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## HORATIO'S DREAM: MODERNITY AND THE DIMINISHED INTELLECT

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OME YEARS AGO, IN A SURMISE CASUAL AND CONVERSATIONAL, A PROFESSOR RE-marked that western philosophy began by thinking about things, moved on to think about thought, and in the last century had settled on thinking about language.<sup>1</sup> He went on to wonder whether a kind of circuit had been completed and philosophy could return to reflect on things once again. Aside from revealing his own proclivity for thinking about things, this philosopher's conjecture is notably broad and sweeping, an attempt at expressing an understanding as expansive as it is comprehensive. In itself, the statement hardly seems remarkable. Nevertheless, such generalizations often appear dangerously audacious in the present era of highly expert, academic specialization. Despite the tendency of introductory courses to rely on such broad statements, academics tend to eschew them. Hamlet might say that mere data, not conscience, has made cowards of us all.

This feature of academic culture itself owes something to the philosophical developments the professor mentioned. With the rise of technical expertise and specialization in western intellectual culture, changes in the very idea of what it means "to know" have extended far beyond speculative epistemology. The culture of knowledge-cultural habits and predispositions regarding thought and man's intellectual nature-has elevated some kinds of knowledge and devalued others. The knowledge of the expert, clearly, is elevated, while the knowledge of the "amateur" is devalued. Likewise, the knowledge of particulars is often highly regarded, while broad, comprehensive conceptions are frequently held suspect.

As a matter of intellectual history, these changes are a fascinating assemblage of losses and gains. The gains in specialization are obvious to all, but the losses have been real as well. For one thing, there seems to be an insistent propensity, now largely unnourished, in man's intellectual being toward a comprehensive understanding-what John Henry Newman called the "philosophic habit of mind." Furthermore, the very word "amateur" suggests a profound epistemological reality now largely disregarded: some kinds of knowledge are approached first and primarily through the affections, through love. "Ubi amor, ibi oculi" goes the old saw; where there is love, there are the eyes to see. Love is a necessary precondition to certain kinds of knowledge, those kinds requiring a surrender of the self to subjects compelling and noble.<sup>2</sup> This, indeed, is where breadth of comprehension and the love of the "amateur" intersect. The latter propels the former. While expertise seems driven by curiosity to ever narrower ranges and the boundaries of knowledge, admiration and love move the "amateur" toward breadth of understanding-even understanding of intellectual limits.<sup>3</sup> This is classically apparent in Socrates. Surrounded by professionals in the business of buying and selling intellectual skills, Socrates discovered that they actually understood very little precisely because they were not "philosophers," or "lovers of wisdom." He looked for an attachment to wisdom so great that it would readily for-

sake reputation or wealth in its service, and even admit when wisdom herself was elusive or partial. These things—repudiating fame and eschewing riches—are not simply noble or virtuous or heroic; they signal both the dedication necessary to pursue wisdom and a kind of piety or reverence with which wisdom must be approached. He well understood that some kinds of knowledge have to be wooed before they are won.

In our times, this seems rather dreamily romantic. To commend breadth in study sounds to the expert rather like an excuse for imprecision or incompleteness. To recommend an amateur's love as necessary for understanding the wide and varied domain of human experience sounds to the professional rather like the intrusion of dangerously emotional criteria in what should be an entirely rational, analytic process. Other than the rise of technical expertise in intellectual culture, whence comes this shift? In thought and in culture, as mentioned previously, what it means to know has itself changed. The history of philosophy aptly illustrates the particulars in epistemology. But the wider (and often literary) culture has seen a narrowing and shifting in the kinds of thinking and knowing considered valuable as well. While an exploration of the lineaments of some of these changes requires a dizzying array of “dangerous generalizations,” perhaps, as a labor of love, it can be undertaken after all.

In the second chapter of his treatise *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Josef Pieper describes with characteristic lucidity a simple yet profound notion of human understanding:

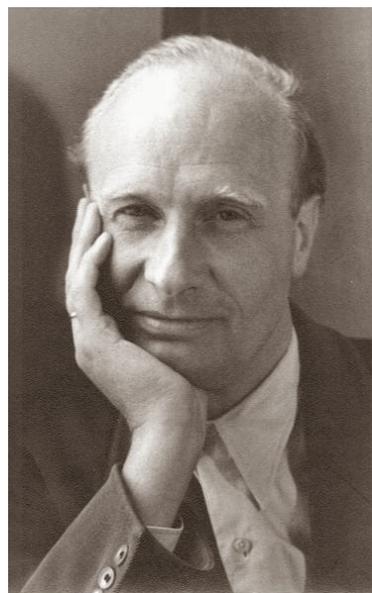
The Middle Ages drew a distinction between the understanding as ratio and the understanding as intellectus. Ratio is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions. Intellectus, on the other hand, is the name for the understanding in so far as it is the capacity of simplex intuitus, of that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye. The faculty of mind, man's knowledge, is both these things in one, according to antiquity and the Middle Ages, simultaneously ratio and intellectus; and the process of knowing is the action of the two together. The mode of discursive thought is accompanied and impregnated by an effortless awareness, the contemplative vision of the intellectus, which is not active but passive, or rather receptive, the activity of

the soul in which it conceives that which it sees.<sup>4</sup>

Important here is the idea that our knowledge is made possible by a kind of harmony between two different functions of the mind. One function is active, discursive or busy. The word “discursive” literally means “running around.” It probes and pushes, masters data, exercises itself vigorously in examinations, and writes treatises. *Ratio* dissects and analyses, as well as builds and synthesizes. Human knowledge in the mode of *ratio* is eminently familiar to us, as we see it in our own education, in Socrates' dialectic, or Newton's calculus.

But what of its twin, *intellectus*, or “non-discursive vision” (Pieper, 35)? This is harder to describe in that we are less familiar with this mode of knowledge, despite its ready analogy to the senses. Intellectus is receptive and still, rather than active and busy. It is figured forth in words like contemplation, reflection, and understanding. We nod in the direction of intellectus through words like “see” as applied to knowledge: “I see, I understand.” In an era of often sentimentalized pseudo-spirituality, phrases like “effortless awareness” can evoke images of mystical dilettantism or vulgar self-help psychology, but this is not at all what Pieper means to suggest. As he notes, *intellectus* is always present in and around *ratio*. They operate together. In the receptivity of *intellectus* is the means of rendering ratio fruitful, for no process alone possesses intelligible content. That is why Pieper says we examine through *ratio*, but, in a strong image, we conceive through intellectus.

In large part, human understanding as intellectus is less familiar to us precisely because our ideas of knowledge took a decided turn toward ratio—and away from intellectus—with the advent of early modernity. Scholars have exposed to view many of the complex facets related to this shift: the philosophical bracketing of metaphysics, the “spacializing” of the imagination, even the effect of printing in encouraging rationalistic dichotomies, where arbitrary divisions are endlessly propagated.<sup>5</sup>



Josef Pieper

But our own immediate world of education bears witness to the triumph of ratio. Students see it in the academic tendency to equate data or information with knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Faculty see it in students' assumption that there is a technique for everything, including original thinking.

The triumph, so to speak, of ratio over intellectus is historically complicated, as are its consequences; but in the tradition of great literature, the value and necessity of a receptive, contemplative way of knowing has a long history. Technically, of course, any kind of knowing requires a receptivity of mind to the thing known. But intellectus, or a kind of contemplation of the real, is highlighted in significant and even surprising ways in many important texts of the ancient and medieval world. For one thing, intellectus as understanding seems to operate more in some genres than in others. Probably the most discursive form of text is the dialectical treatise, while the most receptively contemplative is the lyric poem. Some lyric poems are so irreducibly intuitive or reflective, that they are difficult to talk about in a discursive way at all. In fact, virtually any kind of imaginative literature partakes of or highlights the intellectus manner of knowing more than does highly discursive or analytical writing. Stories or narratives are discursive in a sense, but as they abjure analysis and require vicarious participation in the tale, they too accentuate a knowledge that is more passively aware or reflective than is discursive knowledge.

Homer alludes to this in his famous references to Demodocus, the bard or storyteller-poet we see in the *Odyssey*. Surely Homer indulges in a bit of professional pride as he describes his fictional counterpart in the poem arriving at a feast:

The crier soon came, leading that man of song whom the Muse cherished; by her gift he knew the good of life, and evil for she who lent him sweetness made him blind.<sup>7</sup>

As we will see when we get to Sophocles, the connection here between blindness and knowledge that is intuitive and divine is not accidental. The aforementioned picture of the bard reveals as much about poetry as it does about the poet. There is knowledge here, even wisdom. But its form calls for a kind of awestruck, quiet attentiveness rather than the frenetic activity of ratio. Odysseus himself avers as much when a little later he makes a gift of meat to the bard and says, "All men owe honor to the poets-honor/and awe, for they are dearest to the Muse/who puts upon their lips the ways of life"(8. 497-

499). As Odysseus listens to this bard sing songs about the war and the heroes Odysseus knew so well, he weeps and wonders at his own experience. In a very real sense, Odysseus needs this bard's rendition of his own experience in order to understand it more fully. In the midst of his tumultuous adventures, Odysseus relies upon the ratio of his tactical skill and ingenuity. But fuller understanding requires a contemplation both triggered by and carried forth in a story or narrative. The Ithacan king calls such feasts and songs the "flower of life," which means something a bit more than just "a real good time." Understanding or wisdom is the flower of knowledge, and this requires just the kind of reflective occasion provided by the tale.



While the heroic poet sings and engages wisdom in the contemplative mode of intellectus, later Greeks were no stranger to this either. Socrates is famous for his method, his dialectic, his restless and relentless examination of assumptions, propositions, and arguments. This is ratio, par excellence. But many scholars have noted that this tireless dialectician is also the most poetic of philosophers. The ironies are delicious, for this is the philosopher who politely but firmly ejects poets from his ideal republic. Lovers of literature have never quite forgiven Socrates for this, and they look askance at him much as did many of his contemporaries. What, then, could it mean that he is "poetic"? In the first place, we recall just how much poetry there is in the Socratic dialogues. The philosopher is forever quoting a poet or dramatist to illustrate a point or raise a problem. But Socrates himself employs a poetic or a contemplative mode of instruction in the very midst of his philosophy. In numerous dialogues, Socrates will arrive at a critical juncture of some sort, whether it is an impasse in an argument, a taking up of a new subject, or even a concluding moment, and he will drop the dialectical inquiry and relate a myth or story, such as the myth of Er that ends the *Republic*, or the myth of Gyges' ring, or the story of the invention of writing. At other times, such as as the turning point in the *Phaedrus*, he will himself utter a lyric in praise of the divine love that grounds all philosophic wisdom. Readers often breeze past such moments in eagerness to get to the "real stuff" of the dialogue: another argument. But even a little study of these moments reveals that they are hardly theatrical intermissions. These myths and lyrics

actually embody the wisdom Socrates was discursively treating before. It is as if he moves from a consideration of a thing from the outside to a participation in it from the inside, and this meditative participation is effected through the poetic mode, the intellectus.

There are countless examples of this, but one instance remains most telling. The *Phaedo* is Plato's moving account of Socrates' death and the philosophic inquiry into the immortality of the soul. It, too, ends with a kind of myth—a myth of the afterlife—which Socrates proposes is not an exact representation of the afterlife, but that “something of the kind” is true.<sup>8</sup> Yet the beginning of the dialogue contains something truly startling. When Socrates' friends enter his cell in preparation for his death, the philosopher is writing poetry. This is so odd that his friends question him about this, wondering what he is trying to do or accomplish. Plato makes the point that Socrates is writing poetry in response to a divine command to make music. Here, then, is Socrates, writing poems on the day of his death, in scrupulous obedience to the gods. We recall that music, of course, is the domain of the Muses, those Homeric divinities associated with intuitive knowledge. This alone signifies much. Both Socrates and Plato are too thoughtful for this final activity of Socrates to be either an accident or merely incidental. Just before his death, Socrates engages in both the active inquiry of *ratio*, and the more passive contemplation of *intellectus*, of song or poetry. These activities intermingle, too, as Socrates affirms their essential union. He had always thought, he tells his friends, that he was obeying the command to make music, for philosophy “is the noblest and best of music” (Plato, 444).

Illustrative as this event is, it merits further study. We even have the kind of music specified. Socrates is engaged in both narrative and lyric. He is versifying Aesop's fables as well as writing a hymn in praise of Apollo. This is significant because the fables are the very essence of narrative—no embellishments, no literary luxuries—but pure story. Moreover, the lyric in honor of Apollo is even less discursive than a fable would be. As a lyric, it contemplates and honors its subject. There is little by way of discursive reasoning or a discursive method involved. What is more, Apollo is a divinity associated with reason and with artistic harmony. In choosing Apollo, Socrates honors the god of the festival, but he is also highlighting what looks like a paradox—the union, again, of knowledge through reasoning and intuitive assimilation, *ratio* and *intellectus*. While Apollo represents the order of reason, his

association with the artfully sublime suggests that mere cool rationality is not the whole of his domain. Part of his wisdom consists in a sublime passion and intensity, responsive to beauty, in which we can recognize profound truths with an intuitive receptivity. As his association with oracles and prophecy suggests, Apollo represents both the light of discursive thinking, and the receptivity of impassioned seeing. The two are at one, not at war. This is all the more significant in light of the fact that following the modern exaltation of ratio, someone like Nietzsche will feel it necessary to supplement a seemingly cool, rational Apollo with a distorted form of the intuitive: Dionysius and his passionate intensity.

A final word about the Greeks. It would be wrong utterly to equate *intellectus* and religious piety, but Sophocles echoes in the blind Tiresias something we saw in Homer: the use of blindness to suggest a different kind of inspired seeing. In Sophocles, we observe this kind of seeing contrasted with a more purely discursive reason. *Oedipus* is far too complex a drama to reduce to one or two themes, but one of the most powerful themes at work in the play is piety, and its enemy, a dangerous self-reliance. When angered by the blind Tiresias, Oedipus rashly strikes out at the prophet's very function, proudly recalling the Sphinx episode in which the efficiency and practicality of his own rational labors contrast with the ineffectual inspirations of the prophet:

Where were you?  
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,  
you and your birds, your gods—nothing. No, but I  
came by, Oedipus the ignorant,  
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the  
birds, the flight  
of my own intelligence hit the mark.<sup>9</sup>

The riddle of the Sphinx tests, if you will, the problem-solving capacity of Oedipus. This same problem-solving capacity, however, becomes a virtual liability when Oedipus relies on it alone. He rashly outlines a strategy for addressing the Theban crisis, and lamentable consequences follow. But they follow in good measure because Oedipus lacks that ultimate Delphic virtue: self-knowledge—a kind of knowledge that is less discursive, and more reflective. Oedipus knows a great deal, but understands very little. In large part, his *anagnorisis*, or recognition, is not just the data of his origins falling into place. It is the sudden understanding of himself—his parents, yes, but also his folly, presumption, and impiety, and his unseverable link to matters beyond his manipulation.

Oedipus comes to understand much indeed. In fact, he too becomes blind, suggesting his new susceptibility to a more passive or receptive understanding, and in *Oedipus at Colonus*, we see him take on the role of prophet and seer himself.

Many great, classical texts are leavened by scenes, moments and themes that suggest the need to unify both active probing intellect and quiet, perceptive receptivity. One finds, for instance, the famous scene in Virgil's *Aeneid* where Aeneas and his companions look with wonder at the paintings of the Trojan war in the Carthaginian temple of Juno. There, Aeneas both makes an inference and exhibits his subtle understanding. He points to these scenes, and tells his colleagues they will have nothing to fear, here.

Even so far away,  
Great valor has its due  
    honor; they weep here  
For how the world goes,  
    and our life that passes  
Touches their hearts.<sup>10</sup>

The painting communicates a world of tragic sensibility to those who have eyes to see. It shows that the Carthaginians know “how the world goes”—one is reminded of Homer’s bard and seeing “the ways of life.”

“Dreamy poets” and philosophers are not alone in suggesting a kind of dual operation of intelligence at work in our deepest understandings. Rhetorical and studious as he is, Cicero responds to his daughter’s death by retreating from Rome and undertaking a rigorous course of study and writing on philosophical subjects. The idea is not simply to numb his grief through various labors. Cicero believes that the course of study is as contemplative and receptive an act as it is discursively intellectual, for it will effect a kind of restoration or re-ordering of his soul. In his “Letter to Atticus,” he positively boasts of his restoration and the power of intellectual cultivation to elevate the mind:

[Critics] would have to allow that I have so far recovered as to bring an untrammelled mind to the writing on these difficult subjects or else that I have chosen the most elevated means of distraction from my sorrow and the most fitting for a man of culture.<sup>11</sup>

These examples drawn from the pre-Christian

classical world illustrate in part how natural the duality of ratio and intellectus is in philosophy and literature. It goes without saying that Christian thinkers and authors carried this forward with little difficulty. The idea of a quiet or contemplative intellectual seeing is pervasive and inescapable in Scripture. Hebrew prophetic traditions highlight the inscrutability, mystery and radiance of God, and these certainly do not disappear in the New Testament. Wisdom literature, too, exemplifies the stunning combination of understanding and mystery. The Book of Job presents readers with a man desperate for reasons and logical explanations in coming to understand his condition, but these prove inadequate. His comforters provide impeccable logic, yet even Job’s thoroughly puzzled understanding knows well enough that their explanations are simply wrong. When God speaks, by contrast, Job is contented; yet the arguments and explanations put forward by God are so elusive as really not to be arguments at all. God’s repeated questions build up so deep a sense of inscrutable mystery that one might think understanding would be forever frustrated. And so it is, if by understanding we mean a thoroughgoing discursive analytical explanation. But Job is satisfied, and even repents of asking for a mode of knowledge that he now knows is of terribly little value when faced with certain realities. In those cases, the burden falls on this other, more poetic mode of understanding.

Other scriptural examples abound, as do historical ones. In both Testaments, aphoristic, proverbial expressions and parables emphasize a wisdom rooted in matters habitual and experiential, more often than in abstract thinking. Reading the rules, sayings, and legends of the early hermits and monks provides a vivid picture of men and women seeking understanding through highly contemplative means such as rumination on individual words or phrases in the Bible. The emphasis on the passive receipt of wisdom is so great that there are dangers of treating matters religious as actually antagonistic or in opposition to overtly discursive forms of knowledge. Though many a theologian warns against any rejection of the rational intellect, these same writers affirm that, as St. Ambrose famously remarked, “God does not deign to save His people by means of dialectics ...”<sup>12</sup>



“God does not deign  
to save His people by  
means of dialectics ...”  
-St. Ambrose



St. Augustine speaks of understanding “in the heart” so often in the *Confessions*, that readers are sometimes tempted to see mere subjectivity or sentiment, forgetting that he speaks here of genuine intellectual understanding. A telling instance of this (and one could find many) occurs even before his conversion. In chapter ten of book seven, Augustine considers a fundamental philosophical question regarding the existence and intelligibility of any kind of truth. “I asked myself, is truth then nothing at all, simply because it has no extension in space, with or without limits? And far off, I heard your voice saying, ‘I am the God who IS.’ I heard your voice, as we hear voices that speak to our hearts, and at once I had no cause to doubt.” Then in a comment that, knowingly or unknowingly, Descartes will turn on its head, Augustine says “I might more easily have doubted that I was alive than that Truth had being. For we catch sight of the Truth, as he is known through his creation.”<sup>13</sup> Here, Augustine subtly aligns metaphysics, epistemology, and the ways we relate to our own knowledge. He posits a kind of understanding rooted in that passive intellectual “seeing” that here points to two sources: inspiration and concrete experience of the world. Both sources require a preeminent operation of *intellectus*. Of course, the most famous example of this non-discursive mode of understanding in Augustine is the moment when, briefly, he and his mother experience the eternal Wisdom Himself, as they stand conversing and looking out the window at Ostia, shortly before his mother’s death. This moment of ecstasy is deservedly famous, for it bespeaks the beatific vision which itself is a non-discursive embrace of Wisdom and Truth.

It is not necessary to multiply endlessly the appearance of, or presumption on, *intellectus* in the writings of Christian authors. The intellectual function is, while not identical to faith itself, so conformable to faith, that it streaks across Christian thought like a meteor in the night sky. But it would be a crime not to mention, at least in passing, that quintessential medieval author in whom the relationship of *ratio* and *intellectus* finds a perfect expression. This, of course, is Dante. The beatific vision in the *Divine Comedy* is a transcendent moment of illumination that is rational, yet intensely passionate and passive as well. The earlier journey of the poet through various stages of punishment and purgation is literally a discursive process—not only does he run hither and yon, but we recall how often there are mini-lectures and treatises in the *Comedy*. Yet this process ends in the suspension of all such reasoning and activity in the face of an equally

intellectual yet nondiscursive vision of Truth. The response to this sight is wonder, awe, and lyrical praise, not philosophizing or analysis. One is reminded of the lyrical praise with which Socrates ends his life, as does St. Thomas Aquinas, who forgoes philosophy for poetry when he approaches death.

As mentioned earlier, the Renaissance shift toward *ratio*, to the detriment of *intellectus*, reverberates throughout subsequent thought and culture in complex ways. It has elements in philosophical speculation, in the growth of new orders of learning, and even in some technological developments. There are trends that appear to run in the opposite direction as well. The highly rationalistic (or what is usually taken to be rationalistic) scholastic “method” appears to be *ratio* gone mad over against the Renaissance emphasis on simplified rhetorical, moral, and concrete thought. Most Renaissance thinkers proudly reject speculation and abstraction. But in the main, human intelligence is seen as increasingly, and even exclusively, discursive in operation. The prodigious energies of the Renaissance have given us some of the greatest literature and art of all time; yet these energies in good measure are the result of a curious combination of anxiety and intellectual urgency. Cut loose from the stabilizing moorings of receptive understanding or *intellectus*, *ratio* becomes radically energetic, and even frantic. It sees itself as having sole authority in the intellect, but its inability to provide a comprehensive mode of knowledge prompts it to ever more strenuous discursive efforts doomed to be ever more frustrating. Or, to put it another way, as people lean more heavily on *ratio*, its inherent inability to create human understanding that is full and satisfying leads to even more active, discursive efforts to find such an understanding. Like a patient who craves the very thing he cannot assimilate, *ratio* busily seeks that which it cannot achieve, resulting in a coupling of anxiety and excitement. We find this manifested in the dizzying multiplication of elaborate systems and systematizing of various Renaissance disciplines. For all his contempt for medieval scholastics, Peter Ramus, with his charts and diagrams, makes Aquinas look like an Aesop of philosophical narrative by comparison. In rhetoric, philosophy, law, and even textual studies, a nervous desire to achieve final solutions or perfect understandings results in the paradoxical drive toward both reductionism and elaborate, water-tight methodologies.

This heightened emphasis on discursive rationality only begins with the Renaissance, and does not come

fully into bloom until the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, one can see evidence of this “*ratio* preeminence” in the kinds of texts now recognized as great books from these periods. Increasingly, the seminal works tend to be discursive treatises, tracts, or philosophical systems. There is less of the odd (to us) blending of modes of discourse, such as in Plato, Boethius, Dante, and even Chaucer, where lyrical moments of comparatively passive awe and understanding appear side by side with probing inquiry. Knowledge is increasingly methodically distilled into active processes and even physiological acts. It is no accident that the birth of the essay dates from this period, for the essay is a kind of discourse of *intellectus*, disguised as analytical, discursive reasoning. In fact, the comparative marginalizing of *intellectus* as a necessary mode of knowledge has fascinating consequences. Chased out of “pure rationality,” it returns with a vengeance in imaginative literature. In almost comical fashion, *intellectus* is suppressed here, only to rise up elsewhere.



Descartes is normally and rightly hailed as the hinge on which a revolution turned. Scholars have exposed the ways in which others prepared the way for the revolution, but Descartes provides the archetype for the new triumph of *ratio*. Famous for his “doubt,” that is, his epistemological default setting of doubting everything that can be doubted, Descartes embodies the very opposite of receptivity. Doubt, as it were, declines to receive things. He begins his study of human knowledge by doubting what he knows, and trying to locate an intellectually indubitable bedrock position. He finds it in his famous *cogito, ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am. The nature and consequences of this as intellectual bedrock are well known. He begins with *ratio*, rather than with being, and from *ratio* he infers the possibility of his own existence. Had he said *scio, ergo sum*, I know, therefore I am, he would still have supplanted being as the starting point of philosophy, but at least he would not have located that starting point with a mere process. We think in order to know, but since knowledge is now axiomatically called into doubt, all we have left are such processes.

Descartes significantly departs from Augustine in beginning with the act of thought itself as an affirmation of existence. But as is well known, the equally revolu-

tionary element of Descartes’ thinking is his elevation of methodology—a procedure-oriented model of what it means to know. This is the very triumph of *ratio* as the chief mode of knowledge. Truth is something busily hunted down by a rigorous procedure, and then actively appropriated by the knower. Descartes applies a fundamentally geometrical model of thought to the very end of thought itself—knowledge and by so doing is a prime mover in the historical reduction of wisdom and understanding to methodologically produced information or data. Truth has become methodological conquest, and wisdom a calculus.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, the history of thought succeeding Descartes can be told as a story, a narrative of the consequences of the triumph of *ratio* over *intellectus*. The empiricism of Locke or Hume, the intertwining rationalisms and idealisms in Kant, Hegel, Spinoza, or Leibniz, act and react upon each other and their philosophical traditions, but with the general tendency to perpetuate a methodologically determinate idea of what it means to know something. In many departments of inquiry and thought, a virtually mechanical appearance of knowing was created, especially in those schools of thought (empiricism) where knowledge becomes conceptually entangled with purely physiological activity.

At this point, a certain caution is in order. Certainly, philosophers commit no crime in being systematic. Discursive intellect is in no way illegitimate or disposable. But we are looking here at a matter of proportion and a kind of historical usurpation of a complementary and essential mode of knowledge. Yet if *intellectus* or receptive understanding really is essential, how can it be said to be usurped? What is usurped is its place in the intellectual imagination, not in its actual operation. As noted, even *ratio* must settle down into *intellectus* before it can be said to lead to knowledge at all. The usurpation, however, has real consequences. Banish *intellectus* from our habits of thought, and odd, compensatory disproportions and “reappearances” begin to occur.

Side by side with the systematic discourse of post-Renaissance thinking in fields such as science and philosophy, one finds curious and compensatory impulses toward *intellectus*, or at least intuitive and receptive ways of knowing, in other cultural developments. It is especially prominent in imaginative literature, as one might expect, as such literature has always been the discourse of intuitive understanding. The lyric poem, again, is

probably the closest thing discourse can manage to pure *intellectus*. But compensations are evident throughout the developing West. The cultural vogue of sentiment and sentimentality, of judging character by how ready it is to shed tears, provides one example of a distorted form of *intellectus*. The cult of the sublime in art, the fascination with “views” and “perspectives” in landscapes real and painted, is another. One recalls how Jane Austen’s Elizabeth (in *Pride and Prejudice*), ordinarily quite analytical, succumbs first to the breathtaking loveliness of Pemberly estate, then to the charms and generosity of its owner, Darcy.<sup>15</sup> By their tasteful gardening, you shall know them.

This is an example of how the *intellectus*, once banished, must be compensated for, and literature is a welcome vehicle for its readmission. But compensations also occur within traditionally discursive fields of inquiry, and three varieties of attempted compensation suggest themselves at once. The first is the exaltation of imagination and passion. Most cultural developments are too complicated to be reduced to a small set of causes, yet the Romantic drive toward inchoate, unformulable awareness is certainly a response in part to the tyranny of *ratio*. Rousseau, for instance, beats his breast in wonder at the astonishing power of his passions, and their intractability in the face of his comparatively sluggish judgment. But as his confessional mode demonstrates, passionate excess has become for him a way of achieving self-knowledge. The passions allow him to come into himself, to experience “the feelings of my heart” and thus achieve an awareness and singularity unavailable to the torpid masses.<sup>16</sup> Like passion, imagination takes on the heady role of intuitive prince for many Romantics, conferring upon them an assimilative and transforming power that eventually takes on even political significance and purpose.

Intensity and “excess” lie at the heart of Romanticism, but other philosophers also treat unformulable urges and passions as woefully lost in a systematic world. Nietzsche declares “I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system, is a lack of integrity.”<sup>17</sup> The language of passionate intensity is everywhere in Nietzsche, frequently exalting feelings of indomitable power and highly romanticized ideas of creative autonomy. As mentioned before, his understanding of the Greek Apollo found the supposed cool rationality of the god inadequate and supplemented it with the rapturous excess of Dionysian impulse. These too are complex features of

the philosopher’s thought. Undergirding them is a profound disgust with “rationalism” anticipated by Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, who sympathetically speculates “[W]hy don’t we topple all this sensibleness with one stroke ... for the sole purpose of sending all these logarithms to the devil and living once again according to our own stupid will!”<sup>18</sup>

A second-if less violent-variety of compensation for the loss of *intellectus* is seen in the transformation of certain rhetorical/poetic tropes into full-scale, architectonic devices. Most obvious are paradox and the strategy of indirection. In the works of Kierkegaard the startling effect of paradox is employed as a theological lever with which Kierkegaard will move the world. Hoisting the central Christian paradoxes of redemption through failure, and God becoming man, Kierkegaard constructs notions of knowing that achieve insight through absurdity: “[Abraham] had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago.”<sup>19</sup> His appeal to the absurd is no mere rhetorical hyperbole. Faith itself apprehends the absurd-perhaps derives energy from it-in ways that obviate the cold calculus of pragmatic self-interest or the standards of reasonable probability. Any attempt to buttress faith with reason positively harms belief:

With the aid of approximation, the absurd becomes something else; it becomes probable, it becomes more probable, it may become to a high degree and exceedingly probable ... but, lo and behold, now it has indeed become impossible to believe it ... for the absurd is precisely the object of faith and only that can be believed.<sup>20</sup>

Indirection, either as an author hiding behind pseudonyms, or as another means of sidling up to truth (approximating, not appropriating), is likewise important to Kierkegaard, as it combines rhetorical effectiveness with an epistemological honesty that is true to our need for realities elusive and mysterious. Thus, Kierkegaard’s rambling digressiveness is paradoxically deliberate and meaningful. Truth is told (as Emily Dickinson says) “slant,” and the philosopher philosophizes in surprisingly “literary” ways, inventing fictive authors and approaching things via circumvention. Such indirection, of course, becomes an almost obsessively recurrent literary device in the twentieth century, to the confusion of countless students, and the delight of innumerable critics.

The third and final compensation for the decline in *intellectus* is seen in a fully literary use of narrative by phil-

osophers. This is the most readily apparent compensation, for it was famously embraced by Camus and Sarte, among others, as modernity's particular mechanism for achieving understanding. Philosophers turned toward tales (and the other arts, as well) in a manner that might have gratified the Romantics for its nod in the direction of preconceptual understanding embedded in experience. There was also, frankly, a matter of reaching a wider public. Walker Percy recounts how his first and award-winning novel, *The Moviegoer*, was written in a deliberate attempt to embody the thought of his earlier (and less read) philosophical treatises."

These strategies of compensation—the turn toward narrative for wisdom, the immersion in paradox and indirection, and the elevation of passion and imagination as extra-cognitive means of understanding—can be seen rocketing around later modernity with an intensity bespeaking urgency. Even the postmodern jettisoning of discursive rationality and creaky enlightenment models of knowledge has drawn heavily upon paradox and indirection. In this case, paradox and indirection become both weapon and new architectonic order, if order is the word. These strategies, sometimes deliberate, usually not, show up over and over again in ways qualitatively distinct from their historically venerable ancestors in literature and philosophy. Whether or not they actually compensate for the persistent reign of *ratio* over our intellectual imaginations is to be doubted. A consolation prize rarely consoles. Moreover, the postmodern turn to them has doubled the paradox, systematizing the unformulable, methodizing the chaotic. We still seem stuck in a world—now not of distinctions, say, between *ratio* and *intellectus*, but-of differences. Unintegrated ideas and modes of knowledge float about, often in the same head, rarely even bumping into each other.

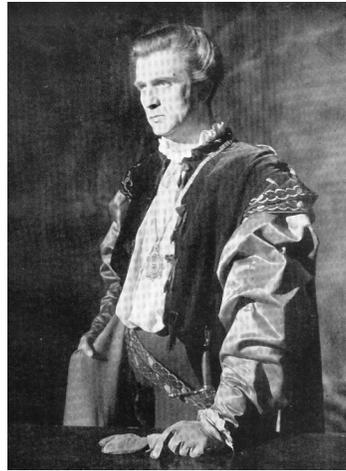
One of the undercurrents in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the tension between the new learning and the old su-

perstitions. One is reminded of Sophocles. Hamlet and Horatio, both up-to-date students in the newly skeptical Renaissance world, are awakened from their rationalistic slumber by what most see only in dreams: a ghost. For many reasons, Hamlet seems rather to relish this awakening, but in a state of wonder and amazement, he signals to Horatio the inadequacy of their schooling: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (2.1.164-165). Again, it would be simply wrong to equate superstition, or even genuine religious faith, with *intellectus*; but an affinity does exist. Revelation, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, has to be revealed. It cannot be summoned. This comparative passivity parallels our natural intellectual passivity in and through which we contemplate with steady, receptive gaze the given world and its intelligibility. As Socrates and

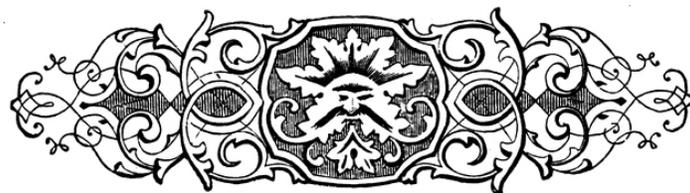
Aquinas knew, the world is to be studied and explored, analyzed and probed. But it is also to be contemplated. The voice of this quiet knowing is heard in many forms of discourse, but it is figured forth most nearly in song, notably in lyrics that praise and wonder at the bounty we call "being."

Horatio's dream has absorbed modernity for some time now, but awakenings are always possible. If philosophers have sung in the past, they can sing again. In studying the intellectual traditions of the West, we attend to this sing-

ing, whether in philosophy or in literature, and by so doing we can attain, in our own fashion, some of that restful contemplation of the *intellectus*. Horatio's final prayer that "flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (5.2.360) is therefore a fitting summation, however surprising, of an important means as well as end, of knowledge itself.



Norman Woodland as  
Horatio, 1948



## NOTES

1A version of this essay was delivered to the Great Books Program at Pepperdine University in February of 2000.

2 Oddly enough, love of a subject often prompts one to pursue its study to the point of expertise. In many instances, the love undergoes a kind of transformation by which it is attached, in large part, to one's facility in manipulating a discipline, rather than the matter of learning itself. While not unavoidable, this does seem to be a professional hazard.

3For a good account of curiosity as a dubious "virtue," see Dennis Quinn, *Iris Exiled: A Synoptic History of Wonder* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002), 25-27; 217-222.

4Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), 33-34. All future references will be cited parenthetically in the text according to author and page number.

5 See especially Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), Chapters 1 and 2; Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 50; Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958) 199-202.

6See Mary Midgley, *What is Knowledge For? Wisdom, Information, and Wonder* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

7Homer, *The Odyssey*, 8.66-70, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992).

8Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. B. Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1937), 498. All future references will be cited parenthetically in the text according to author and page number.

9Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 11. 448-453, trans. Robert Fagles, in *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, 2 vols, ed. Lawall et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).

10 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Bk. 1.55-58, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1983).

11Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 279:1 [XII.38a], 339.

12Quoted in W.A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 2 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 152.

13 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.10, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), 147.

14 See especially Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1938), Part 2.

15 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), 268.

16Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. anon., ed. P. N. Furbank (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 1.

17Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1968), 25.

18 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Serge Shishkoff, ed. Robert G. Durgy (New York: Crowell, 1969), 24.

19 Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*, trans. and ed.. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 6 of Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 36.

20Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 12.1 of Kierkegaard s Writings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 211.

21Walker Percy, "An Interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy," *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 382.