

and edutainment. Then there is our *null* curriculum of disintegrity. Through Gen Ed we impose what some candidly used to call “scattering requirements,” but there is a noticeable void where we might expect to see some corresponding set of integration requirements. We teach students to debunk, largely leaving them on their own to rebuild a livable system of beliefs.⁸⁸

This is not to say that we are unconcerned with general education. To the contrary, we are quite wrapped up in the idea. Who can blame us, when the images are so lifelike? We see a leafy quad. A student is heading to class. With a volume of poetry under her arm, she ducks under a Frisbee and navigates around two classmates arguing over string theory. The education of the whole person is alive and well . . . in the matrix. I do not claim to offer a red pill; but I think there are enough glitches to reveal that formative education is very far from the real business of the contemporary university.⁸⁹ What I am suggesting is that holistic rhetoric and Gen Ed requirements fit perfectly Louis Althusser’s famous definition of ideology as the discursive structures and material practices that mediate “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”⁹⁰

In search of a genuinely formative alternative, we looked for the road to Black Mountain. Navigating between nostalgia and dismissiveness, we discovered a college whose small size and short life represented not failures of marketing and management but a commitment to the rare ideals of self-cultivation and mutual recognition, natality and wide-awakeness. Now that we have found our way there, let’s take our time and look around. How did the culture and community of BMC support students and faculty to encounter, understand, cultivate, and enact themselves? What familiar pedagogical forms had to be reanimated and transformed in this formative quest? We will begin on the porch of Lee Hall, looking in on an unusual form of student orientation.

AN ALLEGORY OF ARRIVAL

Of this very thing, then, there would be a craft—namely of this turning around.
—Plato⁹¹

At the center of Black Mountain’s first, Blue Ridge, campus stands Lee Hall, whose broad front façade faces north, offering an exquisite view of the Craggy Mountains.⁹² With a nod to the Parthenon, the building is

fronted by a grand porch, with steps leading up to an “octastyle portico rising the full three-story height of the building and carried by massive, smooth-surfaced columns with simplified Doric capitals.”⁹³ It was here that early BMC student Doughten Cramer first met with his faculty advisor, John Rice. Duberman’s restaging is worth quoting in full:

On a lovely, warm fall morning he and Rice sat in green rocking chairs on the porch of Lee Hall, Rice basking in the sun and the beauty of the view, Cramer nervously wondering what was expected of him. Rice’s opening remark startled him: “You are now entering college for the first time. You have a whole new world before you. What are you interested in studying?” Cramer didn’t know what to answer: “Interest had never decided my choice,” he later recalled, “but I remembered that I had enjoyed history in school so I stuttered out, ‘W-well, history is sort of fun.’”

“What phase of history do you like?”, Rice asked.

Cramer was again at a loss; he’d never given the matter much thought before. Suddenly he had an inspiration: the Depression then at its height had considerably affected his own life, so he answered, “I want to know what caused the Depression and how future depressions can be prevented.”

Rice laughed—perhaps because it pleased him to see again how easy it was to start the process of self-propulsion in education, but perhaps, too, out of amusement at the contrast between the grand designs of the young and the limited resources of the community; “You’ve given the college a large order!” was all he said.

After some discussion, they decided that Cramer should take Lounsbury’s course on American history and study economics with Helen Boyden, whose Vassar and Radcliffe training had also included history.⁹⁴

I appreciate that Duberman takes time to set the scene. The porch, the rocking chairs, the warm fall morning, the beautiful view: these are far from extraneous details. Cramer is looking out upon the mountains that would become central to his experience at BMC. In another reminiscence describing a single long hike, Cramer begins:

The College’s setting was extraordinarily important to me. The mountains of western North Carolina are beautiful beyond description, and it is as if the atmosphere of the College was consciously a part of the living beauty. It made one sensitive to everything.⁹⁵

Obviously, Cramer is not there yet. This is an anxious first meeting, colored by uncertainty about Rice, the college, his studies, and himself; but

the invitation is on offer. He is given a glimpse of *skholé*, of college as, in Michael Oakeshott's phrase, "the gift of an interval."⁹⁶

I cannot help but recall the very different scene of my first advisement meeting as a freshman at Yale College in the mid-eighties. Having been assigned at random to an astronomy professor, I hiked up Science Hill and sat down in what I remember as an office so crowded that its occupant had to shove books and papers aside to clear a little room on his desk to sign the form approving my selection of classes. I hope I am misremembering, but I don't recall him looking up even once while asking me a couple of quick questions and signing off. The point of advisement is not only to meet with a mentor but thereby to arrange a meeting with yourself. But which version of yourself will you encounter: *Homo sapiens* or *Homo bureaucraticus*, treating life as a things-to-do list and oneself as a checker of boxes? Here is a meeting to shape your curriculum and thereby, not to put too fine a point on it, to shape yourself. It is bad enough if your advisor is not really present; it is absurd if you are not. To modern ears, this sounds like an exaggeration. To the ancients, it was an obvious first principle of education. It is only under conditions of *skholé*, temporarily unhitching yourself from the yoke of necessity, that you can get a look at what you are working with.

The scene on the porch at Black Mountain couldn't be further from my experience on Science Hill. Cramer does not have to interrupt Rice, who joins him on the porch for this very purpose. Far from being harried and distracted, Rice is "basking in the sun." He is relaxed and attentive, ready to be occupied by a conversation with its own logic, but not at all preoccupied. I am sure that the historical resonances of this setting were not lost on the classicist, Rice. It is thought that porticoes surrounded the central courtyard of Aristotle's Lyceum, and Stoic philosophy is named for the Stoa Poikile, the "Painted Porch" where Zeno of Citium taught.⁹⁷ The BMC porch faced the Craggies, not the agora, but this idea of a space simultaneously open and sheltered has roots dating back to the third century BCE, if not earlier. Indeed, the movement of the rocking chairs evokes the famous pacing at the Lyceum. To our ears, it sounds strange to speak of a Peripatetic School of philosophy. The fixed seating of the modern school bespeaks a deeper fixity, as passive pupils are fed predigested ideas.⁹⁸ In a tour de force of branding, this strange new institution associated itself with the idea of *skholé* while twisting its meaning a full 180 degrees.⁹⁹ Finding themselves in an institution premised on compulsion, schoolchildren would find it

darkly ironic to learn that the root of the word “school” meant the chance to encounter and cultivate your own freedom.

In his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, the modern peripatetic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, highlights just this distinctive rhythm of attentive openness, this mode of being richly occupied once we are no longer pre-occupied. As if describing Cramer and Rice in their rocking chairs, Rousseau writes that “the heart must be at peace . . . the person in question . . . suitably disposed. . . . There must be neither a total calm nor too much movement, but a steady and moderate motion, with no jolts or breaks.”¹⁰⁰ Rousseau’s phenomenology of reverie and its rhythm of attentiveness adds depth to our understanding of *skholé*. When we are driven by necessity, harassed by memories, distracted by plans, irritated by wants (that are inflamed by insecurity, envy, and fantasy, not to mention an entire political-economic system predicated on perpetual dissatisfaction), we are not truly or at least not fully ourselves. *Skholé* offers not only the abstract reminder that we are capable of freedom, but a reconnection with the elemental experience Rousseau called “*le sentiment de l’existence*.” Though our instinct for self-preservation often shows up as reactive desperation or greedy acquisition, at its core is an unmediated form of self-affirmation, a pleasurable recognition of “the plenitude of life” within and around us.¹⁰¹ In these happy moments, we rediscover our equilibrium: the work is done, my flaws will wait, the day is perfect, listen to my dog who has known all along what is important. It is in such a state, Rousseau suggests, that “the soul can find a resting-place secure enough to establish itself and concentrate its entire being there, with no need to remember the past or reach into the future.”¹⁰²

On this “lovely, warm fall morning,” in “his green rocking chair,” Cramer is invited to re-collect himself, but note that “concentrated” does not mean closed in. The dialogue with Rice is meant precisely to draw him out, the vista serving as a resonant reminder of open possibilities. “What interests you?” The question is so simple and so fundamental that it is embarrassing how often we forget to ask it. Apparently, Rice was the first educator ever to ask Cramer this basic question. At first Cramer is shy. He draws a blank. But before long he identifies a source of pleasure in his past studies (history) and one nexus of concern in his present life (how to avert the next great depression).

To call this an experimental form of advisement misses the point. This is not a pilot program in “open-air office hours” but a way of breaking

through the crust of convention around advisement; not an alternative to choosing a major, but a reminder of what that should mean. We see the beginning of the process of Rice getting to know Cramer, inviting him to articulate how he conceives of himself in relation to the world, and starting to suggest resources for complicating and enriching that understanding. What this vignette reveals is that the phrase “new student orientation” conceals a crucial distinction. While instruction may be propelled by carrots and sticks, liberal learning must begin with an invitation, with an address to the learner’s freedom. Formative education cannot get under way without at least a glimpse of *skholé*, without a reminder that we are more than, other than, a hamster in a wheel. Of course, students moving to a new scene of instruction need welcoming events introducing campus places and policies. However, it is precisely the inveterate student in us that needs a redirection of attention, from seeing ourselves as acquirers of information, earners of credits, and competitors for credentials to recognizing ourselves as searchers, as learners. As we pursue the higher learning, it is not orientation we need so much as reorientation, and this requires not a single event but an ongoing effort. Indeed, in the epigraph from the *Republic*, Plato’s famously asserts that teaching itself is this *techné tes periagogés*, an art (craft, discipline) of reorientation. However, in the same passage in which he allows for the possibility of *metastrephein* (soul-turning, conversion) (518D5), he stresses the inevitability of *apostrephein* (reversion) (515e2). The idea that you may be looking in the wrong direction or missing the big picture ought to be woven, as Cramer remarks, into the very “atmosphere” of the college, turning the Craggies for him into a constant reminder that there are always unexplored trails and surprising vantage points.

* * *

In general, the effort of Black Mountain College is to produce individuals rather than individualists. . . . The first step in the process is to make the student aware of himself and his capacities; in other words “to know himself.”
—John Andrew Rice¹⁰³

How can man know himself? He is a dark and veiled thing; and whereas the hare has seven skins, man could skin himself seventy-times-seven times and still not say, “This now is you yourself, this is no longer skin.” Besides, it is an agonizing, dangerous enterprise to dig down into yourself.
—Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁰⁴

The view from the porch nicely evokes the promise, preserved in the etymology of the word, that *education* might mean something other than being instructed, equipped, sorted, and credentialed, that our lives may testify to a deeper process of *being led out*.¹⁰⁵ However, it is now high time to hit the trails, trading the grand mountain vista for the actual twists and turns of the formative hike. To leave the story here would be to add yet another installment of that popular genre, educational kitsch.¹⁰⁶ Here is the ending of that screenplay:

EXT. LEE HALL—DAY

MUSIC CUE: Copland's *Appalachian Spring*

As the music begins to swell, the camera pulls back from the porch to reveal the morning mist rising from the blue ridge mountains . . .

Roll CREDITS.

I do not mean to impugn Duberman's recounting of Cramer's meeting with Rice. On the whole, Duberman is an admirably sober and circumspect narrator. If anything, he is drawn to difficulty, alternately highlighting the struggles of the college and his own struggles in coming to grips with its history. He is no friend of kitsch, with its simplified and sweetened version of reality. However, I do detect one misty-eyed moment in Duberman's recounting of this open-air orientation, namely when he speculates that Rice was pleased "to see again how easy it was to start the process of self-propulsion in education."¹⁰⁷ True, he is talking only about the ease of *starting* the process, but even this rings false for the simple reason that Rice himself describes the early stages of formative education as particularly challenging for student and teacher alike.¹⁰⁸

Self-knowledge, described by Rice in the epigraph above as the "first step in the process," is difficult enough. And clearly this is a priority in a self-driven process of holistic formation. How can you root learning in your concerns if you don't yet know what moves you? How can you cultivate and integrate the varied parts of yourself if you don't yet know what you are made of? Interestingly, though, it is Rice himself who gives us reason to question whether this is truly the first step, suggesting that self-knowledge depends on a prior process. Before the self can be known, Rice posits, it must be surfaced. On Cramer's recollection, Rice's opening words were, "You are now entering college for the first time." If this is

how it went, then Rice must have been relishing the paradox, since he held the view that students typically enter college for the first time . . . twice. Checking in at fall registration is what Rice calls the student's "superficial self"; the student's "real self" typically lags behind.¹⁰⁹

At first glance this sounds like a view—contrasting the true self and the masked player of social roles—that was debunked a philosophical generation ago.¹¹⁰ However, Rice is not saying that we have a true self prior to all socialization, or that authenticity is to be defined in opposition to social roles. In fact, Rice stresses how at Black Mountain "the whole community becomes [the] teacher," because "the individual, to be complete, must be aware of his relation to others."¹¹¹ Even if we reject the idea of an asocial, atomistic self, there is intuitive appeal to Rice's rough and ready distinction between a true and false self. That we form and understand ourselves through "webs of interlocution," to adopt Charles Taylor's formulation, does nothing to gainsay the facts that communal life can be damaging—Rice offers the example of the "intrusions of the desiccated schoolteacher"—that traveling across social borders can be confusing, and that we all hide and posture to various degrees and in various ways.¹¹²

It is from such elemental experiences that Rice crafts his believable if simplified allegory of the doubled self:

The immigrant into the world outside the home, in spite of the foretaste through public schooling, finds himself among strangers. . . . He then carries forward what he may have begun as a protective device . . . a superficial self to present to the world in lieu of reality.¹¹³

This means that the student arrives on campus in a heightened state of ambivalence about whether this superficial self should and even could be dismantled. On the one hand, the student has invested considerable time and effort into this façade, which has been "elaborately decorated" and given the "most tender care" (632). In a twisted form of self-esteem, one takes pride not in who one is but in one's handiwork in fashioning a disguise. It may well be that a student's "best thoughts and abilities have gone into its making" (630). "By the time he gets to college," Rice quips, "this superficial self is often a work of art" (630). The student has reached the point where it is difficult to say where the superficial self ends and the real one begins. On the other hand, behind this "carefully designed mask . . . lives

the real [person], growing increasingly chaotic, miserable, and unhappy” (632). From this, Rice draws an obvious but untimely conclusion: the ambivalence about the affordances of this protective shell will bleed into an ambivalence toward the formative opportunities of college itself. The undergraduate arrives at once “longing for his deliverer [and] . . . ready to receive him as an enemy” (632).

If the word “enemy” sounds jarring, this may stem from our unfortunate tendency to try to match the tone of educational writing to its subject matter as if, because we often write about the young (who are assumed to be sweet and innocent), we must write about education as if it were an entirely pleasant and wholesome process. In discussing a theory such as Rice’s, one feels the need to add a content warning: *this essay acknowledges the existence of intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict*. While we love to brand programs and institutions with the term “transformative,” we hate to admit that there are no transformations without conflict, struggle, and pain. Perhaps it is because education has been conscripted into the role of sustaining social hope that we tend to prefer Kodachrome images of teaching and learning, since, as one of our contemporary bards has observed,

They give us those nice bright colors
They give us the greens of summers
Makes you think all the world’s a sunny day, oh yeah.¹¹⁴

In formative education, alas, storms are all too common. As Nietzsche remarks in the epigraph, “it is an agonizing, dangerous enterprise to dig down into yourself.” This is why I suggested that isolating the interaction on the porch makes it into kitsch. Rocking chairs and friendly words notwithstanding, Rice himself held the view that college inevitably begins with a crucible, an active and uncertain struggle to disarm defenses and surface the self.¹¹⁵ For Rice, the student’s disunity entails a double task for the teacher, to serve as both ally and antagonist:

The task of the college is to be [the student’s] enemy-friend: the bitter enemy of the superficial self, the friend of the real self. But the real one is starved, emaciated. It must be fed back to life, while the superficial one must be attacked without mercy.¹¹⁶

But is this a wise approach? Don't learners need scaffolding, support, safety, care? And even if it were pedagogically sound, is such mercilessness morally justifiable?

In only its third year, faculty and students confronted these questions, and each other, in a discussion that Duberman calls "enormously impressive."¹¹⁷ In the fall of 1935, at the end of his two-and-a-half month stay at BMC, Louis Adamic read a full draft of the Harper's article that would soon put the college on the map. This sparked a heated debate "that went on late into the night and continued for weeks—over meals, in studies, in the privacy of letters and diaries." (119). Part of what rankled the community was Adamic's portrayal of Rice as "top dog and Savior" (116). Some thought Rice's role had been overstated; others thought it all too accurate, with Rice preaching "the danger of a one-man college" while refusing to "see his power diluted" (117). There was also a feeling that Adamic had cast the college and its confrontational methods in too rosy a light. Here is Adamic on what Rice and others had come to call "group influence": "The BMC community . . . psychologically strips the individual, and there he stands revealed to everyone, including himself—and finally likes it."¹¹⁸ Part of what impressed Duberman is how thoughtful and outspoken the students were in response. John Evarts challenged the idea that these public decortications were truly pedagogically motivated and done without malice. George Hendrickson pointed out that direct confrontation "sometimes only stiffened [a person's] defenses."¹¹⁹ Then a student named George Barber really started laying into Rice, accusing him of not being able to "sense the delicate moment of when to stop," leaving a student feeling "hammered down" (117). In a comment that would become a commonplace, Rice's junior colleague, Robert Goldenson, simultaneously managed to back the students, acknowledge Rice's dialectical prowess, and reinforce Rice as "top dog and Savior": "We have a rough Socrates here . . . perhaps we need a little Jesus" (118).

To Rice's credit, he stayed in a non-defensive, listening posture throughout the meeting. When he finally spoke, he readily acknowledged his failings, praised Barber for speaking up, and urged more members of the community to share that burden: "You should make yourself into little anti-Rices," "stand up and fight," "sit on my shortcomings," and "deflate my power."¹²⁰ It is also true that many of Rice's former students, including some who felt very stung by him, credit him as "an inspiration," as

teaching them “to question everything,” as “an understanding and empathetic human being with genuine respect for students,” as “the first person who started me really using my mind,” as an internal dialogue partner for “many years,” as “‘the most profound influence’ on their lives.”¹²¹ It seems that Rice truly had a gift for Socratic dialogue and formative conversation. It seems equally clear that he was a man with a mean streak whose dialectics could devolve into simple put downs.

To my mind, none of this invalidates Rice’s agonistic account of transformative learning. Adamic returned to Black Mountain several times over the next two years, finding the college “already much changed.”¹²² In particular, Adamic found that the debate sparked by his article had helped the college more carefully draw the line between being a ruthless friend of someone’s best self and being careless, tone deaf, or just plain cruel.¹²³ If agonistic pedagogy forces one to be especially attuned to the potential of educational harms, this is a good thing. Cruelties still occur in the pedagogy of sweetness and light, including the violence of aiding and abetting our tendency to disavow the unhandsome aspects of our condition. In my view, Rice’s account—if not always his personal practice—is realistic, balanced, and humane.

Notice, first, the dual nature of Rice’s approach: even as one whittles away at the superficial self, one is feeding the dormant one. In his time at BMC, Adamic observed five main ingredients in this diet for the real self: freedom, candor, good will, interpellation, and humor. Let us consider each in turn:

Freedom. When Adamic describes “the freedom of the place,” I take him to refer to that found in any residential college, amplified by the unconventionality and experimental ethos of Black Mountain.¹²⁴ Arriving in a new community offers a freedom to be more than, other than you were. Instead of the expectation to fill an accustomed role, you are greeted by an open-ended interest in who you are and will be. This is an elixir for the dormant parts of yourself.

Candor. Adamic muses that there is probably more candor “on that mountainside than anywhere else in the United States.” There was an imperative to speak your mind and walk the talk. This led to candid feedback that exposed and deflated the superficial self. Here, Adamic is pointing out that, while “discomfiting at times,” BMC also offered you glimpses of authenticity that nourished the real self.

Good Will. This is a crucial counterpart to candor. While discourse at Black Mountain was direct, even confrontational, Adamic found “most of the talk . . . free of malice or pettiness.” Though everyone’s views are subject to challenge, “no one ever goes completely without a champion.” Encountering in others this “desire to help,” Adamic concluded, convinces BMC students that “a great mass of literature notwithstanding, humanity is basically a decent breed.”

Positive Interpellation. Interpellation is my term, not Adamic’s. It refers to the structures of expectation built into modes of address. Every hail from an interlocutor contains a text (what is said) and a subtext (the picture of you implied by how that text is framed in order to reach you). It is just such a structure of expectation that Adamic identifies as a catalyst that can help surface the self, observing how BMC students are “constantly invited verbally and by implication, to be intelligent, to mature, which is slightly annoying but also rather flattering and pleasant.”

Humor. Important as each of these elements is, Adamic considers humor “the most important part of the diet for the ‘real self.’” Neither positive interpellations nor the atmosphere of good will eliminate the embarrassment of awkwardly climbing out of your chrysalis in full view. This, I take it, is the reason why Adamic stresses how “young students learn to laugh at themselves” at Black Mountain, adding that “Rice’s own talent for laughter helps them in this.”

In the Kodachrome picture of education, this nourishing of the real self is all that is needed. Just add soil, water, and sunlight, and the student will blossom. But even a quick look at these elements reveals their shadow sides. We really do care about authenticity . . . and we feel the need to hide. We do want the freedom to renegotiate the terms of our identity . . . and we suffer from Frommian “fear of freedom” and Sartrean “bad faith,” acting as if our nature or past (our “facticity”) definitively answered the question of who we are.¹²⁵ Yes, we have good will and a desire to help . . . and we are prone to envy and schadenfreude. Truly, it is wonderful when we are able to own our limitations and trust others, turning what could be a laughing at into a laughing with . . . and we can struggle to find that trust and that distance from ourselves, experiencing the laughter of others as humiliating.¹²⁶ When we acknowledge such shadows, formative education becomes more fraught.

Thus, while Rice does seem to have sometimes lapsed into actual cruelty, we can read his violent language (confronting in the superficial self a

“bitter enemy” which must be “starved, emaciated,” and “attacked without mercy”) as an attempt to jolt us out of our tendency to romanticize the scene of instruction. On the romantic view, learners want only to find and actualize their true selves. In reality, Rice suggests, we encounter surprising cross-currents in the soul—active forces clouding self-awareness and subverting self-cultivation and self-enactment—whose sediments accrete over time into this stubborn shell-self.

We have considered the ingredients of the diet for the real self. What at BMC contributed to this chipping away of the shell-self? Though it may sound too vague to be satisfying, the most accurate answer is everything. The curriculum was just this: daily life in a close-knit community that prizes authenticity and errs on the side of the blunt and confrontational. We touched on this idea earlier in our discussion of scale, noting Duberman’s observation that BMC’s small size created an environment in which “individual lifestyles, in all their peculiar detail, could thereby be observed, challenged, imitated, rejected—which is, after all, how most learning proceeds, rather than through formal instruction.”¹²⁷ I was then stressing the positive aspects of this experience, how it speaks to our basic need for recognition. But I never meant to suggest that self-confrontation was a walk in the park. To his credit, Rice readily acknowledges the intense demands of this life-wide curriculum of candor. When one student complained that “it’s like living in a goldfish bowl,” Rice replied, “Hell . . . a goldfish bowl is a monastery compared to this place!” I think Rice would approve of my pairing (as epigraphs) his claim that education entails searching for self-knowledge with Nietzsche’s that the search is “agonizing.”

On Adamic’s retelling, the idea of “group influence” arose out of necessity:

The original Black Mountain group . . . abruptly found themselves in extremely tight quarters and had to get along *on a basis of freedom*, not only as students and teachers, but as persons. . . . They had to rub the individualistic corners off one another’s characters.¹²⁸

What began as a communal necessity grew into an intentional educational ideal, giving the idea of well-roundedness a literal inflection. And it appears that “group influence” is a bit of a euphemism, given that what they had in mind was sanding the self. Life at Black Mountain was arranged as a steady siege on the fortifications of the false self.

That such a process should be life-wide should not surprise us. What would be strange is scheduling such personal change on Tuesdays and Thursdays from

1:30 to 2:45: *in this 3-credit course you will outgrow pretense and defensiveness to achieve self-knowledge.* It is only when we misunderstand ignorance as simple lack that we imagine that it can be dealt with in spurts: open up the tap here for a couple of hours; then head down to the next filling station. Once we acknowledge that ignorance is an active process—do we protect anything more fiercely than our illusions?—it is clear that transformative learning must be constantly reinforced from all angles.

To fully grasp this point, we need to get past familiar slogans about living and learning and overly tidy distinctions between formal and informal education. The formal/informal distinction itself blurs together several distinctions, each a bit fuzzy in its own right: Does the learning occur in or beyond the classroom? Is there a person in the situation understood to be the teacher? Is it intentional or accidental? Are we learning through direct contact with the phenomena or through representations (e.g., lectures and textbooks)? Sometimes these distinctions line up, as when a middle school social studies teacher delivers a lecture to teach students about the three branches of government. Or we can imagine a related “lesson” that is nonetheless teacherless, non-classroom-based, unintended, and directly experiential, as when an adult lives through a series of disastrous Supreme Court decisions leading to a political awakening and deep skepticism toward the ideas of legal reasoning, judicial independence, and the separation of powers. At the same time, it is not hard to see how these distinctions can get messy, individually and collectively:

- A resolves to hike every day to form a deeper connection to nature. (Here intentionality pairs with out-of-class, teacherless, direct learning.)
- B hears a poem about Stonewall read aloud and is moved. (Is this direct or mediated?)
- Going to the library to pull a book for class, C finds a different book, inspiring a change in major and career plans. (Here we find learning in a classroom-adjacent but still scholastic space, one in which the student was put in the way of an accidental, self-directed discovery by a teacher’s intentional curriculum.)

Thus, we must be careful not to misunderstand this idea of “group influence,” as if it were a matter of complementing intentional, teacher-led, academic learning with chance interactions among peers. At Black Mountain, students engaged with teachers in a wide range of settings beyond the

classroom. And classes at BMC were themselves often set up to focus and intensify this group process.

Take theater, for example. As theater director Bob Wunsch explained to Adamic, “Our dramatics is tied up with ‘group influence.’”¹²⁹ Wunsch elaborates, echoing Rice’s emphasis on self-knowledge and the superficial self:

We believe it is vitally important that a student knows what sort of person he actually is, what kind of fictitious self he has built up around that actual self, and what the social group in which he moves thinks of those actual and fictitious selves.¹³⁰

Rice imagines life at BMC as a steady invitation to compare lifestyle and character. But this sort of personal comparison can be both too diffuse and too close to home. Drama simultaneously sharpens the outlines of character and offers some distance from the existential stakes of such comparisons. Thus drama becomes the formative art of recasting. While Wunsch would sometimes cast students against type to help them “identify with the aspirations, problems, and experience of people unlike themselves,” he also employed the daring strategy of casting according to type.¹³¹ “Our method,” Wunsch explains,

is to cast, for instance, an arrogant person in an arrogant rôle, in which his own arrogance stands out even more clearly than otherwise, so that not only the audience, which is the community, sees it, but he himself. We try to find rôles for boors, for the autocratically and over-egoistically inclined, for rich boys and girls whose main prop is their wealth . . . so that the place sees them, and they see themselves, in all the glory of their outstanding characteristics: which almost invariably leads to corrective processes within persons.¹³²

If crossing the wires, as it were, may generate a current of empathy, plugging them right into their matching sockets can really throw off sparks.

Within this fishbowl of a college, the stage served to structure and intensify the dynamics of recognition. Drama distills, out of the confusing flow of life, distillates of character, intention, and action. At the same time, it finds the play in the joints of the structures of our stuckness. Candor, recognition, community: in theater, each of these plays its double role as support for the nascent self and siege on the superficial self. Thus, we have begun to get a feel for Rice’s theory of our layered nature and for the two-pronged pedagogy needed to surface the self. We turn now to an extended example to flesh out this allegory of arrival.

★ ★ ★

Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. . . . This beginning is not the . . . beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself.

—Hannah Arendt¹³³

Quotes about the lasting influence of teachers are stock and trade. Less often observed is that influence is negotiated. Only a dialectical formulation captures its complexity: even while it is true that (1) what reads as exemplary and works as an influence is shaped by who we are and what we care about; it is also the case that (2) who we are and what we care about is shaped by our influences.¹³⁴ This helps to explain the curious sensation that certain books were written just for us or that one day we will find our true teacher. For Michael Rumaker, a student during BMC's final years, this was not John Rice but Charles Olson. Nonetheless, Rumaker's memoir, *Black Mountain Days*, offers a rich illustration of how the quest to surface the self was catalyzed and supported by the college's atmosphere of candor and confrontation, its fusion of the aesthetic and the existential, its refusal of the distinction between the formal and the informal, its belief that both professors and fellow students play crucial educational roles, and its embrace of an agonistic, transformative pedagogy.

We pick up his story with an experience that illustrates BMC's culture of candor. Rumaker recalls how "outside the kitchen back door one day after lunch," one of his classmates who was interested in photography, Virginia, took a picture of him.¹³⁵ Though the photograph was unexceptional, Rumaker launched into one of his trademark riffs of appreciative exegesis. Virginia's response pulled him up short:

I went burbling on about something or another, as I usually did, full of beans and nervous energy. Virginia, visibly unimpressed, as she calmly peered through her baby-blue rimmed glasses winding her film forward, said, in her slow, baby-talk voice, "You exaggerate everything."

That shut me up. It offended me at first but then when I thought about it later in my study, it made sense.¹³⁶

The lesson Rumaker took away from this was not the simple one that it is good to be measured and bad to exaggerate. This casual, everyday intervention from a classmate tapped into a root concern of Rumaker's, one that would later blossom in his dialogues with Charles Olson. As it turned

out, Rumaker's problem was not his conversational effusiveness but rather his writerly abstemiousness. Yes, truth was the key concern but, as Olson would later help him to see, "The lie of the imagination creates the truth of reality."¹³⁷

The relationship Rumaker forged with Olson (and, through Olson, with himself) illustrates well Rice's allegory of the struggle to surface. Rumaker was drawn to visit Black Mountain by reports of the college's radical ways, but it was his encounter with Olson that led him to stay. This was not the ordinary prospective student visit with a student tour guide. Received by Olson himself, Rumaker was struck by his attentiveness and his "curiosity and enthusiasms sprawling and darting over enormously wide fields."¹³⁸ "He was," Rumaker ventured, "the first *total* person I had ever glimpsed" (20). Olson asked Rumaker, who was an aspiring writer, to share some of his work, and then proceeded to review it on the spot. Paging quickly through some weak poems (Rumaker describes them as "moonstruck adolescent yearnings," dull in rhyme and meter, amounting to "watered-down Keats or Shelly"), Olson then zeroed in on a promising short story. While Rumaker suspects that the story was also "badly written," Olson "detected the earnestness beneath the clumsy attempt, a hint, anyway, of a possible ability" (31). (This is what we called above a positive interpellation.) When Olson encouraged Rumaker to apply, Rumaker jumped at the chance, sensing that "maybe here I could finally learn to write; equally as important, maybe here I could find a place to be" (25).

Thus began a four-year mentorship, at once writerly and existential, one that included the agonistic dimension predicted by Rice. The feedback on his work, from Olson and other students in the writing workshop, was "unsparingly and brutally direct" (127). And, for a while, it appeared that Rumaker was making no progress. Growing increasingly frustrated with his student, Olson confronted Rumaker one afternoon during his sophomore year (151–152). Like a Zen master seizing the moment to deliver a well-timed verbal blow to an adept's preconceptions, Olson suddenly accused Rumaker of a "fearful solipsism," of writing in a cocoon of his own ego, of failing to "move out" and connect with others. The irony was that even as Rumaker was too self-referential (this is a polite translation of the shockingly graphic phrase Olson himself used), he was also prone to ignore his own experience and write forced prose delivering "social messages" (420). Rumaker was failing to make contact either with his own experience or with others. Finally, when Rumaker shared an "amusing" story about a

devious landlady, Olson had had enough. “He tore the story to shreds,” Rumaker remembers, seeing it as “a rehash of a rehash, about the about, experience two or three times removed from my own” (167).

I do not know whether Olson’s practice of lambasting students in public is defensible, even with young adults. At the same time, it seems incumbent on us to take seriously Rumaker’s own testimony. To be sure, it was a painful experience. As Rumaker recalls:

I squirmed in my seat under his tongue-lashing, my head drooping lower, my spirit along with it. I had no words to defend myself; I was without protection, exposed, without skin. The heart went out of me, and with it the lovely airiness of the afternoon, up there in the pines outside the spacious windows, the broad expanse of valley and mountains in the distance—I felt myself shrinking, felt I could barely breathe. (169)

But even as Rumaker was struck by “the vehemence of Charles’ anger,” he was also struck by the precision of his diagnoses. Olson called him out for always wanting to be on the side of the angels, leading Rumaker to an epiphany about how much he feared losing his mother’s love of him as her “boy-angel” (168). What Olson had been telling him about writing started to click:

“Like Pausanius,” the ancient Greek traveler and geographer, he’d instruct us, “go out and see for yourself and come back and tell us what you saw and heard, first hand.” And this I found was the hardest thing to do for a variety of reasons: fear of exposure, of plunging into the imagination, the main ones; fear of facing not only the world but myself, another. The gist of it was to get the cataracts out of my eyes, unplug my ears, and speak direct with a singular voice—“the many in one”—rather than mouthing the stolen, second- and third-hand banalities of others, including my mother’s. (167)

Insightful or not, it is hard to endorse such rough treatment. Later, at dinner, Rumaker was still feeling raw and exposed. Noticing several students from class staring at him, he felt publicly “humiliated” (170). At the same time, it is this very experience that Rumaker describes as the turning point in his education:

Hard as Charles’ fury was, his verbal slaps that afternoon awakened me into a second birth, for they marked the beginning of my writing life. That lacerating day commenced my leaving the coma of the amniotic sac of an unborn self I—not my mother alone, not my father alone—had up until that moment

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