Veritas Review

A Humanities Journal

Abigail Adams Institute

Statement of Purpose

The *Veritas Review* (VR) is a humanities journal of the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI), based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As we wrote in our inaugural issue, harmony is at the heart of AAI and the VR, and we continue to encourage all our students, alumni, and friends to come together in understanding through the arts, interpretation, and thought. This journal also serves as a written touchpoint for the ongoing humanities programs and events of the Abigail Adams Institute, and exists as much for our graduates and alumni as for the current students and faculty. The staff and the editors are all proud to be part of this effort to promote humanistic inquiry and expression. We hope you will join us in this work.

Veritas Review Staff

Letter from the Editor

Words and images are expressions of thought and feeling but are more than representations of contemplation and emotion: they are forms of action. *Veritas Review* (VR) is an act, something the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI) decided to do. Apathy leaves a vacuum. AAI encourages the whole human being as an individual and as a member of a community and one of the ways it does so is through VR. The goal of VR has been and is to foster harmony, to find a still moment in a world sometimes so disharmonious. The readers, alumni, contributors, editors, staff and students past and present have helped to make this happen through the action of making and sustaining VR and making this part of the effort of AAI to reach out to our growing community at Harvard and Cambridge, Boston and Massachusetts, in the United States and beyond. It takes will and work to keep an institute and journal going. I have the greatest admiration for AAI, its director and staff and all who participate in it and for their support of, and belief in, VR. The director and managing editor are key to so much and help to make VR happen. They do good in search of the good. The new look for VR is looking better all the time. VR is distinctive and individual in each issue but takes work and thought and expresses a community of contributors.

Continuity and change work together in the making of each issue of VR. This issue begins with a section: "Thoughts on Education." Danilo Petranovich speaks of the importance of the education of the human person and of an awareness of intellectual inheritance while exploring a crucial question, that is how to revitalize the university in what he calls an age of decline. Within society and the university, questions arise over individual thought, intellectual property, originality, teaching and learning, and the relation between machine and human, software and thinking, the benefits of intelligence and artificial intelligence, something Alan Turing began to think about in the 1930s. Dallas Terry's exploration of ChatGPT as friend or foe prompts us to consider these questions, some of which are ethical questions, such as what is the good or what is good for us? Maura Ronayne discusses something significant to Western culture since Plato and Aristotle, that is philosophy of education, the ideals and theories in relation to the practice of how we learn and teach, and she does so in connection with with two figures, who stress private and public virtue in education, and are connected to the goals of AAI, Harvard, the United States and beyond: John and Abigail Adams.

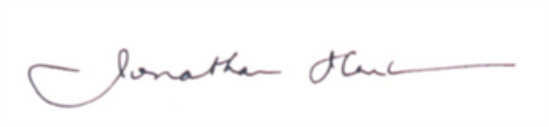
The next section of the issue of VR is "Reflections on AAI Programming." Alexander Hughes muses on cemeteries and permanence and does so by considering Mount Auburn Cemetery, where he led a tour of fellow AAI students, as a burial ground, garden and memorial, a place that might affect or even instruct the feelings of the living. Manuel Lopez analyzes Tacitus, the great historian of the Roman empire, as an author much studied by Montesquieu and the founders of the American republic, how this Roman exposed and explored despots but also furnished those who apologized for absolute monarchy with the way realpolitik worked. Lopez also notes how Tacitus can teach with clarity what is at stake in the defense of liberty and justice – successful or not – that is ongoing. Michael Makej examines the six-week seminar on the revolutionary writings of John Adams that Danilo Petranovich organized at AAI. According to Makej, the seminar had sessions that covered political theory, the British-American constitutional crisis, John Adams' republican turn, his proposals for government, and the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, the last of which Makej led. Makej mentions that the seminar discussed, among other things, the common good and the relation between worship and virtue.

"Creative Writing and Essays" is the third section of the issue. Hannah Duane's "A Day Like Purim" is a delicate and thoughtful mediation on human and God, faith and doubt, seriousness and absurdity, prayer and the absence of prayer. In "Over the Abyss," a fiction, Michael Ochoa explores various perspectives on time and space, here and there, this side and that side: the abyss and beyond. Duane and Ochoa use different forms to represent dilemmas, what it is to be human.

The fourth part of the issue is “Movie Reviews.” Films are an important medium and, through their mix of image, word and music, reach the audience in ways distinct from other arts. Elliott R. Jones reviews Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* as a meditation on evil and on sacrifice and gifts amidst suffering. Suan Sonna writes a review of *Snowpiercer* and focuses on its inequality and violence and whether it reflects society and gets viewers to engage with the world. Part of the strength of this section is the variety in the films under review, films that meant and mean a great deal to the reviewers.

This issue of VR brings together remarkable images and words and has a wide range in its appeal. I hope the readers of this issue will enjoy it as much as I did.

Best,



Jonathan Hart

Table of Contents

Revitalizing the University in an Age of Decline

Danilo Petranovich

This essay is a compressed version of a talk Dr. Petranovich prepared for the Harvard Club of Warsaw.

What is the aim of a university? What is its *telos*, and what is its *modus operandi*? In our discussions throughout the year with students, faculty, and the broader community, these questions come up again and again. And as higher education comes under increasing scrutiny in the public eye, is it crucial that we ask ourselves what education at the college level is all about.

Today, education is commonly framed as the marriage of science and industry for the sake of financial gain, professional development, and technical skills. None of these are bad things in themselves, and they do in fact produce great advancements in research and economic growth. However, as top universities face enormous pressure to maintain their leadership in increasingly narrow fields of study amid fierce worldwide competition, they may be losing something more foundational. Within this framework, many students and faculty risk becoming intellectually isolated by the very success of their disciplines, which leaves deeper questions–questions of humanity, culture, and the human person–by the wayside.

Widespread hyper-specialization can lead to fragmented knowledge, and an interdisciplinary pursuit of knowledge can become muddled. While some universities still insist on core curricula or survey courses in philosophy, history, and literature, in most cases, students are left to choose their own paths at random. Even when courses are compelling and well-taught, students–particularly in the humanities–often experience them as intellectually compartmentalized and narrowly focused. This leaves students fragmented and disoriented, unmoored from any sense of a cohesive intellectual inheritance. The modern system of siloed departments and pressure toward narrowly-specialized expertise threatens to deprive students and teachers alike of any sort of integrative framework. This limits their capacities to make important judgments about the larger social order and to determine the contours of a life worth living. Add to these issues the imperiled status of academic freedom, limited intellectual diversity, the rise of credentialism, the widespread loss of public trust, and the looming threat of AI, and the trajectory of higher education looks bleak indeed.

In recognition of the current landscape of academia, the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI) seeks to make a contribution to humanistic inquiry into the distinctive constitution of the human person, the nature and limits of our powers and faculties, and the ends to which we are drawn as we live out our lives. Through philosophy, literature, languages, history, theology, classics, and the arts, we believe that a good college education ought to shape the intellectual and moral character of young people by forming them in the best that has been thought and said.

As part of its efforts to examine the interrelationship of specialized academic disciplines and their implications for the common good, AAI seeks to support students and faculty in ways otherwise unavailable within, but consistent with, the mission of the university. Each year on the recommendations of upperclassmen and young alumni, we produce *A Course Guide for the Harvard Humanist*, which is meant to be useful to any Harvard student who wants to make the best use of the College's academic resources in the humanities. It is our attempt at encouraging a shared academic foundation in the liberal arts.

In addition, since its inception, AAI has promoted the creation, preservation, and enhancement of introductory survey courses in the humanities at Harvard University. In the absence of a formal core curriculum, we believe that survey courses are an imperative way of shoring up a student's cultural-intellectual grounding. Courses that offer a broad view of a subject are essential for foundational instruction and academic orientation. When done well, they can spur a student's imagination, initiate him into a larger tradition of inquiry, and prompt a quest for lifelong learning. These courses are instrumental in fostering an understanding and appreciation of our inheritance as a civilization. And given the staggering technological shifts facing the next generation, it is wise to invest in these vehicles of basic cultural continuity; only when we know where we come from can we know where we ought to go.

In addition to our work with the university, AAI provides our own supplementary seminars diving deep into foundational texts. From Plato to Jane Austen, Adam Smith to Friedrich Nietzsche, our students explore culturally and historically significant works across disciplines, with an understanding that the humanities work together towards wisdom and integrated human formation. With our supplementary courses, we aim to fill the gaps in our students' university educations with cohesive and immersive liberal arts programming.

The Abigail Adams Institute was founded to help recall the university to its older and deeper vocation of educating students not just for careers, but for flourishing lives. Even if the utilitarian approach of modern research universities succeeds in producing well-prepared, economically productive graduates, college students, for their own sake and the sake of society as a whole, ought to–and deserve to–receive a much richer and more formative education during these crucial years of young adulthood. The university should be not just a factory churning out graduates, but rather a beacon of academic vitality and rigor in a tradition of free and open inquiry. At AAI, through both our supplementary programming and our work with Harvard faculty, we hope to uphold and support this vision of humanistic intellectual formation in the university.

Chat GPT: Friend or Foe?

Remarks on the Use of AI in the University

Dallas Terry

Is ChatGPT a friend or a foe? If it is "useful," what is it "useful" for? If it is useful because it "thinks" for us, isn't this a problem? If it is useful because it quickly does our reading, researching, planning, or writing for us, why do we think this will not render us weaker, less capable, less authentic, nuanced, empathetic, and wise? Do we truly believe students will be the full masters of these machines, never relying on AI to do the meaningful work that students are supposed to do on their own? Do we really think AI will just be a tool? By outsourcing their tasks to AI, do we really believe that students will not be outsourcing the skills, capacities, and competencies that are necessary for genuine intellectual development and inner mental formation? In short, if AI is useful for anything, it is useful for supplanting, or rendering obsolete, the very intellectual, moral, and spiritual virtue that teachers hope to encourage and inculcate. If we want students to be sensitive, perceptive, insightful, contemplative, incisive, and experienced thinkers, then I would argue that AI has no place in our universities.

I am a student in the humanities. It strikes me as relevant that these disciplines, i.e., "the humanities," ought to be particularly careful not to embrace a machine which might diminish our human faculties, particularly those linked with language and thought. I am not Catholic, but I take my university's Jesuit mission seriously. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis warns about extending technology and technocratic thinking beyond its proper domain. Artificial intelligence thinks for us, it researches for us, it plans for us, and it writes for us. The machine we are considering is a machine which will do for us what is actually intrinsically helpful for us to do ourselves. When we outsource what is supposed to be human to what is technological, then "our capacity to make decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one's alternative creativity are diminished."

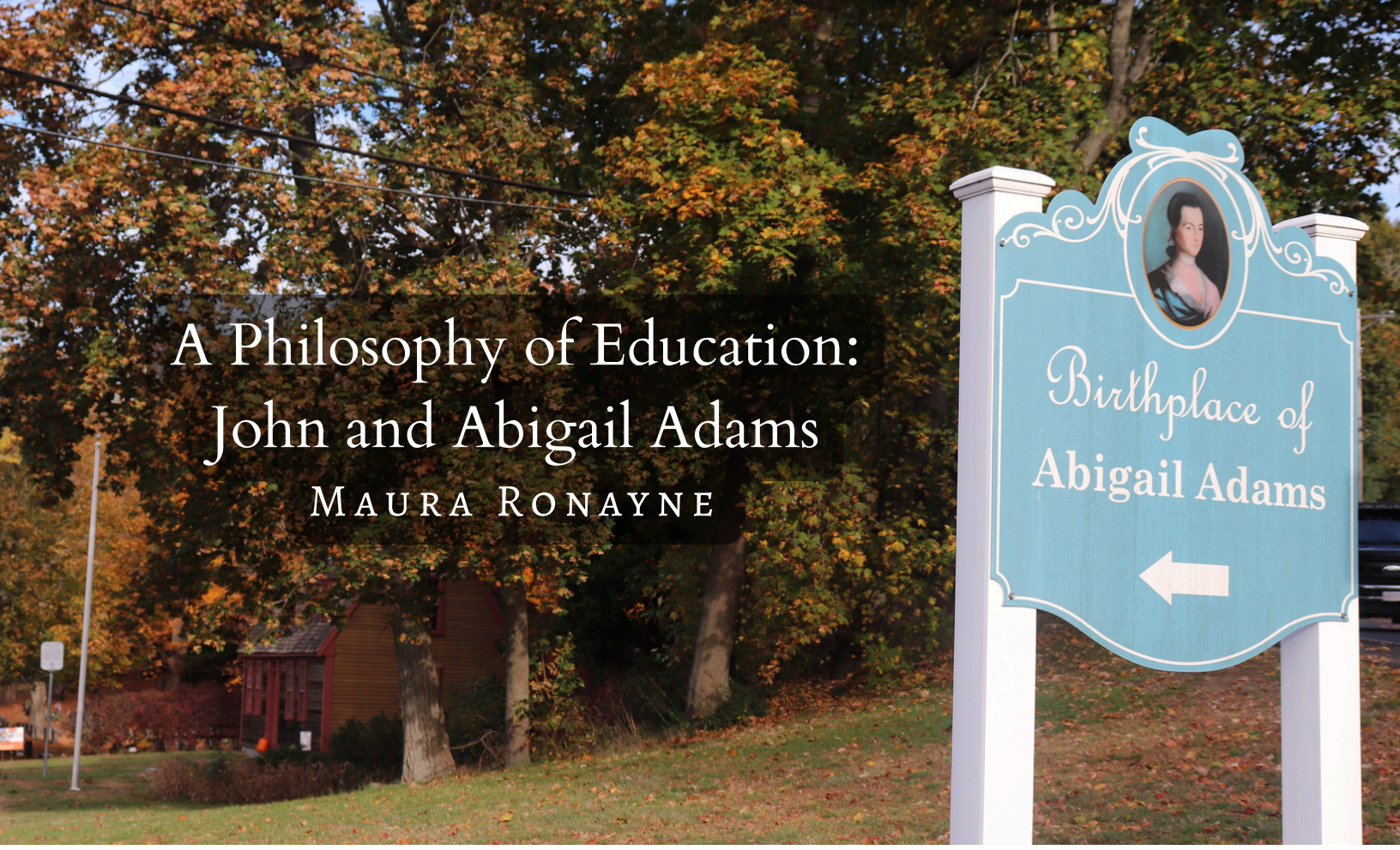
Pope Francis is right. I will put this another way. Whatever a machine does is something that human beings will rapidly forget how to do or else become indifferent to, and will therefore signal an extension in our dependence on robots as well as an extension in apathy. Albert Borgmann argues that our responsibility is to "point out the liabilities–what happens when technology moves beyond lifting genuine burdens and starts freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of." If we automate the skills of research, outlining, planning, and writing, then we are automating the very process of thinking itself. What is thinking but an exercise in attempting to reflect upon and then articulate something, i.e., to make something intelligible both to ourselves and to others? Do we really want AI to be doing this for students? Do we wish to further impoverish their capacities to communicate?

Language shouldn't be treated so lightly, particularly not among prospective scholars and "leaders" who ought to be learning to speak, write, and think more carefully and more precisely. In an essay called "The Tools of Our Tools," Evan Selinger and Jathan Sadowski argue that adapting to technological change simply because that change feels difficult to resist "can blind us to the need occasionally to set boundaries, to draw limits, to protect aspects of the human condition that we should deem inviolable." I would argue that reading, research, thinking, and writing are aspects of the human condition that we should deem inviolable. I will quote Selinger and Sadowski at length: "The most important things people stand to lose by letting automation [or AI] go too far are hard to measure: an active sense of agency, a robust experience of autonomy, and the capacity to execute skills that add meaning to our lives. While these are all real, they feel completely subjective and possibly ineffable. Because we cannot quantify losses in these domains, it is easy to underestimate the significance of what is slipping away and how much diminution is occurring at any moment."

Allowing or encouraging the use of AI in our universities will have ripple effects. As Neil Postman points out, "technological change is not additive; it is ecological." What technology does for us will also do something to us. When we consider the addition of AI into our schools, as if it is just another tool, we make the "fallacious assumption that inclines us to believe that when a labor-saving device is used, it offers a simple substitute for some isolated component of a job. In reality, something more holistic and far-reaching can occur. Automating an activity sometimes transforms the character of an entire task, including the roles, attitudes, and skills of the people who take part in it." Thus, even asking AI to provide suggestions for a paper outline can lead to what Nicholas Carr calls a "degeneration effect." These effects occur "where the resulting technological dependency leaves us less able to adapt to new situations and make our way in the world without the crutch of automation. We naturally come to rely more on the software and less on our own smarts." Let us be frank: Allowing the use of AI will slowly but surely reshape our entire idea of teaching and learning.

AI will also exacerbate shallowness, superfluousness, and emptiness in the lives of our students. Students today are experiencing mental health challenges, which are perhaps a result of an overwhelming sense of *acedia* in their worlds. They feel a profound sense of loneliness and despair, and many psychologists, like Joseph E. Davis, have posited that this despair is a result of a sense of meaninglessness and uselessness. If we choose the "ease and comfort of automation of our own autonomy and agency," then we might render the minds of students even more obsolete than they already fear that they are. What we need to do is to empower the minds of students by helping them cultivate intellectual virtue, a profound sense of competence and joy that comes along with developing a mind that can read, think, and communicate excellently. What we ought not to do is to outsource the potential for that virtue to a machine. AI robs students of their chance at humanity, of their chance to struggle, and to become mature, robust, and responsible men and women.

L.M. Sacasas contends that what we need to do in times like these is to provide an account "of what is good for people to do regardless of whether a machine can do it better according to certain parameters (faster, more cheaply, etc.)" Serious universities ought to be the ones providing an account that argues that it is good for people to think–to read, study, research, analyze, and write–even if a machine can do it for us. Even if a machine can make our lives easier by doing things for us, we ought to resist the temptation. The ability to do so is the very condition of human flourishing, and the very antidote to uselessness, *acedia*, meaninglessness, and dehumanization.



A Philosophy of Education: John and Abigail Adams

Maura Ronayne

Amongst the great romances of history, one unassuming American couple has quietly been immortalized in the hearts of the masses. Thanks to their prolific letter-writing habits (they exchanged more than 1,000 letters from the beginning of their courtship in 1762 to Abigail's death in 1818), John and Abigail Adams have been revered for their enduring, affectionate, and rock-solid marriage.

Addressing each other as "my dearest friend" in their candid epistles, John and Abigail experienced a partnership of equals that was rare for the time period. Beyond her role as his beloved wife, Abigail was also John's faithful confidante, interlocutor, and advisor from the beginning of his law career through his presidency; she was so well informed and involved with political affairs that John Adams' political opponents sneeringly called her "Mrs. President". A crucial factor in the success of their marriage and long-lasting companionship was their foundational value system–particularly their mutual commitment to education. Firmly rooted in the New England tradition, the Adams couple inherited a Puritan legacy of self-discipline, localism, American patriotism, and a strong sense of Christian virtue that all pointed towards a philosophy of education as moral and civic formation.

John and Abigail both received a fairly standard New England education for their time and station. Abigail, like most girls at the time, didn't have a formal education, but was taught basic reading, writing, and arithmetic in the home. She then self-taught and read English and French works from the libraries of her father, who was a Congregationalist minister, and her uncle and grandfather. John Adams went to a local small "dame school," then attended Braintree Latin School, and finally went to Harvard College at 15 with the expectation of becoming a minister–he then switched to the study of law. He did well at Harvard but felt lazy and inadequate, writing in his diary "I have no books, no time, no friends. I must therefore be contented to live and die an ignorant obscure fellow."[1] This could not be further from the truth, and history of course tells the story of John Adams as a brilliant, widely-read, insightful man and one who gave life to Enlightenment ideals through his crucial role in the American Revolution, architecture of a new system of government, and example of leadership as vice president and then president of a brand new nation.

Although their early education was average for the time period, both John and Abigail elevated their intellectual lives to soaring heights through voracious reading outside of a formal academic setting. Thomas Jefferson said of John, "He was so widely read, he could talk on almost any subject, sail off in any direction." And Abigail endeavored to keep pace with her husband, continuing to read and to correspond with intellectual greats like Thomas Jefferson and Mercy Otis Warren.

The Adams couple studied and sought to put into practice the brilliance of the Greeks and Romans, the moral imperatives of Christianity, and the luminaries of Enlightenment thought. They ardently encouraged holistic and intensive education for both their own children and for the citizens of the budding American nation. Both John and Abigail saw education not just as the accumulation of knowledge, but as **essential formation and development of the human soul**. In their minds, learning was inextricably intertwined with the fostering of public and private virtue. Believing a good education to be the very bedrock of a flourishing society, they recognized their heavy responsibility to generations to come.

In a letter to Abigail, John said:

"Human nature with all its infirmities and depravation is still capable of great things. It is capable of attaining to degrees of wisdom and of goodness, which, we have reason to believe, appear respectable in the estimation of superior intelligences. Education makes a greater difference between man and man, than nature has made between man and brute. The virtues and powers to which men may be trained, by early education and constant discipline, are truly sublime and astonishing… It should be your care, therefore, and mine, to elevate the minds of our children and exalt their courage; to accelerate and animate their industry and activity; to excite in them an habitual contempt of meanness, abhorrence of injustice and inhumanity, and an ambition to excel in every capacity, faculty, and virtue." [2]

Abigail too recognized a crucial duty to all future Americans, notably including women. She said:

"I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the Benefit of the rising Generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for Learning and Virtue. If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women." [3]

Although the citizens of New England were more well educated than most Americans at the time, John and Abigail both wanted something greater for their contemporaries, and sought to lay the foundations for high-quality education for their nascent country. An educated populace was essential not only for the cultivation of individual morality and talent, but also as a bulwark against tyranny and a pillar of flourishing civic life. To this purpose, John Adams even founded the still-active American Academy for Arts & Sciences. He also took great care to mention education when he wrote the Constitution of Massachusetts:

"Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates, in all future periods of this Commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them." [4]

Education, to the Adams family, was not only an individual pursuit but a nonnegotiable civic responsibility. It was not purely instrumental, but rather an elevating and civilizing force capable of transforming a backwater colonial enterprise into a great nation. A good education in all its disciplines (history, philosophy, mathematics, literature, languages, and more) nurtures the whole human person for the good of the whole society. In our modern age, in which the language of virtue has become foreign, we might do well to look to these "dearest friends" for encouragement as we seek to recover the deeper formative mission of education.

1 John Adams. *Diary Entry*, 23 [24] Saturday. Founders Online, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-01-02-0002-0004-0024

2 John Adams, *John Adams to Abigail Adams*, 29 October 1775, Founders Online, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0209

3 Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams*, 14 August 1776, Founders Online, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-02-02-0058

4 John Adams, *The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780,* Chapter I, Section VI, in The Founders' Constitution, vol. 1, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch1s6.html

At the Abigail Adams Institute, we are of course particularly attached to the Adams family, and we feel indebted to their example of rigorous self-education. We chose the namesake of Abigail in part because she in particular represents the quiet and persevering work of supplementary self-education on the edges of academia.

Visiting ‘the Deserted Village’

Alexander Hughes

My grandmother lives just down the road from the cemetery where my grandfather is buried. Growing up, when my sister and I would visit her, she would often take the two of us on our bicycles down the street to visit his grave. I remember these visits fondly; they allowed me to pay my respects to my departed relatives and to draw closer to my living family. Somewhere along the way, I grew old enough to also appreciate these cemetery visits for their own sake. I began to reflect on the fact that I, too, will one day be buried—God willing, somewhere on those same grounds—and I in turn began to think about what I might do to justify myself before I get there.

Despite my affinity for graveyards, it was with a twinge of embarrassment that I reacted to the suggestion that I should lead a tour of Mount Auburn Cemetery for a group of the Abigail Adams Institute’s student fellows. It was a welcome idea—but despite the fact that the cemetery is only about a mile from campus and (probably) inspired the cemetery I loved so much as a kid, I somehow never had been there. This oversight would have been unthinkable had I attended Harvard just a few generations earlier, when, I’m told, its spacious grounds were a favored spot to take a date for a stroll or a picnic. Earlier still, in the cemetery’s early days, it was considered one of the focal points of Boston society: the poet James Russell Lowell once said that Bostonians had only two ways of entertaining important guests: a public dinner or a trip to Mount Auburn.

To appreciate why Mount Auburn once meant so much to the city, it is necessary to understand the circumstances of its creation. Anyone who has walked the Freedom Trail can describe the condition of Boston's older graveyards. They were typically cramped, with rows of small, homogenous, gray headstones—and little else. Even in communities where more space was available, early American cemeteries were relatively unornamented and unvarying. They were meant to provide for the dignity of the dead, but they were not meant for the active enjoyment of the living. In some cases, according to John Stilgoe's *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845*, the Puritans intentionally built disheveled graveyards as "carefully articulated emblem[s] of the wildness of personified death." [1]

That changed for a very simple reason—in the 1820s, Boston was running out of space to bury the dead. Afraid of the public health problems that would result from improper burials, Mayor Josiah Quincy III tasked Jacob Bigelow with finding a solution to the problem. [2] Bigelow was both a physician and one of New England's most prominent botanists; as a member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, he saw an opportunity to solve two problems at once.

Drawing on examples like Paris' Père Lachaise, the city's new cemetery would also be a carefully landscaped botanical garden. There wasn't enough empty land in Boston proper to fulfill this vision, so the state legislature bought a farm in Cambridge and set the Society to work transforming it.

When the cemetery was finally consecrated in 1831, several thousand people came to mark the occasion. Gathered together in a convenient spot near the center of the property, they listened as Justice Joseph Story, the first president of the cemetery, invested it with a third role to go alongside that of burial ground and garden. The monuments within were for the purpose of instructing the feelings of the living:

> *It should not be for the poor purpose of gratifying our vanity or pride that we should erect columns, and obelisks, and monuments, to the dead; but that we may read thereon much of our own destiny and duty. We know that man is the creature of associations and excitements. Experience may instruct, but habit, and appetite, and passion, and imagination, will exercise a strong dominion over him. These are the Fates, which weave the thread of his character, and unravel the mysteries of his conduct. The truth, which strikes home, must not only have the approbation of his reason, but it must be embodied in a visible, tangible, practical form. It must be felt, as well as seen. It must warm, as well as convince.* [3]

Mount Auburn was the one of the first cemeteries of its kind in the United States, but many others quickly followed its example, creating new spacious, landscaped grounds for the dead. No doubt this is in part because other cities faced similar problems of overcrowding in their oldest cemeteries. But the greater part of its appeal, I suspect, came from the fact that the form and functions of the cemetery were so well-matched. The mourner, of course, wishes to be comforted, and he might take some comfort in the idea that the dead are somewhere which is clean and beautiful and cared for. More than that, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson, the sure knowledge of death has a wonderfully concentrating effect on the mind. The beauty of a well-kept graveyard has the power to soothe that fear without erasing the desire to live better that it inspires.

Mount Auburn remains an active cemetery, but most of us do not go there to mourn, for example, Charles Sumner or Julia Ward Howe or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The sadness caused by their deaths has dissipated. Instead, we go hoping to be invigorated by the memory of their great deeds and beautiful ideas. Eventually, most visitors reach the largest of the monuments on the property, a tower dedicated to Washington (without honoring him, I suppose, no American Panthéon would be complete). Standing at its top, reviewing Cambridge and Boston laid out before him, one might just be inspired to breathe new life into the nation his ancestors carved out of the forest.

The fear of death cannot be bested by means other than the spiritual, but the fear of being forgotten can be. This is the balm a good cemetery offers us—a surety that our bones will not lay neglected. More than that—more than a commitment that we will be remembered—it promises us that our memories might still do some good after we are gone. It leaves open the possibility that a young man, decades hence, might likewise stumble upon our graves and walk away once more prepared to defend the Permanent Things.

[1] John Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580-1845*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 227.

[2] Meg Winslow, "A History of Mount Auburn Cemetery," March 26, 2024, Cary Memorial Library, Lexington, Massachusetts, YouTube, 1:17:26, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_m7HndvvQQ.

[3] Joseph Story, *Consecration Address: An Address Delivered on the Dedication of the Cemetery at Mount Auburn, September 24, 1831.* Mount Auburn Cemetery.https://mountauburn.org/joseph-storys-consecration-address/

Secrets of Power:
Tacitus on the Soul of Despots and Despotism

Manuel Lopez

At a time of cynicism, demagoguery, and extreme partisanship in our politics, the strength, and even the wisdom, of republican institutions may no longer seem self-evident. In ages past, when political liberty itself became a matter of debate and doubt, there has been one thinker all sides turned to for insight: Tacitus (AD 56 - 120), the great analyst, biographer, and historian of the Roman empire, the longest lasting despotism in the West. He has inspired revolutionaries by exposing tyrants to the infamy they deserve (iii.65.1),* but also attracted apologists of absolute monarchy with his lessons in *realpolitik* and the "secrets of power" (*arcana imperii,* ii.36.1). He is the classical author favored by the founders of the American republic and its philosopher Montesquieu, yet also a byword for Machiavellianism. Nor is that duality the only measure of his breadth. The master psychologist of tyrants, Tacitus lays bare the workings of their souls—but also, more painfully, our own: he shows how even the cruelest tyrants win adherents and at times popular support by inciting envy and mockery of the respectable and providing gifts and licentious entertainments ("bread and circuses") to urban masses having no military or political responsibilities of their own.

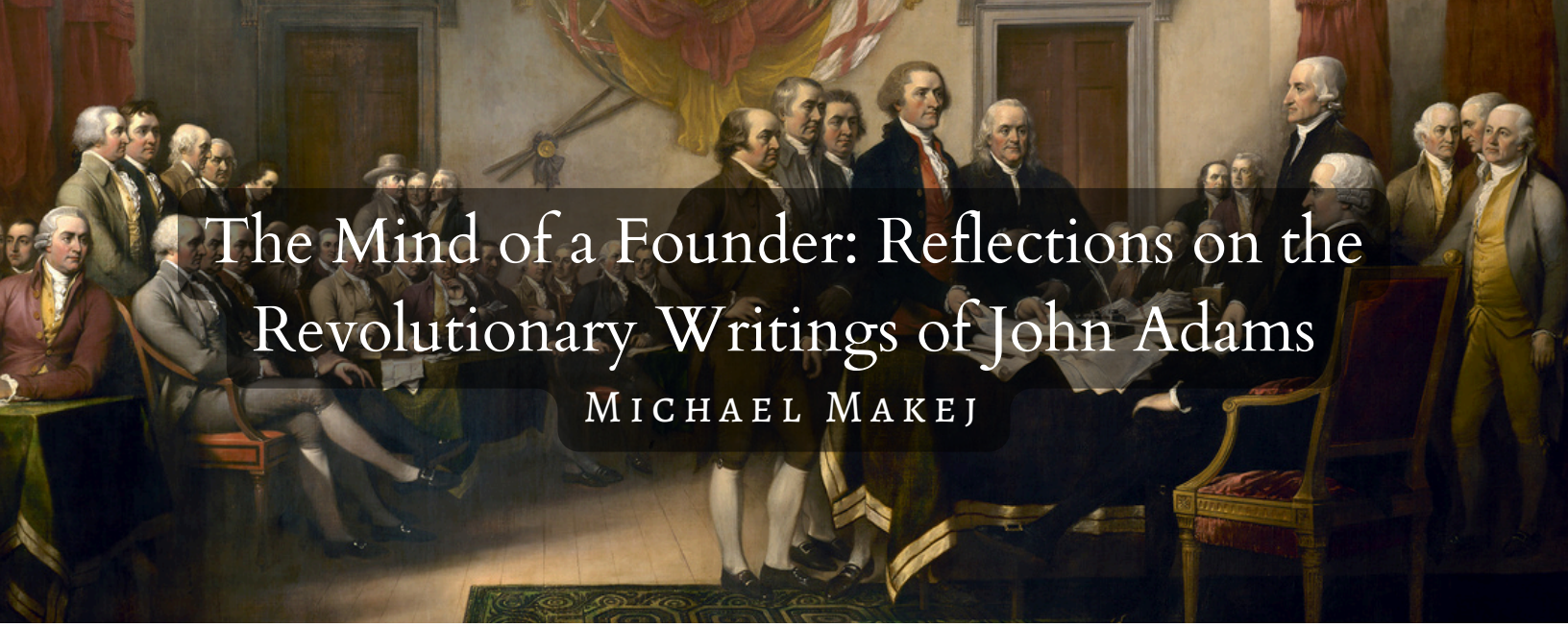
But this is only prelude to a sweeping but sobering reflection on how easily a not unhealthy human ambition for honor and success, turns, in a despotism, into a servile willingness to flatter the tyrant, the fountain of rewards and punishments, and further his profitable injustice (e.g., vi.8-9, cf. i.24.2, iv.2.3). The reigns of terror spread through numerous enablers, above all accusers and informers (*delatores*), a new, restless, hungry class (i.74.2). It is after reflecting on Tacitus that one may begin to realize how ignorant one has been about the most basic things, things that one takes for granted, such as the decency of those around one and one's country as a whole. What would things look like under the absolute rule of a tyrant? How would one's colleagues and neighbors, how would we behave? For in the reigns of terror, even friends and relatives cannot be trusted (iv.68-70, xv.56.4, and esp. xiii.19.1) and pity is banished (vi.19.2-3). These are possibilities one likely would not guess, not with sharpness and confidence, if one did not experience or witness them. A great historian such as Tacitus shows us a very wide range of these possibilities, and indicates the permanent human characteristics which underlie them. One might argue that all of history's awful, murderous regimes could have been prevented if those who founded or made them had had the benefit of an education from such wise observers when they were young. And of course, many of the best regimes, including our own, were founded, and perpetuated, by people who had learned in this way.

Furthermore, the moral and political prejudices of our regime can disguise our worst defects. Tacitus understands liberty and republican self-government to depend on very different virtues and beliefs than we as modern liberals would. His account of the failure of the Roman republic and the expansion of the cruelty and depravity of the Caesars looks in large part to the corruption of traditional mores and religion (especially in Rome, where decadent and cruel entertainments replace civic activity), the fear in the emperors arising from their lack of legitimacy, the dishonor and mockery of respectable citizens, and the progressive liberation from laws and restraints in rulers and ruled. That is, his understanding of political liberty rests on positive demands and virtues, such as spiritedness, self-discipline, toughness, constancy, honorableness, shame, and the straitjacket of law and mores (especially those governing family and sexual relations). We on the other hand, and simplifying to bring out the contrast, tend to think of liberty as a negative matter, our individual rights to live as we wish, rather than as a test of our character and virtues, or of our devotion to law and faith (—faith itself being only a private matter today). Whatever the successes and benefits of our modern liberal and individualistic orientation—and of course in many respects we stand at the peak of human achievement—it may blind us to how we, and especially potential tyrants, would actually behave once the restraints of law and faith (that we take for granted) fade (vi.51.3, xiii.47, xiv.13.2). Tacitus is, after all, much harsher in his assessment of human nature than we are: The need for severe restraints on man arises largely from his insight into the never extinguished and insatiable drive for mastery and dominion at the root of human nature (iii.26-28; ii.88.2).

Students wonder, how could the relentless cruelty, absurd paranoia, and frenzied bloodbaths that Tacitus describes, have taken over—and for so long!—that same nation and civilization that, in literature alone, gave us Ovid, Virgil, and Horace? Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch? — and of course Tacitus himself. How could monsters rise—criminal sociopaths—not just once, but again and again (vi.48.2), to supreme power over millions: Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Commodus, Caracalla? Was it the lead in their water? But then we must be surprised that the highly advanced nation that gave us Kant and Goethe, Bach and Beethoven, also gave us a Hitler. Perhaps our surprise results from a failure to understand not the exception, but the rule: human nature then and now.

Learning the lessons of Tacitus, however hard and bleak, may turn out to be the best defense and hope we have against the threats we now face. As the heirs of a freedom that has endured for centuries, we may be tempted to take it for granted. Even though many of us can now see signs on the wall that our regime is less strong than it used to be, what comes next? We see the decay, but Tacitus stands alone in showing us what is likely to follow from that decay—and with unrivalled clarity. And perhaps that will strengthen our resolve to support our free country, to foster the "new birth of freedom" of which our greatest President spoke. But even if it were not given to us to perpetuate the blessings of liberty and justice to future generations—as "this too shall pass"—understanding our failure would itself be no small gift that we can win for ourselves and pass on to our heirs, the gift that Tacitus passed down to us.

* All references are to book, chapter, and section number of the *Annals of Tacitus*.



The Mind of a Founder: Reflections on the Revolutionary Writings of John Adams

Michael Makej

Every Monday evening this past fall, as the leaves curled into winter and the 250th anniversary of the American founding approached, a small group of students gathered to discuss *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*. These last few months became a clarifying intellectual encounter with one of the nation's most overlooked founders. The seminar, organized by Dr. Danilo Petranovich of the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI), had many motivations and themes: civic piety, a nod to Adams as the husband of the Institute's namesake, the nation's semiquincentennial, scholarly escapism, and the timeless desire to understand the constitutional and philosophical architecture behind our nation.

For most participants, the discussions remained largely academic. Yet for me, a law student who walks past the John Adams Courthouse in Government Center each morning, and who grew up steeped in Massachusetts civic pride, the experience was something more intimate. I have been an admirer of Adams and his writings for several years, but reading him alongside others, who alternately challenged, doubted, critiqued, and were newly introduced to him, helped me clarify my own views and Adams' place amongst the pantheon of Founders.

The seminar unfolded in deliberate stages: broad political theory, the British-American constitutional crisis, Adams' republican turn, his constructive proposals for American government, and finally the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which I had the privilege of organizing and leading in our concluding session. Across these six weekly meetings, our group wrestled with questions that were not only historical but noticeably contemporary: the meaning of the common good, the legitimacy of civil and military authority, the limits of revolutionary violence, the role of religion in public life, and the fragility of constitutionalism in polarized times.

Our opening discussion centered on a deceptively simple question: Where do Adams' ideas come from? Was he a Puritan moralist formed by New England's theological rigor? A Christian republican defending the moral prerequisites of self-government? A lawyer shaped by common-law precedent and Whig constitutionalism? A classically-minded theorist concerned with the perennial problem of faction?

The first session oriented us toward these foundational questions, emphasizing their plurality rather than offering a single interpretive key. Adams is not reducible to any one tradition. This is, in my view, the secret to his enduring relevance. Adams refuses to indulge the inflamed, partisan romanticism that often surrounds revolutions. His theory of politics was anchored in what he famously called 'stubborn' facts: the constraints of human passion, the lessons of history, the demands of institutional design, and the moral inheritance of religious tradition. Where some detected shrewd cynicism or crafty shape-shifting rhetoric, I always characterized Adams' style as the method of an honest philosopher: to pursue the Truth with an overwhelming and totalizing industry, leaving no room for doubt or easy contradiction.

By the third and fourth sessions, we turned from Adams' general philosophy to the colonial crisis. Students arrived with serious questions: Had Adams overstated the constitutional abuses of Parliament? Was revolution justified? What would a British counterargument look like if we articulated it in its strongest form? These sessions produced some of the richest debates of the semester. The group was pressed to examine the loyalist arguments not simply as obstacles to American independence, but as sophisticated constitutional claims in their own right. We attempted to reconstruct Thomas Hutchinson's position with charity: that Parliament possessed imperial supremacy, that the colonies enjoyed only derivative rights, and that Adams' insistence on any American sovereignty was historically unfounded.

I remained firmly by Adams' side. As he marshaled precedent with a lawyer's precision, Adams also rooted his argument in deeper moral truths: that a people must govern themselves or be governed by the caprice of others. A people must control their own destiny. In this sense, Adams understood American resistance as pointing beyond itself, demanding its own fulfillment in the independence of a free, sovereign, American people.

The fourth and fifth sessions marked a turning point in our seminar, much as they did in Adams' own writing. Here Adams definitively broke with the British constitution and embraced a fully republican framework. Our close reading of *Thoughts on Government*, the six-page memorandum circulated in the critical months before independence, became a two-hour dissection of republican architecture. Adams' insistence on bicameralism, separation of powers, and a stabilizing executive was not abstract theorizing but a moral science grounded in human nature and enlightenment thinking. Men are ambitious. Factions form. Senates cool passions. Executives check assemblies. Constitutions, if they are to endure, must be fitted to the crooked timber of mankind.

All of this culminated in our final week: a deep dive into the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, a document Adams singularly drafted while on a committee with Sam Adams and James Bowdoin II. As a Massachusetts native and a lifelong admirer of Adams, co-leading this session was a personal honor. Adams represents not only the best of Massachusetts but the best of America. Across fifteen years of intellectual labor, marked by professional setbacks, personal grief, and unyielding effort, Adams helped kindle in the colonies the very idea of sovereignty and self-government. It was this same discipline that enabled him to motivate public and private sentiment toward independence and to help secure its resolution and adoption at the Second Continental Congress. Then, if this were not enough, Adams went on to draft the longest concurrently working constitution in the world, and the primary inspiration for the United States Constitution. Few state constitutions have had such national and world-historic influence, and fewer still bear so clearly the imprint of a single mind.

To guide our discussion, I posed several questions about the meaning of the "common good," the relationship between public worship and republican virtue, the extent of religious qualifications for office, and the people's perpetual right to "reform, alter, or totally change" their government. I wanted the group to grapple with whether Adams' blend of civic republicanism, religious moralism, and individual liberty can withstand (or has withstood) the demands of a pluralistic, often fragmented America.

As the United States approaches its semiquincentennial, we face questions Adams would recognize: What is the purpose of government? What virtues must a republic cultivate? Can liberty survive without restraint? Can a people remain sovereign without a thorough grounding in history, the common law, philosophy, and political thought? Adams spoke for his generation: now at the 250th, *quis loquitur pro nobis? Quis vox populi?*

What I carry most from this seminar is not merely a deeper understanding of John Adams, though that alone would have justified our weeks together, but a renewed sense of what it means to study the founding seriously. In an era when historical memory is thin and civic confidence is fragile, revisiting Adams is a form of recovery. He reminds us that constitutional government is neither self-executing nor self-justifying. It requires institutions trustworthy enough to check ambition, and citizens willing to discipline their passions and uphold their intellectual and civilizational inheritance.

"This radical Change in the Principles, Opinions, Sentiments and Affection of the People, was the real American Revolution.

By what means, this great and important Alteration in the religious, Moral, political and Social Character of the People of thirteen Colonies, all distinct, unconnected and independent of each other, was begun, pursued and accomplished, it is surely interesting to Humanity to investigate, and perpetuate to Posterity."

- John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, February 13, 1818

A Day Like Purim

HANNAH DUANE

The following essay was written to be read at the Student Conservative Minyan's Yom Kippur morning service.

This year, for the first time I can remember, I did not attend services on Rosh Hashanah.[1] I was feeling overwhelmed with assignments, I told myself. I'll go to the library and then to the holiday dinner. And to the library I went, sat down, and began to cry. I was not trying to catch up on work, I realized a few minutes too late. I was trying to avoid something.

And yet, as I sat down to write this—to think about what it is I was trying to avoid—I have come to feel like Yom Kippur is a bit of a farce. What I mean to say is: What are we doing here?

Aaron is about to take two goats from the community and draw lots. One will be sacrificed to God, the other will be set free. Then Aaron, the High Priest whose sons Nadab and Abihu have just died for offering a sacrifice incorrectly—not for idol worship or making war, but for sacrificing *to God* the wrong way—Aaron takes a bull to make a sin offering for himself and his household. Because surely Aaron is the one who needs to apologize to God.

And the message here, as far as I can tell, is that God, like us, is obsessed with order. That maybe, if we could just control the randomness (whatever that would mean), it would all be okay. Even though it is hardly ever okay.

On Monday, I walked into Rav Jason's office. He had called me back in August to ask if I would speak today. I was distracted; the fastest way off the phone seemed to be to agree. But now, I said:

"I don't know how to write this. I feel mad at the holiday."

IHe said, “Okay.”

I continued: “It all seems like a bit of a joke. We’re going to ask God to give us another year of life because we’ve apologized for our sins—which is to say, because we’ve tried to be good? Because all the people who died in the last year—that was on purpose? And the important part is the apologizing to God, not to the people we’ve wronged—sure, we’re supposed to do that too, but people aren’t really saying these days *wow, the Jews are so good at realizing when they’ve done wrong and making amends*. I guess there’s that as well—we have a lot of repairing to do. But who is this we? I think it’s more Netanyahu’s fault than mine that he’s speaking to an empty room at the UN. But I bet we feel more guilt about it than he does.

But who knows? Maybe he trembles for his country when he thinks that God is just.”

And even though that’s a pretty cliché speech, and I said it less coherently on Monday, Rav Jason was kind to me because that is his job.

And he said: “Well maybe that is why Yom Kippur [2] is like Purim.”

Because the Rabbis love word tricks, right?

And Yom Kippur, if you separate out the first letter, reads: יוֹם כְּ - פּוּרִם—a day which is like Purim. There are several explanations for this. According to one, most holidays are half for you and half for God, but Purim is all for you and Yom Kippur is all for God. But this strikes me as a bad explanation. That is why Yom Kippur is *not* like Purim. Or, the Zohar says that in the future, we will celebrate on Yom Kippur like we do today on Purim.

What I’m trying to say is: maybe Yom Kippur is like Purim because it is, in essence, a farce.

We’re pretending the world is not what it is, that somehow we could order it. Or that God will order it. Or that the Jews might actually respond to their collective guilt. Or that the interventionist God will intervene, that this year, everything will be just. And, as on Purim, we dress up and pretend we are people other than we are.

Eli Wiesel tells a story about Yom Kippur in Auschwitz. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a man he knew, who had been the head of a yeshiva before the war and was now very clearly dying, told him: “I will not fast on Yom Kippur. Not because here, we fast every day, but because how could I plead any more to God?” Then the holiday came around, and they davened Kol Nidre [3] separately, and Wiesel did not see the man until after the fast had ended.

Later that week, the man confessed: he had fasted. Not to please God, but rather to spite him. “The only way to accuse him is by praising him.” Because the most spiteful thing one can do is say to God *I believe you will do the right thing, I believe you will make it better. Either you are choosing to prolong this suffering, or you do not have the power to stop it.*

It is not the 1940s and, thank God, we are free. Indeed, we are the ones forcing others to live every day like it is Yom Kippur. But I think this rabbi’s point stands. After reading Wiesel and talking to Rav Jason, I had an occasion to email many of the professors who I have known well, and so I solicited feedback on my unfortunately angsty “this all seems like a farce” theory.

While many of the Jewish professors I emailed said something along the lines of “I stopped believing in God in the last century, what do you want from me?”, the only Christian I queried had something more helpful to say. This professor directed me to the index of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* by Johannes Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard). Kierkegaard is concerned with this aspect of faith that approaches farce.

He writes, "What, then, is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up."

I haven't forgotten where I am or what day it is. And I don't mean to hold on to the particular absurdity of the idea that God—omnipotent, omniscient and maybe omnibenevolent—could really be born on earth and do things like teethe. But I still want to think about most of Kierkegaard's notion of the absurd here: the idea that He is here, able to intervene and doing so, while also keeping my eyes open to the world around me, where perfectly good people die for no reason all the time.

Kierkegaard goes on:

"So, then, there is a man who wants to have faith; well, let the comedy begin.

He wants to have faith, but he wants to assure himself with the aid of objective deliberation and approximation. What happens? … Now he is all set to believe it, but, lo and behold, now it has indeed become impossible to believe it."

And I don't want to suggest that we're doing Pascal's wager here, Jewish or otherwise. I cannot believe for a reason, because it makes sense, or because I have decided to. As much as another professor told me to talk about how good it is that we all get together to think about how "we, emphasis on the collective, have failed other mortals," I do not know how to pray void of the possibility I might be praying to someone. It's absurd. It's farcical. I'll do it only out of spite. And I have no spite for you, so the spite must be for God.

And so I (or we) resort to farce by way of ritual. Because this way, it can be controlled. I pray and pound my chest with sincerity one year, and not the next, but I will still do it. And because you will still do it too, and all of these people that I cannot have a single thought without—because I am not a person except constituted in the eyes of some community—will do it too.

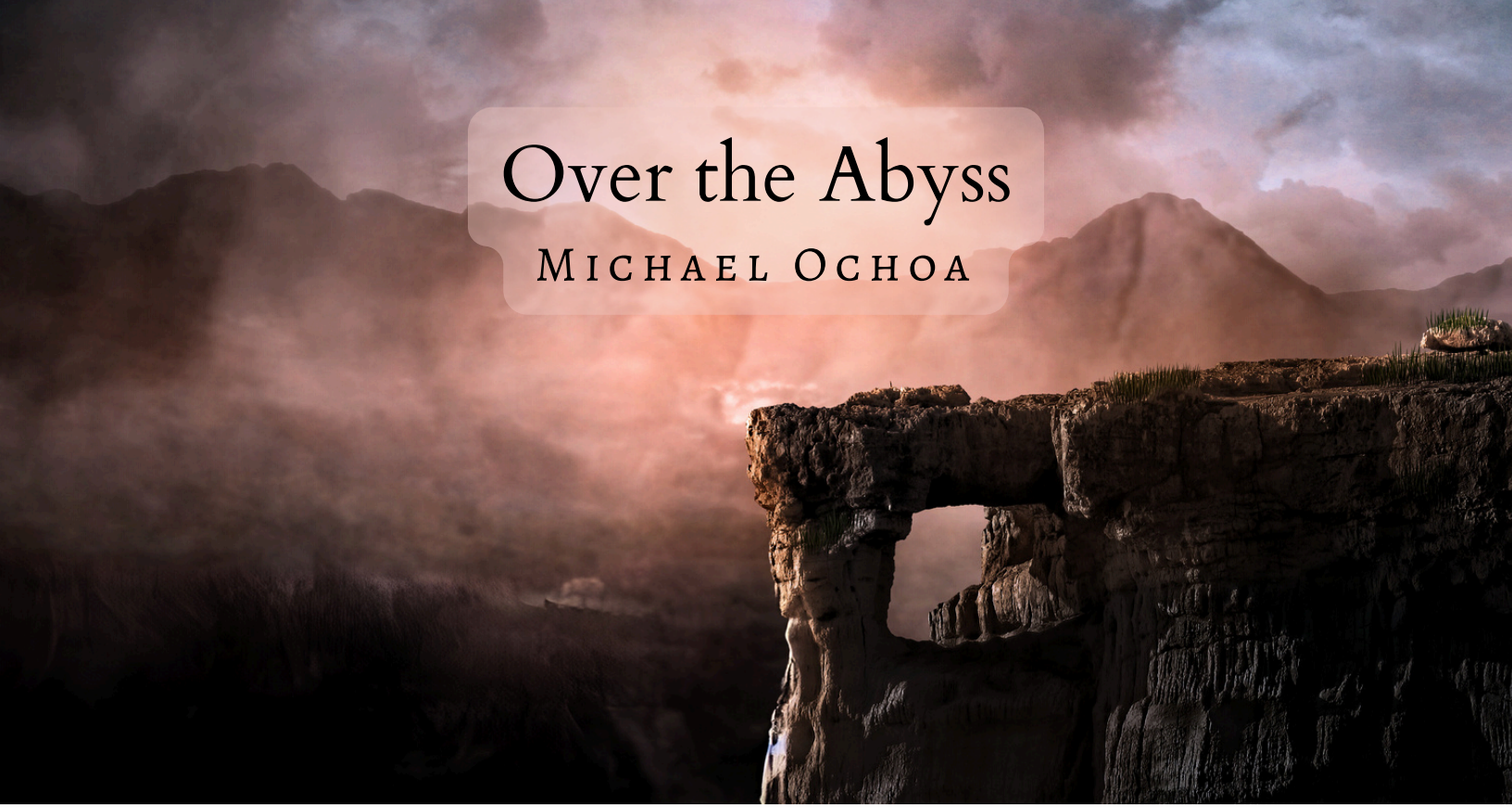
Or we will at least take the question seriously. And that seriousness will be urgent and it will be part of the absurdity. In any event, I will still present the possibility to God of trying to behold Him. Or the possibility that He beholds me. I will still play my part. In spite and in earnestness, in belief and in doubt, and in anger and in absurdity. G'mar chatima tova.[4]

[1] The Jewish new year, 10 days before Yom Kippur.

[2] The holiest day of the Jewish calendar, or "Day of Atonement."

[3] The prayer service on the night Yom Kippur begins.

[4] May you be sealed in the Book of Life. (Traditional greeting on Yom Kippur).



Over the Abyss

Michael Ochoa

Laughter rises from the grassy hill, tossed about in the morning breeze. Families shout playfully at one another amid the din of airships arriving and departing from out over the darkness. Below the green slope, a myriad of airships speckle the plain, ready to be boarded. Passengers meander, preparing to launch out over the Abyss.

Before aviation, the Abyss was the end of the world. Once submerged into its depths, no thing or person returned. But ever since humans had harnessed flight, the journey across the Abyss had become an everyday affair.

The airships range in size and engineering. The oldest hold one or two passengers and run on a combination of inefficient combustion and human energy. The pilots of these antiques crank and pedal and pull their machine through the air in a kind of desperate necessity. Some pilots of the smaller airships get a running start before leaving land, feeling the ground beneath them swallowed into the chasm.

The newer airships are quieter and put out less exhaust, and the newest passenger-ships can carry up to 200 passengers. One of these ships stands out among the rest, glinting like a sun on the surface of the earth, its chrome exterior beaming. On the ship's side, large, bold letters spell out its name: *LAZARUS*.

A pilot from the old war labors up the initial steps to board the ship. He is enveloped by a once-regal pilot's jacket, hemming in more memories than even its wearer retains. A white, wiry beard hangs off his chin. As he trudges down the aisle, some passengers venture a friendly nod. Making it to the bottom of the internal stairs, he removes a discolored handkerchief and takes a moment to wipe his forehead before ascending to the cockpit. Reaching it, he opens the door and takes his seat.

With the last passenger on the vessel, the boarding door slams shut, and deep vibrations run through the ship's frame. A moment later, a flight attendant pops into the cockpit and announces that the passengers are almost settled. The grizzled veteran waves her off and picks up the speaker broadcasting to the cabin. His raspy voice grates on the passengers, "Hello, passengers! Thank you for flying Efficiency Airlines. Today we're running a direct flight across the Abyss." His frown bleeds through his voice as he continues reading from the company placard posted next to the microphone. "We'll get you there safely and, as always, with a concern for your wallet."

Clicking off the speaker, the old pilot lets his thoughts wander. Depth without bottom; unsearchable; everlasting unto everlasting; beyond measure; its limits not set; fathoms unto fathoms; complete removal from the surface; utter –

PSSSHT!

"*Lazarus*, this is flight control." The buzzing radio snaps him back into the cockpit. "You are set to roll over to runway 8."

"Understood," he mutters into the comm. His hands dance around the instrument panel, working life into the plane. The large engines of the airship begin to turn, like giants rising from slumber, and start a slow crescendo into more vigorous life. The passengers chatter unconcernedly about nieces' dance recitals, dogs' surgeries, and the mundane intricacies of business deals.

The airship lurches over the plain toward the Abyss. Wheels rotate slowly, dragging the *Lazarus* over the dust-laden concrete along a yellow-marked path. Other airships mosey along their own paths, lazy until the defining moment. Soon, the *Lazarus* will pass the others and venture out over the darkness.

The din inside the airship increases. The whole cabin vibrates, forcing passengers to shout over the engines as they continue their small talk.

Buckle, announcement. Listen, look, feel. The motors rise. Stop, wait. The motors rise. Lurch, movement, speed. More speed. The motors are risen. Yet more speed! Tilting, tilting, their stomachs are left behind. The angle increases, and…

Suddenly, the ground is below them. They have grown wings. A miracle! A miracle every time.

In his cabin, the old pilot notices a hodgepodge of smaller airships distributed across the sky to the left and right of the Lazarus. Their variety is astounding, seemingly reflecting the bottomless creativity of biology. He sees ships stay afloat via giant bags set off to either side filled with light gases, mimicking a croaking toad with a propeller strapped to its hind. Other ships have fin-like wings protruding here and there, as if they are meant to cut omnidirectionally through the air, a kind of predator in hunt of sky fish.

Some ships are more patchwork, a conglomeration of disparate parts sharing a purpose but not quite planned. It's as though they were cobbled together by some isolated welder working out his imaginings in the bowels of the earth. Materials – leftovers from some more handy generation lost to time – are scant. They are panels of varied metals, all rusted, secured by bolts and clamps and friction and glue; smoke stacks welded askew; seats taken from old rocking chairs and bicycles; and chains and belts and cylinders exposed from the sides, threatening to sever fingers or worse.

Soon the *Lazarus* reaches its cruising altitude and members of the cabin crew file down the aisles, handing out mini pretzels and wine.

Far out to the old man's left and above him, he spots a speck: a tiny ship trailing thick, black smoke.

As the *Lazarus* draws nearer, the neighboring ship grows in size; it's started to lose some altitude. The old pilot fixates on it.

It closes in, descending nearly to the level of the *Lazarus*. Just a few hundred yards away now, the pilot sees the man at the helm crumpling his body at the demands of his ship, his limbs spilling out. Both legs are forced out on either side, and never extend completely as they pedal. He hunches under a low ceiling, head pressed against the top.

The old pilot's hand moves to the throttle. It stays there, frozen, and his eyes fixate on it as a bead of sweat forms on his brow. Then he slightly adjusts the throttle backward and the engines stoop in their grumble by a semitone.

Again, the old war captain peers out his window. Now, the struggling pilot is near enough that sweat can be seen streaming off his rigid face. His body is contorted, and veins pop out of his neck and bulge at the back of his hands. His eyes are locked straight ahead, without deviation or second thought. Lower, lower, he sinks in his flight. The old man has seen this face before. He has worn this face before.

"You wonder what he set out for. What would he risk a trip for in that ship?" The captain murmurs under his breath, shaking his head.

PSSHT! The radio kicks on. "*Lazarus*, this is Air-Control. Come in, over."

"Air Control, this is the captain of the *Lazarus*, over."

"*Lazarus*, we just received an alert that you have deviated from the flight plan. If you continue on your new flight path you will run out of fuel before you make it across the Abyss. You must course-correct immediately."

After a long silence, the old man responds.

"You've probably been in the southern deserts. At least flown over them." He holds down the speaker, not allowing a response.

"Did anyone ever ask you for your water in the desert? Maybe they should've brought more water. They knew how big the desert was. Everyone does. And maybe you only had enough water for yourself. But you knew how hot it was out there. You could feel that heat and you knew that same sun was beating down on them too.

"Maybe they didn't even ask with their words. But you knew who you were, and what you were about and what you deserve and what you've been given. And you saw them, and you knew that they'd been through it. And you didn't quite understand why you had the water and they didn't. Because you were wiser? Not wise enough to have extra. And even though you knew that you had just enough to get through, you wondered about what it might mean to give some away. Right? Because you were under the same sun as they were, and it was hard to think about not making it."

The veteran takes a long pause. As the silence stretches on, lights on the instrument panel blink red warnings at him. He begins again, "And you knew that you had just enough. But this guy didn't." A few hot tears fall out of his eyes. "But see, I didn't earn it. I'm not better than him! But maybe God will give me more if I give it away…"

The captain lets the radio fall out of his hand and leaves it hanging as he makes for the cockpit door. "Captain? Captain! Return to your flight path immediately!" crackles the voice from the speaker. He resolutely descends the stairs, and passenger conversation ceases as he parts the aisle.

Stopping at the boarding door, he collects himself before the now-attentive passengers, then grabs the spinning, locking wheel, and turns hard. Bolts clear their holes and the door flies open, forcing the captain to grab onto the wall as a violent rush of air threatens to rip him from his feet.

Wide-eyed passengers grip their armrests, dig their fingers into the cushions, and hold their breath in suspense.

Air still whipping around the cabin, the captain rights himself, inches to the open door, and cranes his head out. He looks down into the nothingness below, then calls as loudly as he can to the man pedaling in desperation.

The anguished traveler looks to the large airship, spying the pilot's motioning gestures. He pivots his small, smokey ship toward the open door, maneuvering it within feet of the beckoning captain.

Bracing himself, the lone flyer crouches on his seat, preparing to leap. In one swift motion, he abandons his grip on the handle bars and kicks his dying machine back and away from him, springing toward the captain and the open door. The two collide, chest to chest, and crash to the floor. Instantly, the newcomer crawls back to the door to watch his decrepit craft plummet downward. The captain grabs him and pulls him into the cabin as the exterior door closes with a thud. The cabin pressure returns to normal and the passengers release a collective breath. With hair and clothing disarranged from the whirlwind, passengers begin to apprehensively applaud, then crescendo into a roar of appreciation.

The two pilots embrace. As the applause fades, the captain breaks off, faces the passengers and addresses them.

"Sometimes, a question is asked of us." Faces stare back blankly. "If we're lucky, maybe more than once. And we must respond. When you hear the question, you are bound to answer. You cannot shrink in non-response into eternity.

"Many of us have learned to act like the question was never asked." His voice grows sharper. "You ignore it. But you have numbed yourself to what matters most!"

The passengers shift uncomfortably at his growing severity.

"If you have once heard the call and ignored it, some light has gone out. The world has been made darker. Some little wound has been opened. Then, over the years, it festers. So we invent ways to forget about the question. Ways like cake, and clothes, and sports, and sex. You can act like the light never called you. You can bury that memory in all this shit." He spits. "But it will not go away. We either treat it or let it grow."

He glares at the stupefied passengers. Only the drone of the engines sounds. No one moves.

Suddenly, warning lights start flashing red around the cabin. The confused joy of the passengers evaporates in an invisible wave.

"Captain!" A panicking young woman jumps up from her seat. "What's happening? What do we do?"

A bleating siren begins to sound through the plane.

Voices around the cabin rise in a muddled panic. Short sentences. Many questions. Seeds of fear quickly sprout into saplings and full-fledged trees.

The captain whispers to himself, "We gave our water to someone in the desert."

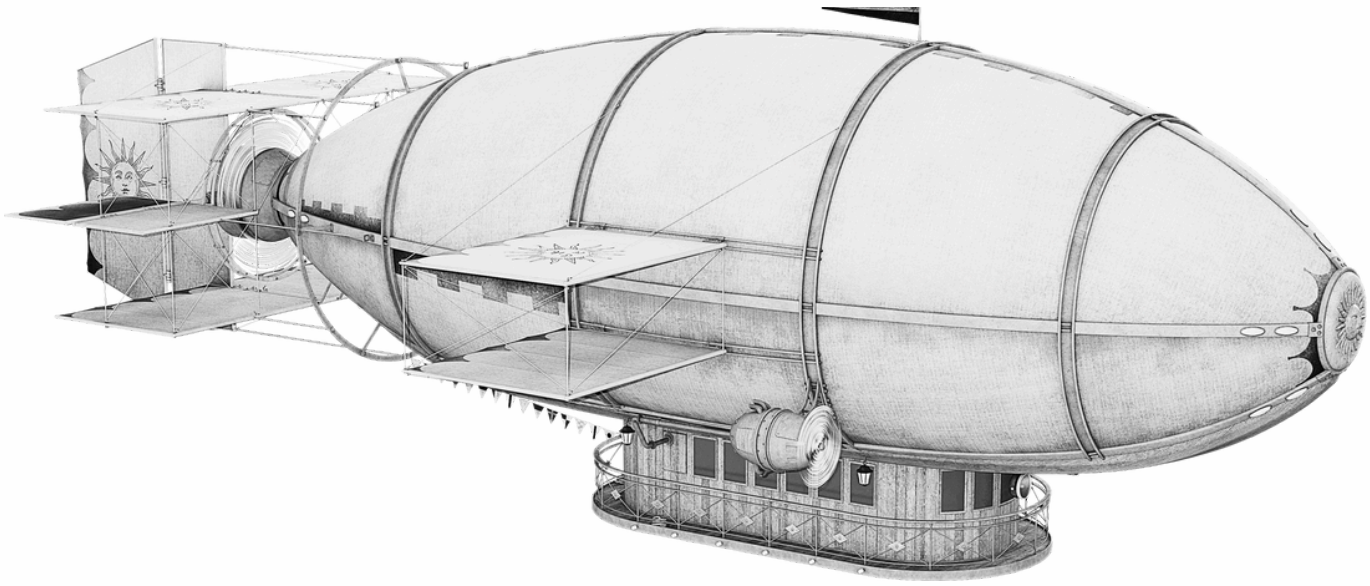
Then, an automated warning issues out over the speakers: *WARNING! LOW ALTITUDE! LOW FUEL. WARNING! LOW ALTITUDE! LOW FUEL.* The warning repeats ad nauseum.

The cabin is flooded in red light.

An ancient terror overcomes the passengers, who no longer command their own thoughts. Instead they speak an ancient tongue, guttural, with a very plain syntax–one long, instinctive scream.

The engines putter into silence. The red lights and warnings cut off into darkness, and weeping, and the gnashing of teeth.
Near the boarding door, the captain searches for the one he saved. He finds him on the floor, in the fetal position, crying, and lies next to him, wrapping him in his arms.

On the far edge of the Abyss, at the airship's intended destination, laughter rises from the grass, tossed about in the morning breeze. Families shout playfully at one another amid the din of airships taking off and arriving. The *Lazarus*, a speck in the distance, sinks below the horizon down into the void. Busied in conversation and in life, no one notices the ship, like some luminous stranger, settling down into the grave.



Movie Review: *The Tree of Life*

Elliott R. Jones

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? ...
When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4–7)

Terrence Malick, the philosopher turned film director, opens *The Tree of Life* (2011) with the above quote from the book of Job.

The Tree of Life won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2011 and features Sean Penn as an adult Jack (the elder of two brothers), Brad Pitt as the father, and Jessica Chastain as the mother. The film is a meditation on the problem of evil, in particular the evil of suffering. The film starts with the father learning of his younger son's death––the cause is not stated, but suicide is implied. An adult Jack wanders an urban landscape decades later meditating on this seminal event. He contemplates his childhood in Texas as he discerns what meaning there could be in the death of his innocent brother. Terrencce Malick himself grew up in Texas and lost his younger brother to suicide when he was in his twenties.

Although some scenes are memories (real and fantastic) of Jack's childhood, other scenes are Malick's own artistic meditations on human existence and suffering that attune the viewer to Jack's experience. Such scenes include travelling billions of years through the creation of the universe, the formation of the Earth, the development of life, and finally, the end of the universe. The narrative is particular to an individual family, but the film as a whole is cosmic in scope.

Malick's unique film style demands a reflective attentiveness from the viewer, whom he invites into a vivid sensory experience. Malick wants to attune us to a world and mood (*Stimmung*) through a carefully curated selection of images, sounds, and music. These sights and sounds affect us as much on an emotional as on an intellectual level. In allowing ourselves to be attuned, viewers rejoice in moments of levity and child-like humor or wallow in the sorrow of tragedy. In the midst of a fragmented conceptual and thematic narrative, the imagery is deeply emotionally effective and holistic.

Aesthetically, this film is a masterpiece. Each image is carefully selected and edited personally by Malick, blending the joyful, the comic, and the tragic to achieve a meticulously manicured portrayal of childhood. Examples of poignant scenes are Jack's birth and his first words, his jealousy of his younger brother, the tyranny of his father, and consequently, Jack's rebellion, and the grace of his mother.

Philosophically, the ideas and themes are abundant.

First, Malick tackles the second most important question in philosophy: “Given that there is something at all rather than nothing, why does suffering exist?"

This film, viewed through a theistic interpretation, raises important questions about God’s providence and theodicy. Adult Jack starts his musings on his brother’s death with these questions: “How did I lose you? Forgot you?”

A theme as important as God’s providence is the theme of grace versus nature. Jack’s mother opens the film with a monologue juxtaposing the “way of grace” and the “way of nature”:

“You have to choose which one you will follow. Grace doesn’t like to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked… accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself, get others to please it too, likes to lord it over them, to have its own way. It finds reason to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things.”

Interestingly, Jack’s father and mother represent these two “ways” of life in his memory. This theme raises the question of whether nature is good or evil, whether there is a way to live beyond nature, given its tendency to dominate and subdue.

Second, the telling of the narrative through Jack’s memory raises questions about how memory develops as a narrative over time. It is clear that Jack, by the end of the film, discerns in his memory something that suggests that all manner of things will be well. What is this something, and is it possible for the viewer to grasp this in their own experience? How is it possible to see the goodness of existence even in the midst of profound suffering?

This film is for philosophers. But because all people are capable of asking the question “why is suffering in the world”, it is for everyone. It is open to as much theological interpretation as the viewer desires and is as much a story of psychology as it is of the universal human condition. Malick offers the viewer the task of piecing together cosmic reality and the meaning of suffering, which is ultimately a task each one of us faces in our own lives.

This film reminds us that this world, dominated today by immanence, politics, radicalism, suffering, exploitation, and despair is also a world that had a beginning, that slowly formed minerals and planets, that formed an earth with molten lava, flora, dinosaurs, mammals, and humans. It reminds us that this world that all so often seems cramped, frenetic, and full of pointless natural and moral evils is also a world of love, joy, celebration, and grace.

The film is book-ended by shots of a mysterious flickering light, welcoming the contemplation of the mysteries of human existence. This light underlying the film is a light of hope that symbolically speaks: “and yet”. And yet, somehow it is not only better that there is something rather than nothing, but even that there is suffering rather than a world without it.

“I give you my son,” Jack’s mother says in the last line of the film, followed by a shot of an endless field of sunflowers bathed in the dawn light as birds and crickets chirp. As Jack’s memory shows, even amidst tremendous suffering, this is a world in which sacrifice and gifts are possible.

Movie Review: *Snowpiercer*

SUAN SONNA

I first encountered *Snowpiercer*, a post-apocalyptic sci-fi thriller, in high school about ten years ago. After an exhausting finals week, I was looking for a light action movie and stumbled across this film. Little did I know, I was about to watch an intense and somber two-hour critique of capitalism.

Snowpiercer released in theaters on June 27th, 2014, to critical acclaim but meager box office returns– except in South Korea and China. In South Korea, it sold four million tickets within its first week which is, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, "the shortest time span for a film to reach that level of admissions in South Korean box office history."[1]

The star-studded cast certainly played a part in the film's success – Chris Evans, Jonathan Hurt, and Ed Harris held lead parts – but more importantly, the film resonated with these audiences because of the social critiques explored by its legendary director, Bong Joon-ho.

This name might not immediately register, but his 2019 film *Parasite* presumably will. At the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020, *Parasite* won Best Picture, Best International Feature Film, and Best Director for the esteemed filmmaker. But even before 2020, Joon-ho had established himself in South Korea as a master with movies like *Memories of Murder, The Host, Okja*, and many others.

I mention *Parasite* here because it shares much in common with *Snowpiercer*. Namely, both films are social commentaries and critiques of the excesses of capitalism. Although *Snowpiercer* did not initially perform well in Western countries, *Parasite's* success has gradually brought *Snowpiercer* back into the spotlight and garnered it cult status.

In a 2019 interview, Bong Joon-ho explained the meaning of his film *Parasite*: "In today's capitalistic society there are ranks and castes that are invisible to the eye. We keep them disguised and out of sight and superficially look down on class hierarchies as a relic of the past, but the reality is that there are class lines that cannot be crossed." Whereas *Parasite* aims to capture and subtly expose those invisible divisions, *Snowpiercer* is more direct.[2]

For example, while commenting on a scene depicting child labor in *Snowpiercer*, Joon-ho said, "In Bangladesh when they decommission large ships and break them up for parts, a full-grown adult can't fit inside, so they use small kids who are under 7 and they work for very little money—it's very dangerous. If you watch National Geographic, you see this. So in fact it's not science fiction, it's something that's actually happening, which is quite sad."[3] What might seem dystopian beyond our wildest dreams is in some instances happening in our world today.

The story begins like this: in response to global warming, the cooling agent CW-7 is released into the atmosphere in 2014. It is designed to last a thousand years. Wilford (Ed Harris), head of Wilford Industries and a brilliant inventor, anticipates the ensuing disaster and builds a train, the *Snowpiercer*. When the earth freezes over as he predicted, he loads what remains of humanity onto his miraculous train.

Aside from its remarkable ability to withstand harsh conditions and house more than 3,000 people, it sports an "eternal engine" which is imbued with religious and cultic significance. The train itself is divided into three classes or sections: the tail, the middle, and the front. The train's population is tightly controlled due to scarce resources and space, and everyone is told that they must accept their preordained place in life. There are only a few characters in the movie who lawfully move forwards or backwards in the train. Moreover, leaving the train is unthinkable because of the cold, which instills a sense of claustrophobia and limits the options for an alternate future. The revolutionaries and elite both feel compelled to work within the boundaries of humanity's survival, preserving the train, despite the system's vast social inequalities and the miserable living conditions of passengers relegated to the tail.

Jumping forward to 2031, Curtis (Chris Evans), the film's protagonist, leads the rear into a major revolt against the front. There have been previous revolts on the train, but none have yet managed to reach the engine room where Wilford lives and tends to the Eternal Engine. Curtis aims for that room, desiring to replace Wilford with a more worthy leader: Gilliam (Jonathan Hurt), Curtis' mentor and a paragon of wisdom and virtue.

Curtis and Wilford are set against each other, but viewers would do well to compare and contrast them. How might each answer this question: "How much are you willing to sacrifice for a noble cause?" One might wonder whether either Curtis or Wilford are pursuing noble causes at all.

Similarly, Curtis' relationships throughout the film with his friend Edgar and his mentor Gilliam are revealing. The nuance of these two relationships tempers any blind endorsement of wholesale revolution. Despite being an outspoken critic of capitalism, Joon-ho demonstrates his awareness of the human toll that revolutions take, and it is possible to interpret *Snowpiercer* as a cautionary tale concerning (but not necessarily against) revolts–even while it critiques the system against which the characters struggle.

With its stark social inequality and graphic violence, does the fictional world of *Snowpiercer* actually reflect our society? Is the film a diagnosis, a criticism, a warning, a satire, or a lament? No matter how one interprets the "moral" of the story and the message of its director, the film prompts viewers to critically examine our own world and our own motivations through the lens of the abominable *Snowpiercer*.

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Ibid.

Biographies

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