

In the Bookstore

"Tho' much is taken, much abides..."

--Tennyson

"Another race hath been, and other palms are won."

--Wordsworth

On a recent trip to New York, I found myself browsing in Book Culture, a new-and-used bookstore just off upper Broadway, near Columbia University. I had been to Book Culture a number of times before, when I was living and teaching on Long Island; but this time was different, for a couple of reasons. For one, I no longer live on Long Island; I moved to Seattle two years ago, after the college on Long Island where I taught a range of courses in writing and literature for 19 years went belly-up, in June of 2016. And for another (and as a consequence of the first), I no longer teach full-time - and sometimes, not at all, as was the case this last spring. Now that I am only an adjunct instructor, at a community college just south of Seattle, my classes -- strictly freshman comp now -- are among the first to be cancelled if they are under-enrolled; or, they could get taken at the last minute by any one of the full-timers who happens to need them to "make load". I know very well how this goes. When I was a full-timer myself, and chair of the English Department, it often fell to me to

cancel one or more of the adjuncts' classes, or "bump" them so that one of my full-time colleagues (or myself) could make load -- three or four courses per semester, as stipulated in the full-time faculty contract. Now the shoe is on the other foot, and I am the one getting bumped, or having my classes cancelled.

But I have become rather karmic and philosophical about this turn of events. As a formerly-tenured and then full professor, I have had my time in the sun; and while I am by no means happy that Dowling College had to close its doors, it came as no surprise. We'd been having serious financial and enrollment problems for years, and so when the foreseen end finally arrived, I (and, I suspect, a number of my colleagues -- those who were left; many, reading the increasingly obvious writing on the wall, had already gotten jobs elsewhere) actually felt a measure of relief. We no longer had to live in a constant state of anxiety about whether the college could make it through another year - or even another semester. The agony of the prolonged death-spiral was over. After Dowling's collapse, I taught comp at Stony Brook University for a semester, then sold my house (at a considerable loss) and many of my belongings, packed up the rest, and moved to Seattle to join Julie, whom I'd met the previous year, and who was to

become my second wife. (My first wife, Diane, died in 2004.)

Many changes in a couple of years; much space traversed, from Long Island to Seattle; different people, different mores. So there was much to "contemplate about", as I like to say, as I stood in the upstairs stacks of Book Culture one afternoon in early May, browsing the shelves in the lit/crit section, and taking down book after book to scan and palpate their felt essences. (To analyze what it is that inclines me to purchase a book I have just seen on the shelves of a bookstore, as opposed to buying it online, would require an essay in itself; suffice it to say here that the factor of "heft" - not physical but ideational heft - plays a big part in my decision.) Browsing in bookstores, especially used bookstores, is a great way to "contemplate about" things in general; which means, in my case, letting my mind wander out from the book in question into other realms of desultory thought and reflection. I find this process both comforting and nutritive. Seeds I am unaware of - contemplational and sometimes creative seeds - are being sown, and given space and time to grow in. The end purposes of this generative and regenerative activity are not at all clear to me, and yet it feels necessary, this mind-wandering and mind-breathing; and a

used bookstore - or, in this case, a new-and-used one - is the perfect venue for such respirational moments.

I was having such a moment now in Book Culture. My mind, in its expansion, folded back in on itself (not unlike a brain), and I became aware of something missing in my life. Something I had not been conscious of before. What was missing, it seemed then -- or maybe I am only just figuring it out now, as I write this - were the factors of "vantage-point" and "co-perspective". These were things I used to have, and had no longer.

The "vantage-point" was the imagined position from which I used to observe myself browsing the offerings in a bookstore. In trying to decide whether I wished to actually buy the book in question - though perhaps it would be more accurate to say needed to buy, because the impulse felt more like need than volition - there entered into play the consideration of the "vantage-point" from which the decision was to be made. During the 19 years I was at Dowling, the vantage-point had been that of the tenure-track, then tenured professor that I was. This involved a certain self-congratulatory feeling I experienced as I weighed the "heft" (always more mental than physical; see above) of the book in hand. I was not only considering whether the owning of the book (not just the reading, but

the owning; and maybe, to tell the truth, more the owning than the reading) would make me a better person: smarter, more knowledgeable, more wise, more virtuous; better prepared to do battle against whatever it was I thought I had to do battle against: the fear of being thought stupid, maybe, or shallow. I was also imagining the position - the vantage-point -- from which I was making this consideration. And what made the whole process self-congratulatory was my awareness of the consciously-privileged vantage-point from which I was undergoing my search for the "right book", the book that promised to make me a better person. Granted, the fact that I was a professor at an obscure college that was experiencing various serious difficulties, including being consistently ranked in the fourth (and last) tier by US News and World Report, was a serious negative qualification that always caused me to discount the value and significance of having tenure at a school such as Dowling, which was maybe something more to be ashamed of than proud of. (I mean, if I had gotten tenure there, then it must not be worth very much. This was an academic version of the Groucho Marx Syndrome.)

Nevertheless, another part of me was determined to hang on to what I had, what I had achieved, since it had

been so long in the making: eight years of graduate school, three years of apprenticeship as a visiting lecturer at Holy Cross, and then the seven years before getting full tenure at Dowling. This vantage-point had been one of relative reassurance and security - again, with the necessary qualifications to be made in the case of Dowling, whose continuing existence, in the face of its ongoing financial and enrollment problems, was in constant jeopardy; the school essentially lived from semester to semester, at least from 2010 on. Now, however, since Dowling's collapse, this particular vantage-point had ceased to exist. Now I was a part-time instructor, hired from quarter to quarter (Highline, the college where I now - sometimes -- teach, is on the quarter system), with no standing or job security. What then was the status of my vantage-point now? What were its current quality and essence? Or did I even have a vantage-point anymore?

Then there was the question of my "co-perspective", which was also now radically altered, if not non-existent. This "co-perspective" was the sense I had had, when Diane was still alive, that she was sharing in all of my plans, aspirations, ambitions and achievements - not as though they were hers, because they weren't, but because they mattered to her too, because they were mine, and I mattered

to her. And also, even more, because we shared a life together. The co-perspective also meant that the aforementioned plans, aspirations, etc. were undergone, by me, with the idea always fully present of how they might be perceived by Diane. My triumphs, accomplishments and the like mattered because they were seen and shared by her. They were experienced always at least partly with her opinions and reactions in mind; what I achieved did not fully matter to me unless it also mattered to her. Nothing really meant much to me until it could be told to Diane, and appreciated by her. In this way the co-perspective was not only a matter of shared values and ideals, but also of a shared consciousness.

Now, however, all that was changed - and was, in fact, over. My academic career, such as it was - such as it had been, at Dowling - was over. Kaput. The job at Highline was just a kind of rear-guard mop-up action, so that I could tell myself I wasn't "really" retired -- I was still teaching; even though, in a much realer sense, I was effectively retired, because I was now receiving Social Security payments, and had been since moving to Seattle. Before, I had been a "somebody"; now I was pretty much a nobody.

Too harsh, maybe - and probably untrue as well. Because I didn't really feel like a nobody. I still had my writing - and now more than ever, since after the collapse of Dowling and my full-time teaching career, writing had assumed an even larger place in my life and self-conception. But if I was now not exactly a complete nobody, I was certainly diminished (if only in terms of my own vantage-point -- and perhaps that of others as well) from what I had been before. Quantum mutatus ab illo qui...

(Latin, you see, makes me feel better - always has, ever since the days of Latin I in ninth grade, when the orderly arrangement of words into conjugations and declensions had the ability to somehow comfort and reassure me. Reassure me of what, exactly? That things had an order and logic and method that I could apprehend; and that because I could apprehend these things, I was somehow superior. Because God forbid that I should in any way be average. To be average was to be inferior. (A variation of the Lake Wobegon Effect.) The only way to be acceptable was to be superior. So the Vantage-Point Syndrome goes way back. The privileged Vantage-Point Syndrome - you might even say the Vantage-Point Syndrome of Privilege - goes way, way back.)

I came to see also, sheltered and contemplating about things in the second-floor stacks of that bookstore on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, that some other things were over and done with as well. One of those things was The Quest. Not the quest for books in general - that would never be finished; but rather, the quest that had been undergone from my former vantage-point. The quest for the knowledge, and wisdom, and confirmation, and validation, and virtue, and - sad to say - the moral self-aggrandizement that could, as I imagined, be conferred upon me by serious, scholarly, highly literary, "hefty" books (see above) - that quest was now over and done with, too. Not that I had ever really found what I was questing for; the particular object of my search had always eluded me. For the books I ended up buying always - as soon as I bought them - turned out to be, in Mr. Sammler's phrase, the wrong books. That is to say, they were never made proper use of by me. They failed to lead to knowledge, etc. To be sure, they remained reassuring when I saw them on my shelves. I was reassured that I was well-armed, well-defended against whatever it was I needed to be protected from. But I also sensed that I had failed to apprehend and absorb the most important messages and lessons my books contained. Their deepest content was

wasted on me; I simply was not smart enough to truly understand it. Maybe, though, if I kept reading good books - and more to the point, if I kept buying them, accumulating them, expanding my shelves - maybe then, someday, I would finally find the right book, the book that would unlock the ultimate secret...

But no. It was undeniable. The Quest - at least as it had existed during all those years of my academic hopes, and aspirations, and strivings - was over. The vantage-point from which The Quest had been undertaken was gone. And the co-perspective of Diane's consciousness -- along with Diane herself -- was now dead, too. My whole way of thinking about these things was over. So many things - habits of thought, dispositions of feeling - were over, and no longer had a place in my life. Books were still important, of course, but they seemed to have lost their former undergirding of urgently personal ideas and sentiments. What was I to do? How was I now to think about the place of books in my life? And therefore - as another consequence of the impasse I now found myself in -- how was I to think about my life itself, such a huge part of which was books?

Though in another sense it was true that the co-perspective had not really died with Diane. For many years

after her death - during "The Afterlife", as I used to think of it - the co-perspective lived on as an ideational artifact of my imagination and memory. I often spoke aloud to Diane (but only when I was alone in the house on Long Island - which was most of the time). It was a comfort to me, at least in the eleven years following her death, before I met Julie, to imagine what Diane would have thought and felt about many things that I was now experiencing alone. How would she have reacted? What would she have said and done? ("WWDD?" became a kind of touchstone or mantra of thought during what I came to call "The Minor Period", that long stretch of years after her death - as opposed to "The Major Period", which was the 23 and a half years, 1981-2004, that we had been together.) And even for a while after I met Julie, after we had begun what at first was just an epistolary relationship (email and FaceTime, because we lived on different coasts), the co-perspective with Diane persisted. I wondered what she would have thought of Julie. I was pretty sure she would have liked her: her sensitivity, her vulnerability, her love of calligraphy (all of which they shared); also the fact that Julie, like Diane, had been born and raised in New York, and was very much a "searcher". Though her prolonged search (Marxism in college, then a short stint of

hippiedom - a cabin in the Maine woods, then tooling around the country in a converted schoolbus, in which her first husband had built an aviary -- then 23 years of evangelical Christianity in southwestern New Mexico; though by the time I met her, she was well-lapsed -- if she hadn't been, I could never have gotten together with her) - Julie's search was very different from the struggle with serious mental illness that Diane had been through and come out the other side of, some years before I met her. But it was in no small part their respective searches and struggles that had made me fall in love with both of them. I felt strongly that if they had known each other (independently of me, somehow -- so my fantasy ran), they would have liked each other, and maybe even become good friends. (Though not when Julie was an evangelical Christian; Diane, like me, was a secular Jew.)

But after I moved to Seattle to live with Julie, the co-perspective naturally withered away. I was no longer alone, and so the ideational artifacts of The Afterlife ceased to exist. (Though I still miss them. Julie is OK with this - another reason why I love her.)

And so now (continued my extended reverie among the shelves of Book Culture), with the co-perspective dissipated, and the vantage-point collapsed (along with

Dowling itself) -- Whither my imaginational life? But this was sort of a specious question, wasn't it? My life was undoubtedly richer now; I had fallen in love again, and married again; I was no longer alone. The Afterlife, along with The Minor Period (they were not quite the same: The Afterlife was a place where Diane could continue to be present, and resonate, whereas The Minor Period signaled all the ways in which she was gone, and mine was a solo existence -- but they covered the same span of time), were both now things of the past. And yet, as things of the past - and precisely because of their pastness - they were dear to me; as vanished artifacts of my imagination, their memory continued to be precious - indeed, perhaps even more precious than before. And so in that sense, they had not vanished at all, and were still - in accordance with the paradoxes of commemoration - very much alive. Julie understood this, too. I was lucky to have found someone who understood, and tolerated, and accepted so much. I was lucky in a lot of ways - despite the losses, and disappointments, and failures; and maybe it was even those setbacks, and the humility they seemed to have engendered, that enabled me to see, on balance, how lucky I was.

But what if your adult - late-adult - identity is once again in question? What if you are moving from being a

lucky somebody to a lucky quasi-nobody? What if, despite all your various lucky vicissitudes, your race is pretty much run? What then? That was the sobering proposition I was putting myself, that early May afternoon in the stacks of Book Culture. It was a Monday, that most sobering and businesslike of days. If I had been employed, I wouldn't have been browsing in a bookstore - I would have been in school back in Seattle, teaching or meeting with students; or, before that, at Dowling, I would have been looking forward to the end of the school year, in a couple of weeks. The memories of Mays past, from the Major and even Minor Periods, were very sweet to contemplate. The vantage-point of those recent Mays, when my summer freedom was so near I could taste it, were suddenly very present to me again. May on Long Island had always had a sensual atmosphere all its own: the brightening light, the warming breeze, all the fresh young flowers and leaves - the "stir of liberation" manifestly at hand. (The phrase is the title of the third volume of Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoevsky, so it seems apt here.) There was a little bittersweetness, too, at the thought that even if I were to teach again in the spring, the spring quarter at Highline ran all the way into late June, and so May in Seattle, beautiful as it is (the springs in Seattle start

earlier and last much longer than those on Long Island), would never have quite the same imminently-liberational feel that it had had for me in New York. No, there would be nothing in my life again like a New York May. New York Mays were over, too.

Much was over, there was no denying it. But not everything. Almost 65 was not 75 - not to mention 85 (though that quantity was still barely conceivable to me. My father had died at 84 - but he was a hardier sort than I. In many ways I was more like my mother, who had died at 71, of a rare blood disease.) But it was the writing years, I reminded myself, that really counted. The next ten years or so - if I were lucky enough to retain my mental faculties. I gave myself another ten years to do something in writing. To keep writing, first of all. To get better. And to be more published - more and better published. Was that going to happen? If it were, it would have to start soon. And I would have to come from behind. I would have to be a dark horse in the race. That was unlikely, but it had a certain appeal. And its unlikelihood was part of its appeal.

The Quest that had been might be over, but the race was still on. And we were approaching the end. The backstretch? Maybe. And I would need the luck of the dark

horse. Dramatic, yes. Too dramatic? Maybe. Though no more so than the innate drama of life. And if there wasn't going to be a final bang, I was determined for it all not to end with a whimper, either.

I came downstairs from the second-floor stacks with a couple of books in hand. One was an anthology of essays by Clive James, called Cultural Amnesia. It was sufficiently hefty, in both senses. The other book I'd chosen was lighter - also in both senses. It was entitled MFA vs. NYC, and was a collection of personal stories by and for young writers trying to decide between getting a graduate degree in creative writing, or forgoing graduate school for an advanced degree in the supreme school of hard knocks. I wondered what I would have done in their place, and this book promised to give me a new vantage-point on the question.

When I came out of the bookstore, it was starting to rain. It had been warm and sunny before. On the way to the bookstore I had taken a detour into the central quad of Columbia, where students were milling around in their light blue graduation gowns and taking photos of each other. Now, however, a light spring rain had started to fall. Luckily, I had brought my Seattle rain jacket with me. The

dark horse in the rain - what could be better? Besides,
the rain was good for the flowers.