

## MY VALEDICTION

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I am writing this the day after my final exam in the final year of my undergraduate studies. My right index finger, which was numb through most of yesterday, aches quietly now, and is incredulous that it has been afforded so little slumber after carrying my pen through the unflattering mishmash of American Literature that I recalled from the past eight months. (My thumb hurts too, but it's classier than my index and doesn't complain that it had an equal role in ending my degree successfully. It knows I know.)

"Successfully." I think perhaps that it's the Emerson still floating around in my head that makes me scoff at the term, but scholarship strikes me as something that cannot be *succeeded at*—at least not inasmuch as *success* marks a terminus beyond which other, unrelated pursuits may be endeavoured. Yet, this is the philosophy that carried me through the last months of this horrible, torturous year—this year where any learning I accomplished seemed incidental at the time, a bonus amidst my struggle not to spoil the accomplishments of my previous three years, like a pretty feather that floated within my fevered clutches as I groped, overboard, for a lifesaver. I imagined that the struggle would be finite (of course it was), and that in a limited number of weeks, after a limited number of papers, comprised of a limited number of pages to get through, I would be "done" university. *I am* done. Now what?

As he and his girlfriend packed up for the summer, my roommate's mother laughed when I asked the question, half-joking but in a genuine daze and wrenched by a rush of post partum ennui. What exactly should I do with myself, in these precious few days before I begin work and then come back for my Bachelor of Education? I couldn't play games with my roommate at his invitation—they felt like an opiate after all the studying and the writing. I couldn't listen to music or sleep—my mind was screaming too loudly and for the first time in a while, *incoherently*, for want of a task or goal worthy of its over-exercised muscles. My leisure, which I had stolen guiltily and manically from time consigned to my assignments and review sessions, which only two days ago I had occupied gladly with games or the internet or stupor, was now worthless to me. I knew that if I told any of them that I wanted to hide in my room and study, or read my textbooks, they would have laughed at

me and thought me pathetic, or at least, woefully indoctrinated beyond recovery. Why is my impulse to continue? *I'm done.*

It's because I'm *not* done. I'm not content to end this mode of learning and do something different.

My roommate's girlfriend, talking to his mother, said she dreaded the thought being placed in a classroom next year where she was responsible to teach a subject she hadn't studied at university. She felt, having spent three years learning English and Fine Arts, that it was unfair to expect her to teach anything else. She was done *studying*; now she was going to *teach*. Gross. Awful, indeed, to think that something she had spent so little of her life doing should determine the rest of it—moreover, that it was her *right* that it should determine the rest of it.

Emerson is where I started because he laments the division of the archetypical Man into men defined by their occupations, as Plato proposed in *Symposium*. We ought to be “Men Thinking” rather than “Scholars,” he argues, because the latter implies that what we are doing at the moment, rather than our capacity to change what we are doing at *any* given moment, determines our nature. It’s frighteningly true of my roommate’s girlfriend: she was an “English and Fine Arts Student” rather than a “woman learning about English and the Fine Arts,” and so feels herself capable of being only an “English and Fine Arts Teacher,” instead of a “woman teaching English or Fine Arts,” or perhaps something else entirely.

She’s in terribly good company—not just among her fellow Education students, who are pushed into this mental quagmire by an administration and school boards which require graduates to have two “teachables,” but among almost *all* of us now, who have come out of high school thinking that math shouldn’t be mandatory for people who don’t like it (or music, or history), and that the world of the post-secondarily educated is divided cleanly between Arts Majors who aren’t expected to know anything about science, and Science Majors who aren’t expected to know anything about the arts.

When was pigeon-holing ever valuable to the individual, let alone something to take pride in? The situation degenerates further, and even more disturbingly: I am an “English Major,” my friends tell me indulgently when I try to define a strange word for them, or analyse the rhetoric of a shabby but attractive argument, or spell something correctly, or communicate well in the written word—as if not only are these domains exclusive to me and

“my kind,” but that my friends who do not share them should take pride in the fact, since it implies that they have some other, potent talent in a discipline that *I* do not possess. Effective communication ought only to be expected from students of the English language and its literature, or historical awareness from disciples of history; an understanding of evolution can only be found in biologists and anatomists, or an appreciation of the raw power of calculus in Physics and Mathematics Majors.

Where pride in specific understanding meets pride in permissible ignorance (as they seem almost ubiquitously to do), communication on any level, with any degree of intensity or complexity or value, breaks down: the circles of human knowledge become disjunct, then insular, then worthless, and the barrier of proficiency will approach the barrier of language in its ability to prohibit general, let alone intellectual, congress. We see this already in the general sense where the uneducated public has come, perversely, to fear the educated individual. Pride in ignorance is widespread because ignorance is universal and pride is pleasing. The result, where democracy holds sway, is obvious, and was predicted by the British when they first lost the struggle to forestall broadened suffrage: we witness today the rise of the uneducated, or the wilfully ignorant, leader—of the common man elevated to power not on merit of his training to rule well, but on the stinking shoulders of an unwashed public that is enchanted with the notion of seeing one of their own (or at least, someone who looks like one of their own) on a pedestal.

University, not so long ago, was greater than it is now. Its very name implies general tutelage, implies knowledge available across the marvellous spectrum of disciplines. Why are we choosing to take only a little here and a little there, when the whole of human achievement is enshrined in one institution and the doors have been flung open? Are we so wise, before we have even tasted of the fruit, to discriminate between the trees on which it grows? Are we so well fed on other things that our remaining appetite is limited?

We were ravenous, once, all of us, because those who ate were few enough that they couldn’t help but see those who starved. Before the rise of the welfare state in the 1950’s and the invention of Universal Human Rights, education was a privilege enjoyed by a self-conscious, lucky few. Afterwards, when knowledge became accessible to the masses, when the diligent fellowship of the illuminati distended and burst under the swell of the proletariat, it became as worthless as my leisure time because the struggle to attain it had been outlawed.

Education cannot be guaranteed. When the attempt is made to do so, and we are forced by our own, arbitrary definitions of right and wrong to let no student go uneducated and no child go not a student, we can only reduce education's definition to the highest achievement of the lowest person. Then, where education is equated with success, *success* becomes the inalienable, universal right of each human being. Where the absurdity of *that* statement makes it impossible to achieve, we can only adulterate the definition of success until it is universally met. This informs the proud exclusivity of the disciplines: aptitudes inherently vary between individuals—some will take to communication better than to calculation, or vice versa—and it is the conceit of this generation that since inequality is unethical, each aptitude is as valuable as the other and is undifferentiated in magnitude between individuals. If we agree on this, it follows that the “communicator” is the fundamental equal of the “calculator” is the fundamental equal of the “better communicator.” Equal but separate; separate but equal. All good. Always.

I reject this conceit. *Success* is a constant to which individuals are relative, and *not* the reverse. All must pursue all and master all to attain it. Only the dead do not learn, and I will not stop learning because I have my degree. *I must succeed before I die.*

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