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Writing on and of Worthwhileness

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” If what the unexamined life lacks is *philosophy*, then, according to this argument, if we want to avoid living *unworthwhile* lives, we ought to philosophize. However, it does not necessarily follow from this that the examined life *is* worth living. So, if we want to live worthwhile lives, philosophy appears to leave us empty-handed.

If we grant Socrates’ above argument, and assume that philosophy can in fact remedy the lack of worthwhileness in our lives, we have only accounted for one half of worth, the negative half. And, the way in which we have accounted for it is by relying upon a system of examination that is somehow supposed to remedy the lack of worth it discovers. That is, philosophy is a form of examination that is a form of articulation, of speech, which, by being spoken, enables us to bring to light instances of *unworthwhileness* in an attempt to discover their source.

But, is there another kind of speech that gives us the ability to articulate the *presence* of worthwhileness in our lives, to discover *its* source? Answering this question is understanding why “we value the poet. [For,] all the argument and all the wisdom is not in the encyclopaedia, or the treatise on metaphysics, or the Body of Divinity, but in the sonnet or the play.”¹ *If* worthwhileness lies “not in the encyclopedia...but in the sonnet or the play”, then immediately we realize that while one moment of the play, or one line of the sonnet, communicates worthwhileness to one person, it may communicate none at all to the next. This problem of

¹ From “Circles”, in *Essays: First Series*. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “All the argument and all the wisdom”, here can be seen as encompassing the *full* expression of worthwhileness, its absence and its presence. However, I will avoid *defining* worthwhileness, since the goal of this paper is not to challenge or propose what worthwhileness is, but rather *how it can be talked about*.

finding a common definition is normally resolved by turning to the dictionary, or encyclopedia, and finding the printed definition for the given word. However, Emerson writes that “*all* the argument and *all* the wisdom is not in the encyclopedia”, and it appears that the argument and wisdom surrounding worthwhileness falls into the unaccounted-for margin. If this is why we value poetry--because it accounts for what is unaccounted--then perhaps by turning to a poet we will receive a more satisfactory answer as to the meaning of worthwhileness: “I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes / We convince by our presence.”² This almost seems worse than before. What should we make of the fact that the philosopher, Emerson, refers us to the poet on matters of worthwhileness, but then the poet, Whitman, tells us not only that it can’t be found *in* the words of his poem, but he further counsels us to “Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten, and the book on the shelf / unopen’d!”³ Is any attempt to fully articulate worth hopeless? If so, why has Whitman himself written these very words? What are we to make of them? Are they meant to shoo us away from the world of words altogether, to push us toward that ineffable source of worthwhileness which can only convince by its presence, a presence lying always just off the page? Or, does he want us to recognize that the page is one of a million places where worth can be found, and that instead of *depending* upon words to hear the voice of worth, we should be listening to worth’s voice as it is spoken *through* the words--just as it can be spoken through any thing? This brings us back to the connection between worth and examination.

In defining philosophy, we equated examination with articulation, but did not specify that articulation is a sufficient condition for examination and not a necessary one. That is, examination, the process of philosophy, can be done without any words at all through silent

² From “Song of the Open Road”, section 10. Whitman, Walt.

³ Ibid, section 15.

introspection, meditation. Thus, we arrive at a new formulation of Socrates' argument in the form of a pressing question: if the examined life is worth living, is it worth *writing* about? Is silence preferable to sound--can sound ever measure up with silence? In regards to the silence of worth's lack, Whitman tells us to "Behold [it] through you as bad as the rest, / Through the laughter, dancing, dining, supping... / Behold a secret silent loathing and despair"⁴. So, even though we don't *need* words to have worthwhileness, do we need them to avoid its lack? For, the silent man, with "No husband, no wife, no friend, trusted to hear the confession" of this "secret silent loathing and despair," will begin to feel they inhabit "Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding it goes, / Formless and wordless... / Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of [them]self, / Speaking of any thing else but never of [them]self."⁵

What is the despair in the silent man's heart he can confess to no one? It is the feeling that what needs to be said will never get said; whereas hope, on the other hand, is the feeling that it will. How are we to reconcile the despair of the man oppressed by the silence of worth's lack and the hope of the poet liberated by his ability to speak of worth's presence? For both men, there is a task that must be done, the former fails for lack of language and the latter succeeds through possession of it. Of course, this is not always the case, there are people content in silence and uncontent in speech; however, if the task at hand concerns the inhabiting of our very self, *our* being, then the only way to avoid fleeing to "another self, a duplicate of every one" is to realize that "it is through nature that nature is to be overcome. It is through words that words are to be overcome. (Silence may only be the tying of the tongue, not relinquishing words, but gagging on them. True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go.)"⁶. If this is the case, how

⁴ Ibid, section 13.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Senses of Walden*, p. 44. Cavell, Stanley.

are we to distinguish between moments when our words overcome us, our nature overcomes us, and moments when our words overcome themselves, and *we* overcome our nature?

When we are overcome by our nature we feel a lack of worth. To remedy this lack are we to use our words to overcome themselves, and in some analogic way, overcome our nature? This would represent the kind of articulated examination philosophy offers us to remedy worth's lack; so, if this is possible, the overcoming of our nature through the overcoming of our words, then philosophy is worthwhile. However, while the process of philosophizing does “let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance,⁷ that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui*...”⁸, once we have reached this “*point d'appui*”, this blank slate, this place of neutral health and infinite readiness, what are we to do then? When there is nothing left to overcome, when there is no longer a lack of worth to be remedied in our lives, when we have proved Socrates' hypothesis correct, what are we to do?

When the score is even with life, it seems like we ought to take up “onward thinking, on the way, knowing how to go on, [but these] are of course inflections or images of the religious idea of The Way, inflections which specifically deny that there is a place at which our ways end. Were philosophy to concede such a place, one knowable in advance of its setting out, philosophy would cede its own autonomy.”⁹ The philosopher does not cede autonomy because their

⁷ This process of “work[ing] and wedge[ing] our feet downward” is essentially the relentlessness of the Socratic method, the destruction of all “opinion, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance” from which worth's lack arises.

⁸ Excerpt from *Walden* (II, 22) in *The Senses of Walden*, p. 71.

⁹ *The Senses of Walden*, p. 136.

language does not allow it. The language of philosophy operates according to the Law of Non-Contradiction--simultaneously philosophy's greatest strength and its greatest limitation--which holds that for two statements, 'P' and 'not P', only one can ever be true. As we saw before, the language of poetry is riddled with instances wherein this rule is broken, and this distinction fails, because the very things the poet articulates are those which the philosopher cannot speak of.¹⁰ Thus, the wisdom of the poet is not the same as the wisdom of the philosopher, which really ought to be called knowledge. This

“Wisdom is not finally tested in schools, / [This] Wisdom cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it, /... Something there is in the float of the sight of things that provokes it / out of the soul. / Now I re-examine philosophies and religions, / They may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under / the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing / currents.”¹¹

Clearly, the poet pities the philosopher, but the philosopher envies the poet:

“Even if an ordinary language philosopher could convince a differently inspired philosopher, or an ordinary human being, that it is not quite right to say that we *believe* the world exists..., and wrong even to say we *know* it exists..., he or she would have a hard time saying what it is right to say here, what truly expresses our convictions in the matter...What still wants expression is a sense that my relation to the existence of the world, or to my existence in the world, is not given in words but in silence. (This would not be a matter of keeping your mouth shut

¹⁰ At the end of Wittgenstein's (in)famous--one or the other depending on who you ask--*Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, he writes, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent”. This conclusion, following from the original premise that “the world is all that is the case”, was meant to represent the end of philosophy. Of course, Wittgenstein later wrote *The Philosophical Investigations* wherein he construed the worthwhileness of philosophy as not lying in its truth, but rather in its use. In doing so, he discovered how philosophy can be worthwhile, when it speaks of what poetry cannot speak of, when it evens the score.

¹¹ From “Song of the Open Road”, section 6.

but of understanding when, and how, not to yield to the temptation to say what you do not or cannot exactly mean.)”¹²

Is “understanding when, and how, not to yield to the temptation to say what you do not or cannot exactly mean” a privilege reserved for the poet? After all, even the most skeptical philosopher has enough faith, enough inexactitude, to “yield to the temptation” of labelling himself a skeptic. For a skeptic to be a *speaking* philosopher, their infinite regress of never “say[ing] what [they] do not or cannot exactly mean” must end here. But if the true skeptic can never say anything, if they want to remain a *silent* philosopher, then their whole life will be lived at Thoreau’s *point d’appui*, always *ready* to do but never able to. Because “having a *point d’appui*, below freshet and frost and fire,” is only useful as “a place where you might found a wall or a state.”¹³

Philosophy doesn’t necessitate revolution, it doesn’t require us to build a *new* state, it merely presents this an option, and, in doing so, polishes off the silver of our freedom for us, so we can see it shine again in the things that we chose to do, which might very well be re-committing ourselves to the walls we find ourselves within, to our state. However the act of commitment is not an act the skeptic is willing to take. When the score is even with life, when they have reached their *point d’appui*, such a person might congratulate themselves, thinking “my work is done, things are as they ought to be”, whereas in the same situation a poet will say, “now that we’ve evened the score, why don’t we try and run it up a little?”

The analogy of keeping score is quite useful here, for speech is scorekeeping, and while for the man of silence the score is irrelevant, if *we are* scorekeeping then we ought to recognize that the language of philosophy is worthwhile to us as a means of evening the score, while the language of poetry is useful to us a means of raising it. However, there is one discordancy in this

¹² *The Senses of Walden*, p. 145.

¹³ Excerpt from *Walden* (II, 22) in *The Senses of Walden*, p. 71.

analogy, and that is the fact that when philosophy evens the score it does so according to the rules of the classroom, the college, and the community, whereas when poetry *raises* the score it does so no longer according to these rules but according to those of the individual, which is why the “wisdom...not finally tested in schools...cannot be pass’d from one having it to another not having it”. That is, where the classroom, the college, and the community have rules that people share, that can communicate a lack of worthwhileness in a common language, and hence, can give those people an understanding of philosophy’s ability to even the score, the rules governing each individual are different (the truly silent individual has no rules, but then again, they cannot win).

What we want in common (worthwhileness) we can only have for our selves; and what we have in common (a lack of worthwhileness) we don’t want for ourselves. We are able to communicate worth’s lack to others, and share it, to *lose* together. But once we start to win, when we try to communicate the *presence* of worth, when we shout, “look at me, I’m winning”, what the others see is merely our joy and no longer the source of it. The philosopher cannot discuss victory, but they *can* communicate *why* they are losing, and in doing so, can help me get back to the *point d’appui*, the place we want to be, “the open road, / Healthy, free, the world before [me]”¹⁴, but, here, it leaves us here empty-handed, which is exactly where philosophy’s promise lies: it empties our hands of the things we don’t want, of the things we don’t need; it is up to poetry to fill them with the things we do.

However, when Whitman writes, “You air that serves me with breath to speak! / You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape! / You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable showers”¹⁵, he can only ever write of what the world is like to him.

¹⁴ “Song of The Open Road”, Section 1.

¹⁵ Ibid, section 3.

When he begins to win, he has left the team. Philosophy, then, is the language of a brotherhood of losers, while poetry is the language of the solitary victor. Whitman reflects on this in the poem “This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful”:

“This moment yearning and thoughtful sitting alone, / It seems to me there are other men in other lands yearning and / thoughtful, / It seems to me I can look over and behold them in Germany, Italy, / France, Spain, / Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia or talking other dialects, / And it seems to me if I could know those men I should become / attached to them as I do to men in my own lands, / O I know we should be brethren and lovers, / I know I should be happy with them.”

Here, Whitman writes from the perspective of the philosopher, who *knows* he should be happy with his brothers, because if he can share in their longing shouldn't it follow that they can share in his hope? But, alas, this language is the language of the classroom, the college, and the community, which asks questions to solve problems, but can never provide unquestionable answers. The language of poetry gives answers, but always to the question philosophy has yet to articulate, and its answers ask no questions. These answers, the poems of the poet, can raise the score but never justify the game (except from within), whereas the questions of the philosopher can attempt to justify the game, but never win it. However, what if philosophy questions the answers of poetry? For, sometimes, what is worthwhile to one person--say, murder to a psychopath--is quite apparently not worthwhile to society--the classroom, the college, and the community. This brings us back to our starting place, “the unexamined life is not worth living”.

If we never question the answers of poetry through philosophy we run the risk of destroying our communities. If we maintain communities, must we renounce our poetry? For, it seems like the college, the classroom, and the community must be abandoned--as well as their

philosophical lexicon--to write in the language of the poet, of one on the road. What if by calling us onto the road, Whitman is not asking us to *abandon* our communities, but to realize the single, shared, *point d'appui* upon which they all stand? The Earth. For, it is only from this place that the language of poetry can be spoken, that worthwhileness can be had, and had *in common*. Only if every individual has this attitude can they live together freely *and* share in, and of, their worthwhileness. The classroom, the college, and the community would no longer be mere human apparatuses, but the Earth itself. Thus, being on the road would require us first to “work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe” to find the globe itself, the *point d'appui*. Being on the road, then, is no longer an escape from society but a requisite for it. Perhaps this is what Emerson saw when he pictured an “America [that] could banish history, could make of the condition of immigrancy not something to escape from but something to aspire to, as to the native human condition.”¹⁶

The question then becomes, is the human condition that of “Old age, flowing free with the delicious near-by freedom of death”¹⁷? Or is it that of youth? To grip responsibility in our hands and wring our lives out of it with every breath? To realize the road as what we share is to realize Emerson’s America; for those who share can never own anything but themselves. If such a project were to succeed, it would take the courage of poets and the diligence of philosophers, *and* it would require each individual to embody both.

¹⁶ *The Senses of Walden*, p. 158.

¹⁷ “Song of the Open Road”, section 12.