

# Glimpses from a Train Window: Some Reflections on Phronesis and Pedagogy

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**A**S I SET OUT TO WRITE THIS PAPER, I feel I must position myself, as poststructuralism invites, and as is only fitting for a geographer, as a passenger on an imaginary train passing through a landscape of the mind, an “inscape” synthesized from impressions and experiences over a lifetime spent in learning and teaching.

I am a near dead-white (well, swarthy) heterosexual male of mixed immigrant stock, semi-nomadic by nature, with roots in both the country and the city, and whose routes regularly take him by air, sea, and land to nearby islands and to far-distant ancient civilizations, both European and Oriental, giving broad dimensions of time and space to the *situatedness* of my theoretical perspective, my “traveling theory” to use the term coined by Edward Said. By training a historical geographer, I have spent the past thirty-five years teaching geography, history, environmental studies, mathematics, and classical literature (in translation, alas). I have tried to avoid teaching “social studies” despite having had to work under that shadow for so many years. During that time, I have raised children, renovated old houses, learned to grow Italian tomatoes, and written more than thirty books on geographic, historic, and environmental topics.

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Myth, literature, the visual arts, theatre, and music enchant me; the worlds of the imagination are as real to me as are the empirical data I have collected in the field and from archival sources. The “real” world and the opportunities for learning found therein are equally compelling for me; I am much more at home both as a learner and as a teacher outside the classroom or library than I am in such institutional settings. Geography is my field of study, and I make sense of the world best in the field. School was (and often still is) a less than comfortable place for me; as a child I struggled against its strictures and narrow box-like structures, finding my freedom in imaginary journeys through the pages of books or *National Geographic*.

Even more liberating were the traveling studies I was fortunate to experience as a child because my father worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway (whose motto, “Spans the World,” emblazoned in white against the Tuscan red of every box car of that time stimulated my mind and sent it traveling across time and space) and had passes on every major railway, steamship, and (latterly) airline in North America and many overseas as well. My first journey took me from Halifax to Vancouver by rail in the fall of 1947. Each year since then, I have made at least one major rail trip; I have spent a good deal of the last half century with my nose pressed against the window, watching the landscape roll on cinematically past my viewing screen, seeing my own reflection in the window, noting the reflections of others observing me, and trying to visualize the geomorphological, biological, and human stories written on the environment on which and through which I am traveling. Words and images from other journeys often pop into my head as I watch the written world go by, such phrases as “we were halfway across Europe and half way through the Middle Ages” from Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East* take on new meanings when remembered on a train traveling from Paris to Prague with a group of high school students. I sometimes have similar experiences when flying but usually only when passing over vast regions of extraordinary beauty: the high Arctic in mid-summer, the Prairies covered with snow, their geological and human histories written in a fine spidery hand in black on white, or the Alps in late spring when sunlight crystalizes on glacial surfaces while the deep colours of spring emerge in the alpine valleys and meadows.

As a graduate student in geography, I participated in seemingly endless debates about the nature of geography, most of which concluded that “geography is what geographers do,” a cop-out which left me dissatisfied. This led me, inspired by the philosophical writings of Clarence Glacken and David Harvey, to formulate my own definition that geography was

what (and how) geographers think, making it a true field of enquiry, an *estate* of mind. I still hold to this view, strengthened by my reading of more recent works such as Derek Gregory's *Geographical Imaginations*.

In recent years, certainly over the past decade, I have tried to shape my pedagogy around (within?) a paradigm of ethical geographical reasoning. My teaching increasingly focused on the connections between knowing about the natural and human systems of the world and knowing how to act ethically as we walk upon the earth, passing through, participating in, and—inevitably—altering those natural and human systems with which we directly or indirectly are interconnected through our acts. The self-study and reflection that underpinned the origins of this dissertation were initially focused on the act of teaching—of the teacher as curriculum—in the context of this quest for an ethical pedagogy of the exploration of human impact on the world.

As I struggled with the autobiographical narrative of my self-study, I found that I had entered “a narcissistic world, where, except for a few lights, we can only see the reflection of where we are” to use Frye's all too prescient phrase in *The Modern Century*. Part of the problem with which I struggled was the fact that I was trying to capture a fixed image of a moving, changing landscape. Giving me advice about how to get my dissertation written, Peter Lijedahl sagely suggested that I think of “a snapshot, not a movie.” Part of my dilemma, he suggested, was the more that I read and reflected, my point of view was shifting and so was my pedagogical practice. Yet that was exactly what *should* be happening; how then could I record that journey of simultaneous self-exploration and the acts of teaching that it informed and shaped?

In my mind's eye, my mental camera, a picture began to develop. Like a print in a darkroom tray an image emerged of a strip of film stock with each frame recording a moment in the process of becoming the teacher I intended to be. Then, my imagination transformed the image of a strip of motion picture film into a railway carriage through which I moved from seat to seat and window to window, trying to get a glimpse of the students and settings I had known (or sought to know) over the past thirty-five years. This essay, then, is an attempt to provide some glimpses from those windows into what might constitute a pedagogy framed in the context of Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* as it might apply to the twenty-first century.

## Glimpses from a Train Window

The title of this paper arises from a metaphor used by Northrop Frye in his essay “City of the End of Things,” a dimly remembered title to which I was drawn when contemplating the interconnectedness of *phronesis*, imagination, metaphor, and environmental/geographic education that I intend to explore in this paper.

What eventually happens I may describe in a figure borrowed from those interminable railway journeys that are so familiar to Canadians, at least of my generation. As one’s eyes are passively pulled along a rapidly moving landscape, it turns darker and one begins to realize that many of the objects that appear to be outside are actually reflections of what is in the carriage. As it becomes entirely dark, one enters a narcissistic world, where, except for a few lights, we can only see the reflection of where we are. A little study of the working of advertising and propaganda in the modern world with their magic lantern shows of projected images will show us how successful they are in creating a world of pure illusion. (*The Modern Century* 27–28)

While Frye is specifically referring to mass media (ironically, the dominant means of enculturation if not of education today), here, it seems to me that his metaphor applies equally well to my reflections on my years of experience in the schoolhouse or classroom as a vehicle traveling through the cultural landscape of the modern world. In the pages that follow, I shall present some glimpses of the world seen through those carriage windows, some reflections of myself and others in that window. Like those images, my thoughts are episodic and fragmentary.

### Window 1: Connections to other Worlds

Digging out my long-buried copy of *The Modern Century*, a transcript of the Whidden Lectures given by Frye in honour of Canada’s Centennial, I was struck by the multiple layers of connectedness to my quest the title of his essay, and its contents, conveyed. It hints at Plato’s *Republic*, Augustine’s *City of God*, More’s *Utopia*, Marx’s “workers paradise,” and the Puritan “City on the Hill” I see embodied in Dewey’s ideal “democracy” to which the young ought to be educated through such courses as social studies.

Frye’s title also resonated in my mind with Francis Fukuyama’s controversial *The End of History and the Last Man*, a conservative postmodernist

examination of the implications of the collapse of communism for philosophy and the field of history. Fukuyama constructs a theory, drawing on Plato's view of the soul and Hegel's dialectic of spirit, that legitimates the "new world order" of spreading "liberal democracy" by tracing and proclaiming the validity of its philosophical origins. Fukuyama identifies liberal democracy with capitalist democracy, arguing that the collapse of Soviet-style communism has left capitalist democracy unchallenged as the only system with global appeal; he contends that this appeal is not transient but has deep roots and broad universality. In the context of my teaching, Fukuyama's world view is one I have sought to explore and deconstruct with students because of the impacts liberal capitalism and globalization have had on the natural environment since the Industrial Revolution, especially in the context of the current debate over global change.

Virtually simultaneous with the release of *The End of History and the Last Man* was the publication of George Woodcock's *The Monk and his Message: Undermining the Myth of History*. Like Fukuyama, Woodcock draws upon the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European sphere of influence to announce the end not of history itself but of its mythology—historicism. Woodcock traces the roots of historicism from Plato to Marx and its relationship to the myth of progress that Frye so vigorously attacks in *The City at the End of Things*. Woodcock sees human cultures and societies as self-determining, not cargo carried on the express train of time:

The demands of human society and the natural world must be harmonized; people must be allowed to determine how they shall be governed and have the right to change their minds and hence their choices by easy amendment. These minimal demands for survival in the present and in the proximal future accord with the great anti-laws of human life: Change and Chance and Choice. They need no Laws, no Providential Plans, no Eschatological Prophecy, none of the determinist and futurist rubbish with which historians as the servants of the powerful have marred their vision and their work. (206)

No doubt because he was Canadian, Woodcock's views have been less widely circulated than Fukuyama's. In my pedagogy, Woodcock has played a critical role. His three Cs—change, chance, and choice—became a mantra repeated over and over again in my classes; I used them to invite students to explore the role of contingency in human and natural systems and to interrogate the quest for certainty, determinacy, and technical ratio-

nal explanations of, and solutions to, social, economic, and environmental “problems.”

## Window 2: Geographic Models, Metaphors, and the Construction of Meaning

Myths, models, and metaphors have great ontological power. It is through them that we construct and convey much of the meaning we find in life experiences. Models (the map is but one of the many types of models geographers create to represent reality) are a critically important part of geographic thinking. I have long been struck by the sheer number of similes (or models) and metaphors drawn from geography and the geographer’s spirit of inquiry one finds in popular and scholarly writing, in prose, and in poetry. Three things come to mind in this regard: the geographer’s sense of wonder and curiosity about the natural world and its peopled spaces, the power of the dynamic processes that shape and swirl in and on and over the earth, and, more tenuously, the possibility (the hope?) that we as humans have a sense that we are of the earth and its natural systems and can only truly understand ourselves in that context.

Northrop Frye explores the relationship between the natural world and myths and metaphors in an essay with a wonderful semiotic pun “The Times of the Signs.” According to Frye:

The doctrine of evolution made time as huge and frightening as space: the past after Darwin, was no more emotionally reassuring than the skies had come to be ... by showing a creative process forming itself within nature, evolution ... made nature not only alien but autonomous, a self-regulating process needing no God to start it or man to improve it.

[M]an lives in two worlds, the world traditionally called the worlds of nature and art. We live in an actual world, our physical environment in time and space, and thus is the world studied mainly by the natural or physical sciences. At the same time we keep trying to create a culture and civilization of our own. This represents the world we want to live in, as well as the world we are creating out of our environment. It is where our values and desires and hopes and ideals belong, and this world is always geocentric, always centred on man and man’s concerns.

It is obvious that the basis of the world we want to live in is mythological. That is, the world we construct is built to the model of a common social vision produced by the imagination. (88–89)

Rereading Frye's *Spiritus Mundi* recently brought me once again into contact with the poetry and ideas of the modern American poet Wallace Stevens.

Stevens, a New Englander, is very much aware of the effects of natural and human forces over time on the environment around him. Much of his imagery and most of his metaphors come from nature and the eternal process of change in nature. Stevens holds that the imagination is in closer contact to the natural world and to the human world of lived experience than is reason, which can live in the closed-up house of the mind and can shut its gates in the face of reality. Frye quotes from one of Stevens's poems, in which he describes the poet as a "capable man" who creates "out of martyr's bones, / The ultimate elegance, the imagined land" (286). In Stevens's poem "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," one of three academic pieces in his collection *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens calls on us to "Divest reality / Of its propriety. Admit the shaft / Of that third planet to the table" (*Spiritus Mundi* 282). According to Frye, in Stevens's geographic metaphor, the third planet earth stands for the imagination, dealing with the turning shaft of constant change but living in the eternal now. "The fact that the imagination seizes on the changing aspect of reality means that it lives in a continuous present. This means not only that 'the imperfect is our paradise' (Stevens (1954) *Collected Poems*, 194), but the imagination is always the beginning" (*Spiritus Mundi* 284). Stevens's writings reveal his deep interest in "the motive for metaphor, the fact that what is change in reality is also pleasure in the imagination" (*Spiritus Mundi* 282). The ever-changing thereness of the physical world, a world of evolving themes and variations, the geographic reality, is the fuel for the fires of the imagination.

### Window 3: Writing Geography

*Geography* is a wonderful word, suggesting two possibilities for writing about the world or what is written on the world. The first allows for a wonderful range of opportunities for students to study and appreciate good writing about the world, its environments, and their inhabitants. Such writings cover the full spectrum of personal, literary, scientific, and metaphysical expression. The alternative reading, writing on the earth, is an opportunity for students to explore the ways in which the earth and its features can be seen to be a work of various creators—supernatural, natural, and human. Here, through exploration of creation myths, great works, and wonders of human creation, the powerful forces found in nature can all appeal to the mythic and romantic intelligences and imaginations. The

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writing by students of their own “anti-geographies,” in Robert Appelbaum’s phrase, can also create an opportunity for students to explore geographic concepts in a creative and imaginative way.

#### Window 4: Locke and the Geographic Metaphor

In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke uses a geographic metaphor, that of the explorer in a strange land, to argue the importance of children’s questions in the process of acquiring an education:

As children’s enquiries are not to be slighted; so also great care is to be taken, that they never receive deceitful and eluding answers. They ... are travellers newly arrived in a strange country, of which they know nothing; we should therefore make conscience not to mislead them. And though their questions seem sometimes not very material, yet they should be seriously answer’d; for however they may appear to us (to whom they are long since known) enquiries not worth the making; they are of moment to those who are wholly ignorant. Children are strangers to all we are acquainted with; and all the things they meet with, are at first unknown to them, as they once were to us: and happy are they who meet with civil people, that will comply with their ignorance, and help them to get out of it.

If you or I now should be set down in Japan, with all our prudence and knowledge about us, a conceit whereof makes us, perhaps, so apt to slight the thoughts and enquiries of children; should we, I say, be set down in Japan, we should, no doubt (if we would inform our selves of what is there to be known) ask a thousand questions, which, to a supercilious or inconsiderate Japaner, would seem very idle and impertinent; though to us they would be very material and of importance to be resolved; and we should be glad to find a man so complaisant and courteous, as to satisfy our demands, and instruct our ignorance.

When any new thing comes in their way, children usually ask the common question of a stranger: What is it? Whereby they ordinarily mean nothing but the name; and therefore to tell them how it is call’d, is usually the proper answer to that demand. And the next question usually is, What is it for? And to this it should be answered truly and directly. The use of the thing should be told, and the way explained, how it serves to such a purpose, as far as their capacities can comprehend it. And so of any other circumstances they shall ask about it; not turning them going, till you have given them all the satisfaction they are capable of; and so leading them by your answers



into farther questions. And perhaps to a grown man, such conversation will not be altogether so idle and insignificant as we are apt to imagine. The native and untaught suggestions of inquisitive children do often offer things, that may set a considering man's thoughts on work. And I think there is frequently more to be learn'd from the unexpected questions of a child, than the discourses of men, who talk in a road, according to the notions they have borrowed, and the prejudices of their education. (173–74).

Locke again uses the example of a geographer's empirical method of enquiry when he makes the case for understanding through reason in his essay "Of the Conduct of the Understanding,"

It will possibly be objected, Who is sufficient for all this? I answer, more than can be imagined. Everyone knows what his proper business is and what, according to the character he makes of himself, the world may justly expect of him; and to answer that, he will find he will have time and opportunity enough to furnish himself, if he will not deprive himself by a narrowness of spirit of those helps that are at hand. I do not say to be a good geographer that a man should visit every mountain, river, promontory and creel; upon the face of the earth, view the buildings and survey the land everywhere, as if he were going to make a purchase. But yet everyone must allow that he shall know a country better that makes often sallies into it and traverses it up and down than he that, like a mill-horse, goes still round in the same tract or keeps within the narrow bounds of a field or two that delight him. He that will enquire out the best books in every science and inform himself of the most material authors of the several sects of philosophy and religion, will not find it an infinite work to acquaint himself with the sentiments of mankind concerning the most weighty and comprehensive subjects. Let him exercise the freedom of his reason and understanding in such a latitude as this, and his mind will be strengthened, his capacity enlarged, his faculties improved; and the light which the remote and scattered parts of truth will give to one another still so assist his judgment, that he will seldom be widely out or miss giving proof of a clear head and a comprehensive knowledge. (243)

For me, one of the great beauties of geography is that it exists simultaneously in the world of the imagination and the world of empiricism. Geog-

raphy is one of the few disciplines (along with psychology and cognitive studies) in which one can receive a BA or BSC, an MA or MSC.

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### **Window 5: Field Studies and the Wonder of Learning**

Plato, Locke, and Rousseau all observe the greater pleasure and motivation that the young seem to derive from learning in nature. My experiences with students participating in various field schools from physical geography field studies in the Whistler area to cultural field studies with students in Europe and Asia would confirm those observations. Field studies (not field trips) are an integral part of a geographical education. The synthesis of understandings obtained from the field experience, the expression of those syntheses in map, diagram, or written form, require the use of geographic imagination on the part of the learner.

John Dewey makes a strong argument for the importance of field studies conducted in a “human atmosphere” that sees nature holistically explored in the context of “relations of sympathy and association with human life”:

Nature and the earth should be equivalent terms, and so should earth study and nature study. Everybody knows that nature study has suffered in schools from scrappiness of subject matter, due to dealing with a large number of isolated points.... The result is an inevitable deadness of topics to which attention is invited, but which are so isolated that they do not feed imagination. The lack of interest is so great that it was seriously proposed to revive animism, to clothe natural facts and events with myths in order that they might attract and hold the mind. In numberless cases, more or less silly personifications were resorted to. The method was silly, but it expressed a real need for a human atmosphere. The facts had been torn to pieces by being taken out of their context. They no longer belonged to the earth; they had no abiding place anywhere. To compensate, recourse was had to artificial and sentimental associations. The real remedy is to make nature study a study of nature, not of fragments made meaningless through complete removal from the situations in which they are produced and in which they operate. When nature is treated as a whole, like the earth in its relations, its phenomena fall into their natural relations of sympathy and association with human life, and artificial substitutes are not needed.

Geographic thinking, with its complex ordering of natural and human processes in space and time, appears to closely approximate the way the brain itself processes information and, through the imagination, synthesizes understandings and constructs representations of the meanings derived from perception of, and interaction with, the worlds of our lived experiences. To do so, we must understand, as Northrop Frye so clearly did, the intellectual limits and ethical implications of our position inside the railway carriage moving through an ever-changing landscape only partially ever illuminated. This, for me, is at the heart of *phronesis*.

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