

WEEK 21, 2020

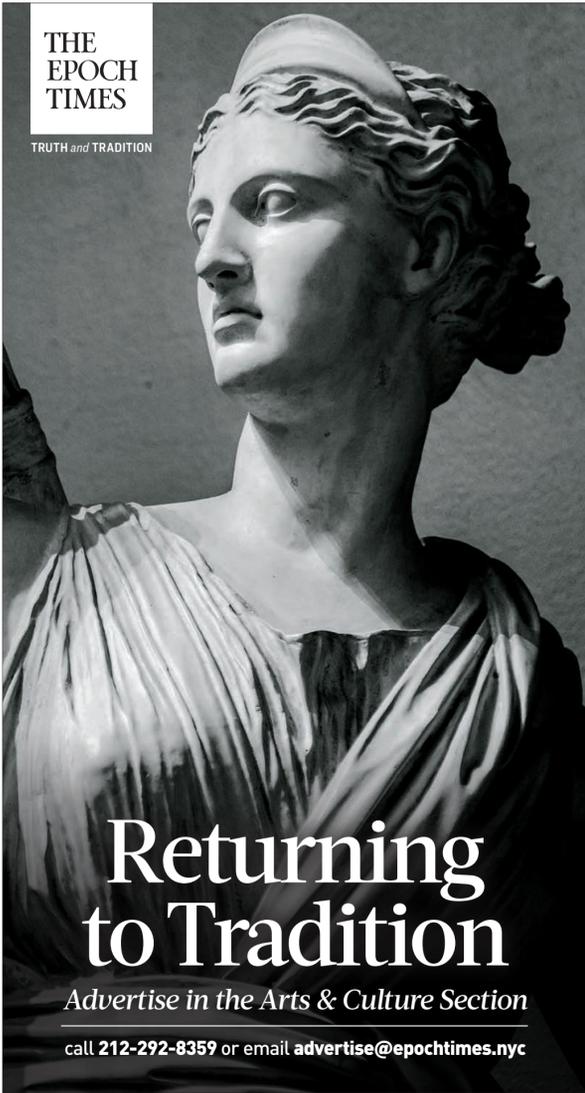
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The Return of  
***Traditional Classical Music...5***

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# Returning to Tradition

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POETRY

BREAKING THE SILENCE:

# Morality, Art, and Poet

In 1978, best-selling novelist John Gardner published "On Moral Fiction" in which he declared, "My basic message throughout this book is as old as the hills, drawn from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, and the rest, and standard in Western civilization down through the eighteenth century...."

In the paragraph following this explanation, Gardner wrote, "The traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us.... That art which tends toward destruction ... is not properly art at all."

At the heart of "On Moral Fiction" was this declaration: "True art is by its nature moral."

**A Forgotten Poet**

In her day, Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919) was famous both in America and Great Britain for her journalism and her poetry. Born into poverty but blessed with parents who valued education and literature, Wilcox set out at an early age to make her way as a writer, becoming a journalist as a teenager, then writing poetry that captured the hearts of common people.



“ True art is by its nature moral.”

John Gardner, writer

When England's Queen Victoria died in 1901, Wilcox was one of the journalists invited to her funeral. As David Walters tells us in his ringing online defense of Wilcox as a poet, "Ella Wheeler Wilcox Critiques," the British already loved her poetry and loved it even more after she wrote verses to the dead queen and her people. Here is the first stanza of "The Queen's Last Ride:"

The Queen is taking a drive today  
They have hung with purple the carriageway.  
They have dressed with purple the royal track  
Where the Queen goes forth and never comes back.

As Walters points out, the woman who had written such fine poems as "Solitude," "The Man Worth While," and "The Winds of Fate"—this celebrant of heart, sentiment, passion, and truth—fell victim, before her death, to "the New Criticism." This academic criticism attacked writers whose work struck them as overly sentimental.

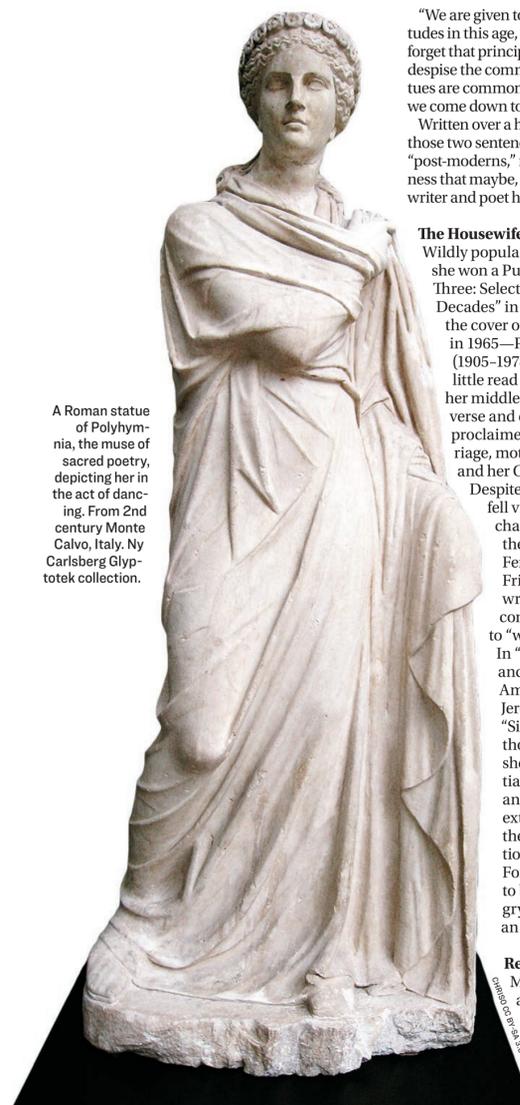
The New Criticism now seems quaint in our own age, having given way to Deconstructionists who would undoubtedly tear Wilcox's work apart as bourgeois, sentimental, sexist, and lacking any sense of class or race.

**The Truth of the Platitude**

In his discussion of Wilcox's "Women Who Want to Succeed," Walters offers this quotation from her essay:



Ella Wheeler Wilcox circa 1919.



A Roman statue of Polyhymnia, the muse of sacred poetry, depicting her in the act of dancing. From 2nd century Monte Calvo, Italy. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek collection.

"We are given to sneering at platitudes in this age, and we sometimes forget that principles are platitudes. We despise the commonplace, yet the virtues are commonplace qualities, when we come down to the facts."

Written over a hundred years ago, those two sentences should jar us "post-moderns," rousing our awareness that maybe, just maybe, such a writer and poet has some lessons for us.

**The Housewife Poet**

Wildly popular in her own time—she won a Pulitzer for "Times Three: Selected Verse From Three Decades" in 1961 and made the cover of Time Magazine in 1965—Phyllis McGinley (1905-1978) is, like Ella Wilcox, little read today. Praised during her middle years for her light verse and deft essays, McGinley proclaimed the joys of marriage, motherhood, suburbia, and her Christian faith.

Despite her talent, McGinley fell victim to the social changes and politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists like Betty Friedan scorned her writing, which they considered harmful to "women's liberation." In "Phyllis McGinley and the Left's War on American Motherhood," Jeremy Carl writes that "Simply put, McGinley's thought crime was that she was a happy, Christian, suburban mother and housewife who extolled both her life in the suburbs and traditional roles for women. For the Left, her failure to be miserable and angry at her situation was an unforgivable sin."

**Retorts**

McGinley didn't always take these attacks lying down. In "The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley,"

which sits at my elbow as I write these words, several poems address these critics: Here are two of them:

**The Old Feminist**

Snugly upon the equal heights,  
Enthroned at last where she belongs,  
She takes no pleasure in her Rights  
Who so enjoyed her Wrongs.

**The Old Radical**

The burning cause that lit his days  
When he was younger came to harm.  
Now Hate's impoverished charcoal blaze  
Is all that keeps him warm.

**Missing in Action**

Also close at hand as I write is "Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama," X.J. Kennedy's and Dana Gioia's sixth Edition of a textbook used in English literature and composition classes around our nation. This book is nearly 1,900 pages long, so fat with page and print I could use it for lifting weights, and it's a fine tool for teaching.

But guess what?

You won't find the poems of Ella Wheeler Wilcox or Phyllis McGinley anywhere in this anthology.

**Pit Lit: The Dismal Side**

Once when I offered seminars in literature to homeschooleders, a student in my Advanced Placement Literature class asked me why we read so few uplifting or positive books. In addition to the Kennedy and Gioia textbook, we read and studied six novels that year, including William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury" (yes, I put my students under the whip with that one), Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," and Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights."

All of these novels are commonly taught in AP classes, but my student had a point. Why is so much of what we regard as high literature so lacking in uplift and inspiration? The Ancients had Ulysses and Aeneas, the Middle Ages had Beowulf and Chaucer's Knight, and Americans once took Natty Bumppo and Huckleberry Finn



Phyllis McGinley's 1961 Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

to heart. What possible models of emulation can we find in Fitzgerald's Gatsby, in Hemingway's Brett and Jake, in Faulkner's doomed Compson family, in Bronte's Heathcliff and Catherine?

That these literary works belong to the ages is not in doubt—they meet Gardner's standard of morality—but the models for emulation they offer readers are negative ones.

Let's conclude with McGinley's short poem "A Choice of Weapons":

Sticks and stones are hard on bones.  
Aimed with angry art,  
Words can sting like anything.  
But silence breaks the heart.

For too long the politically correct and the deconstructionists have dictated literary taste and meaning. Time instead to rescue poets like Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Phyllis McGinley from the silence imposed on them, to listen to them with our hearts, and to draw strength, comfort, and joy from their words.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin in seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](http://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.

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"Plague in an Ancient City," circa 1652, by Michael Sweerts, is thought to represent the plague of Athens. Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

# Thucydides and the Plague of Athens

## What It Can Teach Us Now

CHRIS MACKIE

The coronavirus is concentrating our minds on the fragility of human existence in the face of a deadly disease. Words like "epidemic" and "pandemic" (and "panic") have become part of our daily discourse.

These words are Greek in origin, and they point to the fact that the Greeks of antiquity thought a lot about disease, both in its purely medical sense, and as a metaphor for the broader conduct of human affairs. What the Greeks called the "plague" ("loimos") features in some memorable passages in Greek literature.

One such description sits at the very beginning of Western literature. Homer's "Iliad" (around 700 B.C.) commences with a description of a plague that strikes the Greek army at Troy. Agamemnon, the leading prince of the Greek army, insults a local priest of Apollo called Chryses.

Apollo is the plague god—a destroyer and healer—and he punishes all the Greeks by sending a pestilence among them. Apollo is also the archer god, and he is depicted firing arrows into the Greek army with a terrible effect:

"Apollo strode down along the pinnacles of Olympus angered in his heart, carrying on his shoulders the bow and the hooded quiver; and the shafts clashed on the shoulders of the god walking angrily...."

Terrible was the clash that rose from the bow of silver. First he went after the mules and the circling hounds, then let go a tearing arrow against the men themselves and struck them.

The corpse fires burned everywhere and did not stop burning."



The fall of the Athenian army in Sicily during the Peloponnesian War in 413 B.C. as depicted in an 1893 illustration by J.G. Vogt.

**Thucydides's description of the plague that struck Athens in 430 B.C. is one of the great passages of Greek literature.**

**Plague Narratives** About 270 years after the "Iliad," or thereabouts, plague is the centerpiece of two great classical Athenian works: Sophocles's "Oedipus the King" and Book 2 of Thucydides's "History of the Peloponnesian War."

Thucydides (circa 460–400 B.C.) and Sophocles (490–406 B.C.) would have known one another in Athens, although it is hard to say much more than that for a lack of evidence. The two works mentioned above were produced at about the same time. The play "Oedipus" was probably produced about 429 B.C., and the plague of Athens occurred in 430–426 B.C.

Thucydides writes prose, not verse (as Homer and Sophocles do), and he worked in the comparatively new field of "history" (meaning "en-

quiry" or "research" in Greek). His focus was the Peloponnesian War fought between Athens and Sparta, and their respective allies, between 431 and 404 B.C.

Thucydides's description of the plague that struck Athens in 430 B.C. is one of the great passages of Greek literature. One of the remarkable things about it is how focused it is on the general social response to the pestilence, both those who died from it and those who survived.

**A Health Crisis**

The description of the plague immediately follows on from Thucydides's renowned account of Pericles's Funeral Oration. (It is important that Pericles died of the plague in 429 B.C., whereas Thucydides caught it but survived.) Thucydides gives a general ac-

count of the early stages of the plague—its likely origins in North Africa, its spread in the wider regions of Athens, the struggles of the doctors to deal with it, and the high mortality rate of the doctors themselves.

Nothing seemed to ameliorate the crisis—not medical knowledge or other forms of learning, nor prayers or oracles. Indeed "in the end people were so overcome by their sufferings that they paid no further attention to such things."

He describes the symptoms in some detail—the burning feeling of sufferers, stomachaches and vomiting, the desire to be totally naked without any linen resting on the body itself, the insomnia and the restlessness.

The next stage, after seven or eight days if people survived that long, saw the pestilence descend to the bowels and other parts of the body—genitals, fingers, and toes. Some people even went blind.

"Words indeed fail one when one tries to give a general picture of this disease; and as for the sufferings of individuals, they seemed almost beyond the capacity of human nature to endure."

Those with strong constitutions survived no better than the weak. "The most terrible thing was the despair into which people fell when they realized that they had caught the plague; for they would immediately adopt an attitude of utter hopelessness, and by giving in in this way, would lose their powers of resistance."

Lastly, Thucydides focuses on the breakdown in traditional values where self-indulgence replaced honor, where there existed no fear of god or man.

"As for offences against human law, no one expected to live long enough to be brought to trial and punished: Instead everyone felt that a far heavier sentence had been passed on him."

The whole description of the plague in Book 2 lasts only for about five pages, although it seems longer.

The first outbreak of plague lasted two years, whereupon it struck a second time, although with less virulence. When Thucydides picks up very briefly the thread of the plague a little bit later (3.87), he provides numbers of the deceased: 4,400 hoplites (citizen-soldiers), 300 cavalrymen, and an unknown number of ordinary people.

Nothing did the Athenians so much harm as this, or so reduced their strength for war.

**A Modern Lens**

Modern scholars argue over the science of it all, not the least because Thucydides offers a generous amount of detail of the symptoms.

Epidemic typhus and smallpox are most favored, but about 30 different diseases have been posited.

Thucydides offers us a narrative of a pestilence that is different in all kinds of ways from what we face.

The lessons that we learn from the coronavirus crisis will come from our own experiences of it, not from reading Thucydides. But these are not mutually exclusive. Thucydides offers us a description of a city-state in crisis that is as poignant and powerful now, as it was in 430 B.C.

*Chris Mackie is a professor of classics at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. This article was originally published on The Conversation.*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

# The Return of Traditional Classical Music

An interview with composer Michael Kurek

JOSEPH PEARCE

One of the signs of the sickness besetting modern culture is the apparent loss of the grand tradition of great Western music composition. Where today can we find composers of the caliber of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, or Wagner? Where today can we find operatic composers comparable to Verdi or Puccini?

Much of the responsibility for this break with tradition is an academic culture that has systematically and ideologically abandoned our great compositional heritage in favor of atonal modernism and is most often opposed to harmonious beauty. Few like or appreciate post-tonal music except the academics themselves. And yet all is not lost. There are still contemporary composers who embrace the grand tradition, one of whom is the American composer Michael Kurek.

Michael Kurek's music is receiving increasing acclaim for its lush, neotraditional, melodic, narrative style, which many have likened to the works of the greatest early 20th-century symphonists.

It has been performed by orchestras and chamber groups throughout the United States and in many other countries, across five continents. He has received the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which is the Academy's top lifetime achievement award. His 2017 album, "The Sea Knows," reached No. 1 on Billboard's Traditional Classical Music chart, and he has served on the Classical Nominations Committee for the Grammy Awards. His book, "The Sound of Beauty," was published in September 2019. He is a professor of composition emeritus at Vanderbilt University, where he chaired the department of composition for 14 years.

In this exclusive interview with The Epoch Times, Dr. Kurek discusses with Joseph Pearce the challenges facing tradition-oriented music in an age of modernist iconoclasm.

**JOSEPH PEARCE:** You took early retirement from a top-20 research university this spring. What changes have you witnessed in the teaching of music since you began teaching in 1988?

**MICHAEL KUREK:** The most fundamental among many changes, aside from such modernities as all-gender restrooms, grade entitlement, and hypersensitivity to critique, are the changes in the curriculum. When I began, we required five music history courses—each focusing on the music of a different historical style era of Western classical music—of all music majors. These were primarily to familiarize students with as many pieces of music as possible from each era, providing historical context and also giving them the knowledge of how the differing styles of music were structured. On the tests, they had to recognize and name many compositions from recorded excerpts that were played.

Several years ago, this curriculum was changed. Now the students begin with a first course called "Music as Global Culture," teaching them all sorts of non-Western musical traditions designed to disabuse them of any Eurocentric biases they may have, or perhaps to inoculate them against any they might be tempted to acquire when they hear Western masterworks the next term.

Then they have just one semester, not five, to cover all of Western music history! Naturally, many things must be left out or given perhaps only a few minutes of class time. The students get to choose the next two music history courses, each with a heavy dose of sociology, such as "God, Sex, and Politics in Early Music" or "Music and the Construction of National Identity."

Finally, they take a whole course on modernism and postmodernism (as opposed to just the one course covering the previous six centuries). Other agenda-driven electives are available: "Music, Identity, and Diversity," "Music, Gender, and Sexuality," "Women in Music," "Women and Rock Music," "Artist, Community, and Democracy" (described as "minority viewpoints and cultural pluralism in a democratic society"), and "Hip-Hop, Punk, and the Democratization of America's Pop."

Many of the performance faculty had voted against these curricular changes

because they are trying to train students to actually play the canon of Western music in a symphony orchestra, as a profession. As for the students, many have privately told me that they feel shortchanged on content and feel as though they are the subjects of some kind of ideological indoctrination.

**MR. PEARCE:** Let's talk about your own work as a composer at the university, and how you, as a neotraditionalist, have survived.

**MR. KUREK:** As with the graphic arts departments that no longer teach traditional, representational painting and sculpture techniques, most music composition departments no longer wish to teach (nor in many cases even know how to teach) traditional narrative and tonal music techniques. While in music theory class, all music majors still get (at a beginner level) at least some treatment of the old tonal elements of melody, counterpoint, harmony, and form, these tonal techniques have been essentially ignored in the composition studio by most teachers.

“**If you actually compose fully classical music that people like, your music can find an audience of more than 50.**”

Michael Kurek, composer

I was fortunate to gain tenure before my compositional style was yet as traditional as it later became, but I still had to have twice as many accomplishments as normally needed to gain it. With those accomplishments, tenure could not easily be denied without a clear violation of my academic freedom to compose in any style I want. So, they were stuck with me.

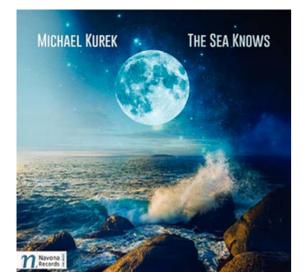
**MR. PEARCE:** Why do symphony orchestras and opera companies continue to program ugly postmodern music, even though the vast majority of the audience and even the musicians in the orchestra strongly dislike it?

**MR. KUREK:** Most of the grant sources upon which orchestras and opera companies depend require them to demonstrate that they are not only "repositories and museums of the past" but also "relevant." That is why the only new pieces you usually hear them play are almost always called "world premieres."

A member of the board of directors of a major opera company wrote me last year of his frustration with this system in regard to modern operas: "three hours of ugliness and atonal singing without a single tune," and he mentioned that ticket sales for those operas are often as much as 70 percent lower than ticket sales for the traditional operas in their season. Although this is costly to the brink of ruin, they keep performing them to avoid being called a "museum." Opera companies are caught in a vicious cycle—or, as he put it, "they seem to have a death wish."

**MR. PEARCE:** What are the actual sales figures for recorded contemporary classical music?

**MR. KUREK:** According to Statista media, sales of classical music recordings in 2018 totaled one percent of all recorded music sales, equal to sales in the reggae genre! And it gets worse. Most of those "classical"



Michael Kurek's 2017 album, "The Sea Knows," reached No. 1 on Billboard's Traditional Classical Music chart.

sales come from crossover artists like Josh Groban, Susan Boyle, Jackie Evancho, and Celtic Woman.

If the vast majority of truly classical music sales are of mainstream classical music, for example, Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner, then for modernist classical music of the 20th century to the present, we are probably talking about a veritable hairline on the pie chart of all music sales. I do know that the average sales for modernist music CDs, not counting copies bought by the composer, performers, and their friends and family, is under 50 copies.

**MR. PEARCE:** How is it that such a tiny, practically unknown subgenre of music can present itself to students, or to anyone else, as the mainstream heirs to the heritage of Western classical music?

**MR. KUREK:** It reminds me of a cult that tells its 36 members that they are first in line to be heaven. Naturally, it does not make me very popular in such elitist company to have had a Billboard No. 1 album on the Traditional Classical Music chart and around 200,000 streams (on Spotify alone) of that album, without any advertising. That is still a tiny number, compared to popular music streams, which can be in the billions for a hit album, but it is at least enough to demonstrate that if you actually compose fully classical music that people like, your music can find an audience of more than 50.

**MR. PEARCE:** What should we think of the coveted Pulitzer Prize in music, and what has been the fate of the 70-plus pieces of music that have won the Pulitzer Prize?

**MR. KUREK:** It is astonishing that the Pulitzer Prize in music carries such supposed stature, when, out of 73 prizes that have been awarded for music composition, only one winner is actually in the standard repertoire—Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring," the 1945 winner. The rest are virtually never performed or broadcast, and are essentially forgotten, most within a year of winning the prize.

**MR. PEARCE:** What needs to happen if we are to see beautiful new works being added to a renewed canon of genuinely great classical music?

**MR. KUREK:** A lost skill set does not reappear simply from the will to have it or from proclaiming the need. Gifted composers must first understand the need and then tenaciously acquire the training from the study of music theory and orchestration, and particularly from the great musical scores themselves. They must practice for years to master it, whether privately or through an educational institution that takes on this mission anew. I do not know of any music school that has articulated this vision for its composition program.

Composers whose music demonstrates traditional craft need to be commissioned with artist grants to fund and promote recordings of their work. How else can the public realize that the train is back on its track? For example, I am about to make a recording of my new symphony with a university student orchestra because I cannot afford to hire a professional orchestra to record it. Both the London Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra had agreed with my recording company to record the symphony, but no funding could be found to pay their musicians' recording fee! This is not meant as a crass fundraising appeal, but it is the most concise, real-world illustration I can think of. How much more influence and impact could the album have using the London Symphony Orchestra?

**MR. PEARCE:** Why, in a nutshell, is a revival in tradition-oriented classical composition so important?

**MR. KUREK:** When all is said and done, we need a renaissance of beauty in the arts as a cultural expression of our higher natures, objective truth, and human goodness.

*Those wishing to learn more about Michael Kurek's work can hear three movements of his new symphony in virtual mockup at <https://MichaelKurek.com>*

*Joseph Pearce is an author of biographies of Shakespeare, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Oscar Wilde.*

## FINE ARTS

# Introducing the French Raphael: Nicolas Poussin's Profound Paintings

LORRAINE FERRIER

"I have neglected nothing," said Nicolas Poussin, the 17th-century French classical painter. Everything in Poussin's paintings is there for a reason, and reason is the rationale behind each and every painting by his hand.

For Poussin, his paintings were no place for frivolity or sensuous pleasures. He believed that painting must deal with the most noble and earnest of human endeavors in a rational manner best suited to the situation.

"For him formal order, even indeed some pedantry of design, is almost invariably a way of expressing with absolute clarity and economy experiences of the profoundest intellectual, imaginative and visual reality. His paintings find perhaps their closest counterpart in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach," art historian Basil Taylor wrote in "French Painting."

Put simply, "Poussin's art is ... a marriage of poetry and reason, sensibility and intellect, a balance of two aspects of one character," states Mary Sprinson de Jesús, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's department of European paintings, on The Met's website.

Poussin's artistic rationale didn't develop by chance. Hard work and an avid curiosity about the best artists before him—the greats of the Italian Renaissance such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian, and the art of the ancient Greeks and Romans—along with years of contemplation, made Poussin an internationally renowned and revered artist in his time and beyond.

Poussin's impact on French art is far-reaching. His art is "for ever, after his time, in the germ-cells of French painting," art critic Geoffrey Grigson states in the introductory note to "French Painting."

### Rome-Bound

Poussin began to paint after Quentin Varin, an itinerant painter, came to work in Les Andelys in Normandy, France, Poussin's birthplace and hometown. Varin so inspired Poussin that the budding artist followed him to Paris in 1612, much to Poussin's parents' disapproval.

In Paris, Poussin became familiar with the classical world via the paintings and engravings of Roman statues and reliefs in the royal collection, mainly made by followers of Raphael. Mythology met him in Paris, too, by way of Ovid's "Metamorphoses," which the Italian poet Giambattista Marino commissioned him to illustrate.

Rome was where Poussin spent most of his life. He tried twice to reach Rome, eventually arriving in the city in 1624. There, he trained in the studio of Domenico Zampieri, commonly known as Domenichino, of the Bologna School of painting. And he gained a powerful patron, Cassiano dal Pozzo, the secretary of Cardinal Francesco Barberini, whose encouragement and influence helped shape Poussin's art and fame in Rome.

One of Poussin's commissions from Dal Pozzo was to illustrate Leonardo da Vinci's "Treatise on Painting," based on manuscripts from Cardinal Francesco Barberini's library, for publication.

As an impassioned antiquarian Dal Pozzo was the first to systematically measure, commission drawings, annotate, and collate the art of the ancient world in his collection he called the "Museo Cartaceo" ("Paper Museum.") Dal Pozzo invited Poussin to use his vast library and encouraged him to thoroughly research his subjects prior to painting. Poussin was known to research his subjects with immense enthusiasm, reading all relevant texts and then immediately and vigorously sketching compositions.

Between 1629 and 1630, Poussin became seriously ill. This coincided with an outbreak of the plague that ravaged Italy. When he recovered, he married and took his painting in a different direction: He moved



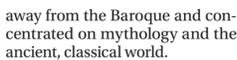
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(Above) "Et in Arcadia Ego," 1637–1638, by Nicolas Poussin. Oil on canvas. The Louvre Museum. (Left) "Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man," 1655, by Nicolas Poussin. Oil on canvas. Marquand Fund, 1924.

## Poussin believed painting must deal with the most noble and earnest of human endeavors.

away from the Baroque and concentrated on mythology and the ancient, classical world.

From 1640–1642, Poussin reluctantly worked for French King Louis XIII, decorating the Grand Gallery of the Louvre Palace. So reluctant was Poussin to leave Rome, that Cardinal Richelieu sent someone to escort him back to France. In Rome, Poussin worked alone; he never had a workshop full of assistants. Yet in Paris he had a whole army of artists to command, and he had to work on painted altarpieces and designed frontispieces for the royal press.

Yet Poussin's time in Paris was fruitful in that it connected him to new intellectual patrons—followers of the dramatist Pierre Corneille and philosopher René Descartes—who served as his patrons until he died.

### Painting the Past: The Highest Genre of Art

Poussin championed history painting, the highest genre of painting according to Renaissance polymath Leon Battista Alberti, and a fact that echoed in 17th-century France. The genius of history paint-

(Above) Self-portrait, 1650, by Nicolas Poussin. Oil on canvas. The Louvre Museum. (Above left) Studies of details from Trajan's Column, circa 1635, by Nicolas Poussin. Pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash, over traces of black chalk. Anonymous gift, 2006.

ing is that it's both a storyboard and a moving picture all in one.

When the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture was founded in Paris in 1648, its aim was to elevate art to the same status as epic poetry and ancient rhetoric. The academy formalized what Poussin was already practicing: An artist, in order to elevate his art, needed "to move on from the representation of a single figure to that of a group; to deal with historical and legendary subjects and to represent the great actions recounted by historians or the pleasing subjects treated by poets. And, in order to scale even greater heights, an artist must know how to conceal the virtues of great men and the most elevated mysteries beneath the veil of legend-

ary tales and allegorical compositions. A great painter is successful in ventures of this kind. Herein lie the force, nobility and greatness of his art," wrote art historian and critic André Félibien des Avaux in the preface of the 1669 publication for the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture conference.

Poussin painted ancient Roman scenes, biblical subjects from the Old Testament, mythological ones from Ovid's "Metamorphoses," and scenes from poems, such as "Jerusalem Delivered" by Torquato Tasso.

### Raphael's Influence on Poussin

Poussin's contemporary Roland Fréart de Chambray, in his discourse on ancient and modern architecture, deemed Poussin "the Raphael of our century." Just like Raphael, Poussin strove for balance and harmony in his work along with ideal beauty and human nature.

Raphael's influence can be seen explicitly in the "Holy Family on the Steps," for example, where Poussin appears to have almost mirrored the three central figures of the Christ child, Mary, and St. John the Baptist from the composition in Raphael's "Madonna of the Meadow," although Poussin's Madonna holds the Christ child higher.

Like Raphael, Poussin placed multiple figures in a composition with care and expertise. In addition to preparatory drawings, Poussin even made wax models whereby he would set a study of his composition in a box to study how the light, forms, and shapes interacted.

His fastidious care for each and every component of his art gave his paintings a depth that can be hard or even impossible to fathom as it's so multifaceted.

Poussin's painting "Et in Arcadia Ego," is a classic example of this depth. In the painting, pastoral shepherds point or gesticulate toward a tomb. The lady on the right is thought to be inspired by the ancient Greek statue "Cesi Juno" (although the original statue was thought to have had clothed arms as Poussin has depicted in his painting). All the figures gather to ponder the Latin phrase that translates as "Even in Arcadia, I am." Arcadia is the most idyllic of pastoral lands, and even in the happiest of places, death is still present.

Just like Raphael, Poussin embodied Aristotle's definition of art: "to represent not the outward appearance of things but their inward significance." There is so much to see below the surface of Poussin's paintings that each one invites repeated observation. It's not surprising that he was known as the "painter-philosopher."



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

### ICONIC FILMS

## Woody Allen's Best Ever

### MARK JACKSON

"Annie Hall" won four Oscars at the 50th Academy Awards in 1977, including for best picture, beating out "Star Wars." This is Woody Allen's signature film and masterpiece, and definitely his most popular.

It's also one of the best films of the 1970s, and underlines Allen's quintessential niche—that of a (self-proclaimed) New York, Coney Island-raised, Jewish working-class-background nebbish-y comic, whose self-deprecating neurosis is born of Jewish guilt combined with an autodidactic, college professor-level intellectualism. Even though the man claims to prefer watching the Knicks and playing his clarinet, he clearly read his way through most of New York's Strand Bookstore.

"Annie Hall" is also a love letter to Diane Keaton (her unique, Chaplinesque feminist wardrobe started its very own fashion craze) and is Allen's romanticized version of New York City existence, which was only topped by his next film, "Manhattan."

Mostly, "Annie Hall" is not a conventional romantic comedy. It's a very accurate and bittersweet depiction of the dynamics of relationships, tinged with Allen's melancholic personality, and made to go down easier than it normally would, due to his world-class humor.

### Odd Couple

Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) meets Annie Hall (Dianne Keaton) after a doubles tennis match arranged by his friend Rob (Tony Roberts). She's a ditzy Wisconsinite WASP trying to make it as a singer in New York, and he's a Jewish schlemiel of a New York comedian.

Their relationship initially works because Annie is starchy and naïve, and Alvy is established and exotic to her and has much to teach her. He turns her young, curious mind on to many things, including

### REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

## 'The Sunshine Boys': One of Neil Simon's Numerous Odd Couples

### MARK JACKSON

I just bought "The Sunshine Boys" on iTunes for \$6.99, which is about what we paid to see it in the theaters back in 1976. I immediately started hollering with laughter all over again. It's as good as it ever was. OK, almost. Walter Matthau was a comedic genius, one of the world's funniest clowns, and George Burns was a straight man for the ages, having had years of practice playing straight man to his wife in "The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show."

### Grumpy Old Men

"Grumpy Old Men" is another movie in which Matthau will slay you with laughter—he specialized in playing grumpy old men—but Matthau's original two grumpy old men roles were Oscar Madison in "The Odd Couple" and Willy Clark in "The Sunshine Boys."

The film's an homage to vaudeville; it's about the feisty reunion fireworks of a once-famous comedy duo, who now hate each other. For 50 years, Al

Lewis (George Burns) and Willy Clark (Walter Matthau) had been one of the greatest vaudeville comedy teams ever. They retired 11 years ago, and it's been 12 years since they've actually spoken.

Clark hates Lewis's guts for quitting the act on him before he felt ready, and Lewis, while he doesn't hate his erstwhile partner, can't stand Clark because of his giant ego and the fact that he's incredibly annoying to work with. Nonetheless, they reluctantly agree to reunite for a TV special, at the behest of Clark's agent Ben (Richard Benjamin), who is also Clark's long-suffering nephew.

The film opens in 1970s Time Square, with the semi-retired, semi-senile Clark headed to a TV commercial audition for potato chips. He wanders into an auto-body shop on West 43rd Street, thinking it's the advertising agency on East 43rd; he kicks the mechanic (F. Murray Abraham) under the car and tells him to check if the commercial studio is located in the back.



A poster for "The Sunshine Boys."

### 'The Sunshine Boys'

Director  
Herbert Ross

Starring  
Walter Matthau, George Burns, Richard Benjamin, F. Murray Abraham, Lee Meredith, Carol Arthur, Rosetta LeNoir

Rated  
PG

Running Time  
1 hour, 51 minutes

Release Date  
Nov. 6, 1975

★★★★★



Annie Hall (Dianne Keaton) and Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) in "Annie Hall."

books on death and dying, college courses, therapy, and black-and-white documentaries about the Holocaust.

Annie and Alvy move in together, and we soon observe the vast, cultural Grand Canyon between their two families (Annie's grandmother, "Grammy Hall," is rabidly anti-Semitic). Annie then slowly begins to blossom as a recording artist, which takes her to Los Angeles, wooed away by Paul Simon (of Simon and Garfunkel) playing an L.A. agent. Alvy, ever the dedicated New Yorker, makes one feeble attempt to woo her back.

### Impressions 45 Years Later

Watching it all these years later, what jumps out at me is how incredibly self-involved Alvy is. Mostly, we think of Keaton's Annie Hall as a vacuous, "la-dee-dah" airhead, but at this late date, her character seems like a perfectly normal, uneducated, low-self-esteem-having small-town girl, with Alvy Singer buzzing around her like a horsefly.

He's forever landing on her with the quick stings of invasive insight into her character flaws that only a professional stand-up comedian could get away with, because the stings are leavened with humor. But seeing it now, I'm amazed she didn't start trying to swat him earlier. Not to mention the slightly creepy, fumbling foreplay he's forever foisting. Overall hangs the slightly pornographic atmosphere emanating from his obvious obsession with sex.

Speaking of which, all Alvy's women were, or are, in therapy, and they're there because he makes them go (and pays for their therapy himself), because he always wants sex, and his mechanical, cerebral approach and overly verbose nebbish-y commentary makes them all (highly unsurprisingly) never in the mood. Annie would like to smoke weed all the while, and Alvy doesn't like that—he'd like for her

## 'Annie Hall' was highly innovative for its time.

to appreciate him for who he is, but he's too annoying and icky to be appreciated without chemical enhancement.

And I never noticed before (until I had an acting career of my own) what a great job Diane Keaton did. She's pretty brilliant. No wonder she's had such showbiz longevity.

### Lastly

"Annie Hall" was also highly innovative for its time, utilizing subtitles to express characters' subtexts, as well as an animated sequence. Allen constantly addresses the camera directly, such as when, standing in line to see an Ingmar Bergman film, he's subjected to the excruciating torture of a pseudo-intellectual blowhard behind him trying to impress a date. The man waxes poetic about the failures of Fellini and name-drops Marshall McLuhan. When Allen can't take it anymore, he pulls the actual McLuhan out of thin air in the lobby, who flatly informs the pompous blowhard, "You know nothing of my work." "Why can't this happen in real life?" Allen asks us.

All in all, "Annie Hall" is really a brilliant depiction of the generation, stasis, degeneration, and destruction phases of a relationship. It's so often the case that relationships don't work out because women think they can change men (men never change; men represent order), and men think women will stay the same (women change and evolve quickly; women represent chaos).

Annie Hall outgrows Alvy. She reads his intellectual books, takes his prescribed adult education courses, puts together her own worldview, sheds her naïveté, grows up, and, not being nearly as neurotic (and with a woman's natural pragmatism and common sense in matters of the heart) recognizes that he'll never change, will never learn to have fun, and will project his neurotic neediness onto her forever. And so she moves on. It's perfect. And sad. And funny. Re-rent it.

a minute!! That's not the Doctor Sketch!! "Oh yeah!! Then show me the Doctor Sketch!! Clark pauses, then moves the lamp six inches to the right. "That's the Doctor Sketch!!"

### Odd Couple

Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple" was incredibly successful, turned into a famous TV show, and has been firmly embedded in the American cultural lexicon as a relationship concept for half a century. Simon got a lot of mileage out of that concept, because Lewis and Clark are also an odd couple: The fastidious, Felix-like Lewis lives in New Jersey with his married daughter and dotes on his grandchildren, Wendy and Mark.

The Oscar-like Clark thinks that in his late 70s, he's still got it, lives in an UWS hotel, and refuses to remember his nephew's kids' names:

"...Milly and Sidney."  
"Amanda and Michael!"  
"Amanda and Sipkiss..."

One half of this vaudeville odd couple, Clark, hollers at Lewis: "From my window I see drug addicts! Car crash-er! Ambulances! Jumpers from buildings! I see everything! What do you see? The lawwwwn mower, and the miilllll man."

### One Joke

Yes, it's funny—hysterical—but it hit me after all

these years that "The Sunshine Boys" is a one-trick pony; it's an entire play and movie based on the idea of encroaching dementia (both Willy's and Al's now-defunct short-term memories) as fodder for a hundred jokes and gags on the topic. At age 16, that was funny. Now, when it often happens that I wander into the living room from the kitchen and can't for the life of me remember what I went in there for, it's still funny ... but slightly less so.

## It's about the feisty reunion fireworks of a once famous comedy duo, who now hate each other.

Also, in the manner of Clark's nephew, after having taken care of my dad (a curmudgeonly, divorced fine arts painter with an UWS apartment that matched the chaos of Willy Clark's apartment, who had a similar degree of memory loss), "The Sunshine Boys" has become in some ways, entirely unfunny. Funny how perspectives change with time. If you haven't seen "The Sunshine Boys," though—see it. It's very funny.

UNITED ARTISTS



"A Tale from 'The Decameron,'" 1916, by John William Waterhouse. Lady Lever Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool.

# The Outstretched Hand and Other Consolations of Poetry

ROB CRISELL

In 1821, the poet John Keats—self-quarantined with a dear friend who served as his nurse—lay dying of tuberculosis, coughing up blood in a small house at the foot of the Spanish Steps. He was 25 years old. The following fragment of poetry was found among his papers:

"This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming  
nights  
That thou would wish thine own heart  
dry of blood  
So in thy veins red life might stream again,  
And though be conscience-calm'd—see  
here it is—  
I hold it towards you."

Like much great verse, this little poem is incurably ambiguous. However, many readers, including myself, think that Keats—misunderstood, abused, and miserable for much of his life—is addressing future readers like us, stretching out his hand to those who would grasp it. His dream is that we might be "conscience-calm'd," which I take to mean "heartened" or "consoled." At the same time, he imagines that if we grasp his hand, we once again would see "red life" flow through his veins. He's receiving and giving blood. He's a friend. The poem is a powerful image of the mysterious commerce that exists between poets and readers, through time and space, across languages and cultures.

Throughout my life, I have often turned to poetry for clarity and consolation, especially during stressful and uncertain times. In light of recent events, it won't surprise you that I've been reading and writing a lot of poetry lately. In this essay, I will try to explain why I find poems so useful. Along the way, I will introduce you to some old friends that have helped me over the years. Maybe they can help you, too.

## Is Poetry Dead?

Besides being a writer and an actor, I teach Shakespeare and poetry to students in a medium-sized city in Southern California. In fact, the day before the state of California ordered all public schools closed due to the outbreak, I was explaining to six different fifth-grade classes how and why they should read poetry. Most of the hundreds of children to whom I've introduced Shakespeare and poetry have discovered something useful and profound in a certain poem and in themselves. Poetry's most valuable lessons have little to do with

meter, rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, and so on. Great poems have less to do with a poet's skill, and more with connections the poet makes between herself, her readers, and the divine.

If that hasn't been your experience with poetry, you're not alone. Poetry is a dead art for most people. (Though I would argue that there's little difference between well-written songs and well-written poems, but we'll leave that aside for now.) Poems are about as relevant to our lives as macramé or the proper conjugation of Latin verbs.

Poet and scholar Dana Gioia explains this phenomenon in his seminal essay "Can Poetry Matter?":

"American poetry ... has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group. Like priests in a town of agnostics, poets still command a certain residual prestige. But as individual artists they are almost invisible."

Or as American poet Marianne Moore famously put it in the first line of her poem titled (duh!) "Poetry": "I too, dislike it." Poems, she writes, are "useful" only if they can create "imaginary gardens with real toads in them."

"Imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Perhaps that line gives you a spasm of confusion, dread, even frustration. I certainly had that sensation when I read it for the first time. I hear you say: "Curse you, poetry! There you go again." Or it just makes you feel ignorant—vaguely aware of your unawareness. Well, join the club. As I tell my students, the best poetry makes you sweat a little. For me, Moore's line has something to do with how the best poems can take us from the visible to the invisible. In Owen Barfield's words, poetry marks the "forgotten relations" between things and among people. It bridges the chasm.

In my opinion, dead poets are best at this kind of bridging. They're done with all the strife of existence. They've lived through wars, plagues, riots, and revolutions. They're finished with "joy and moan," as Shakespeare writes. As Henry Longfellow memorably puts in "A Psalm of Life":

"Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time;  
Footprints, that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,  
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again."

Poets tell us to take heart. They remind us that we have a friend who knows exactly

**Poets tell us to take heart. They remind us that we have a friend who knows exactly what we're going through.**

what we're going through. Maybe that friend wants to make us laugh, like Lear, Nash, Dahl, and Silverstein. Maybe they want to tell us a story, like Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Poe. Maybe they want to break our heart, like Sophocles, Yeats, Sassoon, Plath, and Bishop. Whatever it is a poet does, he or she is there to remind us—in a new way—what it is like to be a human being.

Reading and writing poetry is a way of thinking. A well-known definition of a poem is where "a feeling has found its words." Poetry evokes emotion, and that emotion evokes thought—and often transformation. Poems are at their most powerful when they resound with a feeling that we have within us. They alert us to what is deepest in ourselves.

Here are a few other poetic descriptions of a poem, which can be found in Edward Hirsch's outstanding book "How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry":

- A message in a bottle
- A soul in action through words
- A speaking picture
- The bloodiest of art forms
- Language compressed and raised to its highest power
- A time bomb designed to explode on contact

If none of these metaphors resonates with you, that's all right. Poetry is one way of thinking, but it's certainly not a popular way these days. In our modern world—especially with the surreal overlay of the coronavirus—our language is increasingly literal and prosaic. Today, for example, our dialogue is dominated by dreary words like epidemiology, germs, health care, containment, PPE, viruses, contagion, isolation, social distancing, lockdown, etc. We retreat to the safety of our various tribes. We look for existential meaning in science and politics, blaming or championing ideologies or leaders. We even dull our minds with food, alcohol, drugs, mindless entertainment, and other distractions.

All of this is normal and understandable. But as Hamlet—that sublime philosopher-poet and everyman—puts it:

"What is a man,  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more."

Even a beast washes itself and avoids infection if it can. Even beasts seek protection with friends and kinfolk. Only humans search for meaning outside the physical plane. Only humans are poets, philosophers, and artists.



Writer, teacher, and actor Rob Crisell.

## I've Been Busy During Lockdown

After governments around the world shut down much of civilization and banished all to our collective rooms, I instinctively turned to poetry (also faith, family, friends, music, the arts—I'm not crazy!) to help me navigate the sadness, fear, and chaos:

- First, a theater director and friend began a series of "Quarantine Monologues" from William Shakespeare as a way to reach out to the arts community. I was the first to contribute a speech (or two).
- I completed yet another draft of my verse adaptation of Sophocles's "Electra" for a theater company that is producing it in October, if all goes well. A group of actors did two dramatic readings of the play in May.
- I began a daily feature on my Facebook page and YouTube channel I call "30 Poems of Hope and Joy in 30 Days." Every day, I select and recite a well-known poem, sharing a few observations as well as a biography of the poet.
- I submitted a Shakespearean sonnet recitation (mine was Sonnet 32) as part of an online sonnet series in which 154 actors from all over the world perform all 154 of Shakespeare's sonnets. I acted in live dramatic online reading of "Much Ado About Nothing," "King Lear," and "The Merry Wives of Windsor" with an all-star cast of actors (myself notwithstanding).
- I started something I called "Plague Stone Poetry." I placed a piece of wine under a fake boulder at the top of my driveway and invited various friends to give me their favorite poem in exchange for a bottle of wine. I received poems by Gabriel Garcia Lorca, Plath, Henley, Poe, MacLeish, Millay, James Thomson, as well as a few originals.
- Based on my work teaching poetry in schools—and at the request of several teachers—I wrote and recorded a Young Poets Workshop, which you can find on my YouTube channel. I also recorded several Shakespeare speeches for classroom use.
- Finally, I wrote—and continue to write—poems, including several poking fun at the virus (they were funnier a few weeks ago). I submitted a poem called "The Virus and Cure" to an online competition sponsored by the Friends of Falun Gong. I wrote nine haikus about my chickens. My favorite poem so far is one I wrote about frogs. I just finished a sonnet about my relationship with my son and a ballad about plague stones.

Thanks to all this activity, I have a stronger mental and spiritual foundation that I hope will help me weather the thousand natural shocks that will visit us over the next weeks and months. I have "shored these fragments against my ruins," in the words of T.S. Eliot. I hope these fragments, however, help you, too. I've tried to provide certain poetic and artistic resources for others, while also helping myself. Trust me—everyone benefits from a wiser, happier, less anxious me.

Before you go, allow me to introduce you to a few dozen old friends with whom I've been reacquainting myself during the quarantine. See? Here they are—they hold out their hands to you...

- "A Psalm of Life," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
- "No Man Is an Island," by John Donne
- "Hope' Is the Thing With Feathers," by Emily Dickinson
- "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," by William Butler Yeats
- "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," by Dylan Thomas
- "Sonnet 29," by William Shakespeare
- "God's Grandeur," by Gerard Manley Hopkins
- "Morning Song," by Sylvia Plath
- "Excerpt from 'The Four Zoas,'" by William Blake
- "How Do I Love Thee?," by Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- "Sea Fever," by John Masefield
- "There Will Come Soft Rains," by Sara Teasdale
- "The Dying Christian to His Soul," by Alexander Pope
- "Travel," by Edna St. Vincent Millay
- "The World Is Too Much With Us," by William Wordsworth
- "Macavity: The Mystery Cat," by T.S. Eliot
- "Invictus," by William Ernest Henley
- "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," by Robert Frost
- "Those Winter Sundays," by Robert Hayden
- "No Coward Soul Is Mine," by Emily Brontë
- "She Walks in Beauty," by Lord Byron
- "The Second Coming," by William Butler Yeats
- "The Dream of the Rood," by Anonymous (8th century)

This essay is reprinted with permission from Rob Crisell. It was originally published with 25 other essays in the "Coronavirus Collective" in early May 2020.

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# What the Story of Lot's Wife Can Tell Us: Don't Look Back!

JAMES SALE

What are we going to say or think once this lockdown is over and this pandemic is subdued? Frequently, but not always, we have a tendency to "look back," and as we do so it is often with rose-tinted glasses. For example, after World War I, and even now, the British have this view of the prewar period—the Edwardian Age—in which their empire was glorious and life was opulent, and much safer. The TV series "Downton Abbey," for example, starts at just such a point (1912) and then unpacks what happens when world events intervene in the otherwise comfortable lifestyles.

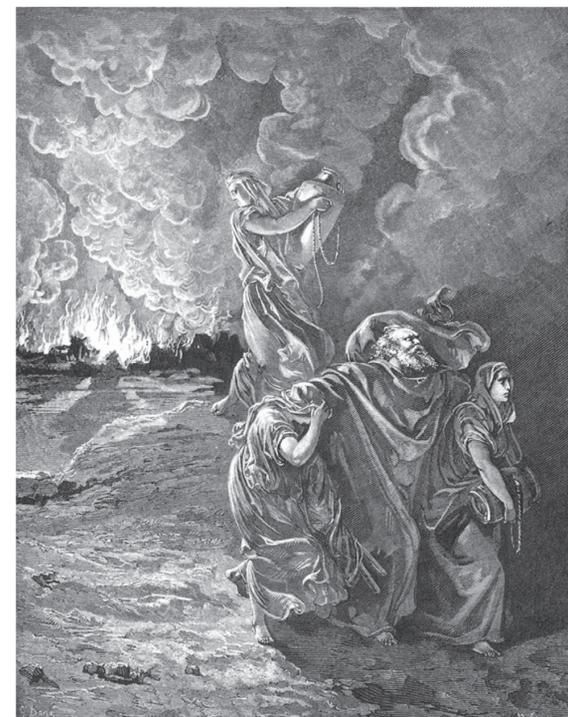
Interestingly, of course, the same sort of romantic fictionalized history did not occur in Britain—and, I imagine, in America—after World War II, for in this instance the Great Depression was simply too great and too recent for anyone to want to go back to those "glory" days. But that said, the principle remains that we do tend and want to glamorize how things were before. And in the case of COVID-19, we will have plenty of reasons to want to look back: nearly full employment, rising wages, a booming stock market, health care and education mostly available for most people in the West, plus entertainment and circuses everywhere with which to console ourselves and readily available 24/7!

However, to do so is, I think, a big mistake. The story that perhaps more than any other characterizes the dangers of looking back is in the book of Genesis, and a very strange story it is, even by biblical standards. The story may be pure myth, or it may be literally true; it is difficult to know. Certainly, the historian Josephus claimed to have seen it, and the Quran also endorses its actuality.

I am referring to Genesis chapter 19 and the pillar of salt. God had decided to destroy the cities of the plain and warned Lot and his family to flee the city of Sodom. They are given strict instructions not to look back as they fled the fire that rained down, but Lot's wife (identified in Jewish tradition as Edith) did look back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Why is this significant?

## The Past and the Future

Basically, human beings live in three dimensions of time; or more accurately, they live in one dimension, the present, but as they do, they are always aware of the duality of the other two—the past, which is receding from them, and the future, which is approaching. And as one is going away while the other is coming forward, it should not surprise us that they therefore have different perceptual properties, or create different effects on the human consciousness.



"The Flight of Lot," 1875, by Gustave Doré. From an illustrated Bible, Genesis 19:26.



A rock formation venerated as Lot's wife. It is located on the Jordan side of the Dead Sea.

To be clear: We do need to think about the past, especially to learn from it, which we can do in a number of ways. Also, we need to contemplate the future in order, most importantly, to create it; for without anticipation of it, we would merely react and be a victim of circumstances, much as animals are.

But the trouble with idealizing the past is that we can so easily get stuck there. For the past tends toward a sort of myopic nostalgia for us all. Even if our childhood or our youth was not ideal, at least we were young then, and so more energized, more attractive, and, critically, so much further statistically from that endpoint we call death. So the vice of the past is its nostalgia-inducing torpor.

The future is quite different, though. When we contemplate the future (assuming we are not a hypochondriac, or chronophobic, or some such), we find there is the only virtue left in Pandora's box when all the others have fled: hope. I used the word "contemplate" rather than "think" about the future since I wanted to suggest a deeper level of involvement with the future. Implicit in "contemplate" is the idea of our imaginations engaging with it, and so shaping and creating it.

There is a famous story about Roy Disney, Walt's nephew, who at the opening of Disney World had some Disney executive say to him, something like, "It was such a shame that your uncle never lived to see this." Roy's alleged reply was: "But he did—he saw it in his imagination (his mind's eye), which is why we are seeing it (physically) now." Wow!

## Lot's Wife

Returning to the story, then, why was Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt, and why salt? Why are these two points significant?

The first answer is very clear: She disobeyed a direct command from God, whom she was obligated to obey as her husband did (albeit reluctantly). In this sense, we are reminded of the Adam and Eve story. In some sense, this is

just another variant of the interdictions frequently encountered in fairy stories, which human beings tend to break and with catastrophic results.

But why did she break the commandment not to look back? Voyeurism, morbid curiosity, wanting to see pure destruction in action?

Possibly, but I think more likely that the reason is contained in the second answer: Why a pillar of salt? Salt is a crystalline substance, inert chemically, frozen as it were in its structure; and it is commonly used as a preservative. Another way of putting this might be that it mummifies living products and keeps them in suspended animation for some future consumption. The looking back of Lot's wife, then, represents that refusal to live in the present, to hanker for the past, to stay fixed emotionally and spiritually, and to not allow life to flow and change, but to be permanently stuck in what one perceives as the safety of what one already has.

## Why did she break the commandment not to look back? Voyeurism, morbid curiosity, wanting to see pure destruction in action?

This desire for safety, for the comforts of what one has had, is a sort of leitmotif in the history of Israel. Two examples might be these: A few centuries later, it emerges at a critical juncture when Moses and Aaron (Numbers, chapter 14) are threatened (with death by stoning) by the people who think it better to go back to slavery in Egypt rather than go forward to the great destiny that God has promised them.

We remember that manna itself was the daily bread of the Israelites, not some product to be stored; if stored beyond a day, it rotted and stank (Exodus, chapter 16). And in the New Testament there is one mention of Lot's wife in Luke, chapter 17. Ominously, this is Jesus warning his disciples that the end times will come suddenly, unexpectedly, and that turning back as Lot's wife did will be fatal. Interestingly, Jesus explicitly makes the point that those seeking to conserve their belongings or save their lives will lose all. The meaning, then, is clear.

There is a line in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" where Hecate, patroness of the witches, says: "And you all know, security / Is mortals' chiefest enemy." The drive to achieve total security (which is always something we possessed yesterday) means that, in other words, to stay in the past will (future tense) undo us all.

Thus now, as COVID-19 unwinds, it is important that we all don't look back too much. Yes, we have had some good experiences, good things have happened (as well as bad), and there have been achievements of which the human race might be proud. But in going forward we need to have a future-orientation, an imaginative perspective on what might be. In this way, we must circumvent being living—that is, dead—pillars of salt.

James Sale is an English businessman whose company, Motivational Maps Ltd., operates in 14 countries. He is the author of over 40 books on management and education from major international publishers including Macmillan, Pearson, and Routledge. As a poet, he won the first prize in The Society of Classical Poets' 2017 competition and spoke in June 2019 at the group's first symposium held at New York's Princeton Club.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION: FILMS THAT UPLIFT THE SOUL

# A Witty Romantic Comedy With a Deeper Message

IAN KANE

By all accounts, 1940 was a year of tremendous upheaval and tumultuous change. Hitler's war machine was steamrolling through Europe, crushing all who stood in his way with his blitzkrieg or "lightning war." Stateside, the first peacetime drafting act (Selective Training and Service Act) was put into place, meaning that all men between ages 21 and 36 had to register for possible military service. The television network CBS demonstrated the first color TV system in New York City. And on the West Coast, the first freeway (Arroyo Seco Parkway) in the United States was cleared to open for service in Los Angeles.



Mike (James Stewart) carries Tracy (Katharine Hepburn) after they've dipped into too much Champagne.

Consequently, many Americans looked to entertainment venues, particularly film, to assuage their anxieties and mitigate the stresses of widespread change. Although film noir was arguably at its height during this time, there was also plenty of screwball and romantic comedies that were being produced to lift spirits and bring good cheer.

Director George Cukor ("A Star Is Born," "My Fair Lady") had the good fortune of drawing three tremendously talented

actors in their primes to star in his romantic comedy "The Philadelphia Story," based on a play by Philip Barry. The film begins with a fiery breakup between upper-crust husband and wife C.K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) and Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn).

The action really starts as Tracy finds a new husband-to-be in self-made man George Kittredge (John Howard). The stage is set for the wedding of the year, with Tracy's wealthy family insisting that it be an invite-only affair. However, the editor-in-chief of Spy Magazine (think: National Inquirer), Sidney Kidd (Henry Daniell), wants to cover the wedding. He assigns reporter Macaulay "Mike" Connor (James Stewart) and photographer Liz Imbrie (Ruth Hussey) to cover the grand affair, which is to be held at the Lord estate.

The only way that Mike and Liz can hope to gain access to the wedding is through the help of Tracy's ex-husband, C.K., who seems to have some hand in arranging for Spy Magazine to cover the event. C.K. introduces Mike and Liz to Tracy as his friends, but Tracy sees through the charade. C.K. then reveals that unless she cooperates, Spy Magazine will run a hit piece on her father, who has been philandering with a dancer in

New York.

The ramifications of such news are not lost on Tracy, who agrees to let Mike and Liz not only cover the wedding but also stay at the family estate during the few days leading up to it. Tracy's mother, Margaret (Mary Nash), and younger sister, Dinah (Virginia Weidler), still absolutely adore C.K., despite his alcohol issues.

Tracy becomes curious about rough-around-the-edges Mike and finds out that he's written a beautiful book of short stories, which she finds at a local library. She becomes drawn to Mike and discovers that his tough exterior is a façade that protects his sensitive, intellectual side. Soon, she finds herself caught up in a dilemma—should she go on with her scheduled marriage to a man she has little in common with? Should she further investigate her interest in Mike, who seems to be falling for her? And why is she still arguing with her ex, who is trying to protect her family's good name?

Along the way, the men in her life note that she's an untouchable goddess-like, perfect creature—one whose icy strength, it seems, cannot stand others' weaknesses.

## A Fabulous Cast

The star-studded cast is mostly on point, with Grant playing witty foil to Hepburn and Howard, Hepburn as a conflicted woman and Stewart as an oft-bumbling, yet deceptively smart fellow. However, Stewart steals the show with perhaps



A poster for MGM's "Philadelphia Story."

the sole romantic role of his career (which earned him his only Oscar in the Best Actor category, amazingly). His physical posturing, eye movements, and overall comedic timing are impeccable.

**'The Philadelphia Story' is a film that sports equal amounts of bubbly comedy and romantic tension.**

Hepburn's turn as an icy, blue-blooded socialite who learns more about herself as the film progresses was also fascinating. Grant's performance was admirable, although there were some times when he seemed to be a little out-of-touch with his character—as if he were somewhat mechanical in the delivery of his lines. By no means was he terrible (his bad days are still head and shoulders above most

actors' good ones); he just didn't seem to embrace his character as much as the others.

"The Philadelphia Story" is not only a film that sports equal amounts of bubbly comedy and romantic tension, but it also is a film about learning to accept others in spite of their flaws, and then making the right choices based on appreciation for those you truly love and those who truly love you.

*Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit [DreamFlightEnt.com](http://DreamFlightEnt.com)*

## 'The Philadelphia Story'

**Director**  
George Cukor

**Starring**  
Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, James Stewart, Ruth Hussey, John Howard

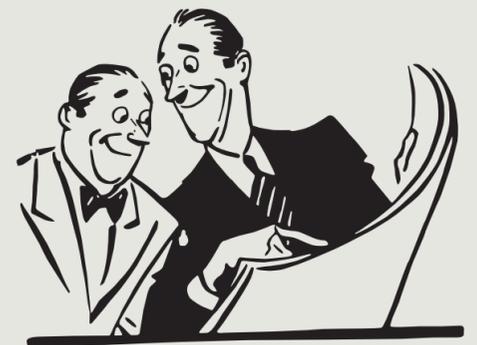
**Running Time**  
1 hour, 52 minutes

**Rated**  
NR

**Release Date**  
Jan. 17, 1941 (USA)

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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