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Filling This Empty Chair: On Genius and Repose

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I



The Chair & the Pipe (December 1888-January 1889)

I listened to many classes about hermeneutics, and after each class I seemed to be filled with the same feeling of confusion. It was not so much a confusion about what hermeneutics was, but more a perplexed feeling about how this style of inquiry was going to impact my life as a teacher. From what I initially gathered, in some sort of “magical” way, something remarkable from the life world of the classroom would simply present itself to me. It seemed that my role would be to take up this particular event and care for its message, so that the beauty of its dailiness was gently uncovered and honoured. Well, I certainly had no intention of holding my breath and waiting for the hand of the curriculum god to tap me on the shoulder, delivering a profound message! As a teacher, I felt so tangled up in the everydayness of the classroom, I wondered if I could ever step far enough out of the situation to see and hear the possibilities presented daily. By the middle of October, I had resigned myself to the fact that every one in my graduate course had received a special message from Mercury, except for me.

Wednesday, October 28th, 1998. My plan for the morning was to provide the children with

an opportunity to apply their imagination and skills to a descriptive writing passage. Rather than simply “teaching” all about what descriptive writing entails, I decided to select an art reproduction and share my own writing about it. My intention was to draw upon our collective background experience with art and use that as a springboard to create beautiful writing. Since the beginning of the year, the walls of the classroom had been filled with reproductions of the works of van Gogh, Gauguin, Monet, Manet, Matisse and several others. Available, too, was a large pile of smaller, 8" x 10" reproductions that children could take to their work areas and ponder. Daily, we would sit in front of large reproductions and talk about them, how they made us feel, made us think, and we learned of the lives of these artists, their troubles and successes. As I read my own paragraph based on Van Gogh’s painting of a bedroom, I could instantly sense a connection between myself and the children. I remember thinking “This is going to be a great lesson.”

One of the first student books I picked up to read was Nathan’s. He had written two pages on the image of Van Gogh’s chair:

The sad and lonely chair sits alone in a cold and empty room. The only warmth is a little smokeless pipe. So as the chair sits alone with still only a little warmth, the chair waits for something. But what is it? It still waits for the moment, that moment that the chair thinks will never come. The brick floor gives a chill in the air. The chair still sits by the door, waiting for the moment. But the door doesn’t budge. Days pass, but everything is still. Still as a rock. So everything goes like this day after day after day. This goes on and nobody sits on the chair. Nobody even notices the chair and that’s how it will stay.

When I read Nathan’s passage, I felt a chill up my spine, knowing that the chair was waiting for Van Gogh to return from the field in which he shot himself. During the weeks that followed, I shared Nathan’s writing with colleagues both at my own school and in the system. I also shared it with friends and family members because I didn’t want this event to simply be held under an awful educational gaze. Each time I shared his writing, I was met with a stunned look, followed by always well-meant comments which always seemed to dismiss this gift Nathan had given us:

“Nathan is so thoughtful. He always says the most amazing things.”

“What grade did you say you teach?”

“You are so lucky. I could never do that with the children in my class. They just aren’t capable.”

“Nathan is really gifted. He really ought to be tested.”

“Well, how are you going to extend this child’s learning now? Perhaps he should have an opportunity to take his own writing and create his own picture.”

*How should I extend Nathan’s learning? How absurd! The real question that Nathan’s writing presented me with was about **my own** learning being extended. For days I carried his book and picture around with me; to my home, to meetings, around the school...just wondering what to do next. I found myself tempted to sit Nathan down and drill him about why he wrote what he did about Van Gogh’s work and what it meant. Thank goodness I refrained because, upon reflection, I realized that asking Nathan about his own work in this way was not going to give me the answer or the questions I was looking for.*

*In almost all of the responses to Nathan’s writing no one could find a way to speak of **the work** he produced: what does this writing tell us about this painting and what we ourselves may have failed to see, to feel, to understand? about the loneliness and sadness and isolation and emptiness that van Gogh often hides under such colourful images? about our beliefs as teachers about children’s ability to even express such things?*

What also became troublesome were questions like these: would Nathan’s writing have been this rich if he had no images to build from, to rely on, if we had not pursued and practised, with the whole class, how to respond to such works with care and thoughtfulness, if we had not deeply explored the worlds that these painters evoked and how they offered us

a new vision of our own world, if we had not listened to what each other said about the paintings we were looking at? Most responses to Nathan's work failed to respond to **his work**. The reason for this is that many people tried to start with Nathan himself. I realized that the only way that I could take care of Nathan's writing was to start with the world opened up by van Gogh's work, because **that** is what his writing is about.

When David [Jardine] came into the class later that week, I asked Nathan to read his work to him. Nathan had been reading passages from Van Gogh's letters to his brother, and we had watched portions of **Sister Wendy's Story of Painting**, a charming and moving video series on the history of art. They went out into a quiet spot in the hall, and after reading his work to David, Nathan said:

"He's buried next to his brother, you know."

II

Empty chairs had been a feature of van Gogh's thinking since childhood. The memories that crowd behind this single image are connected with deep mournfulness, with thoughts of the omnipresence of death.

....

His own chair, simple and none too comfortable, with his dearly-loved pipe lying on it, stands for the artist himself. We may well be tempted to recall the pictorial tradition that provided van Gogh with his earliest artistic impressions. Dutch Calvinism sternly insisted on an iconographic ban that prohibited all images of the Holy Family except symbolic ones: the danger that the faithful might be distracted by the beauty of the human form had to be avoided at all costs. Thus Christ could be represented by a 'vacant throne.' (Walther & Metzger 1997, 8)

Thus, too, van Gogh himself, not just his death but aspects of his living, can be represented by his room, by the place he has inhabited—the pipe, the chair, the modesty of the surroundings, the colours that speak of Arles (unlike, say, the dark muddiness of *The Potato Eaters* [1885], which places its inhabitants so differently, in hues and colours that seem to place them right into the ground out of which their meal has come):



The Potato Eaters [1885] by van Gogh

Jennifer had her Grade One students doing "self-portraits" this same year as Nathan arrived, not by literally drawing pictures "of themselves," but by drawing pictures of their rooms, the spaces they live within. She also introduced me to a wonderful, disorienting book called *Room Behaviour* (1997) by Rob Kovitz. From the back cover:

Room Behaviour is a book about rooms. Composed of texts and images from the most varied sources, including crime novels, decorating manuals, anthropological studies, performance art, crime scene photos, literature and the Bible, Kovitz shapes the material... to create an original, fascinating and darkly funny rumination about the behaviour of rooms and the people they keep.

Those room portraits that the children did, like van Gogh's painting, were akin to portraits of "vacant thrones"—portraits of spaces that a non-portrayed "subject" (for lack of a better term) inhabits. But this is not quite correct—"the subject" *is* portrayed, but the portrait is *of* a particular *sort* of subject. These are not portraits of an isolated, autonomous, egocentric "I myself" that somehow sits at the centre of any inhabitation, but of a "self" that issues up out of and leaves traces within an inhabitation, a "keep," up out of and in to a world of voices and relations and ancestries and kin, of colours and palettes and hues, images and tales, up out of places, memories and topographies (Gadamer 1989; Jardine, Clifford and Friesen 2002, 2002a) and even up out of the most ordinary, everyday objects that we find ourselves surrounded by (Jardine *et al.* 2000). The "self" that these "room-portraits" portray is, so to speak, an ecological, embodied, worldly, inter-related (non-substantial, unable to exist by its self) "self," not an isolated "I."

So the vacant throne, the empty "room portrait" somehow *is* the self, but now treated as empty of a self-existence independent of its Earthly relations. (This interpretive thread is, of course, *not at all* in line with the Dutch Calvinist idea of "the vacant throne." On the contrary, what we are pointing to here is a way of loving the world and its places and loving our own straggly emergence into being who we are.)

These Grade One room portraits thus provide a simple critique of Cartesianism and its belief in the logical precedence of an abstract, empty, worldless "I am," in favour, instead, of an inhabitation that is the Earthly self's keep and an "I" that grows up out of its sojourns within the world.

This Grade One venture highlights the oddness of many curriculum guides which go through a sequence like this: me, me and my family, maps of our classroom, our neighbourhood, our city, our city past and present, the province etc. These sequences presume that what is somehow most immediate in the life of the child is his—or herself and that curriculum should radiate, so to speak, "outwards" from there. This, of course, is totally unsupported, both by developmental theory (see Piaget 1952; Jardine 2002, 2002a) and by the common sense we develop by living around children and carefully listening to what they are saying to us about these matters. As Kieran Egan (1986, 1992) shows so well, the worlds of imagination and mythology and great stories of places and people far away are much more *immediate, compelling, and understandable* than is the abstraction "my self." Children are much more drawn to, capable within, and articulate about large, troublesome, ancient, venturous, living, imaginal "spaces" of Impressionist painting (e.g. Jardine *et al.* 2000), the allure of old geometries (e.g. Friesen 2000) or Pythagorean cults (e.g. Jardine, Clifford and Friesen 2002a), the spell of trickster tales (e.g. Clifford, Friesen and Jardine 2002; Lensmire 2000), or the age-old troubles of time and its telling (Clifford and Friesen 2002) (to name a few, clearly limited examples), than they are within the cramped and literal-minded enclosure of "myself."

"Myself" doesn't simply disappear in ventures into such alluring, difficult places, only its metaphysical (i.e., non-experiential, dis-embodied, uninhabiting, hallucinatory, ideational, logically consistent but ecologically insane [Bordo 1988]) sense of enclosure. This "myself" is experienced as issuing up out of the course of the experiences, not that I *have* (*Erlebnisse* [see Gadamer 1989, 60-70]) but that I *undergo* (*Erfahrung* [see Gadamer 1989, 240-262]) in and through the world. This world in which I undergo experiences, is not just inhabited and formed and fashioned by myself and by and within by own(ed) experiences, but is always and already experienced, articulated, and inhabited. It has always and already been formed and fashioned by shared and contested inheritances, voices, and ancestries, up out of which I must slowly and continually "find" myself becoming who I am. I am surrounded

by a “multifariousness of voices” (Gadamer 1989, 295)—and not just up out of the human inheritance but all Earthly calls and keeps.

Even these late autumn birds locate, form, and fashion this worldly “I am” (Jardine 2000) in ways far “beyond my wanting and doing” [Gadamer 1989, xxxviii]— here, spotted by these Pine Grosbeaks “before I know it” and whether I have a “lived experience” of it or not (differently put, this is a way to distinguish between phenomenology and hermeneutics).

In just this way, this “world” of Impressionist paintings is *already long-since inhabited* before Jennifer, her Grade One class, or I arrive. Therefore, because this world is not simply “our experiences” or “our constructs,” our “our meanings” or “our perspectives,” entering this world requires some measure of giving ourselves over to *its* “wantings and doings” (Gadamer 1989, xxxviii)—*its* measure of what it wants of *us*. It helps form and fashion who we each become in venturing through it. That is to simply say, we *learn* from it. But now, learning does not just mean that there is a subjectivity who now has, as some interior possession, new information. Rather, it means that each one of us who ventures to, for example, the world of Impressionist paintings, becomes someone who, in different and multiple ways, has come to know her or his way around (*ex-peri*) this place—someone “experienced” in it. The experiences undergone are experiences *of the place* and not simply and only and obviously experiences somehow “of” the experiencer. Simply put, Nathan’s words are *about* van Gogh and self-portraits and rooms and loneliness and dying. They are *of* Arles and Theo. They invoke the muddiness of *The Potato Eaters* (even if Nathan never *meant* to refer to it or to the Dutch Calvinists portrayed in it). When we take his words to be only *about Nathan* (which, as teachers, we surely must do as part of our obligation to him), we *have changed* topics. We have, so to speak, “switched rooms” by now taking these words out of the worlds they invoke and re-placing them into Nathan’s life and biography and psychology. Certainly we experience Nathan’s deep love and enchantment and sense of affinity and connection with this place he has explored. But we don’t come upon Nathan as an isolated psychological subject. Rather, we come upon him “in place”—here, in Arles, in the presence of death and bright palettes.

This frail, contingent, finite, emergent, dependent “self,” then, slowly finds and forms itself in and through its inhabitations, through the “rooms” that surround and care for this emerging self. Each individual self (whatever this exactly now means) does not simply possess its surroundings but is also kept by them. The character (*Bildung* [see Gadamer 1989, 9 and following]) of this emerging self is dependent, at least in part, at least to some terrible extent, upon the company it keeps.

It is frightening to consider that I become what I surround myself with. If I surround myself with trivial, cheap, repetitive, disconnected, meaningless things, my life is in jeopardy of becoming trivial, cheap, boring, disconnected, and meaningless. If we surround students with rich, generous, thoughtful, challenging, enchanting worlds (e.g., the world of Impressionist paintings) the “self” that each one is cultivating now has the chance of becoming generous, thoughtful, and enchanted. However, when I think of the intellectually and spiritually empty surroundings of many classrooms, the prospects of the students that inhabit such surroundings is almost unbearable.

III

Consider, then, another take on something oddly both akin and radically different than “the vacant throne.” Jacques Derrida (& Ferraris 2001, 30-1) is speaking to the question of the difficulty of his own writing and an image arrives:

one does not always write with a desire to be understood—that there is a paradoxical desire not to be understood. It’s not simple, but there is a certain “I hope that not everyone understands everything about this text,” because if such a transparency of intelligibility

were ensured it would destroy the text, it would show that the text has no future [*avenir*], that it does not overflow the present, that it is consumed immediately. Thus there is the desire, which may appear a bit perverse, to write things that not everyone will be able to appropriate through immediate understanding. There is a demand in my writing for this excess...a sort of opening, play, indetermination be left, signifying hospitality for what is to come [*avenir*]. As the Bible puts it—the place left vacant for who is to come [*pour qui va venir*].

Here, the place left vacant with bread and wine at the Seder table, waiting for Elijah to arrive, does not bespeak someone who has *left* but someone who is *coming*. As with “the vacant throne,” it represents someone who is not here, who is not a given, not present, but this absence is now not a once-present and now vacated Self which is elsewhere and still governing, like some Cartesian “I am” or some Husserlian “transcendental subjectivity” which experiences itself as “above this world” (Husserl 1970, 50). This empty chair now stands for *a future which has yet to come* (*avenir*). The futurity represented by the empty chair is not a given, not “frozen” (Smith 2000; Loy 1999), not “foreclosed” (Smith 1999) but “yet to be decided.” What will become of me, what will become of this work I am producing—all this is still coming, is not yet settled, and no amount of hurry or anxiety or effort will outrun this eventuality.

This is what is “given”: this empty chair.

In this light, the empty chair, like the Grade One room-portraits, portray an inhabitant who *has a future*, who is always yet-to-be-itself, yet to fully and finally arrive. So even Nathan’s lamentations over van Gogh’s empty chair and the impending sense of loss and death it portends points to the fact that here we are—who would have thought?—over a century later and half a world away, experiencing van Gogh’s suicide and the work-signs he left of his life, and the room portrait trace of his leaving. Van Gogh has died and has no future. But imaginally speaking, here we are, still living out the work he left. Not unlike Nathan himself, what van Gogh’s work will turn out to be is still yet-to-be-decided and it is being decided anew right here, right now, in this Grade One classroom.

Just to complicate matters further, not just this “self” but these “keeps” are *themselves* not frozen or foreclosed or finished. They are not givens but are “open for the future” (Gadamer 1989, p. 340). The places we venture with (or without) children in (and out of) school—spelling, reading, mathematics, poetry, art, biology, chemistry, philosophy, Dutch Calvinism, Impressionism, writing, hermeneutics, ecology, and so on—are continuously becoming constituted and understood and inhabited differently. They are, so to speak, *living* places or spaces or rooms, (or, if you will, “living disciplines”) that form part of our living Earthly inheritance, and as such—as *living*, i.e., as susceptible to the future—we “must accept the fact that future generations will understand differently” (Gadamer, 1989, 340). When Jennifer surrounded her classroom with prints of van Gogh, Monet, Matisse, Picasso, she was providing her class with a “roomy,” generous topic/topography (see Gadamer 1989, 32; Jardine 2002b) whose full meaning is, in its very temporal, finite, contingent nature, still being decided. There is not yet any final word on this place of Impressionism and van Gogh, even though much has been said. Our only option, then, is finding ways to *get in on this conversation* and to speak in ways that *keeps the conversation open* to being taken up anew (Smith 1999). To paraphrase a phrase of Derrida’s (& Ferraris 2001, 32), this topic still has an empty chair at its table of contents. It is still “open” to question, to debate, to transformation, to being understood differently, becoming ignored or forgotten, or to perhaps even becoming despised again as van Gogh and his works once were.

IV

The Austrian art historian Hans Sedlmayr gives the title “The vacant throne” to the final

chapter of his essay in cultural criticism, *The Loss of the Centre [Verlust der Mitte]*.

Sedlmayr writes: “In the 19th century there was an altogether new type of suffering artist: the lonely, lost, despairing artist on the brink of insanity.” Van Gogh’s chairs constitute a metaphor of the crisis of the entire century. (Walther & Metzger 1997, 9)

This line of argument is also found in Gadamer’s (1989) concern over the image of the artist as a mad or tortured genius who has no place in the world and whose works thus became like “vacant thrones.” Under such an image:

Whenever one “comes upon” something that cannot be found through learning and methodical work alone—i.e., whenever there is *inventio* where something is due to inspiration and not methodical calculation—the important thing is *ingenium*, genius. (Gadamer 1989, 54)

Under such a logic, we don’t look to the works and what they have to say to us, but to the creator, the one who has generated this work, its “genius” and what the work has to say about this creator-genius (“Nathan is really gifted. He ought to be tested”). We look for the “origin of the work of art” (Heidegger 1971, 1972) in a subjectivity, some great, off-stage “I am” that has uttered the work into existence, sometimes seemingly *ex nihilo*. In this light, van Gogh’s paintings are *all* “vacant thrones” that point to the off-stage creative, gifted, genius from whom they have issued and who is, somehow, their “reason” for being.

One of the greatest and most troublesome gifts that Hans-Georg Gadamer’s work *Truth and Method* (1989) offers us as educators, a gift in part inherited from his teacher Martin Heidegger, is a disruption of this discourse of “the genius.” Much of the early part of this work is dedicated to unearthing how, through what he calls the “subjectivization of aesthetics” (Gadamer 1989, 42-81), any sort of human production (the *work* of an artist like van Gogh, or the *work* of a burgeoning author and art connoisseur such as Nathan) had become reduced to a sort of “subjective production” that is available only through the equally subjective reactions or responses of a viewer, reader, listener, and so on. (This tendency is what Edmund Husserl identified in his *Logical Investigations* [1902/1972] as “psychologism” and to which his phenomenology—which greatly influenced Gadamer’s work—was a response). Nathan’s description of van Gogh’s work and van Gogh’s work itself are both understood, under such a logic, as subjective creations which point, most immediately and fundamentally, *to the subjectivity who produced them*. Worldly works are therefore understood as “creations” which are comprehensible only insofar as we unearth or recreate the “creator” of the work (this was, according to Gadamer [1989, 187 and following] a central desire of Schliermacher’s [1768-1834] version of hermeneutics, where understanding the work of a creator-genius, in fact, understanding any historical inheritance, becomes a matter of “congeniality”—a matter, one might say, of “like-mindedness”).

In Nathan’s case, rather than approaching his work and the worlds it opens up, and thus encountering him becoming himself *in the midst of* and *in the keep of* and *in relation to* these worlds, we pursue a type of subjective, psychologistic attribution of talents, backgrounds, skills, proclivities, likes, dislikes, or gifts. We want to fill the empty chair by metaphysically positing a presentable, knowable, assessable, given, self-identical generator of the work from whom the work gets its original/originary (Jardine 2002), authoritative/authorial (Jardine 1992) bestowal of meaning, its *mens auctoris*. Thus, under the metaphysics of genius, we call out to the author to save us from the task of interpreting the questions that the work itself places *us* under.

Likewise, our responses to this painting or these words have themselves become subjectivized. Just think of how epistemologically timid we have become and how our teacher education practices have taught teachers precisely this discourse of subjectivity. I might suggest that Nathan’s description of van Gogh’s work is wonderful, but, under the metaphysics of genius, all I am actually reporting about is myself—my responses, my thoughts, my perspectives, my opinions, my experiences. Under the metaphysics of genius,

we are not drawn out of ourselves into a worldly meditation with each other about a world that is already full of a “multifariousness of voices.” Rather—and not disingenuously meant and not exactly false either—we get a commonplace educational adage, “Nathan is so thoughtful.” The next most commonplace adage is “you are a really experienced teacher who loves art. I could never do that.” In this later case, the metaphysics of genius is attributed to the teacher instead of the child, thus keeping in place the inability to explore—or to see the worthwhileness or even, sometimes, the *possibility* of exploring—the work itself and the worlds it might portend.

Under the metaphysics of genius, to understand the work, then, is, to some extent, to *turn away from the work itself* towards its creator through a de-coding of the author’s intent or meaning or desire or experience or background circumstances or “knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (all versions of the *mens auctoris*). This, of course, recapitulates a much older metaphysic: that the world itself, in all its rich array, is understandable, venerable, worthy of our attention, only insofar as it is understood as a sign of God’s creative beneficence. All things are only *ens creata*, and, under this gaze, becoming enamoured of any worldly thing in and for itself or in terms of its mundane, Earthly inhabitations is a form of fallenness and a source of potential deceit, deception, seduction, or betrayal. Hence an old argument that the Church has long-since had with the advent of modern science: figuring out the worldly causes of worldly things is a vacuous and pretentious enterprise. Why? Because, in their deepest reality, all worldly things are “vacant thrones” pointing to the One great off-stage Creator (which becomes recapitulated in the Enlightenment’s capitalization of Reason). And, to the extent that humanity is made in God’s image, we, too, although in much more contingent and mundane ways, are both the crown of the *ens creata* **and** are ourselves creators of works (see Jardine in press).

Even though it appears that we have arrived in a place that is quite arcane, traces of this phenomenon are rampant in education. To understand this gift that Nathan has handed us requires handing it back to him. It’s *his*. Doing anything else, under the metaphysics of genius, would simply involve imposing our own views on his, robbing him of his voice and replacing his *ingenium* with ours. But then here comes the constructivist horror hidden in the metaphysics of genius—“the old mythology of an intellect which glues and rigs together the world’s matter with its own forms” (Heidegger, 1985, 70). This pernicious phenomenon is at work for many “qualitative researchers” who tie themselves in knots taking transcripts back to their “authors” for checks on what the words mean *to the author*, all in a valiant effort to not “impose” on the transcripts their own “forms” (see, for example, the classic work by Lincoln and Guba [1985] or Miles and Huberman [1994]). It is at work, therefore, in the desire of many “qualitative researchers” to report to us what their participants mean (somehow imagining themselves as the “representatives” or “stand ins” for their absent participants [another appearance of a “vacant throne” in a transcript that now the qualitative researcher attempts to fill?]). Under this same metaphysics of genius, researchers become perpetually caught in the epistemological dead-end: “I can only tell you what I thought the participant meant when I took their transcript back to them with *my* interpretation of what it means and heard them say this about what I said they said.” Even the sad and impossible question that some will ask (“How many times should I take it back?”) bespeaks the spell of the metaphysics of genius.

And it is clearly at work in the profound silence Jennifer encountered from those who read Nathan’s words. All in all, we hide a deep desire for the author to come fill this chair that has been left empty before us.

We can’t believe, perhaps, that this chair has been left empty *for* us.

V

Martin Heidegger shows that the work of art [and, in his later work, Earthly things and even words themselves] [are] not merely the product of an ingenious creative process, but

that [they can be] *works* that [have their] own brightness in [themselves]; [they are] there [*da*], “so true, so fully existing.” (Gadamer 1994, 23-4)



*The chair waits for something
The brick floor gives a chill in the air
Days pass, but everything is still
nobody sits on the chair
Nobody even notices*

These two works have been recited because returning to them helps dislodge a final feature of the metaphysics of genius by introducing a phenomenon which does not make an appearance under the metaphysics of genius: the worldly repose of things.

Having been through the twists and turns of this paper, I now experience how both van Gogh's painting and Nathan's writing have each become much more fulsome and troublesome and provocative and substantial than they initially were. Each of them has become, so to speak, “stronger” and more robust than either would have been without the appearance of the other. This is a version of the “art of strengthening” that Gadamer [1989, 367] suggests defines a true conversation:

[It] consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one), but the art of thinking (which can strengthen...by referring to the subject matter).

In fact, unexpectedly venturing into this world of Impressionist painting once again in this Grade One classroom, having been in this place many times before, facing Nathan's words and the reappearance of van Gogh and this cascade of empty chairs and vacant thrones and dreams of rooms and habitations, I'm struck again by how incommensurate to this Earthly place is my knowledge and experience of it (a first beginning of an ecological humiliation of “constructivism,” wherein the limits of my own experience are experienced). In fact, the more I experience of this place, the more often I find my way around it, the more threads of referentiality and ancestry and dependence and kin that I can muster, the more incommensurate my knowledge and experience become.

Put the other way around, the more often I venture to this place, the more experiences I have of it, the better *it* gets.

This is, in fact, a rather ordinary thing: the more we learn and experience about a particular artist or composer, or about a painting or piece of music, the more often we return to a piece of wilderness in all its various seasons, the more we pay attention to the cycles of Pine Grosbeaks and their tethers to weather and sun, the more often we arc together circle-segment cross-hatches in the bisecting of angles (see Jardine, Friesen and Clifford, P. 2002a), the more deeply do we experience the fact that these things have lives of their own, “beyond my wanting and doing” (Gadamer 1989, xxxviii), beyond my “rigging and gluing” (Heidegger, 1985, 70).

Therefore, as my experience-of-this-place grows, I come to realize more and more deeply a profound ecological point: *this place is not just here for me*. It does not just “face this way,” so to speak. It “stands-in-itself.” It has its own “repose”:

The existing thing does not simply offer us a recognizable and familiar surface contour; it also has an inner depth of self-sufficiency that Heidegger calls “standing-in-itself.” The complete unhiddenness of all beings, their total objectification (by means of a representation that conceives things in their perfect state [fully given, fully present, fully presented, finished]) would negate this standing-in-itself of beings and lead to a total levelling of them. A complete objectification of this kind would no longer represent beings that stand in their own being. Rather, it would represent nothing more than our opportunity for using beings, and what would be manifest would be the will that seizes upon and dominates things. [In the face of van Gogh’s work, or Nathan’s] we experience an absolute opposition to this will-to-control, not in the sense of a rigid resistance to the presumption of our will, which is bent on utilizing things, but in the sense of the superior and intrusive power of a being reposing in itself. (Gadamer 1977, 226-7).

There is an empty chair, not just facing here, inviting, welcoming, waiting, but also on this table’s hither side.

This is where the notion of the metaphysics of genius really begins to hit home pedagogically. When Jennifer chose to surround her Grade One children with works of the Impressionists, she understood that this world, this space, this place, this “room” has its own repose and part of the work of the classroom adorned with these works became to introduce her students to their repose. This is the great and necessary pretense of an experienced teacher: even though these children may not at the outset experience the repose of this place, their teacher is experienced in this place. They have come to know their way around which means that they have experienced for themselves that this place stands-in-itself and has a repose that is worthy of children’s (and teachers’) attention. An odd and pedagogically familiar faith follows here: as a teacher, I know that, if the right work can be done *here*, with *these* students, within all the frailties of *this* classroom, *this* year, that repose just might come forward and show itself in all its myriadness and generosity and openness and undecidedness:

All things show faces, the world not only a coded signature to be read for meaning, but a physiognomy to be faced. As expressive forms, things speak; they show the shape they are in. They announce themselves, bear witness to their presence: “Look, here we are.” They regard us beyond how we may regard them, our perspectives, what we intend with them, and how we dispose of them. (Hillman 1982, 77)

This strikes another ecological blow to the metaphysics of genius and the confidences of constructivism: that things might regard us beyond how we may regard them. That even in those times in which we force the witness to give answer to questions of our own determining, we are being witnessed as well, beyond our own determination.

As the above cited passage from Gadamer suggests, this experience of repose is not simple, familiar and easily had. Repose is not a “surface feature” that is simply lying there, somehow out in the open and immediate and obvious. The appearance of the living repose of things *requires something of us*. An experience of repose has to be *cultivated*. Jennifer, simply put, had to *teach* the children in her class how to take good care of the world of Impressionist paintings.

Ecologically, this is such a simple point. It takes no time, patience, effort, learning, work, or love to simply use this place for our own ends or to experience this place only in light of our own “wanting and doing,”(Gadamer 1989, xxxviii) our own ingenious “rigging and gluing” (Heidegger 1985, 70), our own effortful “seizing and dominating”(Gadamer 1977, 226-7). It does, however, take time and effort and work and love and patience and learning to come to experience this place in its repose. Experiencing this place in its repose—say,

this place of Impressionist paintings—is experiencing that it stands there in ways that no amount of our experiencing, however ingenious, can fill.

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The Potato Eaters: <http://www.abcgallery.com/V/vangogh/vangogh8.html>

Sister Wendy's Story of Art: <http://www.shoppbs.org/sm-pbs-sister-wendy-story-of->

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