

"Life, London, this moment of June..."
--Virginia Woolf

I learned this summer that I'm an unpleasant person to accompany to a museum. I have a tendency to remain at a single exhibit or single piece of art for a prolonged period until I feel that I have fully internalized the material. For example: the Tate Modern in London. I stood in front of Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* for almost an hour, until I had fully explored minute details, attempting to glean meaning from the strangely entrancing beauty of the piece. Many of my peers seem to have a built-in timer that says to them, "you've looked at this piece of art for a while...you've given it the due diligence it deserves for being a 'great' work of art...now it's time to move on." I think this "museum timer" is applicable to many people today, especially those on the Internet or social media. There's an appropriate amount of time to contemplate or review something, and then it's time to move on, whether or not one retains a single aspect of what they just read. After noticing this in England, I began reacting to it by consciously resisting my aversion to extended concentration and instead focusing intently whenever possible. I tried to retain and learn wherever possible, from the lethal throwing discs (*chakram*) in the Pitt Rivers Museum to the tiny replicas of workshops in Egyptian tombs in the Ashmolean Museum.

While my museum behavior isn't conducive for the progression through a massive museum like the Tate, the National Gallery, or the Ashmolean (in Oxford), I think it represents a microcosm of how I learn. While I enjoy taking a holistic approach to learning, I am best suited to focusing and fully exploring a single facet of the material. I would rather leave the museum with an intense knowledge of a few works instead of a superficial understanding of many works. Indeed, I discovered on this trip that "close readings" provide me with a fulfilling

understanding of the work that I would not otherwise get. My review of *Titus Andronicus*, which I read to the class, was comprehensive and solidly constructed. However, I was ultimately disappointed with its blandness; it was complete but not novel. Only through close readings and honed focus can I arrive upon the novel concepts that make me truly proud of my work. My next review was far more specific, forsaking an unnecessarily exhaustive overview for a full examination of a few aspects of the production.

While the museum visits were fascinating (and free), they were an ancillary activity to the ten productions that we attended. From *Hamlet* performed from the set of a modern Liverpool jail to a gruesome performance of *Titus Andronicus* in the Globe Theatre that induced over a number of audience members to swoon as a result of the portrayal of brutal sexual assault, we received a thought-provoking Shakespearean theatre experience. While there were 'conventional' productions intermixed (such as *1 & 2 Henry IV* in Stratford-upon-Avon), I especially enjoyed a dynamic production of *Richard III* outside the St. Paul's Church in Covent Garden. In the production, the audience moved at least five times to different locations all around the churchyard, ultimately culminating inside the church for the final scene in which the creaking of the antique wooden pews echoed around the ancient church in a way that made the audience believe for a moment that they were actually in 15th century England. The movement of the audience, while occasionally bothersome, was ultimately a brilliant touch, as the audience became so anxious to see the conclusion of the play that they were practically running to the last location, barely avoiding the actor moaning and bleeding from his wounds at the Battle of Bosworth Field.

I was able, and blessed, to be able to travel outside of the program itself. Alongside Σ'16 David Kagan, I visited both Edinburgh and Dublin. Although a slight snag at the beginning of the trip Ireland applied a slight damper to the trip (apparently, a passport is an important

document to remember when traveling abroad), I was able to recover and especially enjoyed visiting the WB Yeats exhibit. The exhibit commences in a dark room with the words of WB Yeats' poems displayed on the wall as famous authors narrated them. This room was a nice touch as, while I have studied Yeats prior to this trip, many people have not read his work extensively and this room made him more readily accessible. We also toured the Irish Writers Museum, which emphasized the fact that many of the genius writers in the English language are Irish. Simply viewing the streets that inspired Joyce and Wilde provided substantial insight. The edginess of their work became not unreasonable, as we watched a bike violently torn off a bike rack only fifty feet ahead of our group.

Oxford, on the other hand, was immaculately groomed and perfectly safe (assuming one doesn't suffer from claustrophobia as a result of the swarms of tourists during the daytime). The green space surrounding the town was remarkable; I utilized it extensively for exercise and contemplation. I was able to go in a different direction away from the city and see a different vista each day. One of my expeditions was particularly unconventional. Having read that J.R.R. Tolkien was inspired for his fictional town "Bree" by the real town Brill in Oxfordshire, I decided to make a *Lord of the Rings*-inspired pilgrimage to Brill. I departed at 3:00 PM (a mistake) and set off on the 13-mile trek to the hamlet. After wandering through the ancient "rights of way," which are barely marked (I was walking through backyards for at least a third of the trip), I finally finished the journey via the road, arriving in an area that looked eerily like the Shire at approximately 7:00 PM. After drinking a gin & tonic at The Pheasant, the local pub, I realized suddenly that I would be returning on unlit one-lane roads for quite some distance if I didn't move quickly. I put on my backpack, set off at a jog, and proceeded to run all the way back to Oxford without incident, though I was somewhat fatigued at the end of the trip. While the trip was perhaps ill advised, I enjoyed immensely the proximity of everything in England. I

could walk 26 miles from South Atlanta and barely make it to Midtown. In Scotland, I was able to bike from Edinburgh down to Rosslyn Chapel, the Chapel made famous by the book *The DaVinci Code*. I am particularly well versed in the lore of Rosslyn after a Brother led me to believe during pledging that Rosslyn was intimately connected with certain secret functions of the Lodge. The trip was fascinating, but moreover the surrounding Scottish landscape was absolutely sublime. Although I still haven't figured out how to get around a round-a-bout on a bike, I enjoyed how much of the United Kingdom that I could see simply with a bicycle.

The ongoing dispute that I have with certain Brothers (mainly business majors) over the value of 'soft skills' (such as the ability to read critically) versus 'hard skills' (such as the ability to crunch numbers) was immediately put to the test upon my return to the Lodge. We faced a 'Bylaws crisis' during a rush meeting which led to a Brother declaring that he must drop his hold because he "is a constitutional literalist" and couldn't violate the word of the bylaws, regardless of their intent. The #1, #2, and myself (#3) are now delving into the text of the bylaws to eliminate inconsistencies and codify some of our current practices. Many of the skills that I developed in England have come into immediate use, in a far more tangible way than I expected. Additionally, I continue to attempt to set a high standard for communication, whether via email, comments in meetings, or simply discussions in the dining room. I think I previously underestimated the value of an upperclassman expressing himself with eloquence; I had forgotten how highly I regarded what I viewed as impossibly brilliance from the seniors when I pledged. I hope that my pledge to engage in elevated—as a rushee said in Formal Rush—"repertoire" with my fellow Brothers. My current vendetta, albeit somewhat menial, is against the phrase "very unique," as something cannot be shades of 'unique'; it is completely novel or it isn't. Finally, I recently signed on with Professor Armitage, my faculty advisor in England, to

work on a Senior Honors Thesis on WWI poets, specifically highlighting the poets and their role as propagandists for the UK government.

I read *Mrs. Dalloway* after I returned from England. Virginia Woolf's novel, which is set over the course of one day in the West End of London, follows various characters as they stroll through the London streets. As they walked, I paced alongside them in my head, smoothly placing myself amongst the city crowds and bustling streets. As Peter Walsh turned onto Clerkenwell Road, I mentally followed him on our daily walk to school at the Winston House. Reading the book made an irrefutable point: only physically have I departed England. A piece of my consciousness is still in London, and it takes only a slight cue for me to return to the places where I lived this summer, to hear vividly the "leaden circles dissolving in the air" as Big Ben peals at the top of the hour.