

Clichés of Infinite Jest

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Kevin Gary makes the following claims: Proverbs, being a species of the cliché, are inherently neither good nor bad. Good proverbs cannot be identified by their propositional content alone; one must look to the formative role they play in the wider living tradition and in the hearts of the participants of that tradition. The liberal triumvirate of Autonomy, Authenticity, and Critical Thought blinds us to the potential of certain proverbs to initiate students into a living tradition that gives meaning and coherence to self and one's relationships with others. Instead of dismissing all clichés as trite and empty, liberal educators should teach students to discern good clichés from clichés that are morally neutral or repugnant.

The claim that proverbs contain transformative force and not just propositional content is convincing to me. Proverbs resist empty and trite formalism when judgment is suspended and hearts are open. "It works if you work it," as members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) would say. Working it entails risk triggered by both an aspiration to be something better than what one is and the faith placed in proverbs to help one become so.

There is indeed something troubling about this process, especially if we, like Michel Foucault, think of thought as not "what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning," but as "freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem."¹ Proverbs, as the post-its of wisdom traditions, are often resistant to thought in this way, especially for believers. And this should worry liberal educators much like "discursive formations" used to worry Foucault.

But Gary suggests that it would be a serious mistake to dismiss proverbs so quickly. For one, proverbs serve as parts of a greater whole. Taken alone, a proverb is indeed "limply improbable clichéd drivel," to use a phrase of David Foster Wallace's.² But proverbs do not function in a vacuum; they are activated within a constellation of prior and subsequent motivations, models, values, relationships, and living traditions.

We don't just blindly grope for proverbs to follow, we choose them based on the models we wish to emulate and because we are ultimately dissatisfied with ourselves. Stoics utilize proverbs to emulate their sage Socrates while the AA residents of the Ennet House in Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* cling to them hoping to someday join the ranks of the crocodiles, the old, hard-core residents who exist on a higher spiritual plane of sobriety. Self-criticism, understanding what one can and cannot do, coupled with aspiration toward a model, trigger a proverb's actualization.

Part of the worry about proverbs is what goes on or fails to go in one's mind as proverbs are enacted. Julia Annas's description of virtuous activity sheds light

on this process. She contends that virtuous activity lacks occurrent critical thought and is self-effacing.³ Like all skilled activities, one loses oneself in the flow of what the situation demands. Think of the performance of a concert pianist before a large audience. Her rendering of the piece, while devoid of critical thought and autonomy while playing, is embedded in a wider temporal horizon of critical engagement, commitment, and innovation.

The pianist's autonomy and originality are hard won. Paradoxically, she only gains her voice, her critical discernment, and her innovative style on the back of endless repetition, memorization, exposure to various musical styles and conventions, and an early commitment, which must constantly be renewed, to identify herself and her projects within the practice of piano playing. Thus, she participates in a living tradition, which only survives through constant dialogical renewal that encourages, in fact demands, a measure of critical thought, autonomy, and originality.

Marcus Aurelius's Stoicism and the twelve-step program of the Ennet House underscore the protean character of proverbs actualized in such traditions. For Aurelius, these exhortations serve to reaffirm principles and align judgment with will. The rigorous demands of Stoicism — to rationally recognize and accept one's fate with joyful resignation — require discipline and constant critical attention. His exhortations do not diminish in effect with each utterance, but function as daily, renewed affirmations to remain virtuous in the face of an unfolding cosmic order. Even the sage must change — there is no room for a shoeless gadfly at the helm of the Roman Empire.

But if Stoicism provides a way to be free in the face of human adversity, addiction reminds us of our basic vulnerability. Proverbs play a much heftier role in the lives of the AA initiates. Instead of harmonizing will and judgment, proverbs (*in loco parentis*) replace the will of these addicts, making decisions as their judgment sits in suspension.

Wallace writes,

The bitch of the thing is you have to want to. If you don't want to do as you're told — I mean as it's suggested you do — it means that your own personal will is still in control, and Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still. The will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago. It's now shot through with the spidered fibrosis of your Disease. His own experience's term for the Disease is: The Spider. You have to Starve the Spider.⁴

Given the alternative, it is understandable why one would readily give up the right to freedom and autonomy. What Wallace calls the "Losses" of living with addiction cut you off from all meaningful relationships. Left alone with the Spider you have no basis for critical thought, autonomy, and originality except for it, through it, and with it. Proverbs promise, in such desperate situations, a reboot, a respite from thinking too much. They also serve as an initiation into the practice of being sober. Like other wisdom proverbs, the steps taken do not work in isolation but must be enacted with others, for example, mandatory meetings, Identifying rather than Comparing, "Giving it Away," and so on.

So what does this mean for liberal education? It is clear that Gary is less interested in disclosing the nature of proverbs than in exposing the chinks in the liberal self. Proverbs, it turns out, are ready reminders of our vulnerability. We are not fully self-sufficient and autonomous. Even a philosophy like Stoicism — with its unyielding insistence on the priority of reason and the freedom of the will — demands that we drink from the well of its wisdom tradition, cultivating fundamental dispositions with routine and ritual.

Taking some liberties with the text, one could also read in this the deeper suggestion that, in a sense, we all suffer from the spidery fibrosis of the human condition, authenticity's dark side. We not only possess a natural capacity for empathy and solidarity, but also a propensity for easy distraction, cheap thrills, aggression, self-absorption, hubris, and a fear of facing our finitude. Addiction, in this reading, is a metaphor for human frailty, our inescapable congenital dependence on something other than ourselves. That dependency can be self-destructive (as in feeding the insatiable Spider) or self-affirming.

Wisdom traditions, Gary suggests, hold out the promise for a self-affirming dependency that bolsters our better natures, leading us to meaningful lives with others based on reciprocity and mutual understanding. Because not all traditions are equal and even the best are flawed in some way, a liberal education should equip students with the tools to discern between commitments. Rather than dismiss all clichés as empty and trite, we must accurately appraise the promise of living traditions available to us; the living traditions in which, consciously or not, we all participate.

Not surprisingly, Wallace reaches a similar conclusion. In his commencement speech to Kenyon College, he challenges liberal smugness and its ironic stance toward the world. An atheist, he argues, is no different from the religious dogmatist. Both suffer from “[b]lind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up.” Freedom lies in something besides knowledge. The real education, he states, is “learning how to be well-adjusted,” deciding “what has meaning” and “what to worship.”⁵

Keep in mind that all forms of worship will eat you up. Worship money and you will be consumed with the fear of penury, intelligence and you will feel stupid, or the tenets of the liberal self and you will be less free. Wallace states,

Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the centre of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom.... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.⁶

But what is this choice really? It seems to me that the paradox that Gary speaks of — that one must lose oneself in a tradition in order to gain a self — poses significant problems for the liberal educator. Of course, Gary realizes this, but for the sake of argument, let me spell them out anyway.

It is not clear, for instance, how a liberal education can help us discern which proverbs and traditions deserve a leap of faith. I am sympathetic to the idea of giving each a charitable reading — a good liberal education does this already — but given its own commitments, I don't see what more one can possibly expect.

We are rarely in the position of the AA initiate — where the principles we live by are so thoroughly destructive and the alternative so clearly superior. Instead, we are thrown into environments, exposed to people and ideas, and fall not just in love, but into myriad relationships, practices, and commitments. A liberal education can help us appreciate the complexity of our thrown-ness, as I think Gary is trying to do, but it can't help us master it. (To believe otherwise is to fall victim to the very thinking against which Gary rightly warns us.)

It is true that the radical adherence to a liberal self and ironic comportment prevents one from meaningful, lasting commitments. But I remain unconvinced about the nature of the problem. While truisms of liberal thought that celebrate consumerism, social fragmentation, and self-absorption saturate our culture (see, for instance, the entire field of economics) liberal education is not the main culprit. These slogans may have a liberal sheen, but they are not the products of a liberal education; in fact, they call for one.

Liberal education is a living tradition, one that has enriched even those communities highly critical of its ideals. Because it is not static, it need not commit itself to any liberal doctrine or reach definitive conclusions about human nature. As I see it, liberal education today has a twofold task: The first is to unsettle the student — to encourage her to critically reflect on what she is, does and believes. Socratic Irony is one of many ways to help her do this. The second task is to introduce that same student to different ways of being, to open paradigms and pathways of thought and possibility that would have never occurred to her before. In short, it promises liberation from a natural environment through exposure to our varied cultural inheritance, warts and all.

But a liberal education shouldn't pick winners. It doesn't tell you that being a pianist is better than being an accordion player — even if the pay is better. We must be humble about what a liberal education can do. It is for that reason, among others, that we shouldn't abandon the call to be critical, autonomous (to an extent) and yes, on occasion, original. Living traditions will thank us later.

1. Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics and Problematizations (1984)," interview by Paul Rabinow, in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas S. Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 24.

2. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 352.

3. Julia Annas, "The Phenomenology of Virtue," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2008): 21–34.

4. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 357.

5. David Foster Wallace, "This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life," transcription of the 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address, May 21, 2005, <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf>.

6. *Ibid.*