ERASMUS

Edition 2

think deeper.

FEBRUARY 2024

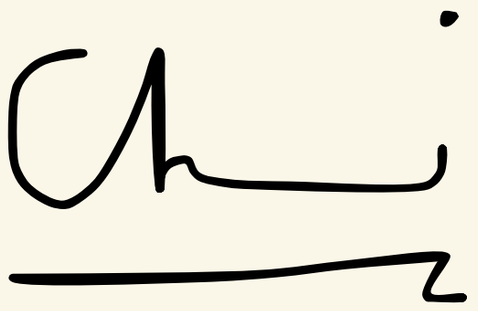
Dear voyager...

Welcome to this little space where ideas abode and abound.

Welcome to a reading experience devoid of topic, time and word constraints - just as our writers are devoid of topic, time and word constraints.

Welcome to *Erasmus*.

I hope you enjoy your stay with us,
and I hope the ideas in these essays will stay with you.



Chenrui Zhang

The Potty Potted Pot Problem

I, like many people, own an item or two with the handy stamp “made in China”. My extensive mug collection adds some British production lines, while my glasses come from Italy, and some of my tableware from France. The food I eat as a student is a rather irrational collaboration of foods from cultures around the world, thrown together haphazardly in a pan, and eaten at irregular intervals. The books I handle in the library mostly come from the minds of British, American and German scholars. My music taste is just as random, with the languages I listen to including a song or two in French, Spanish, German and Korean, as well as my native tongue of English.

If a catastrophic world event were to hit my college, and myself and the rest of the students and lecturers here were buried under a large pile of debris, archaeologists in the centuries to come may well dig us up, and have a whale of a time attempting to work out who we were. Were we British or not? Which city did we come from? What on earth were we doing there? The joy of living in Oxford makes it easy to come into contact with students from around the globe, and to, in befriending them, come to see the world we live in from different viewpoints. But for the archaeologist of the future, left with but a random array of objects from a variety of origins, the task of identifying their owner becomes colossally complex. Was I a woman from Sainsbury’s? Or did I migrate

here from Germany, picking up random items along my travels, finally settling in Oxford? Or, did I come into contact with sellers from many countries, and buy something off of them to take home? Were these objects heirlooms, passed down for generations until they were buried with me? What meaning did I attach to each of these items? Were they part of an expression of my identity, or just household necessities?

Imagine, also, that there was no literary record left to analyse. The only items surviving that were left from the lives we live now were the most durable. Foods and fabrics would degrade easily. Give it time, and metal would rust. Bricks would crumble. Perhaps all that would be left would be the foundations of the buildings and a skeleton or two if we were lucky.

This is the problem faced by archaeologists, studying cultures that have left no surviving literary record – either by the chance of non-survival (i.e. they wrote on degradable material and nothing is left of it) or because they did not have a writing system yet (and so didn't write anything down – instead, they likely used more of their memory, something that we often forget to do today; I, for one, can't remember what I ate this morning, let alone what I learnt in my lectures last Tuesday, to my dismay). What is left to these tired truth-finders is scraps of material, mostly from burial sites, but also from settlements, and often with it a whole host of pottery.

Pottery survives. Clay is remarkably durable – and even while it can break and shatter, and the paint or decoration wear off over time, there always seems to be something left of it. If then, archaeologists from the future dug me up, and found my plate had a stamp saying "made in China", and this was all they found… They may well be tempted to label me as Chinese. Unfortunately, I am English.

While this is a humourous thought process, I can reassure the reader that for at least students of Classical and Mediterranean Archaeology and Ancient History, this can be one of the most frustrating aspects of their degree that they come across. They can happily relate to you an ancient site of their choosing, and excitedly mention all that has been found there, and various theories about its function and the people who once passed through. Once you ask, however, where each individual item from excavation comes from, and who owned it, the student may look nervous. Due to the advances in excavations, finds and scholarship within the last 50 years or so, we can be more confident with the question: where does this 'type' of item come from?

But even then, there is the problem of where it was made. It is all very well saying that Pot A found at site B is an Aramaic plate of Style C from time period D, likely from site or region E. But was it made in site B, or was it made by site E? Was it made by a local of site, or by a foreigner from site E living in site B? Related to this, then, is who owned it? How did they get it? Was it a local site B-er, a site E-er, or someone else entirely? Was this pot even made in some other site F, in imitation of the style of site E, and then did it find its way to site B? The life of a pot, being so easily movable, is a remarkably tricky one to pin down. Now that clay samples can be analysed scientifically, at least sometimes we can tell roughly where the clay came from with more certainty.

Pottery really does move too easily, and unless there is some kind of stamp labelling it (not a common phenomenon) we only have the pot to go by. Style is, of course, a great start. For example, the shape of a pot, how it is decorated, how it is made – added to its probable function – gives great indication of where the original 'type' of pot came from. And, after the classification drives of the last century of

scholarship, knowing the style and the type of pottery allows the archaeologist to place the piece of pottery on a chronological time scale and in a vague geographic area. We now have enough information about the development of pottery in many cultures and social groups to give pretty good guestimates of such things. Thus, if I were to find in Christ Church Meadow in Oxford a teapot, I would be able to say, from comparison with a textbook of other pieces of pottery, whether it was an 18th century London-made teapot or a locally made 1950s teapot. It is a silly example, but you get the gist.

Because of these classifications, pottery has been used to help date archaeological sites. Naturally, there are other ways to date a site, but pottery is useful to give the archaeologist a good idea of what time period they are looking at. Sometimes, pottery is all that there is left – in that case, we have little option but to date what we have found by pottery.

To round this off, and to help the reader to appreciate and acknowledge this problem, I will give a semi-fictional example.

An Archaeologist found a fragment of pottery, at a settlement in the north of Africa, known as Utica, nearby Carthage. They were aware that Utica was known as a 'Phoenician' settlement (that is, founded by people from cities or a city on the Levantine coast in the eastern Mediterranean, like Byblos, Tyre, Sidon and the like – the name 'Phoenician' has come from Greek sources, and is not, as far as we know, how the 'Phoenicians' actually identified themselves, making the term problematic), and that the settlement was probably founded sometime in the 9th century BC. They studied the piece, and realised through comparison that it was an 8th century BC amphora (for simplicities sake, a large jug that could hold and

contents of liquid or otherwise), of the Late Geometric style (around 760-700BC), from Corinth. They assumed, given that later ancient historical traditions labelled this site of Utica as 'Phoenician', that this amphora had arrived in Utica from a 'Phoenician' trader, who had, on their travels, visited the port at Corinth and picked it up, perhaps to trade the contents later. It had then been deposited somewhere in the settlement of Utica, after the trader had arrived at the settlement.

But what if, said the first Scholar after the finds were published, you are wrong? What if, it was a Corinthian man living there? What if, said man had travelled away from Corinth in search of new opportunities, and ended up in Utica? What if, there was a group of Corinthians living side by side the 'Phoenicians' and the other social groups and communities who lived in the area from before the time of the 'Phoenicians'? What if, they carried their home pottery with them?

But what if, said the second Scholar in response to the first, you are wrong? What if, a Greek trader, from whichever city, came to Utica to trade, and then left? What if, it was a Rhodian or Athenian carrying the amphora, and they did not come to settle, but to trade?

But what if, said the third Scholar in response to the second, you are wrong? What if, the amphora was meant to be travelling to Greek settlements further west, and the ship was shipwrecked, leaving the Greek travellers stranded near Carthage, and this amphora is what remains of their unexpected stay?

But what if, said the fourth Scholar in response to the third, you are wrong? What if, this was not an amphora from Corinth, but was actually made locally, by a 'Phoenician' potter who wished to emulate the popular style of a transport jug, to make either the jug or its contents more sellable?

But what if, said the fifth Scholar in response to the fourth, you are wrong? What if, the people groups who had lived here longer than the 'Phoenicians' used this piece of pottery? What if, this was part of their interaction with the cultures and people groups who they were now in contact with?

But what if, said the Student in response to the five scholars, you are all wrong? What if, when the amphora is the sole Corinthian object in this site, it does not mean a person or a family? What if, it does not mean trade? What if, it does not mean shipwreck? What if, we can't tell anything for sure?

But what if, said the second Archaeologist excavating the site ten years later, I just found more Corinthian pottery? Does this finally mean Corinthian people definitely lived here?

And so the tale continues. None of this is new to archaeologists nowadays, and with further discoveries our theories and discussions will constantly flux and change. But it is nonetheless worth writing about, if merely to vent frustration to those who know nothing of the subject, and also to add to the modern discussions about identity, the way each of us express and construct our own identity, and how the community also expresses and constructs its identity.

As I finish, I leave you with something to remember and ponder on: pots never do equal people. Even if we find a whole host of pottery from site A in site B, we cannot conclude that people from site A lived in site B. People express themselves in a magnificent variety of ways, and we cannot rely on just one small piece of evidence to reconstruct even a part of their identity, ethnic or otherwise.

Hannah Treece
our Grim Sleeper

The dark world of Agatha Christie

It's a glorious summer's day at the Essex country house of Styles Court. The manor's proud owners, the Cavendish family, spend the day much like any other: horse riding, games of tennis, tea on the lawn. But that afternoon, two furious arguments are overheard, and in the early hours of the morning, the family matriarch suffers an agonising death from strychnine poisoning.

This is the basic plot of Agatha Christie's debut novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, and it is a quintessential example of what became her modus operandi; an isolated setting, a contained list of suspects, and a vast catalogue of plausible motives for dispatching the unfortunate victim. These elements would remain consistent throughout her sixty-year writing career, helping define a formula which made her the best-selling author since William Shakespeare. Perhaps because of this consistency, she seems to have developed an unfair reputation as an author of twee, "cosy" crime fiction, in which every plot is a variation on Colonel Mustard in the library with the lead piping, and nothing happens to seriously challenge the established order of country houses and chocolate box villages. Nothing could be further from the truth; her writing is often subversive and unsettling, a window to a world in which nothing is as it seems and no one can really be trusted.

In Agatha Christie's world, everyone is a potential murderer. Her most famous detective, Hercule Poirot, believes that "it is the quietest and meekest people who are often capable of the most sudden and unexpected violence."

Christie's writing is full of seemingly ordinary, upstanding members of society who turn, for a multitude of reasons, to murder: doctors, actors, archaeologists and police officers have all been unmasked as killers in her 66 novels and dozens of short stories. It is true that the overwhelming majority are upper- or middle-class, but this was the stratum of society in which Christie spent most of her life.

By writing about settings and people with which she was familiar, she was able to explore the darkest recesses of human nature, exposing the hypocrisy of a society which wore a mask of respectability to hide the lies, secrets and greed which festered behind closed doors. The middle-class identity of her murderers is part of what made them so disturbing to twentieth-century Britain: this was not a world which people associated with violence and untimely death, and it implied that any community could have a potential killer in its midst.

And even those characters innocent of the murder itself are usually hiding secrets of their own, meaning the restoration of normality which accompanies the unmasking of the killer at the end of a Christie novel is an illusion. How can life go on as normal when the characters have had the darkest parts of their natures exposed, and when they all believed each other to be potential murderers?

Perhaps even more unsettling is the unexceptional nature of most of her victims; most of them are not wealthy widows or heiresses. Those murdered in Christie novels include curates,

teachers, shopkeepers and a Girl Guide. People are killed for such trivial reasons as being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or to distract attention from a more significant crime. Far from a settled, orderly representation of middle England, Christie's world is one in which no one is safe, and violence, hatred and murderous jealousy lurk around every corner. As her other famous creation, the elderly Miss Marple, says, in any of Christie's beautiful villages or luxurious hotels, "you turn over a stone and have no idea what will crawl out."

No relationship is sacred to Christie. People in her stories are murdered by their closest friends; by their spouses; even, in the case of one unfortunate man, by his own mother. Contrary to her image as a clinical, detached writer who glossed over the inherent violence of the crimes she wrote about, many of her murders are surprisingly brutal. Victims are strangled, bludgeoned, drowned, and poisoned with hydrochloric acid. Nor does she shy away from disturbing subject matter: in the novel *Halloween Party*, for example, two young children are drowned, while her play *The Mousetrap* drew on a real case of horrific child abuse which shocked the nation at the end of the Second World War.

And even apart from the presence of violence and secrets, the world of Agatha Christie is not the serene idyll of the popular imagination. The times in which she lived were often worrying and unstable, and this is reflected in her novels. Take her debut, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*; life in the peaceful country house takes place against the backdrop of the First World War. Petrol is rationed, the village doctor is unmasked as a German spy, and the narrator, Captain Hastings, is recovering from a wound received on the Western Front. Hercule Poirot, introduced in this novel, is a Belgian refugee, "limping badly" from an injury implied to have been suffered while fleeing his homeland. Christie's

impressive technical knowledge of poisons, frequently used to great effect in her books, had its roots in her WW1 work in a hospital dispensary. Later novels reflect fears of the political extremism which surfaced after the war; both communist and fascist sympathisers, and the occasional spy, were featured in her work during the 1920s and 1930s.

The political establishment did not escape criticism either. On being unmasked, one politically influential murderer implies that Poirot should let him go because of his importance to the country's future. The suggestion is treated with the contempt it deserves.

Christie pushed the rules of detective fiction as far as they could stretch, while sticking scrupulously to the unwritten law that the reader must be given an opportunity to identify the killer before they are unmasked. Novels such as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The ABC Murders* take advantage of expectations concerning how a detective novel should work, using them to pull the rug from under the reader's feet.

These novels are now so well-known that their solutions might seem cliched, but a century ago they were almost revolutionary. *And Then There Were None* is a story of psychological torture, in which ten people, trapped on a deserted island, are mocked by an unknown killer as they are picked off one by one.

In her later career, much of her work revolved around the theme of memory, leading to a number of novels concerning the investigation of cold cases. Perhaps the best of these is *Five Little Pigs*, in which five different accounts of the same sixteen-year-old murder are put together to solve the crime.

So why is Agatha Christie often seen as an escapist author of cosy crime, fun to read on a long winter evening but without much literary merit?

The lighthearted tone of her writing often serves to dampen the unsettling implications of a world in which everyone is hiding something, and anyone is capable of murder given the right motivation. The comical habits and appearance of Poirot (with his huge moustache and obsession with symmetry and neatness) and the amusing image of the elderly Miss Marple running rings around professional detectives provide Christie's work with enduring charm and introduce levity into the novels, an essential ingredient in interwar crime fiction. Without it, the dark world of Agatha Christie may have been too dark for a society scarred by the ravages of a global war.

And perhaps she has been a victim of her own success: such is her reputation for plot twists and ingenious solutions that this is what reviews of her work have usually focused on, then and now. There is nothing wrong with this – it's made her the bestselling novelist in history – but it does lead to her being thought of as a clever plotter, and not much else.

I believe it's time for a reassessment of Agatha Christie. Her novels will always be seen as among the cleverest in the crime fiction genre; but it's high time they were also recognised as being among the most innovative, and the most disturbing.

Benjamin Salter
our armchair detective

On desire

Imagine a world without desire. Imagine a world in which humans beings could think, feel, communicate, but could not want something. Anyone suffering from depression will tell you what this is like, especially if they are advanced in years. There is one thing worse than desiring something you do not want to desire, and that is desiring nothing at all. Not that 'nothing' is an object which can be desired: rather, the faculty of desiring is itself dead.

Few people would want to enter this strange world of unwanting and unwanted humanoids; and those who already taste of this dystopia in their real lives would very much have the old reality back, the days of childhood when the smallest branch and the tiniest toy awakened a whole universe of desire in them. There is something healthy and vital about having vigorous wants. What we might call appetitive indifference is a symptom either of a robot or of a very sick human being. If you ask Dante, the only place in the *Divine Comedy* where desires are well and truly dead is the icy pit of Hell.

'Desire is the very essence of man,' said Spinoza in 1677. From the moment of birth, before it can even think, love, and speak, the rational animal is a desiring subject. Philosophers have long laboured to aptly describe the reality of desire, though of course, one cannot get an objective view

on the matter, for the very act of defining is also an expression of desire. Classical philosophy—Cicero for example—tended to view it as one of the four passions, alongside fear, joy, and sorrow. Thus, desire and fear are the forward-looking responses to an object not possessed, while joy and sorrow are emotions felt once a thing is possessed.

Implicitly, desire represents lack and need. Diotima argues in Plato's *Symposium* that Love (used roughly as 'desire' in this text) cannot be a god, but only a spirit, because she is in need of goodness and beauty. Even in our modern vocabulary this is the case: we desire an object until we attain it, after which it is more appropriate to use words like 'enjoyment,' 'delight,' 'rest,' or 'satisfaction.' So desire is the primal symptom of the incompleteness and open-endedness of human nature, a nature which can never rest satisfied with what it possesses in itself.

The inevitable question, 'need for what,' is not so easy to answer. Common experience reveals a bewildering diversity of wants, including friendship, food, reproduction, entertainment, knowledge, peace. Plato (*Republic*, VIII) distinguishes necessary desires which are natural and good to satisfy (e.g., to eat) from unnecessary desires which are extraneous and whose indulgence is dangerous (e.g., overeating; exacting revenge).

Either way, it is common to group all human desires under the single desire for happiness, for eudaimonia, as Aristotle would say. Happiness being not a singular object to be grasped and pursued, but something mediated through countless, often conflicting desires. Plato puts it even more generally when he speaks of 'the desire to have the good forever' (*Symposium*, 206). No doubt Brian May was reading his Penguin edition of the *Symposium* when he sat down to compose 'Who Wants to Live Forever.'

Plato and Aristotle posit an underlying desire for an ultimate good in each human psyche. Be that as it may, tangible human experience always feels more obscure and complicated. Often the human subject simply does not know what it desires. In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, C.S. Lewis' young protagonist spends a good deal of time looking through a window in a wall in hopes of seeing 'the Island,' a sight he used to see, and which used to fill him with great yearning, so that he now painfully desires the old yearning itself, though for what he could not say.

Among potential objects of human desire, *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a top candidate. I mentioned earlier the problem of desiring nothing, but equally debilitating is desiring everything so that one doesn't know what one wants, which ultimately feels rather like wanting nothing. When it comes to desires, stillness and exuberance are equally destructive.

Pondering this messy state of affairs, many thinkers have been less confident to identify what humans desire than to point out that those desires, whatever they are, are not satisfiable. 'We grow weary of those things (and perhaps soonest) which we most desire,' said Samuel Butler (c. 1670). In Dante's *Commedia*, the insatiable she-wolf in the Inferno represents man whose 'heart, I saw, could never rest' on earth (Purgatorio 24.31). Alphonse de Lamartine, a lover of Dante as it happens, defined human beings as 'limited in nature, infinite in desires' in 1820. I think Ralph Waldo Emerson wins the prize for pithiness: 'Much will have more' (1870). The only certainty appears to be that satisfaction is the great thieving knave of our spiritual lives, like a consummate magician who elides his audience at all the right moments. Strange fact indeed, then, that we should desire at all.

However, the matter is not always seen in such a hopeless light. For a very long time there has existed an alternate approach to the problem of desire, which prefers to ask how they arise rather than how they are fulfilled. The Platonic tradition, and the Judeo-Christian tradition which interpreted it, make the astonishing suggestion that human desires are not merely to be indulged or denied, but to be examined, tested, transformed, and perfected.

The Stoics preached the suppression of the passions, but for Plato the spiritual life was a progressive ascent through increasingly wholesome kinds of love, having as its object first a body, than bodies in general, then minds, then Beauty itself (*Symposium*, 210). Several centuries later, Plato's disciple Plotinus theorized about an ascent from the body to the transcendent One, which although presupposes that every soul desires the Good/One (*Ennead* 1.6.7), also requires active reordering of desires away from physical things and towards immaterial realities.

Regardless of the merits of the Platonic vision, one can at least observe the ambition and sheer daring of the plan; namely, that people can by some herculean effort of the intellect reach into themselves and reorient their wants. No less remarkable is getting a compass to point in another direction.

Drawing on this framework, Christians have tended to supernaturalize the first of the four Ciceronian passions into the desire and love for God, and when it comes to more ordinary desires, they usually talk about ordering (not merely eradicating) them and harmonizing them with the primal desire for the creator-God. Hence we find an almost comical phrase in the King James Bible when Christ says that 'With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you' (Lk 22:15).

It would be a great mistake to think there are only two kinds of people: first, the rational person, who denies his desires and by athletic exertions of the will does only what he ought to do; and second, the indulgent one, sensual and impulsive, who seeks to satisfy whichever desires happen to be the *plat du jour*. There is a middle category. These are the men and women who, keenly sensitive to their desires, guide and cultivate their wants according to reason such that their rational and appetitive functions are integrated and unified.

These are the kinds of people who convey well-rounded personalities and appear the most grounded: because they are one, and as Plato would say, the different parts of their souls operate in unison like a well-ordered city.

Pascal said that man is a thinking reed; but in truth he is really a desiring plant which thinks, and thus in the final account, more like a sunflower, than a reed.

Andrei Lambert
our petit philosophe

The mathematics of friendship

In the grand equation of human connections, the mathematics of friendship offers a delightful conundrum: it is both quantifiable and enigmatic, grounded in logic yet defying precise calculation. The foundational principle here is the axiom of reciprocity, mirroring the algebraic need for balance. This principle posits that friendships, much like equations, require equal contributions from both sides to remain in harmonious equilibrium.

First up, the axiom of reciprocity, which sounds like something out of a physics textbook but really means, "I scratch your back, you scratch mine." It’s the bread and butter of any friendship, suggesting that like a delicate algebraic balance, each side should bring something to the table. As David Burkus might tell you, it’s all about mutual benefits, though not in a transactional sense – more like trading baseball cards of emotional support and inside jokes.

Then there’s the Circle of Friendship, a geometric model that suggests closeness is inversely related to how broad your circle is. Think of it as your social life being a pizza: the more slices you have, the less pizza each friend gets. Dunbar threw in his two cents, stating we can only manage about 150 meaningful relationships before our social Rolodex starts to overflow. This model essentially tells us we might be trying to befriend the entire auditorium when we should perhaps focus on the front row.

Probability theory adds another layer, painting friendship as a random lottery of who you sit next to on the bus or bump into at a coffee shop. Yet, this randomness is somewhat of a facade; it's the repeated, "Hey, didn’t I see you at that concert?" encounters that start to follow a pattern, transitioning from serendipity to "Let's grab coffee".

Graph theory offers a bird's-eye view of our social networks, showing us as nodes in a vast web of connections. This is where you find out if you’re a hub, a connector of disparate friend groups, or perhaps a bit of a loner, dangling on the edge of the web. It’s a reminder that sometimes being the bridge can make you the mayor of Friendship Town, privy to gossip and invites galore.

But let’s not forget, the heart of friendship isn’t something you can plot on a graph or calculate with an algorithm. It's in the inexplicable fits of laughter, the "thinking of you" messages, and the comfort of silence between words. Aristotle mused about friendship being a single soul dwelling in two bodies, which might be overdoing it a bit, but he’s not wrong. It’s these immeasurable, unquantifiable moments that stick, defying the neat confines of mathematics.

In wrapping up this foray into the arithmetic of camaraderie, it’s clear that while the models and theories provide a neat framework, they fall short of capturing the full spectrum of what it means to be friends.

The real magic of friendship, much like the beauty of a complex equation, isn’t in the solving but in the marvelling at its existence. It's an algebra where the unknowns are the very essence that makes each connection unique and where the most significant figures are those that warm the heart rather than fill a ledger.

In this light, the mathematics of friendship is less about numbers and more about the art of human connection, a reminder that in the ledger of life, the most valuable entries are those penned in the ink of shared experiences and mutual affection.

Elias Turing
our experiment

Studio Ghibli: childhood endures

To me, Studio Ghibli is synonymous with wonder. Wonder for the world and the enchantment of storytelling and wonder for the magic of quiet moments in day-to-day life.

To simply call it a Japanese film studio would be a disservice to the unparalleled magic it brings to the world of animation. Though originally aimed at children, Studio Ghibli films have transcended cultural and generational differences since 1985 and won the hearts of audiences of all ages and backgrounds. Its ability to illuminate the beauty in the mundane and weave captivating tales makes founders Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki's cinematic powerhouse a homage to storytelling.

My first experience watching a Studio Ghibli film reminded me of how the ache of childhood nostalgia compels us to remember both life’s defining and fleeting moments. Whether the setting is a reposeful countryside town in *My Neighbour Totoro* or a miniature world hidden within a house in *The Secret World of Arrietty*, there is something profoundly sentimental about the magical realism and detailed aesthetics woven into every Ghibli tale.

Childhood nostalgia in Studio Ghibli feels like a familiar embrace, one you can’t help but sink yourself into when you crave solace amid the chaos of the outside world. Nostalgia

can be a crushingly bittersweet emotion to navigate, yet Studio Ghibli films gently help us to remember our vibrant and limitless feelings in childhood. When experiences like playing on the swings with friends were viewed in technicolour and adulthood was merely a distant whisper into the future. The beautiful hand-drawn animation style of Ghibli allows the audience to become immersed in fantastical world-building, yet it is the intricate details in the characters' everyday lives which evoke the viewer's comfort. Rather than depending on CGI, Ghibli's soothing stop-motion sequences allow for imitation of movement in the physical world, breathing life into minute moments such as an embrace between characters or the flicker of candlelight.

Take *Ponyo*, where the heart-warming scenes of a little boy called Sosuke and his goldfish friend Ponyo are filled with childlike curiosity. When Ponyo realises she can transform into a little girl and explores Sosuke's coastal town and the human world, the viewer sees how the importance of friendship and devotion is imbued through precious moments during their adventures.

Studio Ghibli's most popular and critically acclaimed film, *Spirited Away*, showcases the enchantment of adventure and courage through Chihiro's growth in navigating the spirit (*kami*) world. Her surreal encounters with characters including the mysterious spirit No Face and Yubaba the antagonistic witch culminate in a profound story that delves into themes of identity, love and resilience in growing up. Though the fantasy elements of Ghibli films such as in Spirited Away may be complex, the striking relatability viewers feel towards the characters' lives is deeply emotionally resonant.

The human condition is explored wonderfully in Ghibli's

animation, through universal themes surrounding everything from friendship, transitions into adulthood and grief to environmental consciousness and community.

When I watched *Whisper of the Heart* for the first time, a coming-of-age story chronicling the journey of Shizuku and Seiji who explore first love and independent ambitions, I felt an inextricable longing to relive my childhood memories. One memorable scene where Shizuku and Seiji go on a bike ride through their picturesque town at night still stays in my mind. The soft visuals of glowing streetlights, the endearing laughter of the children and the wondrous depiction of their surrounding city landscape encapsulate the pure joy of tender yet significant moments. The characters feel so alive that you can't help but live vicariously through them as if they were real companions rather than moving images on a screen. Though taking various shapes and forms, their emotions are as human as the viewers' feelings.

What makes Studio Ghibli films stand out is not just the emotions they evoke, but also the immersive music scores in each film which blend seamlessly with the stories created.

Joe Hisaishi's masterful compositions for Ghibli soundtracks help to bring the characters' experiences of their surrounding world to life. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, for example, his piece "The Merry-Go-Round-of-Life" is a mellifluous ode to the cyclical nature of life and a subtle nod to the enduring spirit and heart of Howl's castle. The synergy between music and art is an indispensable aspect of Ghibli's storytelling process, breathing life into the narratives of each film. If music alone can mentally transport an audience into alternate realms of their imagination, Studio Ghibli is proof that art itself is not confined to the limitations of moving screens. Hisaishi's words "Music has no nationality" serve as a reminder that it

is a universal language spoken from the heart. It dismantles linguistic barriers across the globe and reaches across cultures and generations.

One might argue that other animation studios can have the ability to create nostalgic and aesthetically pleasing films, but what makes Studio Ghibli unique is how even in the rapid development of 3D animation and monetization of content for children, it remains committed to its original artistry. The films are not excessively commercialised or profiting from our childhoods as cash-grabs, every film frame is produced with care and attention to detail which elevates the blend between fantasy and reality. Though the comforting visual elements of Ghibli films may especially appeal to younger audiences, there is an unparalleled feeling of nostalgia which seeps through the scenes.

As Miyazaki explains what makes animation appeal to him:

“I like the expression 'lost possibilities.' To be born means being compelled to choose an era, a place, and a life. To exist here, now, means to lose the possibility of being countless other potential selves.”

Studio Ghibli characters, though fictional, allow us to step into the lives of different bodies, offering an idyllic form of escapism from the mundanity of our day-to-day lives. Despite their endearing dispositions, they often grapple with their own struggles and weaknesses, ones that so closely mirror the intricacies of the human experience.

Growing up comes with an insurmountable pressure to conform, to define ourselves by what we do rather than staying true to who we are. Amidst a cacophonous dread of external opinions, we too often lose the foundations of our

peace and well-being. In this era, fast entertainment and media frequently sacrifices meaningful content as it becomes an incessant chase for consumerism and popularity. Studio Ghibli, however, encourages a more thoughtful and introspective approach to life and self-discovery.

Every time I revisit a Ghibli film as an adult, nostalgia is no longer a burden to carry, but rather a companion who is gently leading me back to my inner child. As a celebration of storytelling, these films aim to cherish not only the innocence of our childhoods but also the aspirations that linger when we learn to navigate adulthood. The magic of Studio Ghibli will always resonate with me as a reminder that even as the landscapes of youth change, time cannot erase the dreams and inner worlds we hold dear to us.

Minh Anh Nguyen
our whimsical devotee

Melnyk's musical mystique

Music has extreme personal importance for a great many people, and I am no exception. To say there is a realm of music which moves me, or has wider meaning somehow, a profound message, or exhibits sheer genius, would not be new. There is a wealth of differing, beautiful musical narratives out there enriched in genius past and present; in this article I would like to introduce the dear reader to yet another, not necessarily as one more or less glorious than the others but as a remarkable, unique. The author of this music would be the first to deny that his music is "best", though I would wholeheartedly say he ranks among the greatest that has ever lived or will live. Who is "he"?

Lubomyr Melnyk, born on the 22nd December 1948, is the sole progenitor, genuine performer and composer of the type of music to which I refer: "continuous music". It is essentially an art form for the piano only but can be excellently combined with other instruments. He is Ukrainian but grew up near Winnipeg, Canada, before moving to Paris where he had his musical revelation in this 20s. He has been called "the prophet of the piano". This is a grandiose title and deserves some justification, which I will try to give. He is very much still alive, kicking and touring, and I am a current student of his (I know – biased, right?). But I am so because I chose to be, because I sought him out; his music blew my mind and occupied the crater it left for months until I summoned up

the courage to contact him – I'm not exactly being forced at gunpoint to write this.

As already said, it is not a unique thing to have an intensely personal connection to music, but the nature of his connection and his music is unique. It is also quite unplayable (in a good way!); to the best of our knowledge, the overwhelming majority of his pieces cannot be truly performed by any other pianist (we would both love to be proven wrong on this point). For immediate shock value, let me say he holds world records in speed and duration of speed, with peak speeds of 19.5 notes per second and sustained 14 notes per second over the course of a whole hour – in each hand. These are… insane numbers, and genuine (though were taken from a studio recording rather than a special Guinness-approved performance) but maybe you're not impressed.

Fair enough; there are loads of YouTube videos of fast pianists doing glissandos or repeated key smashes at similar (but usually slower) speeds, but no one listens to repeated key smashes, do they? I suppose there's no accounting for taste. It's far more significant that it is possible to play at such speeds and still produce something genuinely musical. But be not distracted, the speed is in fact the least important part, a mere side effect of his technique. I mention it only for shameless read-bait.

His music typically consists of great (in the oldest sense of the word) flowing phrases, with clearly emphasised melodies somehow picked out among the sea of notes, harmonies emerging from the brushstrokes. And in this sea, there is supreme subtlety in the intonation and weight of every note – they are not there for show. The overall effect is striking. Sure, it is an acquired taste and not everyone can like it, but I

would highly encourage anyone to at least try it, especially for those interested in piano. For first exposure, I think the tracks: “Pockets of Light” (which I performed at the most recent Balliol Member’s concert), “Le Miroir D’Amour”, “The Pool of Memories” and “Butterfly” offer a gentle and varied introduction. Ever more extraordinary pieces do exist, but this is a good place to start. I promise you have not heard anything truly like it.

To call his technique merely “technique” is almost missing the point. Bear with me here. He is a deeply spiritual man and has a complex philosophy surrounding the piano, and from my own experience of the man I think it is fair to say when he plays it is as if he is in a holy communion; not Communion with a capital Christian C, mind, there is no religion here. He enters a deep trance-like state, with mind, body and piano linked inextricably in what he thinks of as another dimension, or indeed an enormous family of other dimensions. To the average scientifically minded Western ear, such claims are easy to politely undermine. I myself held statements like these at arm’s length, being a staunch atheist all my life. Yet interacting with this music has broadened my horizons; seeing the impact of these ideas on a real man and experiencing them in the miniature for myself has softened my scepticism. Take away the spirituality, and his music is no longer possible. And again, I say that as a rigour-obsessed mathematician living on the outskirts of faith, but I very strongly mean what I say here.

Unfortunately, a combination of the common mistrust of spiritualism with Lubomyr’s admittedly eccentric online self-presentation has brought a great dealt of derision his way; it is common to find comments along the lines of “it’s just arpeggios”, for example, but you may as well say all piano music is “just notes”; please keep an open mind. Indeed, he

worked in relative obscurity until fairly recently, being dismissed by the establishment as a fringe musician. I am happy to say he now tours more regularly and I'm currently looking for support to allow him to come to Oxford to perform from time to time.

To offer a simple explanation of how the spiritualism helps, one idea is that you cannot force your hands to maintain those controlled speeds for any meaningful length of time without causing serious tension in the hand, finger, arm and mind. He can do what he does in part because he cannot even feel his fingers when he plays; the sense of touch any good pianist must have has transcended to … something else. Words fail me slightly, for I am not him and I have only experienced fragments of this for myself. The ability to play without thought and rely on muscle memory is common to all experienced pianists, but this runs deeper; he has developed the entering and control of the thoughtless state to stellar heights, so that it is somehow an art form rather than the simple side effect of practicing that it is for most of us.

However, this really is a simplistic take on what's going on; he is neither entirely unconscious nor unthinking nor concentrating in the usual senses, and is without any of the apathy or tension those entail:

"Part of my mind controls the fingers, part of my mind controls my hand, part of my mind is controlling my entire body, part of my mind is thinking about something else, and part of my mind is combining everything. For the body to be able to reach this enormous universe, which is huge, it has to be changed. This is what continuous music is about."

These are not pretentions delivered from on high, either. I say all this because it is exactly what I have been trying to do

for the last few years of practicing his music and can confidently say that it really works! I first contacted him after learning the notes to “pockets of light”… and it took a further two years to actually play the piece, to bring out and experience the hidden song, and I can only do that by following his principles.

I have “learnt” (to a limited extent) a few more of his pieces since then, and I know I play them best when I am enervated, when there are no flickering mental or physical distractions and the only thing I can do is sink into the keys and unthinkingly let the hands move but still attempt – and I make no claim that the attempt is truly successful – to perceive them (he is very fond of this language) as abstracted away from the ‘self’ yet still within my sphere of influence.

To reopen my eyes or let myself regain some degree of active consciousness is to introduce tension in the body and damage the flow, maybe even ruin it on a bad day.

Or something like that – I’m certainly not “there” yet, wherever there is; try, or try not to try, as I might there is almost always some (increasingly smaller as time goes on!) amount of tension in my hand which obstructs my playing. I am probably decades away from being able to play even a few of his more advanced works.

These ideas can be, and were, taken to their extreme: I can remark that he developed this music from a state of total mental and physical exhaustion, while homeless in Paris with almost nothing save for a kind friend who allowed him the use of her old piano in her attic. This was the critical period of transformation, and he relates it with his Ukrainian heritage:

"This music would not exist at all if I were not Ukrainian. Our distinguishing feature is that we tend to sacrifice ourselves".

Thank you for reading. I apologise if I perhaps spoke too mysteriously, but as said it is very difficult to express exactly what is going on. I wish I knew myself. If nothing else, I hope I've piqued some interest and that the dear reader will give his music a go for a little while, allowing some time for it settle in the mind. Do contact me if you wish to; I'm looking for future "Oxford Society of Continuous Music" members!

Nathan Adlam

our monadic musician

Thinking like an Economist

What is economics?

Once upon a time, an economist called Lionel Robbins wanted to answer the question ‘what is economics?’. This is a good question, and arguably a strange one to not have been answered satisfyingly by as late as 1932, when economics had been well established as a discipline.

However, many subjects develop this way, with people asking and answering disparate questions only to eventually discover they are working on the same fundamental things, and then forming a discipline to work on these questions which derive from the same source. Medicine might start off as a study of various maladies, from battle wounds to toothaches, but eventually practitioners realise that the questions they are asking are all connected in being about the nature of the human body and human health. This improves the discipline and the practitioners, as a doctor faced with an unfamiliar illness will be well served by knowing how the human body should work normally, and all the things that have been seen to go wrong with it before. Therefore, for ‘economists’ it is important to try and work out what economics is, and what is and is not part of it.

If you were asked what economics is, what would you answer? Stop for a minute and think about it. I am willing to

bet something like ‘the study of the economy’ came up, which is of course sensible. What is the economy then, beyond just whatever economists study? Perhaps your mind rushes to the stock market, to the Bank of England, to a newsreader saying the ‘economy’ is going well or poorly. This is definitely something economists study, and it would be profoundly weird to come up with a definition which does not include this in ‘economics’ but it also seems profoundly limited, which I am going to attempt to show you.

Who is the most beloved man in economics? There are many great economists, but there is one whose clear sighted genius has allowed economics to truly advance and step out of the darkness of ignorance. I am of course talking about Robinson Crusoe the castaway from the novel of Daniel Defoe. I joke of course, but Crusoe turns up nigh constantly in economics, because the concept of a castaway on an island is so useful for illustrating what we mean when we say economics. In addition, it is a very valuable way of illustrating what else is economics, beyond what we would normally think of as the economy, and how economics can be of use in all kinds of decision making.

So, Crusoe is, as he always is, on his island, entirely alone (economists largely do not bother to consider Defoe’s actual plotline and just have Crusoe be a lone castaway on an island). He has no money, nor any way to spend it if he had, yet even here, there is an economy.

Crusoe may fish, or collect coconuts, and only has 16 hours in the waking day to do so. He must evaluate his preferences, and ration his time, for it is scarce, at least in the sense that no matter what he does, he would always prefer more time, or more coconuts and fish than he is able to collect in the time he has.

This is the crucial fact, Crusoe is facing **scarcity**, and this is what makes it a matter of economics. If Crusoe could collect all the coconuts he desired in an hour, and all the fish he desired in 2, and had no other uses of his time, then there would be no economics to think about, at least beyond a trivial fact that he should collect all he desires. Crusoe's time is scarce, so he must make **choices**, he may have fish or coconuts, but not both (or at least, not all he wants of both).

This expands to the real world, beyond Crusoe's Island. With the money in my budget, I must choose between going out to write this article in a café (as I have done) or go out to dinner tonight, and I may not do both. There is **scarcity** and therefore there is economics. In the economy at large, when the chancellor brings out the budget it is a matter of economics because there is **scarcity**, if there was infinite resources such that we could do everything we possibly would wish to, there would be no meaningful choices to make, and thus no economics.

In case you haven't been alerted by all the scarcity in bold by now, economics is 'the science that studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce resources which have alternative uses'. In effect, when we are faced with scarcity meaning that we can't do all that we want with what we have, economics is the study of the choices we make. By extension, 'an economy' is a system of distributing scarce resources (BoE).

Economics does not care why we want what we want, only that we do. A man called Alfred Marshall called economics the study of human welfare (by which we mean wellbeing) and went as far to say that when we talk of war, there is no economics to be thought of, as welfare does not enter into it. This seems profoundly weird, that we might talk of welfare

brings economics firmly into the subjective, do phones serve ones welfare? How do we produce a theory in terms of welfare when the idea of what is good for people is such a contested topic? Ultimately, to talk about preferences is far more objective. A phone may or may not serve my welfare, but I undoubtedly want one, and am willing to consider using scarce resources to obtain one, and thus economics merely must take our preferences as they stand, rather than questioning them.

So, we have many wants and scarce resources, and therefore we make choices. This is a very nice concept, but what does it tell us? What are the choices we make and how do we make them? The next bolded concept I want to introduce you to is **rationing**. Generally, when we say rationing, we imagine something out of the blitz, but rationing is the 'artificial restriction of demand'. This is what we have to do when faced with demand which exceeds resources, along with our second bolded concept **incentives**. Incentives are any mechanism to encourage anything, but in this context we care about incentivising production. If our natural state is to want more than we have, then we need to find some way of increasing what we have, and reducing what we want, such that these things come into alignment.

So we restrict demand and encourage supply, very good, but how? Let us turn to two cases, which I think are the two ways of doing this. Firstly, let us look at the totalitarian dictatorship of Scott-topia, the denizens only care about bread and rest, with bread being distributed equally from a central stockpile, and produced by workers who work without payment. This issue is, the denizens of Scott-topia want to consume more bread than they want to produce. Each denizen would be sated with 20 loaves but each denizen would prefer to only grow 5 (as they would prefer to rest

rather than work in the fields). Faced with this catastrophe, the magnanimous dictator of Scott-topia, Scott Chakravarti, mandates 2 directives: all citizens will consume 10 loaves of bread and if they consume more, they will be shot, all citizens will produce 10 loaves of bread as well, if they produce less, they will also be shot. Satisfied with this, Scott goes back to his palace made of solid gold, convinced he has in fact solved economics.

In the neighbouring Chakravarti-land, the denizens are just the same, but instead the magnanimous president Chakravarti Scott mandates a market for bread, bread will be provided in return for labouring in the grain fields. Thus, the citizens want bread less (as to have bread comes with a cost of having to have less rest time) but produce more (as producing bread comes with the reward of being able to consume it), and thus the situation settles at every individual producing and consuming 10 loaves. Chakravarti Scott embezzles all that was left in the stockpile and retires to his palace of solid gold, satisfied he has solved economics.

Gold palaces aside, these are the two approaches we tend to take to rationing and incentivising. Either we do it by ‘fiat’ or by ‘markets’. Fiat is a far simpler system to understand, with someone deciding how much one should produce and consume, and simply forcing it to be so. This system often is implied to be very Soviet, with production targets and bread rations, but it doesn’t have to be. In fact, virtually all jobs work on ‘fiat’. When you are hired on to a company, your employer doesn’t give you a task then bargain with you on the price, they merely impose it on you at the cost of losing your job.

Fiat can be very simple and very successful. For example, in WW2, food rationing made a great deal of sense; the

government knew what its food stockpiles were, it knew the caloric needs of the population so artificially limited consumption. Likewise, firms work by fiat as it can be deeply inefficient to invoke markets and incentives when trying to get people to do things, better sometimes to just say ‘do that’ and have that be the end.

Yet fiat can have terminal problems, or at least markets can have great advantages over it. Firstly, markets force people to give up their true preferences. I fully intend to give this another article (so watch this space!) But put simply, when preferences are non-objective (there is a set, objective number of calories a person needs to live, but not a set amount of cake someone needs to be happy, or a set amount of leisure time to feel enriched for example), it is difficult to maximise utility, and this can lead to over and under provision of resources. Likewise, markets act as both incentive to production and disincentive to consumption and will fairly inevitably bring a system into alignment by price changes, which a fiat system won’t necessarily do.

Regardless, the way these mechanisms deal with scarcity and whether any of them do it better (and of course there are a million variations on the theme of fiat/markets) is ultimately a question of economics because they deal with scarcity. This concept is at the very core of economics, and when you next look at ‘economic’ news, you should try to understand it by looking at what is scarce, and therefore what choices are being made in response. I hope this has made you a more informed citizen, till next time!

Ian Chakravarti
our Braincell

On Finding my Grandad's Poetry in the Bodleian Library

"Twas Brillig and the double time
Did gear and gimble in the wage
The sloping floor was sheathed in grime
The Gov'nor was in a rage.
Beware the Forklift Trok, my son
The forks that pierce
The wheels that maim
Beware the Forklift Trok, and shun
The foreman, old Roy 'whatsisname'."

The subtitle to my grandad's reworking of 'The Jabberwocky' reads, "with apologies to Lewis Caroll"; I have to say, I love the image of the author of *Alice in Wonderland* casting his eye upon *Mixed Nuts!*, which comprises the collected works of the Medway and Maidstone Writers Club from the 1990's. Calling this book up from the dusty vaults of the Bodleian library, one finds it in an unsurprisingly pristine condition, pages untouched, and looking at the quality of the verse within it, one can perhaps imagine why. The best advertisement the publishing company could come up with was, and I quote, "At just £5.99 for 278 pages, it is certainly value for money".

The slightly despondent, unconvincing, ”certainly”, dragged into the sentence as wearied compensation, offers little to be excited about, and one might feel that if selling a book is the aim, predicating it upon the fact that each page costs just over 2pence, is a strange way of going about it.

The Medway and Maidstone Writers club, to my knowledge, no longer meets, but there is still writing folding itself into the cracked pavements and discarded vapes of my hometown. One simply has to look past the tattoo parlours and betting shops, to find a writer like Bill Lewis, better known as Billy Childish, who captures the troubled spirit of where I grew up in his description of the Lunar New Year festivities:

“It’s Chinese New Year,
Our February,
And bitterly cold.
The dancers in pink satin shiver.

A woman standing
Behind me in
The crowd says,
I don’t know why
They don’t do it
When the weather
Is warmer.”

I think my grandfather would have approved of these lines, that leave the punchline dangling without explanation, bereft of speech marks as if to suggest that any of the frozen souls, huddled between Debenhams and Poundland, could have made such an ill-informed judgement. There is something to

be said for writing that sounds like home, and lines whose bedraggled trainers attempt to avoid the same smashed glass you catch shimmering on Sunday mornings, when sunlight feels so deadened that one wonders how Icarus was ever caused to plummet from the sky. Verse that has the same blend of cockney and Americanism that you perfected in order to be understood on the playground, and haven't been able to shake since.

I don't think a literary critic of the future will ever find this writing worthy of comment, it holds itself together with a shameless verisimilitude, being less concerned with interpretative difficulty or readerly astonishment than it is with simply glowing with the warmth of the fact it was composed at all. For a craft cannot exist if it does not encompass those content with simply enjoying it, or, put a different way, I do not think that a voice should have to move mountains to move people. I am reminded once again of my grandfather, and his description of himself, newly married, as 'The Trolley Man':

"I'm the trolley man on Friday's now
I get collared every time
My brain simply stops working
I assume a mood sublime"

I cannot help but find in the word "sublime" a domesticating of Romantic ideals of lyric into the monotony of the weekly shop, and whether that is present here or not, I am utterly convinced that my nan took no prisoners in leading him around the supermarket, for that was always her way. He goes on to write how "strolling seemed to suit the mood", as if to become a flaneur of the dairy aisle, a dallying wanderer

of the commercial expanse, or simply someone striving for entertainment in the undulations of daily life. In that way, I think grandad was a brilliant poet, for he understood that poetry offers us all; a way of looking at the world and seeing in kaleidoscope, of never settling for boredom when there is always the faintest trace of inspiration within it. Allowing us to see everything as capable of being made afresh, renamed upon each viewing- appropriate for a man whom everyone called Sam, despite his name being Arthur.

Arthur Watson, whose surname comes from medieval times, meaning son of Walter, or son of Water, for that is perhaps how it was pronounced; fitting for a man who fought on a torpedo boat in World War Two, who spent much of his time on the ocean attempting to not become victim to it. Upon his return, he was nicknamed 'The Factory Poet', or so the story in my family goes, principally because he wrote to make his colleagues laugh, and to dispel the drudgery of their work somewhat. Flicking these pages I find a time-memorial of scenes I have witnessed in retrospect, nan's garden, with:

"Something coming up
The convolvulus? Or the buttercup?
Lawn looks bad with yellow patches
Where our little dog squats and scratches."

These lines, in all their stumbling comedy, that hold their rhymes and half-rhymes in tottering balance, remind me of the first impressions I had of poetry; those of its sounds, its rhythms, the way words play against each-other. Dad, and his old copy of *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, his soft voice in the evenings, the son of a poet, reading poems that he loves.

These things may not seem important, but if we cannot see the concordances between words when they are trying to show us their togetherness, then how difficult does it become to see concordances between people when they are striving toward separateness? Might we take this as a reminder that sometimes lending a book, reading to or with a friend, or writing a poem, is a way of leaving a part of us within someone's fondest memories, possibly to be found again. I may be the only person to request my grandad's writing for as long as it remains in the archives, and I doubt anyone will buy it again, despite its thoroughly reasonable price, but I cannot help but think that there is beauty in that dormancy. Principally because it allows the wonder of rediscovery, something grandad captures perfectly in his 'Looking Ahead':

"Spring will dispel my lethargy
It should do the world of good for me
Observing every growing thing."

Myles Watson
our poetry ponderer

The Rainmaker

There was a drought in a village in China. They sent for a rainmaker who was known to live in the farthest corner of the country, far away. Of course that would be so, because we never trust a prophet who lives in our region; he has to come from far away.

So he arrived, and he found the village in a miserable state. The cattle were dying, the vegetation was dying, the people were affected. The people crowded around him and were very curious what he would do. He said, 'Well, just give me a little hut and leave me alone for a few days.' So he went into this little hut and people were wondering and wondering, the first day, the second day. On the third day it started pouring rain and he came out.

They asked him, 'What did you do?' 'Oh,' he said, 'that is very simple. I didn't do anything.' 'But look,' they said, 'now it rains. What happened?' And he explained, 'I come from an area that is in Tao, in balance. We have rain, we have sunshine. Nothing is out of order. I come into your area and find that it is chaotic. The rhythm of life is disturbed, so when I come into it I, too, am disturbed. The whole thing affects me and I am immediately out of order. So what can I do?

I want a little hut to be by myself, to meditate, to set myself straight. And then, when I am able to get myself in order,

everything around is set right. We are now in Tao, and since the rain was missing, now it rains.'

The Rainmaker was one of Carl Gustav Jung's favourite stories: he insisted that all seminars on active imagination begin with the story. 'Active imagination' is a method by which one lets the unconscious arise and one comes to terms with whatever surfaces, no matter how unpleasant, and is a central piece in Jungian psychology.

For Jung the unconscious was something that had to be recognized and wrestled with in order to reconcile it with our ethical values, which if one succeeds so in doing results in 'individuation': an alignment of unconscious elements with one's ego (our conscious area of the psyche that we are directly aware of).

In spite of many disagreements one might take with Jung, *The Rainmaker* story is a beautiful capsule for his ideas, even if they happen to be mistaken, hence why he recounted it repeatedly and why I would like to explore its interpretations and in doing so produce a brief overview of active imagination. Following the vein of active imagination, I will take detours characterised as speculative to see if there can be any kernel of, not plausibility per se, but of truth — what Jung would call 'psychological truth'.

It should be noted that the interpretation I offer ought to be ousted by yours, the reader's. It is integral to Jung that its reading comes from within us. He was not a prescriptive psychologist, as he aged he divulged his own interpretations of his patients' dreams less and less, instead acting as a guide who tentatively showed them symbols similar to those they encountered. When we reflect and attempt to reach down

into our mind, symbols that we face, although perhaps common across cultures and religions, are sculpted and linked to other symbols from our own individual lives. It is only your own honest, thoughtful interpretation that reveals yourself, and the stories that usually allow for that are dreams due to how personal their origination is. But, by telling the story of the Rainmaker, Jung hopes to help us understand what he means by the process of active imagination, for it is by the very process of active imagination whereby we can remember who we really are.

An Interpretation

There was a drought in a village in China. They sent for a rainmaker who was known to live in the farthest corner of the country, far away. Of course that would be so, because we never trust a prophet who lives in our region; he has to come from far away.

'There was a drought in a village in China'; the 'village in China' is the ego — small in a vast expanse of mental content. The rainmaker represents the unconscious. He lives in the 'farthest corner of the country, far away'. Just as our unconscious contents dwell at a large distance from awareness, so does the rainmaker. Our immediate, directly accessible thoughts can distort who we truly happen to be, therefore we should fail to trust ourselves because who we are is not who we believe ourselves to be: 'we never trust a prophet who lives in our region'.

So he arrived, and he found the village in a miserable state. The cattle were dying, the vegetation was dying, the people were

affected. The people crowded around him and were very curious what he would do. He said, 'Well, just give me a little hut and leave me alone for a few days.' So he went into this little hut and people were wondering and wondering, the first day, the second day. On the third day it started pouring rain and he came out.

The ‘village’ is now a symbol for our compound selves, not our Self, in other words it is an aggregate of our mental elements — the village is the psyche. For Jung, ‘psyche’ just is the totality of all mental processes, conscious as well as unconscious.

The village being in ‘a miserable state’ relays separation and incongruence. The rainmaker is the unifier, and so, because it is ourselves who make our own psyche’s incongruent and it is ourselves who must also be the unifiers, he is also the psyche.

So both he and the village stand for the psyche. He is the sum of conscious and unconscious components, just as the village is (the rainmaker could represent the ego too). He therefore personifies different things throughout the story and his arrival marks a shaking of the story’s meaning or an additional layer of significance to it, as now he is not merely a symbol for the unconscious. His being left ‘alone for a few days’ is important as well, it alludes to the aspect of active imagination in which the rainmaker calms himself, creating a vacuum in his awareness so as to let rain, his unconscious, pour out into the open: this is part of active imagination, letting the unconscious come up.

Water is a common symbol for renewal and rebirth; the rainmaker has been reborn by harmonizing his entire psyche, bringing life to the village as well. The isolated ‘little hut’ provides an image of solitary introspection which invited his, and subsequently the village’s, unconscious, for both he

and the village are unified as one because they are both a single symbolic psyche. The unconscious elements were not fully integrated into his/village's Self when he first arrived. Only when integrated does the unconscious pour out as a completely compatible manifestation, so the process of coming to terms with the unconscious occurred in the 'little hut' and the process of letting the unconscious come up was both his entering in the little hut and his seclusion within it.

Thus the narrative entwines the stages, so to speak, of active imagination: the rising and the coming to terms with the unconscious.

They asked him, 'What did you do?' 'Oh,' he said, 'that is very simple. I didn't do anything.' 'But look,' they said, 'now it rains. What happened?' And he explained, 'I come from an area that is in Tao, in balance. We have rain, we have sunshine. Nothing is out of order. I come into your area and find that it is chaotic. The rhythm of life is disturbed, so when I come into it I, too, am disturbed. The whole thing affects me and I am immediately out of order. So what can I do?

Because the prophet comes from a land in balance he has an ego sufficiently developed to deal with a confrontation with his unconscious, which is perhaps why no prophets within their region could be trusted to bring about rain?

Jung warns about the dangers of active imagination without a strongly developed ego, he confesses his own ego's struggle with his dreams in his autobiography: when he tries to recapture memories of childhood he feels as if teetering on the edge of neurosis. Then we see that the 'rhythm of life is disturbed' which, in turn, makes the rainmaker 'disturbed', reinforcing why a reading of at least partially fused symbols — both village and rainmaker as psyches – may make sense.

I want a little hut to be by myself, to meditate, to set myself straight. And then, when I am able to get myself in order, everything around is set right. We are now in Tao, and since the rain was missing, now it rains.'

'We are now in Tao', a state of an entire psyche in balance is what Jung calls 'individuation'. No element of one's psyche is separated from one's Self, and so, since now there is no separation there is nothing missing, because nothing 'was missing, now it rains'.

The unconscious is the rain washing through the psyche, flowing through and dynamically interacting with every aspect of it in a peaceful manner, nourishing all that had suffered from deprivation of recognition that one's Self was out of balance with the unconscious, and deprivation of integration, integration that can only be achieved alongside recognition.

A Conclusion

My approach may appear erratic, but symbols have the peculiar power to simultaneously represent opposites; in one context they can be of death, in another context they can be of birth. Switching between two different meanings may work as a tool to help us understand them, but in reality a symbol might represent two or more ideas, including their opposites, in the same context and at the same time.

I have not been explicit in aspects of my analysis of Jung or the meanings behind some of his terminology; I aim to convey an approximate essence of Jung's beliefs, not the technicalities. The goal is, strangely, to raise more questions than answers: you can observe as much in Jung's writings, where he vacillates between poetic ambiguities and

scientific precision. Because the answers to many of the questions in our psychological dimension, according to Jung, require an intimacy with your own memories, there is often only one person who can completely grasp them: yourself. And whether you adamantly disagree with Jung or think my interpretation silly since I've not taken a simpler approach by discussing Jungian notions like 'synchronicity', I hope I have nonetheless helped illuminate Jung's beliefs, what *The Rainmaker* might mean, or your own beliefs.

Will Robinson
our puddle peerer

The beginning of the end of your idiomatic irks

This piece serves as the germ of what I initially dubbed the Idiomatic Irks, Icks and Irritations collection, in which I planned to allay my ire with the exasperating linguistic habits of all of us (myself included), both orally and in writing.

Once I embarked on this renegade adventure — great self-acclaimed linguistic messiah that I am —, I regularly, almost daily, encountered irks I wished to eradicate. Although this was a boon from a writing perspective, it also meant I was faced with an increasingly daunting list of bullet points to explicit into actual paragraphs.

The idea dawned on me to transform them into a series of shorter complaints, rather than an endless meander composed of my verbose thoughts.

The pretentiousness that you'll hopefully come to expect in these pieces completely flies in the face of the passive-aggressive quips that I usually endorse when critiquing someone. More integral to your experience as a reader, it in no way reflects my qualifications as a student of the language. I am merely a second year physicist with a passion for linguistics and a propensity to subtly judge others.

I'll preface this series, which details my irritation with others' writing style, by apologising for my very own.

As a bilingual by birth and a polyglot by education, my writing can be reduced — reasonably, I'll add — to a veritable salmagundi of phrases, expressions, and sequences borrowed from countless languages and people across time and space. I have been known to be an avid viewer of certain popular series, to the point of repeatedly rewatching my favourites. I read and listen to books and podcasts on innumerable topics, in different languages. I'm exposed to the stilted wording of many scientists. All these influences have unquestionably engrained themselves in my writing; not to even mention the effect of my social circle, constantly shaping how I express myself.

So, I do ask for patience when you happen to identify a gallicism, or 'frenchism' — the former term being etymologically ambiguous given that I am neither as strong nor rotund as Obélix.

Throughout all my writing, I do generally aim to maintain certain norms.

These include: the use of italics without quotes when writing book or film titles; the use of italics with quotes when writing in Latin; the inclusion to the extent of my ability of words in their original language (in parentheses, usually); fairly basic yet nonetheless systematic punctuation habits…

I'll certainly be chastised for the hypocrisy of complaining about linguistic style whilst espousing these standards and often not actually maintaining them. Perhaps I'll experiment with a novel idea; or I'll be convinced of the baseless rationale behind one of these norms.

You'll find in this opening salvo the first, brief musing upon which I decided to expand. I would not suggest you interpret the choice of ick in this first article as a statement of its relative importance or prominence. It's merely a relatively recondite and even trivial quibble of mine.

I do hope to one day detail the complete sack, the full spectrum, regardless of how abstruse the final product would be. It aligns with a broader vision of language as a framework that has intrinsically shaped me.

To close this waffling introduction, of what I hope will become the inauguration in a regular read of yours, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my social circle, and specifically my mother. She was the inspiration behind much of the oral offence I'll endeavour to cull in this exposition, and arguably was the source of this collection as a whole.

The Younger Sibling Syndrome of the "/"

To whet your appetite, a short piece; nonetheless one that is dear to my heart, as a younger sibling myself.

The ampersand ("&") has always boasted great respect from writers across the globe. It isn't tawdry or improper to use it in handwritten or digital form. Companies even include it in their names, marketing and logos.

Its origin is more than noteworthy: the name is supposedly a corruption of "and", "per se" in Latin, and "and", thus literally meaning "(the character) & by itself (is the word) and". Single-letter words, such as "a" or "I", were referred to with the modifier "per se" to specifically indicate that one meant the word rather than the letter. The symbol is derived

from the ligature of "ET" or “et” (Latin for “and”), according to Geoffrey Glaister, librarian for the British Council in the 20th century. Google’s Ngram Viewer — a powerful resource that tracks word usage throughout the Google Books database — suggests the usage of the ampersand has remained fairly stable over the past 500 years.

It may even date back to graffiti in the ancient city of Pompeii, ruined in the first century, or so suggests Keith Houston in his *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols & Other Typographical*.

Perhaps most illustrative of our openness to it, if you were a 19th-century school pupil, it would have featured as the 27th character in the alphabet you learnt.

On the other hand, the slash (“/”), for some unknowable reason, hasn’t earned anywhere as much adoration. It’s marred by the quagmire of names used to refer to it, from “diagonal” to “oblique” to the infamous “frontslash” (which my autocorrector won’t even acknowledge). The very name “slash” was largely proliferated due to the advent of computing.

Its history is less illustrious than that of the ampersand, given that it was originally synonymous with dashes (“-”). Throughout the medieval era, it adopted different purposes in different locations: in France, it served as a comma, for instance.

While it’s often used to express “or”, the ‘other’ conjunction, it can have slightly vaguer meanings, commonly as inclusive or exclusive “or” (a topic for another day) and as a transitional word.

Admittedly, it's far more versatile than its elder brother as it serves a purpose in such a wide range of fields, from maths, to coding, to poetry.

I feel we usually ignore its presence, neither lauding nor chiding it. It plays its role in day-to-day life, discreetly appearing almost everywhere.

Perhaps sensitive parents that we are, we have found an equally caring means of expressing our appreciation of it: through speech.

Unlike the ampersand, the use of the word "slash" orally is not at all abhorrent. One could very appropriately describe an eatery as a "bar-slash-restaurant" in conversation without jolting one's interlocutor; it would certainly be less objectionable than calling it a "bar-cum-restaurant" to most.

Hong Kong could benefit greatly from judicious use of the "/" over the Latin alternative haunting local life. To the amusement and chagrin of visitors and residents of the city, their "litter cum recyclables collection bin" signs could undoubtedly be replaced with the less repulsive "/", not to even detail the more egregious government press releases for the "old mine experience tour cum sharing with youth".

The proliferation of the word "slash" as a component of our lexicon speaks to its power and utility. But that adaptability extends father than the French comma-writers could ever have imagined. It can transform potentially insulting or hostile wording into more welcoming and inclusive alternatives.

The Syriac naming dispute immediately comes to mind, as it

prompted the US and Swedish censuses to use the respective official designations "Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac" and "Assyrier/Syrianer" for the ethnic groups.

English, in which the system of noun gender has long been eroded, now makes astute use of the “/“ to add inclusivity to its gendered third-person pronouns. “He/she”, “s/he” and similar alternatives abound. The “/“ provides the optimal solution in both its clarity and subtlety.

Although some of us may identify with the “/” as an unassuming member of the punctuation family, it has clearly outshined its older siblings. After reading this piece, you may find it has even secured its place as the favourite of the lot (as all youngest siblings inevitably do).

If you related to these frenetic, meandering thoughts that far too frequently distract me from conversations with others, perhaps this piece provided solace in the knowledge that you are not alone. If you disagreed with any of my points – or more likely with the manner in which I expressed them —, in my eyes, that serves as a testament to the virtue of the English language: albeit woefully unsystematic and inconsistent, like a mellifluous, nascent river, it evolves and extends under the mystifying influences we apply to it.

The irony that, overbearing and over-demanding parent that I am, I both chastise and cherish the language is not lost on me. I wouldn’t dedicate the time to linguistic refinement if I didn’t respect its unique attributes. Moreover, I don’t believe I would value the dynamics of social interactions, founded on individual idiomatic habits, if not for these particular eccentricities.

Vivek Henri-Abensour
our Sentient Salmagundi

The Forest for the Pedantrees

When I was little, I was taught to paint by a family friend. Most of the lessons I learned about perspective, colours, shading, and so forth have faded with time. But one has stuck with me quite closely. When you make a painting, your assumption is that it will be viewed as a whole from a small distance away. Painting is creating the illusion of a whole – it's a clever combination of colouring, shading, and penmanship. There is an illusion of depth, of perspective, of light. Much the same applies to movies and television.

Most laypeople, when viewing a painting, will have a fairly easy time saying what they think of it. I like this drawing of a port, because the ships are detailed and the sea is pleasant to look at, and because I like naval scenes. I don't like this other drawing of a port because the colouring is less pleasing to me. We generally treat paintings as one experience that is appreciated as a whole.

For film, we do something similar. If done well, a layperson can watch a scene and have an emotional reaction from the music, the camera angles, the shading, the cuts – creating the illusion of interpersonal tension, or an emotional high, excitement, boredom, fear. From these scenes, a plot is brought forth – when done well, these scenes flow into each other seamlessly unless otherwise intended. Each element of a film, just like each element of a painting, does not necessarily

have to be perfect – it just has to be good enough to act alongside everything else and create a cohesive experience. Individual elements can of course, like individual brush strokes, look silly or strange on their own.

All forms of art are like playing a very evocative, emotional, memorable, and meaningful card trick. This is of course not a bad thing, in any way. Art is a way of getting something out of your head, and showing it to someone else. It's fundamentally about humans trying their damnedest to show each other what's in their head, and that's beautiful.

The thing with art is, though, that it has to be appreciated in context. The examples of this are plentiful. When reading Lord of the Rings, for instance, everyone is duly instructed to keep in mind that, "All those tropes you see? Those weren't tropes. Tolkien invented them."

Really, a cave painting would look a little crap if you didn't know who made it, and when. Imagining early people thousands of years ago, still exploring the world for the first time, leaving those hand-prints to reach out and wave at people millennia in the future, provides an entirely different impression than viewing them purely as hand-prints.

In essence, it's important to view a piece of art as an experience, a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

I think as reviews have become more popular and accessible, on YouTube as elsewhere, there's been an increasing amount of entertainment of taking art seriously out of context for the purposes of entertainment, to the extent that it often becomes damaging.

For instance, since the 2010s, a certain type of YouTube

movie review cropped up. Unlike a standard written review, this specific strain of reviews began in video format, and generally did not look at the movie as a whole. I grew up on these, and am quite familiar with their workings.

The way a YouTube review generally starts, is that the reviewer enters the shot and sighs. They are going to be reviewing a piece of art – this piece of art is something that is great and everyone has watched, something that is bad and everyone has heard of, or something bad that no one has heard of. The reviewer looks exasperated, and expresses how reluctant they were to make a review of this thing. Then they reveal their opinion about the movie – unsurprisingly, they find it bad. They will occasionally pay lip service to the good aspects of the film, before ripping into it like a wild monkey rips into a fermented apple.

The audience now gets to enjoy between 20 minutes and several hours of someone granularly picking apart a movie for their entertainment. It's rather like watching a public autopsy.

This format is done by countless reviewers, and generally has some amount of vulgarity, anger, satire, parody, and even re-enactments and skits of the movie itself. A prime example of this format is Doug 'That Guy with the Glasses' Walker of 'The Nostalgia Critic' (launched in 2007, and ongoing to this day). This series was so successful that Mr. Walker even made an attempt to create his own short movie series. This was unsuccessful, however it does show how much of a genre YouTube reviews have become.

By and large, I think that many such YouTube reviews have a huge problem in that while they are often very entertaining, they aren't good for art as a whole. A granular analysis of,

say, ‘Star Wars’ where every acting slip-up, every weird costume, every odd sound-effect, every dated reference, is shoved to the forefront is just a poor representation of the movie. ‘Star Wars’ is about a heroes journey through a vast, mysterious, and exciting galaxy, while having a classic space-age aesthetic. It’s an experience where you stand alongside Luke as he faces impossible odds to defeat a fascist Empire and befriends a rag-tag group of rebels. Yet, a review seen before or after watching the movies inevitably leaves a sour taste in ones mouth.

Consider the beginning of Episode IV. A rebel ship is disabled and boarded. In a red-lit corridor, rebel troops show fear and determination in their faces as they point their guns to a doorway. Warning alarms blare, as a masked figure clad in all black, wielding a red laser-sword emerges and defeats them almost single-handedly.

To the viewer, what jumps out is the mood, the lighting, the tension – the viewer can connect to the men whose fear the viewer can see, and can abhor the almost inhuman monster that emerges whose face is black metal. But what does a reviewer of this sort do? The reviewer will point out how somehow unrealistic it is for our villain, Darth Vader, to be wearing black, or bringing a sword to a gunfight, or why the imperial villains wouldn’t just use grenades to clear the corridor before moving in.

Now, your memory of the movie is forever entwined with such ridiculous and pedantic criticisms that have no real bearing on the experience of the art itself. Such an attitude of unmitigated pedantry is displayed in a great number of movie reviews and in fan forums. There exist lengthy analyses on a scene-by-scene basis of popular (and unpopular!) movies and their problems.

I enjoy these. I enjoy a huge amount of different forms of media analysis, because criticising things is fun! But I believe that this is becoming a problem for media literacy. Granular reviews, due to being comedic, are generally much more popular than more thematic ones. But they introduce a certain form of analysis that is relatively straightforward to do, and can be applied to effectively any movie. Someone with this idea unconsciously in their mind would find it difficult to immerse themselves into media when they are paying attention to details as opposed to the thing as a whole – it's a lot like going into a national park and criticising the placement of the moss. It's very easy to miss the great and actually very important themes of the rise of fascism in 'Star Wars' when you're busy looking at the costume design.

It would be a faulty review of modern media reviews if I didn't offer something constructive. If you can't get your fill from an angry internet denizen shouting at a camera, where can you get it? Well, I'm of the opinion that while reviews themselves are a form of entertainment and art in their own right (just look at how stylised they can be in their own right, or how they can follow their own plot and character development of the reviewer), but the best critique is actually a conversation via creation. Like academic writing, a lot of art is in dialogue with itself and with other pieces of art. 'Austin Powers' is in some way a response to 'James Bond', as is 'Mistborn' to 'Lord of the Rings'. Actually watching and rewatching movies and the items that were created as a response, or writing your own items, requires somewhat more effort and time commitment, but is a broadly more fulfilling endeavour.

Nicholas Haque
our resident contrarian

On modern art

I cannot define modern art because modern art is by its nature undefinable. If it could be defined, it would be neither modern nor art. However, that it exists cannot be disputed. Great art has changed and it has changed in all its forms. Renowned paintings once depicted mythology and men; now they depict splashes and dots and swirls. Renowned music once encompassed operatic narrators and mimetic concertos; they now encompass bohemian crooning and choric lyrics. Renowned prose once necessitated elegance and intricacy; now renowned prose necessitates clarity and concision.

Some have called this a shift from realism to abstraction but I think the change lies in something subtler. What great art was about hundreds of years ago has not changed to what great art is about today: what has changed is our way of expressing it.

Let us indulge in the following thought experiment. You are a dressmaker who has been called upon to create the greatest dress in history. How would you go about making it? First, you need the best materials. This would make it last throughout history. Second, you need a meaningful design that speaks to all peoples across time. This would ensure it never loses value. So how do you go about creating something meaningful? By making the dress not a dress but a symbol of something greater. Say you wished it to symbolise

the Garden of Eden, an instantly recognisable notion of paradisical innocence. You could quite simply paint the Garden of Eden on the dress. This transforms the dress from a bunching together of material to a symbol of sweetly unattainable innocence because there is a Garden of Eden on it. You have given the dress a narrative to follow. However, you soon find lots of dresses with Gardens of Eden painted on them. You are clearly not the first to have thought of this. So how do you imbue the dress with meaning without crudely painting a story on it?

Through symbols. Symbols are habitually defined as something that stands for something else. A logo symbolises a company because it represents the company without being the company. Thus do symbols generate meaning. However, I believe that ‘symbols’ as a collective term is not enough to explain great art’s transition from classicality to modernity. Collectively, ‘symbols’ merely differentiate the thing that represents from the thing that is represented. I believe a further differentiation is needed: a measurement of the gap between symbol and symbolised. I have arbitrarily split this into first- and second-order symbols.

Take a tree. A first-order symbol would be a drawing of the tree. This represents a tree without being a tree. A second-order symbol would be a drawing of something else that represents a tree. So, the difference between first- and second-order symbols is their respective distance from what they represent. First-order symbols are either very similar to what they represent or are so well-known that we recognise them by sight: a heart symbolises love, tears symbolise sadness. In literature, first-order symbols would be instantly recognisable references and allusions; in music, instantly recognisable tunes; in fine art, instantly recognisable scenes. Painting the Garden of Eden on your dress would make it a

first-order symbol. First-order symbols are usually used when you want to clearly convey a precise message. Examples abound in political cartoons and satirical verse. Second-order symbols, however, are not similar and in some cases radically different to what they represent. They behave a little like conceits, whereby a poet thrusts two very different objects together to see what meaning is generated by their friction.

Sceptical? Let us see my theory in action in what is arguably the most famous symbol of modern literature: 'The Wasteland'. Quite simply, I ask, what is the 'Wasteland'?

Different critics give different answers. For Michael Austin, it is 'the myth of the wounded land' where the literal or sexual death of a king 'imparts barrenness to the entire land' so that 'Nothing grows and everything sucks.' For Pericles Lewis, it is the place of Christ's 'death and resurrection'. For Tulika Anand, it is the 'damaged psyche of humanity'. For Felicita Burton, it is simply 'any piece of unproductive or unused land' which 'may imply a battlefield or an unused farm.' For Lok Raj Sharma, it is a mix of 'the waste Land of King Fisher, the waste of King Oedipus of Thebes and the Biblical waste land'.

They cannot all be right because they all say very different things. Yet I argue their differences lie not in a religious reading or a socio-historical reading, but in their choice to interpret the 'Wasteland' as a first- or second-order symbol. As a first-order symbol, it denotes, as Burton states, 'any piece of unproductive or unused land': a wasted-land. Had T.S.Eliot not written such a poem, the immediate receptory signification of a 'Wasteland' would be agriculture, for it is a land that cannot produce crops. This agricultural barrenness then lends itself directly to Austin's notion of sexual barrenness.

The infertile King becomes a metonym of the wasted land in his inability to cultivate an heir. The shift from first to second order symbol has begun. Sharma takes this a step further by linking the 'Wasteland' of the poem to other literary wastelands. The gap has widened for want of an intermediary figure. With Lewis' interpretation, we edge closer to the second-order symbol: without the framing of Sharma's 'Biblical wasteland', there are no immediate or even intermediary connections between an unproductive plot of ground and Christ's grave.

It is Anand's interpretation that brings us to second-order symbol analysis. Contextless, a 'wasteland' has no correlation with 'the damaged psyche of humanity', and vice versa. We do not look at an uncultivated plot of land and think of humanity's psychological fragmentation. Nor do we look at humanity's psychological fragmentation and think of an uncultivated plot of land. Yet the greater the gap in meaning, the greater the potential for meaning. By linking the 'Wasteland' with 'the damaged psyche of humanity', all sorts of meaning abound: 'the passing of Victorian ideals', 'the trauma of World War I', 'cultural notions of masculine identity', 'the romantic literary ideal of a visionary-poet capable of changing the world through verse.'

Thus, through first-order and second-order symbols, we can compare critical interpretations on a more fundamental level, without categorising one as Marxist, another as feminist. Having given a brief demonstration of their use, I return to the importance of second-order symbols as we are all familiar with first-order symbols. I believe that second-order symbols are at the heart of modern art. The transition of great art was not from realism to abstraction but from first-order to

second-order symbols. We no longer tell life through stories, but stories through symbols. Thus, the essence of modern art is a fragmented narrative.

This idea of the essence of modern art as fragmentation is not new. The pioneers are, unsurprisingly given the visual metaphor, art critics: in 1995, Linda Nochlin defined 'modern experience' as 'sense of social, psychological, even metaphysical fragmentation' that resulted in 'a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value'. The subtitle of her book, *The Body in Pieces*, was 'The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity'.

In 2006, in *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, Jane Rendell defined 'allegory', a close cousin of symbolism, as 'the insertion of a ruined fragment from the past into a contemporary setting…to critique the version of the future it offered.' In 2021, Geoff Bateson remarked in a blog post that from the end of the Victorian era, 'artists sought new ways of responding through aesthetic processes of flux, of fracture and of fragmentation instead of the traditional focus on unity and wholeness.'

However, whilst these critics analyse how the essence of modern art is fragmentation, they do not explain, or attempt to explain, why. With first- and second-order symbols, we can see both how and why. The fragmentation of modern art lies in the adjustable gap between the symbol and the symbolised, and the reason for having a gap at all is because the greater the gap, the greater the perceived originality. The essence of modern art is fragmentation.

Chenrui Zhang
our thinking buddy

This is just to say...

Not that I ate the plums in the icebox, as William Carlos Williams did, but that every essay here remains the intellectual property of its writer.

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