

Metanoia and the Erotic Catharsis of the Human Soul:
The Full-SOUL Orgasm at the True, Deep “Common Core” of
True, Deep Democratic Education

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I first want to heartily thank the author of this essay for the many lovely and loving thoughts it contains; for its sensitivity to and deep care for what matters most deeply and humanly in the education of human beings; and, above all, for its clear and touching experiential portrayal of the *metanoia* in both the monastic practice of the *lectio divina* of canonically sacred texts *and* in our modern ability to phenomenologically transform ourselves and pedagogically help others transform. The latter educating a *temporary* holding in sacredness of the Otherness of texts artfully designed as aesthetic vehicles for this *metanoia*, and an understanding of the inherent sacredness of this experience *in itself*, apart from the historic traditions such as monasticism that provide sacredness relatively automatically. I believe I can speak for most readers in saying that, particularly the penultimate section, “Insights from Monastic Reading,” became itself an actual *enactment of metanoia*, not just a phenomenological and historical description of it. So, before I respond with comments of my own, I’d like to resituate us in what I think is the climactic moment of the piece, and I encourage you all to imagine your relation to a particular personally deeply beloved text as we reread these words:

Spousal relation provides what I think is a unique analogy for transformative reading. The encounter with a text (or a person) is first motivated by *studio* — pursuit of an object of affection. As the reader spends more time with the Other, it becomes more familiar and occupies a greater space in her life. She begins to adopt its idioms, partly out of habit, partly from a growing fondness. She delves deeper into its viewpoint, respecting it as equal to her own. Her worldview evolves in conversation with the Other, and her will is changed as well. Her actions are made with its considerations in mind, her preferences and pattern of life are shaped by continual friendship, her *I* is no longer her own. But far from being immolated, she still approaches the Other with a sense of wonder, for it cannot be reduced to something to be analyzed, but holds an indefatigable mystery.

In *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change*, Jeff Wilhelm and I show that there is a *reflective, metanoiac* dimension to aesthetic experience that can be seen as the point of having such experience and that literally *converts* it into — not just the sweet, rich, but ultimately unnourishing dessert it is often seen as — but the main course and essential nourishment of our lives, establishing our “spousal relation” with life itself. John Dewey called art and other aesthetic experience “consummatory” rather than merely “instrumental”¹ — the very experience *for* which we live, our central reason for being, our ontological *telos* — the *metanoia* induced by the full aesthetic encounter being the deepest pleasure, the fullest awakens and presence to life itself that we can have.

So, then, why should we *need* an “arduous conversion” to this, as the essay claims in the end we do? Why can’t everyone, once even witnessing the possibility

for such deep, consuming experience, say simply, as the woman in the diner of the movie *When Harry Met Sally* did, after, in reverent awe, beholding Meg Ryan, at a nearby table, portray a full, prolonged, consummatory orgasmic ecstatic explosion: “I’ll have what *she’s* having”? Why should the inducement of *metanoia* be in *any way* marginal to democratic education, rather than *absolutely* central to it, through its enabling and consummating the “spousal relation” with Others that can and should be the consummation of the whole of democratic life, as government of, by, and above all, *for* people? And how might we actually, honest to God, in reality open up the democratic masses to the *metanoiac* transformation that can bring *us all* to live together in deep happiness, perpetual peace, and “indefatigable mystery,” rather than confining this experience, by and large, to monasteries and ivory towers, outside of which much of life is seen by those living within those sacred *metanoiac* preserves as nasty and brutish?

I actually think that there are real, honest to God, *philosophical* answers to these questions that bear the potential to induce the human world *in its entirety* to undergo collective *metanoia* — that the kingdom of democratic *metanoia* is already at hand if we can just read the right books in the right *metanoiac* way and teach *metanoiacally* accordingly. And that if we can *just do this*, most everyone *will* say, “I’ll have what *she’s* having!” And education will become a whole lot more humanly real, and fun!

Perhaps it is not accidental that the seminal thinker here eventually became a participant in the monastic tradition: the phenomenologist Edith Stein who, after the critical *metanoiac* experience of reading the autobiography of Saint Teresa, became a Carmelite nun and eventually, perhaps the first philosopher-*saint* since the Middle Ages, being canonized in 1987 by the phenomenologist-Pope John Paul II, who had studied with Stein’s dear friend Roman Ingarden. Stein’s understanding of empathy grounded in *flesh*, in the living body can provide the basis for an understanding of the democratic *soul* through which we can delink the *experience* of *metanoia* from presumptions that the main reason for having it is extrinsic: to undertake an “arduous journey” to unite with distant hard-to-see beyonds rather than to engage in fundamentally pleasurable “spousal relations” directly in the here and now that *also* point to transcendental mysteries. We can all learn to aesthetically “*make the flesh word*” by bringing our living bodies into empathic “spousal relations” with one another in ways that bracket our often hard-to-determine and conflicting notions of how a pre-existing divine Word or metaphysical Idea might have been made flesh. Bracketing these ideas as personally and culturally *ours* in regard to our dealings with Others, without denying or attempting to erase their power, enables us to center our moral lives on fleshly experience *itself* and on the progressive empathic feelings of spousal relatedness that can lead us all — in empathically, *metanoiacally analogous paths* — to *a posteriori* transcendental intuitions of ultimate moral oneness.

What Dewey called “*apriorism*”²² may have done much damage to the world and to our minds. As Martin Heidegger points out in “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth,” the Allegory of the Cave initiated the metaphysical tradition in philosophy that historically ended up drastically impoverishing human being-in-the-world and depriving us of much of the power of *metanoiac* transformation (though it was clearly *not* Plato’s

intent to do this).³ And the empiricism on which modern democracy was founded ended up only aggravating this, perpetuating mind/body dualism as a ghost in the imaginary machine it envisioned as the *whole* of life, and eventually effecting the globalization of a process I call “*Körperation*”: the control of inert bodies by active minds imagined as *dissociated* from them (*Körper* being German for the “inert body” that is op-posed to the “living body,” or *Leib*). Stein’s understanding of empathy, or *Einfühlung* — the sense of oneness that we have in analogously imagining the inner phenomenally embodied lives of others through outward signs, objective correlatives *sensuously grounding* the *metanoiac* experience of Otherness — is the largely unacknowledged germ of much later phenomenological thought, which together presents us with an understanding of a process that I have recently taken to calling “*Leiberation*” — the free erotic connection of the *soul-force of our living bodies* — that is the consummatory inducement for the organic regrounding of democracy, freeing it at long last to center on the soulful, erotic realization of human potential rather than merely on the collective, cooperative, *merely* instrumental domination of *Körperation* that can turn us into soulless zombies if we are not careful.

We experience erotically embodied *metanoiac* soul at four levels: the first two immanent, the second two transcendent *a posteriori*. The first is the sheer phenomenal givenness of our living bodies and of whatever appears to us through them and the soulful life-force they give us. The second is the artful constitution of this givenness in educative, soulfully meaningful “lived experiences,” embodied *in time* and spousally related to in time-bound acts of deliberate *intercourse*, which is the central task both of art and of artful, humane teaching to help provide. (And *Erlebnis* in German is in clear contrast to *Erkenntnis*, consumable knowledge versus the *metanoiac* experience of *life*, in which we are *ourselves* consumed and find new meaning.) The full power of orgasmic, cathartic, *metanoiac*, meaningfully empathically lived experiences, though, comes when they are seen as poetic microcosms and the aesthetically constitutive *metanoiac* components of larger, “*metapoetic*” *transcendental* wholes. The meaningful, soulfully embodied erotic “life story” (*Lebensgeschichte*), the taking of our personal *Selves* as Others in the whole of the worldly *life-time* allotted to us, *converts* the aesthetic given-nesses of life to *moral* givingness to it, and so potentially — in ways that we can sometimes partially but never wholly see — adds to the sum of life in the ongoing embodied story of the ensouled “living world” (*Lebenswelt*), contributing in both fathomable and unfathomable ways to the *growing good* of the world which *metanoiac* conversion brings us both to see and to become an active part of.

So, what is embodied *metanoia*? And what is its ultimate power in the world? It is a meaningfully, empathically lived, embodied experience of intercourse with life that suddenly, dramatically, revelatorily, and cathartically alters the meaning of the whole of our life story within the whole of the lifeworld to which it is correlated — that orgasmically shatters the prior containers of our experience and opens us up to larger and seemingly better views of life and ways to live it, reorienting us to newly seen, emergent good. Think back to the experience of reading. I asked you to recall to see both its immediate power and its power for good in your own

life, and thus in life as a whole. And then think: if enough teachers who have been transformed by such experiences can just provide enough such experiences — and a philosophical understanding of their ultimate meaning — to enough students, might it just be possible, or even likely, perhaps even in the near rather than distant future, for the better part of the human world to say *collectively*, “I’ll have what *she’s* having!” And so to recenter *the whole of the human lifeworld* in collective and ongoing empathic spousal relations of *metanoia*? And so to finally reveal, after 2500 years, the full *erotic* potential of democratic *political* life for the unveiling of the mysterious meanings *of life itself*? For revealing, over and over and over again, in multiple orgasmic responsiveness, the hidden connections of human souls within what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls the “Over-Soul” of the living, growing world?

I, for one, am hoping so! And hoping that the “full-soul orgasm” of *metanoia*, seen as the true, deep, *consummatory* “common core” of democratic education, will *very soon* induce the de-centering of the merely instrumental “Common Core” — that is in turn itself little more than the instrument of the blob-like, zombie-like process of disembodied and anonymous *Körperation*, which we can *easily*, joyfully and lovingly, encompass with the soulfully humanizing processes of embodied *Leiberation* if *we so choose*. “To *all* have what *she’s* having,” rather than making the relatively impotent collective choice of *metanoia interruptus*, in which this consummatory experience of the soul is by and large confined to the islands of monasteries and ivory towers of various kinds! And why in God’s name *wouldn’t* we come to collectively make this choice of *metanoia for all* rather than just for some, once we can be educatively brought to see it as a real *and vital* choice — literally the choice of *soul-life* over *soul-death* — that we, both personally and collectively, do have?

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 159.

2. John Dewey, “German Philosophy and Politics” (1915), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 201.

3. Martin Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth,” in *Pathmarks* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 155-182.