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A BEGINNING, A MIDDLE, AND AN END

In the Fourth Canto of Dante Alighieri's Inferno, Dante, his guide Virgil at his side meets first poets, then lawyers, and then finally a third group, the great philosophers. The scene is described in one translation of the Italian as follows:

When I raised my eyes a little higher,
I saw the Master of Those Who Know,
sitting among his philosophic kindred.

All look to him, all show him honor;
There nearest to him in front of the rest,
I saw Socrates and Plato...

I cannot give a full account of them all,
for the length of my theme still drives me on
that often the telling comes short of the fact....

As any contemporary reader of the Commedia would have known, "The Master of Those Who Know," was Aristotle. He needed no other introduction. Of course, Aristotle needs little introduction to this assembly. Himself a student of Plato at his academy, Aristotle was a marine biologist who wrote extensively on physics, metaphysics, poetry, theater, music, logic, rhetoric, politics and ethics. His intellectual descendants include Thomas Aquinas, Marx and a modern collection of philosophical ethicists. He is still the subject of philosophical debate today.

When I first read these lines in the Comedy far too many years ago – more than 50, they piqued my interest. I am almost ashamed to admit that even at that early date, a freshman in college or even a senior in high school, I wanted to be one of them, a

Master of Those Who Know. While I had no thought that I could rival Aristotle, I desired very much to be a wise man, to be Someone who knew Something.

Unfortunately, I paid little heed at the time to the sage comment of the senior member of the Greek philosophical triad, Socrates: that the beginning of wisdom was knowing oneself and concomitantly knowing what it was that you did not know. Not being a master myself I have valued the moments when I have witnessed masters at work or myself took some halting steps at mastery in one endeavor or another. Along the way I hope that I have gained some appreciation of what real “knowledge” is.

But before we go too deeply in that direction we are not yet finished with Aristotle. When I went off to college, attending what was then a very Catholic Bellarmine University, the college sported a very rigorous program in philosophy. All liberal arts students had to take a 12-hour sequence in that discipline. Much to my developing disgust, the whole sequence was devoted to Aristotelian philosophy, and all of that was viewed through the narrow prism of Thomas Aquinas. I increasingly found it all quite stultifying. Yes, I did have a grudging appreciation of Aristotle. Obviously, he was a great observer. At a very early age, a high school teacher had read me one of Aristotle’s texts, the famous passage in De Caelo where Aristotle demonstrates from observation that the world is round, describing how the hulls and then the masts of ships disappear over the horizon as they leave the Piraeus, the port of Athens. And this in the fourth century BCE. That sounds simple, but who of us has the combination of imaginative power to couple the sinking ship image with the unseen ball which must be between object and observer, for the picture to make sense? Not I. Aristotle was of course both a great observer and a great analyst. I’ve read little of Aquinas, but I

suspect that he further outfitted Aristotle into a strait jacket of regimentation. I know I bristled every time I heard the Sainly Thomas refer to Aristotle as “The Philosopher.” I didn’t know much, but I knew there were other philosophers even if I had never read them.

However, there came a glorious day in my 22nd year when I struck out across Broadway on New York City’s Upper Westside from the confines of Columbia University to a place where I spent many hours browsing among all those wonderful books that make up Western Civ. Paperback Forum was then a thriving bookstore, someplace around 115th Street or so, not far from Jack Kerouac’s old haunt, The West End Cafe, and my own favorite luncheon spot, Ta-Kome 2, home of a very special meatball hero. Browsing one day, I ran across the philosophical dialogues of Plato. I picked up a couple, The Symposium and The Timaeus I believe. I was both fascinated and dismayed. I was fascinated that philosophy could actually be fun and easy to read, and disgusted that I had spent four years of my college career reading the wrong philosopher. Of course, anyone who has studied elementary philosophy knows that Plato and Aristotle are the original left and right brain of philosophy, Plato one side of the philosophical endeavor and Aristotle the other.

Alfred North Whitehead famously said that all philosophy consists of footnotes to Plato. Others, perhaps not on the same wavelength as Professor Whitehead, like to say that Aristotle is the father of modern philosophy. Certainly, he is the initiator of systematic philosophy. Plato was more given to stories and myths than his famous pupil. While Plato’s bent and method were inductive, Aristotle was inclined to the deductive, moving from observation of facts to principles, as we see in the disappearing

ship image. I tend to be more comfortable with Plato's likely stories, his myths and archetypes than I am with systematic Aristotelian rigor. And yet I must grudgingly admit it is short sighted to ascribe genius to poetic Plato and turgid lack of imagination to systematic Aristotle as I did for far too many years. For example, Aristotle was onto something I believe I have rediscovered for myself and tonight I will share it with you.

So much for the beginning, let's plunge into the middle. Tonight, I intend to go into some detail about Aristotle's succinct, all-encompassing but at bottom enigmatic comment that dramatic works are or must be composed of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Here is what "The Philosopher" actually said in his Poetics:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.

"A beginning, a middle and an end." It sounds inarguably correct, but what in the world does it mean?

This is so general and gnostic that it almost becomes poetic in its sheer bluntness. In its stark simplicity Aristotle's formulation can be applied to all of tragedy, all of the serious novel, and all story telling. The subject is vast. So, in the limited time we have here, I am going to focus not on the base setting beginning, or the most memorable denouement, the end, but on that humble connective tissue, the middle.

Critical literature gives short shrift to the middle, when it treats it at all. I have looked into this as the dawning realization I am about to share with you popped out of its shell in my cranium. The middle is generally seen as no more than a subservient

vehicle to take us from the attention-grabbing beginning through an entertaining chain of complications to that which we will take away from the work and long remember, the end. No writer of persuasive prose worth his salt relies exclusively on the middle in his argument or explanation. The good parts are placed up front or at the end. More colloquial advice given to young would be lawyers and other writers of persuasive prose is: tell them what you are going to tell them, tell it, then tell them what you have told them. But the emphasis is always on alerting at the beginning and reminding at the end, not forgetting, but not emphasizing the middle.

Nevertheless, over the last 13 or 14 years or so, I have discovered in the discussion group I lead at the Mercantile Library, a basic truth about the middle. As some of you know long ago and oh so far away, as Karen Carpenter sang so well, I was an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York. Working off my freshly minted Ph.D., I diligently prepared for my classes with a reading of the subject text and then plowed into the critical literature to make sure I was familiar with and not deviating from the received wisdom of the day. However, by the time I got to The Mercantile some 30 years later, I had been reading for my own satisfaction for years. I made a pact with myself to avoid referring to critical texts except when absolutely necessary. For example, few would presume to discuss Haruki Murakami's The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle without a little help from his friends. Nevertheless, in the main, I have gone on this Mercantile voyage of discovery with 15-30 fellow travelers, a healthy mix of all ages and both sexes and we have learned what we have read together with the texts alone to guide us. I'll read the book 3 or 4 times and take notes but refer as little as possible to critical literature.

My group generally explores four literary works over a course of as many months. I don't lecture but serve as a literary tour guide, leading and focusing discussion on just what a particular work is about. Over the course of years and many discussions, a particular organizational fact kept appearing in book after book. Not in all, but in enough that I began to see it as a basic architectural principle of many literary works. The principle is almost – not almost – but absolutely embarrassing in its simplicity. Gentlemen, I assert that in many works, not all, but in very many, you can go to the mathematical middle of the work and there find the author's deeper meaning, like buried treasure where X marks the spot.

"You're kidding!" you say. No Sir! Take a book of about 300 pages, subtract the 10 pages of introduction, then divide the 290 remaining pages by 2. $290 \div 2 = 145$. 145 plus the 10 pages of persiflage is 155. Go to page 155 of the text. There or thereabouts, more times than you would think possible you will find the heart of the book, its *raison d'être*, the thing or things that the writer wanted most to say.

I know you will think this is crazy and part of me thinks it must be also, but I have seen it far too many times to deny its truth. I am not a conspiracy theorist, a numerologist, or a believer in blind luck or astrology. But I do believe what I have read.

Tonight, I will give you three primary examples. They are very different works; David Mitchell's Black Swan Green; Charles Dickens' Great Expectations; and Javier Marias's A Heart So White. If my expert analysis does not convince you, you can demonstrate this to yourself the next time you read a novel of your own choosing. Where do you start? You need only go to the last page, discern the page number, subtract the introductory material, and divide by 2, adding back the number of pages of

introduction, to take you to the heart of your story. But now, let us look at these three distinguished works and see what we can see at this mysterious mathematical middle, elaborating on The Philosopher's succinct pronouncement.

David Mitchell, 50-year-old Englishman, has written some amazing novels, nine so far. His works are often long and complex. I have read three, two of the variety just described: The Thousand Years of Jacob deZoet and Cloud Atlas. Jacob deZoet takes place in 18th century Japan while Cloud Atlas is a set of six interlocking stories that start in the South Pacific in the early 19th century, à la Herman Melville and progress all the way into a post-apocalyptic future set on the island of Hawaii. The stories are interrelated. There are eleven segments that proceed chronologically from past to future, and then retrace their steps from future back to past. In segment six of the eleven we delve most deeply into the future, and then start back, as the story works fast forward, reaches stasis at the middle segment, number six of the eleven, far into the future, and then heads back.

I've already spent too much time on Cloud Atlas – you should read it for yourself, it's fascinating. The middle there is too complex for analysis here. My focus tonight is on Mitchell's much simpler and at first glance less ambitious work, Black Swan Green. This early work of Mitchell's is clearly autobiographical and shows us 13 months in the life and death of a family. The central figure, 13-year-old Jason Taylor enters a painful adolescence while seeing his parents' marriage dissolve. The work is divided into 13 chapters for the 13 months, January to January of the following year. Of course, it is the middle chapter, number seven of thirteen, July, that is the subject of my thesis, where the heart of the book, the all-important middle resides.

By the way, the Random House paperback edition is 294 pages long. $294 \div 2 = 147$. All-important middle chapter “July” commences on page 142, ending on 166. Smack in the middle. QED.

Why is July, the middle of Jason’s year and the middle of Mitchell’s book so important? In addition to being a stuttering adolescent mess, trying to cope with bullies, alluring young ladies, and his bickering parents, young Jason is an aspiring poet, publishing his poems in the monthly parish magazine under the curious pseudonym Eliot Bolivar. In the course of delivering a batch of his poems to the parish vicarage, which is set in an almost fairy tale landscape, Jason runs afoul of the colorful Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck, an elderly big bad wolf type who gives Jason a lesson and pep talk in poetic composition and the canons of European literature. In the extended discourse on writing and literature that makes up the July chapter, Madame van Crommelynck introduces Jason to the European writers who will be Jason Taylor/David Mitchell’s masters: Chekhov, Flaubert, Hesse, Mann, Rilke, Gogol, Proust, Bulgakov, Hugo, Kafka, Alain-Fournier. Thus, Madame discloses to Jason whom he must read to become literate and through her Mitchell discloses to us his formative influences as he was aspiring to become a writer.

This is the heart of the matter for our author. Mitchell, who now lives in Japan, with his Japanese wife and two children, grew up in Worcestershire geographically and sociologically and, more centrally to the literary critic, like the trail blazers, who paint the blue rectangles on the telephone poles on Erie Avenue pointing out the Mid-American Trail, he gives us the signs showing who it was he read and absorbed from Western literature in developing his art.

The whole story of the novel Black Swan Green concretely and vividly set in the suburban town of Black Swan Green is important, Jason's mother and father, his bemused but loving older sister, his painful forays into adolescent romance, his friendships and his days at school. But at the heart and center we have the beginning of his education as a writer, carefully but not totally hidden in the fantastic setting of the encounter of young boy with elderly crone, Mme. De Crommelynck. While the beginning six and ending six chapters are firmly set in Jason's past, the middle chapter gives us a glimpse of the writer's literary roots and his ambition, the path into his future.

Throwing us further off the scent, later in the book we learn that Madame and her husband have been extradited to Germany, where they await indictment on embezzlement charges. It's a self-conscious yet guarded gesture, but like a lot of moderns, Mitchell can be a self-conscious writer. His books create an interrelated intramural life of their own, as characters in one book pop up in another. Mitchell has enough literary Chutzpah to say to the audience, his readers – "Yes I am pretty good and you think so too – let me show you a bit of how I got here as maybe I pop up in my novels", a trick the Turkish Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk also uses from time to time.

Now none of this will work for you if you believe with some critics and readers who would never think of themselves as critics that the work is always and only its own meaning. That is to say, to parse or analyze the work is to demean or lessen it. The work is what it is and to dissect is to kill. I have always found this position to be an easy out not only for the lazy student, but also for a writer who wants to keep his or her personal thoughts private who, perhaps, does not want to get into an argument at a

tiresome reading in an almost empty classroom or bookstore over meaning with some knucklehead who knows much less about the subject than she or he does.

I have never subscribed to this essentially agnostic view. I see nothing wrong with examining the parts of a literary work and then putting them back together into a more fully appreciated whole. That is the only way that we learn what it is the writer is instinctively saying or learn at least as much as we can of what the writer is trying to do.

I can see skeptical scowls out there. You might be thinking – “Ok, so maybe we have this young Mitchell guy showing off with his tricky use of the calendar, but what about real literature? The Classic writers we read back in the day would not pull such juvenile stunts.” Let me respond to this school of thought, by pulling a Classic off the shelf.

Most of you have read and think you know Great Expectations. For many of us, the gods of pedagogy served us poorly by making us read this wonderful Charles Dickens novel while we were in the early years of high school. Popular culture remembers Great Expectations as the story of Pip, the young blacksmith’s devil. When orphan Pip is quite young and living with his sister and her blacksmith husband, Joe Gargery he runs into an escaped convict one night in the Kent marshes. The starving convict almost scares Pip to death and in the process, forces Pip to bring him food. Years later Jaggers, one of the most vivid but certainly unflattering portraits of a lawyer in all literature visits the Gargery household and announces that an anonymous benefactor has noticed Pip and wishes to take care of him, to provide the wherewithal to raise him as a gentleman. He is to have “great expectations.”

Pip does not know who his benefactor is but comes to think that it is the elderly recluse Miss Havisham, who lives a solitary life in the same area, and has as her ward a beautiful young girl, Estella. Pip is made to be a companion to Estella as the story moves along, and he comes to believe that Miss Havisham is his patron and that Estella's love is to be part of the benefits package being showered upon him.

Of course, we learn that neither his great expectations of wealth nor his infatuation with Estella pan out. At the center of the book and the center's environs (Penguin Classics edition, text of 484 pp.; $484 \div 2 = 242$), we see Pip turning aside from the true path of middle-class virtue. In showing us this aspect of Pip's life, Dickens says plenty, and without being at all didactic about the social mores and ills of the day. Pip has gone off to London to learn how to be a fine gentleman. In physically leaving his home, he also slips the moral anchors that he had developed growing up with the Gargerys. When he returns to the village for the visit that makes up the center of the book, he snobbishly avoids contact with his old friend and mentor, Joe, choosing instead the company of Miss Havisham and her beautiful ward Estella.

However, Dickens could not make his feelings clearer. Estella is not worthy of Pip's love. Of course, Pip is too young to know what real love is. In the middle of the social upheaval of the 19th Century English industrial revolution, Pip chooses false goals over socially responsible behavior and the real love shown him by Joe Gargery and Biddy, the girl he should have married (but who eventually marries Joe!). It is only very late in the book that a repentant Pip is reunited with these fine people, and that comes after he has had to swallow the bitter pill of learning that he was the unwitting protégé of Magwitch, the convict he had assisted years before, exiled to Australia where he has

paid his debt to society and amassed his own fortune. There is no space in this paper to delve deeply into the full message of this book: Dickens's attitude toward transportation of convicts; imprisonment for debt; child labor; oppression of the poor and much more and especially the nature of real love for others, but Dickens makes his position clear in the middle, and that middle fully illuminates the end of the book as we reach it.

Back at the middle, most tellingly, Pip listens to but fails to understand Miss Havisham's rant about how she has raised Estella to be a human venus flytrap, luring men into love of her and then not loving them in return, with fatal result. When we finally arrive at the end of the book, the future that Miss Havisham has predicted and planned for Pip has played out, except for one significant twist – while Pip is somewhat saddened by the failure of his great expectations, Estella is in far worse shape, a hollow shell worn out by a loveless marriage not to Pip but to a man far her inferior. The center of the book, the middle that we have discussed sets up the moral road map for how Pip and Estella have both gone wrong, and by implication shows him and the middle-class reader how better to live their lives going forward – where the truly great expectations lie.

Now this penchant for making the more or less middle of the book its heart is not limited to literature in English. Let us turn to a writer you may not, but should, know, the talented Spaniard, Javier Marias. At this point the author of 17 often translated novels, Marias is one of the most prominent names in European literature. From his apartment high above Madrid's central square, Marias has written a passel of novels redolent with

philosophy, references to Shakespeare and other masters and a deep appreciation of the vagaries of human nature.

Our subject tonight is his early work, A Heart So White (Vintage paperback edition, 279 pages of text, $279 \div 2 = 140$). Some will recognize that the title emanates from the words of Lady Macbeth as she excoriates Macbeth for his perceived cowardice after he has “done the deed,” killing the king. On a more mundane level, the story line of the novel follows the early days of the marriage of Juan and Luisa, two sophisticated Madrileños who earn their living as interpreters. In the course of adapting to marriage, Juan encounters and tells us about a number of unhappy couples. In almost every case, as we come to see, the male treats the female abominably. Indeed, Juan learns that his own father had killed his first wife, many years before; and his second wife had committed suicide when she learned the horrible truth. (Juan’s mother is innocent and oblivious wife number three – this is still a novel, not a ghoulish Gothic tale.)

As Juan and Luisa come to know each other in marriage they also come to know the horrible truth about Juan’s father. At the very center of the book, around page 140, a few pages before extending to a few pages after, they disclose some crucial truths to each other as Marias explores perceptions of male and female behavior. Luisa is a forthright, direct, loving woman. She tells Juan that she would want to know if he ever had thoughts of doing away with her. As this group might suspect, male Juan is not nearly so direct. First, while Luisa shows him time after time unconditional love, he is full of suspicion and reserve, misinterpreting her faithfulness befogged as he is with unfounded fears that she is interested in someone else. Thus, it comes as no surprise that he hides from the truth, telling Luisa he would not want to know if she wanted to do

him in. And of course, we know him well enough by this point to know he does not mean it.

Indeed, Marias further emphasizes this central perception of his novel, that the woman is direct and giving, while the man is secretive and reserved if not downright hostile and cruel in the following section, which begins just a few pages after the mathematical middle. There he tells us about Birta, a friend of Juan's, a girl with a gimpy leg from a wound that didn't heal properly (shades of Philoctetes from the Greek myths of the Trojan War). Summarizing a painful episode all too briefly, loving Birta is treated shamefully by Bill, whom she meets on line. This is one and the worst, after Juan's father's homicidal marriage, of the many examples of men inevitably mistreating women in this quiet, yet telling novel. At the very center then, of the novel, A Heart So White, we learn that the heart of woman is white with innocence and pure love, while the male heart is white if not with cowardice, then with hesitance to confront emotional verities.

So, there you have it. I could give you more examples of the all-important middle but I have made my point and probably worn you out. Of course, the precise middle is not that important in any number of works. In my experience the precise middle of picaresque novels (novels of travel and adventuresome journeys) are not necessarily fraught with significance. In the great American novel, Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby the encounter between Daisy and Gatsby at the center of the narrative when he shows her his collection of fine shirts, the Joseph A. Bank moment, is important, but not centrally so, because much of the novel's importance stems from its having a frame story. The Great Gatsby is not only the story of young Mr. Gatz from the Dakotas,

reborn Gatsby but also the story of Nick Carraway, the lad who comes East and having had his fill of the life there retreats permanently to the Twin Cities of his Minnesota youth.

Modern art is not so taken with classical symmetry as art of preceding ages. In William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying a baroque tale of life and death in his Yoknapatawpha County, the central speech of the dead mother, Addie Bundren, is delivered very late in the book, emphasizing by its place all the more, the absolute futility of the ostensible published reason for the Bundren family's epic journey, to bury their mother with her family in Jefferson.

So – now we are finished with the middle and come to the ending. Does this theory of mine add up to anything? I will not soon forget one member (female) of my Mercantile discussion group announcing in no uncertain terms that my theory is all wet. Where else would you put the center of the story, if not in the middle? To get from A to C, you have to pass through B. Much like Juan in A Heart So White, I responded to her forthright very basic criticism with the silence that greets the end of all Literary Club papers. In my own case, at that point I did not know what to say.

I am also disturbed by the nagging thought that some form of law of averages is working here. The meat or heart of a novel will have to be somewhere between beginning and end, and will occur a number of times statistically, at the statistic middle. I remember my days in college as a smart aleck checker for the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company. When shoppers would see my NCR cash register ring up a total due of \$7.00, or \$15.00 or \$21.00, the more vocal of them might express amazement. I invariably brought them down from their numeric high with the scornful comment,

muttering “You dumb ass” under my breath that “Yeah, it happens just about every 100 times someone goes through this line.” But my theory works out far more often than one time out of 100. I do believe there is an organizing architectural principle at work.

I intend to continue to think about this theory of mine as I proceed on my journeys of discovery with my fellow voyagers, female and male, at The Mercantile Library. By this point, veterans of the courses I conduct eagerly chime in when I ask them to turn to the mathematical middle of the text to see what we can find buried there. X marks the spot.

For the moment, I can't take this perception much further than this. Much of art is based on principles of proportion, symmetry and balance. As Aristotle might put it, a proper work will form a pleasing whole. What more pleasing and proportionate than for the central thought or perception of a work to occur at its center, with properly measured steps leading up to it from the beginning, and the implications flowing properly from it towards its end?

That is as far as I have gotten in my journey. I don't intend to submit this paper to Philological Quarterly or the MLA Journal. As Aristotle himself might say, there is nothing following the end of this paper – except, perhaps, my hope that this theory might help you from time to time to a deeper understanding of some of the wonderful works of literature that led you to this Club in the beginning. And, by the way you neophyte Literarians would be well served to make sure that your papers begin somewhere, proceed to a middle that emanates logically, emotionally and intellectually from the beginning and proceeds to a related conclusion, forming an artistic whole Aristotle would approve. Your listeners will also.

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