The Well-Located Man

William D. Mastin

I used to study mathematics. I still do, I suppose, though only in dire straits. I hold a Bachelor's of Science degree in the subject, and have loved it since I was very young.

I was quite a confused child, I would say. I understood little of what was going on around me, and any purchase on I did attain only confused me further. This being quite an unpleasant state to perpetuate in, I searched for some respite from the turbulent and unsettling waters I found myself thrown in to. I quickly discovered the dark and mysterious practice of logic, though I wouldn't recognize it as such for a long while afterwards. I spent hours as a boy with logic games and puzzle books, and made what was really quite a fine introductory study of elementary cryptography. All the right seeds in, perhaps, the right soil. In my studies, I performed well in mathematics, I suppose. I can't be quite sure - my mother educated my siblings and I from home until we left for high school, and never issued formal grades. In my high school studies, though, I performed excellently. It was a strange thing to be identified as an 'A' student, after playing in a space where it was quite difficult to gauge one's own ability. I was, in fact, quite surprised to find that I, apparently, understood many concepts taught in class better than my teachers did! This was incredibly unsettling, never mind frustrating. How is a student, who understands what their teachers do not, to learn? I had many conversations with my teachers on various mathematical topics, in the course of which I cannot be sure that my educators even grasped the questions I asked. This is often, I should say, the scorching of the fertile mind. In spite of this, I excelled in mathematics during my high school years, and resolved to pursue a degree in the subject at university. My recollections of my freshman year are hazy - they seem to be a weak blend of other people's memories that I've absorbed in stories of "those bright college days". From the few memories I can still recognize as my own, I remember doing quite well, even remarkably well, in mathematics. I wrote a very successful paper on the Basel problem, I was recommended for a position as a mathematics tutor, and I completed a summer research project analyzing a classic game called "Triominoes". I even audited a course on real analysis - one of the most significant points in my mathematics career, to be sure. Then, as the spring term drew to a close, students were instructed to go home and stay home until further notice was given.

These were, certainly, dark times. To me, though, the darkness proved to be the

darkness of the womb to the fetus. For it was during this time that I began to perform the my first serious study in mathematics, among other things. Finding them simple and entirely uninstructive, I abandoned university-issued textbooks for ones of my own choosing. This may have been arrogant, but the resulting study was better than any I had known yet. I still regard this decision as one of the seminal ones in my academic career. I was still, unfortunately, compelled to complete assignments for my courses. I therefore began a double-life, as it were. I studied from my own selection of textbooks, gleaning an education quite superior, I should say, to that of my unfortunate classmates, and completed the cumbersome work of my courses, in record time, I might add. This form of study, being at once quite freeing and quite restrictive, propelled me to ponder questions, not only of mathematics, but of the foundations of mathematics. One, in particular, became my own particular hobbyhorse: how is it that we come by our axioms? Euclid's postulates, for example, seem perfectly clear and obvious, and certainly allow us to work in the geometry of the plane. But how, I asked, can we justify the postulates? After all, if mathematicians wish to have any purchase on representation, or anything extending outside of mathematics, it is necessary to locate the axiom outside of the realm of creation *ex nihilo*. As before, I turned to my professors for explanations. And, as before, my questions were taken to be quite ridiculous. "Just do the math", I can remember one professor scoffing at me after a particularly tense exchange on the origins of truth tables. Even then, having studied no philosophy whatever, I was quite aware that the answers to my questions would not be found by "doing the math". By its very nature, after all, the axiom justifies the system and is not justified *by* the system. And so, answerless, back to my desk I went.

Perhaps spurred by this discovery of the apparently unjustified foundations of mathematics, I fumbled for something more solid. Fortunately enough, a just-forgotten passion peeked out from the dust. As the song says, "Maybe I should have saved those leftover dreams". Luckily for me, I had, and could therefore avoid that rainy day for a while longer. This reanimated enthusiasm, I say now with the slightest cringe, was politics. Not uncommon for people of my age to be interested, almost in spite of themselves, in politics, I should think. We have matured, after all, in one of the most turbulent and uncertain political climates in this country's history. Not because of the intensity of the modern political attitude, I should say, but rather due to the failure of rigor in the modern political sphere. I felt this failure acutely as I matured from a child to a young adult. I even, I'm quite embarrassed to admit, had strong political aspirations during my last year of high school and first year of university. In fact, as a senior in high school, still reeling from the frankly disturbing spectacle of the 2016 election, I began to plan the fashioning of the well-informed man. I resolved to perform a kind of survey of the modern political landscape, catalogue the most important issues, and synthesize the arguments of the two armies. Thereby would the well-informed man emerge. As my senior year of high school could not possibly be called calm, I never started the project. But, as I returned to my desk in the dark and fury of 2020, I decided to take it on once again. I

began, even if that was all I was able to manage. For as I wished to perform my syntheses with some degree of rigor, it was necessary to first analyze the arguments of both sides of the issue in question, independent of each other. A problem analogous to my issues with mathematics arose here; in virtually every argument I analyzed, I identified too many issues to count. Propositions, one being supposed to follow directly from the other, seemed to be, at best, distant relations, even where their logical relationship held firm. Arguments were based on political axioms that were either entirely preposterous, clearly created for the purpose of making that particular argument, or else, if they held any sense, they fell into the same problem of axioms I noted in mathematics. For these reasons, apart from the distinct feeling of being a horticulturist wading through industrial waste, I quickly abandoned the project, and was again somewhat lost at sea. I was quite in the position of a sort of Odysseus: banished from every shore I could see, ever finding firm ground for only a moment. I had, though, in my political surveys, smelt the whiffs of fresher, sweeter gardens, not found in mathematics or in the wasteland of the political.

These twin demons, poverty-stricken in terms of rigor, drove me far away from the political (I would maintain my mathematical devotions for a while longer), nearer to the shore of philosophy. I began listening more and more to "public intellectuals"; The lectures and conversations of Jordan Peterson, Sam Harris, Bret and Eric Weinstein, and Stephen Blackwood were particular habits of mine. Peterson presented me with the beginnings of the psychoanalytic, the stoic, and a great deal of the Platonic, Harris offered the brutally scientific, and Blackwood introduced me to the classical humanities. I loved it all, and immersed myself for the entirety of 2020 and 2021. These minds, and many more besides, all were engrossed, by one road or the other, in the question of religion. The debates between Harris and Peterson were especially lively, and carved up the landscape nicely. In these debates and others like them, the example of interpretation and understanding of fiction, drama, poetry, and interpretation more generally, cropped up endlessly. These "scholars" spent, and continue to spend, more time dancing around Kant than it would take to simply read what the fellow wrote. This was a problem I yearned to solve. I had all but given up reading fiction years before as a direct consequence of my inability to contend with the works. "What does it *mean*?" was my constant refrain. I was as unable to solve the problem myself as I was unable to find any writings of any nature on the topic whatever! Full of scorpions, indeed, was my mind. And so, being quite helpless, I resolved to reach out to any person I could imagine being of any help whatever. I contacted my high school literature teacher, my freshman literature professor, two members of faculty in the English department, and the chair of the department. I only wanted answers. The responses I received from the first four contacts ranged in temperature from lukewarm to downright freezing. I recall the particularly frosty response from my high school teacher: "William, I have no idea what it is that you are asking (No signature)". And then, at the very last, I received an email that I now regard to be the most important communication I have ever received. My inbox read "RE: Literary Analysis

Correspondence; from Kevin Spicer".

A few days later, I met Dr. Spicer in his office. I can vividly recall it, and have often reminisced about the moment I stepped through the door; how rare it is to be able to exactly locate the beginning of one's life! I recall the office vividly: the bust of Shakespeare sitting on the file cabinet, four bookshelves overflowing with a seemingly endless array of books, the pair of shoes by the desk. It was a glorious place. We walked out of the office and took the elevator down to the first floor. We turned out into the newly finished quad, making small talk: the first of our "pre-show banters", as he now calls them. It was a perfect August afternoon, and the campus was in full bloom. We sat on one of the benches lining the path that winds through the quad, connecting the old and new areas of the campus. We began to speak. I can remember noticing immediately just how easily I could speak to this man, and what an odd experience that was! I hadn't spoken to anyone about any serious topic in over 18 months, and yet the words seemed to literally slide off of my tongue and hover in front of me for the smallest moment, before Dr. Spicer would take hold of them, turn them in his hands, pull his own from his pocket, and toss the new thought back towards me. It was, quite literally, a divine experience.

We spoke for three hours that day, from noon until three. Our conversation swam from personal history to literature to philosophy (nothing serious at first, I must mention), and back again at a galloping pace, while I attempted, with a grin splitting my face, to hold on. Our conversation was so distinctly different from those I had observed in the political and "publicly intellectual" spaces, that I found myself quite at a loss for exactly what to say; I had no idea how to operate in this space. Even so, the words kept tumbling out, apparently not of my own accord. At the time, I would have thought this to be something akin to a moral sin which, after lurking for some time, would come up from the deep and snatch me back down out of my arrogance. So much more surprised was I, then, when Dr. Spicer did not sneer or scoff or simply get up and leave, but listened to my juvenile ramblings and considered them somewhat seriously! Such an experience I had never had, and such a man I had never met. His mind was absolutely immense. I have often said, when holding in my hands a book like Kant's first *Critique* or Heidegger's *Being and Time*, that it feels as if I hold a black hole in my hands. Sitting next to Kevin Spicer on that bench on that August afternoon, it was as if I sat next to Atlas himself. I hated to leave, but our conversation had exhausted my mind to the point of incoherence. We said goodbye, and I walked away, in shock of the man I had discovered by sheer luck and chance.

Thus began the first period of my studies with Dr. Spicer. We planned to meet every Friday morning at 9 o'clock on our bench, where we would speak for an hour or more, until one of us was forced to leave, for one reason or another. I had, both in my mathematics studies and in listening to the speakers previously mentioned, developed a strong Platonic or neo-Platonic view of things. I had the makings of a fine religious scholar or pre-Kantian metaphysician, I'm sure.

Dr. Spicer, on the other hand, is a scholar of, among (all) other things, Shakespeare, Hegel, Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, Levi-Strauss, and Nietzsche. We had, therefore, many disagreements early on. Subjects of truth and good and beauty were hotly contested. I, having read little to no serious philosophy, was perhaps more heated than he in our discussions. It is the ultimate failure of the intellectual, I've learned, to hold too tightly to one's ideas and commitments. It took quite some time for me to emerge from my Platonic shell; or rather, for Dr. Spicer to crack the shell with a well-placed word. In the next few months, I would occasionally duck back inside my broken shell for some illusory security, while the storm of new and better ideas raged outside, threatening to tear the shell away once and for all.

Dr. Spicer has maintained throughout our relationship that "the easy thing", as we've mutually called it, is rarely, if ever, worth doing. What good is it to avoid the difficult thing? On the contrary, the difficult thing is the *only* thing worth doing. In these early days, he carried this philosophy to its full with artful caution. He was careful not, as I say, to rip my shell away all at once and expose me to the raging tempest, but rather to tap around the shell, perhaps let a breeze or so in through the cracks, but still allow me the safety of my orthodoxy, until I would emerge of my own accord. He tapped, to be sure with some serious hammers: the *Dissoi Logoi* and Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* were hammers chosen particularly well. I, of course, clung to Plato with a stony grip for quite a while, letting little light into the shell. As a sort of rebellion, I began reading Wittgenstein, without mentioning it to Dr. Spicer. I found it agreeable, being both as mathematical as any philosophy could be and, in a comforting way, complete, closed, and consistent. I took Wittgenstein quite to heart, and often returned to him when the tone of my conversations slipped from the civilly disagreeable to the dispositionally contentious.

And yet, as I reminisce on those times, I am not quite so sure that the ideas being shown to me seemed so abrasive as a function of their content, but rather as a function of the limitation of my own language. My resistance was not, that is, a disagreement or even a misunderstanding, so much as a failure of my own linguistic filter. This filter, which might have been characterized as semi-politically neo-Platonic, allowed little of value through. This terribly narrow frame persisted for some time, until I was finally able to leave my cracked shell behind, and step out into the storm. After hiding inside for so long, I found the wind pleasant on my face. Strong the new wind was, and violent, but I found a wonderful guide by my side, helping me to sway and dance in the gale. My old shelter still called out to me from time to time in a Calypso's voice, enticing me to come back where it was safe. It was, after all, quite difficult to dance and sway with so many radically new ideas; I can recall leaving Dr. Spicer's office on several occasions with a nauseous feeling in my throat and stomach, having been so shocked by the new country I had been guided through. My previous commitments provided a respite from these challenges to growth.

I would return to these commitments periodically, but less and less frequently,

over the next few months. Having exhausted ourselves in tussles over absolute entities, we resolved to move forward into a slightly less contentious area: psychoanalysis. I had only encountered this peripherally, and had never thought much about or for it. It would, in fact, not be until later, with the long-awaited acceptance of negativism, that I would really grasp the significance of the psychoanalytic. Nevertheless, I was more than happy to make a fine study of the area with my good friend guiding me along the way.

As the fall term drew to a close, I made a small survey of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, accompanied by selected essays from his complete works, and all, of course, motivated, supported, and supplemented by my conversations with Dr. Spicer. He, being one of the finest living Lacanians, would always include in our discussions of Freud an awareness and recognition of Freud's relationship to Lacan, and the lines of continuity (and discontinuity) between the two. To wit, we once spent a particularly memorable January afternoon reading two books by the children's poet Shel Silverstein: *The Missing Piece* and *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*. Spicer turned to me and said, quite seriously, "everything you need to know about Lacanian psychoanalysis is in these two books". I really won't ever forget that afternoon - it was one of those rare afternoons which only come about with one or two people in a boy's life. Luckily for me, they tend to come about more often than not with my dear friend and mentor. In addition to Lacan and Freud, we covered several essays by Slavoj Zizek: several from his collection *The Plague of Fantasies* and his essay on Brandom's work on Hegel.

The last two months of that autumn and first two months of that winter fostered an incredible amount of progress, both in my own mind and language and in my partnership with Dr. Spicer. With regard to the former, it was shockingly clear, even to myself, that my language and mind were expanding at a breakneck speed. It was as if the orthodoxical plugs in the dam were, one by one, falling away and being swept swiftly away by the rushing current that roared through the holes, previously walled up. I was finding myself less and less disturbed by the radical ideas springing from my mentor's tongue. I found I could make sense of them with some degree of clarity and even the brief glimmer of rigor. This development, naturally, deepened and enriched the relationship between myself and Dr. Spicer. We had, I feel it necessary to emphasize, butted heads with the ferocity of two mountain goats in the months previous. So much greater was my shock and relief during this new period, then, when I found that we really disagreed about very little, and had even spoken, apparently at odds with each other, about exactly the same thing. The expansion of my language and its coordination with Spicer's language was, there is no doubt, **the** turning point in our relationship.

We therefore, using Lacan as a sort of bridge, transitioned from psychoanalysis into philosophy of language. I cannot say with any certainty when our discussions of language began; I only remember that it was quite cold, and we spent our days in the sacred office, warming ourselves by the light of the green lamp on the desk. However it began, it was the first time I was able to synthesize

my study into something that vaguely resembled an argument. My mathematical sensibilities, as well as my studies of Wittgenstein, had provided me with a picture of language that was, it appeared, totally incommensurate with my friend's. His picture, though he would never use such a visual word, was radically structuralist. Being masterfully versed in Derrida, Lacan, and Deleuze, he presented quite an intimidating argument. For my part, I found myself positing a strongly representative or referential picture of language, grounded in my mathematical and Wittgensteinian commitments. I didn't disagree totally with the structuralist model, but some leaps were simply too much for me to condone. One of the largest of these was the claim that the signifier not only necessitated difference, but was defined *purely by* a difference in terms, with each term having no defining characteristics apart from its difference from every other term. I found this claim to be quite preposterous, and defended my position (if it can be given such an honorable title) in a debate that lasted for over a month. Now, having studied Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, I can locate the claim in the proper space, and am edging closer to an understanding of what, really, is being suggested.

During these days, Spicer and I read several essays, including Derrida's *Structure, Sign, and Play.* I found it surprisingly agreeable, save a the last quarter, save a few passages that are, most probably, the most important in the essay. In his incredibly astute and subtle manner, my mentor refrained from insisting on these post-structuralist ideas for the time being…we would touch in them in a different context later. We also considered some structuralist ideas put forward by Levi-Strauss in *The Structural Study of Myth.* This was particularly helpful as we attempted to locate each other on the question "just how powerful is language, metaphysically speaking?". On this, too, we disagreed.

Towards the end of this period, I should say it was last May, we dispensed with our debate and decided to look at language from perspectives that would not cohere, necessarily, with either of our positions. This has become a usual technique for us; when we two unstoppable forces find ourselves at an impasse, we abandon our respective tracks all together, and attempt to find consensus along different less well-traveled roads. To find some consensus here, we turned to Heidegger and *On the Way to Language.* Dr. Spicer being a trained Heideggerian, I had been exposed to quite a bit of Heidegger before this point. This, I will mention here, was another wonderfully chocking thing about speaking to Dr. Spicer. Despite never having read many of the texts we spoke of, I was nevertheless able to speak about them without a problem, thanks to Dr. Spicer's inimitable ability to summarize a complex topic in a few sentences, with the kind of richness and depth that only comes from the most profound contemplation. This has been an invaluable gift; it has made extremely difficult texts incredibly understandable to me on a first reading. This has allowed our conversations to extend far beyond my measly repertoire. My exposure to Heidegger followed this model; in reading *On the Way to Language*, though still shocked and paralyzed by the profundity of the work, I found it to be intelligible and even understandable. All thanks to my dearest friend and mentor.

Again, it is quite impossible to specify any punctuation to mark the end of this epoch. In the space we inhabited, and continue to inhabit, one hardly notices time at all. Time's incessant bumps vanish, as if a celestial launderer takes special care to iron them perfectly, even if the wrinkles must return in the next moment, forcing us to part once more, reluctantly, as time returns, as it does to all men, to us.

The spring term ended, and we separated for a week or so - a bit of time to decompress and regroup. I lived only a mile or so from campus, so when Dr. Spicer asked if I'd like to spend some time together over the summer, I was overjoyed. At this time, out significant differences had either been resolved or had been hidden away in the proverbial closet which, once opened, would consume a whole afternoon with debate. Given this organization, we entered what I will here refer to as "the happening time". I choose the word "happening" carefully, for it is quite the perfect word to describe what went on. At last, after a study lasting little under a year, I had acquired something of the true philosophical attitude; again, with all credit and commendation given to Dr. Spicer. Such were his patience and generosity that, upon realizing my progress under him, I felt quite guilty at not having progressed quicker. And yet, I was all the more delighted, now that I was able, to keep pace with my mentor during this time.

We had, throughout our friendship, danced around Shakespeare. Dr. Spicer is a fine Shakespearean, and so was quite anxious to introduce me to the bard ever since he noted the spark of potential in me. Under a mutual, though unspoken concurrence that it was, finally, the right time to study the plays and poems, we agreed to devote the summer and following fall term to Shakespeare. We began in June with Julius Caesar. It was certainly pastures new for me, and for my mentor as well, in an odd way. It was a different newness for each one of us, which allowed a wonderful and fascinating pas de deux of study. I would bring up quite a naive point (I'll still call them such, though Dr. Spicer insists they were not) and Dr. Spicer would turn it in such a way that made it seem more profound a question than I ever could have conjured on my own; this is the value of years of devoted study. This capacity of Spicer's, which continued all through our studies, even past the point where I ceased to ask naive questions, was absolutely invaluable. I can say with a fine degree of certainty that (it would be tedious of me to remind the reader to give every medal to my mentor, so I won't) I was able to make as complete and profound a study of Shakespeare as any undergraduate could hope to make.

"Study", though, should not be taken here as a noun, for we did not study the bard in the same way one studies a gem. The gem does not move, does not respond to the viewer, is totally indifferent. The admirer's task is to observe the gem and, after all, exclaim "My goodness! It's breathtaking!". This model may be applicable to literature, but only after consideration of the insights of the new criticism. Spicer and I certainly spent plenty of time admiring the bard's skills and profundity - often wondering how in the world such a man could exist - but only after *doing* something with each text. In the first place, it is not clear

that the text (any text) has the quality of the gem - that it is there, in full, with its beauty and meaning on display. It seems necessary, at least for us two, to wrangle with the text a great deal before its beauty really came to the fore. Hamlet comes to mind - we spent the better part of a week (with several skipped classes on my part) wrangling with that play. It was only a few months ago, as a matter of fact, through our current discussions of Deleuze, that we (or at least, I) began to really understand what the play was about. Dr. Cutrofello's book, *All for Nothing*, was a fine catalyst as well. This pattern, quite reminiscent of what Deleuze wrote of his relationship with Guattari - something to the effect of 'Felix would say things to me, and though I'd know exactly what he said, I wouldn't understand it until six months after' - would continue throughout my study of the bard. Spicer would say things to me that I knew were unbelievably insightful and profound, but wouldn't be able to understand them for weeks after. And once I did, I would drag him (willingly, I should say) back to that play or poem, and we'd play again the tune we'd both heard before, now tapping our feet in the same tempo. Hamlet, Coriolanus, Henry IV parts one and two, and Venus and Adonis were only a few of the works that we rehearsed, so to speak, several times.

Then, we arrived at **the** play. In his book *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle states, so rightly, that the uncanny is the recognition of the foreign in the familiar or of the familiar in the foreign; that is, the recognition of oneself in the infinitely other. This, Spicer had said to me since the name of Shakespeare parted my lips for the first time, was *Lear* for him. "It's tattooed on my brain - I'll never read it again. There's not a speck of light in that play", he would say to me. Now, imagine with me: you've met a fellow who has read every serious work of philosophy and literature of the last three-thousand years, practically knows them by heart, can synthesize them with unbelievable speed and accuracy, and holds one author - say, Shakespeare - above them all. And then, it is discovered that the *one* work from the entire western canons of literature and philosophy that this man refuses to bring close is written by his favorite author! How odd! So, naturally, I insisted that we cover *Lear*. We did, not without some resistant from my dear friend. I prepped for our conversation, which was not my custom. I found every piece of criticism on it published in the Quarterly, the Survey, and the Bulletin in the last hundred years, read essays by Bloom, Bradley, Coleridge, Empson, and more. I know the literature on Lear better than any other play. We spoke of it one Monday, for our usual stretch of around 150 minutes. I don't suppose we should ever do so again. I understand, as I did immediately when reading the play, the aversion. It is a horrific, terrible, absolutely beautiful and ingenious play that should be read by every living soul. Once is quite enough. I mention that moment in particular because it confirmed, at least for me (Spicer will say he held this confirmation long before) that I was competent, or at least capable, in this area. I had walked with my best friend over the scorched soil of *Lear*, and had survived the tread. Not easily, certainly, not even comfortably, but I had made the journey with him, arm in arm all the way.

Towards the end of our Shakespeare studies, we began, on Spicer's passionate

recommendation, to study Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. I have continued to do so, though the semester and my undergraduate career have long since ended. It is one of the greatest works of continental philosophy ever written - I cannot assess it otherwise. I fully intend to continue studying it in the future, along with all the rest of Deleuze's work. Deleuze, with some other notable names on the side, solidified for me something that had been brewing for some time - my commitment to post-Kantian continental thought, which would have seemed beyond impossible to the confused student who reached out to an English professor two years ago. This school of thought, when properly located in the proper linguistic space, is not radical or destructive or subversive or even malicious, as the 'student' of Peterson would have expected two years ago. It is profound, capacious, artful, and, most importantly, true! Or, at least, true enough to make me want to make it the object of my study; we mustn't forget what happened to Macbeth. The doctrinaire forget that the witches speak in riddles, and that the acceptance of "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" as pure, untainted truth forgets that "Macduff was from his mother's womb Untimely ripp'd". One mustn't forget what happens next to our poor Thane of Cawdor.

And so, after a perhaps unreasonably long story (that could have been much longer), I suppose I'll have to end it here. I hope I've given you some idea of how I arrived at your doorstep, and who's to blame. That's my knocking you're hearing - go right ahead and open the door.