

Spicer and I

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Reflecting on the past five years, as I do often, I am struck both by their absurdity and their apparent necessity. That is, though no sage could have ever foreseen them, it is the most difficult thing to imagine them passing by a different passage. This is, one supposes, man's eternal struggle with contingency, but such philosophical aphorisms are quite useless to capture or eliminate the potency of experience. Though what I will write here may be nothing more than an extended aphorism of this sort, I hope it will allow you, dear reader, a partial view of the potency of my friendship with Kevin Spicer.

I first met Dr. Spicer late on an August afternoon in 2020. I had spent the previous eighteen months at home, studying mathematics in the quiet of my room—at the time, an agreeable proposition to my mind. I had developed my own process of study, quite distinct from that which my professors recommended. I tended to stray quickly and dramatically from my textbooks, into pastures which allowed the questions “why ought this definition be unquestioned?” or “from whence does this idea originate?”. This was quite opposed to the orthodox conduct of the proper student, who would study the textbooks faithfully, memorize their contents, earn fine marks on the exam, and allow the study to flee their mind with blistering speed the moment the classroom was out of sight. I had little interest in this model. With a certain degree of intellectual arrogance (which, incidentally, has yet to be shown to be unwarranted on my part), I found the practice of mathematics rather dull, and found the study of the particular foundations of mathematical ideas a great deal more interesting. This was, for one reason or another, scoffed at by my professors and marveled at by my classmates. It was, I hope you will see as I now do, a humanism that I was attempting to inject (or re-inject, as I now believe) into mathematics. Mathematics has become, in my opinion, too scientific and has strayed too far from the humanities. I hope this digression will not bore my reader—I will come to Dr. Spicer directly.

This implicit humanism, as I now see it, perhaps drew me to another humanist pursuit I had placed firmly on a shelf several years before—literature—though perhaps not. I had, in years gone by, read several novels by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wilde, and Chesterton, and had found them absolutely incomprehensible. “What does it *mean*” was my eternal question which, as I will soon recount, has now changed shape under Dr. Spicer's pedagogy into a question much more

productive. I was infuriated by literature and, being bored with mathematics, I sought an expert on the topic. I sent several pieces of correspondence, both to then english department and to one or two outside sources, and received mixed responses. Dr. Spicer's was, by far, the most enthusiastic. His response was, at a paraphrase, 'Hi Will... I'd love to talk! Let's read something together'.

I met my future friend in his office on the third floor of Tower Hall. His office was decorated in the proper style for the life of the mind: innumerable books, both dusty and polished, crammed into four groaning bookcases. A wonderful place, to say the least. We moved our meeting to the quad, where I was introduced to the most expansive, comprehensive, and freest intellect I have yet had the pleasure to encounter. The man appeared to have read every philosophical and literary text of the last three thousand years, and was able to synthesize them at a moment's mention.

Our three hour conversation that day was a shock to me in several ways. I, being a philosophical juvenile at the time, was astounded at the sheer sway of this professor's mind. I was, roughly speaking, a student of neoplatonism and a weak interpretation of German idealism. This, as one might deduce from Dr. Spicer's academic record, was quite antithetical to his chosen philosophies. Yet I saw not a crumb of animus nor opposition in his face as I presented my ideas. Though at this time I did not know the degree to which my words must have ground against the fibers of his mind, it was nevertheless a great surprise to speak to a mind of such a caliber and to be taken quite seriously—a thing I had rarely experienced in my life, and hardly ever in my academic career. It is still a marvel to me that Dr. Spicer was able to exercise such patience with such a naive mind. He, of course, denies any accusations of grace and will accept no accusations of any sort, but I must ask you to believe myself rather than him.

If there is one thing that may be said of Spicer's pedagogy, it is that it is radically inclusive. Consider the position: a young, hotheaded mathematics student with a neoplatonic philosophy speaks with a professor, steeped in the continental and postmodern traditions. Their respective schools could not be more opposed, and given the potency of philosophical commitments, One might expect these two to come to blows, or for a shouting match to ensue. Who would have predicted the result—the two become the best of friends and continue to study together for the next three years, and for the foreseeable (and unforeseeable) future. How inclusive must such a professor have been at a first meeting! Such tolerance, it seems to me, is nothing short of superhuman. This is the sort of inclusion present in Dr. Spicer's pedagogy, as well as his study: the radical acceptance and positive valuation of every singularity.

Deriving from this exceptional characteristic comes another: a profound and subtle sense of freedom and influence. I have, after several years of study with Dr. Spicer, come to see the value of postmodern philosophy, bit by bit. I now consider many postmodern philosophers to be classed in the highest quality, and cite them frequently. This may seem suspicious to the external reader—it may have the ring of an indoctrination. I must dispel this misconception directly.

Though Dr. Spicer values the postmoderns highly, I could not relate any moment during the hundreds of hours we have spoken that would indicate any attempt at a conversion or even an attempt at influence. I am certain that if I had chosen—for it was my own choice to accept postmodern ideas—to abide with Plato and the Stoics, Dr. Spicer would have accepted me into his office just the same, provided my views were not simply dogmatic. Even now, topics on which we disagree fiercely open nothing but new conversations for us. I should like to think I have imbibed Spicer’s free approach to philosophy, at least somewhat.

Finally, I must emphasize the tremendous creativity of Spicer’s mind and pedagogy. He and I have spoken at length of the hermeneutic, both within and without Heidegger. Spicer, I am convinced (though he will, again, deny it I’m sure) has always been aware of its power for the study of philosophy as well as literature. On the rare occasion that we set ourselves the task to read one text and one text only, we find ourselves at a loss—“what fun is this?” is our eternal, if silent, objection. If we cannot read a text through several others, the study becomes quite dull. After having observed, independently, the same dullness emerge in several classrooms who participate in the same error, I am convinced that Spicer’s commitment to the fundamental nature of the hermeneutic is quite right. To read is never to read alone; to think is never to think alone. Both are only possible through the Other, through that which is different. The best thought, Spicer seems to have intuited, is therefore through as many others as are available! This, paired with his definitive openness, imparts a wild creativity in my dear mentor. His want, for himself and for his students, is to have access and ability to make use of as many different ideas as can be had. An idea that is not used is dead, so says Spicer.

This devotion to the usefulness of ideas has been a source of endless advancement, not only theoretically but practically. I am rather timid by nature, and am hesitant to precipitate change in my own or others’ lives. I was hesitant to graduate early, hesitant to apply to a graduate philosophy program, hesitant to write about one of my favorite authors. Dr. Spicer, with a touch as soft as a breeze, encouraged me to do all, and I’ll be endlessly grateful for it. He encouraged me, you see, not because it was his opinion of the right thing to do, but rather because he perceived a self-restriction in me that was hindering my progress. I’ll never forget the day we sat in his office, I coming to an end of a monologue on Hemingway, when Spicer, in a cautious tone, said “have you ever thought about writing anything about Hemingway?”. Thus began my publishing career. He and I wrote a paper on Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants”, submitted it to the *Hemingway review*, and were immediately (no revisions necessary, that is) with astronomical praise. This is entirely due to Spicer—if I had been left to my hesitancy, I would almost certainly never have put pen to paper.

I will stop here, lest I bore my reader to a slumber or diminish Dr. Spicer through excess. I can only hope that what little I have said here will give an accurate picture of the wonderful man I have come to know and love these past few

years. Though I do feel a certain possessiveness in our relationship, it would be a crime for me to deny him to any other student. I therefore give my full and wholehearted recommendation for Dr. Spicer to be promoted to the position of full professor.