

Beyond the Pit and the Pendulum

An introduction to the third issue of *Beyond*

When abroad, especially at a young age and for the first time, people can feel trapped, as if they had fallen into a pit and were subject to a constant, unpleasant swing between states of mind that are only apparently distant from one another: anxiety and depression, excitement and frustration. To break this sort of spell and (to borrow from Edgar Allan Poe's imagery once again) climb out of this "cave" of emotional as well as social exclusion, trustworthy adults can serve as a great resort — a lifeline, if you will.

This is particularly true in the case of the student-teacher relationship, especially if the professors also have been international students at some point early on in their lives and for a significant span of time. Besides, this relationship can prove beneficial to both parties, as teaching, too, can prove — strangely enough — a lonely and isolating experience at times, even inside the classroom. Teachers (like students) can feel isolated and bored; these feelings (loneliness and boredom) can become eye-opening opportunities, not to be wasted by either teachers or students.

In this regard, I'd like to turn to another nineteenth-century piece of literature, which may help me describe a feeling common to most teachers at some stages in their careers. I'm alluding to what one may call "the Canterville ghost syndrome." It affects teachers when the more they try to impress and involve their students in the subjects they love, the less those very students seem to be responsive. Just like the poor ghost in that Oscar Wilde story: no matter how hard he tried, he always ended up being mocked by the practical-minded family of US tourists who found his gruesome performances far from scary (in fact, quite ridiculous instead). In the end, as you know, the Canterville ghost and the disenchanting guests who had rented the haunted castle became friends and their relationship turned out to be good for all the characters in the story. Among other

things, they learned that their similarities (what they had in common) were more numerous and more important than their differences.

Come to think of it, most literature (both East and West) is about finding ourselves in the supposed "other." Such is the case, for instance, with the myriad chivalric romances dating from more or less the time when Wilde's ghost was alive in flesh and bones. I mean those medieval tales where knights inevitably realize (sooner or later) that they have a good deal in common with the "other" (whatever that may be) which they encounter on their journeys. This even applies to the so-called "monsters." Having at least reading knowledge of Latin, the authors of those texts knew that the word "monster" (from Latin "monstrum") is a sign to show us (Latin "monstrare" / "to show") something important. As such, a "monster" per se is neither positive nor negative; it's just a sign, a chance (like luck, which can be good or bad), an opportunity (to understand and, maybe, help us grow) that we should not waste.

Going further back in time, think of the first work of literature we know of, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, with the eponymous hero (who is actually considerably flawed at the beginning of the story) meeting the "savage" Enkidu, learning from him, teaching him in turn, and eventually becoming best friends. Another moving example (and another ancient masterpiece) on this same topic is the dialogue between Shiva and Arjuna before the final battle in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Those who reach "serene wisdom" (Krishna tells Arjuna) see all facets of life (starting with themselves and the other human beings) as many pearls on one and the same string.

Sometimes this feeling extends to literary characters. To lovers of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, Pierre Bezukhov and Aleksei Karamazov have "substance" as if they were acquaintances (or even friends) of theirs, real people whose desires, hopes, and disappointments they know from personal, direct experience. In a letter to one of his friends, Petrarch once wrote: "Books speak with us, advise us and join us together with a certain living and penetrating intimacy." Whether we like him or not, one must admit that Petrarch (who scholars universally acknowledge as "the Father of Humanism") practiced what he preached. He took literature

so seriously and experienced it so intimately that he wrote letters to the ancient authors he was most fond of (among them, Cicero and Seneca) as if they had been his own living friends – in some cases even suggesting that they mend their ways!

As I'm sure you have understood by now, I've taught literature for some time, mostly focusing on medieval texts. Don't get me wrong, though: I'm glad to be living in this time period – despite Covid-19 – and I would never want to go back to previous times (let alone the Middle Ages). Yet, there is one teaching from medieval culture that – I think – we should not forget: the worst sin (that is, the worst trap of all) is desperation. When we lose hope, we stop trusting anything and anyone, starting with ourselves.

We know all too well how common this feeling has become today, even among our “privileged” students. Teachers (the “other”, in their eyes, both as foreigners and because of their institutional role) can be a great resource to them. For starters, teaching students that the “other” (no matter how different at first sight) is part of their own personalities can be a first, crucial step to keep them from falling into that “pit” or (if this incident has happened already) climb out of it. This will stop the uncanny pendulum between those “emotional poles” that I alluded to in the beginning of this short preface, a swing that most people regard (mistakenly, I'm afraid) as mutually exclusive.

Obviously, it takes some remarkable qualities to accomplish this. In sum, it takes good teachers: generous people who love their job, who are already very knowledgeable but never grow tired of learning more and – therefore – listening. Professionals who have enough grit and stamina to keep their enthusiasm alive for decades and share it. Scholars who never take anything for granted (that would be the first sign that it's time for them to quit), who do research in their fields and possess that great amount of both passion and energy that one must have to be a teacher and, therefore, never stop being a student too.

To discuss this ideal profile and probe its authenticity vis-à-vis the many changes that affect our ways of teaching and learning (often chal-

lenging the very idea of education today), professors Federico Damonte and Francesca Passeri have gathered some colleagues at Palazzo Bargagli (one of the two ISI Florence facilities) in March 2019 and organized a one-day conference. International education provides a vantage point to observe the dynamics that determine the teacher-student role nowadays. Several factors contribute to this. Among them are the very intensity of this learning experience abroad, the different backgrounds of all the parties involved, and the awareness of being offered (students and teachers alike) a unique opportunity to grow.

And so, it is now time for me to turn the floor over to the teachers who participated in the conference organized by professors Damonte and Passeri. Practicing this privileged profession with humility, knowledge and enthusiasm, they all share one hope. They all hope that they may be both remembered and superseded by their “others”, that is, those very students who travelled far to continue (and, sometimes, even start) the longest trip: the search for themselves.

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