# THE MIDWAY REVIEW

*A Journal of Essays*

*Volume 11, Issue 1*
*Autumn 2015*

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*The Midway Review* publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Spring 2015 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult *midwayreview.uchicago.edu*.

Letters to the editor may be addressed to *themidwayreview@uchicago.edu*. We ask that letters be limited to 350 words.


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*"That's not art. My four-year old could do that!"*

*I couldn't help imagining we looked like a Seminary Co-op window display.*

*There are intentional and unintentional towns.*

*Stale popcorn pops and lukewarm Domino's is placed onto paper plates at the concession stand underneath the bleachers.*

# Contents

# Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

This is the first installment in The Midway Review's 11th volume. Our very first issue was published way back in the Winter of 2006—so look to next quarter for a more official ten-year anniversary. For now, we hope you enjoy these four essays. Nothing precise unites them, other than a reflective tendency, and a willingness to critique preconceived notions—about art, cities, habits of mind, or hometown football. These seem like good places to start any essay. E.B. White wrote, "There are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses, as many essay flavors as there are Howard Johnson ice creams…I like the essay, have always liked it, and even as a child was at work, attempting to inflict my young thoughts and experiences on others by putting them on paper." Us, too.

—The Editors

# Why We Can't Answer the Question: "What Is Art?"

*(Maybe Because it is Grammatically Incorrect)*

Alex Foster

Alex Foster is a third-year in the College majoring in Economics.

I was first asked, "What is Art?" in primary school. Though I was sure I knew what art was, I didn't know how to answer this question. My teacher waited proudly while we sat in silence, embarrassed that our ignorance had been exposed, and as far as I know, I would still be sitting cross-legged on that alphabet carpet today had no one answered. Luckily, my cousin Asher knew. He declared, "Art is the pictures of boobs that get into museums."

That was art to primary schoolboys whose grandparents had taken them through the Art Institute. I've been asked to define art many times since then, and the "boob" answer is not even the most dissatisfying I've heard. In one sense, art is clearly defined: "art" is the spirit of creativity. It is a concept, culture, field of study, and form of experience, which is to creativity what science is to reason and what religion is to faith. But a satisfying definition for art as a collection of items, specified by the word "artwork," continues to elude us. The sheer quantity of different definitions that great thinkers have suggested (which this article will review) is a testament to our repeated failure—and a testament to the import we assign to this issue. Art classes begin by asking, "What is art?" for a reason; the way we define art shapes how we make it, study it, and enjoy it.

I've wondered whether any definition could satisfyingly describe how we use the word "art." What makes Banksy's prints street art, while most vandalizing of park walls is not? Or is all tagging art? When did the urinal that Duchamp called *Fountain* become art? Was

it when he put it in a gallery? Did the postminimalist copper wires on my grandparents' walls become art when career artist Richard Tuttle folded them? Did I do the same when I folded my broken bicycle brake wires to fit into my trashcan? By God, I did the deed with passion and nostalgia. Is there an "aura" in a choral production (as German philosopher Walter Benjamin famously theorized) that is lost when you record the art and remove it from the auditorium?[1] If so, how could critics overlook the aura of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* when they witnessed the films' monumental debut, yet any student would insist that her own digital copy of the film is art? On what grounds do people tell me that my Kanye West poster doesn't belong with the posters of "artists" on my wall? Does an album become art when it's old even if the album doesn't change? Or does the distinction arise from the grandeur of the albums' inspirations? Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* was inspired by insight into institutional oppression and by former band mate Syd Barrett's insanity; *Yeezus* was inspired by a lamp.[2] This makes me think, are lamps art? All of them—all products everywhere—have aesthetic considerations. Is Kanye's lamp different because of the extent to which its designer, Le Corbusier, privileges aesthetics? How did Kanye realize that this lamp was art? Should I be looking at more lamps?

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008).

2. Jon Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask," *New York Times*, June 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/arts/music/kanye-west-talks-about-his-career-and-album-yeezus.html.

If I wrote the dictionary, I would redefine the word "art" to make it a verb. It would describe an action performed by people observing paintings, sculptures, music, and other human-constructed objects. Think about the way we commonly use "art" now. We try to create a category of *objects* with our standard noun "art," but everything can be art, and even when the objects don't change, they always, in some situations, get demoted to non-art. For example, last year I worked as a research assistant to an economics professor specializing in art history. Soon after being hired, I excitedly went to the Art Institute to memorize the active eras of different painters, and left successful in that goal but completely unimpressed. I usually love art, but I think I was more impressed by Salvador Dalí's stupid hat when I saw it at the Castle of Púbol in Spain than I was by his paintings that day at the Art Institute. Throughout my time working in that RA job, I looked at Dalí paintings, which in other circumstances would give me shivers, and I felt nothing. At one point, I looked at the image on

an auction record for Dalí's *Moment de Transition* and only thought, "Wow, nine million dollars." People look up images of the painting and call it "art," but while I was in the mindset of economics, I looked at the exact same image and it was just a thumbnail for an auction item. Maybe it stopped being art because of a change in *my behavior*.

If graffiti, urinals, wire, lamps, songs, photos, and painting are "art" only to some people some times, I think our word "art" has less to do with intrinsic qualities that the objects could be said to share and more to do with the viewer (or listener, or audience member, or user, or other beholder). Whether or not something is "art" by our standards is not only contingent on how its viewer is viewing it at the moment, but is actually *defined* by how its viewer is viewing it at the moment. A special phenomenon does occur when I look at paintings and get shivers, but it's not that the painting is something phenomenal; it's that I'm *doing* something phenomenal. Therefore, I have moved to totally stop using the word "art" as a noun to describe objects. The word is useless in that sense. I propose that the essence of art associated with an object is an activity performed by the object's viewer. That activity, of appreciating all the feelings and thoughts that our body stimulates in us when we perceive a human-constructed object, ought to be what we identify with the word "art." Art would be a verb. An example sentence wouldn't be, "I go to museums to look at art," but rather, "I go to museums to art at paintings."

I cannot honestly say we had a merry evening.

I don't think we have much to lose by scrapping the common word "art" as a noun, and repurposing the letters to form this new verb. Art, the way we commonly use the term, is not a stable class of objects. In math

terms, we say a function is well-defined if it produces a unique output for any input. I think a well-defined noun should stably refer to a unique object or group of objects, which are identifiable by features that they possess and that other objects do not possess. For example, "wire" is *always* any metal formed into a long, slender, flexible rod; a wire might lose its "wire" status if it is physically cut into metal shards, but it won't lose its status on the whim of the observer the way it might lose its status as "art." People often use words differently because they disagree on whether the object in question actually possesses the necessary defining features. For example, someone looking at a straightened wire dead on from one end might not know that it is a long rod, and thus say it's not a wire. However, in that case, the mental concept of what a "wire" should be isn't under debate, and people can productively discuss whether the object does or doesn't have the features that it needs in order to be a wire. Rarely does a word elude definition so dramatically that people cannot even agree on what features are supposed to define the word. So I wonder, by what features could we define "art" as a noun if we were to try?

Luckily, people suggest definitions of art all the time, and it only takes a bit of thought and a lot of endurance to go through and evaluate them. I don't intend to evaluate whether they are correct; any definition can be correct by definition, so to speak. Rather, is the word "art" that each of these definitions produces useful to round up all the things we call art? If some definition for "art" as a noun can characterize the things that we call art, without also characterizing tons of things we don't call art, or omitting things that ought to be art, then "art" as a noun is a well-defined, useful word that shouldn't be scrapped. In this essay, I cannot go through every definition of art ever conceived, but I can, without cherry picking, address every definition I've encountered in my own discussions and reading, and I believe that most of you, readers, will find your favorites accounted for.

We can categorize art's existing definitions fairly well according to what feature each definition claims is the requisite feature in a piece of art:

1) *Imitative* — We might as well start where everyone else in first quarter Hum starts, with Socrates, who would have sympathized with my general impulse to re-examine art. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates begins the very discussion of art which I will explore, with the remark, "We generally postulate a certain form or character—a single form or character always—for each plurality of things to which we give the same name." About those things we name "art", Socrates concludes, "Shall we say that all artists, starting with Homer, are imitators of images of goodness and the other things they create, without having any grasp of the truth?"[3] Socrates was clearly quite critical, but some artists themselves have proudly embraced his portrayal of their work. When 17th century painter Nicolas Poussin was asked for a definition of painting, he suggested, "It is an imitation done with lines and colors on a surface, of everything which may be seen beneath the sun."[4] I think most people today believe art is more than imitation. Sure, Poussin's landscapes are imitative, but abstract expressionist paintings and nearly all songs aren't. So this definition fails to characterize the collection of things that we call "art."

Nobody is ever sea-sick—on land.

3. G.R.F Ferrari, ed. and Tom Griffith, trans. *The Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

4. R.G. Saisselin, "Art is an Imitation of Nature," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 52 (1965): 34-44.

Note that this definition and the definitions that will follow can be imaginatively interpreted so that they capture everything we call art. For example, you could insist that abstract paintings are art because they imitate feelings, funk music imitates the churnings of the womb, and Kanye's lamp imitates the curves of the world, or something. But if we interpret the definitions that loosely, then basically we could say everything is art, and our word "art" is only

as useful as the word "thing" to round up all the objects we call "art." That is to say, not useful at all.

2) *Insightful* — This definition asserts that art is any creation that provides insight into true things without literally depicting reality. Picasso provided a well-known verbalization of this definition: "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth." Joining him, philosopher Arthur C. Danto, a Columbia professor and the art critic for *The Nation*, said in 1964 that Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, a replica of real soap pad boxes, was art; not because it imitated soap pad boxes, but because it had meaning. It was indeed a lie of a soap pad box that told the truth about consumer culture.[5]

5. Ken Johnson, "Arthur C. Danto, a Philosopher of Art, Is Dead at 89," *New York Times*, October 27, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/28/arts/design/arthur-c-danto-a-philosopher-of-art-is-dead-at-89.html.

Whereas the Imitative Definition was so sharp that it cut out things that most of us confidently call art, this definition produces a word that's a bit too blunt for any good use. The essence of it captures a major feature in artwork: things we call art often have information that is not literally, explicitly expressed. But so many things meet this criterion. For example, a note from a friend after a dispute that says, "Wanna come over and watch *Rick and Morty*?" is written work that's meant to be interpreted for its abstract information (namely, "I'm not mad at you"), but you wouldn't call it art.

3) *Expressive* — This definition is similar to, parallel to, and probably compatible with the Insightful Definition, but it privileges the phenomenon of the *artist transmitting feelings over the viewer receiving ideas*. Poet Amy Lowell's said, "Art, true art, is the desire of a man to express himself," which I think captures art culture, but doesn't apply well to art pieces.

Art is not necessarily a product of the desire to express oneself. In my art market research, I came across many Warhol sketches (some of them inevitably mindless doodles) that had been uncovered and auctioned as art. We call things "art" without any idea of whether the creator intended to express something. We'll never know whether our ancient Egyptian pottery was made just to satisfy rulers (or, for that matter, whether some modern songs were produced just for the money), so an artist's intentions can't be the linchpin to a useful definition of "art".

4) *Beautiful* — Georgia O'Keefe said, "Filling a space in a beautiful way. That's what art means to me." This is actually similar to my own definition, only not as well formulated and not as complete, in my opinion. Consider that beauty is notoriously in the eye of the beholder. To say art is beautiful concedes that art is defined by the viewer's reaction to the object. I think O'Keefe is anchoring "art" to a different unstable category: "beautiful." If we don't know what intrinsic traits make an object beautiful, my verb definition of "art" makes more sense because it anchors "art" to the viewer's reaction, which we can describe. On top of that, the Beautiful Definition is incomplete, because recognition of "beauty," per se, is not the only response we can have to the objects we call "art." We might instead feel disgusted, scared, informed, excited.

5) *Skillful/Imaginative* — How concerned were you when I didn't begin my "What is art?" essay with the classic introduction, "The Oxford English Dictionary defines art…"? Perhaps some of you have arrived at this paragraph after frantically flipping through the article looking for where I discuss the OED, since it would be too peculiar to read anything before the OED definition is presented. Welcome! The rest of you might have considered at this point that maybe I forgot about the OED entirely. Surprise! The OED defines art as

> The expression or application of creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, drawing, or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Also: such works themselves considered collectively.

The artist's abilities are central to this definition, which formalizes the complaint of dads everywhere ("That's not art. My four-year-old could do that!"). But indeed, four-year-olds create macaroni art, and adults make splatter paintings, so specialized

I can sit and look at it for hours.

skill and imagination are not requisite traits in the objects we call "art."

6) *Celebrated* — A common, circular definition of art says that objects are art because they are celebrated (as art), or perhaps, celebrated as art specifically by art critics. Arthur C. Danto embraced this definition in addition to the Insightful Definition that I built from his ideas above. Danto knew that we call a whole host of entities insightful, yet not art, so he stipulated that, while the process by which art is identified should be the search for meaning, the process itself should be undertaken by experts, whom he called the "artworld."

This definition feels satisfying in its accuracy and concreteness, but dissatisfying in its exclusivity. I think the self-appointed supremacy of the artworld is exactly what turns so many people off from art in general. Danto's definition is, "I can't define it, but someone I've never met knows it when she sees it." This definition wouldn't make "art" the first title whose use is prescribed by experts (consider titles like, "Nobel laureate.") The fact is, though, that we don't defer to the artworld every time we call something "art." If a college student gets a painting hung up in her dorm, we don't wait for a critic or gallery owner to tell us what to call it. Danto's definition would better suit a term like "high art," which is a useful term for sure, but wouldn't be used in all the circumstances that we use the term "art."

7) *Other, miscellaneous buzzwords* — There are other buzzwords and phrases we use to discuss art, and I love them and think they are captivating and resplendent. One of my favorites is, "Art is the stored honey of the human soul, gathered on wings of misery and travail" (attributed to novelist Theodore Dreiser). Really great stuff . Just not the same as a functional definition for how we use the term "art."

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All these people, smarter than me, have struggled to show that the noun "art" can be well-defined and useful. I do not claim I can

succeed where they failed. But I can do what I do best: give up where they kept trying. There is no definition for the noun "art" that we've all been using. "What is art?" is a trick question used to teach primary school students that they aren't so smart. We can come up with a better word—a word that more accurately describes the world we see and lets us more accurately see the world we describe.

Therefore, we don't lose much by giving up on "art" as a noun, and repurposing the letters to make a verb that describes the action we undertake when we appreciate the paintings, music, sculptures, architecture, film, writing, and everything else that we commonly call "art." I still think there should be a word for the things we commonly call "art," but it should not aim to define the objects themselves as much as the objects' role in our "arting" activity. "Artwork" is a misnomer, since the designation isn't bestowed through the pieces' production. In French, works of art are referred to as "objects of art" (*objets d'art*). Besides the fact that "objets d'art" has a connotation in English for non-paintings, the phrase "objects of art" functions perfectly, and I've begun using it in my life to describe things at which I art. I feared that maybe this phrase has the same flaws as the original noun "art," but an analogy reassured me:

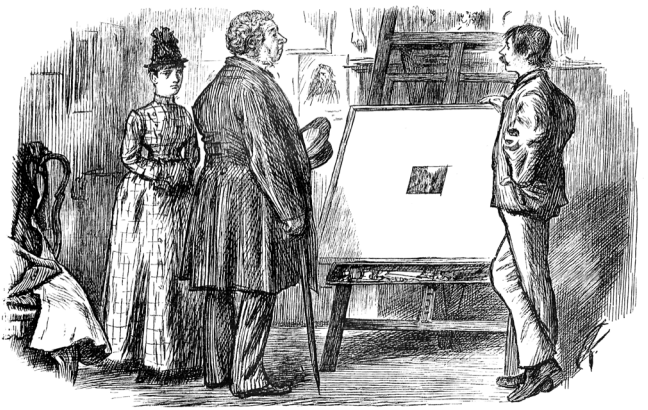
(a) **A painting** is to **a pancake** as
(b) **my new word "to art"** is to **"to eat for breakfast"** as
(c) **an artist** is to **a chef** as
(d) **"objects of art"** is to **"my breakfast"** as
(e) **the original word "art"** is (almost) to **"food"**

The phrases in (a) are well-defined stable categories of objects. The phrases in (b) are actions performed upon those objects. The phrases in (c) describe people who deliberately (as a career or hobby) create objects for use in the activity in (b). The phrases in (d) are titles for the role the objects play in the action. The phrases in (e) are titles allegedly based on intrinsic characteristics of the objects . (I could only write one article criticizing a word per quarter, but "food," you're next! Ha. Just kidding.) "Food" is not nearly as problematic of a word as "art" because, though its definition is fuzzy around the edges, I think it's more useful. We can say food is any nutritious substance the likes of which people or animals eat or drink in order

to maintain life and growth, and I'd bet that 100% of the things I've ever instinctively called food suit that definition. The same could not be said for any definition we found for "art" as a noun.

In my limited tour lobbying for the use of "art" as a verb this week, I've faced many angry questions from my girlfriend and more aggressive apartment-mates. First, can I art at something that isn't physically present? Tough question. But one that needs to be asked. You could really define "to art" either way. My inclination is that you can art at the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre, and you can art at a Google image of the *Mona Lisa* (with slightly more difficulty), so why not say you can art at a memory image of the *Mona Lisa* (though this is even more difficult)?

Next, if arting is an activity, how can you be good at it? When is it easy, and when is it difficult? Like any activity, some people are probably more talented than others at arting, but we all improve with constant practice. The goal is to become more perceptive to objects in the world and more perceptive to how we feel and think about those objects. Practice entails affirming the sensations we experience when we view objects, trying to understand those sensations, and pushing them further. People learn to art better with simple, less direct exercises, as well, such as meditating, experimenting with drugs, and reading Nietzsche. Beyond the general skill of arting, people develop skill at arting specific types of objects. You might be familiar with this effect in music, where familiarity with the instrumentation and common keys of a genre grant ease for listening to that genre's songs. In fact, most people



A considerable amount of attention to the subject

won't like a particular song or album until they become familiar with it (radio hits appeal on the first listen because often they reshuffle pop sounds that are already familiar). You need to acclimate to the rhythm of a piece to art at it. In recognition of that, people should, for example, force themselves to listen to Beethoven's *Egmont* those first few times, to exercise their specific *Egmont*-arting muscle. Arting is easier in some situations, and some objects of art are better for people than others. *The Mona Lisa* is special in that it lends itself particularly well to arting for many people. It doesn't impress everyone, but it deserves fame because of how many people have found themselves able to deeply art at it. And it helps that people see it in a museum surrounded by other arting patrons. We all have some arting rituals of our own. My editor says he likes going to the movie theater because there's a little ceremony in it and it helps him lose himself in the experience with the crowd. Arting is typically easier when it's in the context of a ritual.

Does arting need to be done deliberately? I wouldn't define arting such that you need to know you're arting in order to do it, but you need to know you're doing what arting is—that you're appreciating a human-constructed object.

Can an artist art at her own work? Sure.

Does the artist play any role in other people's arting? I'd say no– but not everyone agrees. One quite famous definition of art as an activity already exists. It comes from Leo Tolstoy in his 1897 book *What Is Art?* Tolstoy believed that art was an activity between two people – the artist and the viewer. He says:

> Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them....It is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings.[6]

This applies to a certain kind of arting, but I would like to be able to say that I art at objects whose creators had no intention to connect

6. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, trans. Almyer Maude (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960).

with me. For example, I art at statues in the Oriental Institute that were meant to honor the Assyrian king Sargon II, but I don't feel reverence for the Assyrian king Sargon II. And the *Iliad* inspired in me despair for the horrors of war, but my classmates became excited by the glory of battle; is one of us (probably me) not arting at all because we disagree with Homer? No. There are many good reasons to believe that an artist is not the only authority on his work, so arting must be conducted exclusively within the mind of the viewer (who might or might not consider what she knows about the artist).

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This is all pure semantics, but correcting our words has real effects on how we see the world and how we interact with it. "Art" as a noun has eroded the spirit of art in our culture. We're taught from primary school that some things are art, and when we see art we are supposed look for its beauty and meaning. This perspective implies that we can't be impressed in the same way by objects we don't call "art." Have you ever heard someone say, "I want to fill this wall with art"? How sad that they do not stop and appreciate the wall! Art is not a strict category of objects; everything that people make can be arted at a little bit at least. We could have arted at all the urinals we saw before Marcel Duchamp put one in a gallery, but because we all tried to fit objects into the non-existent categories that our misguided language provided, we passed up that chance to art. Let's stop making that mistake. We should pick up that CD or book that we cast away when we determined that—because it didn't immediately appeal to us–it was missing some intrinsic element of "art," which never existed in the first place. We can art at that thing if we try, and how sweet it will be when we experience new ideas and feelings in response to something we nearly dismissed!

Our word for "art" as a noun is worse than useless; it's damaging. From now on, all of us should use art as a verb, and seize agency over the action that it describes. Instead of wasting more energy trying to answer, "What is art?"—a centuries-old effort for which we have nothing to show—let's learn to answer, "How can we art better?"

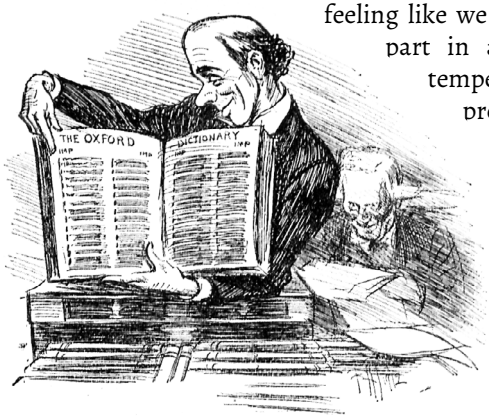
# My Metafictional Struggle

Hannah Shea

> *"Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines itself towards obscurity, not clarity."*
> —Elena Ferrante

Hannah Shea is a fourth-year in the College majoring in English.

For several months, my boyfriend and I traded volumes of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels back and forth during visits, from Jerusalem to DC to Chicago. His mom got in on it too, buying her own copies and out-reading both of us. Somewhere between reading the third and the release of the fourth, that other European multi-volume writer, Karl Ove Knausgård, nudged his way in, his first volume of *My Struggle* making its way from mother to son to girlfriend. There was a period of time while he was visiting Chicago that we read together—at cafes, on the train, by the lake—he with his Knausgård, me with my Ferrante. I couldn't help imagining we looked like a Seminary Co-op window display. I also couldn't help feeling like we were reluctantly taking part in a battle of gender, or temperament, or degrees of pretentiousness, fought with our choice of sufficiently-literary-yet-highly-addictive novels. At that point, having not yet read Knausgård, I was obstinately loyal to



Ferrante, and felt there was something to be loyal to.

If I had to divide my life so far into two parts, the first part, much longer than the second, would be my most formative years, and the second part would be the years I came to understand how I was formed. In the first, I grew up with my family in my hometown in the status quo that enclosed that time and place. I had happiness and frustration, intuitions and questions, confusion and general angst, but didn't know how or why. In the second, I was away, at college. I had enough distance and time with different people to understand how my childhood and adolescence had affected me. We were all coming to understand the ways we'd been shaped, and in my eyes the quality that always forgave a person the damages, privileges, quirks, or affectations of their cloistered upbringing was a healthy self-awareness. But for me, this new layer of self-awareness came with a new, less healthy self-*consciousness* as well. On the one hand, I started to understand why I didn't know how to tell funny stories, or why I struggled to start conversations with a stranger at a party—and what that had to do with

Marched proudly up the platform with my cheeses

my past and the person I am. On the other, understanding these formative things didn't mean I could change them; instead, I tended to feel them as an anxious presence, taking up room in my mind. Your self-awareness can quickly surpass your competence, and part of being self-aware is knowing that. (It's like being "well-read"—the more books you know, the more you know you don't). Part of being self-aware is being self-conscious.

So, helpfully enough, I became preoccupied with my own self-consciousness. And in that context, after reading these two memoir-like, intensely metafictional books, I firmly hoped to end up relating to my own life, my own narrative, in the manner of Elena Ferrante rather than Karl Ove Knausgård.

My valuation of Ferrante over Knausgård doesn't have to do with the quality of their writing or the contents of the lives they write about. Rather, I compare them because their books embody two different modes of being in one's mind while engaging in one's life. Each features an authorial character writing a memoir in which his or her past self is also a writer. *My Struggle* can be considered Karl Ove Knausgård's biography, while the Neapolitan novels are not the story of Elena Ferrante's life ("Elena Ferrante" is a pseudonym). However, the relationship of the authorial character of Elena Greco to her past is comparable to Knausgård's. Both separate the Karl Ove or Elena of the past and present into two characters whose minds are exposed for observation. As the older self encounters the younger, we glimpse their reflections, preoccupations, and processes of writing.

These metafictional glimpses in *My Struggle* are filled with philosophical musings on death, art, time, knowledge and how to understand oneself in the world. Right at the beginning, Knausgård lays out his theory: growing up is a process of manipulating the world into just the right position so that we can understand it, and then fix it there. Everything new we encounter we simply fold into this understanding instead of making new meaning of it and letting it reconfigure our perception of the world and ourselves. There are no more mysteries. Later in the book, Knausgård describes the suffocating feeling this growing up produces. The world becomes "tightly enclosed around itself, without opening to anywhere else,"

even while he knows this to be "deeply untrue, since actually we know nothing about anything." (Try talking to this guy at a party.) He says this is the reason he writes, to write himself beyond his folded-up world. In the book, his younger self is attempting to do this by writing fiction, but he is failing and knows he will keep failing. So he decides that he should just write from inside of the world he knows—his own consciousness—and find meaning in it, instead of trying to get out.

There's a scene at the beginning of the book where Knausgård talks about a Rembrandt self-portrait. The portrait becomes a model for what he's trying to do in *My Struggle*—what he failed to do in fiction. In the painting, Rembrandt is old and Knausgård has the impression he's staring straight into Rembrandt's eternal, inner being, the Rembrandt that was Rembrandt to himself and not to others. Knausgård writes that Rembrandt "sees himself seeing while also being seen." This quality in art moves Knausgård and he makes it an ideal. Later, he talks about this quality in terms of the "distance between reality and the portrayal of reality" when "the world seemed to step forward from the world." In these moments, he is able to escape his fixed world and feel himself as part of something beyond, hopeful and in awe. Yet these moments of epiphany *depend* upon a disengagement from reality through a Rembrandt-style multi-layered consciousness.

I am compelled to compare *My Struggle* and Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* because I think the difference between them as literary works depends upon how each authorial character engages with his or her life. Considered this way, they become books about how to live, reflect, and write, and my inclination towards one over the other has to do with the life I'd hope to live, and how I'd hope to think and write about it. Knausgård's way didn't offer much hope. In *My Struggle*, I felt Knausgård was writing out of a desperation to find meaning in a self-consciousness that overwhelms his life and stunts his ability to write the fiction he admires. I identified strongly with the division in his book between the events of his life and the existential preoccupations and insecurities that overpower them. But I feared that this division results in disengagement from life, the difference between anxiously viewing it from a distance and

releasing into the stream of it. I saw a bit too much of myself already in Knausgård's "struggle," and for that reason I don't aspire to it.

Ferrante's work offers something different. The impetus for the Neapolitan novels is the question of how Elena can understand how the course of her life unfolded. There are two types of experiencing and giving meaning to reality that pull back and forth through the books. One is embodied by Elena and one by the counterforce to her life, Lila. While Elena writes everything she knows in order to create order from it, Lila "governs the imagination of others." Lila's strange gift of storytelling and controlling her reality overhangs Elena's whole life, no matter how far she gets from their childhood neighborhood in Naples. Much of the series focuses on Elena's journey out of her impoverished, violent, politically volatile home through college, writing, and marriage, but the fourth book brings her back to that neighborhood. Her writing is a barrier between her and her past. She does not return to the neighborhood to defeat its hold on her, she comes to "to create order" and to "paste one fact to another with words, and in the end everything has to seem coherent even if it's not." Elena's project is this: to tell everything about her life with Lila, and to see what shape it takes in the end when she steps away to look back at it.


We were too clever for them.

Elena is preoccupied by doubts about the purpose of her writing, but persists, because there is something essential at stake between her and Lila's minds. While Lila feels her life to be an effort "directed only at containing herself, Elena's mind is ordered by words and sentences. The ordering principle is herself, her sense of an "I" that is the accumulating center. In this sense, Elena's "I" is different than Knausgård's: all of her anxieties and reflections are taken up from *within* the events of her life because there is no existential "outside" to it. Elena's story is a desperate attempt to *seize* her life for herself, to create a seal between Lila's mind and her own. The "self-consciousness" in Ferrante's novels is a paranoia that one's life isn't one's own, that it's controlled by patterns of the past and the imposition of others' own ways of living. But there is no doubt that the only way to change or explore these facts is through changing one's life, not one's philosophy.

Both books are concerned with a common struggle: how to live within one's own mind, fraught with the past and preoccupations, and how to make sense of and represent it in a way that is free of suffocation. I felt that in his writing Knausgård watches his life with his nose to the window, waiting for something to take shape inside. He gave up fiction writing because, from within his fixed world, the idea of anything beyond his own perception lost meaning, and so he could no longer "combat fiction with fiction." Ferrante, on the other hand, knows that all of life is fiction, but places her character at the center of it. The Neapolitan Novels are only one of innumerable forms Elena Greco could give her life and, by writing this one, she purges herself of the preoccupations that haunt it. While Knausgaard forgoes this sense of unboundedness by treating his life as the unalterable thing that happened to him and putting himself outside of it, the bounds of Elena's life far exceed the form of her writing, and any one telling of it, no matter its length and depth, will only capture one glinting face.

# On Walking and Chicago

Max Bloom

In my high school years, I spent many days taking the train to New York City and going for long walks there. Accompanied either by my father or my friend Noah, I grew to incorporate the routines of that city into my psychic frame: the furious lines of traffic along the vertical avenues of Lower Manhattan, the pedestrians entering and exiting posh cafes and shops in Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope, buses rushing past the beautiful Art Deco of Grand Concourse in the Bronx, subway cars suspended above the East River on the Manhattan Bridge, or Metro North trains passing overhead at Park Avenue and 125th Street. Admittedly, I never came to know the city like locals do, systematized in accordance with routines, understood from the perspective of a single residence, experienced both in the

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He never did care for the river.

day and the night. I saw it rarely at night, I did not suffer through any of the various inconveniences that must attend daily New York life. Nor did I share in many of those more sublime moments that come with living in a place: dawnlight shafts coming in through the window, for instance, turning vast cityscapes - Art Deco, modern, townhouse, brick, and glass—tawny and golden in the clear morning light. I had no home in New York and that made all the difference: the city to me was by necessity multi-nodal. There was no neighborhood for which I could construct a sizable list of decent restaurants; but for East Flatbush and the East Village, Chelsea and Greenpoint, I could furnish the memory of a good meal.

Over the course of four years I took a fifteen- to twenty-mile walk through New York at least once every couple months. By my best estimate, I walked at least three hundred distinct miles of New York City sidewalk, through all of the boroughs save Staten Island. Certain areas of the city acquired specific resonances for me; I came upon Sunset Park again and again, a neighborhood in the southeastern corner of Brooklyn of small turreted brownstones that fell down steep bakery-laden slopes from the park itself, a grassy space at the summit of the neighborhood where stooping elders


Montmorency's ambition in life is to get in the way.

and high-pitched children kicked soccer balls back and forth. From the park issued one of those tremendous city panoramas that make New York feel so infinite: Southern Brooklyn rowhouses, glassy harborwater, and then the towers of Lower Manhattan exploding from the water and racing their way up the slender island. I think back on Sunset Park and settle into something of a reverie: I think of conversations with my father and my friends, and of *mole poblano*. I think of the first time I walked with Noah and our friend Marie through Sunset Park at the end of a very long walk, how we arrived at dusk, when the park was full of families and the clothing stores and restaurants along the main strip overflowing with customers, how the neighborhood felt livelier than any place we had walked through in miles, how the fading light reflected just right on the brick buildings, how I felt sweetly that I had discovered something, even if it was simply something that had always been there and I had just come across it for the first time.

It has been a year now since I have left New Haven, a year now living in Chicago—less, if times back home are discounted—and I have just begun to know it: I take weekly or fortnightly walks, on bright cold Saturdays or Sundays, uncovering the neighborhoods and streets of a new city. And as I make my walks I have succumbed to my guilty pleasure of endlessly making comparisons. I could never keep myself from judging Chicago neighborhoods against corresponding New York quarters; observing how the townhouse styles of Old Town and Wrigleyville compared to those of the West Village or Boerum Hill; determining whether Lincoln Park's bourgeois aesthetic could compete in grace with that of Riverside Drive; comparing the views from the Blue Line and the Red Line with those from the 7 train or the Metro North tracks.

Chicago did not at first win many of these comparisons. The best neighborhoods in the world bear with them a vast chorus of activity, Jane Jacobs' "sidewalk ballet"—neighbors and friends meeting up with each other, children running around, shopkeepers greeting regular customers. For a long time, I had trouble finding that in Chicago. On my early walks, I had the sense that the Chicago pedestrians were always just passing through on their way to another place: I didn't often see children or teenagers walking around by themselves

or, for that matter, adults walking without a definite end in mind. Often when I saw two friends talking with each other, they would suddenly duck into a coffeeshop or a restaurant. People seemed to use the sidewalk primarily for traveling; all the intimate conversations, meet-ups, and bored languishing took place inside.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's narrator in *Notes from the Underground* says: There are intentional and unintentional towns. New York is firmly in the second category; for a long time I believed that Chicago was in the first. There are Chicago neighborhoods, particularly the wealthier neighborhoods, where every restaurant, store, apartment building, and bike stand seems as if it has been put up by some calculating entrepreneur; in New York, apartment buildings, grocery stores, used bookstores, and restaurants all mix together without any apparent sense of order or design, except as products of the great haphazard city. Generally speaking, the city is full and there is not room for the entrepreneurs and capitalists to configure the streets and their relation to the streets; the great dead weight of the city has done that for them. Much of Chicago is like this, too, but the neighborhoods I first chanced upon—many of the iconic sections of the Loop and the North Side, for instance—were not. Consider, for example, the stretch of Clark and Wells Street moving north from the Near North Side where, it seems, whole blocks are taken up by chain restaurants and Chicago institutions (Lou Malnati's, Portillo's) that have consciously modeled themselves on the interstate architecture of the Midwest. I spent several of my first walks passing through

these blocks, and it was hard for me to convince myself that I was passing through a real city. The businesses seemed set up for tourists, not residents, and everything felt a little too orderly.

These perceptions were unfair—stereotypes with some truth to them, and a long list of exceptions each. They became less convincing to me as I saw more of the city and realized that these impressions rarely held consistently, that Chicago is no homogeneous place and that a single adjective that describes Ravenswood perfectly will fall apart a few miles west in Avondale. Moreover, I grew to notice the advantages Chicago has over the other cities I know; I, familiar with New York City as my urban model, was simply not primed to notice them at first—at least not consciously.

Chicago's charm was what I eventually did notice—or, perhaps, noticed immediately and eventually came to recognize that I noticed. I have always been charmed by New York. But the charm I feel from New York is inseparable from the iconic grandness of the city: the cover of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (man and woman; bench; Queensboro Bridge) says it all for what I love about that charm: it's an interaction between the contained and introspective world of the individual and the supernal expanse of the great city. In Central Park you see skyscrapers across a park; in Brooklyn Heights you see skyscrapers across a river. Even where you can't see skyscrapers, the feeling of density, the complexity, reminds you that they are there.

I experience a different type of charm in Chicago: it is simultaneously a more widespread and more local phenomenon. More widespread because it is present in street after street; in hundreds or thousands of locations across the city, many of them scarcely known, rather than in a few iconic streets and scenes. More local because it arises from interactions at the level of the neighborhood or the block, rather than from the sweeping vistas of the city. I notice this type of charm at North Broadway in Uptown on an early walk through the city: the quiet groupings of pedestrians around the Vietnamese restaurants at Argyle; the white-tile 1930s buildings; the patches of five or six-story buildings dotting irregularly the horizon; the Red Line trains stopping; the residential streets leading east to the beach, with their russet faded-glory apartments;

heading west towards Ravenswood, well-shaded and quiet, with dog-walkers and neighbors conversing under the greenery. I notice it crossing on Archer Avenue at the South Fork of the Chicago River, seeing from the bridge the Midwestern houses and baroque churches of Bridgeport . I notice it whenever I pass the intersection of Clark and Irving Park in Lakeview, where there is visible to the south the hint of the Wrigleyville clamor (traffic picking up, denser businesses), and, to the east, Irving Park curves up and then down in a long arc to the apartments on Lake Michigan. The charm of these moments, a charm that feels rarer in New York, is in how all the world, and all the scope of human interaction, is pared down to the narrow scale of the neighborhood in sight: the *banh mi* restaurant, the Foursquare houses, the El stop. The background clutter of the universe disappears; urban domesticity takes over.

Chicago can do this because it is an unusual American city: it is dense enough that its neighborhoods are vibrant with pedestrian life, yet it is not so dense as to give me the feeling of an undifferentiated whole. The very aspects of the city that can make it at times unpleasantly dissimilar from New York—the lack of cohesion and easy pedestrian access between neighborhoods—manage as well to partition impressions and create a more varied space. The range of aesthetic impressions in Chicago never failed to impress me. Even

To return to our present trip: nothing exciting happened.

the two miles from the Lawrence Avenue stop on the Red Line to the Kimball Avenue stop on the Brown Line suggest a multiplicity of cities: the down-at-heel Art Deco neighborhood near the lake, with its narrow crowded streets and the elevated rail line is quintessential Chicago, gritty and historic. The stretch from Western to the Metra line at Ravenswood is residential and quiet, placidly Midwestern, with kids wrestling in lawns and playgrounds on the residential streets off Lawrence. In Albany Park, the wide dusty street, lined with immigrant businesses and crowded, suggests Queens or Brooklyn. Certainly there are distinct neighborhoods in New York as well: the demographic space between a place like Mott Haven and the Upper East Side, only a forty-five minute walk away, is tremendous. But for any two neighborhoods in New York, I always felt a common imprint of New-York-ness. The continuity of the whole of New York City is one of the things I have always loved about it and one of the things I have always found limiting about it. Chicago is its complement. Chicago neighborhoods partake in a bewildering multiplicity of forms and moments, forsaking any attempt at unity for an interweaving of distinct personalities. Consider the way that neighborhoods blend fluidly into each other in New York, while in Chicago they are so often separated by open space—underpasses, railroads, highways, canals, parks, the industrial area where the old stockyards used to be on the South Side. Both of these—the New York City cityscape, typified by its ever-visible skyline, and the Chicago streetscape, configuration of bar, shop, and restaurant—are visions of the infinite, in the whole or in parts.

Chicago seemed to me totally natural in its patterns of life. In neighborhoods across the city, the dominant impression I have received has been one of community and routine. This impression is present in New York as well, but I believe it is complicated by the fact that everyone in New York knows that they are living in New York and so New York stops becoming an ordinary place of ordinary lives. All the international fixation, the domestic celebrity and attraction, the representation and rerepresentation in literature and film—these all make New York City wonderfully exceptional, but they also make it hard for any neighborhood in New York to feel entirely organic. On the other hand, I remember walking through Irving

Park in the late spring, where there were families sitting and talking on bungalows and taking their children to church and buying new cars and driving to work. The streets were attractive, not grand; they bordered on the suburban in places. But there was that calming sense that hovers over most of those Chicago neighborhoods not immediately adjacent to the downtown charm. This was the charm I came to notice so much in Chicago – the charm of being a place engrossed in the rituals of everyday life.

I have begun to fall into those rituals myself. I take Saturday walks around Hyde Park and notice familiar sights: children playing in Nichols Park, the dusky brick of the Catholic church on 55th and Woodlawn reflecting rivers of melting ice, the passerby filing past the records on the sidewalk by the shops on 53rd, the ornate limestone blocks of Kenwood and North Kenwood, a woman delivering mail to the old mansions that line Ellis around 44th Street, a softball game at 50th and Dorchester, the massive Romanesque façade of Kenwood Evangelical Church. Walking back from classes in the afternoon, the great flat stretch of 55th Street, Washington Park on one side, the low stretch of urban renewal leading to Lake Michigan on the other, has always made me feel calmer at the end of the day.

The feeling of settling in is a feeling I never had with New York—sure, I grew to know more and more of it, but at the end of the day, each day, I was riding the train back to Connecticut. Most of my time in Chicago is not spent on long walks but in the little exercises of living in a place—leaving home groggy in the morning, making my way on Friday nights to my favorite restaurant, killing time by wandering around the university quads or across the Midway to the '30s architecture of Woodlawn. In the morning through the window there *are* those dawnlight shafts I never experienced in New York. They reflect off the brick buildings across the street, buildings I could feasibly draw from memory. If I look through my window at night, I see the glow of the streetlights on a line of oak trees, and I see the shadows of the leaves on old Neo-Classical apartments. I like my block; I like my neighborhood. I like the Victorian houses on Woodlawn south of 55th; I like the dome of the old shuttered Christ Scientist church on Blackstone; I like the waves of Lake Michigan on the Point; I *really* like Harold's Chicken. When I return to the

city after time on the East Coast, and take the 55 bus from Midway past the taquerias and bungalows of Gage Park, the churches and greystones of Englewood, and back across Washington Park to my stop on Ellis , I feel like I have come home. I couldn't say now whether I like Chicago or New York more. They are very different cities and I know them in very different ways. But I miss either of them if I spend too much time away.

The people falling back respectfully on either side

# Big Game

Noah Sawyer

Noah Sawyer is a fourth-year in the College majoring in Biology.

Things slow down when fall returns to St. Joseph, Michigan. Apples are ripe on the tree and the streets are a little bit sleepier as the tourists pack up for the year. The lake is too cold for swimming, the sunsets lose their lackadaisical summer luster. There are no more festivals, no more late nights at the Dairy Korner—polyurethane ice cream cone rising through the roof, teenagers getting their knock-off Blizzards. The kids don't stay out as late, playing in the back alleyway, and the rough, pitched asphalt street out front is quiet. The town prepares for winter.

But there is high school football.

St. Joseph High School—the only public high school in town—was built in the '50s. The design was ripped from the notebook of a California architect; the school is full of floor-to-ceiling windowpanes and the old boilers strain during the winter. My mom started working there as a physics teacher in the '80s, and I know it hadn't been renovated in the years since. The walls were yellowed, the paint chipped, and the exterior needed a facelift. One early winter morning when I showed up for class the heating system had given out, pouring acrid smoke into the hallway where my classes were held. We shuffled out to find a class that didn't reek of burnt plastic. Another year the power inexplicably went out in one wing of the building, requiring another game of classroom musical chairs. The education was great (probably the best you could get in the county), but the building didn't show it. Kids used to joke about the

fact that we couldn't keep it above 60 degrees on cold days.

Renovations officially started in 2012 after many months of budgeting and pushback from the community. Locals thought that the finances were going to line the pockets of greedy and overpaid teachers. My neighbors put out a wireframe hand-painted sign telling the town to not to give any more money to our corrupt school system.

The stadium where the St. Joe Bears played was renovated ten years before the school. It was not the only construction in the renovation—the building project added a new fieldhouse with basketball courts and an indoor track field, new spaces for the wrestling team, new weight rooms used by community members and many student athletes, and a new outdoor track for the track team. The field was also a bit older than the school proper, having


A simple and blameless life on thin captain's biscuits

been built in 1949. But it becomes obvious which of these facilities is most important on a fall Friday night. Parents, grandparents, students, children, and alums file into the stadium. Stale popcorn pops and lukewarm Domino's is placed onto paper plates at the concession stand underneath the bleachers. The band warms up in their marching uniforms, cheerleaders stretch on the track, and the flag twirlers practice their twirls. And the team, hidden away in cinderblock rooms below the stadium seats, hype themselves up for the game about to begin.

St. Joe, Michigan, like many Michigan towns, has seen better days. The population has been steadily declining from the '60s—down from their post-white flight population of nearly 12,000 to an estimated 8,300 in 2014. Families are leaving for better employment prospects elsewhere, and many young adults see little reason to move back to the town if they get outside of the county for college. Much of the industry that made up the backbone of the community—electronics and appliance assembly for companies like Whirlpool and Heathkit—has dried up or simply gone out of business. The freight industry that supported many coastal communities across the Great Lakes—the giant, rusty freighters that would bring in copper and salt on hot and hazy summer days at the beach, ambling

But we merely urged him not to be an ass.

slowly towards the mouth of the St. Joe River—have fallen apart as well. While the city has fared much, much better than many of the outlying communities after the financial collapse, most of the town's economy is centered on tourism. And those rich Chicagoans are buying up properties that were once home to native Michiganders and turning them into posh summer homes that lie vacant during the winters. Like many small towns across America it can feel like the soul of the city is dying—and that's a hard pill to swallow for families that have lived there for generations.

The relationship between education and football is fraught. There are many students who would not be able to pass high school if it weren't for the minimum GPA that is required of all athletes in the state of Michigan. Football gives those kids a sense of fraternity and a reason to show up to school in the morning. On the other hand, our communities still spread a flawed message of the plucky young football player being picked out to go and play at a university. A high school education is often considered secondary to the athletic training of players—meet these minimum requirements so that you can stay here, but remember that football is your ticket to college and success. This belief is reflected in the mandatory extra PE courses that the football players take—necessities of the sport. You might wonder what the point of a minimum GPA is if we don't teach our kids to enjoy school, to find inherent value in their education. Are the at-risk football players really gaining anything from being forced to maintain a 1.67 so that they can continue to play football?

There were few things more important to my town than the St. Joseph-Lakeshore game. Five miles of Cleveland Avenue tarmac—a literal straight shot down one unbending country road—is all that separates my old school and its rival. The days preceding the perennial "big game" fill the slow September air with a sort of murmur. Teenagers travel from one town to another when it gets dark to graffiti their rival's property—a tradition that usually starts in good fun and eventually devolves. Townsfolk grumble about defaced cars or maize-and-blue bear paws that have been spray-painted over by kids. Across the border, people in Lakeshore probably deal with the same thing. But without fail the story is passed around that the others did it first—and so the rivalry continues.

And then the night of the big game is here. The players run out through the wide cement opening in the bleachers of Dickinson stadium. Parents cheer; middle schoolers stand expectantly at the edge of the field hoping to get a high five from the quarterback. The marching band plays. And the game begins. In the long run it doesn't matter who wins or who loses. Both teams go through their strong and weak streaks and trade off who makes it to the state playoffs. What matters is that moment—that enthusiasm, that sense of community, that fraternity. Those kids out on the field get a taste of glory, and we tell them that this will be the best time of their lives.

There is no poetry about Harris—no wild yearning.

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