

The Reed

An Undergraduate Journal of Existentialism
from St. Olaf College

"Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed . . . It is not from space that I must seek my dignity, but from the ordering of my thought. The possession of lands would give me nothing more. By space, the universe envelops me and swallows me up like a point. By thought, I envelop it."

-Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

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Editor's Note

This year, we are excited to present *The Reed* in its first ever double-issue format. This joint publication of the 2007 and 2008 issues commemorates our 10th anniversary as St. Olaf's interdisciplinary journal of Existentialism.

"Existentialism" is, at best, a tenuous term. To begin with, most of the figureheads commonly associated with the movement either preceded or rejected it as a label. Then, after flourishing in the mid-twentieth century, it became further convoluted as a cliché catch phrase associated with broader cultural trends. It is tempting, in our current age, to view Existentialism as nothing more than a bloated has-been--a vacuous relic from our parents' college days.

But while Existentialism may not be easy to codify as a unified philosophical position, it is nonetheless a useful term for designating a collection of related philosophical questions and a particular approach to them. It is a rejection of essentialist doctrines in favor of the subjective individual, and a critique of the traditional methods of philosophy. Because of this last point, it is only fitting that *The Reed*, as a journal of Existentialism, takes an interdisciplinary approach. Philosophical discourse is not limited to treatises and essays, but manifests itself in literature and art as well. Existentialism is a humanization of philosophy, and the questions it raises remain very much alive.

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The Reed accepts essays, poetry, prose, and visual art related to Existentialism. For the purposes of the journal, we define "Existentialism" broadly: anything that addresses canonic Existentialist thinkers or themes commonly associated with the movement (e.g. absurdity, alienation, subjectivity, paradox, truth as metaphor, life as suffering, etc.) will be considered for publication. There is a 4,000 word limit for essays, and MLA format with endnotes is encouraged. To submit, simply send your entry as an email attachment to:

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Table of Contents

	Colin Halverson St. Olaf College	<i>Annaliese</i> (cover art)
4	Justin Haddock University of Texas at Austin	<i>Bermuda Grass</i>
6	Larissa Walker Siena College	<i>Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Elimination of the Overwoman?</i>
12	Gil Thompson St. Olaf College	<i>Ergates: A Marxist Rendition of Qobeletb's Teachings Found in Ecclesiastes</i>
21	Kay Wadherc Trinity University	<i>My Island</i>
22	Steven Flores University of Iowa	<i>Que es valor?</i>
34	Justin Haddock University of Texas at Austin	<i>The Most Practical Interrogatives</i>
35	Nigel Dawson Northern Michigan University	<i>Sunyata and Nothingness</i>
40	Olaf Samuelson St. Olaf College	<i>untitled</i>

Bermuda Grass

By Justin Haddock

All experience, shining dully
Amidst a background of heartbeats and footsteps,
 Stoplights and backstreets,
Ringing purely and plainly in the thickness of dead air
Raining down on me from Heaven's half-empty glass
Drenching me as I grasp for more

Instead I reach for the truth which stares
Glinting like a pen knife
Sunning between the long and short ribs
 Of our mother's father's father
 Or our father's mother's mother
Both of whom tumble into obscurity and Otherness
Standing like tombstones under these fluorescent essents
Calling out to the blind passersby:

 "Here lies God's only son, Judas
 who was born a lonely twin
 and died, lost beyond the veil
 of the beautiful abyss
 called the spotlight."

The future is filled
with the cream tangerine dream
 of music and lyrics
stripping naked in the street and jogging past
 the paint-striped, rubber-pieced fields of the past,
 smiling blindly and boastingly flashing their crooked, yellow teeth
 at those who dreamed and still dream
 of being

Tomorrow is nigh
And the sun is high
And the day is coming
 when the fruits of my blundered blossoms will
 Cling to their aging homes and begin to drip
 with the rotting blood of January's dismay,

or allow the Eastern wind to carry them from home
and show them the mercy of Bermuda grass in April

How the sweet songbirds of love spit
 Song of poison from their parted lips!
And how the branches on which they perch
 crack and bend under that weighty guilt,
 that strange familiarity of summer stereo

Lie lust and litter, songbird
Pass not your glaring eye
 nor shattered mirror
 nor tangled nest,
 weaving into that Great Uncertainty.

Leave me before I denounce the rituals that
Austen and Charles and Danielle sang of,
Under a moon of infinity,
Dancing and praising Aphrodite for her provision of that magical
Triumvirate
of Anglican
Evil.

And I'll leave, too, quiet,
that the devil might swallow you whole
should I utter a single, shuttered
word.

We the virus unknowingly spread
our feeble minds outwards
 to grasp and control what Father God has given us

We know no other nature than this
one - this one
single, dove-tailed playground,
opening its willing holes for us to plunder
 inwards

and make sick
everything we touch.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Elimination of the Overwoman?

By Larissa Walker

“Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None.” Did Nietzsche intend for Zarathustra to be a book for all men, and a book for none, that is woman? Is this a book exclusively for the overman, and a book for none, or no *overwoman*? Did Nietzsche envision *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to be interpreted as a noticeably misogynist narrative? Or is there more to his text than appears upon first read? Perhaps Zarathustra's riddles and abstract metaphors have a deeper, more feminist conviction hidden beneath their seemingly sexist convictions. Although there is a strong misogynist component to Zarathustra's literal speech, the rhetorical figures Nietzsche utilizes throughout the text do in fact leave room to uncover a distinct feminine undertone. By the end of the text the impossibility of expressing Zarathustra's eternal recurrence without first recognizing and then necessitating the existence of women becomes quite clear.

Regardless of his initial intent to embrace and fulfill the life of the overman, Zarathustra ultimately comes to desire simply *teaching* the ways of the overman. That is, by transforming himself into a prophet of the eternal recurrence, he is satisfying his urge to live as the overman by simply professing its existence to others. Yet, to attain such a goal Zarathustra needs to also master the essence of wisdom and life. Ironically, as much as Nietzsche's text is criticized for blatantly demeaning women, both wisdom and life (crucial elements in grasping the eternal recurrence and teaching the ways of the overman), are portrayed as entirely feminine figures (*Zarathustra*, 226). If Nietzsche intended Zarathustra to speak with a sharp misogynist tongue then he surely would not have depicted such essential attributes in female form. Moreover, not only does Zarathustra promote the existence of wisdom and life as feminine, but he also stretches the need for a womanly presence so far as to declare, “Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, unless it be this woman whom I love: for you I love, O eternity...*For I love you, O eternity*” (*Zarathustra*, 228). Therefore, woman embodies three crucial forms in creating the quintessential overman: wisdom, life and eternity.

Yet, Zarathustra's feminist reverence is not restricted solely to his innate desire for children and eternal life. Rather, as he exclaims in another passage, “Deeply I love only life - and verily most of all when I hate life. But that I am well disposed toward wisdom, and often too well, that is because she reminds me so much of life...Oh yes, wisdom! One thirsts after her and is never satisfied” (*Zarathustra*, 109). Once again, not only does Zarathustra illustrate an obvious recognition for the existence of female, but he also affirms the inherent *need* for her presence in the life of the overman, outside the realm of pregnancy and birth (woman's supposed sole purpose).

Why then, after affirming such clear and decisive instances of admiring, if not demanding the feminine, is Nietzsche's text repeatedly interpreted as misogynist? Is this an overt misinterpretation of Zarathustra's ultimate intentions? In the majority of assessments, Zarathustra's speech does indeed display misogynistic convictions when taken literally. For instance, “You are going to women? Do not forget the whip!” (*Zarathustra*, 67) or

“Everything about woman is a riddle, and everything about woman has one solution: that is pregnancy” (*Zarathustra*, 66) and again, “All-too-long have a slave and tyrant been concealed in woman. Therefore woman is not yet capable of friendship: she knows only love” (*Zarathustra*, 57). When taken literally, these statements can easily be interpreted as an obvious illustration of Zarathustra's view of women as slaves, whose only purpose is child-bearing, and are clearly unequal in the same aspects of life to which man is capable of enjoying, for example, friendship.

With such demeaning phrases, Nietzsche *does* provoke a sexist critique of *Zarathustra*. However, especially when taking his biographical background into consideration, even more so the context in which *Zarathustra* was written, Nietzsche's bold displays of anti-feminism are almost understandable, and even readable as potentially implying an entirely contrary and subtler notion of a pro-feminine position.

Lou Andreas Salome, one of Nietzsche's closest colleagues and friends undoubtedly played a prominent role in his representation of women throughout *Zarathustra*. According to one account,

It was [Lou Andreas-Salome] who plays a starring role in Nietzsche's biography and is central to a biographical consideration of 'woman' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as well as in all of Nietzsche's work after *Zarathustra*. It was Salome, after all, who in 1882 was photographed sitting in a small cart holding a very small whip, with two sheepish philosophers - one of them Nietzsche himself - standing in the cart's traces. (Oppel 120)

Another critic proclaims, “That the genesis of *Zarathustra* involved Lou Salome and the exhilarating and humiliating experiences of 1882 is clear to anyone who takes a biographical approach to the text” (Solomon and Higgins, 12). Furthermore, in strict relation to his relationship with Salome, Oppel again suggests, “Knowing that Nietzsche found one captivating and intelligent woman, flesh and blood rather than figurative, with whom he drafted aphorisms on 'woman,' helps to throw some light on the disparagement and the praise of women that occurs in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*” (130). The combinations of these assertions have multiple implications when attempting to explain Nietzsche's rich text.

First, Salome's rejection of Nietzsche's marriage proposal undoubtedly tainted his views on women, especially as they pertain to marriage and children (a fact to consider when analyzing Zarathustra's speech “On Child and Marriage”). Secondly, Salome was one of the first people with whom Nietzsche discussed his theory of the eternal recurrence. Since Nietzsche's conception of eternal recurrence is often viewed as perhaps the most crucial component to Zarathustra's purpose for existence, Nietzsche's conversations and correspondence with Salome involving this 'eternal' possibility ought definitely be considered as a prominent influence on his personal views of the feminine. Furthermore, when literally examining the famous statement, “You are going to women? Do not forget the whip!” bear in mind that Nietzsche allowed the exact opposite portrayal in the *staged* photograph.

In that famous photo, Nietzsche and his close friend Paul Ree are standing aside a wagon and coincidentally, a wagon that also happens to be accommodating none other than Lou Salome inside, complete with a whip in her hand. Not only does this depiction contra-

dict the obvious critical statements surrounding “Nietzsche the misogynist,” but it also reaffirms the fact that the text is merely a verbal expression for Zarathustra, *not* Nietzsche himself. Moreover, many critics often neglect to consider that the statement involving the whip was actually made by an old woman Zarathustra converses with, which again, further complicates the original charge of chauvinism. In one analysis of this controversy, Solomon and Higgins propose, “The old woman's suggestion hints that she does not think that women will participate so readily. Far from endorsing the naturalness of male control, the old woman presents the sexes as engaged in a power struggle that the male is by no means assured of winning” (8). Clearly, this inference provides Nietzsche's text with an even stronger feminist voice. For without a tool such as a whip, man's natural powers are insufficient to control with the power of the feminine.

The problem remains, then, that these instances of literary dichotomies only serve to exacerbate the already controversial interpretations of Nietzsche's literature. As one account explains this dissension,

Nietzsche's views on woman are straightforwardly those of an aristocrat who sees male-female relationships and the social roles of each sex in strictly functional and unsentimental terms. However, on the level of a textual politics in which the question of style is paramount, there can be found in Nietzsche's writings a celebration of the 'feminine' and of woman...It cannot be without significance that Zarathustra's quest for meaning and truth culminates in the recognition of 'eternity' understood as woman. Nietzsche uses the idea of 'woman' as a metaphor for life understood as eternal pregnancy and fecundity. It is woman who thus embodies, who bears and carries, the overman as life's perpetual desire for self-overcoming. (Ansell-Pearson, 327)

Thus, just as Zarathustra declares women are riddles, so too are his testimonies involving them. His metaphorical parodies involving the scope of feminine are nothing less than Nietzsche's own personal use of riddles through the mouth of Zarathustra.

Although the Zarathustra text is indeed easy to read literally, such a “riddle theory” would allow readers escape the boundaries of naive misinterpretations and instead reconsider other metaphorical manifestations throughout the narrative. For instance, assume Solomon and Higgins were accurate in hypothesizing that Nietzsche sought to illustrate a power struggle between the sexes in Zarathustra's conversation with the old woman. If such a conviction holds true, then Nietzsche is certainly no misogynist, but rather, a proponent for feminism.

This advocacy for the feminine is irrefutably concealed continuously throughout the entire text of *Zarathustra*. Even though Nietzsche designates only one chapter completely to women (“On Little Old and Young Women”), there remains no uncertainty that Zarathustra incessantly reaffirms the need for a womanly presence throughout his journey. When addressing “On Reading and Writing,” Zarathustra outwardly contends, “Brave, unconcerned, mocking, violent - thus wisdom wants us: she is a woman and always loves only a warrior” (41). And again in Part II, Zarathustra analyzes not only wisdom, but also her close relation to life, and laments,

I almost answered wickedly and told the angry woman [life] the truth; and there is no more wicked answer than telling one's wisdom the truth. For thus matters stand

among the three of us: Deeply I love only life - and verily, most of all when I hate life. But that I am well disposed toward wisdom, and often too well, that is because she reminds me so much of life...is it my fault that the two look so familiar...

Perhaps [wisdom] is evil and false and a female in every way; but just when she speaks ill of herself she is most seductive. (109)

These analogies linking wisdom and life to the essence of female are entirely imperative when examining the necessity of woman throughout *Zarathustra*. In her chapter, "Zarathustra's Irony and Its Mastered Moment," Oppel proposes,

By the end of part 3, the feminine, implicit in Zarathustra's major prophecy of eternal return and in his self-overcoming, has become assimilated as an important, major part of his Self. If Life is a woman, and if she is Zarathustra's very own life, then the logic is neither man nor woman, but human and inclusive (180).

Thus, wisdom and life are placed on an entirely different level of importance when considered in context with the Life of Zarathustra himself. For then, not only are these attributes embodied by the feminine, but more significantly, Zarathustra himself is perceived as in fact embodying a female form properly his own.

Herein lies the ultimate interpretation of Nietzsche's feminism. Throughout the literature Zarathustra vividly conveys his pursuit for the eternal recurrence symbolically through three stages of existence - as birth, life and ultimately death. Oppel interprets this possibility as follows:

At the outset of the narrative, Zarathustra leaves his mountain retreat because he is overfull, overladen with wisdom - very pregnant - and ready to give birth, that is, to communicate it to his fellow humans...eventually he leaves even this small group [of followers], returns to the mountains, and communes with himself; at this point the discussions become lively, as he is not merely lecturing, but engaging in give-and-take with the women in his life who are implicit in his Self. (Oppel, 162)

Clearly these women "implicit" in Zarathustra's self also serve as many of the qualities he later describes as essential in fulfilling the life of the overman. These include attributes like laughter, dance, suffering, pregnancy, childbirth, war, solitude, love, friendship and most importantly, eternal life. Unquestionably, a majority of these traits are deemed as feminine in the text. For instance, when discussing "On Involuntary Bliss," Zarathustra proclaims, "Happiness runs after me. That is because I do not run after women. For happiness is a woman" (160). Again, and perhaps more notably, Zarathustra continues to yield to woman and states, "And because we know so little, the poor in spirit please us heartily, particularly when they are young females. And we are covetous even of those things which the old females tell each other in the evening. That is what we ourselves call the Eternal-Feminine in us" (127). These crucial elements are what Zarathustra believes will eventually lead to the achievement of the *Übermensch*.

Conceivably, Zarathustra's most prominent portrayal of his creating the overman, or rather, of his birthing process, is represented in the section "Upon the Blessed Isles" when he pronounces:

But you could well create the overman. Perhaps not you yourselves, my brothers.

But into fathers and forefathers of the overman you could re-create yourselves: and I would let this be your best creation. Creation - that is the great redemption from suffering and death, and life's growing light. But that the creator may be, suffering is needed and death is much change. Indeed, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators.

Thus are you advocates and justifiers of all impermanence! To be the child who is newly born, the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth and the mother's pang: of the birth-giver. (87)

This passage wholeheartedly epitomizes the possibility of Zarathustra's (or "the creator's") life stages: of his birth, of his life, and of his death. The creation of the overman is unconditionally linked to the creation of a child, through pregnancy and birth, with the feminine qualities that *are* woman and mother.

Zarathustra concludes his section "Upon the Blessed Isles" by affirming, "Myself I sacrifice to my love, and my neighbor as myself - thus runs the speech of all creators. But all creators are hard" (90). This "sacrifice" to love is later represented more fully in the chapter "On Involuntary Bliss" when Zarathustra proclaims,

Companions the creator once sought, and children of his hope; and behold, it turned out that he could not find them, unless he first created them himself. Thus I am in the middle of my work, going to my children and returning from them: for his children's sake, Zarathustra must perfect himself. For from the depths one loves only one's child and work; and where there is great love of oneself it is the sign of pregnancy: thus I found it to be. (161)

Zarathustra's enduring pregnancy allegory eventually embraces its final stage in the affirmation of the eternal recurrence as part of the section "The Seven Seals." Zarathustra begins the chapter by pronouncing,

If I am a soothsayer and full of that soothsaying spirit...in its dark bosom prepared for lightning and the redemptive flash, pregnant with lightning bolts that say Yes and laugh Yes...blessed is he who is thus pregnant!... Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, unless it be this woman whom I love: for you I love, O eternity...*For I love you, O eternity.* (228)

There is clearly reference made to Zarathustra's pregnancy of the overman repeatedly throughout the text. Of course, a misogynist critique of the narrative *could* convict Nietzsche for impregnating Zarathustra exclusively with an *overman*; however, the more rational, symbolic interpretation would instead call for a critique in favor of the feminine - one which recognizes the totality of Zarathustra's journey through life's stages, and understands these as undeniable feminine components and exemplary human components.

This more abstract, figurative reading of *Zarathustra* as an advocate of the feminine certainly proves more substantial when reading the text in its entirety. In fact, some approaches to the text may not only suggest Nietzsche as a feminist, but even a contender for a radical revamping of the gender gap that existed in his period of time. As Oppel proposes,

The very absence of women as characters and models, in fact, makes possible the transfer of feminine characteristics to male characters; in the simplest way, the absence challenges the heterosexual dichotomy by eliminating it as a narrative pos

sibility...Nietzsche's narrative challenge to the heterosexual dichotomy clears a space for new ways to think about what it is to be human, which is the main goal or purpose of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. (Oppel 154)

Perhaps such an extreme evaluation entails assessing what it means to be a "feminist" from a different perspective. Perhaps a feminine narrative does not strictly demand that men and women be of equal fortunes in life. Furthermore, perhaps interpreting Nietzsche as a feminist of his time presupposes that the male and female standards merely be reconsidered, even modified. For instance, when discussing marriage, Zarathustra announces, "Your love of a woman, and woman's love of man - oh, that it were compassion for suffering and shrouded gods! But, for the most part, two beasts find each other." Not only does Zarathustra refer to both the male and female equally, but more significantly, he refers to them as beasts. If Oppel's proposition holds any relevance, then perhaps such references in *Zarathustra* are Nietzsche's way of indicating society does indeed need to reexamine 'what it is to be human.'

Zarathustra is without question a book intended for interpretation and for guessing. Merely examining subtitle alone, *A Book for All and None*, implies in itself a subjective literature to develop soon thereafter. For this reason, it is Zarathustra's *riddles* that warrant interpretation, not purely the words themselves. To analyze only the obvious instances of gender discrimination in Nietzsche's text would be to take Zarathustra's words out of context and prompt inaccurate interpretations. Thus, such an omission would indeed portray Nietzsche as an outright misogynist. However, the more allusive deductions from the rhetorical figures prove otherwise. Zarathustra's pilgrimage through the stages of life stimulates none other than recognition and appreciation for the feminine. Without the feminine, it is implausible to even consider the possibility of conceiving, let alone bearing, the overman.

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Ergates: A Marxist rendition of Qoheleth's teachings found in Ecclesiastes, NRSV

By Gil Thompson

Reflections of a worker

- 1 The words of a worker, the son of the proletariat, a pawn in the factory.
- 2 Vanity of vanities, says the worker, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- 3 What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?
- 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but poverty remains forever.
- 5 Workers arrive at dawn and leave at night, and hurry back the next day.
- 6 A myriad cargo ships sail to the west, and go around to the east; round and round go the ships, and on their circuits the ships return.
- 7 All capital flows to the rich, but the rich are not satisfied; to the place where capital flows, there it continues to flow.
- 8 All bourgeois things are wearisome; more than one can express; their eyes are not satisfied with seeing, nor are their ears filled with hearing.
- 9 What has been is not what will be so, and what has been done is not what as it will be done; there is something new under the sun.
- 10 Here is a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"! It has never been, in the ages before us.
- 11 As movements of long ago are remembered, so will there be remembrance of movements yet to come by those who come after them.

Philosophy of action

12 I, Labor, when a pawn of the bourgeois in London, 13 applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that capital has given to human beings to be busy with. 14 I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing profit. 15 What is crooked must be made straight, and what is lacking must be counted. 16 I said to myself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who labored before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." 17 And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know oppressor from oppressed. I perceived that through action this is not a chasing after wind. 18 Though in much wisdom is much vexation, those who increase knowledge must decrease sorrow.

Misery of the worker

2 I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But again, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" 3 I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine--my mind still guiding me with wisdom--and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for us workers to do under heaven during the few days of our lives 4 I made no great works; I fitted bolts and operated machines for others; 5 I made myself nothing, and gave the product of my labor to another.

6 I made him capital from which to feed the thirst of gaining wealth. 7 I saw male and female slaves, all children who were born in my house; the bourgeois had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before him in London. 8 I also gathered for him silver and gold and the treasures of Asia and of the colonies; he had singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many mistresses. 9 So I became naught and fell behind all who were before me in London; still my wisdom remained with me. 10 Nothing my eyes desired I could give to them; I kept my heart from all pleasure, for my heart found no pleasure in my toil, and such was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a subjugation to the bourgeois, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Futility of wage labor

12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who owns not his labor? Only what he is demanded to have done. 13 Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as rich excels poor. 14 The wise have eyes in their head, but the fools walk in darkness. Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. 15 Then I said to myself, "What happens to the capitalist will happen to me also; why then has he been so very conceited?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. 16 For there is no enduring remembrance of oppressor or of oppressed, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. At least the rich die just like the poor! 17 Still I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. 18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled

under the sun, seeing that I will leave nothing to those who come after me 19 --and it is clear whether they will be wise or fools. So they will be slaves for the same master I toiled for and used my hands until they bled. This also is vanity. 20 So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21 because today one who has toiled with pain and suffering and no rest must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What do proletarians get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? 23 For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. 24 There is nothing better for proletarians than to come together, since there is no enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is necessary for one who is commoditized; 25 for apart from others who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who owns production may have wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the laborer he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to produce for one who was born well. This also is vanity and a chasing after money.

Everything has its time

- 3** For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
- 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
 - 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

- 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- 5 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
- 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- 8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Inevitability of revolution

9 What gain have the workers from their toil? 10 I have seen the business that capital has given to everyone to be busy with. 11 It has made revolution suitable for our time; moreover it has put a sense of past and future into workers' minds, since the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. 12 I know that there is nothing better for workers than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13 moreover, it is capital's curse that all should insufficiently eat and drink and take no pleasure in all their toil. 14 I know that social classes do not endure forever; struggle can mutate them, or destroy them; the bourgeoisie have revolted so that all should stand in awe before them. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and the bourgeois now seek out what has gone by.

Natural equality of people

16 Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was

there as well. 17 I said in my heart, we will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is appointed a time for every matter, and for every uprising. 18 I said in my heart with regard to the human beings that fait is testing us to show that they we are but animals. 19 For the fate of bourgeois and the fate of proletarians is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. We all have the same breath, and bourgeois have no advantage over the proletariat; for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. 21 Who knows whether the bourgeois spirit goes upward and the spirit of workers goes downward to the earth? 22 So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should share their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

Oppression and toil

1 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed--with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power--with no one to comfort them. 2 And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; 3 but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. 4 Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's competition with another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

- 5 Fools fold their hands and consume their own flesh.
- 6 Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after productivity.

In friendship and labor

7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 8 the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and bourgeois eyes are never satisfied with riches. "For whom am I toiling," workers ask, "and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business. 9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. 13 Better is a poor but wise worker than an old but foolish minister, who will no longer take advice. 14 One can indeed come out of poverty to property, even though born poor in the country. 15 I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that youth who replaced the king; 16 there was no end to all those people whom he led. Yet those who are powerful will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a corruption of the soul.

Bourgeoisie demand obedience

5 Guard your steps when you go to the house of wealth; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil. 2 Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before us, for the bourgeoisie is in control, and you are not; therefore let your words be few. 3 For dreams come with many cares, and an activist's voice with many words. 4 When you are put to work, do not delay fulfilling it; for

we have no pleasure in red fools. Be diligent in your workplace. 5 It is better that you should not be hired than that you should be and not loyally abide! 6 Do not let your mouth lead you into trouble, and do not say before us that it was a mistake; should we be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands? 7 With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear us! 8 If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. 9 But all things considered, this is an advantage for a land: a king for a plowed field.

Proletarian response

10 The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. 11 When goods increase, those who consume them do not increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes? 12 Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep. 13 There is poetic justice that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, 14 and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. 15 As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. 16 This also is poetic justice: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from suppressing our voice? 17 Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment. 18 This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find

enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life poverty gives us; for this is our lot. 19 However all to whom capital gives wealth and possessions and whom it enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their possessions--this is on the backs of laborers. 20 For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because wealth keeps them occupied with the joy of their gains.

Vanity of wealth

6 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: 2 those to whom circumstance gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet greed does not enable them to enjoy these things, and no person enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill. 3 A man may beget a hundred factories, and live many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not share life's good things, or has no conscience, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. 4 For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; 5 moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he. 6 Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good--do not all go to one place? 7 All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied. 8 For what advantage have the rich over poor? And what do the poor have who know how to conduct themselves before the living? 9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a chasing after wind. 10 Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what human beings are, and that they are not able to dispute with those who are stronger. 11 The more words, the more

vanity, so how is one the better? 12 For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?

Wisdom of class-consciousness

- 7** Class-consciousness is better than precious ointment, and the day of death, than the day of birth.
- 2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart.
- 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.
- 4 The heart of the class-conscious is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.
- 5 It is better to hear the rebuke of the conscious than to hear the song of fools.
- 6 For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools; this also is vanity.
- 7 Surely oppression makes some workers foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart.
- 8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.
- 9 Do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools. 10 Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from class-consciousness that you ask this.
- 11 Consciousness is as good as an inheritance, an advantage to those

- who see the sun.
- 12 For the protection of our class is like bourgeois protection of money, and the advantage of consciousness is that it gives life to the one who possesses it.
- 13 Consider the work of Marx; who can make straight what capitalists have made crooked?
- 14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; nature has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not make claims of inherent differences.

Value of caution

15 In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. 16 Do not pretend to be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? 17 Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you cause misery during your time? 18 It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who is just shall succeed with both. 19 Organization gives strength to the proletariat more than ten rulers that are in a city. 20 Surely there is no revolution possible on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning. 21 Still, give heed to everything that the people say, or you may hear your friends cursing you; 22 your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others. 23 All this I have searched by experience; I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. 24 That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? 25 I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the

sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness. 26 I found more bitter than death the capitalist who traps, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters; one who fights may escape him, but the fool is owned by his wages. 27 See, this is what I found, says the worker, adding one thing to another to find the sum, 28 which my mind has sought repeatedly, and I have now found. One bourgeois among a thousand I found, but a true capitalist among all these I have not found. 29 See, this alone I found, that nature made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.

Call to action

S Who is like the class-conscious man?

And who knows the interpretation of history? Consciousness makes one's face shine, and the hardness of one's countenance is changed.

2 Do not keep the state's command because of an uninformed allegiance. 3 Do not be terrified; fight against its oppression, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for the capitalist does whatever he pleases. 4 For the word of the oppressor is powerful, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?" 5 Whoever obeys his will meets no immediate harm, but the wise mind will know the time and way to fight. 6 For every revolution has its time and way, although the ignorance of workers lie heavy upon them. 7 Indeed, they do not know what is to be, but we can tell them how it will be! 8 No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind, or power over the day of death; there is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practice it. 9 All this I observed, applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while one person exercises power

over another to the other's hurt.

Time for revolution

10 Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the parliament, and were praised in London where they had done such things. This also is vanity. 11 Because sentence against an evil system is not executed speedily, the human heart is fully set to do evil. 12 Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who rise up, because they stand fearless before oppressors, 13 but all will not be well with the current system, nor will it prolong its days like a shadow, because it does not stand in fear before the masses. 14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. 15 So I suggest revolution, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to rise, and speak, and emancipate themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that circumstance gives them under the sun. 16 When I applied my mind to know class antagonisms, and to see the business that is done on earth, how worker's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, 17 then I saw the path of history, that one can find out what is happening under the sun. Once we toil in seeking, we necessarily find it out; even though those who are wise claim not to know, our future cannot be denied.

Nothing to fear in rebellion

9 All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the class conscious and the wise and their revolution is in the hand of fate;

whether it will be soon or late one does not know. Everything that confronts them 2 is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. 3 This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. 4 But whoever is joined with the workers has hope, for a living dog is better than a dying lion. 5 The revolutionaries know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. 6 Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun. 7 Go, write your pamphlets with enjoyment, and attend your rallies with a merry heart; for nature has long ago approved what you do. 8 Let your flags always be red; do not let song be lacking in your voices. 9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in death, to which you are going. 11 Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. 12 For no one can anticipate the time of emancipation. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so workers are snared at a time of oppression, when it falls upon them.

Wisdom is not related to social status

13 I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. 14 There was a little farm with few people on it. A rich landlord paid a banker for it, bringing in many police and armed men. 15 Now there was found on it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom could have delivered the farm. Yet no one remembered that poor man. 16 So I said, "Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded."

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one fool destroys much good.

Miscellaneous observations

10 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a foul odor; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

2 The heart of a fool inclines to the right, but the heart of the wise to the left.

3 Even when fools walk on the road, they lack sense, and show to everyone that they are fools.

4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will demand great respect.

5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it proceeded from the ruler: 6 today folly is set in many high places, and the wise sit in a low place. 7 We will see slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves.

8 Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; and whoever breaks through a wall

will be bitten by a snake.

9 Whoever quarries stones will be hurt by them; and whoever splits logs will be endangered by them.

10 If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, then more strength must be exerted; but wisdom helps one to overcome.

11 If the snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer.

12 Truth spoken by the wise brings them difficulty, but the lips of masses consume them.

13 The words of their mouths begin unsteadily, but their talk ends in undisputed truth;

14 yet the bourgeois still talk on and on. It is clear what is to happen, and we must tell anyone what the future holds!

15 The toil of the masses wears them out, and they do not even know the way to fight.

16 Alas for you, O land, when your king is a servant, and your workers will feast in the morning!

17 Happy are you, O land, when your king is a peasant, and your workers feast at the proper time-- for strength, and not for drunkenness!

18 Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.

19 Feasts are made for laughter; wine gladdens life, and fraternity meets every need.

20 Curse wage labor in all your thoughts, and curse the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter and others will follow you.

Advice to the workingman

- 11 Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back.
- 2 Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.
- 3 When clouds are full, they empty rain on the earth; whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.
- 4 Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.
- 5 Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of history, which necessitates everything.
- 6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which who will prosper, the workers or the bourgeoisie, or whether both alike will be good.

Advice to the young and the old

- 7 Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.
- 8 Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.
- 9 Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but work

to help your fellow man, for all these things history will bring you into judgment.

- 10 Banish selfishness from your mind, and live in fraternity with your fellow man; for youth and the dawn of life are not just vanity.

12 Be conscious of class in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; 2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; 3 in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; 4 when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; 5 when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; 6 before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the istern, 7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. 8 Vanity of vanities, says the worker; all is vanity.

NOTES:

- Male language is used for stylistic purposes, but male language should be taken as gender-neutral.
- I removed the epilogue since its authorship is disputed and its content is not consistent with the rest of Ecclesiastes.
- Since Ecclesiastes is Greek for Qoheleth, I used the name Ergates, Greek for worker, for the sake of consistency.

My Island

By Kay Wadbery

There is an island of brightness in my heart of suffering
Tendrils of reality and coils of emotion lap at the shores
Of my holy island.

Made sacrosanct by whom, I cannot fathom, but still the skies are blue.
My refuge, my solace, impossible to reach consciously though I try
The birds wheeling above try to sort their survival from the colors.
What are these colors?

A dot of green grasses and sifting sand on a tapestry of blue,
My refuge uniquely inaccessible, as is yours, my love.
Slowly undulating hills whose beauty only I behold.
Thoughts enshroud my feeble, mortal mind and the sun burns my skin.
Reclining on the beach haunting memories refuse to fade.
Pushed aside for brief, unconscious periods of elation,
Memories return as inevitably as the tide.

But up and dash backward quickly now! Afore the licking water coaxes your feet.
Skip backward and stay dry, but feel the passing possibilities of the act.
Suddenly, dive forward! All or nothing, dry or wet.
You are on the beach, all fibers of all muscles relaxed in unison.
You are fighting to swim - not away from the island, but not towards paradise
either.

Relaxed or struggling. The mental torture of indecisiveness
Drags on those who procrastinate, those who fear.
For your fear, mighty swimmer, is transient, as is your life.
Do not forget even the most valiant of swimmers must return to land to rest,
And even the most content must return to activity.
For happiness is the balance between exertion and rest.
Happiness is the balance between the sky and the water.
Happiness is the balance between Heaven and Earth.
“Yet happiness,” the omniscient bird says, “lies on your island.”

Que es valor?

By Steven Flores

Once there was a very old man who, as he grew older, began to despair more and more about this very fact until the dignity with which he used to face life shrank away to become a pit in his gut. After a night of feeling especially small, he lay in bed a long time tossing and turning, tossing and turning until, finally, he fell asleep. He had been asleep only a short while when a funny thing happened. A great concentration of light broke through the blinds and shone all around the old man's bed, waking him. He rubbed sleep out of his ancient eyes and smacked his gums in bemusement.

When he came to, he sat up in order to better take in his surroundings. He propped himself up on pillows and leaned against the headboard of his antique bed. The whole room smelled of must and medicine. Light beamed in through the drawn blinds. Darkness sat in the corners of the room like strangers. It was capable of encroaching at any time. Noticing the darkness, the old man took fright. "It's near the end," he whispered. He pulled himself upright, and as he did this, a peculiar thing happened. The light was concentrated almost entirely on the old man; the darkness grew to surround the bed.

"Surely, things like this don't happen for no reason," he said to himself and, frightened by the new life the bedroom seemed to take on, decided to get out of bed right this instant. He thought it better to meet the darkness before it consumed him. "I'll have a look around," he pronounced and pulled himself, piece by piece, out of bed, stretching his feet out to meet the cold, hardwood floor.

To make sure he wasn't seeing things, to make sure he wasn't dreaming, the old man grabbed his glasses off of the nightstand. The clock read 6:17. The kids would be by in an hour or so.

When the old man put on his glasses, everything came into focus, but nothing changed. Light still surrounded the bed. Darkness waited to snuff it out. He moved straight to the window and drew the blinds. There was the sun, radiant, sitting playfully on the horizon. The old man put a finger to his chin, his brows had a meeting. "That must have been it," he said, and then, out of habit, turned to scrutinize his garden. "The lilac has outgrown the verbena," he noted, "and the hyacinths have been demolished. A shame," he said, and shook his head.

The old man owned what pride told him was the finest house in Middle America. And it really was a nice house. A fresh coat of white paint with blue trim on the outside, three bedrooms, two baths and a screened porch. It was twice as big as the house he'd grown up in with six brothers and sisters besides.

Nights, in the house of his childhood, after all the others had gone to bed, he would sit up with his mother at the kitchen table. He was the oldest, and it was his privilege to sit up. The old man and his mother, they listened to Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller, and tried to make sense of the America they hadn't inherited. After the big band segment had ended, he would finish his glass of hot milk and crawl onto his mattress under the kitchen table. While covering the table with a massive threadbare blanket, his mother would say "Good night, miijo. Tenga suenos." Then, she would withdraw ruefully to the corner of the room and

resume work on a new blanket.

It had taken him a lifetime, it had taken him ages, but the old man had managed to make it from the meatpacking district all the way out to his quaint house in the sprawling western suburbs of Omaha. Christ was dead and back again by 33. Alexander the Great had conquered most of the known world also in less than half his time. Nevertheless, the old man was proud. He had worked hard.

It was because he had worked so hard, blood and sweat, to get his house that it meant so much to him. He was a protector of sorts. Every morning, the kids with the bikes would come by on their way to school, and every morning, the old man would rise to meet them. He would shake with great fury as he watched them ride through his garden on their bikes and take apples from his tree. What the kids didn't feel like eating they would throw at the old man's house. They aimed at him, directly at him, as he yelled from the protection of his screened porch.

"Wham!" "Got him!" "Direct hit!" they would yell.

"What the hell is the matter with you kids?" "I'll find out who you kids are, and tell your parents." "I'll go up to the school and tell them about you kids, you'll see," he would yell back.

It hadn't always been this way, but the more the old man fell into despair, the more vigilant he became of his house. It wasn't even his garden, but his late wife's. He kept it, not out of homage to his beloved, but rather from the irresistibility of the work. The kids hated the old man for being so up-in-arms about his garden, but he had worked hard. He had worked his entire life. And his wife was dead, and his kids were gone, and he had nothing left to work for.

Later, in the afternoons, the old man would go out and pick all the apples off of his lawn. Bent over his feeble back, with his head tilted toward the grave, he would say, "Rotten apples. Kids these days are rotten apples."

This morning, the old man was thinking of rotten apples. When he was a kid, and he concluded that he had been one at some time, had he been a rotten apple? No. He couldn't have been a rotten apple. The kids with the bikes are the rotten apples. "Always were and always will be," the old man said. His lips met with the conviction of years upon years.

When he was a young man, no more than a boy really, he didn't have a bike. That was okay because neither did Dale, the Pollack. That's what they called him, the Pollack, and the old man was called Alfie. When all the rest of the kids would tear off on their bikes leaving them in the dust, Alfie and the Pollack would stay around the stockyards playing catch, wrestling, scrounging up money for Cokes at Wolczynski's Grocery. Sometimes, they would save up enough to buy bait, and go down to the Mighty Mo to fish.

"Go down to the Might Mo to fish," the sound parted the old man's lips. Something stuck out, but he couldn't remember how it went.

"Go down to the Mighty Mo to fish," the old man repeated.

"The Mighty Mo and Dale," he reached, and seemed to grab hold of something.

The old man put his hand to his chin. His fingers framed his mouth. His brows reconvened. He sat down on the corner of the bed, posing for a long time. His mind rifled through words, through combinations of words; "Dale, undercurrent, Wolczynski's," "Dale,

dust, fishing,” Dale... Dale... Dale... until, finally, the fog cleared and memory came rushing in, illumined, as it were, by a great light. The old man traversed space and time to the episode of his childhood...

It's Sunday in early spring. Latin mass is just out. *In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.* Go home. I run home, get out of my Sunday best, put on my long pants, roll them into short pants, throw on my raggiest t-shirt, and take off to meet Dale at the corner of Wolczynski's. Dale's birthday, my treat, and I hand the change to old Wolczynski, take the bait and the two Cokes, and then it's down to the riverbank. It's hot, summer hot, and the sweat forms a thin layer so that my shirt sticks to my back.

“It's true what they say about you guys, huh?” Dale says.

“You're lucky it's your birthday,” I say, making like I'm going to pound him.

The tree line gets thick, real thick, and I stop and unroll my short pants, making them long pants again. Dale says he's not allergic to poison ivy. “It's a family thing,” he says, pushing his chin up. We walk on, right on through to a clearing, a different one, downriver this time from the South Omaha Bridge.

It's when we get there that I see it. Out in the clearing where the tree line meets the sediment. A Schwinn messenger: frame candy-apple red, beef-tongue red. It's got this magnificent arch at the top. The forks shine brilliantly. Mud splatters across the frame, and I become aware of the sweat running from my temples. The Schwinn has chrome hand-brakes. It's beautiful.

Dale and I are standing side by side, awestruck, when we hear them. The sound comes from upstream, and when I peek out from behind the tree line they're ankle deep in the current. Two of them. Their long pants are short pants too, but they're the nice kind that I'd never go down to the Mighty Mo with. One dips his hand into the current and splashes water on his raw-red shoulders.

“Son of a bitch, it's hot,” he yells, and the other yells something I can't quite make out.

My lips are pressed, vacuum-sealed, and I look at Dale and say, “Sonsabitches. Lucky sonsabitches.”

But Dale doesn't say a thing, not a damn word. Doesn't make eye contact either. Just stares down at his shoes. The look on his face makes it feel like it's not his birthday anymore and my stomach starts to hurt so that I don't want the Cokes.

Dale shoegazes for so long that I gotta say, “C'mon, Dale. Forget about it, and let's go fishin'. I'll get a pole rigged up for each of us.”

It takes him a while. He licks the sweat off his upper lip so many times I'm sure it's all gone, and when he looks up, he's biting his cheeks. The heat seems to have gotten into his eyes.

“You're right,” I say. “Let's move downstream. “They probably scared all the—
And then Dale's look sort of socks me in the gut.

“I'm taking the bike,” he says.

“Aw, Dale! C'mon now. Don't do that. That's not your bike- it belongs to one of those kids.”

“Those spoilt sonsabitches don't deserve that bike. It's my birthday today, and I

know I'll never get a bike without takin' one. I ain't ever seen them kids before. They ain't gonna stop me and neither are you."

"Dale, c'mon now. You can't do that. It don't matter if it's your birthday. It ain't right."

"Look, those spoilt sonabitches don't even care enough to look after their bikes, they shouldn't have 'em. They probably never really wanted anything like I do."

"But I have," I say, and I mean it too.

"Look, Dale, people like you and me just gotta wait a little while for things, work a little harder, but they'll come."

"No, that ain't they way it is. Look at anyone who's got what they want, and I betchya they took it. Look at McCuddy down there at the packing houses, with your pa and mine. Goddamn! Negro Adolphus lost his thumb in the meat grinder last week my dad says, all because McCuddy had him cleanin' it without shuttin' off the power. There's plenty of people who deserve that job, but don't got it. People, Alfie. Pollacks and Spics, just like we're gonna be. Just like we are now. McCuddy don't know shit about shit, and neither do you."

"Dale-

But he moves right on past me. In his eyes, I'm already dust.

"Losers weepers," he says. "That's the way it goes."

Dale doesn't even look back, and I forget the way he rides off on the Schwinn. All I remember is that my best friend is gone, and I'm losers-weepers left in the dust. The sun feels like it's crashing down on me, and I feel real, real heavy in the gut. So heavy, in fact, that I don't even move when those spoilt sonsabitches come back and beat the shit out of me.

Even without a bike, with a fat lip, and being altogether losers-weepers, Alfonso Gutierrez Jr. held his head high when he came home that day. He looked at every single one of his brothers and sisters with the zest of new truth. The youngest, Maria, began to cry.

The old man remembered feeling like he learned something that day. Something that meant something. He refused to take refuge in his mother's arms as she cried. "Ay, mijo! My mijo! Why has this happened to mijo?"

He held his chin high and spoke calmly and deliberately about what happened. His brothers and sister watched the best they could as he told his story with quiet pride. Dignity. He held a sack of frozen peas to his eye, and frowned when anyone cried.

"That was the beginning of ethics," the old man reflected. "My ethics."

Alfie and his mother were still sitting at the kitchen table when his father came home. Right away, his mother had started in about what had happened to Mijo, moving her hands graciously as she told the story. The little flowers on her black dress flew into the air with the crescendo, and fell gently back down at the denouement.

Young Alfie sat in silence and didn't correct his mother on the details of the story, so pleased was he with her telling of it. He let the sack of peas rest on the table and displayed the bruise circumscribing his left eye. There was quiet pride in what he had done. "Maybe," he thought, "my father will be proud too."

As soon as his mother finished the story, Alfonso Gutierrez Sr. fixed his black eyes on his son. He didn't say a word. Instead, he moved over to the kitchen counter and picked

up a knife and a lime. Alfie's mother moved to the freezer and took a tray of ice over to his father.

"Aren't you even going to say anything to him about it?" she said.

Chop! The skin pulled taut over the bones of his father's arms was gritty and spackled like the sediment of the Mighty Mo.

"You know, Alfie did a thing that a lot of kids wouldn't have done. He could have been the thief instead of Dale," said his mother.

Chop! was the reply the father gave. His lips were pressed, vacuum-sealed, in consternation.

"We could have a stolen bike on our front porch right now. But not Alfie, he's too good of a boy." The flowers danced back and forth. Though he had never heard it said, Alfie was sure that his mother was beautiful.

Chop! this time the knife came from overhead, splitting the lime with effortless precision.

"I was thinking, his birthday is coming up, and maybe we should start looking down at Sears and Roebuck for a bike for him."

Alfie's eyes lit up.

"Basta ya! Callete!" his father bellowed.

He motioned her out of the room, moving the knife in an eloquent gyre. The years at McCuddy's made the gesture look natural. With his back still to Alfie, Alfonso Gutierrez Sr. opened an overhead cupboard and took out some tequila and a lowball glass. After he poured himself a drink, he took a dishrag and dabbed it against the tilted bottle neck. He took a drink and turned toward Alfie.

Alfie said nothing. He sat looking down at his bed underneath the table, sucking on his swollen lip. When his father came over, he picked up Alfie's chin with stone hands. Alfie's nostrils burned at the odor of tequila. His father's nostrils flared at the smell of dried sweat. Alfie looked into his father's eyes as the tequila rag pressed slowly into his swollen lip. He winced and grabbed hard to the sides of the chair. He waited for his father to speak.

"This is what the world does to you, son. Blood and sweat," said Alfonso Sr.

Alfie stared into his father's eyes, trying to break their opacity. He wondered why his father was never easy on him.

The old man remembered that humid Sunday night. His father had come home from the bar, dead drunk. Rogelio was with him. He saw himself as a young child, Alfie Jr., holding tightly to his pillow, scanning the massive threadbare blanket on all sides for any movement. His father was telling Rogelio in Spanish something he couldn't understand. Alfonso Sr. didn't teach the kids Spanish so they couldn't understand the arguments between their parents. Whatever his father was saying, he was drunk.

Before long they were stomping around the kitchen at Rogelio's suggestion of "mas tequila." Presently, the old man remembers the fright that came with the clumsy sound. *Clunk... clunk... clunk...* and then, all at once, the blanket flies up from the table, and his father's face looks like silly putty as he laughs a big, voracious laugh. He looks like a painting the old man had seen at the Joslyn where a man stands in horror on a bridge surrounded by

violent swirls of color.

He remembers.

His father kicks the mattress and he scrambles out from underneath the table.

Alfonso Sr. looks at his son like a wild animal. His black eyes seem to hang in space. He turns to Rogelio.

“Rogelio, el quiere una bicicleta,” he says, laughing his big laugh.

A light smile comes over Rogelio's ruddy face.

“Is it true, Alfie? Your mother says we should get you a bicycle. Is that what you want?”

And he nods.

“You're stupid. Just like her. You think that I don't work hard enough to provide for you and your brothers and sisters. Right, Alfie?”

“No, no!” Alfie insists, his eyes growing wide.

“A bicicleta,” Alfonso Sr. says. “Cuanto cuesta? Que es valor?”

The old man recalls the stench of tequila and fear.

“Do you know what a bicycle costs Alfie?”

And he nods. “Y-y-yessir.”

“Yes,” Alfonso Sr. bellows. “You know what it costs. But what is it worth, Alfie? Que es valor?”

“Que es valor?” Alfonso Sr. repeats, and seizes his son by the shoulders. Alfie shakes his head fearfully from side to side. He is on the verge of tears.

“You don't know,” his father is shouting now. “You won't know until you've had to work for every penny of it. How much it's worth. And it's not easy. You'll find out. It's never easy. It only gets worse. No one will appreciate it.”

“No,” Alfie whimpers.

“You'll know. If you want a bike, you'll work for it. Anything in this world, work for it. And work without stopping.”

“Work unceasingly.” Alfonso Sr. mocks the priest at the Latin Mass. He traces the sign of the cross.

For a while, Alfonso Sr. is quiet, speaking in his own tongue like a man in reverie.

“Que es valor!” he screams, smacking Alfie on the cheek.

Rogelio turns his head away. Alfie cries.

“Cuanto cuesta? Que es valor?” his father repeats. He grabs Alfie by the shirt and throws him into the living room.

The voice follows him all the way down the hall.

“Que es valor? Que es valor? Que es valor?”

In the bedroom, Alfie's brothers and sisters sleep two to a bed, and he lays there besides. With nothing to rest his head on and nothing to give him comfort and warmth, he lays down on the hard, dirty floor and asks himself over and over, “Que es valor? Que es valor? Que es valor?”

The old man sat reflecting on life, asking himself “Que es valor?” What did it cost, and what was it worth, and what had he done with it? There was something in what his father

had said, something of a joke that he had caught that day as he mocked the Latin priest and his holier-than-thou way. "Work, work unceasingly." The old man saw it now. His father was getting at something with his mockery. "Anything you want, work for it." The old man pushed the words forward and watched them carry him through his entire life.

The more the old man reflected, the more he realized that, for him, life was not a luxury to be enjoyed, but a debt to be paid. Life was work. Work was life. Soon after that sweltering Sunday night, he began delivering newspapers, taking the extra time on foot. Eventually, young Alfie raised enough money to buy a bike. It was no Schwinn messenger, but nevertheless young Alfie was proud. He had worked hard. Maybe his father was right, maybe he had never really appreciated the value of hard work.

The more he worked, the more he felt the value of having something, something that meant something. No sooner than he bought his bike did he ride it down to the restaurants. There was Johnny's, where he worked as a bus boy after school. There was Owl's Chicken Hut, where the owners were good to him and, when it was his birthday, gave him anything he wanted on the menu. There was the car he wanted, with wheel wells that were shiny and chrome-metallic. There was the car he got, with wheel wells that didn't stick out, and were rusted besides. There were the girls in his class and there were movies to take them to. Anything he wanted, he worked for it. And so it went.

One summer, after his junior year of high school, Alfie's father got him what he called his "first real job" working on the beef line in the packing house. Alfonso Jr. was kept down, on the killing floor, with all the other Mexicans in that nightmare vision of Henry Ford's America. The packing house looked like mechanized fallout shelter replete with inlets and outlets for the deceased and adventurous to the world above. But it was a killing factory, a slaughterhouse. There were concrete floors and walls with no paint, but blood

spatters

everywhere. Poles and Mexicans pack into the packing house, standing one by one at their posts down the line. Alfonso Jr. is third-down-the-line. His job is to cut the tongues out of the cattle and throw them into a bucket for processing. His first day on the floor there is an incident.

Alfonso Jr. is third-down-the-line, trying to get a grip on his knife, when the cattle come in. His father waits five slots down, knife in hand, standing ready to flank the cattle. The cattle come down the belt secured and fastened, their necks braced to prevent movement. Seldom do they moo before the first man, equipped with a pressurized air gun, drives a small, steel spike through their skull. There is a death crosseyed and painless and easier to watch than the .22s that were so inefficient; that shattered on impact; that were responsible for the scar on Alfonso Sr.'s right forearm.

The second man is the bleeder. As each cow comes by, he slits its throat. Blood splatters everywhere so that Alfie has shoes stained crimson within his first five minutes on the job. Then, it is his turn. He is to take the tongues up with his left and cut up under with his right. It sounds easy enough, but what no one bothers to tell him is to stay away from the jaw bone.

With each cow that comes down, Alfonso Jr. feels his blade getting duller and

duller. The more he tries to stay away, the more bone he hits. The whole process is bizarre, and the unnaturalness of it makes the fear rise up in his chest. He begins to seize up. The tongues become more and more work, and the line moves slower and slower.

The men did piecework, and so before long the man next to him, a Pole with a long face and stringy blond hair, begins striking his knife against the side of his tin sanitizing dish. *Clank...clank...clank...* the din moves down the line, joined by the shouts of men.

The old man hears them even now.

"Hurry up down there!"

"What's the hold up?"

"What the hell is wrong?"

"Andele! Rapido!"

The noise moves down the line in a direct current. Then, it stops. With the push of a button, there is a buzz and a whirl like a machine table that has gone too far and, like a penitent, wishes to back up. The line stops. The voices continue undulating until they reach the head of the line some twenty men down.

The supervisor, old Irish McCuddy, bolts down the stairs. Red in the face and hands flailing, he marches to a Mexican named Dominguez at the head of the line. Alfonso Jr. gapes in disbelief. He knows about McCuddy. To be humiliated on his first day, and in front of his father! He opens his eyes wide to make sure he isn't dreaming when Dominguez turns and points not at him, but further down, at his father.

McCuddy's face turns sour and his jaw crooks to the right as he pushes his tousled black hair back from his forehead. He moves with deliberate, short steps. Everyone turns to Alfonso Sr.

"Hey, Pancho, is that your boy down there?"

"The name's Alfonso, sir."

"I said Hey-Pan-cho is that your boy down there, slowing up the line?" McCuddy says, puffing out his chest.

"Yes, that's my son," says Alfonso Sr., face like a stone.

"Well then, Pan-cho, why don't you see if you can go down there and help little Panchito out with those tongues, unless you want him out of here. Then, I'll put you where he is."

Alfonso Sr. stands there for a long time before he turns and walks silently back to his boy. Outwardly, he is biting his cheeks, his eyes are heavy. "But God help me if there wasn't a smile under there," the old man reflects. And now, in his mind, it seems that yes, there was a smile, a consolatory one, which seemed to say "Nothing is so serious, Alfie. Nothing, really, is so serious."

In complete silence, with great precision, Alfonso Sr. takes up the knife to cut out the tongues. And indeed it is a smile- it's alright if it's uneasy- that comes over his father face as he counts.

"Uno."

Slice!

"Dos."

Slice!

“Tres.”
Slice!
“Cuatro.”
Slice!
“Cinco.”
Slice!
“Seis.”
Slice!

At the sound of the last tongue hitting the bucket, Alfonso Sr. looks his son straight in the eyes. As the younger cowers, the older breaks just a little. The opacity of Alfonso Sr.'s black eyes soften just enough, like a faltering of purpose, that the son understands.

Que es valor?

With a nod, Alfonso Sr. gives the knife back to his son. Alfonso Jr. grips it, and this time it feels right. His father turns around and makes his way back to McCuddy. “Ready,” Alfonso Sr. says, picking up his knife to wait for Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro, Cinco y Seis.

Time passed quickly after that; in long days and short years. The old man moved from the killing floor to the killing field. He did recon on Pork Chop Hill, and his valor there propelled him to first-class private as well as first-class citizen. It always seemed funny to Alfonso that, at home, he was a Mexican, but in Korea, he was American. His uniform shouldn't have been his foothold to the good life. But he never had time to worry over that.

He met a woman, Sandra, an American nurse in Korea and, when the war was over, they moved in together. Alfonso Gutierrez Jr. finished his electrical training and, sure enough, they got married.

The wedding vow was stolen. Some proverb she'd heard from an anaesthetized soldier. She had cried when she heard it, and would repeat it to him over and over again, in canvas tents and mess halls.

“May the poetry of your love never become prose.”

But it did.

Before they knew it, life was a drawn-out script, and there was nothing to do but to move from one end to the next. He was an electrician, and she was a nurse. They had kids of their own, a son and a daughter. The years went by and by.

Alfonso Jr. continued to work. They moved from the apartment in the city to the house out of town, and finally, to the quaint home in the west Omaha suburb. He got used to moderate wealth and wore it with quiet pride. Dignity. He warmed up to love and, with time, felt almost worthy of it. These things too took work.

He buried his parents. His mother died slowly, of cancer. All his brothers and sisters were there, gathered around her and weeping, but Alfonso Sr. did not weep. He knew her soul would be whitewashed, and she would be carried away in the wind, happy.

His father too died, without a word, in his favorite bar a block from his house on X Street. A stroke in the left frontal lobe rendered him speechless, but Alfonso Jr. had heard his last. He can still hear the words hidden behind black eyes, coming across the chasms, from the other side of death...

When the eyes screw up in his head, they move more than up- they move out. Into me, scraping me, visceral and violent. Transmigration, possession. Eyes without a face, and I'm wracked with grief so deep that I no longer exist. He's not saying anything. Not anything. But god, oh god, is there sound! Maria and mom, screaming and shouting, primal and full of fear. It's so bad that my senses stop up, the speed of sound slows down, and all is great white noise. He's not speaking! A lifetime of work and it's come to this: He can't speak. He's speechless now. He has nothing to say for himself. *Was it worth it? Was it even worth it? Goddammit dad! God damn you!*

Dad's not dad, he is me. And when the eyes screw back and up and out of his head, it's white. Comatose. The lines of the barroom floor fall out so it is all white. Everything is all white. *Nothing's so serious, Alfie. Everything is all-* His eyes smile on me, and it is too much. I put my head to his bony chest, but still, I can't bear it. I'm scraped from the inside, and out come the raucous cries-

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

And, of course he can't actually say it. But I know it, now. I know it.

"I love you. I love you. I love you."

Time disappears. Nothing's around. I forget where he ends and I begin.

When I come to, when what's inside returns and sits heavy like lead in the pit of my gut, I realize I'm no longer with dad on the floor. He is dead. He is gone. I'm looking at mom and Maria. I'm looking at faces I'll never forget, telling them that I love them. I am my father's necromancer.

From that day onward, Alfonso Gutierrez Jr. would let no one, not even his wife, refer to him as Alfie. He was Alfonso Gutierrez now. Sandy was still Sandy. Long after- when their son became professor of astrophysics at Wisconsin-Lacrosse, and their daughter became athletic trainer and happy wife of the seconds-string quarterback of the Seattle Seahawks- Alfonso made it his duty to watch every Seahawks game.

Sandy started her garden.

Life moved on like this, a series of measured tasks. With a home of his own and kids abroad, with a wife and a garden, Alfonso always found something to do. For a long time, for as long as his mind was occupied and his hands were working, Alfonso Gutierrez Jr. was happy.

The clock on the nightstand read 7:07. The kids would be by any minute now. Alfonso Gutierrez Jr., now an old man, sat on the edge of his queen antique bed alone. His wife was dead, and his kids were gone, and he had nothing left to work for. He sat on the edge of darkness. He sat at the end of life.

Life was work and work was finished and *cuanto cuesta* and *que es valor?*

His father had said nothing when he died, and the old man thought he too would soon die in *nada y nada y nada*. But perhaps there was nothing to be said, nothing one needed to say, at the end of life, if one acted correctly. And the stroke for his father? It was because there was always much more understanding in his eyes, in his gesture, than he had ever been able to articulate.

The old man recalled that day at the packing plant, his father's eyes, their opacity breaking and the light coming through, "Nothing is so serious, Alfie. Nothing, really, is so serious." And even though they said that the stroke would have made it impossible for Alfonso Sr. to smile at death, the old man knew better.

There were many things that the old man knew so well they needn't be spoken. His own father, and how he had worked, blood and sweat, to provide for them. So what if he didn't know how to say love? He knew it that day at the bar. His father had loved. His mother too, with patience and mercy. All the silent things that held them together. She moved silently with the wind, he was sure.

The old man saw, with great lucidity, where he came from. His mother's love. His father's hard work. And if he too had spent his life so that his children could stand on his shoulders, then all the better. That too was a legacy.

The light in the bedroom was shining brighter than ever. The old man was also radiant. The pit of his gut imploded and he burned white hot. His life had been a good one, worthy beyond measure.

The clock read 7:14. "The kids will be here any minute," the old man said. Work was over, and he had it in his head that he was going out to meet the sun.

His feet strode along the cold, hardwood floor. Down the hallway, through the dining room, into the living room, where he stopped, right behind the front door, and peered surreptitiously out. The kids were nowhere in sight. Moving lightly, the old man positioned himself, crouching behind the junipers that surrounded his screened porch like a moat.

The old man brimmed with excitement when he heard their voices coming around the corner. It sounded like three voices this time. "Maybe one of the boys had stayed home sick, or maybe to the dentist," the old man thought to himself, trying not to make a stir. One bike, and then another crashed to the ground. "Those spoilt sons-of bitches don't even care enough to look after their bikes, they shouldn't have 'em," the old man thought, sniggering to himself. After that, all was quiet for so long that the old man thought he may have missed his chance.

Wham! An apple hit the screen and dropped a couple feet from the old man.

"Come on out, you old geezer!" the first boy said.

The old man smiled to himself.

Wham! Another apple hit the screen, and this time the old man had to put his hand up to deflect it.

Wham! "Where are you, you old bastard?" the first boy.

"Maybe he finally croaked," a second.

Not yet.

Wham! Wham! The two hit and fell on either side of the old man.

"Did you finally croak old man?" the first boy yelled, more audacious than ever.

Not yet.

"He's finished! He finally croaked!" the first boy shouted.

"Ding dong the prick is dead, which old prick, this old prick! Ding dong-

Now.

The old man bounded from the bush, taking the third boy's bike before it even hit

the ground. He moved at the boys so fast that they couldn't even speak. Just like a ghost. As he moved, he saw nothing of the boys, or the garden, or the yard, or Maple Street at all. He saw something else.

As he moved, the old man saw all the points in space and time that had connected to become his life flash before him in a series of beatific visions. Love, hope, strife and fear moving all the way to the back of life where the reds and blues and greens and yellows blended into one great, white light. Standing there, in white light and without a word, was his father. He was smiling, and it was not uneasy, and there was nothing else.

The third boy recovered himself enough to shout, "Hey! Hey, you old bastard! Why don't you get your own bike?"

The sun shone brighter than ever, enveloping the entire hill atop Maple Street, and the old man burned white-hot in his ascension. All was great, white light where the father stood, still smiling.

"Cuanto cuesta? Que es valor?" the old man shouted, and smiled brilliantly as he rode into the rising sun.

The Most Practical Interrogatives

By Justin Haddock

What is one to say
when the constraining and cavernous truth convenes
with us on the bathroom mirror's runway?

Do we stare at the strange strangers?
Do we beg to be released from ignorance?
Do we wish them to release their names?

Or do we turn cheek, eye, heart
From the prying eyes of the I?

Nothingness and Sunyata

By Nigel Dawson

At first glance, Western and Eastern ways of thinking about the world appear to be radically different philosophical systems, with little or no common ground immediately apparent to the casual observer. Historically, many Western thinkers have sought to describe the world in terms of the material and immaterial, subject and object, God and man. In contrast, many Eastern philosophies tend to describe the world as a holistic system, a unity of the universe and everything contained within its bounds. For the Eastern thinker there seems to be little or no difference between the material and immaterial or the subject and object. Winston King best describes this philosophy in the foreword to Keiji Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness* as the "amphorous unity of nondistinction" (xi). However different and incompatible these two philosophical traditions may at first seem, by finding a concept common to both systems it becomes possible to begin the process of comparison and contrast. For the purposes of this essay, the ideas of nothing and nothingness will form this conceptual link.

In the West of the twentieth century, the concepts of nothing and nothingness were popularized by thinkers such as Heidegger and Sartre, each of whom use the idea of nothingness, in one form or another, to explain their insights into the human condition. In the East, the concept of nothing became prominent much earlier, acting as important pillar of many branches of Eastern philosophy; a pillar around which entire metaphysical world-views are formed. In this paper, the similarities and differences of the concept of "nothingness" as explicated in "What is Metaphysics?" by Martin Heidegger, and the concepts of sunyata and nirvana as put forth by Keiji Nishitani, a twentieth century Japanese philosopher and religious scholar of the Kyoto School of Philosophy.

Nirvana and Sunyata: A Nishitani's Approach to Nothingness.

In order to compare and contrast Heidegger's "Nothingness" with the Nishitani's view of nothingness, it is imperative to provide a description of the concepts of sunyata and nirvana; concepts that provide the backbone of Nishitani's nothingness.

Sunyata.

Sunyata literally translates from the Sanskrit as absolute emptiness or nothingness, symbolically represented by a closed circle. This concept was introduced into the Buddhist tradition by Nagarjuna, a second century Buddhist monk and founder of the Madhyamika school of philosophy, which gave rise to Zen Buddhism in Japan; the philosophical tradition from which Nishitani comes.

Translating sunyata as emptiness or nothingness gives the term, for the Western reader, a sense of the negative. As Daisetz Suzuki writes in *Zen Buddhism*, this is far from the case. "It is a positive concept with a definite connotation... it is what makes the existence of anything possible" (261). This idea of sunyata taking on a positive meaning is re-enforced by Nishitani, who writes that sunyata is the "original nature of the Eternal Buddha" and is "present at all times and already fulfilled, always in the 'present-perfect' mode" (288). In this regard,

Nishitani's conceptualization of sunyata is much like the concept of the eternal, immutable but omnipresent God existing outside of time or space in the Christian tradition.

Sunyata is not the negation of being; rather it is both the complement and opposite from being. Sunyata is the nothing that stands behind all things, the ever-present nothing that is the ground of all being. For Nishitani, the material world is an impermanent mask of existence, behind which lurks absolute emptiness. Having said that, sunyata is not separate from being, nor is it contained within being. Being and nothingness permeate all aspects of existence, both of these concepts are necessary conditions of existence. It envelops and permeates all that is. Sunyata is the nothing that gives the something meaning, in effect it is the nothing which allows the "is" to exist.

Take for example, an empty mug. A mug is not a mug solely by virtue of its material self. Rather a mug is a mug because of the aspect of nothing that comprises an element of the mug's being: the empty space that can be occupied by liquids. If there were no aspect of nothingness inherent in the mug's being, it would cease to exist as a mug. Therefore, for something as simple as a mug to exist there must be both aspects of being and nothingness.

Sunyata is neither subject nor object; it is both simultaneously. We experience sunyata not because it is an object outside of ourselves; we experience sunyata because we are sunyata.

Nishitani regards sunyata as the ultimate reality:

True emptiness is nothing less than what reaches awareness in all of us as our own absolute self-nature. In addition, this emptiness is the point at which every entity that exists becomes manifest: as what it is in itself, in the Form of true suchness (106).

Nirvana.

While most Westerners have heard the term nirvana in relation to Buddhism, the true meaning and importance of the word is often misunderstood. To complicate matters even further, differing schools of Buddhist thought treat the concept of nirvana differently. For the purpose of this essay, nirvana is the nirvana as viewed by explained by Nishitani.

In its simplest form, nirvana is the state achieved by freeing oneself from suffering. This is accomplished through the destruction of ignorance by the attainment of wisdom and the cessation of all desire. This in turn leads to the individual breaking free from the cycle of birth, death and re-birth known as *samsara* or the wheel of becoming. Chakrabarti describes nirvana as the "blowing out of the flame of the self" (623). However, to view nirvana as such is to miss the true meaning of the concept. For Nishitani, nirvana is more akin to becoming one with the primordial emptiness that envelops and permeates the universe. When one attains nirvana, one does not cease to exist; instead, one continues to exist eternally as part of the essential nature of the universe, sunyata. This echoes the thought of Eckhart who saw salvation as the unification of the soul with the Godhead, which itself was nothing.

Heideggerian Nothing.

The work in which Heidegger deals most explicitly with the problem of Nothing

and Nothingness is a short essay, first published in 1929 entitled, "What is Metaphysics?" This essay is the transcript of Heidegger's first lecture as the University of Freiburg, and was a work that Heidegger continually returned to, adding several postscripts and commentaries throughout the next few decades.

"What is Metaphysics?" finds Heidegger first asking questions about science and the "what-is", and in short order he finds himself asking about the nature of nothing, how we come to discover nothing, what this nothing means to us and its relationship to being. He views Nothing as a problem for science; to the scientist nothing is just the negation of being that in and of itself cannot be the subject of scientific thought.

Heidegger's concept of Nothing is not the negation of what-is-in-totality; a term Heidegger uses to describe the entirety of existence. Heidegger argues that to view nothing as the negation of the what-is-in-totality is the common, everyday idea about nothing. He thinks that if one thinks of Nothing in this way, the true essence of nothing remains hidden; Nothing and Nothingness remain an abstraction. His argument is as follows. Knowing what-is-in-totality can only be achieved as an abstraction, as having knowledge of the totality of existence is a human impossibility. If the totality of existence can only be known as an abstract idea then the negation of the totality of existence can also only be known as an idea. By pursuing nothing in this way, its essential nature forever remains hidden. For Heidegger, Nothingness is not the result of negation, rather the Nothing is prior to and the foundation of negation. Nothing exists before the act of negation.

The question then becomes, if we cannot look to what-is to discover the essence of nothing, then how do we come to learn what nothing may be? How can we even be sure if nothing, for want of a better word, exists? For Nothing to be revealed to us, we must peer beyond the veil of existence and see beyond what-is-in-totality. Heidegger argues that this Nothing reveals itself to us through our moods. Moods for Heidegger are not what the everyman would describe when one thinks of moods; they result from the way Da-sein acts within and reacts to the world. Moods are "the ground-phenomenon of our Da-sein" (Heidegger, 248). By this, Heidegger means that moods are the foundational aspect of Da-sein. The mood, which lets one experience the Nothing, is dread. Dread differs from fear, in that fear always has an object that is the cause of our fear. Heidegger describes dread as an objectless angst. Dread causes one to experience the slipping away of the totality of what-is from us, leaving Nothing for us to hold on to prevent ourselves also slipping away. However, it does not do so by annihilating the what-is. Instead, it makes itself known as being at one with the what-is. Being and Nothingness are two facets of the same phenomena, inexorably unified. Heidegger claims that, "Dread reveals Nothing"(249). Dread makes one aware of the finitude of ones life. In turn, as we are a part of the what-is, a part of the totality of existence, we ourselves start to slip away when faced with this revealed nothingness. This in turn leads to a transfiguration of oneself. According to Heidegger, during this confrontation with Nothing and the resultant dread it brings about "man is changed into his Da-sein" (250). It is only after confronting dread, that Da-sein manifests itself in its pure form. In effect, by revealing itself through dread and making us intimately aware of our finitude, the Nothing allows us to become, as Heidegger would say, authentic individuals. In this regard, the Nothing is not a negative aspect of the world it is a positive. Nothing is that which allows

individuals to take responsibility for their lives and become authentic beings, actively choosing what they make of their own lives. “Without the original manifest character of Nothing there is no self-hood and no freedom” writes Heidegger (251).

We deal with this dread by throwing ourselves into the world, by pre-occupying ourselves with the banalities of day-to-day life, idle talk, and busy work. It is in this way we seek to distance ourselves from the nothing, and therefore from the absolute sense of dread. However, by doing so we act in-authentically, we attempt to push back the omnipresent, but hidden nothing.

Just as in Eastern thought, Heidegger thinks that Nothing exists in unity with what-is, “in dread, Nothing functions as if at one with what-is-in-totality” (251). Nothing and the what-is are both extant, the Nothing is required to reveal that the what-is “is” and is not Nothing” (251). Nothing is an original, primordial part of the essence of existence. Nothing reveals that what-is truly is, which in turn allows Da-sein to come face to face with the extant world.

As Nishitani’s philosophy teaches that sunyata is our own absolute self-nature, Heidegger argues that the existence of Da-sein, his concept of our individual absolute self-nature, is only possible by being thrown into the Nothing. For Heidegger, Da-sein **cannot** exist without the Nothing which underlies the totality of what-is, “. . . Da-sein is only possible when projected into the Nothing at the outset” (256).

Heidegger sums up his position and re-enforces in importance of the revelatory nature of Nothing in the following passage:

Only because Nothing is revealed in the very basis of our Da-sein is it possible for the utter strangeness of the what-is to dawn on us. Only when the strangeness of what-is forces itself upon us does it awaken and invite our wonder. Only because of wonder, that is to say, the revelation of Nothing, does the “Why?” spring to our lips. Only because this “Why?” is possible as such can we seek reasons and proofs in a definite way. Only because we can ask and prove are we fated to become enquirers in this life (256).

In effect, not is it only because of Nothing that we can even begin to contemplate the big questions but because Nothing is the basis of our Da-sein, we are destined to enquire about life.

A Comparison of Heidegger's Nothing with Nishitani's Sunyata.

In many ways, Heideggerian nothing and sunyata are similar. Heidegger sees Nothing as being revealed to us by dread, which for Heidegger is objectless Angst. Nothingness and the Nothing are directly experienced by Da-sein. Nishitani describes nothing as a foundational aspect of being, neither subject nor object but that which transcends and unifies. Both systems of thought agree that this Nothing cannot be sought out, empirically measured and categorized. Both agree that to know the nature of nothingness the extant individual must intimately experience nothingness.

In some ways, Heidegger sees the nothing in both a negative and positive light. By

having Nothing revealed through dread, the extant individual must go through an existential crisis and becoming intimately aware of his or her own finitude. However, this existential crisis can lead to an individual taking responsibility for their lives, and by doing so allows the individual to make the choice to become authentic. In short, dread and nothingness can lead to a type of existential salvation in which we take control of our lives.

In contrast, no existential crises are necessary for the individual to know sunyata. According to Nishitani, sunyata is known by virtue of it being our true self-nature. Sunyata does not lead to a moment when we become self aware, as Nothing does for Da-sein. We become self-aware and aware of the nature of our being through contemplation and meditation, by connecting with ourselves.

This leads to what may be the most radical difference between these two twentieth century thinkers; Heidegger sees our absolute self nature not as absolute emptiness as does Nishitani, but as Da-sein. This still leaves Nothing as an objectless “object”, something separate from and wholly different than Da-sein. Nothing does not form an integral part of our existence but is an aspect of our being without which we cannot become authentic individuals. Another striking difference is that although Heidegger seems not to directly give value to Nothing, after reading “What is Metaphysics?,” one gets the impression that the revelation of Nothing, while not bad, is not exactly good or pleasant. For Nishitani, sunyata itself seems to carry no value; it is neither good nor bad, but the realization of it as our absolute self-nature leads to understanding ourselves in a way that brings peace of mind.

Both authors conclude that the questions regarding Nothing are important metaphysical questions. In fact, both authors seem to conclude that Nothing is the basis from which all metaphysical thinking emanates; without Nothing we would have no foundation on which to build our inquiries into human experience.

Despite the differences between Heidegger's “What is Metaphysics?” and Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*, these two thinkers reveal the importance and existential relevance of questions regarding the nature of Nothing and Nothingness. Both of these thinkers force one to think about Nothing in a new light. If there is but one thing that is certain, it is that to those who read and think over these thought provoking works, Nothing will never be the same again.

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By Olaf Samuelson

Today I stumbled upon a log
or was it a tree?

I was here.

it stated to me
So were some couple
deeply engraved

I feel obligated
so I fumble with my blade
Just a correction

I am here.