

## Echoes of the Past

By Benjamin Covington

The figures in the foreground of Antonio Joli's *Capriccio With Saint Paul and Old London Bridge* look out upon contemporary eighteenth century London from a structure that is nowhere to be found in the city in reality; rather, it is taken from an imagined antiquity.<sup>1</sup> These individuals find themselves in a building that seems as if it could be reached by ascending the steps portrayed in the *School of Athens*, walking past Plato and Aristotle, and continuing down the nave of that "grand if imaginary structure."<sup>2</sup> Joli's barrel-vaulted nave, framed by statues on both sides, is reminiscent of the one from Raphael's masterpiece, if not an intentional *extension* of it. Yet, the echoes of the *School of Athens* are confined to the foreground of Joli's work; rooted in antiquity, the individuals gaze out upon an accurate portrayal of the then modern cityscape of London. What they see does not mirror the structure from which they are observing; nor should it. However, London's skyline does contain semblances of the past—none more evident than the dominating presence of the neo-classically influenced Saint Paul's Cathedral, which rests to the lower-left of the work's center. Its towering Corinthian pillars and sloping pediment might initially seem misfit to London's cityscape; yet, observed through the elevated perspective of the viewer that passes through the foreground's central arch, the cathedral seems to be an almost natural and perfectly-situated continuity of antiquity.

The structure in the foreground of Joli's painting serves as a *lens* of sorts; it renders intelligible the London skyline, and the placement of Saint Paul's Cathedral within it, by serving as an intermediary between the present reality and the past. The potential of Columbia University's *Core Curriculum* functions similarly. The *Core* is a set of classes, which explores

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<sup>1</sup> This painting can be viewed on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Lieberman, "The Architectural Background," in *Raphael's School of Athens* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 65.

the literary, artistic, and philosophic traditions that have contributed to and shaped the West. As with the contents and layout of London's skyline, the most pressing issues and opportunities of our time are not fully comprehensible until we have approached them with a lens that takes significant account of the distant but still present traditions, which contribute to our current socio-political landscape.

As a transfer student in my first year at Columbia University, the yearlong course, *Literature Humanities*, has comprised the bulk of my exposure to the *Core*. It provides an overview of the development of the western literary tradition, beginning in ancient Greece and continuing through twentieth century Europe and the United States. It includes some works that could not be more distinct from our current time in their setting and orientation while others are prescient in their ability to speak to phenomena of the twenty-first century; however, both groups equally inform our ability to approach the present.

This first grouping of works are set in political climates and societies drastically different than our own, but by their very nature of being alien to modernity, they prove their value. The reader is forced to consider the differences between our state and the ones depicted. Serving as contrasts, they help illustrate the positive externalities provided by modern constitutional democracies that are increasingly being taken for granted, overlooked, or actively assailed in the United States and throughout Europe. Perhaps, in a Miltonian manner, the power and value of our own domestic system can only truly be proven through the experience of its *absence*. Fortunately, to simulate such a process, we can turn to literature.

The first two books of Euripides' *Oresteia* present a society, which entirely lacks the *rule of law* and one that would have seemed mythical or pre-modern even to Euripides' audience in the fifth century BC. The trilogy's conflict is rooted in a brutal act, which takes place at least a

decade before the work commences: Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter. This occurrence, alone, is lamentable, but what imbues this work with a tragic quality is that Iphigenia's murder only begets more violence. Those personally involved take it upon themselves to attempt to serve as impartial vessels of Justice,<sup>3</sup> but only manage to achieve excess and death.<sup>4</sup> The seemingly never-ending cycle of murder is ended in the play's third book, *The Eumenides*, when a newly established court makes a binding ruling, imbued with legitimacy through force and relative impartiality.<sup>5</sup> The play concludes with a judiciary in need of reform and reevaluation of its founding premises, but one that nonetheless provides an invaluable public good: *order*.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Tamar in *Genesis* occurs before the codification of either Jewish divine law that would later be provided in *Leviticus* or the imposition of regulations by a temporal state. With this, no institutions and few obligations existed that provided the semblance of a social safety net. Tamar, a childless widow, disguises herself as prostitute in order to trick her father-in-law into impregnating her.<sup>7</sup> These actions, which have potentially fatal consequences, are not born out of guile or wickedness but rather *desperation*; the acquisition of a dependent is the only option Tamar has of attaining a livelihood.

The *Iliad* depicts a society in which foreign policy decisions are not the product of debate and analysis within institutions of expertise but instead are dictated by the personal feuds and perceived wrongs of those empowered to make decisions. The epic poem is further set in a society in which dissent is not tolerated nor are speech and protest protected. In *Book II*, Thersites appeals to an assembly of his fellow Achaian warriors, questioning the motives of the

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<sup>3</sup> Aeschylus, *Oresteia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), *Agamemnon* ln 910, 1406, 1432 and *The Libation Bearers* ln 1603-1610.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, *Agamemnon* ln 1372-1378, 1431-1447.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Eumenides* ln 565-573, 826-828, 927.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, ln 734-743.

<sup>7</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, and Carol Newsom, 4th ed. edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), *Genesis* chap. 28.

war and advocating a return home.<sup>8</sup> Yet, he is silenced when Odysseus—to the “sorry” yet tacitly approving laughter of the crowd—violently beats a “scepter against [Thersites’] back and shoulders.”<sup>9</sup> There is a lingering but unknowable sense that perhaps if he had continued his oratory, the destructive toil of the *Iliad* could have been avoided. Yet, the outcome is fixed when channels of debate and dissent are visibly undermined without provoking a significant reaction from the citizenry.

We live in a state in which the average citizen enjoys far more rights and freedoms and a higher quality of life than the average character in the works explored in the course. This essay in no way argues on behalf of complacency; the positive externalities noted—the rule of law, a social safety net, and the delineation and protection of fundamental rights—are not our state’s final objective. Our democracy involves and requires constant action, to ensure and expand the scope of rights in an ever-changing society that has not fully addressed some its gravest national sins and to guard against creeping despotism. We do, however, need to be wary and vigilant of policies, ideologies, and actions, which—in times of hardship—assail key pillars of our country, like those mentioned above, instead of addressing the issues, themselves.

Milton places the possession of choice and the desire for freedom at the center of the human condition, and insists—through *Paradise Lost*—that both are accompanied by immense consequences and responsibilities. The magnitude of these latter two substances are perhaps greater in our society than in Milton’s as we are the co-authors of the law, not merely the subject of it. Thus, the exercise of our freedoms—especially our civil and political ones—have larger ramifications with the potential for both good and evil. For Milton, in a fallen world, the self-defense of ignorance or lack of information as an account for poor decisions is not adequate. The

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<sup>8</sup> Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), Book II.225-242.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II.265-270.

acquisition of the knowledge, which comes through experience, informs our decision-making process. And, in the political sphere, the most important choices we make and how we exercise rights, such as voting, are the products of habits developed through everyday decisions.

How do we consume news and information? Do we restrict ourselves to sources that only think in the same manner that we do? We cannot allow our state to become so stratified based on media consumption that segments of the population operate on fundamentally different codes, leading to a breakdown in communication in which basic concepts and even “words, too” are forced to “change their usual meanings.”<sup>10</sup> Further, how receptive are we to information that contradicts our own ideologies? *Don Quixote* displays the dangerous ease with which one can impose one’s belief-system onto the world, even if it is not based in reality. We must resist being like the work’s protagonist—quick to demonize the wicked Frestón the Wise or some subset of the population when faced with a discrepancy between reality and our beliefs. Although we should tolerate and encourage dissent, we cannot disregard facts; sometimes, windmills are simply just that.<sup>11</sup> When objectivity is assaulted, it is not an acceptable response to dismissively shrug our shoulders and say, “What is truth” anyway?<sup>12</sup> The efficient exercise of our political rights necessitates that we continuously ask, “What is *the* truth?” None of these described tasks, which democracy requests, are easily or quickly accomplished; they are lifelong endeavors. And, the *Core Curriculum* provides the invaluable frameworks necessary for wholehearted attempts.

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<sup>10</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Harper, 1836), Book 2.82.

<sup>11</sup> Miguel De Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman, Reprint edition (Harper Perennial, 2005), 59.

<sup>12</sup> Perkins, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha, John* 18:38.

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