

The Glass Bead Game

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European, especially German theorists, often enjoy playing a delightful game which reminds me of Hermann Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*.¹ They pretend there is an implicit philosophy in the natural language, as if God created language in a way that behind the multitude of meanings and connotations, words have important meanings by themselves. It goes like this: Let us think about trust, for instance. Trust is a firm reliance on the integrity, ability, or character of a person or thing. The word also relates to *trees* and being wooden. It implies firmness, another word for rigidity, lack of flexibility. What role may the notion of trust play in moral discourse? Does rigidity correspond to the moral content of trust?

Arguments of this sort are much less common in the English-speaking world. One of the reasons is that despite an enormous number of roots, English offers relatively limited possibility for word mutations. Another reason is perhaps a different tradition of language use. An English speaker is aware, for example, that *medium* is both an environment and a middle part, but s/he just is not often interested in what the two meanings can tell us about each other. People regard polysemy to be a linguistic accident. The connotations of natural language are not viewed as a serious philosophical argument.

I come from the Russian tradition that learned such a game from the Germans some time in the last century, and cannot get enough of it ever since — taking the game too seriously at times. So, when Jana Noel says, let us think about horizon, I cannot help liking the very idea from the start. Besides, she is very good at the *Glass Bead Game*. Her initial move is to recall the images of horizon, and therefore the whole layer of poetical language with its abundance of emotionally flavored meanings. A reader is invited not only to accept or reject the string of meaning Jana attaches to horizon, but also to call up his or her own feelings. For her, these are notions of mystery, intrigue, a sense of beyond and other notions-feelings. For you, horizon may mean loneliness, despair, elusiveness, or something else — if you do not want to play the game; but if you do want to play, as do I, you could search your personal semiotic storage and find that yes, horizon may mean all these things, and very convincingly so. Just do not look for authoritative arguments for a moment. Now, you're in.

The second step is more semantic than poetical. With the help of Gadamer, Jana suggests: where there is horizon, one should think of a vantage point. It is where we stand, both physically and mentally. Horizon becomes the "range of vision." Then we are led back to the initial notion-emotion, the movement related to horizon. If one does not move, one's horizon becomes limited. The horizon turns into a finite and established boundary. For people who are not exposed to ethnic diversity, it is difficult to move in relation to their horizon. Wherever they go, they find, so to speak, the same vantage point. Ethnically insulated whites carry their horizons with them.

Next Jana Noel remarks on the *city*, which she reads as the concentration of difference. From the formal logical point of view, this move does not make much sense. According to the Glass Bead Game rules, the move is perfectly lawful. Indeed, a city offers a multitude of vantage points; wherever you go, you move in relation to horizon. It is difficult for me to retain the initial metaphor of horizon while thinking about a city. But the mental picture of a city is a very powerful tool of imagination for anybody who ever experienced an air of excitement on the streets of New York, London or Moscow.

In the city, one constantly brushes against strangers, and hears bits of their stories, never finished or complete. Strangely, Jana Noel's paper itself reminds me of such a city. Her paper is populated with scores of authors, each of them represented by a short quotation, never within a context. There are fifty citations from over twenty sources on ten pages of the text; not a small town-like writing. The authors come along, say a few words and disappear in the crowd, leaving us with the "glimpses, snapshots" of their thought, and with the sense of beyond. In this paper Jana is a literary *flaneur*, a stranger among strangers, who takes in much, but remains free and disengaged.

The city as a concentration of difference is a direct opposition to a rural way of life. People with a bounded horizon want the dream of community, of conformity, of sameness, of catharsis, writes Jana. Here is where a reader should be aware of the Glass Bead Game conventions. The normative language here should not be taken literally. Jana claims two things: first, that city life is more hospitable to the difference than rural life; and second, that rural life connotes community. Does she think the community is something inappropriate for the classroom? Yes, she can think so *in this round of the game*, but not in every other context.

For one could play the same the game differently. For instance, I might draw on works of Ray Oldenburg² and Christopher Lash,³ and plausibly show that a big city severely limits one's range of vision. Precisely because the city is full of strangers, its dwellers never really experience authentic difference. I would support it poetically by saying that the city is the place where one never knows one's true horizon, and never can watch a sunset. I would also claim that the vantage point is not an individual creation, but the result of a communal experience. Therefore, one must be embedded in a communal context in order to really experience another's vantage point. Then I would support it factually, saying that mechanical exposure to difference in fact does not guarantee acceptance of the difference. Many stories of desegregating schools might prove just that. An individual may be as ethnically insulated in Manhattan as s/he can be broad-minded in the woods. And finally, I would assert that the classroom should be a place where kids experience community, essential human sameness, and benefits of safety. So, the classroom should be an island of rural utopia amidst the imposing diversity of the big city. It is the transparent boundary between the city and a classroom, where students learn to move in relation to horizon. Of course, I could say all these things, but it would be another game, wouldn't it?

Speaking of games, I do not imply in any way that the method Jana Noel employs in her paper is irrelevant to the real life. On the contrary, I find it a legitimate

and refreshing method of philosophic inquiry. Courageous quests for new languages and meanings give a clear *moral* direction to both classroom practice and educational research.

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1. Hermann Hesse, *Magister Ludi (The Glass Bead Game)* (New York: Bantam Books 1970, c1943).
 2. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, And How They Get You Through The Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
 3. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites: and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).