there was Sarah Prazeau, who hiked part of the Appalachian Trail alone during quarantine and now, inspired by the mutual support between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, has decided that on her next hike she will bring a partner so that she can "share the incredible experiences I have with someone close to my heart." Nicholas Acevedo, whose surgeries for a serious medical condition left him especially vulnerable during the pandemic, said that "while their story of friendship is not very realistic to today's standards, the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is a model relationship we should strive for during these incredibly unusual and unfamiliar times. In my case, the relationships I created with the people around me were key to a healthy mindset and outlook on my current situation with surgery and the pandemic".

Their relationships with others—and the sense of security and comfort that went along with having someone in their corner—were powerful tools in helping them cultivate and demonstrate resilience. Yet the social support system was not the only commonly mentioned tool enabling students to survive and thrive during the pandemic. The many personal discoveries and insights about dealing with change and struggle that they picked up in the course of their pandemic journeys were instrumental as well.

No Outcome is Certain: Harness the Journey and Learn to Bend

In contrast to Aeneas' tactic of getting his people to focus on the end goal of a new Trojan homeland, many students found it far more fruitful to see what they could learn along the way. For them, this focus on the journey connected strongly in their minds with the importance of being able to "bend" when the winds of change blow. Logan Anderson encapsulated this insight well:

It appears fruitless to focus upon a destination, especially given how important the so-named 'journey' is…I am unable to recall how many different instances I've seen or heard the phrase 'in these uncertain times', and in my mind, this primarily serves to alienate the present from the past and create this mirage as if the 'times' have ever been certain. While our whole world has changed in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the notions of returning to normalcy and returning to a more certain time are simply impossible. This destination—this return—to normal life outside the current situation is not what I choose to focus on, as I see the journey, the daily events, as the most important elements of life in this pandemic.

Zoe Davis also commented on terms like "the new ordinary", and stated succinctly that "Nothing is ever ordinary, and nothing will ever be simple enough to be." And Hannah Arnett put it even more

succinctly that we need to become "comfortable with being uncomfortable." The sentiment that instead of focusing on a destination that may not even be possible you should be ready in hard times to turn the journey in creative and positive directions, resonated with a great many essay authors. While they referenced several texts in expressing this focus on the journey, there were two great literary works that were key when it came to putting into words how one should approach hard times.

On the one hand, students were moved by *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and how Douglass, while mired in the dehumanizing state of slavery, managed to prepare himself for his journey toward eventual freedom. In particular, his achievement of literacy amidst the most difficult of circumstances impressed students greatly, especially given the potential consequences for him if a slave master disapproved of his attempts to better himself. As Brastone Ngoma put it "Douglass knew that knowledge is power and was something that slave owners tried to strip [slaves] of in fear that they'd rebel or reach their full potentiality." Jason Scott stated that he drew direct "inspiration" from Douglass not only learning to read and write but teaching others to do so as well by recently beginning to tutor kids in Math, a subject that he says he "often view[s] as a second language that I speak. The language of how the world operates. I have a deep passion for it and strive to teach others how to not see math as a class, but as a language of numbers. This has brought me joy, as I am able to teach younger kids a love for what is often regarded as the worst subject in school."

On the flipside of that notion that it is important to turn the journey in positive directions, highlighting Frederick Douglass as an inspirational role model, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's larger than life character of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* served as a cautionary tale for many students on what not to do when change brings hardship, even as they sometimes saw themselves in him. A warrior, respected leader, and unwavering standard-bearer for traditional culture, Okonkwo could not adjust to change, which came in the form of

British colonial authorities and missionaries arriving in his traditional Igbo village, altering it irreparably. After trying unsuccessfully to fight this threat to the way of life he loved, he wages one last stand by killing a messenger sent by the District Commissioner, and then commits suicide when he realizes that the rest of his clansmen were not going to walk that road of rebellion and violence with him. Liam Coyne, who admits that he has grown weary of this "dystopian narrative" we are in, nevertheless felt that "had [Okonkwo] fought through the change that caused him so much anguish, he might have been able to come to terms with it and continue to uphold his values despite the new circumstances. Instead, he chose to directly oppose the change in a futile attempt to bring back the village lifestyle that had already begun its transition into the past. It was his adamant resistance to change that ultimately destroyed him,"

For Kieran Whitsitt, Okonkwo helped explain America, just as America helped explain Okonkwo. He saw the pandemic unfold while living at the American Embassy in Moscow, in particular news of many Americans being "unwilling to put their lives on hold for anything or anyone other than themselves" by refusing to make adjustments to the pandemic reality. He describes Okonkwo as an "American" character in some ways. Okonkwo's fear of weakness, his pride and strength, while helping him succeed in traditional Igbo society, also "ended up being his tragic downfall" when that society changed, and he killed the messenger. Whitsitt goes on to say that "these John Wayne-like gunslinger characteristics exist today in the United States as well. These attitudes of standing up against authority when your own and your neighbors' lives are at risk is what led the United States to having the most COVID-19 cases in the world."

Frederick Douglass and the fictional Okonkwo: two individuals facing strong, morally complacent powers that denied them control over their own destinies. Yet, they represent two different ways of meeting that force. In contrast to Okonkwo, who would not bend and ended up breaking, Douglass' willingness to plan for a future as a free

man, to develop the skills that would help him succeed when it happened and to exercise the patience to wait for the opportune moment was inspirational for the students.

The Power of Transformative Texts

Salman Rushdie, in a guest essay for the *New York Times*, states that "the greatest and most enduring question of literature" is this: "How do ordinary people respond to the arrival in their lives of the extraordinary?" The answer, says Rushdie, is that "Sometimes we don't do so well, but at other times we find resources within ourselves we did not know we possessed, and so we rise to the challenge…" It is a sentiment reinforced in many students' essays as they used their texts to come to grips with their own "extraordinary".

Would students in the Transformative Texts classes who chose to submit original material to the contest have mined their class texts for wisdom on the challenges and consolations of their pandemic journeys without the prodding that the contest provided? The question resists a general answer. Some likely would have. Macartney Parkinson, for example, described a habit he has had since childhood to write down "any key lessons" he comes across in the material he reads. He notes that in his ongoing COVID-19 journey during the Fall semester, he "used the analogies that I had picked up from SCLA 101…to help me with my struggles." He continues: "Although the [books] that I used to help me seemed far from real, I interpreted them in a way that I could use them to help me during my quarantines, my parents becoming ill, and my unusual wrestling season." He notes that the arduous journeys of Gilgamesh and Beowulf were especially influential. Other students, however, no doubt needed the contest prompt to think more deeply about their texts in relation to their own pandemic journeys. Ultimately, I would suggest that this does not matter. The power and value of transformative texts is not determined by the *immediacy* of their impact. Instead, it is their capacity to speak to a whole range of human

experiences. Understanding and application come with significant, often targeted, and, in this case, *invited* engagement with them.

Pedagogically, the contest provided a reminder that using great literature to help students understand their collective and personal struggles is not frivolous; it is not somehow a lesser pursuit than understanding the pagan to Christian transition in *Beowulf* or the role and nature of the gods in the *Aeneid*. Those latter things, while important, do not trump the sometimes exhausted and overwhelmed students' need to find something that speaks to them personally in the works they read. There is no greater obligation that the phrase "Transformative Texts" brings with it than to meet students where they are and provide them a chance to experience and discuss both the wisdom and the comforts these texts can provide.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Cox, David. "Unbroken: What Makes Some People More Resilient Than Others?" *Guardian*. December 19, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2014/dec/19/unbrokenresilience-louis-zamperini-post-traumatic-stress-disorder#:~:text=. Accessed April 10, 2021.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Garden City: Dover, 2016.

Mayes, Amanda, and Melinda Zook. "Stranded on Calypso's Island: Cornerstone, COVID, and Power of Transformative Texts." *Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and ADVANCE Working Paper Series*, vol. 3, special issue 2 (2020): 61–72.

Mitchell, Stephen. *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

Rushdie, Salman. "Ask Yourself Which Books You Truly Love." *New York Times*, May 24, 2021.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 2007.

Zook, Melinda S. "Giant Leaps for the Liberal Arts at Purdue." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning,* vol. 51, no. 6 (2019): 45–51.

Purdue University Student Essays Quoted:

Acevedo, Nicholas. Untitled. Nov. 2020. SCLA 101 Transformative Texts I.

Anderson, Logan. "A Journey Through Change." Nov. 2020. SCLA 102 Transformative Texts II.

Arnett, Hannah. "COVID-19: A Tragedy and a Blessing." SCLA 102.

Coyne, Liam. "The Current Normal." SCLA 102.

Davis, Zoe. "Extraordinary." SCLA 102.

Ngoma, Brastone. Untitled. SCLA 102.

Parkinson, Macartney. "COVID-19 Journey." SCLA 101.

Prazeau, Sarah. "The Pandemic: Our World Transformed." SCLA 101.

Scott, Jason. "The Principles of Journeys That Connect Us." SCLA 102.

Whitsitt, William Kieran. Untitled. SCLA 102.