

“Last Lecture”
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In Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Before the Revolution*, one of my favorite movies, the young protagonist, Fabrizio ~ he’s in his early twenties ~ is torn between the doctrinaire Marxism he’s vowed to commit his life to ~ the revolution he professes to believe in with all his heart and soul ~ and the bourgeois pleasures that, presumably, the revolution is meant to put an end to. He’s so serious-minded ~ that is, he takes *himself* so seriously ~ that he can’t just admit that, like most of us, he’s easily seduced by sensual delights and youthful frivolities, which his sober politics are too narrow to permit. But he loves arguing about American movies over coffee with his (non-Marxist) friends and the bustling squares and antique architecture of Parma, where he grew up in a very comfortable home, and going to the opera with his family in the magnificent opera house that was built for the kind of people he’s not supposed to approve of. Truth be told, Fabrizio is a terrible fraud. And if he weren’t, if he were really as pure of mind and straight of purpose as he wants to believe he is, then we wouldn’t identify with him, and we wouldn’t sympathize with him.

The art I love most dearly emerges from an acknowledgement that we’re none of us pure of either mind or heart. It’s the art of mixed tones ~ buffoonery mixed with regret, as in Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*; comic absurdity mixed with heartache, as in Chekhov’s stories; salvation that appears improbably out of despair, as in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, or when all hope is lost, as in *The Winter’s Tale*. It’s the art of surprise, which can only come from the unpredictable ~ and what I mean by “unpredictable” isn’t the preposterous (like the twists in M. Night Shmalayan’s movies) but the turn you don’t expect just because it’s so true to life, and life is never predictable, yet when you see it or hear it you think, “*Of course.*” At the end of Philip Kaufman’s movie of the Milan Kundera novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example: the married couple, Tomas and Tereza, having fought their essential differences (his lightness, her heaviness; his taste for sexual variety, her fidelity; his longing for freedom, her tendency to feel unmoored unless she’s in her native country) as well as chafing against the oppressiveness of the Communist régime in Czechoslovakia, recapture their romance long after fate has stranded them far from their sophisticated urban lives, and, in a provincial inn, dancing together and making love, they experience a night of true happiness. Suddenly they’re so light their lives are weightless, and then, on a road made dangerous by the morning fog, they have a car accident. Kaufman shoots it as in a shaft of light; Tereza and Tomas simply disappear ~ as if their lives had grown so light that they could just vanish. What happens to them that day is sad for their friends, certainly, for us, undoubtedly, but not for them, who have never felt so unfettered, or so much in love. The double perspective, the double tone, the affirmation that life has as many layers as the French pastry I treasured when I was a child, the improbably airy *mille feuille* (the name means, literally, a thousand leaves) ~ that, as Virginia Woolf wrote in *To the Lighthouse*, “nothing is just one thing” ~ that’s what I cherish most in the arts.

At the other end of the spectrum is the kind of art that sermonizes, that reduces life to definitives and platitudes, that claims to know precisely how everyone should have acted ~ and I believe that it’s thoroughly, inherently false. When it comes in the form of drama, it generally wins the Pulitzer Prize or the Tony Award or both, like *Angels in America*, where the playwright, Tony Kushner, tells us in no uncertain terms which characters we’re allowed to like and where the ones we’re not allowed to like are summarily punished; or like John Patrick Shanley’s misnamed *Doubt*, which in fact doesn’t have a moment’s doubt about the guilt of the priest suspected by the protagonist (a tough-minded nun) of molesting a middle-school boy. When it comes in the form of a movie, it often wins the Oscar, like Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty*, whose sour depiction of life in the suburbs bears no resemblance to the memories of anyone I know (including myself) who grew up in one, or *Crash*, which purports to build a case for the inherent racism of Americans based on a series of incidents almost all of which defy our experience of the way people actually behave in contemporary America. These movies practice a kind of Q.E.D. (*quod est demonstrandum*) logic. We all know deep down we’re racists, but no one likes to admit it, so when a “daring” filmmaker like Paul Haggis has the “courage” to announce it, we’re cued not to check his evidence to see if it holds water (would a white L.A. cop in 2005 practically rape a middle-class black woman in front of her husband and then get away with it right under the nose of a black supervisor?)

but to read it as a confirmation of what we already believe. We all know, don't we, that the suburbs are full of materialistic, duplicitous men and women who lead miserable, dead-ended lives, so we accept the characters in *American Beauty*, even though they conduct themselves in ways that contradict everything we know about the way their supposed real-life counterparts behave; we accept as some kind of deeper truth the executives who take jobs at MacDonald's and work out naked in their garage, the histrionic wives whose sex lives are impeded by fears of staining the furniture, the teenage girls who fall in love with their stalkers. That "deeper truth" may be trite, but these movies congratulate us for recognizing it and for being serious enough people to swallow it whole.

Yeats said that art is forgiveness for sin. I think what he meant was that art has to be generous. It's always easy for us to look down from a great height on the characters in a work of fiction or a movie or a play and pass judgment on them ~ especially since most of the fiction we read and the plays we attend and, God knows, the movies we see give us points for doing just that. But just as "the rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance," to quote Prospero in *The Tempest*, so it's more difficult, more challenging and far more rewarding to see the humanity in a character who commits the kind of offenses that we may hope we wouldn't commit but in truth know ourselves to be fully capable of. If we embrace these characters ~ Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, whose addiction to morphine puts her out of the emotional reach of her husband and her sons, or Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, whose terror of death drives her into the arms of teenage boys ("The opposite is desire. So how could you wonder? How could you possibly wonder?") ~ we embrace them wholeheartedly, with a kind of moral depth that allows us to transcend the conventional and the small-minded. We love Hamlet, but, it seems to me, we love him more because we see him not only at his best (when he tells Horatio, in the serenity of acceptance, "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow," or when he exchanges forgiveness with Laertes, the brother of the woman he loved and whose heart he shattered) but also at his worst (when he bullies his mother and brings her to tears, or when he hesitates to kill Claudius at his prayers because, not content with taking revenge for his father's murder, he wants to send his uncle's soul to hell). We never stop loving Othello, even when he lets Iago persuade him to kill the infinitely sweet Desdemona, who lives only for him; we never stop loving him because his unreasoning jealousy lives side by side with a love so intense that, inevitably, when he finds he's been gulled, all he can do is to destroy himself. And we never stop loving him because we know him ~ we *are* him (there but for the grace of God . . .).

And that's the secret, isn't it? Bad writers and directors of the kind I've alluded to always want to offer us the easy way out ~ the lie that we're superior to the characters on the stage or the screen; put another way, they create false, two-dimensional characters we can *only* feel superior to. It's the genuine artists who bind us to great sinners like Lear and Othello ~ or more likely, in modern art, to petty sinners, who throw their lives away for pride or spite or else carelessly, without thinking about it, and then realize, too late, what they've done. We find them in Chekhov's plays, which have unhappy endings, and in Paul Mazursky's movies, which, through the melancholy and the resignation, somehow discover happy endings (*Blume in Love*) or at least mixed ones (*Enemies, A Love Story*). (To my mind Mazursky, of all American filmmakers, comes closest to Chekhov.) These characters' moment of consciousness ~ what Aristotle called the *anagnorisis* ~ is what makes them tragic, or, more often in modern works, tragicomic. My three favorite short stories share that moment of consciousness: Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," and ~ my favorite of favorites ~ James Joyce's "The Dead." Perhaps I lean most toward "The Dead" because Joyce is kinder to Gabriel Conroy than Tolstoy is to Ilyich or James to Marcher: he doesn't just give him an epiphany; he lets him have it while there's still some chance that it can do him some good, before he's on his deathbed (like Ilyich) or at the grave of the woman whose love might have redeemed him (like Marcher). Now I'm going to show you the seed of that epiphany ~ in John Huston's exquisite movie version of Joyce's story. For those of you who don't know the story, let me set the scene. At the annual New Year's dinner party given by his aunts and cousin, Gabriel is swept up in one folly of self-involvement after another ~ a quarrel with a colleague whose playful tone he completely misreads, a toast he makes (it's his annual contribution to the occasion) that is so formal and intellectualized that it doesn't come close to touching the true kindness and graciousness of his hosts (and yet, in their generosity and unquestioning love for Gabriel, they accept it as if it were the warm tribute he *ought* to have made). But no folly is greater in Gabriel than the proprietary pride with which he approaches his wife Gretta. He's booked a hotel room for the night and anticipates making love

to her. But all evening she seems remote from him. At first he doesn't realize it, because he's so caught up in his own concerns; he doesn't see that she's being swept away from him, into some painful and poignant memory. Finally one of the other guests, a celebrated tenor who's trying to impress a young woman he's squiring, sings a ballad to her. His voice comes wafting out of some upstairs room, but the tune arrests Gretta on the stairs and stirs her so profoundly that Gabriel, watching her from below, suddenly understands that there's an invisible wall between them.

What happens after this scene is that they go to the hotel, and there Gretta tells Gabriel about a boy, Michael Furey, who loved her more than his life and then died. It happened when she was a schoolgirl, long before she ever knew Gabriel. Gretta cries herself to sleep remembering this old love, and Gabriel moves, in a breathtaking arc, from bitterness and resentment at being closed out of the grand passion of her life, to an acceptance ~ the first he's ever felt ~ that he belongs to something greater than himself, to a commonality that includes everyone he's known, both the living and the dead. But let me talk a little about the scene I showed you, which precedes Gabriel's epiphany and which is, for me, as beautiful and as moving as any scene I know, in fiction or in film. (Those of us who love both understand how rare a gift it is to discover a movie that can match the experience of a great book or story; *The Dead* is, in my estimation, the best movie anyone has ever made of a great piece of fiction.) Huston, capturing Joyce, portrays (through Donal McCann's expressive silence) Gabriel's recognition that he can have no access to Gretta's private thoughts and memories; he fooled himself into thinking she was his, but truthfully she's as distant from him as those delicate women in Vermeer paintings who are clearly caught in the vortex of some emotion but are so veiled ~ cobwebbed ~ by the artist's brushstrokes that we can't get at them, and we can only guess what that emotion is. Until Gretta tells the story of Michael Furey in that hotel room, we have no way of getting at how the song, "The Lass of Aughrim," makes her feel. But if we don't know what she's thinking about, Anjelica Huston ~ one of those performers (as Pauline Kael wrote of Katharine Hepburn in *Long Day's Journey into Night*) who makes you understand why the phrase "divine" used to be appended to the names of certain actresses ~ illuminates the ineffable quality of that private reminiscence, while her transported paralysis on the stairway recalls the power of music to return the ghosts of our dead.

My student Nick Coccoma, who graduated last spring but is here this afternoon (and who is largely responsible for my giving this lecture), focused his Honors thesis on the intersection of drama and philosophy. He began it by talking about the recent Broadway revival of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, starring Vanessa Redgrave, which shook him to his roots. For Nick, the emotional transportation that great art affords us is both a moral demand ~ great art calls us to be moved to tears ~ and evidence of a moral dimension. Now, by "moral" he doesn't mean "pedantic" ~ drama that teaches us little lessons that most of us know before we walk into the theater. What Nick's getting at ~ if he will permit me to offer my own gloss on his thesis ~ is that the artist's creation of emotion out of the raw material of experience is a moral act because it puts us in touch with what makes us human. I've spent my career as a critic trying to put in words the emotions that the art I love calls up ~ the art of the playwright (Chekhov pinpointing the heartbreak of each of the *Three Sisters* as they sit together at the end of the play and listen to the army march away), of the filmmaker (Robert Altman's gossamer visuals capturing the sadness of McCabe's final hours in the snowy western town that is the setting of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*), of the actor (Lillian Gish as Lucy in D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, spinning around and around in her closet in terror as her vengeful father splinters the locked door with his axe). I've spent my time as a director trying to work out, always with wonderful, open-hearted actors, how to shape those emotions, often (no surprise) in the kind of poetic, emotionally knotted texts that have always drawn me as a critic ~ plays by Chekhov and Tennessee Williams and John Guare. And I've spent my best hours in the classroom, or so it seems to me, framing those emotions with my students, so that we can look together at how playwrights and filmmakers achieve them.

This is really going to embarrass him, but the papers Nick wrote for my American Drama class used to make me cry because he was so good at replicating the emotions in the plays he loves, and so there I was, face to face with them again, just as we are when we see a good production of a great play. The cheap ironic pose of much contemporary art and entertainment teaches us to be cynical when we're confronted with pure emotion, and the cheap sentimentality of much of what we see debases our responses, so we find it easier to cry at a phony melodrama like *Million Dollar Baby* than at a Greek tragedy or the moment in *The Tempest* when the fairy sprite Ariel teaches the mortal Prospero how to be human. But

education in the arts has the potential to restore the thrill of genuine emotion ~ I absolutely believe it does, or I wouldn't have become a teacher of theater and film. And so I say, without hesitation, that an artist's (and particular a dramatic artist's) ability to accomplish the lyrical evocation of a complex emotion as Huston did in that scene from *The Dead* is the zenith of his or her art. And, applauding that feat, which still, after all these years of going to the theater and the movies, has the power to fill me with wonder, let me show you another scene I love.

That was, of course, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, in the eleventh-hour *pas de deux* from *Swing Time*, "Never Gonna Dance." When the number comes up, they're about to part, for reasons that don't make any sense ~ she's just learned he's engaged to another girl and she doesn't realize that he isn't in love with her; her pride and her hurt feelings have gotten in the way so she can't see what's so obvious to us. "Does she dance very beautifully, the girl you're in love with?" Rogers asks Astaire. "Yes, very," he replies, clearly referring to Rogers. "The girl you're engaged to," she clarifies. "I don't care," he says. "I've danced with you. I'm never gonna dance again." And after he serenades her (this lovely song is by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields), they move into a sort of "anti-dance" that articulates what the dance critic Arlene Croce calls "the hunger of blocked desire" ~ two spirits drawn magnetically into an expression of both their need for each other and their inability to act on that need, as if they've become a pair of marionettes driven on a magnificent current of emotion, with their hearts working the strings, in a dance that is the embodiment of romantic anguish.

I don't know how I could possibly improve on Astaire and Rogers, so I'm not going to show you anything else. But perhaps I can give you a short list of some of the instances of high feeling in movies I most cherish, since movies are, after all, the medium I've spent the most time writing about and talking about. I recall Marlon Brando in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, wiping the undertaker's make-up off the corpse of his wife and giving voice to the bloody mess of feelings that her suicide has churned up in him. The way the restless energy of twelve-year-old Frankie (played by twenty-six-year-old Julie Harris), the heroine of Fred Zinnemann's film of Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, whirling around the kitchen of her small-town southern home on a close summer evening, suddenly deflates as the housekeeper, Berenice (Ethel Waters), rocks her in her mammoth arms and, singing the spiritual "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," brings her momentary respite from the burgeoning adolescent agonies the girl is enslaved to but hasn't begun to comprehend. The memory that assails Michael (Al Pacino) at the end of Coppola's *The Godfather, Part II*, after he's sent his brother Fredo to his death, of one of the last times his family was whole before it was torn apart ~ though we see the seeds of destruction are already in place, so turning back time just augments the pain of the tragedy, for Michael and for us ~ just as returning to her tenth birthday brings dead Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* no consolation for the loss of the people she loves. Montgomery Clift as Robert E. Lee Prewitt in Zinnemann's *From Here to Eternity*, blowing "Taps" on his bugle in honor of his murdered comrade (Frank Sinatra). Hannah (Florence Patterson) in Gillian Armstrong's film of *Little Women*, crushing rose petals over Beth's bed after she's died, and pausing to scatter some over her beloved dolls. The end of Satyajit Ray's *The World of Apu*, the last of his *Apu Trilogy*, when the sudden sight of the child he abandoned carries Apu (Soumitra Chatterjee) past his grief for the wife who died in childbirth, to forgiveness for the boy, forgiveness for himself, and an affirmation of the ineffable bond between father and son ~ there, on a deserted beach, at what could be the end of the world but unexpectedly seems like its beginning. And another deserted-beach scene: Alec (Kelly Reno) in Carroll Ballard's *The Black Stallion*, offering a gift of leaves to The Black, the splendid Arab horse that rescued him in a fire at sea and then again from a cobra on this island off the North African coast: the boy holds out the leaves, the horse nuzzles them, the boy pulls back his hand, the horse retreats and then charges back, and the delicate courtship dance between boy and animal crescendos into a mystical melding of the two forms, silhouetted against the twilight horizon, as The Black, in an act both of *noblesse oblige* and of friendship, permits Alec to ride on his back. When artists conjure up moments such as these, we can truly say the muse sits on their shoulders. When we are in their thrall, they pass the cup to us and for a while they make us their kindred spirits.