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Spiraling from a center

James Tolan

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Spiraling from a Center

A Creative Thesis submitted to the
University Honors Program
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With University Honors
Department of Philosophy

by

James Tolan

DeKalb, Illinois

August 1987

A capstone is to be the culmination of one's undergraduate education, and after more than a year this capstone has in fact been the culmination of mine. I reluctantly came to Northern five years ago simply because I found it to be the least objectionable of all the options I believed myself to have. I became an honors student because Dr. Rosen asked me, and he seemed like a nice enough fellow. And as my cornerstone I chose Philosophy 101 with Dr. Stanage, because a friend from high school told me all philosophy was a big bull shit session, a study for which I was exactly suited. The class turned out to be one of two classes at Northern where I experienced a strong sense of personal growth and commitment. It was the only class I attended regularly that semester, and the only one that ever presented me with the occasion to think.

Grades were determined largely on the basis of four papers which offered us such questions as "Who am I?", "What can I know?", "What should I do?", and something similar to "What am I?" I don't quite recall that question not only because it was the first but because I earned a D- for my effort, an effort which consisted of my high blown bastardization of Thoreau, Emerson and the whole of American Transcendentalism.

The second paper, "What can I know?", was one I was determined to use my own thoughts and reasoning ability to address, but somehow my acute powers yielded a very brittle

reductionist argument that reached the tenuous conclusion that to believe was to know. Basically my reasoning was that all I could know was that I believed something to be true. This stumble into thought was considered worth a B-, a charity I didn't find sufficient at the time, so Dr. Stanage agreed to read the paper once again and on this reading offered to change the grade to a C. I declined his offer and wrote a truly extracurricular piece of satire parodying Plato's "Theaetetus!" On reflection the piece offered the argument that "sure my thinking is crummy, but it's mine. Thinking on one's own is better than parroting, therefore I should get better grades than the stenographers who transcribe class notes into papers.

Well to my good fortune and his kind credit, Dr. Stanage didn't kick me in the ass for my cheekiness, as I had been accustomed in my elementary education, instead he praised my efforts and asked me to read the paper in front of the class. With that piece I had finally pushed away a lot of the artifice and expressed myself more sincerely and somewhat truthfully. My quest wasn't an heroic one, but more a reaction from a bruised ego, still I wanted to prove that I could think and express myself sharply, freshly and clearly,

My next paper was in response to the question "What should I do?" I wrote a short story as my attempt at reply. It was a piece I'll probably never show, but it gave me a path. If I truly wanted to express myself honestly and freshly this was a way.

I then spent the next four years receiving a fine education, the whole while thinking of myself as a writer and never writing a word. After Dr. Stanage's class I declared majors in Philosophy and English, quickly dropping the English major after realizing I was to be taught to be a scholar instead of a thinker. So for the better part of those four years I was a philosophy student, but not the philosophy student who had written "Tolatetus" and the short story, instead I fell back into to the path I had ruttet out through those first two papers in the cornerstone.

And so it went until the spring semester of my initial senior year when the time came to take my capstone. Dr. Stanage consented to supervise my thesis after four years, and to culminate my college career I chose to study Gabriel Marcel, an interesting enough philosopher of whom I knew nothing more than that he would fulfill not only my capstone requirement but also my final departmental requirement, so I read Marcel for about two months before fleeing, before running away from finishing something that I was not ready to complete, in a way that would have been cheap and mean.

For a year I bummed around and read and generally led a life of soft lamentaion. When I decided to return this semester it was not with dedication, only with the tired sense that this was something I had to get over with. So

Dr. Stanage agreed to take me on again, this time with a capstone in which I was to study the relationship among reason, feeling and art. The study began as a rather formal philosophic inquiry into the question, but Dr. Stanage encouraged me to consider the poetry class I was taking as almost a sister class to the capstone, and as the semester progressed incest thrived.

The writing of these poems and more importantly the poems themselves are the beginning of an understanding to the questions I started asking in my cornerstone five years ago. And probably the two most important things I learned as an undergraduate here at Northern are the sanctity of the question and its honest expression and investigation, for me in poetry. This is the culmination of my college career, one which began in my cornerstone and has spiraled from that center toward its thankful conclusion in my capstone, the only two classes I took with Dr. Sherman Stanage and quite apparently, the two most important classes I've ever had.

Sincerely and with Great Thanks,

James Tolan

james tolan

Elegy

Slow summer sunrise
through gates of a graveyard
left to green
over abandoned wounds

a young woman
naked on the grass
watches her toes
slide dewy
across the name
of a man she never knew

no wife
or child by his side
fidelity planted grey
in the still rich earth
of a time
uncomplicated by memory,

yet all alone
she fingers toes
against the cool dawn breeze
melting in her eyes.

james tolen
2/16/87

Just a Feeling

Some days

I'd just rather jack off

or caress your teeth
with a ballpeen hammer.

Its nothing personal,
just a feeling.

james tolan
2/16/87

Poetics

A few simple lines
on white paper—
I go spiraling
in a vastness
of landscaped beginnings
not knowing
where I'm going
or how I'll get there
just enjoying
the action
and wondering
at the shapes
that follow.

james tolan
2/28/87

Comedy

I spend my nights
one leg balanced
on a tightrope
which divides the gulf

into a shallow pool
of tiny yellow fish
swimming over
a sandy bottom

and an ocean
of melted pine
silent under
ripples hardly moving

as I, caught
in cross winds
of shifting force,
live in the sway

of a droop toed leg
counting steady time
between the wade
and the plunge.

james tolan
3/3/87

Industry

Pale winter morning,
a yellow brick factory
with blinded windows
and fenced concrete lawn
opens for business as
the school bus arrives.

Poet as Genealogist

My mother called me
a "son of a bitch" today.
Should I explain?.. nah

james tolan
3/3/87

Heart on a String

Last March
it only stormed,
never rained,
and when skies were blue
the wind would blow
just the right amount
for those who loved
to watch kites imitate
butterflies on leash.

It was the month
we built our heart-shaped kite
and let it soar
as we ran hand in hand
across the field
passing string
 you to me
 me to you,
and even when we became
lost in clouds
and let our heart be tangled
in the limbs
of young stretching trees
we'd take turns
holding the string
as the other
carefully untangled it.

* * * * *

This March

bottom heavy clouds drizzled,
and the wind,
heavy with scent from nearby farms,
made flight a chore,
so we took turns
running our heart
at the edge of the field,
and when my turn came
again I grew bored
and tried some daring stunts,
losing more and more string
until handing it back to you
it had reached its end
and fell into the high branches
of a dying elm.

Even then you offered to climb to the top,
if I would only help,
but I couldn't seem to remember how,
and you were scared to try alone,
so we go on
tangled in a dying tree
at the edge of the field.

james tolan
3/4/87

An endless flow
of late nights
poured from
next month's rent
into a glass
reflecting static
black and white
images from lonely
childhood afterschools
and other sad stories
from twenty one years
of hard life
well earned
in suburban comfort
writing weak words
of strong emotion.

james tolan
3/31/87

I wonder...

what

the hell

did

Mary Magdelene

do

when

foot washing

just

wasn't

enough?

james tolan
3/31/87

Wind & Leather

Hardened peroxide spikes
guard a tautly tender head
fettered with the sounds
of wailing anarchy

A soul, sweaty and stained,
beneath buckled black leather,
he walks the guard rail

over U.S. 41

spitting on Wonder Bread
Trucks and Volvos, waiting
for the wind to blow.

james tolan
4/6/87

Giggles before the Void

I could
take her ass
and put it in a box
by the window

and every morning
I'd open the box
and tickle her ass
with a goose feather
and giggle

but sometime
or other she'd forget
and drop— assless
into the bowl

then all puckered
and embarrassed
she'd want it back
and I'd be stuck
with an empty box
and a bald goose

and every morning after that
I'd have to get up
and feed that goose
and look for something
to put in the empty box

james tolen
4/8/87

The Emasculate

The castrated condor
fell down upon
a golden limousine,
stealing away with
the Ernest Hemingway
shrunken head
hood ornament—
freshly cubed in ice.

Carrying the famed man's
wee noggin between his legs
like the dripping remains
of once productive loins,

the condor circled
the bullfight arena
in search of more
fertile metaphor
before dropping Papa's
quickly melting head
into the rum punch
of a wilting widow
fingering herself
in a private box.

"Perfectly charmed,"
she had a hole drilled
between his ears
and wore him as
the center piece
among her string
of gems.

james tolan
4/13/87

Chrysalis

I carve a life
from a sandy clump
of freshly forming stone,
using moist-marrowed bones
and soft-tipped fingers
to form
a supple space
among naturally
occurring points
and edges,
until crumbling
into the cradled groove,
I grind heels and back
into crudely fitted rock
and scrape
still pliable sand
over juiceless ribs,

then wait
for the cool healing
into stone.

james tolan
4/20/87

Poetics II

So much voice
hides in the dotted shade
of feathers

waiting

for the words
it will carry
on a brick

blown through plate glass

•
james tolan
4/20/87

A Nod into Spring

Waking after a long winter's nap,
I find the polar bear

upon whose cuddly tummy
I had been slumbering

engaged in the quiet
sucking of my head.

Unsure of his motivation,
I reach up

and tweek his crinkled wet nose
only to have it come off

in my hand where it blossoms
into a wax cupped tulip,

tipping with pooled rain.
Well pleased,

my thirsty friend quenches
his cottoned mouth

before plodding happily off
into a fresh-morning world.

james tolan
4/22/87

Another Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a pouched faced
old man

dozing on
lithium

beside
the bill of rights.

james tolan
4/28/87

