

# Transformations

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1

Down the dark, wet street of the inner city lurked armed gangs, scurrying rats, bumps of drug-lacerated humanity huddled in the soft rain, feral dogs—and in deep peril, his friend.

Don't be afraid.

But I am afraid. I wish I weren't, but I am, so don't tell me not to be! Who wouldn't be? There are damn good reasons to be afraid. This is a killer's street.

Those sound like excellent reasons just to leave.

I know, but I can't. My friend is in trouble; I should go help him. But I'm too scared.

He needs your help whether you're afraid or not.

I know that. Why do you think I'm afraid? If it weren't for him needing me, I wouldn't be afraid at all; I wouldn't even be here; I'd be home. Unafraid, and safe.

But if he needs you, shouldn't you help him?

Aren't you listening? I'm afraid. I'm afraid to stay; I'm afraid to leave. I don't want to be shot and killed; I don't want to go home knowing I left him when he needed me. So I'm afraid either way! Oh, God! I wish I weren't so . . . I don't know: I wish I weren't so scared.

Fear is a natural thing. It's nature's way of ensuring survival. Being afraid may be keeping you alive right now.

Nature's way, huh? That doesn't help any. Even if it weren't natural I'd still be afraid. So would you. So *are* you!

Why do you say I'm afraid?

You're scared, too. I'm afraid of a dangerous street; you're afraid of a word. A mere word. You're afraid to say that word, aren't you? Just now, when I said I wish I weren't so . . . and then broke off—you expected another word didn't you? So go ahead, say it!

What word do you want me to say?

Chicken.

Are you calling me chicken? Or is that what you think I'm afraid to say? It's about courage, isn't it? You're afraid of being shot if you go down that street; you're afraid of being called a coward if you don't.

I don't give a damn about being called a coward. I'm afraid of being one. We're both cowards.

Not entirely. Not if you're still here. But it's transformed now, isn't it? It's not just a natural thing anymore, is it? Maybe fear never is just fear, at least for the thoughtful or the hesitant. You're right about one thing, though: it was wrong to tell you not to be afraid; I should have urged you to take courage. You spotted that; it took a little courage even to spot it.

So here I am shaking like air coming out of a jet, and just because I say "chicken" I get a medal for bravery? Good thinking!

Somehow I don't think you'll be standing here much longer. You see, you've transformed everything now, including yourself, just with that one word, courage.

But I'm still scared.

I know. But now it means something entirely different.

2

It's so easy to get lost in this charming old city. Where are we?

I'm not sure. Do you see that yellow stone building over there, next to the park?

Yes, I see it. What is it?

I don't know.

Then why did you point it out?

Do I have to know what it is to point it out?

Well, Einstein, if we want to get back to the hotel, what good is it to note that building if it's not on this tourist map?

Getting back to the hotel isn't the only thing that matters, you know.

It's not the only thing that matters, I agree; but it is one thing that does. I don't see any use at all to point out a building without knowing what it is or where it is. You don't just look at a building for no reason.

If we were in Agra wouldn't you look at the Taj Mahal, or in London, wouldn't you look at the Tower?

Of course I would. Those are tourist sights. They are monuments.

So you let a tourist map tell you what to see? You can go home and tell everybody you saw the Tower of London. Bragging rights.

We're not in London. If we were, I'd go to see the Tower. And I'd see it because Elizabeth was imprisoned there and all kinds of famous people lost their heads. It's an historically interesting spot.

And that yellow building isn't?

I don't know whether it is or not.

If I told you a famous person was killed there, would you then find it worthy of being looked at?

Sure, why not? It does look like someone important might have died there, come to think of it. Maybe we could ask someone.

I can't believe this. You'd look at that building only if you knew it was historically interesting?

Don't be so superior. What's wrong with history?

Nothing's wrong with history. I love to visit historical places, too. But a sense of history isn't the only reason to look at a building.

Sure. And one of the most important reasons is to use it as a landmark to find our way back to the hotel. I'm hungry. If that yellow building has a restaurant or pub or grill or whatever they call it in this country, I'll take interest in it.

Now, look. You're being deliberately otiose. I ask you, as a favor. Just look at that building.

All right. I'm looking. Now what?

Well . . . isn't it interesting?

What would give it *interest*? History would. Food would. If it's a store, merchandise would. Why is it interesting? How could it possibly *interest* me if I don't know what it *is*?

Good Lord! Why do we always get into these arguments? But, you're right about one thing. I misspoke. Interest does require a context, doesn't it? What happens if you look at that building without any context at all: no history, no use, no utility, not even shelter. If we agree that the building is entirely uninteresting, and yet I still want you to look at it, what would you say?

Probably something about your age and what it's doing to your brain cells. Something along those lines.

For heaven's sake. Look at the architecture.

Architecture! Here I am starving and lost and you talk about architecture?

We had breakfast an hour ago; and we're not lost in any real sense because there are taxicabs and polite people in shops who would tell us where we are. Look at that yellow building, *please*.

But I've never studied architecture. And isn't architecture history? Oh, very well. Let's see . . . It is lovely. Indeed it's beautiful, isn't it? It's rather

serene, yet protective in its strength. How did he manage that, I wonder? The architect, I mean. Perhaps it's because those stones are cut in oblong shapes, and he uses them both horizontally and vertically in different places. The eye is led upward by the vertical—see! Yet it doesn't soar, like a cathedral; its breadth gives it a solidity that pleases just because it mutes its power, offering welcome, too. Its elegance, though, suggests it's not just anyone whom it welcomes, only the elite. Perhaps that's what the architect wanted to do: welcome the elite warmly; but with institutional security.

You may be right. Wait a minute. Give me that guide book and map. Why, here it is. Yes, it *is* on the map. It's a famous convent school—

Of course it is. You can *see* it is. You don't need a guide map.

You've changed your tune. I thought you *liked* maps.

I like maps if I want to get somewhere or know where I am. But just looking is different. It was that one word: *architecture*. That transformed everything, didn't it? How silly of you not to have noticed.

*P* I not noticed? I can't believe this. Which of us didn't notice?

You didn't, you philistine. You kept talking about interest, not noting that interest forfeits the art. You finally got me to look; only now 'look' means something entirely different.

## 3

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury; you have heard the counselor for the prosecution sum up her case against my client. She is a skilled, indeed artful attorney, and has succeeded in bringing together the various elements of both circumstantial and direct evidence into a coherent scenario. It is her job to prosecute, and one of the reasons she has an enviable reputation for success is her ability to make her version of the story so believable—so rational, if you will—that you, as jurors, will be persuaded that any other account seems artificial or strained. She has done that in this case. Her account is believable. Her account makes sense. But in a court of law, ladies and gentlemen, it is not enough to offer a coherent and sensible account. It is necessary that any alternative story that would acquit my client is so unlikely that you would have to judge it to be unreasonable. The counsel for the prosecution has tried to do this, too. She has tried to show that what you would have to assume in order to acquit my client is simply beyond our normal understanding of what is reasonable.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been a public defender for many years; and as I'm sure you know, all of us in the public defender's office have very heavy caseloads; sometimes we barely have enough time to read all the files, which include the prosecutor's briefs. I'm not complaining about this—I mention it only to explain that over the years I have found it both helpful and necessary to listen very closely to a prosecutor's summing up. I have won a

few cases by attending avidly to these summaries—not only to what they contain, but sometimes, more tellingly, to what they do not contain; or rather, to what they skim over. For I have learned that what is skimmed over is sometimes skimmed because there's a weakness there. When a prosecutor takes a breezy or relaxed attitude toward a facet in the case, glossing or dismissing it lightly, I prick up my ears. Not always, but often enough, this glibness alerts me to increase my suspicion. They, the prosecutors, don't realize that when they trivialize, they're doing my job for me. I'm always grateful when they lighten up. I am grateful today.

Did the counsel for the prosecution, at any time during her summing up, wave anything aside as unimportant? Did she ask you, in your hearing, to hurry past a subtle point, lest the overall thrust of her way of telling the story be missed? If she did this, and I think she did, we must ask why? Let us review what she said, to see if you, the jury, can remember a moment when the pace of her account lightened a bit, when her tone became friendly, whimsical, inviting just a touch of bright contempt, making you feel a little easier in hurrying past a point; hurrying past it, ladies and gentlemen, so that you would not think about it.

Her initial witness was the police officer who first arrived at the scene. He testified that, in a response to a dispatch, he found my client in the back of a warehouse, wiping off a heavy metal bar. The night watchman was lying unconscious on the floor, and the back entrance to the warehouse had been forced open. This officer further testified that the crime lab had found evidence on the bar suggesting it was used to force open the rear door, and positive evidence—blood—proving it had been used to strike a hearty blow—luckily not fatal—at the back of the watchman's skull. Outside, in a large burlap sack were several boxes of rare and very expensive items taken from the warehouse. These are facts that are not in dispute. Nor is it in dispute that a merchant in the shop next to the warehouse had through his window seen my young client come out of the forced exit at the rear, pick up a burlap bag on the landing, and then, after hesitating, put down the bag, and return into the building. The merchant immediately called the police. You have heard the merchant testify to this. You also heard testimony from a certain Scott Wilson, who is my client's coach for the church baseball team and who had become something of a mentor and guide to the young man. You heard this kindly gentleman testify he had received a warning by telephone from an unnamed caller who had informed him that my client might be in trouble at that address. According to his testimony, he arrived just minutes after the merchant called; indeed he arrived at the scene while the policeman was in the act of arresting my client.

Mr. Wilson's testimony is particularly damaging, for he is a reluctant witness, a very reluctant witness, with obvious fondness for the boy. Yet, under the prosecution's careful questioning, he was forced to admit my client

was going through what he calls a phase of alienation, and had spoken of wanting to do something remarkable. Further, his testimony completely reinforces that of the arresting officer; Mr. Wilson also saw my client with the iron bar still in his hand, with a cloth wrapped around the bar.

The counsel for the prosecution noted that the crime lab was unable to find any prints at all on the iron bar or on the boxes of the precious merchandise. Since my client was found wiping the bar with a cloth, his guilt seems ineluctable. According to the prosecutor, my client, after forcing open the rear door with the iron bar, used it to knock out the watchman from behind, and after taking the various boxes of expensive items and putting them in the sack, only then, realizing his prints might indict him, in something of a panic, first wiped the boxes in the bag and then returned to the warehouse to wipe off the bar. Since no one else, except, of course, for Mr. Wilson and the arresting officer, was seen in the area, the evidence seems to doom my client.

Finally, you heard the testimony of the detective who interrogated my client at the police station. According to the detective, the defendant, after waiving his right to counsel, admitted he had wiped the iron bar and the cases of stolen merchandise, but denied he had committed either the felonious act of grand larceny or the felonious attack on the watchman. To the felonious charge of obstructing justice by tampering with the evidence, the defendant curiously remains silent. When asked why he wiped the bar and the boxes, he does not answer. He is remarkably taciturn about his motives. He would not even tell me, his own attorney. I was in the dark about his reticence as much as you.

When the counselor for the prosecution came to this point in her summing up, what did she say? She smiled at you, and asked you—and I'm quoting her exactly here—“why wouldn't he explain his motives? Well, would you?”

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, as I sat here listening to her sum up her formidable case against my client, that question of hers simply did not ring true. Everything else did; she tells a compelling story. Why did she ask, “would you?” One would have expected her to explain that the most obvious reason for keeping silent about his motive for wiping off the bar was that there could *be* only one reason—a reason that would indict him—namely, to erase his fingerprints. But she did not say that. Why didn't she? We might speculate. Is it because she realizes that focusing on the motivation for the single act of wiping the iron bar would raise the question about the one part of her case—one part of *this* case—that is a little puzzling? For here is the problem: the boy must surely know that if he did not break open the door, strike the watchman, and steal the merchandise, he would have no apparent reason to wipe the bar. But if he had no reason to wipe the bar, neither did he have reason to wipe the merchandise. Indeed it is the fact that the merchandise is also wiped clean of all fingerprints that makes us pause. Yes, of course, if he had struck the watchman he would have wiped the bar; but why, at the scene of the crime, when time was precious, would he wipe all of the

boxes? Why wipe them *first*? Why not simply run away? This is the line of thought the prosecution does not want you to take, so she directed your attention to the motive for wiping the bar, but not by stating the obvious motive, but by asking if *you* would have done so. You—each of you—realized immediately why you would have wiped the bar; and you then would have assumed the question of motive was settled, and with that motive settled, so would be his guilt. But though the motive for wiping the bar might be explained, the same motive cannot possibly be ascribed to wiping the boxes. The prosecution does not want you to think about that. Rather, she points to his silence, to his reticence, about his motivation, as an indicator of his guilt. “His silence damns him,” she said—and again I quote her directly from the transcript. But does it?

Why wipe the boxes? And more important, why remain silent about your motive? All we need is a suggestion; indeed one word will do it. It transforms everything, so that we must read the obvious backward. Perhaps this boy is not a liar as the prosecution says, but every word he says is true. Perhaps he was not taking the merchandise away, but bringing it back. He was not trying to escape, but was allowing himself to be caught if necessary. He did not erase his fingerprints from the bar or the boxes, but the fingerprints of another. He is willing to go to prison so that the other would not have to. But he simply could not, even to protect someone, lie; for he had taken an oath, and to him an oath is sacred. That’s the kind of boy he is. The remarkable thing he said to his mentor that he wanted to do was not to steal, but to sacrifice. To ensure this, he did not even want a lawyer, but the judge would not let so young a defendant try his own case, so I, a mere public defender, was appointed. He would not talk to me about that night at all. Above all, even now, he remains silent about the one thing that would be the easiest to explain away. The one word I offer to you that enables us to see why he wiped the bar *and* the boxes, why he must remain silent on his motive and still keep his oath to tell the truth, indeed why he is here at all, is loyalty. Loyalty is the supreme virtue of a noble youth. It is the ground even of his remarkable, if imprudent, sacrifice. His silence is to the counsel for the prosecution an indication of his guilt. But with that one word, *loyalty*, the scenario is transformed from a base story of venal crime to a noble story of great sacrifice. One who is loyal is usually reluctant, ever, to lie under oath. To the prosecution, his silence convicts; but with the suggestion of the word *loyalty* his silence acquits, for now it means something entirely different.

## 4

What do you think about that theory we heard in the metaphysics seminar today?

There were too many theories in that seminar. I’m tired of theories.

Yes, well—I guess I don't mean just another theory; it's what you might call a metatheory. You scowl?

What a vile phrase. I suppose metatheories are then ranked by meta-metatheories. How silly it all seems.

Why, how saucy you are! Whatever else could metaphysics be except theory—a theory of reality.

Saucy? Perhaps I am a bit saucy. I sometimes feel so outclassed by the others in the seminar. They all seem to thrive on it—as you do. But . . .

Ah, yes. There's always that word *but*. Spelled with one *t*, so as not to fan your sauciness. You're disingenuous, you know. That's the academic word for 'saucy'. You don't feel outclassed, you feel superior. You may be new to our graduate program, but don't play the injured innocent to me. I'm your friend, and know you too well. You think we're just *wrong*.

If sauciness be a species of honesty, then, excluding you, I think everyone in that seminar, especially the professor, is wrong.

In what way, wrong?

They leave out the bump . . . The bump of the real.

What *can* you mean?

They offer up alternative theories as packaged games, marketed by cleverness, to entertain the buyer—in this case, the student. They don't ever seem to ask, seriously, whether any theory is true, much less real; and that's caused in part by their insistence that even those words, *true* and *real*, are already contained and perhaps found only in the plastic-wrapped packages.

That might be an indictment merely of how the professor runs the class. You don't have to treat the theories we read as untrue or as mere alternatives.

That's what I thought at first. But it's deeper than that. Consider what we do, or what we are expected to do. We study theories of reality without studying reality itself. Romeo does not consider theories of beauty when he sees Juliet, his sudden awareness of and slavery to her beauty is a bump. Neither do the hungry consider theories of nutrition when they reach for food. A good practitioner does not consider theories of health, he seeks remedies for those who are sick. By analogy, those who study metaphysics should not study only theories of reality but reality itself.

What is reality itself?

That's the point. I'm not sure. But I am aware of my reality. I don't need a theory to tell me that.

So you think Descartes is right? Begin with a metaphysics of the self.

Descartes begins his metaphysics with a ball of wax. That's his model for what's real: a substance like wax that persists as wax through the changes of its properties. He applies that to his own existence—with disastrous results. He is almost the paradigm of what I mean: he lets his theory explain himself.



But whatever explains us just is, as explanation, theoretical. His theory may be wrong, but it doesn't follow every theory is wrong.

And how do you find out whether a theory is wrong or right? Leave aside internal consistency, which I agree is a necessity. Among consistent theories, don't all explain everything? But they can't all be right, since they contradict.

What about adequacy?

Good. But to judge a theory as adequate you need to have resource to some extratheoretical bump, especially of oneself, to test for adequacy. Look—I'm not denying the need for some sense of internal coherence or theoretical structure; I'm simply saying the word *real* is not captive of any theory as theory. Whatever we think about reality outside a system or theoretical account is surely a part of what we mean by metaphysics.

What *is* reality outside a system or theory?

Look. If I imagine a desk right here, I can nevertheless still pass my hand through the space. Were there a real desk, however, in trying to pass my hand through it I would bump into it. Perhaps, though, this example is too materialistic. Suppose I had unwarranted guilt feelings which could be alleviated by the discovery of certain facts: I learn I was not responsible for another's suffering, so the guilt feelings vanish. Contrast that with real guilt: no matter how I may try to deny the censure I cannot escape it: I am guilty and need to own up to it and even atone for it. What I'm trying to say by the word *bump* is that reality *obtrudes*; it has something irresistible in it. I am aware of reality just when it is inescapable, like the avalanche blocking my path.

So, according to your theory, no theory is adequate. Your "ism" is anti-ism-ism. You laugh.

Of course I laugh, because your mockery is both friendly and clever. You're trying to show me I can't escape theoretical limits, but you do so in a playful way, as friends should. But my laughter is real and not a theory of laughter, and we are friends and not mere theorists of friendship.

But if I *think* about laughter and friendship, how can I avoid my concern to make them compatible—and to think of them as compatible is to theorize.

The danger is that your attempt to make friendship—perhaps I should say *being* friends—compatible to being risible might eclipse the reality of laughing and friends. Being a real friend is not the result of theorizing.

But if, in addition to being a real friend, I also want to *think* about it, must I not in *some* sense, theorize?

Perhaps, but I don't think so. Let me show you what I mean. Suppose I discover you have committed a misdemeanor. I am torn between being a friend and being a citizen to report you—especially if someone else might be blamed. The sudden burden, washing over me like a cascade, reveals entirely new—that is, unsuspected—dimensions of what it means to be both friend

and citizen. I learn something profound I did not realize before; but such learning is not theoretical. I'm not sure it's empirical, either; indeed I'm not sure what to call it but I cannot deny I have not only learned something new, I have also learned something deep and profound: I am somehow changed.

Of course. But few thinkers or theorists deny that experience can add to our understanding.

Excuse me, but you're missing my point. I do not speak of the experience but of the thought. I am thinking—nontheoretically—directly about what it means to be a friend, what it means to be a citizen. I grant later on I can also speculate theoretically about it, but why would you deny I am thinking about the reality of our being friends when I confront, nontheoretically, such agony?

Perhaps you are thinking. What's your point?

Such direct, nontheoretical thinking about the reality of being friends actually changes me in some way. I keep thinking of that comical word *bump*; which I realize is inadequate. At least I want to say this: such learning is not merely *about* friends, it is part of what it means to be friends. I am not some outsider looking in, I am overwhelmed by the reality of what it means to be a citizen and a friend, and that is not the result of theorizing but of thinking directly about being real.

You used the term "overwhelmed." Is that what you mean: we should include in metaphysics the study of our emotions and feelings?

No—at least, I don't think so. I'm not talking about psychological change *in* me but a metaphysical change *of* me. There may be some emotive states that accompany such change; I suspect awe or astonishment might be among them, and I don't think metaphysicians should blush at the opportunity to learn from such feelings; but on the whole I would say that emotive feelings, not being universal, cannot be central; they certainly are not what I mean when I say I can study being real without first constructing a theoretical account of reality.

Maybe. Plato, after all, says philosophy begins in wonder.

And may continue with it. Yes, *wonder* is probably a better word than *awe*, *astonishment*, or being *overwhelmed*. It is the metaphysical change though that matters.

So you suggest that such learning is a discovery about being a friend in such a way as to change what being a friend means, so that you as thinker are metamorphized by the "bump" of this realization. In a way you're demanding that what happens to us when we think is an essential part of being a thinker.

I suppose that's what I'm doing. Yes. I want to know what happens to me when I think philosophically about me. Perhaps "metamorphosis" is as good a term as any. To think directly about our being real friends must change us as friends, don't you think?

It may. Although when you insert the term "as" I wonder about the accuracy of the word *metamorphosis*. Perhaps *transformation* is more apt.

So that true metaphysical thinking transforms us as thinkers? That sounds closer to what I'm trying to say.

If so, the notion of metaphysical thinking has itself been transformed, for now it means something entirely different.

## 5

You're the director of this play, so help me out here.

Ah! Well—of course. What passage troubles you?

It's not any one passage. It's Portia herself; or maybe it's the whole play. You see, at first I thought: here's a girl—Shakespeare calls her that—who cleverly outwits the court of Venice to save Antonio's life; gives a whale of a speech about the quality of mercy; plays a fairly dirty trick with the rings on her incompetent husband; and returns to her home a triumph. So I thought that was the key to her character: she's smarter and spiritually stronger than any of the men, and to understand her is to recognize her superiority, and how she manipulates the male-dominated system without sacrificing her femininity. Her only mistake was falling in love with that sappy, useless brat, Bassanio.

Ah! Well, there's some truth in that, of course; but it's a mite . . . political. You say that was your first view. What happened then?

The same thing that always happens when I perform Shakespeare. She becomes a lot more complicated. I don't mind that; a great play needs rich characters. But Portia is not just complicated, she's a . . . I don't know—an enigma. And unless I figure her out, I won't be able to play her.

Ah, well! Maybe it's the other way around. Only by playing her can you figure her out.

That's why we have rehearsals. But how am I to read her lines?

Ah! Her lines? They're fairly straightforward, I should have thought. It seems to me you did quite well in this rehearsal.

"Quite well" is not quite well enough as you know quite well. My delivery was only "quite well" because I have not yet caught the essence of her character.

Perhaps her character develops; she may not be the same Portia at the end as at the beginning.

It would be a dull play if she didn't develop. I sense that, you know. She learns. Maybe that's the point: her learning. There's a scene that suggests this: right after Bassanio chooses the correct casket, she tells him she would be trebled twenty times herself for his sake. But then she adds:

. . . But the full sum of me  
Is sum of nothing, which, to term in gross,  
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractis'd:

Happy in this, she is not yet so old  
 But she may learn; and happier than this,  
 She is not bred so dull but she can learn;  
 Happiest of all is, that her gentle spirit  
 Commits itself to yours to be directed . . .

Ah! I knew I had chosen the right woman to play Portia. Instinctively you have selected a crucial passage. Her learning, and not her triumph in the court, gives the play a theme worthy of such a splendid character as Portia. But, please, go on. What troubles you about those lines you read so well?

But did I read them *right*? That's the point. Is she serious? What could she learn from *him*? She doesn't need to be trebled twenty times herself to be already sixty times smarter and nobler than that giddy, greedy, green grasshopper of a boy. Is she simply blinded by love, so that she *thinks* he's smarter than she? Or is it a metaphor: her loving is like an education? Or is she ironic: she really means she will teach him. Or is she suggesting that love is the true educator, not Bassanio. But mostly I want to know what she means by the various educational terms, school'd, lesson'd, learn'd. In what way is she to learn? And *what* does she learn?

Ah, well. I know you share the maxim that the text is always the ultimate source. Let's see . . . Can you give me a passage in which she clearly learns something, and even says so?

A passage where she learns? You don't mean her learning how to defeat Shylock? No, I didn't think so. I'm not sure I can. Though, maybe . . . there is one passage that might serve. It's my favorite in the whole play. She and Nerissa are walking back home, at night, and she spots a candle burning in her house, and says: "So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

Ah, yes. Go on. I'll take Nerissa's line: "When the moon shone we did not see the candle."

So doth the greater glory dim the less:  
 A substitute shines brightly as a king  
 Until a king be by; and then his state  
 Empties itself, as doth an inland brook  
 Into the main of waters. Music! Hark!

It is your music, madam, of the house.

Nothing is good, I see, without respect;  
 Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day.

Silence bestows that virtue on it, madam.

The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark  
 When neither is attended; and I think  
 The nightingale, if she sing by day  
 No better a musician than the wren.  
 How many things by season season'd are  
 To their right praise and true perfection!

Ah, I can see why that might be your favorite.

It's magical! It's like a childhood fantasy; so lovely, so serene and charming, you just don't want it to stop. The two girls have walked a long way, and are tired, but as they near their home, you can almost feel their fatigue drop off of them; their soft, gentle language is a balm to the soul. It tells us something about them we didn't realize before; but the enchantment of that scene also contrasts vividly with the harsh calculation of mercantile Venice and the metallic cleverness of the court. Without that scene it would be less a comedy. It doesn't make us laugh; but it makes us feel wonderful. It's full of grace and warmth.

Ah, indeed. You see that: comedy is about fools being foolish, usually as lovers, but the judgment is warm and gracious; its truth is gentle learning.

Somehow I feel this passage shows us about that gentle learning, but I can't quite fit it in. The imagery itself seems to shift. At first, the point seems fairly banal: we note the candle only because it's dark; we note the substitute only because the king is absent. It would seem, especially in the comparison with the king, that the lesser is noted only when the greater is away: but the king is truly greater than the substitute. Is she suggesting Bassanio is like the substitute? He's not so bad if you don't compare him to anyone else? This seems to be the dubious wisdom that we should be thankful for small favors—one that doesn't seem fitting for Portia. But then she suggests the crow and wren *really* sing as sweetly as the nightingale if they are not "attended." Does she mean the virtues are merely in the eye of the onlooker, so that as long as she sees Bassanio as worthy, then he *is* worthy? That's a bit of relativism that might work for Cupid, but not for virtue; Portia is made of sterner stuff than that. Then, though, she seems to make the strongest claim of all; it is the season that brings us to our perfection. Does this mean her boyish husband might grow up to be a worthy mate? Or is this magical moment *her* season? In returning to Belmont, after her conquests of Shylock by means of legal cleverness and Bassanio by means of the trickery with the rings, has she come to her perfection? If this last is correct, it doesn't seem to mesh with the candle's being appreciated only in darkness, or the music only in silence. I'm not even sure whether she is triumphant or humbled; and whichever it is surely would alter how I say the lines.

Ah! Well. You certainly are right that the imagery develops. She not only uses metaphors, she actually spells out their meaning by two differing principles. First she says “nothing is good without respect” meaning ‘comparison’; but then she says “things are seasoned by their season.” Both of these adages or principles, if you will, are educational. She has learned to judge things by “respect”; she has learned that everything has its season; and it is by that season or ripeness that the thing should be judged.

But translate that for me. What or who has reached its season? Herself? Bassanio? And what is that perspective, that “respect,” that enables her to judge things aright?

Ah. Well, you know I’m not sure it is any one thing or person. Perhaps, indeed, Shakespeare means us to understand that the play itself has reached its season.

Ah! Good heavens, I’m beginning to sound like you: starting every sentence with “ah.” Oh, well. Yes. That is . . . wait. I’m more confused than ever.

Ah. Oh, dear. Sorry. Forget the “ah.” Do you remember the very first line of this play?

Why . . . yes. Antonio says: “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.” What about it?

Why is he sad? And why doesn’t he know?

I’m playing Portia, not Antonio.

But the play itself is named *The Merchant of Venice*.

Isn’t that Shylock?

No. Shylock is not a merchant; he’s a moneylender. Antonio is the merchant.

So the play’s about him? How?

In the last act, after all the triumphs, what does Portia do to Antonio?

Do to him? I don’t—oh, yes. She welcomes him into her house. Isn’t that simply common civility? Wait! I think I’m catching your drift. It’s important, somehow, that Portia welcomes Antonio.

It takes something, doesn’t it, to welcome your rival into your house?

Her *rival*? Are you saying Antonio and Bassanio were lovers?

There’s nothing in the text to suggest that. But there is a great deal in the text to suggest Antonio loves Bassanio.

Aha! So he’s sad just because his love is unrequited; and perhaps he does not want to admit to himself he is in love with him, which is why he says he does not know why he’s sad. Only a lover would lavish such largesse on that greedy puppy to a degree that is almost embarrassing. He even signs that dire and dreadful bond just so the boy can woo Portia. Ha, again! Bassanio, on his wedding night, leaves Portia untaken and intact, just to be with Antonio. What can she do that would ever equal the sacrifice that Antonio has given him? Bassanio feels both guilt and fondness—are you sure

they're not lovers?—and so he leaves *her* for *him*! Were Antonio to die, her boyish husband would feel forever indebted to his ghost.

That's part of it. You're a little harsh on Bassanio, I think. After all, he does love Portia, and in some ways he loves Antonio. I think you are harsh on him because, in playing Portia, you sense he is perhaps unworthy of you. But tell me what it takes for you, Portia, to greet Antonio, whose life she has saved but who is still her rival, into her house?

What it takes? Courage? Sacrifice? A deeper cunning? I'm not sure, though I feel I *should* be sure.

Let me remind you of something. After Shylock is out-Shylocked by Portia in the court, who is it that urges Bassanio to give the young legal clerk—Portia in disguise—his ring of troth?

Antonio, of course. That's symbolic of the whole play, isn't it? In any contest between the two people he loves, Bassanio is always guided by his friend the merchant, not his young bride. But then, how *could* she welcome Antonio to her home?

Well, you've just shown me how. You tell me. Why does she welcome him?

Because of her love for Bassanio, I assume.

Ah, Perhaps. But think further. She out-Antonio's Antonio, too. Antonio sacrifices both his wealth and his life so Bassanio can marry Portia. Portia also gives her wealth to him, and even welcomes her rival for him. But, it is not a begrudging welcome. No, indeed. The audience doesn't feel that at all. She truly welcomes him because she is transformed.

Yes, but why? How is she transformed?

Take it from Antonio's perspective for a moment. Consider *his* learning. At Belmont he suddenly discovers his savior is *his* rival. He is truly noble in court as he offers his life, telling Bassanio not to grieve at his death, and urging him to be happy with Portia. He means that, and Portia sees he means it. He now discovers it was Portia who saved *his* life. Yet, this discovery cuts both ways: although now he must admit he owes her his life, he also realizes *she* now knows how deeply and maybe darkly he loves her husband. Within seconds of learning this, he is welcomed into her house.

Wow. He must have been overwhelmed with a conflict of emotions. Perhaps he senses that only Portia grasps how he loves Bassanio; but at the same time, he realizes how deep *her* love for Bassanio is, too. But why tell me how to perform Antonio? I'm Portia, remember?

Ah, yes. But you see, those two are mirrors of each other in a way—and not merely because they both love the same boy. They are the two noblest characters: they may be the only ones who understand each other. They are kindred in their nobility of spirit. One suggestion might be this: the play opens with Antonio's confession of his sadness and his ignorance of its base. Perhaps only at the very end does he truly realize *why* he was so sad, and why

he was ignorant. He is now no longer ignorant. Oddly, he, Antonio, is worthy of her, Portia.

I see. So that's why you wanted me to think about Antonio: he mirrors her.

Yes, in part. Let me ask you to take another perspective. What does Bassanio learn, at the end, however dimly?

"Dimly" says it all. Unless he's totally dim—which I don't think is the case—he learns clearly that she, Portia—me!—will forever be the true lord of Belmont. She may say he is the lord, but we all know she is going to continue to be the head of that household.

And how does that make him feel?

I never gave his feeling a thought. But you want me to. That's odd. I'd say: though he may feel a twinge at this slight on his manhood, quite frankly I don't think he cares that much. I hate to say it, but I think he's proud of her.

I'd say you're absolutely right. And now: how does she feel about him?

You're good at this, you know. That's an interesting question. Somehow I feel a parallel: she knows he's lightweight, and perhaps there is a twinge of regret for having a lump of Jell-O for a husband, but quite honestly I don't think she's going to let that resentment get in the way. She still loves him. She put him through a tough test with the ring, and he failed. But she is perhaps surprised that, though she is disappointed by his weakness, her love has not diminished. Indeed, it may even have increased. That's the ultimate triumph, isn't it? She learns, perhaps to her own surprise, that like the candle in the darkness or the music in the silence, her love is not decreased but increased by her discoveries. Her love is like a good deed shining in a naughty world. Even more, their love is like the real king; the substitute of the king is merely the external manifestation of it. That's what true learning is, isn't it? Knowing the real from the appearance. That line is the pivot of the whole passage, and I think I missed it.

So she learns not from Bassanio exactly, but from her loving Bassanio.

And by the mirroring of herself *as* lover in Antonio.

Yes, I think you're right. We spoke of Antonio and Portia mirroring each other; but your favorite passage is not only about mirroring, but about appearance and reality. Bassanio may be weak, but her love is real, and from that reality she learns the truth. The pivotal line is, as you say, the one about a good deed shining in a naughty world. Her discovery of her own joy in loving truly is like the good deed. Here's the point. It doesn't matter if the vast world is naughty: the single good deed *still* shines; indeed it outshines the whole world.

She is *happy* to learn that truth. Portia learns the truth about Bassanio, but in doing so, she learns the greater truth about herself by transforming into a *real* wife, loving truly, regardless of the boy's flaws. Her *love* of Bassanio and not Bassanio is her true teacher. She is transformed by this wisdom, so



that Portia becomes—hah!—Portia becomes truly Portia. She trebles herself twenty times. Ha! I know how to play her, now. When she and Nerissa approach Belmont, she is gently *surprised* by her own *joy*! Yes! What she learns is truth; what leads her to this learning is her real love of Bassanio. In her realization of this truth, she is transformed, she has reached her season and is elated by her transformation; the *taste*, if you will, of that truth, is the seasoning, as salt seasons, in her welcome of Antonio. It's still about learning, but now learning, and even truth itself, mean something entirely different.