

on pseudo-intellectualism

AND SO LENS-LE

³ My father during the college application process: "There are so many qualified people out there. To some extent it's just a CRAP SHOOT." My father upon hearing that I was accepted to Stanford: "That's incredible. You're going to love it so much. It's like it was MEANT TO BE." The transition from a chaotic to a deterministic view of the universe can take place very quickly.

⁴ Many of us never thought of ourselves as intellectuals until we came here. Being the smart kid in high school is being the kid who gets the grades regardless of interest in the material. Rare is the student who attempts to untangle his motivation: Is it four parts grade and one part curiosity or two parts grade and three parts curiosity? We arrive at Stanford and are pleased to learn that some time over the summer we became intellectuals. Simple as that—our motivations are sorted out as if by peer pressure. Idealism is in; grade grubbing is out. From the faculty's perspective, the democratic usage of the term is a way of helping freshman build confidence in the value of their ideas [i.e., speak out in IHUM section] and, as such, hopes to foster the intense scholarship to which those ideas would eventually lead. The problem is that, satisfied with our de facto intellectualism, many of us are content, and the premature application of the title can actually serve as an impediment to learning.

⁵ If this essay were written in French, this misunderstanding would not be possible.

BOB: What did you say?

NICK: I said intellectualism is dead.

BOB: Who's dead?

NICK: Intellectualism.

BOB: What are the symptoms?

NICK: There are no symptoms. It's completely and utterly dead.

BOB: When did it die?

NICK: Sunday, while I was in the bathroom.

BOB: What were you doing in the bathroom?

NICK: I was using it.

BOB: The bathroom?

NICK: Yes, the bathroom. I was reading one of the footnotes to one of the footnotes to *The Waste Land* when someone else entered and started talking to me through the stall door. This was our conversation:

OTHER: Damn It Nick.

ME: Sorry.

OTHER: Why do you have to shit in the first stall?

ME: I like the first stall. It's my stall.

OTHER: I like the third stall.

ME: I don't like having people on both sides of me.

OTHER: What?

ME: I don't like having people on both sides of me.

OTHER: That barely ever happens. When it does, I just lift my feet up.

And so forth. By the time we were done talking, I realized that intellectualism was dead.

BOB: Why don't you like having people on both sides of you?

NICK: The whole thing is just a fad.

BOB: Well, I think it sounds like a genuine neurosis.

NICK: Just because we go to Stanford,³ it's now in vogue to go out for coffee and talk about books or cutting edge research or Zambia.⁴

BOB: Zambia sounds like intellectualism to me.

NICK: And yet you can't point to it on a map.

BOB: Maybe you're just looking at the wrong map.⁵

NICK: You know where the footnote of a footnote leads?

BOB: When are we going to start drinking?

NICK: Exactly! As an undergraduate, the footnote of a footnote always leads to the end of the book and the beginning of the weekend.⁶

BOB: May I tell you something frankly?

LESS GLASSES 1, 2

BY BOB BOREK

NICK: You may, Bob.

BOB: Your desire to be an intellectual is what I like least about you. I think that intellectuals are an enormous drag. I think that they are uptight, high brow, self-absorbed and that the reason John F. Kennedy is one of their favorite American presidents is because they think he's "hot."

NICK: That's a stereotype. ⁷ (ā'-pîr-ē-ə-dîs'î-tē) Or something like that.

BOB: Is it? I thought it was a compliment.

NICK: I recently heard an English major attempt to lecture a Physics major. He mispronounced aperiodicity⁷ seven times and concluded by telling his "dear Physician" that what he thought about how the world worked was an over-simplified model.

BOB: I would never be so forthright with my physician. Especially while he has his hand on my...

NICK: Perhaps you are missing the point.⁸

BOB: Well, it is over-simplified. Isn't it?

NICK: Yes, but the alternative is despair or apathy: "I can't even understand how this doesn't work so how am I ever going to understand how it does work."

BOB: What you don't seem to understand Nick is that college is nothing more than a pre-game for real life or graduate school.

NICK: People might interpret that idea different ways.⁹

BOB: I'm becoming suspicious that you're making an argument.

NICK: You've found me out. Almost thought I could keep it implicit: We have learned to talk more than we think.

BOB: Where does *Leland* fit into this?

NICK: Sorry, what did you say Bob?

BOB: I said where does *Leland* fit into this?

NICK: Who's Leland?

⁶ The OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY offers two definitions of intellectualism. First is the philosophical: "The doctrine that knowledge is wholly or mainly derived from the action of the intellect, i.e. from pure reason." Second: "The exercise of the intellect alone; devotion to merely intellectual culture or pursuits." The first definition implies a belief and the latter implies an action. Most of us subscribe to the first definition in some variant or another, basically treating intellectualism as an attitude. In the latter case, however, intellectualism implies hard work. It means that one has a rigorous interest in a subject. One's curiosity can't help but tug on every loose thread and as a result he learns to love the library. Pseudo-intellectualism is the attitude without the action. It is not the footnote of a footnote. It is reading an excerpt from ON GRAMMATOLOGY and then putting on our lens-less glasses^{*} and sitting around discussing the disconnect

between signifier and signified. It is the duck syndrome, but in this unique variant, the duck's mother and father have actually purchased a large propeller and have had it surgically implanted in its underbelly. The duck goes about constantly acting like it's fine eagerly waiting for someone to ask it earnestly: "How are you doing?" so that it can talk about just how hard it's working, long enough to delude itself into believing this is true. In this particular variant, fortunate students see hard work as an option—not as a necessity. Without the action, the call to pure reason's the result of a pretty paycheck.

¹ It is my belief that monolithic essays by pretentious undergraduates on the state of intellectualism at John Doe University go largely unread and unappreciated. Please note that this essay is on pseudo-intellectualism and allow it to be an exception.

² At the risk of seeming overly clever, I have written my essay in the classical Socratic style. For a justification of any irregularities in the approach keep this idea in mind: You begin to listen to THE REPUBLIC book-on-tape and shortly into the dialogue between Plato and Glaucon, Lil' Jon screams: IT'S THE MOTHER-FUCKING REMIX!!!

⁸ This is, in fact, the case. The point is that undergraduates are too ready to renounce the merits of categorical thinking. Science may or may not be able to portray the world more accurately than the Humanities [see Sir Philip Sidney's A DEFENSE OF POESIE], but one can not skip over the introductory models and feign understanding of the far more complicated concept. In the growing process, there is knowledge that supplements what was there before and knowledge that refutes it. However, growth is a process that requires patience and requires a movement through each of its stages even if that stage will be undone at a later time. The only way that one can get away with this superficially is if they are not held responsible for their understanding. Consider the fact that it has been proved many times over that it is possible to fail a Physics exam, but one can smoke a crack rock at 2 a.m., gloss over the cliff-notes of a text and commence a paper due the next day at the beginning of class with a strong assurance that they will not fail the paper [this may or may not be true]. In both cases, there is responsibility for the material but on different scales.

⁹ In my experience, there are two main factions of pre-gamers. One believes that the best way to lower their social inhibitions before going out to a party is alcohol. The other believes that it is marijuana. If Bob actually applies this idea to the rest of his life then my experience tells me that he will have a great time until he is about forty, at which point he will awake one morning to find himself in a strange bed with a woman that he does not know.

^{*}Lens-less glasses can be taken as the central metaphor of pseudo-intellectualism. Wearing glasses without regard for their utility is a performative act, the goal of the performance being that others will regard the individual as short-sighted, far-sighted or smart. Through a somewhat paradoxical correlation, glasses have developed this association with intelligence [i.e., above average clear-sightedness]. Consider the seemingly omniscient "Owl-Eyes" in THE GREAT GATSBY. More specifically, glasses have been taken as a metaphor for awareness of the subjective nature of one's view of the world. Everyone is tethered to one's point of view, but intelligent people know that they are tethered whereas everyone else runs in circles until their cheek is up tight against the pole. Joyce's imperative: "Wipe your glosses with what you know." The pseudo-intellectual performs his intelligence without regard for the intensive study that might justify it. He goes about perpetually wiping his glosses with what he knows but never cracks the cover of FINNEGAN'S WAKE.