

DISPUTATION CLIV

October 20, 2016

Dearest Peucinians,

We have been in recess for the past two weeks on account of Fall break and Noam Chomsky, but as we have run out of excuses to delay our next encounter, we must reconvene at Massachusetts Hall this Thursday — with four newly declaimed members — to discuss the sources of epiphany and inspiration.

RESOLVED: THE WORKS OF ART OFFERS GREATER INSPIRATION THAN THE WORKS OF NATURE

Affirmative: Andrew Carnegie '17

Negative: Madame de Stael '19

“A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”

The *he* in this passage is Gabriel Conroy, who has just delivered a speech at a dinner party and now returns to his hotel room with his wife Gretta. Gabriel is a professor, and during the aforementioned dinner party he exhibits the characteristics typical of his profession: he is contemplative and aloof, lost in his own mind. He patronizes the people he speaks with over the course of the evening, for he is generally less interested in what they have to say and more interested in how they will receive his speech. It becomes clear that Gabriel has lived his entire life in this manner — Gretta informs him, before falling asleep, that she had been courted in her youth by a young man by the name of Michael Furey, who passed away at the age of 17 and who she still thinks about many years later. Gabriel is shocked that he had never known this about this man and the profound influence he had had on his wife. After Gretta falls asleep, he stares out the window and wonders at how the mere memory of the deceased can haunt us so after death. He notes how the snow falls indiscriminately upon all living and dead things, bestowing a gentle dignity upon everything it touches. His thought turns towards what is common between all human beings, and he recognizes that as long as there is a such thing as memory, even the distinction between the living and the dead is a blurry one. Thus Gabriel, who previously ridicules his wife for wishing to leave Dublin to visit her hometown of Galloway, decides that it is time he joins her and see where she grew up.

After a lifetime of self-absorption, it takes a mere snowfall — admittedly an uncommon occurrence in Ireland — to reorientate his thoughts towards other people. Against the drudgery of everyday life, it is this spectacle of nature that moves him towards epiphany. The reader, in turn, cannot help but be moved also, but this is less a result of the snowfall per se and more so a result of the narrative structure and the stunning language that the artist, James Joyce, employs in concluding “The Dead,” the final story in his collection of short stories *The Dubliners*.

“The Dead” is a beautiful if somewhat ironic illustration of the points in contention. Our life *in* society stagnates as we follow the same beaten paths and tired modes of thinking day after day, and parallel to this is the life *of* society, which occasionally fine-tunes itself but generally maintains its form generation after generation. Rarely do ideas and actions arise *ex nihilo*; everything that man produces is in some way derivative of the things that have come before. For philosophers such as Rousseau and Thoreau, who draw on nature as a reservoir of social criticism, the natural serves as an escape from the echo chamber of vice that society so often collapses into.

And yet we can all agree that snow is not a sentient force that seeks to imbue humanity with egalitarian principles. If Gabriel learns anything from the snowfall, it is because he is already overwrought with emotion and is therefore susceptible to an idea that the snow incidentally suggests, but by no means endorses. Nature might be the ultimate source of escapism, but does nature speak to any of the deepest concerns and desires that weigh on us, or does it necessarily indifferent to our constructed lives because it stands in opposition to them? Humanity, after all, is not intertwined with nature as it once was (for the Native Americans, for instance) but is built instead on top of and against nature. Human beings are uncanny because they violate and do violence to nature, disturbing its order and laws to live comfortably and apart from what is wild. How can nature offer anything meaningful to a species such as this?

How can anything manmade serve as a better metric of what is beautiful than nature? Does mankind reach its full potential when it embraces nature, or when it finally overcomes it completely? Do art and nature serve different purposes for the individual and for society?

*Thursday October 20th, **8:10 PM** Sharp
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire*

Yours,
μὲνω - Meno

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus