



MIDDLESEX

A Literary Journal

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Middlesex, *A Literary Journal*

Editor-in-Chief

Emanuel di Pasquale, *Poet in Residence*
Middlesex County College

Associate Editors

Daniel Zimmerman
Mathew Spano

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AT MOLLY'S PUB

On this cold evening
Down among the old row houses
On Chestnut Street,
My brother and I
Are huddling for warmth
Against our father's name
And staring at the sharp, bright light
Reflecting from the street
And the snow filled park across the way,
Recalling the chill of other tables
And settling into our coats,
As if the window had cracked open,
And in it flowed, clear and unbearable,
His element, and the ice he lay on,
Eleven, unnoticed, with a broken hip,
Refusing to tell his brother he was hurt –
He told me once, an old man,
The child's anger welling in his eyes;
He almost died, they all did then –
Turning now to my brother's voice,
My eyes returning from the winter light,
As bright and sharp as a broken bone.
With a last glance at the empty park,
And the boy who waits on the ice.

**'TROOPER MEDITATING BESIDE A GRAVE'
- JOSLYN MUSEUM, OMAHA**

Standing there among the stunted pines
Beneath a mourning veil
Of limbs and shadows,
The trooper stares quietly
At the cross of his friend,
A stillness in his face, while
A halo of darkness surrounds his head,
As though to sanctify the privacy of
This moment shared between them.
And yet the way the cross falls
Out of the painting and into the museum
Begs me to enter the scene,
To set the cross erect
Before it falls into the weeds
And rots in the long world's weather;
While the cross just yards away
Is straight, and the name
On its crossbar is clear
For those who come to search.
But what of the third cross,
Deep in the pines
And disappearing into the forest shadows?
The man who lies beneath
Bereft and forever waiting,
Living out eternity
In this approaching dusk,
As a young man in an empty forest,
Alone and waiting for his comrades
To return.
The crosses stand implacable,

They are the painting, memento mori,
The republic of the dead.
And yet for all his offices of love,
I want this burden lifted from
The trooper's heart,
For the man himself is so alive,
With his trim and kempt mustache
And his cap set at a raffish angle,
That I want him to return
To his life and escape
This heartbreak disguised as paint.
He has survived after all,
This man who has walked into the scene
From outside the painting;
And as I gaze at him watching the dead,
I want to pull him away from this mooring in time,
To set the painting's light in motion,
And let him walk with me out onto Dodge Street
And into a bright Nebraska afternoon;
Yes, I would like that for him;
But the paint will not move
With the changing of the light.

BRADY'S PLATES

Mathew Brady assembled and financed the team of photographers who documented the Civil War. At the war's end, deeply in debt, Brady was forced to sell most of his original plate glass negatives with their intact images to greenhouse owners.

Captured by the light of Brady's lens
When their lives had leaked away,
Left splayed across their rifle pits
Or laid in rows by battered trenches
In confusions of tattered jackets and limbs,
Did they resent their role as spectacle,
These gentlemen of wounds,
Grown perfect in composure now for
Crowds that round the gallery roamed
Or stared through stereopticons?
They must have felt relieved at last
When the plates were sold for greenhouse glass,
And the ghostly shadow of an upturned face
Could cast its veil across a lily's pistil.
A boy once murdered in
The flower of his own beauty
Fostering the blooms
With arabesques of light.
And all those spirits
In the summerhouse dome
Would finally rest in peace,
Suffused with the sunlight
They once made beautiful for
Those who loved them,
Warmed by its white radiance,
As it filtered through the rose windows
Of their dying
Onto the orchids and the pinks below.

IN MEMORIAM: RUDY

My mother, orderly as ever,
Calls to tell me the gardener,
Suffering from dementia,
Has died in his sleep.

He would save boxes and mark them:
Good box to put things in.
Or so she said.

I remember broad shoulders and a baseball hat,
And trailing him around the yard with my glove.
He taught me how to catch a fly ball.
Throw me a high one Rudy I would say,
And the ball would sail toward heaven.

PIKE BENEATH THE RAIL BRIDGE
(FOR MAT SPANO)

A snake of shadow doubles in the water—
A grounded pike in his cold redoubt, his
Troubled blur of darkness underneath him

Rolls over motes of stones like a cut kite-tail,
In a water-flight of greedy feeding, snap and
Strike after strike into terrorized small fry

That blaze his evilly thin needle teeth with blood,
Curling broody clouds into lake-light and weeds
And obscuring the dumbshow action of a life.

II

The weight of the pike, black as a wrenched rail spur,
Meditates in his mysteriousunderworld, gleeless
And deeply green as a Christmas bough—

I am life! I am knife! he seems to say, scissoring
His blunt course beneath the taut causeway,
A troll below the ebony river's surface, shadow

Inside shadow, his deathly inches glistening ink
As he writes the page of life black as himself
Or his shadow-self, the self that guides the knife.

POSTCOITAL OLIVE GROVE

Here I lie as if on a shield of dust
Beneath a black-green dapple of olive trees,
The sun in patches alive as fire ants
Over my beloved as she snores, *sotto voce*,
The wine rolled emptily out of reach
As steep hills fall away to a scent of hidden seas
And my forgotten pipe burns, itching my fingers,
My teeth fresh and shivery as if smiling,
The white plate bare of all but a few grapes.

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW

The police artist is drawing my face
For a stranger, one who attended the ill-
Attended impromptu poetry reading
Under a chilly streetlight flickering
Where we used the forbidden words
With facile ease as in the old days:
Genders, pronouns, she, he and all that.
She hadn't seen much, though, just a zee
Zaying zomething, a blur like a face
Wearing a beard or sprouting one,
Two feet, or maybe one was fake, she
Hesitated to say, other-abled, some color
Or other. Yes, yes, I think zee was a shade.

THING

The name of the thing is Thing.
But it's really a hand in a box
That shuts itself in with a lid.
Sometimes it pops out of another box
Or shuts another lid, after helping
To hold a nail or straighten a tie.
Thing's shadow-puppets are dramatic and informative,
A kind of one-handed hula. Today,
Thing loops a lariat, or is it
A noose, and leaves it neatly coiled
On the old-fashioned table for later use.
Now, what am I to make of that?
Thing dances a little, gives a firm OK.

PAPER

Alone as a dot
In a snowy meadow
The pencil tip
Sheds black feathers
Like an old crow.

The sheet is ice
Or desert--
Void or supernova.
It doesn't say
And you don't ask.

Slide down whiteness
Holding hands
Then stop on tiptoe
And acknowledge this
Endless cliff.

THE CURVE OF HER WORLD

The tears that pepper her cheeks
Refresh a softness in her gaze,
Give back grace now the monster
Sorrow has swum away to sea
To bother other deeps, other shes
While my darling thoughtfully
Walks barefoot back ashore to me
From over the curve of her world
Spatted amazed, pinching her top
Back into place, even smiling
And almost meaning it, meaning
To mean it in the near future,
Her face a new polaroid
Shaken slowly into focus—
I see a dolphin of shadow dart
Into the tidepools of her eyes
Come from her lone sea-sojourn
Not all the days ahead will keep
From circling the boat of us
As she approaches my hammock
Swinging like a hanged man which
In tarot simply means 'change.'

TIGHTROPE

Walking curb edges for practice
The tracks of departed trains
I've sought, I'm always seeking
A kind of balance in the brain
An equipoise, a perigee, a grace
Where thought and its subject
Equally displace
Each other (and themselves)
On principles of mutual alliance
The way Earth pulls back
Her punch into the sun, and sun
His enthusiasm contains
To less than hellish flame.
So that survival might feel
Restful, I beaver at my niche:
I count my words like beads
Into the sorting dish: red,
Blue or black, alive or dead,
I've all the signifiers assigned,
All the labels that I need
To have my cusséd abacus succeed
—To keep my accounts unsettled
That entropy would nettle.
I count the wordy beads:
Charity, dignity, hope;
Keeping your head up is like nothing
So much as walking a tightrope.

A JAZZ VOICE

A jazz voice never listened for
Emanates in syncopation
From behind the closed door
Inside a littered taxicab
Stale as wet cigarettes
I duck to enter. "Where
Are you headed?" the driver
Says over the river of radio
The two voices braiding
In my ear live and lithe
Inviting as in a new-spun
Dream a night journey
From the low-watt dimness
Of the shut door behind me
And on to where the roadway
Lies slick and glistening
Whispers of earlier rain leaving
The black wide pupil brimming
With overmuch of emotion almost
Save that the jazz voice busking
Broken hearts brings a comfort—
Strange comfort! Pain easing pain
Telling me whatever dream
Is rolling like a tear tonight
Had rolled this way before....
Forlorn elms and watchful skies
No strangers to what muted me
What had those radio voices
Unspool like talking smoke
I could inhale, inhale, inhale.

ALL OF NOTHING

Speak, or do not speak.
It is the same, for every squeak

Itself's such a kind of thing
That grapples supple nothings—

The empty curve of a gong
Potent with potential song.

But in itself, however curled,
Is no more than a suave

And silent sort of hollowness,
Only full of a poet's wish.

BOLTING

The garden radishes,
 planted like
minor aspirations
 in the cool
of a rainy April,
 have all bolted
and gone to flower.

These tiny pinks,
 mimicking
blind eyes,
 seeking a
fickle sun,
 strain high
on their frail
 stalks while
the roots,
 failing to plump,
grow crooked
 and bitter.

CANDLESTICK UNELECTRIC

Outworn, mere decoration
except in a storm,
brassy gleam of
the underdish mirroring
a lightning thrust
against the gloom
to mimic waxen dreams
of other tallows
that once lit the footsteps of
the disappeared now
disappeared themselves.

EARLY EVENING AT RON'S

Gregg takes a healthy pull
of his blonde
Carton Boat, the oar
of ingenuity dipping in
the weed-choked moat to move
a leaden dream.

“Time doesn't exist,”
Eman says, his voice
a reverberating blondish
oboe reed.

“It's made up.” Suddenly, his hand
twirls above the carved-up table top
fingertips together like
a kid's striped top. “See, it's just
the duration of the earth's spinning.”

The burn of whiskey mimics a conversion
of motion to minutes and makes me think
in rhyme—*no time, no space*—as the globe
of Eman's wine glass catches up
an empurpled version of my face.

I wince a little at the hint
of double chin. I shrug—just
another dustless hologram
from the universal rim.

ROSE

A dull red inked in
needlepoint—black outline
over bone—the thin
architecture of the blade,

the unblemished skin,
a garden without shade
or sun and no seasons,
nothing to upset design—

no borer or early petal-fall,
no tearing wind or flood,
no thorn to draw a redder blood
till breathlessness draws in the pall.

SACRIFICE TO THE INVISIBLE

This must have been the way
the world wanted it
back, the body lying
two days on the deck,
near the sun-scalded barbecue,
eyes whitening, and wings,
delicate and brown,
enlivened in the slight breeze,
the stinger hidden in
a slight declivity
between dry planks,
the upper body wrapped,
like a lady's slim shoulders
on Park Avenue in 1962,
in light brown fur.

WHERE IS?

Where is
the wild idea amid
so many grievances?
Where is the word
and the emerald sea for which
to live? Your victimhood makes
me sleepy. Where is
the triumph in
the raw face of winter—
the passion to swim
in the rush of the flood and
then to emerge
with the white glory
of the sea on your hair, wet
with desire and smelling
of sex?

FROM LAKE HOPATCONG

From Lake Hopatcong and the wild-flowing forests,
Moon-driven, to the Leni Lenape, warriors of peace—
Ocean and river dwellers and the life-giving squaws
To Irish, Italian, Portuguese,
New Jersey lives
On British sturdiness and Roman Law—
From the cloud-driven Palisades
To the Pine Barrens and the fluid shore—
From Mexican, Asian, African,
From sisters and brothers,
From China and the wide and good world,
New Jersey lives—
Land of mountains, forests,
Streams and ocean song.

A LONE SEAGULL

A lone seagull, instrument
Of water, bone, and blood,
Circles outside my balcony,
West from the calm ocean
Down Bath Avenue--
Dances in open-winged song,
Faces me sideways, rises,
Falls--then sun-held, shoots
For sea and sand

MAESTRO

“Maestro,’ the man said, I know you are a genius,
but you make me look bad, a pauper.”

“And how is that?”

“No diamond necklace on her, not even a small emerald.”

”Her neck is her diamond,” answered the man from Vinci.

“She has a sad look,” the rich husband said. “No, her smile is also
diamond.”

“I can’t buy it. People will think I am poor.”

‘Fine. I will hold on to it,’ answered the painter, and kept it for all of us.

UMA-INSPIRED POEM

(scrawled over a newspaper photo of Uma Thurman in 2006)

Walking along the boardwalk
And thinking of Dylan Thomas
The waves spinning white tulips,
Green fused.
The prairie rose honey
For the sultry bee and cardinal
Patricia's eyes a sacrament

IN PRAISE

Your eyes Venus
At full midnight,
Your legs flower stems,
Your hair sunflower in bloom.
You walk as one:
You and the moonlight

ANCIENT OR NOT

*the snake took my flower.
I didn't complain. admire
the fired brick walls of my city.*

so Gilgamesh to Urshanabi
with no one left to float
to Utnapishtim for
a chance to escape desire,
an impossible goal,
short even of irony.

just another guy, King G
still swaggered in Uruk, known
for wisdom, bearing the scars
lesser men suffer in war,
wounded more by the ferryboat
to inescapable reality.

fellow citizens of antiquity,
we remain custodians of that fire,
witness to a past not soon over.

AT FIRST SIGHT

swirls spell tongue-probe
the newly enamored deploy,
phrases phases of decoy,
relics of Pandora's hope.

rapt & ribboned, eyes
sliding sideways yearn
to swerve back, turn
past evasion, validate surmise.

look no further, they say:
we're neither's mirrors,
just a pair of doors,
all our tomorrows today's.

FOR THE BIRDS

sparrows swallow their songs
when I walk
the alleyway, but crows
know better, bitching alerts.

how to St. Francis their fear,
draw them like cats
to my shoulders,
speaking English?

I greet them, try
to meet them in tones
they might never hear,
my wings invisible.

old fashioned,
they resort to rooves,
to trees, oblivious
to evolution.

privilege denied
of original tweets,
I rest content,
bemused, aloof.

that they want nothing
to do with me, I get.
whatever tunes they sing,
total street cred.

SWAN SONG

swans, nasty up close, mate for life
(except for Zeus, also nasty)
& glide (except for Zeus) idyllically,
giving the god an alibi.

nobody knows how swans think
(or how Zeus does),
or gives a knowing wink
suggesting knowledge of because.

nobody knows whether Leda cried
before she spawned a history,
compelling Greeks to cross the sea,
all of whom, save one, to die

Kool-Aid the clueless drink
obedient to ad hoc laws
manages only to hoodwink
hawks from handsaws.

DOLLHOUSES OF ST. LOUIS

Fire of 1849 shaped the city
Wood buildings ablaze
From Earths' clay
Another city is raised

Dolls fill the newly polished homes
Industrial metropolis, demand creates supply
Railroads, street cars and steamboats
Created on the backs of slaves nearby

Time changes a place
Collapses a town
Ebb and flow
Laying homes to ground

Brick by brick
External dismantling of history
Collapse of structure
Internal reveal provides mystery

Neighborhoods sold as goods
All that remains, rubble and fire escapes
Otiose homes punctuate the streets
Slowly surrendering to the surrounding landscape

Play pretend
Black lives echo the halls
White flight
Tearing apart the walls

Vacancy sign

On flowers pressed in the façade of brick

No one inside

Flame consumes the wick

Generations buried

Thieves collect

What is the value of life,

With nothing left to protect?

PHOENIX

Fire cannot exist without air,
Feed the flame, form desire
One spirit, they share.
Catch a spark; glittering embers appear

Blinding, consuming ensnare,
Burning higher;
Love on a dare.
Neither plays fair

Impossible to compare
Decompose, combust afire
Destruction directs repair
Ashes birth a stronger heir

Choir crackling, feral and rare
Warm liquid lament rings the howling frontier
Wild once more; passion fier
Tears give birth to flesh made bare

Nothing ever dies, just takes to the skies
Marriage of fire and air;
The perfect pair.

COLD FEET

Right or wrong
Makes no difference
All paths mock
My own ambivalence

Piercing knives through the heart
Release a valve long gone
Birds and fire depart
Sing a burning song

Hot from the inside
Pouring out
Steaming tears
Short and stout

Turn around
Your face is gone

Cold feet, stop in your tracks
Tip the candle, drink the wax
Trust breaks, safety falls
Down comes baby

Anticipation of falling
Sleep taunts and tricks
Insides are rotting
Proof brick by brick

Sink into sand
Only see hair and hands
The more you squirm
The more you harm

Translucent lace
Brushes the air
Invisible paint
Dissolves at your stare

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Growing up between two worlds
But never to maturity
Flying amid sleep and awake,
Dream and reality

Trade an acorn
For a thimble,
Remember when
Love was so simple

Childish means
Selfish ends
Pirates sail
Time pretends

Walking through The Land of Obscurity
Good form veils sinister intentions
Geography of magic
Mermaids stare at their reflections

When we fall
We never land
Been here longer
Than we planned

Stretched out time
Lost my marbles, misplaced trust

One way back
Happy thoughts and pixie dust

Prop the window
Death awaits; my old friend
He will have to wait a little longer
Time for adventure, it's not the end

TURTLE SOUP

Made with alligator snapper—the appetizer
Opening the awards banquet.
But his life force lingers still
In the heavy brown broth.
A molten spoonful draws
Me down the bowl's swirling
Mud hole, his cold blood slowly flooding
The chambers of my heart.

Something digs in
Against your admonishing glances,
Gazes up at your gossips like goslings
That have strayed into dangerous waters,
Glares at your polite assembly—speeches sputtering
On the surface, platitudes plashing
Like fatigued frogs teasing a hair trigger spring,
A trap loaded to snap up the whispers and quips
That dart around the table like minnows lured
To my murky den with a twitch of worm tongue--
I wait, an angler from the abyss.

Lure me out at your peril, I'll not budge:
My long clawed gauntlets bore into bedrock
Beneath sand and silt where I lodge and seethe—
An anvil in Vulcan's forge.
Spiked tail protruding from heavy armor,
Some dark magic must have merged in me
Black knight with black dragon.

Wait me out?
I'll winter six months plus without a breath,
Gnawing on a grudge like Ugolino
Beneath Cocytus' stinking ice.
Your thaw only stokes my appetite,
And the eye of my vice looks to lock on a target—
The fingers of your outstretched hand?—
For my steel beak to neatly cleave.

Dispatch your envoys, cygnets
Paddling heedlessly, dangling
Their delicate feet over my dungeon—
I'll snap them down one at a time leaving
Just the snowflake down dancing
On the settling surface.

PICKEREL GRIN

The pickerel I lured from the shrouded canal
Had the grin of a Murphy or Hoolihan—twisted smile
Of all who dug by hand the sixty-six miles,
Their bleached bones dumped in an unmarked hole,
Their souls leaching into the leaden current.

Defiant underbite, lips drawn tight,
Exposing his jagged grin: the Wild-eyed grimace
That follows sharp despair when told
Of the dollar-a-day wage for toil
In a self-dug grave—the cholera,
Shredded hands and feet, bloody rags
For shoes—tattered fins that flail
Against the current; thinly veiled rage
At having to stomach his terms to heed
The starving screams of the suckling overseas.

The hook set, he thrashes his chains
Against the bars of the net.
I'll flay him and set free his watery ghost,
Make of him a communion meal: raise a Host,
Eat of his flesh, drink sacred wine,
And swallow the soul of all his suffering.

**GLENN GOULD'S 1966 PERFORMANCE OF BEETHOVEN'S
PATHETIQUE SONATA: A REVIEW IN VERSE**

With the opening chords, we plod aboard
Our Pequod--would-be whalers, landlubbers
Curious about the rumors of the Hell-bent captain,
That virtuoso of ivory, Phyceter Faust.
To the thud of his jawbone trudge,
The heavy gait of Fate, we clear moorings,
plotting a course to perdition.
With the first cascading run, we plunge
From the davits--his harpoon planted, we scud
the surface, seat rows turned whaleboats!
The keys of the white concert grand keen
Into whale teeth, the open lid yawns
Wider, revealing ravaged wrecks
And bleached bones of those drowned souls
Foolish enough to haul cables and hoist sails
Seeking the new whale road,
Swallowed whole in the first movement's whirlpool.
Our Ahab embraces the *Gravé*,
Hurls curses into the depths, courts the beast
Who obliges with a lightning lunge
by the end of the final run, leaving nothing
but a lone page of sheet music—lifeboat for last notes,
a floating epitaph.

With the *Adagio*, we reach a halcyon dream--
Notes float down like sea birds
Settling on surface wreckage, singing
A prayer for our drowned Ahab,
Who set souls and sails on a beast
He would chase round perdition's flames

Before giving him up. Melody unfurls,
In billowing sails beckoning,
Angelic bark to carry our crew to paradise,
Charting a course to God.

The *Rondo* hauls us back from the gangway
into the maelstrom once again! Our Ahab is alive,
Clawing, stabbing his way out of the Hellish gut!
The sea's heaving contractions
Birth Ahab anew, now Jonah clinging
To a coffin with keys—last lifeboat
Of the proud vessel that made this mad quest.
He leaves us shipwrecked but more alive than before,
Washed up on the alien shore
of an undiscovered country.

MY BEARD

May my beard continue to bloom long after I'm gone.
Buried in an oblong pod
Of burnished oak or pine,
I give it leave to shoot forth hairy filaments, fibrous feelers,
Probe for crannies, tiny cracks that hide in the hinges of a coffin lid,
Pry open a sliver just wide enough
For sprouting finger and toenails to curl & twine like tendrils of an iron
vine punching through
 concrete slabs,
Mingle with mycelia, hoary rhizomes and wildflower roots,
Groping for the first pale glint
Of snow-filtered sun.

GAME OVER?

Asteroid 2015 TB145
Seven football fields around,
Skull-shaped,
The fathomless orbits
Of its eyes arcing farther,
Now closer, round and round
Every three years
For thirty millennia.

Ymir's great cranium nodding off
Toward Earth; dead comet,
Desiccated angel,
Lucifer's gaze locked on
Target—thieves of Father love,
Cause of his deep-hearted grief
That hurtled him headlong
Into the void, circling

The rotten grin of Pan Ku, Purusha,
The Great Pumpkin,
Lolling past the open-mouthed moon,
Bowling blindly down the alley
Of the Milky Way
Toward a cosmic strike,
Tunguska kiss times twelve
On Jerusalem or Beijing,
Benares or Bethlehem,
Machu Picchu,
Manhattan or Moscow.

Yahweh yawns,
Tired of having to slap down
These upstart primates,
Makes it a game of chance—
Loves the action, the long odds—
Casts a skull-shaped die our way,
Which we pray will be as Hunter's head,
Bouncing down the long ball court,
Bursting in a shower of pumpkin seeds,
Meteors to illuminate
The long shadows of Xibalba.

VEGAS STRONG



Vegas Strong is all we remember now, 58 dead just another day in America. Las Vegas, Sutherland Springs, and all the anonymous victims of guns and rage and moral apathy. Chicago, Newark, Salt Lake City. Forget your thoughts and prayers. They ring hollow. The gun is American idolatry, a talisman of freedom, a fool's projection of safety and liberty. Where is the American Abraham willing to smash them into dust?

PASSING BY



How many drive past without even a momentary glance. I couldn't read his sign or ask his name. At the light, Jones and Lone Mountain. Just a second. He looked up. I wanted to know, to talk. Here's a five. But then red goes green. We go. He stays.

POGROM 1903

To return home.
To blood and tombstones. Ash
and the acrid stench
of flesh left
too long in the pit.
His wife
gutted and stuffed with straw.
Animals. They slaughtered
his children. His house
ransacked, the vultures
picking at its flesh,
at the muscle
and sinew, the magic
that made it home.
They burned it.
Burned the neighbors',
the whole shtetl, left
a smoldering heap
of coal. My Moisha,
my Yitzhak, my
Zinna, my beautiful
children. Why not
take me? Me. Wanders
now like Moses. No.
Like Cain, marked
by his sin. But what sin?
Like Job, he asks,
What have I done
to warrant
such treatment?
The smoke rising
from his heart
offers no answer.

DYLAN, DONNE, COHEN, HEANEY:

POP GOES THE POET OR THE POET GOES POP

Let's stipulate first that pop music -- and by this I mean rock, hip hop and all forms of popular music -- is not poetry.

Let me stipulate further that spoken word and slam also fall outside of my definition of poetry.

I should make one more stipulation: the previous statements are not judgments of value. They are considerations of the formal aspects of what I view as distinct art forms, each of which deserve to be evaluated on their own merits. Bob Dylan, Cole Porter and Chuck D are true artists, but what they do, the tools they use, and the conventions they operate under bear only a passing resemblance to the work of TS Eliot, William Carlos Williams or Martin Espada. Judge Chuck D and Espada as you will, but recognize that the criteria are going to differ.

My thinking on this is summed up, imperfectly to be sure, by the comedian Steve Allen (<http://www.biography.com/people/steve-allen-9181628#synopsis>). Allen was the first host of the Tonight Show, an accomplished jazz pianist and sympathetic to the Beats. He also, according to a number of accounts, hated rock 'n' roll (<http://articles.latimes.com/2000/nov/01/news/mn-45193/2>). He began running a regular segment in which he offered dramatic readings of early rock lyrics (<http://www.chron.com/life/hoffman/article/Hoffman-Steve-Allen-deserves-some-credit-2079673.php>) -- this was the mid- to late-'50s -- designed to prove to his audience how insipid rock music was.

His dramatic reading of Gene Vincent's "Be-Bop-A-Lula" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpxhEoV5IsE>) was wildly funny. His audience -- the pre-baby-boom generation who were being challenged culturally by a new energy and shift in cultural perspective -- likely laughed because they agreed with the disdain at the heart of the bit. But, if that were all

there was to the sketch, it would be long forgotten. What has kept Allen's dramatic reading fresh, I think, is its essential truth. Vincent's lyric was never intended to stand alone as poetry. The power of "Be-Bop-A-Lula" is not the lyric and not even the music -- a simple, four-cord shuffle that is not tremendously different than a lot of other rock or blues songs. The power is in the package, the way the music and lyric work together with Vincent's delivery (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDU9FP5_B2M) -- that was new and powerful and proved that the rock song is far more than just its lyrics -- or any of its component parts.

This goes for Bob Dylan and Patti Smith as much as does for Gene Vincent. Separating the lyrics from the music is unfair to the songs themselves. They are compelling, but lack what Denise Levertov might call a "functional line." Unlike contemporary poetry, which Levertov says uses the line to score thought and sound by creating a slight pause where a pause might otherwise not be found, the line in a song lyric is a function of the music, in particular of the song's rhythm, the rhymes reinforcing what the musicians are doing. The best lyricists push against these boundaries, but even Smith and Leonard Cohen -- who were poets before they were songwriters -- are beholden to the larger whole that the song's musical structure requires.

Here are two stanzas from "Digging" by Seamus Heaney (Poems):

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

These are in free verse and, while the first of these stanzas rhymes, the poem is not a rhymed poem. There is a distinct rhythm, but it is not the rhythm of traditional closed-form poetry or song. The rhythm is created by variations in metric feet (which refers to how the stresses fall in a block of syllables) and by the punctuation and syntax. And while each of the seven lines can be said to encompass a complete syntactical unit, only two of the seven are end-stopped -- meaning that the larger unit of meaning

ends at the end of the line. The rest are enjambed, though the rhythm (as per Levertov) relies on the slight pause that the line ending implies.

This is very different than what we find in song lyrics. Robert Christgau (<http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/music/lyrics-che.php>) made that point nearly 50 years ago and I think it bears repeating.

“However inoffensive,” he wrote, “The ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face’ sounds on vinyl, it is silly without the music. Poems are read or said. Songs are sung.”

This, of course, is my point – which is why I listen to Dylan but rarely pull down from the shelf his book of lyrics. Christgau continues:

“My Back Pages” is a bad poem. But it is a good song, supported by a memorable refrain. The music softens our demands, the importance of what is being said somehow overbalances the flaws, and Dylan’s delivery – he sounds as if he’s singing a hymn at a funeral – adds a portentous edge not present just in the words. Because it is a good song.

It works on numerous levels – and can sustain numerous interpretations, as Christgau points out. But “the lyrics – except for that refrain – could be gibberish and the song would still succeed.” Why? “Dylan is a songwriter, not a poet. A few of his most perfect efforts — ‘Don’t Think Twice,’ or ‘Just Like a Woman’ – are tight enough to survive on the page. But they are exceptions.”

I’m not even sure I would go that far. Again, Dylan’s imagery is remarkable, his use of language surprising and thrilling. Both of these are prerequisites for good poetry. But he does little with the line, because it is the music that ultimately dictates the rhythm and carries his work forward.

Dylan is not alone. As I said, even songs by those songwriters who started with poetry – Cohen, Smith, Paul Simon, Jim Carroll – are controlled by the music. These writers might write effective and affecting poetry, as well, but their songs are songs and not poems.

Consider “Hallelujah,” by Cohen.

You say I took the name in vain
I don’t even know the name

But if I did, well, really, what's it to you?
There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken Hallelujah

The song is written using an a-a-b-c-c-b rhyme scheme for each verse, which is in place for the entire song. The lines do vary in length some, though the stresses correspond to the basic rhythm of the song. However, and this is why I make the distinction between song and poetry, every line ends with a rhyme and each rhyme closes a syntactical unit. The words are written to be sung, not recited, as Christgau said about Dylan, and they lose something without the waltz-like accompaniment. (At least they do for me.)

That is not the case with most rhymed poetry written over the last several centuries – see John Donne, for instance, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Poets use the rhythm and the line – even in formal verse -- to create tension, often purposefully disrupting the rhythm, inserting mid-line pauses using punctuation (caesuras) or running the syntax through the rhyme (enjambment). Donne's "Death Be Not Proud (Holy Sonnet 10)" (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44107/holy-sonnets-death-be-not-proud>) is a good example.

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

The poem is a sonnet, meaning it essentially is a 14-line argument that follows highly controlled structure – in this case, eight lines following an a-b-b-a-a-b-b-a rhyme scheme, followed by four that follow a c-d-d-c scheme and a closing couplet in a-a. The poem also follows a rhetorical format, with the argument turning at lines eight and nine. Donne breaks with the expected iambic pentameter at the start (a nine-syllable line with four feet and two caesuras), addressing death directly as the subject of the poem, pausing, as he acknowledges that all ultimately must travel this road. He gives death his due, but then strips death of its power in lines nine through 12.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

He follows the taunt that closes line 12 with a final statement, his final argument.

One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

It is death that must give way. Donne, a Catholic convert to Anglicanism who became a minister, essentially was arguing that death was not final, that the afterlife meant that death's provenance was short-lived and that the soul would awake.

I spend a bit of time on Donne, because I think his sonnet – a word that literally means “a ‘little song’” (see Poetry Foundation glossary (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/sonnet>) -- demonstrates the differences between the song of the poem and the song in pop. It's not just the argument pressed by the poetic structure – Chuck D's best work with Public Enemy and Prophets of Rage also unfold as elaborate and angry arguments, though they take do not rely on the sonnet's rhetorical turn. Donne's use of caesura and enjambment disturbs the rhythm, preventing readers from finding comfort in the structure, from grounding themselves in an aural repetition.

Those of us who use open forms – i.e., free verse – do the same. Heaney is expert at this, teasing the reader with echoes of closed forms, of earlier forms. In a book like *Human Chain*, which is unlike many of his earlier books in that it is nothing but free verse, presents the reader with meticulously constructed lines. The syntax and the meter interact and sometimes conflict, heightening the sense of music and enhancing meaning. The poems flow forward rhythmically, often in lines that come close to pentameter without actually falling into a formal pattern.

“The Butts” (Heaney 11), for instance, opens with a four-foot line, followed by a line of a single foot – essentially a pentameter line broken over two with a caesura interrupting the fourth foot (“His suits hung in the wardrobe, broad / And short”). Another hidden (almost) pentameter overlaps, running from comma to comma – “broad /And short / And slightly bandy-sleeved” – creating a sense of regularity. The second stanza

underscores this sense, unfolding in three short, two-foot lines—lines that end with a definite stop: “Flattened back / Against themselves, / A bit stand-offish.”

Technically, there is no pentameter or regular meter here; it is just an echo created by these implied overlays – Robert Pinsky describes the effect in *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (71-74, 99-109) – one that establishes a subtle, almost formal cadence underlying the more conversational rhythms that are overtly present. The echo creates the illusion of formality, adding a sense of restraint that both pushes the rhythm forward but keeps it in check.

These are techniques that rarely find their way into pop and rock music, not because the song lyric (as opposed to the lyric poem) is an inferior form, but because poetry as it has developed across the centuries has moved away from the lute and the lyre. The early ballades were, in fact, ballads – similar in form and just as reliant on musical accompaniment as anything by Springsteen, Cohen or Dylan. But the forms diverged, developed their own conventions, their own approaches. Just as the novel’s earliest seeds can be found in the epic poem, contemporary poetry and contemporary song lyrics can trace their conception to the early troubadours.

The difference, the reliance on melody, on the purely aural elements of the song (think Michael Bloomfield’s guitar on the Dylan album *Highway 61 Revisited*) that cannot be replicated purely in words, has left us with two distinct, if related, art forms. The songwriter can – must, really – rely on the music and the performance (which is similar to the playwright’s understanding that her words will be performed by actors on a stage, or even the spoken word artist’s reliance on performance) to create meaning.

The poet cannot rely on a backing band or the peculiarities of our own spoken voices. Our goal is to create something that can live on the page (and sometimes off), but that relies purely on language to create its music and meaning.

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REFLECT IN NATURE



KOMOREBI (木漏れ日)



ECLIPSE THROUGH LEAVES



Rachel Zimmerman

REACHING FOR MORE



**THE ROAD TO ROMANTICISM:
DESCARTES, NEWTON, LOCKE, AND THE RETURN
TO REASON**

It seems useful in any discussion of Romanticism or neo-Romanticism to look at the origins of the nineteenth-century movement. Leaving aside the claims that Romanticism can trace its roots to Muslim writers in Spain or to the medieval Goliardic poets as chiefly picayune historical problems dealing with the remote past, we ought to begin with eighteenth-century German Pietism, which seems to have had a direct role, and then move back a century or so to René Descartes, Isaac Newton, and John Locke.

As Isaiah Berlin has shown, German Pietism grew up in the rich cultural soil of German psychological inferiority that followed the horrific religious conflict in Germany known as the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).¹ This war devastated the German population and impoverished the countryside. New impetus was given to the German sense of inferiority in the next century as England, the Netherlands, and France rose to become great colonial powers while Germany remained fragmented in more than thirty distinct duchies and principalities. The great achievements of the Enlightenment, beginning with the Englishmen Newton and Locke and culminating in the great age of French rationality with Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Condorcet, and the like further depressed the German spirit. The Germans, who were once the leading lights in Europe during the time of Charlemagne's grandsons, had become a commercial, political, and intellectual backwater.²

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 34-40; see also Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1994), 21-22.

² Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*, 34-40.

One way to respond to the achievements of the English, Dutch, and French was to say that those achievements were unimportant, useless, or at best, superficial. Pietism is just such a response.³ It strikes the same pose as Jesus, who advised his followers to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” Wealth and power, which the English and French seemed to have achieved, was inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. It was not the material world that counted, but the spiritual. Indeed, material success was an obstacle to achieving spiritual insight. Didn’t Jesus say that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to gain the kingdom of heaven?

If we wanted to find a pagan influence for this kind of thinking, it would surely be the Greco-Roman philosopher of the third century A.D. Plotinus, who, through the writings of St. Augustine, became an important influence on Christian thought.⁴ Plotinus saw reality as ultimately united in a single supernatural being, which he called “the One.” A similar conception may be found in Buddhism. The One interacted with matter through a series of emanations or hypostases. These are essentially divisions within the One. The first emanation is the *Nous*, or the world of intellect, which creates new divisions from the One. This *Nous* is very much like Plato’s world of the intellectual forms, and Plotinus no doubt derived his idea from Plato. From the *Nous*, a second emanation known as the World Spirit reaches down into formless matter to create the forms we see in the material world. For Plotinus then, the One was the highest form of reality; matter the lowest.⁵ Humans were a hybrid of matter and spirit, the latter of which reached all the way back to the One. Morality, for Plotinus, consisted in uniting oneself as firmly as one can, through contemplation, to the One. This also meant paying as little attention to the material world as one could without actually killing oneself.⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4, 9-10, 17-23.

⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead V*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 15-23, 27-29.

⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead III*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 385; Plotinus, *Ennead I*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 109-113.

Plotinus, then, like Jesus and the German Pietists, taught that the material world was the least important part of reality and to focus too much attention on it was tantamount to sin. It is probably worth noting that Plotinus lived during a time of turmoil within the Roman world. His asceticism and withdrawal from the physical world seems largely a response to the chaotic politics of *his* time. The same might be said for Jesus. The Jewish community in Judea in the first century was part of the Roman Empire. As such, it was dominated by an unsympathetic outside power. Jesus's teachings emphasized the importance of the individual's inner spiritual resources. Plotinus, Jesus, and the Pietists are united in emphasizing the spiritual and denigrating the worth of the physical because they found themselves in chaotic circumstances in regard to politics and economics, and in relation to the physical world generally.

Through Augustine, Plotinus has influenced all Western Christian thought, Catholic and Protestant, and a thoroughgoing study of German Pietism would surely be able to make fast the connection to Plotinus's philosophy, too. But such ties needn't concern us here because Plotinus had a direct connection to Romanticism. Most romantic thinkers and writers read Plotinus. Hegel's whole idea of the unfolding of the Spiritus Mundi bears a relation to the Plotinian idea of the World Spirit, though there are significant differences. And Coleridge, Shelley, and Yeats are all deeply dyed in Neo-Platonism, as Plotinus's philosophy has come to be called.

But let's return to German Pietism. As we have seen, the Pietists reacted to French and English political, economic, and intellectual success by simply denying its importance. There is more to human existence, they were saying, than temporal power and wealth. According to the Pietists, humans may have the ability to apply logic to the material world, which may help them to gain power and wealth, but reason is not the most important human characteristic. Humans are also spiritual beings, and their spiritual side is what really counts. One can almost feel the contemporary materialist philosophers and scientists who hold sway in intellectual circles today turning up their collective lip in a sneer at the naïveté of the Pietists of yore. "Spirit, what is the realm of the spirit?" they might say. "Show me the soul

then. How can we measure it? And if we can't objectively perceive it and measure it in a way we can agree to, how can the soul or spirit or the supernatural be said to exist at all?"

Eliciting these questions, perhaps through a naïve return to outmoded, even medieval, ideas of spirituality, was the true contribution of the Pietists to Romanticism. Romanticism holds as one of its fundamental tenets that there is, indeed must be, something more to a human being, and by extension to all of reality, than that which we can measure with the pitiful yardstick of "objective" reason. Unlike the Pietists, however, the Romantics in general were not willing to wholly abandon a belief in the importance of the physical world. Hence the importance of Locke, the founder of the modern British empiricist school, who concentrates on the importance of physical reality.

Perhaps no modern philosopher is more misunderstood than Locke. This is true in spite of the fact that all modern philosophy either builds on Locke's thought or reacts against it. He is to philosophy what Mozart is to music. Locke is likely misunderstood because scholars today don't bother to read his books. Instead, they read books about Locke's philosophy, which too often distort what he is saying through a process of oversimplification and generalization. Steven Pinker alludes to this problem in his book *The Blank Slate*, which is really an attack on the whole idea of the *tabula rasa*, the Latin phrase meaning more precisely "shaved tablet," a metaphor commentators have long used to characterize Locke's idea of the human mind at birth. Pinker notes that Locke himself never used the phrase "the blank slate" or "tabula rasa." Locke, who rejected the notion put forward by René Descartes that humans have inborn ideas, simply said that the human mind at birth is like "a white piece of paper" and that experience, from which we get all of our ideas, writes upon the paper, creating by this process each individual self.⁷

Many empiricist philosophers, as Pinker and A. N. Wilson have shown, have interpreted Locke to mean that the mind is empty at

⁷ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002), 5; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1975), 104.

birth and is merely a passive receptor of ideas.⁸ But Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, says that the mind “receives” ideas in two ways. The first is through perception of the physical world.⁹ Locke never denies the existence of a reality outside of ourselves, as Bishop Berkeley comes close to. He does, though, say that it is impossible to know the true nature of the reality outside of ourselves because all information about it comes to us by way of the fallible apparatus of perception.¹⁰ Contemporary philosophers call these perceptions “sense-data.” But Locke’s reason for believing in the exterior world is not perceptual really, but logical, one might even say “common-sensical”—it is fatal not to.¹¹ The truth of this can hardly be denied. We may not be able to prove the physical world exists, but in order to live at all we must believe that it does. If we accept Locke’s position here, then we must also declare that any philosophy which denies outright the existence of the physical world must, by definition, be suicidal. So if we hope to live, we must accept as useful only such philosophies as posit the existence of something outside of ourselves. Even Plotinus accepts the necessity of breathing air, eating food, and drinking water to preserve life, which in turn is necessary for contemplation.¹² A connection, then, to the physical world is required in order to pursue any connection to a higher intellectual reality, or if one prefers, to the spiritual. Romanticism would be of no use to us at all if it denied the physical world and its demands, and as a set of theories, it never does.

From the time of St. Thomas Aquinas until today, philosophy has instructed us that the chief way we understand the physical world is through reason. We get our information about the physical world through perception and then we analyze what we have perceived, using logic (e.g., mathematical reasoning). Reason allows us to understand physical nature in a way that proves useful to us. Descartes showed that perception alone would lead us to fatal mistakes in ordering our

⁸ A. N. Wilson, *God’s Funeral: A Biography of Faith and Doubt in Western Civilization* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 32; Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, 11, 34-35.

⁹ Locke, *Human Understanding*, 104-105.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 321-27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 325-26.

¹² Elmer O’Brien, *The Essential Plotinus* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Co., 1964), 115; Plotinus, *Ennead IV*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 367.

relations with the exterior physical world.¹³ We perceive the lion in the distance to be a puny inch high. What threat could an inch-tall cat be to us? It is reason that allows us to adjust our perception. Through experience and comparative reasoning, we know that the lion in the distance only *seems* an inch high, but it is really a 400-pound animal quite capable of doing us immense harm.

From Descartes, then, we learn that the mind is not just a passive receptor of information. And Locke agrees that the mind is an organ of activity in as much as the second way we get ideas, in his view, is by observing the activity of the mind itself, through thinking about what we have perceived. For Locke, the mind at birth is empty of ideas. But it is not altogether empty. He notes that “the mind has a power.” This is the power to perceive things coming to it from the physical world and to assess, remember, compare, and order those ideas for potential use. Moreover, the mind also has the power to combine ideas to form wholly new ones: “purple cows,” “flying pigs,” and even “honest politicians.”¹⁴

The rationalists of different stripes and the Romantics both build on the foundation of Locke’s philosophy but differ over which aspects of it are most significant. The empiricists and the utilitarians, for instance, emphasize Locke’s notion of ideation, how the mind absorbs “sense-data.” By contrast, as James Engell has noted, the Romantics, and in particular Coleridge, emphasize Locke’s assertion that the “mind has a power” to make sense of the things it perceives. Locke doesn’t explain exactly what he means by this power, but Coleridge will call it the imagination, and part of the imagination, according to Coleridge, is the “esemplastic power,” which allows the mind to combine disparate perceptions of the physical world with each other and with the inner workings of the mind to form “new wholes.”¹⁵

¹³ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 145.

¹⁴ The quote itself refers to the power to combine ideas, but Locke notes that the power of the mind extends to many other operations and activities. Locke, *Human Understanding*, 104-107, 149-50, 163-64, 233-34.

¹⁵ James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 18; James Engell, “Introduction” to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols., ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:xcv, lxxvi, xc; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 1, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 195-202.

Broaching the subject of the imagination as a fundamental capacity of human beings leads us squarely to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although Rousseau is associated with the French Enlightenment, in many ways his most notable contributions to philosophy stand against the fundamental claims of the Age of Reason. He held that the moral life—both of the individual and of society—is dependent chiefly on feeling and imagination. The Enlightenment, by contrast, extolled the supremacy of human reason, logic, mathematics, and science. Its goal was to produce so-called “objective knowledge” about which all rational beings can agree. In a nutshell, the Enlightenment, following Newton’s mathematical proofs in *Principia* of the laws of motion, held that unchanging laws of nature govern the universe and that these laws are consistent with one another. Reason, then, is the key to unlocking the secrets of the universe because the universe is a logical construct.¹⁶ Or so was the prevailing opinion among Enlightenment thinkers, and, by the way, of many people today.

The notion that the universe operates on the basis of logical laws is an old one, going back at least as far as Aristotle. Aristotle saw the universe as eternal and essentially rationally ordered, if not precisely mechanistic. It was also the only reality. Therefore, to understand the fundamental nature of reality and humanity’s place in it, at least as far as Aristotle is concerned, one must look at physical nature with an eye to discovering the underlying principles that make it work. Reason, says Aristotle, is the key to discovering and understanding these principles.¹⁷

Aristotle’s philosophy represents an attack on the dualism of his teacher Plato. Plato held that there were higher realities than those represented in physical nature. Because physical nature is always in a state of change or flux, as Parmenides had shown, no philosophical certainty, Plato reasoned, could be derived from it. True understanding of reality could only come when one penetrated the illusion of physical reality to discover the more significant realms above it. A higher realm to which the well-informed might gain access, says he, is the world

¹⁶ R. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 50-52, 65, 105-110; Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 21-26, 33, 78.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, in particular Book 1: Chapter 9, and his *Physics*, Book 1: Chapter 8, and Book 8: Chapters 1 and 9 in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 233-34; 354-59; 388-90; 706-711.

of the forms. This world consists of intellectual or mathematical constructs that are unchanging and which describe all of the forms we see in physical nature. The tool for penetrating the illusory world of material things and gaining access to the world of the forms is reason. But there is a higher realm of reality than even the world of intellectual forms. This Plato calls “the Good,” which humans can only dimly apprehend through the severe exercise of dialectical reasoning. Were one able to finally experience the Good in its full reality, one would find absolute definitions of truth, beauty, love, and justice. Moreover, one would come to understand that all of these things are essentially one and the same thing: “beauty is truth,” as Keats wrote.¹⁸ One can immediately see the similarities between Plato’s tripartite idea of reality and that of Plotinus.

Socrates, Plato’s mentor, did not concern himself with questions of metaphysics or ultimate reality. In this, he is connected thematically to Locke. His inquiries are concerned with morality and ethics—how do we know what we ought to do in any given circumstance?¹⁹ To answer this question, Socrates, like Locke, had first to tackle the first part of the question. How do we know anything? This is the root of epistemology in the Western world. To “know” something we must satisfy two criteria. First, we have to believe the thing to be true. That’s the easy part. Second, the thing must be true. Therein, Socrates discovered, lies the rub, which caused him to spend the better part of his life asking eminent Athenians fundamental questions about the nature of reality. What is truth? What is love? What is beauty? What is justice? Through his discussions, he is able to reach plausible but not provable definitions of truth, love, beauty, and justice. Knowledge, then, eludes him on these important issues. “The only thing I know for certain,” he concludes, “is that I don’t know anything at all.”²⁰ Historians and subsequent philosophers have called this acknowledgment of the limits of human knowledge “radical ignorance.”

¹⁸ W. H. D. Rouse, trans., *The Great Dialogues of Plato* (New York: New American Library, 1984), 308-318, 331-334, 483-84; John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in *The Poems*, ed. Gerald Bullett (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 204.

¹⁹ See for instance Plato *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), 2:805;

²⁰ This is my own paraphrase derived from Plato’s *Apology*. Rouse, trans., *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 427, 429, 434, 436-37.

It could be said, then, that Socrates and Locke form something of a school of political thought. Both have serious doubts about our ability to know things. In the case of Locke, we have perceptions of things in the exterior world, but we can never penetrate to the essence of what those things are. Leaving aside for the moment Locke's own radical ignorance, we ought to return to Socrates. If we have no real knowledge, on what basis can we make decisions of right and wrong? What guide do we have to action? The answer, says Socrates, is reason and individual conscience. "What ought I to do now?" This is the question we must perpetually ask ourselves, and, says Socrates, reason will help us find the answer. It is a matter of inner debate. We might not have any ironclad system of morality we can appeal to, and yet the answer lies within us. How can we then create moral laws to govern our society? Again the answer comes through rational debate. What seems right to us, given the particular situation in which we find ourselves? We may not be able to prove the truth of the decision in all cases, but we can find a solution that seems most reasonable to us at a particular time in history. Socrates leads us to understand that it is precisely not knowing that gives us freedom to decide and then to act. But it is also reason that allows us to decide what is best for what we imagine the future will or should be.

While Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates have different interests and solutions to philosophical problems, they are united in a belief that reason is the highest human attribute. All three agree that reason is supreme in human affairs, ought to be cultivated, and that all else should be subordinate to its dictates. Aristotle and Socrates seem to believe that all humans are capable of rational thought. Locke thought so, too. Plato, by contrast, believed that only a few people are truly capable of governing themselves rationally.²¹

The Greeks and the Romans after them, while they worshipped supernatural gods, built their societies on the foundation of Greek rationality and as such were essentially secular humanists. In their view, human ideas and actions shaped society. And yet, in spite of this agreement in principle, the Greeks and Romans differed on how

²¹ Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Jowett, 1:735.

to form and apply human ideas in the material world. The Greek philosophers tended to believe (following Plato) that there was a universal and ideal form of government that could be apprehended through reason and then, perhaps, applied in the world. The Greek approach was idealistic, theoretical, and somewhat abstract. The Romans, on the other hand, emphasized trial and error. They were realists, much more mundane in their approach to politics and economics but ultimately more successful. Both approaches, however, are united in applying human reason to the problems of living in the world. But with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, the reign of reason foundered and went under.

In the Western world, it was the Enlightenment that restored reason to its position as the preeminent human attribute. To say so begs the question: What caused it to fall from its high pedestal? The answer is: the spread of Christianity, first throughout the Roman world, and after Roman power fell by the wayside in the West, throughout the remainder of what became Europe. Christianity is a sect of Judaism, and as such it developed in opposition to the Roman way. It was opposed to the materialism of the Roman world and therefore appealed most strongly at first to the have-nots—women, slaves, and the poor. It is a natural inclination among the oppressed to try to limit the decision-making power of the oppressor. In the Greco-Roman world, human reason, theoretically, was the final arbiter of choice. Reason, of course, is often corrupted to serve merely as a justification for greed—either for wealth, power, or both. It was in the interest of the oppressed classes, then, to limit the power of the oppressors to make choices. To do so, they needed to assert that there was a power above human reason, above human power itself. This power, of course, was God.

Christianity inherited the idea of one universal God from the Hebrews. The many gods of the Greeks and Romans were finite beings. Their power was considered to be greater than that of humans, but it was not infinite. Moreover, the gods were fallible, exhibiting human traits such as deception and jealousy. The chief difference between the Greeks and their gods was that the gods were immortal.

In a penetrating short essay on Romanticism, W. H. Auden

noted that humans define themselves in relation to their gods on the one hand and to nature on the other. This is because humans have always seen themselves as creatures between God and nature.²² Humans therefore seek to be more like their gods and less like nature. In most cultures, emulation of god or of the gods is defined as morality. Those who seek to be like God are moral; those who give way to animalistic natural instincts are immoral.

In order to be more like their gods, the Greeks sought to become immortal. Since this was impossible in literal terms, they sought a *kind* of immortality by being transformed into myth.²³ This is why the winners of the Olympic Games paid dearly to have Pindar, the greatest poet of the fifth century B.C., memorialize them in poems.²⁴ It also explains why the Greeks were hyper-competitive. To be recognized as the best in warfare, athletics, philosophy, poetry, art or science allowed one to be remembered. To live in the memory of one's society, as Achilles did, was the closest thing to immortality one might achieve.

In contrast to the Greek idea of the divine, the Hebrew conception of God, developed over many centuries, was that there was but one universal God who was infinite and above nature. This God was eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. No human being could aspire to be like such a god. Paradoxically, this all-powerful God allowed each of his followers a will of his or her own. As the historian Charles Robinson has said, this created a conception of history in which two forces were at work. One was the will and purpose of God and the other, the will and purpose of each individual human.²⁵ Morality consisted in the individual conforming him- or herself to the will of God. Sin was following one's own inclination against the commandments of God. God set the moral law for the Hebrews, which was not a matter of debate. As long as they adhered collectively to

²² W. H. Auden, "Introduction," in W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson, eds., *The Romantic Poets: William Blake to Edgar Allen Poe* (Franklin Center, Pa.: Franklin Library, 1982), xi.

²³ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁴ Francis Lee, trans., *The Odes of Pindar* (London: William Miller, 1810), 135; Alan Beale, *Greek Athletics and the Olympic Games* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 133.

²⁵ Charles Alexander Robinson, Jr., *Ancient History: From Prehistoric Times to the Death of Justinian*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan Co., 1967), 90.

the will of God as embodied in the Ten Commandments, He would protect them as a people during historical time. The individual was not expected to emulate God but to obey Him.

Christianity, which developed first among the Jews in the Greek-speaking Eastern half of the Roman Empire, adopted the Hebrews' conception of God and of history, but it combined these ideas with Greek individualism and the desire for personal immortality. The Old Testament God was preserved in the figure of God the Father, but since it was beyond any human being's capacity to emulate such an infinitely powerful being in the Greek way, a more anthropomorphic iteration of God had to be created in the person of Jesus, the Christ. In a strictly historical sense, there is no contemporaneous evidence that Jesus considered himself to be begotten of God or a divine being in any way. The idea that Jesus was God incarnate was a later invention.²⁶ It should be noticed, in this regard, that it was not unusual in ancient times for leaders to be recognized as divine or to gain divine status at death. Deifying individuals after death and sometimes before was a longstanding practice in the Middle East. Naramsin, the Akkadian emperor, was deified during his reign in the third millennium B.C.²⁷ The pharaohs of Egypt were routinely deified and so was the Roman Emperor Augustus at his death in 14 A.D.²⁸ But the fact that Jesus was at once God and man made him a model who might be emulated. God the father made the moral law, but Jesus, by example, set a model for moral behavior. Emulating Jesus, which included suffering for one's faith, was the road to immortality. The New Covenant promised eternal life after mortal death for the faithful.²⁹ The best the Classical Greeks could do was to achieve a kind of literary immortality by exhibiting supreme human excellence. Christianity, by contrast, promised real immortality in a supernatural state—an afterlife—in return for moral excellence. The rewards of this new faith had an

²⁶ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 79-83.

²⁷ Harriet Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 33-34.

²⁸ Robinson, *Ancient History*, 60; Arthur E. R. Boak and William G. Sinnigen, *A History of Rome to A.D. 565*, 5th ed. (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1965), 298.

²⁹ John 3:16; Mark 14:24-25; Heb. 9:14-15; Eph. 2:7-9. London: MacMillan Co., 1967), 90.

important advantage even over the Old Covenant of the Hebrews. No one could ever check whether its claims were true, since to receive the benefits of the religion one had first to die.

Still, the cobbled-together nature of Christianity led to insuperable logical difficulties. The trinity is perhaps the outstanding paradox. How can a single monotheistic deity also be three distinct beings? How can finite humans inflict suffering on an infinitely powerful being in the person of Jesus? How can an infinite being pour himself into a finite historical person, yet remain fully himself? The strains on credulity were manifold, but fortunately, late Roman society and early medieval society were sufficiently credulous to accept a belief system riddled with logical disconnections and downright contradictions.

During the Middle Ages, humanism was thrown over the side. Society, politics, and economics were no longer human creations controlled by humans for humans. Things happened in history because God willed them. Theoretically, the purpose of humanity was to seek salvation in heaven in the Christian way by following the will of God. A being of infinite power, well beyond the bounds of humanity, well beyond nature itself, set the rules. New dogmas were created to enforce the idea that humans could not govern themselves. Original sin fit the bill perfectly. The sin of Adam and Eve tainted every person even before they emerged from the womb. And because humans are by nature evil, they do not have the power to govern themselves. As the Middle Ages developed, debate over the theology of Christianity and its meaning became much more narrowly focused. What salvation required was obedience to the divine will. But since God did not send out periodic bulletins on what he desired from humanity, some mortal person or persons had to be entrusted to interpret the divine will. Chief among these was the pope. Through him, the kings, whom the pope anointed, received temporal coercive power over society. They were said to be God's divine agents. At least this was the theory.

Any political system based on the will of God in which certain individuals are said to speak for God is by its very nature abusive and tyrannical. "In all countries," wrote the philosopher John Stuart Mill, "where they could get civil power to side with them, [the clergy]

. . . have succeeded in their nefarious purpose, and mankind are still groveling at their feet.”³⁰ Little wonder that the popes and kings lived in palaces while the faithful huddled with their livestock in filthy huts. The latest manifestation this system would be the Taliban in Afghanistan. Such a system is implacable and by its very nature beyond mortal criticism. If “the ways of God are mysterious to men,” as church leaders claimed, reason would perforce be an inadequate tool for understanding God’s will. But the powerful seem always to understand that faith means three things for the underlings—pay us most of your money, suffer for your sins, and obey us.

Reason seemed vanquished. But then the church made a fatal mistake. Church leaders thought reason might be used in a limited way to bolster their dogmatic positions, but they were wrong. They failed to understand, as Rousseau surely did later, that reason is a solvent which dissolves every system it touches. Once it is allowed off the mat for any purpose whatsoever, it quickly gains ascendancy. It is the undisputed champion of the world. Like a juggernaut, it crushes everything in its path, even itself. The problem is that on its own it only destroys. It is by nature, anti-creative.

Reason made its return to the West in the form of Aristotelian philosophy. The earliest important manifestation was Peter Abelard, who in the twelfth century used what little was known of Aristotelian logic to analyze the Scriptures and the teachings of the church fathers. The idea was that logic would help churchmen marshal arguments to persuade the laity of the truths of Christianity. It may have helped a little in this regard, but it did much more to expose the logical inconsistencies of the faith.³¹ The appeal of Aristotle became even greater once the bulk of his philosophy was rescued from the archives of the Muslims. The three great monotheistic religions worked together to translate Aristotle from Arabic into Latin, and by the end

³⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1873), 324.

³¹ Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 141; Edward Grant, *A History of Natural Philosophy: From the Ancient World to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115; Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2013), 124; Brian Tierney and Sidney Painter, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages, 300-1475* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 372.

of the twelfth century most of these works had been sent on to Paris.³² Once again, the church thought it might be safe to allow scholars to use the newly recovered Aristotelian logic in a limited way—to gain a better understanding of both revelation and of the physical world as long as this understanding of materiality didn't touch directly on religious teaching. Because the medieval mind was inured to obedience, Aristotle's pronouncements on physics and the natural sciences were initially simply accepted at face value. Very few chose to observe nature closely enough to determine whether Aristotle was correct.³³ After all, too keen a focus on the physical world, on matter, meant too little focus on matters spiritual. Too much interest in the world, even though it was God's creation, was sin. This was St. Augustine's teaching, which had been based on Plotinian philosophy, and which permeated the Christian world.³⁴

But the church's containment policy was doomed to fail. For centuries, reason may have lain dormant in the dusty pages of Aristotle, but once living minds took up those pages, it would never stay idle for long. The Renaissance movement would take a long stride toward the modern world by simply looking seriously again at the physical world. The secular humanists of the Italian Renaissance billed their own movement as a rebirth of classical learning and values, in particular those of the Romans.³⁵ But looking seriously at the past almost always propels one into a radically altered future. It is always the mind focused squarely on its own time, living exclusively in the moment, that is stultified, shackled blindly in the box of its own devising. The Romans were realists who felt entirely competent to shape the world to suit their own needs. This idea was very different from the traditional Christian view, which posited an all-powerful and demanding God and a completely weak and sinful humanity whose sole purpose was to

32 Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927), 281-82, 284-90, 297; Armstrong, *A History of God*, 204-205; Tierney and Painter, *Western Europe*, 370-71.

33 John W. Baldwin, *The Scholastic Culture of the Middle Ages, 1000-1300* (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1971), 59, 63, 67-69; Henrik Lagerlund, ed., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*, vol. 1 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 969; It took Petrarch to take a hard look at Aristotle's teaching and to test it against experience. See J. H. Plumb, *The Italian Renaissance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), 172-74; Tierney and Painter, *Western Europe*, 372-73.

34 Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey (Franklin Center, Pa.: The Franklin Library, 1982), 192-94; Chadwick, *Augustine*, 115.

35 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 120-35.

do the bidding of the Almighty (as represented by the papacy and the monarchs) or suffer the everlasting consequences.

Renaissance artists were interested in the sculptures and paintings of the Romans because these works seemed more realistic than the works of their contemporaries. In order to create similarly realistic works, these artists realized that they must begin again to look at the physical world. Perhaps the first was Giotto, who began to employ a more realistic perspective. He was not copying other paintings as medieval artists were wont to do but painting from what he himself observed.³⁶ Brunelleschi soon discovered that human perception of the world conformed to mathematical principles. He devised linear perspective, providing a usable mathematical ratio between the apparent size of an object and its distance from the viewer. He proved that mathematics could be used to describe physical reality with certitude.³⁷ It might be worth mentioning that Robert Grosseteste in late medieval times had proposed that this could be done, but his ideas were ignored except in the most elite intellectual circles.³⁸

In the Renaissance, it is Leonardo da Vinci who is the transitional figure. He began in true Renaissance fashion by observing the flight of birds in order to paint them more realistically. But in short order, Leonardo realized that birds flew according to certain principles and that if these principles could be understood, human beings could also learn to fly.³⁹ One historian has said that Leonardo's mind was very far from modern, noting that "he was simply not inclined to be a systematic thinker."⁴⁰ But while this may be so, Leonardo did hit upon the chief idea of the Enlightenment and of the Western World since, that reason could be used not only to understand how the physical world works (as Aquinas had said) but also to change it in consequential

³⁶ As Sarel Eimerl has noted, Giotto and the later artists of the Renaissance were influenced by the teachings of St. Francis, who advised that far from being sinful, physical reality was a creation of God to be enjoyed, particularly for its beauty. Eimerl notes that "Giotto followed Francis' injunction to behold and savor the world around him." Eimerl, *The World of Giotto: c. 1267-1337* (New York: Time-Life Library of Art, 1967), 9-10, 11-12, 14-15.

³⁷ Jay A. Levenson, ed., *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), 340.

³⁸ Tierney and Painter, *Western Europe*, 375.

³⁹ Bayla Singer, *Like Sex with Gods: An Unorthodox History of Flying* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 106.

⁴⁰ Richard Turner in *Leonardo da Vinci: Renaissance Master*, A&E Home Video, 1998.

ways. This was a far cry from the medieval mindset, which was built upon obedience to authority. Part and parcel of medieval obedience was an acceptance of the world as is along with one's place in it. These things couldn't be changed, or shouldn't be, because they were de-facto expressions of God's perfect judgment and will.⁴¹

It was precisely this medieval turn of mind that the English philosopher, courtier, and scientist Francis Bacon challenged at the end of the sixteenth century. Bacon noted that there had been virtually no change in the condition of the masses in Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire to his own time, a period of more than a thousand years. The reason for this was that people spent most of their time thinking about the wrong thing.⁴² Bacon didn't have to name the thing. It was, of course, religion, which in the case of Christianity was riveted on the otherworldly. What was needed was to apply systematic logic (reason) to our observations of the physical world. By this process we could discover general axioms (principles) that might be of use in changing the world for the better.⁴³ Bacon's ideas were virtually the same as Leonardo's, but he had moved a little further toward the modern by insisting on systematizing the investigation of nature. Bacon was, in part, also responsible for popularizing an indispensable element of modern life—utilitarianism, which would spawn an entire school of philosophy in Britain.⁴⁴

But it was a Frenchman, René Descartes, who did more to dethrone Christianity as the underlying principle of the West and to reinstall reason (science) in its place. Descartes, a mathematician who wrote in the seventeenth century, held that reason was supreme and was fully capable of unlocking the inner workings of the universe.⁴⁵ This wasn't so revolutionary. St. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest mind of the Middle Ages, had said essentially the same thing. Aquinas had noted that there were two kinds of truth, "natural truth," which governed the

⁴¹ J. Bronowski, "Leonardo da Vinci," in Plumb, *Italian Renaissance*, 225-28.

⁴² Francis Bacon, "Novum Organum," in Edwin A. Burtt, ed., *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), 54-55.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁴⁴ Francis Bacon, "The Great Instauration," in Burtt, *English Philosophers*, 13; See also Bury, *Idea of Progress*, 50-63

⁴⁵ Bury, *Idea of Progress*, 65-66; Peter A. Schouls, *Descartes and the Possibility of Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 34-35.

physical world generally and which human reason could apprehend, and revealed truth, which God transmitted to humanity through revelation as embodied in Holy Scripture. Aquinas was careful to note that revealed truth was superior and trumped the truth apprehended by reason every time in all cases where the two types of truth seemed to conflict. For Aquinas, the seeming conflict between revealed truth and natural truth could only be the result of faulty reasoning.⁴⁶

What was revolutionary about Descartes' ideas was not that reason was competent to understand the physical world, but what he thought it would find when it was vigorously applied. Reason, Descartes asserted, would discover unchanging laws of nature. Leonardo and Bacon had said almost the same thing. Reason could discover principles or axioms that might be of use in changing the world for the benefit of humanity. Descartes' expression, though, is stronger by a mile. His principles were laws and the laws were unchanging. Moreover, these immutable laws were forever consistent with one another. If Descartes' ideas were true, Aristotle's mechanistic universe was back in full force, and God would be relegated to the position of unmoved mover, hardly the medieval tour de force that willed the fall of every sparrow and interceded in the affairs of nature and humanity to perform miracles that could never be rationally explained. If the laws of nature were unchanging, as Descartes claimed, then it was logically inescapable that God could not change them. God could, therefore, play no role in the physical world. This inescapable conclusion did not escape Descartes. A devout Roman Catholic whose philosophical inquiries were mainly directed toward proving the existence of God, the implications of his own philosophy profoundly distressed him. To deal with them, he simply ignored them as best he could. Reason, Descartes declared, should be used only to understand the physical universe. It should never be applied to society, politics, or religion.⁴⁷ The problem, of course, is that people, who create society, politics, and religion, are part of the physical universe and therefore subject to its laws.

Bacon and Descartes had now promulgated three-quarters of a new, modern philosophy of reason, which historians now call the Idea

⁴⁶ Tierney and Painter, *Western Europe*, 380-81; Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *The Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 219.

⁴⁷ Quentin Taylor, "Descartes' Paradoxical Politics," *Humanitas* 14 (2001): 78-88.

of Progress: 1) Reason (i.e. the scientific method) is supreme; 2) it can be used to discover unchanging laws of nature, and 3) knowledge of these unchanging laws could be used to change the world for the benefit of humanity.⁴⁸

The church also understood the import of this new philosophy. It defended itself by brushing aside Johannes Kepler's three laws of planetary motion and declaring that in spite of all of the years of inquiry, no unchanging laws of nature had ever been found. Therefore, Descartes' idea was nothing more than a theory and an idle one at that. The church could safely dismiss Kepler because the laws of planetary motion were so remote from people's everyday experience that only scientists would even bother to take note of them.⁴⁹

In addition to its effort to defeat the new rationality of Descartes, the church had two other battles against reason on its hands, one against the Protestantism of Martin Luther and the other against the new science Nicolas Copernicus had spawned, of which Kepler was a proponent. Luther's attack on the doctrines of the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church came from the application of reason to the Bible. The church itself had encouraged this kind of textual analysis from at least the early twelfth century on. The Renaissance had brought about a renewed interest in textual analysis of all kinds, and Erasmus and others began to apply the new techniques to different translations of the Bible.⁵⁰ The problem for the church was that over the centuries it had developed a number of doctrines that seemed completely unmoored from the Scriptures. Chief among these was the idea of purgatory, but the idea of the trinity, the divinity of Jesus as interpreted by the church, good works as a requirement for salvation, and the immaculate conception could all be challenged once reason was applied to the interpretation of the Bible. Luther took on some of these issues himself, but it was the sale of indulgences that famously prompted his attack. Indulgences were the equivalent of get out of purgatory free cards for

⁴⁸ Bury, *Idea of Progress*, 65-66.

⁴⁹ It puts one in mind of the bankers who have so largely influenced U.S. foreign policy for their own selfish ends, many times in direct opposition to the real interests of the American people. The intellectual servants of these financiers, relying on the continued credulity of the American people, freely publish articles on what they are up to in the leading foreign affairs journals, confident that no one who is not already in on the conspiracy will ever take the time to go to the library and read them.

⁵⁰ Plumb, *Italian Renaissance*, 149-52.

the gullible. All one had to do was, say, pay the Bishop of Madgeburg or another such official of the church a fee, and he would issue a piece of paper releasing one's deceased relatives from purgatory and into God's heavenly mansion. Luther attacked indulgences, not only because they seemed corrupt on their face, but also and chiefly because he could find no justification for them in the Bible.⁵¹

At his trial before the Diet of Worms, the church asked Luther to recant all of his arguments. The Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope were banking on the traditional pull of obedience to authority, no matter how irrational that authority seemed to be. After all, there was the great emperor himself with his princes seated in judgment of one insignificant German monk, the son of a miner, a nobody. But Luther, though he was in so many ways medieval in his own mindset, refused to back down. "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason," he said, "I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other."⁵² This posed a serious difficulty for the church. There was no mention of indulgences or purgatory in the Bible, and there was no reasonable interpretation of anything in the Bible that would allow the church to argue that indulgences or purgatory were legitimately drawn from the Scriptures. Luther convinced many thinking Europeans that the surest guide to true faith was not through a blind obedience to the church's interpretation of the Bible, which could be a willful misinterpretation for the purposes of greed, but rather the application of individual reason to the Holy Word of God. Within a few years most of northern Europe had broken free from the Roman Catholic Church, and the new Protestant churches followed Luther's doctrine that true faith required understanding the Bible through the individual's own conscience.⁵³ In effect, this threw the Bible into the hands of reason, and it would take just two centuries for reason to completely undermine the Bible altogether as a believable explanation of man's relationship to God and the universe.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 50, 306; Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1977), 56-60, 68, 259; John Schofield, *Philip Melancthon and the English Reformation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 46-47.

⁵² Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 19, 141-44.

⁵³ Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 106-108, 121-22.

⁵⁴ Wilson, *God's Funeral*, 343-46.

While the Protestant Reformation was heating up, a new controversy emerged over the nature of the universe itself. The church had long held that the Earth was the unmoving center of the universe, which the sun and all the planets orbited. This is what Aristotle had said, this is what Ptolemy had observed, and this comported with what the Scripture said. After all, wasn't it written in the Holy Book that the sun rose? This showed conclusively that the Earth was stationary while the sun moved. Trouble arose when the Pope asked Copernicus, the cathedral canon of East Prussia, to use his mathematical skills to find out what was wrong with the old Julian calendar, which had been in use in the West since the time of Caesar. The measurement of time in essence depends upon a comparison of daily and seasonal changes on Earth with the changes seen yearly in the heavens. It was clear that a flaw in this comparison, i.e., in the calendar, was causing Easter to slide off toward a new season. To rectify the calendar, Copernicus would naturally have to analyze the astronomical tables of the ancient Roman astronomer Ptolemy, on which the calendar was based. Copernicus found that a simpler way to organize the universe (as the solar system was then called) was to put the sun in the center and have the Earth orbit around it as did the other planets.⁵⁵

Pope Gregory accepted the new and more accurate calendar Copernicus had devised; he even named it after himself, the Gregorian calendar.⁵⁶ But the church could not accept the heliocentric universe on which it was based. To do so would be to admit that the church had been wrong for centuries on the basic construction of the universe. Acceptance of the Copernican model would also lead to further difficulties. If the Earth moved, where then was hell, which was traditionally located below the Earth? Moreover, if God's chief occupation was, as the church held, cataloging the sins of humanity in the book of fate and issuing forgiveness upon confession, contrition, and penance, it would only make sense that God would position Earth, where humanity lived, in *medias res*.

Copernicus published his findings in 1543, the year of his death, and Tycho Brahe, Kepler, and Galileo over the next century

⁵⁵ Gerald G. Holton and Stephen G. Brush, *Physics, the Human Adventure: Copernicus to Einstein and Beyond* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 17-26.

⁵⁶ Holton and Brush, *Physics*, 20, 23.

collected evidence in support of his heliocentric universe.⁵⁷ To defend its traditional geocentric model on which so much depended, the church made an appeal—not to science and reason—but to medieval authority—this time to Aristotle, who was, in Dante’s phrase, “the master of those who know.”⁵⁸ In areas where Scripture was mute, for instance, in physical science, Aristotle’s word had been law for the medieval schoolmen, and this tradition continued within the church into the seventeenth century. One need never test what he said by actual observation of phenomena. (This, in itself, was an irony, since Aristotle held that only through actual observation of phenomena could one gain any true knowledge.)

The bulwark of the church’s argument against heliocentrism was Aristotle’s physics, which held that the universe was made up of five essences. Everything on Earth was made of earth, water, fire, and air. The fifth element, ether, was not present on Earth but was the element from which the sun, moon, and planets were made.⁵⁹ Aristotle said that substances behaved the way they did depending on the elements out of which they were made. Each element sought to be with like elements. Earth was the heaviest of the elements. It did not move unless some force moved it, and it sought to remain at rest, which was its natural condition. If a stone or clod of earth were thrown into the air, it would fall back to rest upon the Earth because it was attracted to the like substance of the immovable Earth itself. Water sought to be with other water. It fell down from the sky in the form of rain, then flowed in rivulets to join larger bodies of like substance, streams to rivers, rivers to the sea. Aristotle seemed to have explained why a rock hurled at the moon didn’t continue through space to the lunar surface. The moon was made of a different element, ether. The rock, which was made of earth, was simply not attracted to it. Ether, like air and water, moved of

⁵⁷ It is important to note, though, that while Kepler used Tycho’s observational notes to advance a more accurate model of the Copernican system, Tycho himself never fully embraced heliocentrism. Victor E. Thoren, “Tycho Brahe,” in René Taton and Curtis Wilson, eds., *Planetary Astronomy from the Renaissance to the Rise of Astrophysics, Part A, Tycho Brahe to Newton* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12; James Gleick, *Isaac Newton* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 49-50; Stillman Drake, *Galileo: Pioneer Scientist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 78-79.

⁵⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine by Birth, but not by Character: Canticle One: Inferno*, trans. Tom Simone (Indianapolis, Ind.: Focus, 2007), 50.

⁵⁹ Kathleen Crowther, “The Scientific Revolution,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750*, vol. 2 (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2015), 73-76; Aristotle, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 555-56.

its own accord , which also explained why the moon moved.⁶⁰

According to the church, Aristotelian physics proved that the Earth did not move. If the Earth moved and was like any other planet, then it would likely be made of the same substance as the moon and the other planets. Since like substances were attracted to like substances, a rock thrown at the moon should then continue through space to the lunar surface. The fact that it did not showed that the Earth and moon were not made of the same stuff, while the rock and the Earth were. Since a rock did not move unless something moved it, neither did the Earth.⁶¹

As long as no one found an unchanging law of nature that captured the popular imagination, the church could successfully hold off the Idea of Progress as a philosophy that might supplant Christianity as the foundation of Western society. The church could also hold off acceptance of the Copernican model of the universe so long as no one could provide a believable alternative to Aristotle's physics. Then came Newton. In terms of modern history, no one comes close to Isaac Newton in importance. His stature is colossal. All of the revolutions in science, politics, religion, and philosophy since the seventeenth century radiate from him. In the 1660s, Newton invented calculus and then used it to discover and prove what appeared to be an unchanging law of nature—the law of gravity.⁶² His was an unchanging law that everyone could readily understand. He explained why we are all held to the surface of the Earth. Moreover, the particular law he had found provided a believable alternative to Aristotle's physics. Elements weren't attracted to each other because they were made of like materials; all objects in the universe, no matter what they are made of, are attracted to each other. The force of the attraction is proportional to the mass of the two objects, and inversely proportional to the distance between them. A rock comes back to rest on the Earth because the Earth is the

⁶⁰ Edith Dudley Sylla, "Physics," in F. A. C. Mantello and A. G. Riggs, eds., *Medieval Latin: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 355-56; Rusty L. Meyers, *The Basics of Physics* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006), 8-9; William E. Burns, *The Scientific Revolution: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 18; Tierney and Painter, *Western Europe*, 373-74.

⁶¹ Helen S. Lang, *The Order of Nature in Aristotle's Physics: Place and the Elements* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 187.

⁶² Gleick, *Isaac Newton*, 38-47; 54-59.

most massive and nearest object to the rock. And all of this was more than a theory, he provided mathematical descriptions that allowed anyone to test the truth of his assertions.

Newton's *Principia*, published in 1687, was like a double cannon blast straight through the bow of the church's arguments. He had found the elusive unchanging laws and therefore seemed to have proved that reason could be used to find them. Now all that was necessary was to find practical application for this knowledge. That would come before the end of the seventeenth century with the reinvention of the steam engine. He had also proved the Copernican/Keplerian model of the universe to be correct. Newton explained not only the behavior of objects on Earth but why the planets remained in their orbits and why they accelerated as they neared the sun. In short order, it was clear that Newton's calculus could predict with unerring accuracy the rate at which an object would be drawn to Earth. Moreover, it was an accelerating rate. The objects moved faster with each second of fall. One might gather all the holy men in the world to pray that God would make a falling object behave in another way—levitate perhaps—but after Newton, it seemed pretty clear that it wasn't going to happen. If the laws of nature were unchanging, people began to deduce, God could play no role in the physical universe—miracles couldn't happen.

Newton's findings also knocked Aristotle down a peg and allowed for a partial vindication of Plato. If the Middle Ages were largely Aristotle's, the modern world is Plato's. Plato had never been able to meet Aristotle's objection that the unchanging forms could never explain dynamic change. To Plato, the forms were largely mathematical, but the highest form of mathematics in ancient times was geometry. Geometry could not provide a mathematical formula for dynamic change. But calculus could. Newton, then, could provide an unchanging mathematical form or formula that incorporated the kind of dynamic change to which all material reality is subject. Much of modern science and technology aims, after Newton, to find the unchanging formulas that can describe the changes visible in the physical world. Music for instance can now be digitized into a binary *form* and then be repeated with absolute fidelity ad infinitum.

Newton's discovery allowed thinking people in the West to replace Christianity as the foundation of society with the Idea of Progress. By 1750, the French writer Bernard de Fontenelle had added the final element to the Idea of Progress, which soon became the philosophy of the Enlightenment and then of the Western world. De Fontenelle wrote that using reason to find unchanging laws of nature and then applying that knowledge to improve conditions in the world for humanity would lead to *perpetual progress*.⁶³ Humanity now had a recipe to make a heaven on Earth and no longer needed to depend on God.

The acceptance of the Idea of Progress pulled the rug out from under traditional Christian theology, but it also undermined the authority of traditional government. The world was about to enter a period of revolution. The old forms of government, which rested upon God's power through Divine Right, were no longer sustainable. If God could not play a direct role in the physical universe, he certainly could not choose who the king was to be or provide the king through innate ideas with a mandate to rule others. If political power could not come from God, another foundation for it must be found. It was Locke who found it.

Locke ignored Descartes' warning never to apply supreme reason to politics or society. He destroyed the idea of Divine Right, the notion that God chose the king as His agent for carrying out the Divine Will. He did this by showing that there are no such things as Descartes' "innate ideas." If God had placed any ideas in the human mind prior to birth, argues Locke, surely it would be some idea of Himself. But at birth and for many years thereafter children seem to have no idea of God at all. When they do finally gain some awareness of God, says Locke, it turns out to be precisely the same idea of God that their parents or other caregivers have. This suggests that children learn about God from the people around them in precisely the same way they come by all other perceptions and ideas. Moreover, children the world over reflect, more or less precisely, the religious diversity of various human communities. The question then becomes: Why would God plant so many different ideas of Himself, in some cases polytheistic ideas, in the

⁶³ Bury, *Ideal of Progress*, 107-110.

minds of children?⁶⁴

Descartes' argument for the existence of inborn or innate ideas was directly connected to his faith in God and his rather circular "proof" of God's existence. He claimed that he had a distinct and positive idea of infinity. In other words, he could visualize infinity so that his idea of it was not simply the opposite of finite. He went on to say that in life he had never experienced, at least so far as he could tell, anything that was infinite. Since all perceptions and experience in life were of finite things and no one could have any idea beyond what they had experienced, the source of his idea of infinity must be an innate idea, or so he claimed. Descartes believed that he must have experienced something infinite before birth and this infinite thing was God. He held this as proof that God had implanted this innate idea of Himself in the mind of old René Descartes. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke ridicules Descartes' claim.⁶⁵ If one had a positive idea of infinity, says Locke, why couldn't you add one to it, since you can add one to anything. If you knew what infinity was, why couldn't you double or triple it?⁶⁶ So much for Descartes' one proof of an innate idea.

It follows from Locke's reasoning that no one can make any claim to having an innate idea. If God cannot plant ideas in a person's mind before birth, then the king cannot claim to have an inborn knowledge of how to carry out God's will. Since all ideas come from experience after we begin to perceive the physical world and no one can prove to have had any direct experience of God while living, it follows, says Locke, that all ideas of God, except that he exists, must be opinion. Therefore, religious toleration is necessary and just, and no one can assert to have authority from God to rule over other human beings.⁶⁷

If the power of government cannot come from God, its source must be found elsewhere. Reason tells us, says Locke, that people must have created governments to protect their own interests. So the power

⁶⁴ John Locke, *Human Understanding*, 85, 87-95.

⁶⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 87-92.

⁶⁶ Locke, *Human Understanding*, 209-223.

⁶⁷ Locke *Human Understanding*, 619-30; John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Huddersfield, U.K.: J. Brook, 1795), 9-14, 16, 29; W. M. Spellman, *John Locke* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 42.

of government comes from people organized into communities who create the government for their own purposes. Locke says all adult human beings, with the exception of those who are mentally ill, are reasonable and therefore have the ability to make rational decisions about how they would wish to be governed. Reason also tells us that to be fully human, people require life, liberty (which Locke defines as the ability to live one's life according to one's own sincere beliefs), and property (without which one cannot be politically free and independent). Government then should protect these natural rights—life, liberty, and property. These rights are part of the natural law of society and are discoverable through the exercise of human reason.⁶⁸

In 1689, John Locke and Isaac Newton met for dinner on a couple of occasions. Locke told Newton that he had read *Principia* and had understood the import of it even if he could not quite grasp the mathematics. The import was, of course, that Newton had found an unchanging law of nature, and that if there were such laws, God could hardly play a role in the physical world. He certainly could not shape human political institutions. We don't know whether Locke grasped all of these implications from *Principia*. But he certainly did know that political institutions based on a purported notion of God's will could never be rationally defended.

Locke tells us that *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* grew out of a discussion he was having with a group of friends as early as 1671. *Two Treatises of Government*, in which Locke attacks the idea of Divine Right as the foundation for absolutist government, was begun in the 1680s as a justification, it seems, for radical political action against King Charles II. Locke believed that Charles meant to restore absolutist government and Roman Catholicism in England. Locke had found out that Charles had a secret treaty with the absolutist French king Louis XIV, under which Louis was paying Charles to subvert Parliament and restore Roman Catholicism as the state church in England. In opposition to this, the philosopher seems to have participated in planning Charles' assassination. The plot, though, was

⁶⁸ John Locke, *Locke: Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136; John Locke, *Of Civil Government* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1947), 119, 142-47, 158-60, 166; Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 10, 56; Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics & Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 581.

discovered and Locke fled to Holland.⁶⁹

Locke remained in exile until Charles' brother and successor James II was deposed.⁷⁰ James had publicly declared himself to be a Roman Catholic, and when his wife bore him a son and heir, who was also baptized into the Catholic Church, several members of Parliament decided to act against the king before he could establish a Roman Catholic dynasty.⁷¹ The Roman Catholic Church in the seventeenth century, though it did not explicitly endorse absolute monarchy based on Divine Right as the only legitimate form of government, was associated with these ideas, particularly in England. Under these circumstances, restoring Roman Catholicism as the state church meant the end of constitutional government. From Holland, Locke was active in helping to organize the overthrow of James II.⁷² This came after seven English nobles invited the Protestant Dutch Prince William of Orange to invade England and claim the throne for his Protestant wife, Mary, James's eldest daughter. This William did in the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. The army and a good part of the navy deserted James, and he was forced to abdicate and flee to France. Mary assumed the throne, and Parliament passed a law declaring William to be co-sovereign with his wife.⁷³

These events allowed Locke to return to England. He had revised *Two Treatises of Government* to take into account the events of the Glorious Revolution. Many scholars have seen *Two Treatises* as a justification of the Glorious Revolution, and in part it was. But it turned out to be a more radical interpretation of recent historical events than the English public was willing to accept. Locke held that James II had violated the natural rights of the people and that the sovereign community had acted through its representatives in Parliament to

⁶⁹ Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics*, 17-22, 375-80, 383, 385-86, 406-410.

⁷⁰ Spellman, *John Locke*, 25

⁷¹ John Miller, *James II: A Study in Kingship* (London: Methuen, 1989), 1 86-87; Maureen Waller, *Ungateful Daughters: The Stuart Princesses who Stole their Father's Crown* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002), 197.

⁷² Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics*, 352, 536-42; Spellman, *John Locke*, 24-25.

⁷³ Robert Beddard, *A Kingdom without a King: The Journal of the Provisional Government in the Revolution of 1688* (Oxford, U.K.: Phaidon Press, 1988), 17; Howard Nenner, *The Right to be King: The Succession to the Crown of England, 1603-1714* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1995), 156-57; Miller, *James II*, 201-206; George E. Cokayne and Vicary Gibbs, *The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom*, vol. 2 (London: St. Catharine's Press, 1912), 658-61.

remove him and to substitute William and Mary, whom the community believed would be better able to protect its interests. Most of the political leaders in England, however, did not accept this view. In fact, though the revolution had made Parliament stronger and opened the door to the theory that it was sovereign, the fiction was maintained that James and by implication his infant son had willingly abdicated the throne, thereby clearing the way for Mary to come to power. In this way, it could still be asserted that the prerogatives of the crown, which flowed to the monarch through his or her sacred connection to God, were preserved.⁷⁴ Locke's more radical view—that institutions and officials of the government had only the power the people allowed them to have, none of which was sacred—would only gradually be accepted in the Western World, beginning with the American Revolution.

The historian Richard Ashcraft argues that Locke published *Two Treatises* in 1689 as an argument against allowing William to assume too much power based on traditional prerogative.⁷⁵ Locke published *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which provides a philosophical basis for his political treatises, the same year. The chronology of events in late seventeenth-century England is certainly interesting from the perspective of intellectual history. Newton published *Principia* in 1687, asserting that there were unchanging laws of nature, which if true, would mean that God could play no direct role in the physical world. The very next year, the Glorious Revolution began, during which James II, a monarch whom many believed was secretly absolutist and a believer in Divine Right, was chased from the throne. Then, in 1689, Locke published *Two Treatises of Government*, in which he destroyed for all time any legitimacy for royal government based on God's Will. Locke's work made government subject to rational analysis. He asserted that the only basis for a just government was the consent of the governed, who had the ability, and therefore the right, to create, alter, or abolish any government that could not stand up to the scrutiny of human reason.

After Descartes, Newton, and Locke, then, reason was indeed

⁷⁴ Locke, *Of Civil Government*, 192, 241-42; Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics*, 558, 560-72, 578, 582; Spellman, *John Locke*, 111; Jack P. Greene, "The Glorious Revolution and the British Empire, 1688-1783," in Lois G. Schworer, ed., *The Revolution of 1688-89: Changing Perspectives* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 263.

⁷⁵ Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics*, 594-601.

supreme. The laws of physics and nature, religion, society, and politics were all subject to logical analysis. Human reason became the final arbiter of truth in all aspects of human life. Reason ruled, and everything in heaven and on Earth was subject to its law. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Idea of Progress, formulated largely by French and English thinkers, had become a powerful force for change, transforming France and England into formidably organized nations with worldwide empires while revolutionizing their politics and economies.

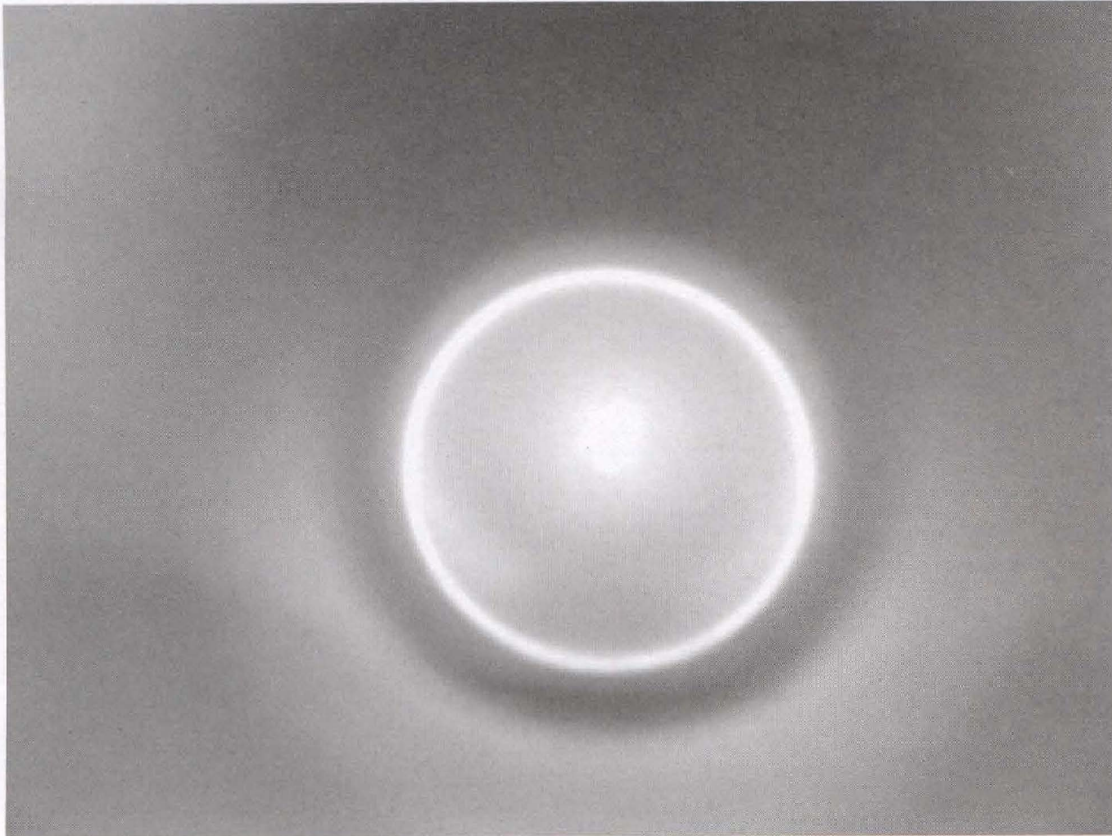
Germans, such as Luther and Kepler, had no doubt made monumental contributions toward ushering in the realm of reason in both religion and science. But, by the same token, the bulk of ethnic Germans found themselves without a unified nation to call their own, let alone a far-flung empire, their homelands ravaged and their population decimated by a crushing foreign invasion and an internecine war. They emerged from the seventeenth century lacking, as Maurice Cranston has said, “any real political or institutional identity.” “They had left the feudal past,” says Cranston, “but they had not been propelled into modernity.” Isaiah Berlin has commented that the Germans, who had been humiliated by the French army, suffered an “inferiority complex” writ large as they witnessed the greater achievements in the arts and sciences of not only the French, but of other western Europeans who were busily building great nations. The result was that many Germans turned to a more extreme branch of Lutheranism—Pietism—which turned away from the world toward the inner life of the individual (a key step, by the way, toward the Romantic). As Berlin notes, Pietism placed its “emphasis upon spiritual life” and cultivated a “contempt for learning, contempt for ritual and for form, contempt for pomp and ceremony.” And, it might be added, a contempt for rationalism. The Pietists sought a religious life built upon the foundation of religious *feeling*. These emphases—on the inner life of the individual and on feeling—would provide fertile ground for later German Romantic thinkers, among them Herder.⁷⁶

Pietism, though, was a simple turning away from the intellectual advances of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It did not really

⁷⁶ Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, 21-23; Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 36-38.

seek to engage intellectually with Enlightenment ideas, much less to directly challenge them. And while such a turning away—into the inner life of feelings or to the subjective life of the mind or even back to nature—became fundamental in many ways to Romanticism, Romantic thinkers never turned fully away. They directly confronted Enlightenment ideas, building on them in some ways and fiercely opposing them in others. This other more intellectually combative strain did not find its roots in Pietism, but in the ideas of the Scottish philosopher David Hume, who would use reason against itself and open a door for another power of mind to rise to a position of supremacy—the Romantic imagination.

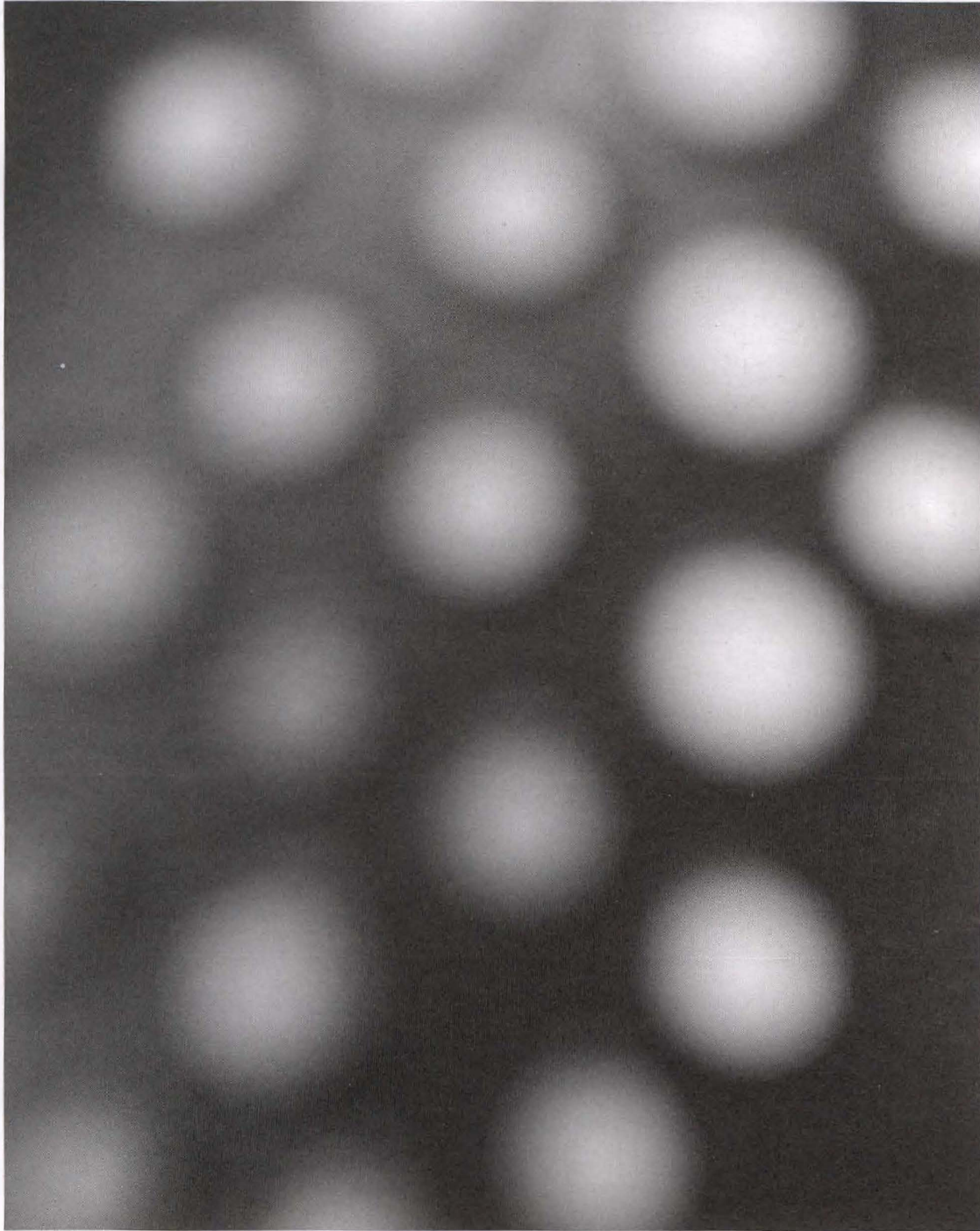
BOWL LIGHT



DOOR HINGE



SPOON HOLES



**“ONLY CONNECT”: A REVIEW OF DANIEL ZIMMERMAN’S
*THE INTERRUPTED BREATH***

As E.M. Forster famously (and ironically) once said, “Only connect,” knowing full well the perennial struggle and near impossibility involved in the use of language to this end. At its core, Dan Zimmerman’s illuminating new book of poetry, *the interrupted breath*, delves into the burden of language human beings must endure as the central tool for communication. The English language is a magnificent, beautiful but ultimately unstable and imperfect tool to be sure, and Zimmerman’s work captures the heroic efforts of one individual to use this tool to make himself known to another in a meaningful way. More than most poets writing today, Zimmerman understands the challenges and complexities of language...as well as its potential to convey the deepest human truths if used skillfully. When this happens, it is heroic and profound, when it doesn’t, the results are tragic, and Zimmerman shows us the full spectrum of outcomes in his impressive body of tightly constructed, sophisticated, and moving poetic gems.

Linguistically complex, Zimmerman’s work signals his allegiance to such poetic mentors and influences as Jack Clarke, Robert Creeley, and Charles Olson. His concentrated, multifaceted, resonant style achieves (and in some instances surpasses) what they achieved at their best—that goal of all great poetry to create a new, hyper-efficient language that articulates what has never before been articulated, and what few have ever even thought to articulate. What makes Zimmerman’s work even more fascinating is that beneath his masterful manipulation of language lies a sensitive, deeply human and remarkably perceptive soul. The poems in his oeuvre are shot through with a Romantic sensibility and music, and it may come as no surprise to readers that his doctoral work focused on the work of that founding father of English Romanticism, William Blake. Blake’s spirit has welled up in much of Zimmerman’s work throughout his long and productive poetic career—

in his engagement with current political events, a love of nature and folklore/myth, a suspicion of institutions, and a passionate defense of the freedom of the individual. That same spirit may be found in *the interrupted breath*, albeit concentrated to a single instance—that of the way contemporary English is used to bind (as in the joining of two souls or the confinement of one by the other), manipulate, misdirect (both willfully and unconsciously) and, occasionally, even to break through and liberate. And Zimmerman intrepidly explores this theme on multiple levels—from the individual’s use of language within his/her own thoughts, to its use in attempting genuine communication and understanding between two individuals, to its use and misuse in and among small communities, even to its broad use among political parties and entire nations.

In laying out the near impossibility of language to truly and deeply link the thoughts and feelings of two minds, Zimmerman at the same time delights in celebrating the stubborn persistence of people to keep on trying. “bank shots” captures the difficulties in using names to pin down meanings:

the nameless things that suffer names
conspire to revolt: whales
change lanes on the whale’s road,
wine whitens the sea...

Indeed, there is real risk in the attempt to use names and words to “only connect,” but the risk is worth it provided one approaches the task with all due humility as to the ultimate impossibility of the task, as Zimmerman makes clear in “no massé”:

show some respect for the table,
the felt. run the rack you’ll wish
you hadn’t. not this time.
make it a close game. stick
your neck out.

And the decision to take that risk fascinates Zimmerman; he celebrates the leap of faith that one takes in hitching thoughts and emotions to

words and the miracle and music that sometimes results. Taking the risk to utter thoughts into language and sentences—*the interrupted breath*—has the potential to create language that is music, a sentiment beautifully expressed in “talk dirty”:

if none of us despair
of consequences, of the dark
we share, the interrupted breath
could sing.

Even when confronted with ineffective, even subversive, use of language, Zimmerman doesn't despair. “memento mori” begins by evoking Hamlet's exchange with the foolish Polonius whose language subverts the effort to connect with other minds, locked as he is in a perpetual monologue seeing others as mere reflections of himself—a narcissistic short-circuiting of language not lost on Hamlet who reflects on the limitations of words used in this superficial way but also holds out hope for a better, deeper use of words:

so search in vain.
say what you must.
whatever the result, words

may bandage, but the healing
comes from within, beneath
the thin skin we try to protect.

Language rightly used might even heal the wounds of death and time that separate reader from authors, as Zimmerman reveals in “absent friends”:

...ages apart, translated badly,
I rewind millennia for speech
adjusted to the dusty ear
in all of us...
your blessing came
before my prayer. you carried me
back to my name.

Zimmerman beautifully illuminates the power of language and literature to reach across millennia, linking readers with long since passed authors and, even more incredibly, putting the reader in touch with his true self.

No idealist, Zimmerman also casts an unflinching gaze on the tragic consequences of failed or willfully misused language. In “a word with you,” he traces the linguistic circuitry of idea-intent-formulation-reception and where that conduit hits a detour or gets short-circuited. He laments:

I’ve told you
a thousand times,
one says,
& haven’t
evidently
ever got it right.

In “easier said,” Zimmerman suggests part of the problem may be in the constantly shifting, ephemeral nature of language itself:

chattering voices
slip by like fish the river
as quickly forgets

A theme seeded in the opening lines of the poem that opens *the interrupted breath*, “a word with you”:

older than words,
sentences
morph more often,
verify
by tongue’s slips
natural election

“say it anyway” reflects the natural frustration with the limitations of language as an imperfect tool in trying to communicate. With our words, our body language, our hand gestures, facial expressions, etc.—even so, we still come up against a wall of inarticulateness: the wall that

poets probe to find holes, maybe even doorways. But language can also be used as a weapon—to communicate punishment, torment, hurt—as “chill” bitinglly asserts:

I shouldn't have said it.
neither should you. honesty's
the first travesty.

of course I meant it.
so did you. but it didn't
lead to a breakthrough.

Zimmerman extends the idea of the dual nature of language—to heal or to hurt—beyond one-on-one relationships to its effects on the community. In “can't go home again,” he laments the loss of an idyllic past when neighbors seemed to share a common language—spoken and unspoken—that bound the community together with shared values:

where we could speak
without having words all the time,
a time when what went unsaid said
we'd come together in the right place

“just tell it straight” goes further to undermine the idyllic past, first describing it in similar terms to “can't go home again” but then revealing its shadow side at the end of the poem where neighbors shared their tales and riddles only within their group while casting a wary eye on the “other” neighborhoods:

we told tales in the twilight
or dissected riddles for insight
with our tones hushed on the q.t.
lest the next porch hear our wry screed
& not tell if we spoke true
or tricked them with our false news

Courageously, Zimmerman pushes out further to consider the willful misuse of language on the masses, especially resonant of the current

political climate in America. In “veracity,” we are shown the power drunk leader assured of the blind faith of his followers—a situation not unfamiliar in American politics today:

what if anything you said seemed credible?
you don't even know who's listening,
but half of them believed before you said it.
it matters over whose eyes who's pulling the wool.

“the menace” shows us the point of view of the blind followers, willfully deceiving themselves as Erich Fromm noted in order to get drunk with the power of the collective:

if something said could've fogged your head,
you'd have gone there for a song. you'd belong
to the corps eager for war with the stranger.
you'd rhyme with the crime every time.
you'd be the dog in the manger.

Ultimately, *the interrupted breath* moves beyond the consideration of language as communication—from the heroic-tragic efforts and consequences of language in interpersonal relationships, among small communities and neighborhoods, and in broad mass communication (and manipulation)—to the aesthetic qualities of language, both in its everyday use and in its artistic, poetic use. “daily rushes” evokes the poet's longing for a language that can capture beauty:

in the wordless hush
where you pass
birds flutter and mate
on the velvet lawns

worms in the earth
beneath your feet
glide together
sharing your pleasure

“air” reveals the poet's delight in re-discovering literary masterpieces as if

meeting old friends again after many years. He rejoices in the intimate connection between great literature and memory:

what a delight to discover
I remember every word
rereading poems I haven't
since my first gray hair.

the interrupted breath ends on a hopeful note with the poet celebrating the inspiration that he continues to discover all around him, inspiration enough to give him the courage to attempt to capture beauty in verse. Such is the muse he encounters during a routine run to the supermarket in “an ars poetica”:

...the beautiful, strategically clad
and studiously nonchalant
woman in the supermarket
with a long verse in miniscule
Sanskrit when we repeatedly
excused ourselves in different aisles
zeroing in on the same preserves
as if neither knew or needed to
the gist or etymology
of her inscription.

In the end, *the interrupted breath* provides a fascinating, brilliantly poetic insight into the contemporary use of English in America. The poet's delving into the interrupted breath in the sounds of phrases and sentences elicits a catch in the reader's breath—at the moving tragic heroism of a stubborn species to perpetually make the effort to use language to “only connect” even in the face of its ultimate impossibility; at the shocking deliberate misuse of language to harm, mislead, and manipulate; and at the astonishing ability of poetic language to capture the beauty in the everyday. To be sure, Zimmerman's readers will experience that catch in the breath with every poem.

CONTRIBUTORS

Champ Atlee lives in Lawrenceville, New Jersey with his wife Annette and daughter Olivia. He is the author of *Reynolds' Keepsake and The Theater of Memory: The Poems of Champ Atlee*, and his poems have appeared in the journals *America*, *Civil War Magazine*, and *The Amherst Review* among others. He teaches at The Lawrenceville School, where he is Director of the James Merrill Poetry Seminar.

Emanuel di Pasquale is Poet-in Residence, Professor of English at Middlesex County College, and Editor-in-Chief of this journal. Born in Sicily in 1943, DiPasquale came to America as a teenager. His published translations include Dante's *La Vita Nuova / The New Life* (with Bruno Alemanni) (Xenos Press, 2012) and Silvio Ramat's *Sharing a Trip: Selected Poems* (Bordighera Press, 2001), winner of the Raizziss/ de Palchi Fellowship. In 1998 he won the Bordighera Poetry Prize for his translation of Joe Salerno's *Song of the Tulip Tree*. DiPasquale has published over a dozen books of his own poetry, the latest being *Love Lines* (Bordighera Press, 2013), *The Ocean's Will* (Guernica, 2013), *Self-portrait* (The New York Quarterly Press, 2014), and *Knowing the Moment* (Blast Press, 2014). For several years, he served as poetry editor of *Chelsea*, a major NYC literary journal. He lives by the ocean in Long Branch, NJ, where he serves as Poet Laureate of that community. His "Bob Dylan Incident" was recently published in the Long Branch newspaper, *The Link*.

Gregg Glory [Gregg G. Brown] has devoted his life to poetry since happening across a haiku by Moritake, to wit:

Leaves
float back up to the branch--
Ah! butterflies.

He runs the micro-publishing house BLAST PRESS, which has published over two dozen authors in the past 25 years. He still composes poems on his departed father's clipboard, which he's had since High School. He is a two-time Asbury Park Poet Laureate awarded by the Asbury Music Awards.

Hank Kalet is a poet, freelance writer, and Economic Needs Reporter, *NJ Spotlight*. He teaches writing and reading at Middlesex County College, and is a part-time lecturer in journalism at Rutgers University. His poetry has appeared in numerous small press journals and his journalism appears in *The Progressive*, *NJ Spotlight*, *In These Times*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Certainties and Uncertainties*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2010. *As an Alien in a Land of Promise* is a book-length exploration in poetic form of the failures in American capitalism and the continued predominance of homelessness in America. It is based on a year of visits to the now-closed Tent City homeless encampment in Lakewood, NJ, with photographer Sherry Rubel and filmmaker Jack Ballo. Sections of this poem have been published in *Serving House Journal* and *Blue Collar Review*. His most recent book of poetry is *Stealing Copper* (Finishing Line Press, 2015).

Mathew V. Spano has published poetry, short stories, and essays over the last twenty-five years, many of which are included in his first book *Hellgrammite* (BLAST Press, 2016) and his second book, *Imps* (BLAST Press, 2018). His work has appeared in various publications, such as *The Los Angeles Times*, *Psychological Perspectives*, *Turtle Island Quarterly*, *Quantum Fairy Tales*, *The Yellow Chair Review*, *Frogpond*, *Cicada*, *This Broken Shore*, *The Heron's Nest*, and *Middlesex*, as well as in anthologies, such as *Palisades, Parkways & Pinelands* (Blast Press, 2016); *Baseball Haiku: The Best Haiku Ever Written About the Game* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2007); and *The Poets of New Jersey: From Colonial to Contemporary* (Jersey Shore Publications, 2005). He has taught English Composition and Mythology in Literature as a full-time professor for over twenty-five years at Middlesex County College in Edison, NJ where he now serves as the English Dept. Chair.

Daniel Weeks is the author of *For Now: New & Collected Poems, 1979-2017* (Coleridge Institute Press, 2017), which includes nine previously published collections in addition to hitherto unpublished work. His poetry has appeared in *The Cimarron Review*, *Plainsongs*, *The Stillwater Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *The California Quarterly*, *Mudfish*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *Zone 3*, *Slant*, and many other publications. His work has also appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Wild Poets of Ecstasy: An Anthology of Ecstatic Poetry* (Pelican Pond, 2011), *On Human Flourishing: A Poetry Anthology* (McFarland, 2015), and *Palisades, Parkways &*

Pinelands: An Anthology of Contemporary New Jersey Poets (Blast Press, 2015). His translations of French symbolist poetry have appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *This Broken Shore*, and *Middlesex*. He is also the author of *A More Prosaic Light: Essays, Revisions, and Reviews, 1987-2015* (Coleridge Institute Press, 2015) and *Not for Filthy Lucre's Sake: Richard Saltar and the Antiproprietary Movement in East New Jersey, 1665-1710* (Lehigh University Press, 2001).

Jared Weeks, a photography student at Brookdale Community College, is assistant editor of the literary magazine *This Broken Shore*. His photographs have appeared in the magazines *This Broken Shore* and *Images*. He has also provided photographs for book covers for the Coleridge Institute Press and Blast Press.

Daniel Zimmerman, Professor of English at Middlesex County College, served as Associate Editor of the issue of *Anonym* that published Ezra Pound's last canto, and as editor of *The Western Gate*, *Britannia*, and *College English Notes*. His poetry has appeared in many magazines and anthologies and, in 1997, he invented an anagrammatical poetic form, Isotopes. His works include *Perspective*, a curriculum of the soul #20 (Canton, NY: Institute of Further Studies, 1974), *See All the People*, illustrated by Richard Sturm (Toronto: Open Studio, 1976—now available as an iBook), the trans-temporal *Blue Horitals* with John Clarke (Oasii: Amman, Jordan, 1997), *ISOTOPES* ((London: frAme, 2001), and online: *ISOTOPES2* (Chicago: Beard of Bees, 2007). His book *Post-Avant* (2002, Introduction by Robert Creeley) won the Editor's Choice Award from Pavement Saw Press in Ohio. This year, BLAST Press published his new book, *the interrupted breath*.

Rachel Zimmerman is a mixed media artist currently living in Brooklyn and developing performance works on cultural and environmental issues. Born in New Jersey and raised in Arizona, she received an AAFA in Theatre Design from Scottsdale Community College and a BA with an emphasis on Lighting Design from UNLV. She is influenced by the effects of nature through light while exploring themes of love, death, politics, religion, culture, time and truth. Her style is a mixture of ideas from Impressionism to Expressionism, Magic Realism to Surrealism, Absurdism to Street Art. She demonstrates how life extends beyond its own subjective limits, blurring dream and reality.

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DANIEL WEEKS

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RACHEL ZIMMERMAN