

Hey Guigo, May I Borrow Your Ladder? We Need to See Something. or, 'Learning to See' as the Telos of Study Abroad Pedagogy

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In 1150, a few short years before the death of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Carthusian monk by the name of Guigo (Guigo the Second in fact) wrote a letter to a fellow monk, a brother named Gervase.¹ In it he sought to explain "these thoughts of mine concerning the spiritual way which monks should follow". The letter, over time, came to be considered as a primer on prayer; a treatise on the spiritual exercises of monastic contemplatives. Subsequently, it has attracted and received several titles. Among them, "Scala paradiso", "Scala claustralium", "the Ladder of the Monks", and "A Ladder of Four Rungs".

Before proceeding to the argument posited by this paper, let us first examine the contents of Guigo's letter such as they are; in their intended context.

Guigo's ladder is comprised of four rungs: *Lectio*, *Meditatio*, *Oratio* and *Contemplatio*, or, translated into modern parlance, *Reading*, *Meditation*, *Prayer* and *Contemplation*. In the course of his letter, Guigo explains how these rungs are linked in a causal progression. The monk begins, and must begin, with the *Lectio*. That is, the reading of something; most often a passage from Scripture. The monk then engages in *Meditatio*, and meditates upon what he has just read. He carefully turns his mind, in a spirit of careful and conscious reflection, upon what has just been read. *Meditatio* begets *Oratio*; a prayerful utterance borne in response to the meditative activities. And finally, the monk awaits *Contemplatio*; the ecstatic embrace of the presence of God. Consider Bernini's sculpture of Saint Teresa in agony.

As stated previously, the Rungs are understood to be linked in a causal chain. At least the first three rungs. The fourth, *Contemplatio*, is certainly linked to, and can hardly ever happen without, the first three. Indeed to obtain *Contemplation* without *Prayer* would be miraculous (although not entirely impossible). But, importantly, the ecstatic fruits are a divine gift and are not therefore guaranteed.

Each of the stages requires the next for fulfillment. Guigo states that *Reading* without *Meditation* is sterile; *Meditation* without *Reading* is liable to error; *Prayer* without *Meditation* is lukewarm; *Meditation* without *Prayer* is sterile; and that, *Prayer* when it is fervent merits *Contemplation*.²

In Guigo's thoughtfully concise summary: *Reading* puts food whole into the mouth, *Meditation* chews it, and breaks it up, *Prayer* extracts its flavor.

Working from this summarization of Guigo's understanding, I will attempt to argue that the Ladder of the Monks, in so far as it provides a structure that facilitates learning how to see, can and should be used as a suitable and anagogical model for the pedagogical core of any successful study abroad experience.³

This requires us to expand some of the definitions of the Rungs originally given by Guigo. But this expansion need not damage the structural integrity of the argument itself.

For example, *Lectio* (literally, reading), will in our case be expanded to include seeing; and, by

extension, all aspects of regarding and sensing. Seeing should herein be construed as experiencing the fullest magnitude of sensation to be offered.⁴

Andrea Palladio championed a similar understanding of what it means to truly and fully experience something. Inspired by the writings of Luigi Cornaro (c1484-1566), Palladio set out on a number of expeditions hoping to achieve sobriety: the consummate balance of virtue ("book learning") and experience ("activity free from theoretical and intellectual musing"). And so he wrote in the Dedication of the *Quattro Libri*...

"I have taken pleasure in the subject of architecture since my earliest youth, so that for many years I have not only perused with great care the books of those who endowed by generous fortune with great intelligence have enriched this most lofty science with the most admirable principles, but have also traveled many times to Rome and other cities in Italy and abroad where I have seen with my own eyes and measured with my own hands the fragments of many ancient buildings. Finding myself moved and inflamed by my profound studies of *virtu* of this type and having applied all my powers of thought to it, I also set myself the task of writing about the essential principles that must be followed by all intelligent men eager to build well and gracefully."

If we are to recognize these essential principles, take the measure of a thing, or (not so) simply wax into the fullness of the presence of a thing, the fact is that we must have an object to read/see. And this constitutes the greatest strength of the study abroad program: that the student is brought into a direct relationship with the object to be seen as it exists. In its true and native state. It ceases to be represented in a merely analogously fashion: in the image, plan, section, or elevation which are the sole recourse of the distance-learner. It is actualized. It becomes present.⁵

In the presence of the thing itself, the authentic object, *in situ*, we can see it as it truly is. Or at least, we have the greatest opportunity to see the thing, to perceive the reality of the object. Whether or not we actually perceive anything, or further still, comprehend that which we perceive, requires the successful completion of each and all of the rungs, in concert. In causal succession. The mere fact that Guigo's monk reads, or is present at a reading, does not, in itself allow him to penetrate the content of the reading - but it is equally certain that one can neither appreciate nor penetrate that of

which one is ignorant. So the strength of the study abroad program is the great promise that something may be comprehended (or learned) because the object of the study will be fully present.

To this can be added the positive influence of the responsive alertness borne out of the novelty of experiencing something for the first time. The shock of the unfamiliar (or the relatively unfamiliar) leads to perplexity. A perplexity which elicits reflection.⁶ It is curious that this survival mechanism is difficult to sustain amongst the familiar.⁷

It is however clear that that which meets the senses does not constitute the whole of reality. Much less the whole of transferrable or translatable reality. And so Reading without Mediation is indeed, sterile.

Meditatio will be considered to include the thoughtful consideration of the object read or seen. It is an application of the mind. It is not to be detained by unimportant things. Meditation examines. It examines thoroughly. It may or may not be directed or discursive, but it certainly requires criticality, reflection and memory.

The student needs to develop, and be encouraged to develop, a reliable and efficient memory. The student needs to be able to pull from prior experience; and correlate aspects of similarity and difference. They need to be able to gain a sensitivity to correspondence.

But the student must be very careful to avoid the habit of merely Recognizing (performing a hasty categorization or a premature classification without the benefit of adequate reflection). There is a balance to be struck between experiencing things and trying to look too quickly, with the sole intention of confirming a pre-determined or hastily constructed conclusion, and by doing so neglecting the thing in its own right.⁸

The hallmark of Meditatio is concentration without elimination.⁹

Meditation without Reading is liable to error.

The student must have a vital experience, not a mere experience.¹⁰

This is both difficult and terribly critical. I number myself amongst those who would suggest that a student have something consistent to look for amongst the things they are looking at. Something, or some thing (be it an architectural feature, an element, an architectural condition) which can serve as the object of study. An object of inquiry.¹¹ The faculty member can, and should, suggest an object of inquiry, or even better recognize it within the body of the student's work. But it remains to the student alone to make the final selection.¹² This guards against the tendency to engage in 'Building Spotting': the urge to simply collect visits to well-known buildings and projects and, what is more odious, claim a position of privilege based upon the mere fact of having visited those projects. Even if those visits were mindless. It can help to guard against the tendency to travel as a mere tourist.¹³

And because Meditation without Prayer is sterile, there must be Oratio. The student must respond in a communicable way. They must produce. They can photograph. They may write. They must draw and sketch. This requires that they develop the means to communicate graphically. Hopefully they have had a good start in Studio. They may even possess a well-developed aesthetic or stylistic tendency. But they need to be very careful not to fall back on rote.¹⁴ They cannot exchange a consistent and pleasing image for a lack of reflective thought.¹⁵ They cannot confuse the conventions of habit with the rigor of criticality.

The process is to be employed and repeated implicitly. As with any solid pedagogical method, the student should only be aware of the effects. But, through discursive iteration, the student ought to be able to begin to suspect certain discoveries, and trends within those discoveries.

In time, their achievements will encourage and beget refinement and further development. Their curiosity will be both whetted and honed. Their memory will become more reliable and certain. They will progress in their ability to discriminate and discern. They will be able to read and see more clearly, more precisely, more keenly. The influx of precise observations will provide much material upon which to meditate. The deductions of the meditations will become that much more articulate and communicable. And the resulting Oratio will be that much more poignant and effective.

They will learn how to see. And understand what it means to see. And trust their ability to see. And be able to communicate what they see. And what they think about what they see.

If this is what is expected of the model, what is asked of the student?

A certain degree of skill.¹⁶ Rigor. Curiosity. Openness.

An openness to see. An openness to detect, discover and then sustain a trajectory: a set of conditions or principles which very well may underpin their career as architects. A willingness to confront and attempt the unknown in an effort to expose additional intellectual fronts.

Above all the student must be possessed of the ability to persist. There will be days when the eye does not function. Followed by days when the mind does not function, or the memory fails. Or the hand does not cooperate. Or some mutiny is concocted by a set of two faculties, or perhaps even all of them fail to fall in line. It is important that they not succumb to frustration. That they work through those periods. They must persevere.

I confess that these are virtually the same aspects required for the successful completion of a studio. And to this list I would add that a Study Abroad program, by its nature, places a premium on adaptability and an ability to accept change.¹⁷

And what is asked or expected of the faculty member?¹⁸

The ability to challenge the students and enforce the expectations of rigor.

Sufficient breadth: the possession of the knowledge required to provide at least the kernel of an insight. The knowledge can be rooted in history, culture, language, architecture, technology, philosophy, theology, design... The insight provides a potential point of departure. The student provides the momentum.

The faculty member must also possess the ability to quicken the student's attention to opportunities to establish connections. They must function as the student's memory until theirs has sufficiently matured. They must highlight apparent trends

in the inquiry. Be they conditions or principles. Whether they are maintained by an individual or by the group.

And the faculty member must insist that these apparent trends be subject to constructive scrutiny. The student must learn to see beyond what is accidental, to what is fundamental and essential. All this must be done without short-circuiting the individual inquiry.¹⁹

Most importantly, the faculty member must provide an example to the students. They themselves must be serious and attentive and rigorous and willing to endure the changes that result from education. They themselves must balance intellectual progress with a willingness to suspend conclusion and sustain inquiry. They themselves must be willing to See and Reflect and Sketch and share the fruits of their inquiry with the students.²⁰

And here is the ultimate goal. That the ability to see outlasts the initial effect supported by the presence of the novel. That the student forms a reliable basis for Seeing, Reflecting and Drawing, before the student acclimates to the environment and the objects within that environment (in this case of this argument, Europe).

It will then be possible for the student to have confidence that they can see when they return home. And thereby penetrate more fully that which they had wrongly assumed to be so familiar.

Alas, *Contemplatio*, the moment of epiphany, is, as Guigo reminded, never guaranteed. But the possibility of the reward can be, and has to be, merited. It will certainly not be a matter of sheer architectural revelation.²¹

Near the conclusion of his letter, Guigo acknowledges four obstacles: unavoidable necessity, the good works of the active life, human frailty, and worldly folly. He states further that "the first does not harm, the second may be permitted, the third is wretched, the fourth requires penance be performed." Let's simply offer our concurrence.

ENDNOTES

1. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, trans., *The ladder of monks: a letter on the contemplative life and Twelve meditations by Guigo II*. Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1978.
2. Again, *merits*, but does not necessarily, of its own accord, *produce*.
3. Here it may be necessary to distinguish between a travel-based program and a studio-based program. Although I feel that learning how to see ought to be at the pedagogical core of either model, I concede that it is more difficult to sustain these practices in a studio-based program. Primarily because of the intrinsic difficulty of the studio model: namely, that the students (and perhaps even the faculty member) easily fall into their typical/normative studio habits.
4. The argument, as the history of epistemology indicates, is not solely semantic. But Aristotle, for one, did posit that intellectual comprehension begins with sensual input: that discoverable universal truths are to be found in the particular. Subsequently, there followed a number of interesting arguments over which was the highest of the senses. Aristotle championed touch, while Plato and Aquinas argued for the preeminence of sight.
5. The oft-repeated observations of students can be offered as anecdotal evidence of this effect. As is the case when students remark how 'different' (usually smaller) their favorite building is 'in real life': freed from the trickery of the wide-angle lens and the cropping tool.
6. John Dewey, *How we think* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1910), p 9-12.
7. Here I cannot resist exposing myself as a proponent of the Grand Tour, and more generously, of basing programs in Europe. If one accepts that an object is to be read, Europe presents itself to the student as legible. It is sufficiently different to challenge hasty preconceptions, and yet it can be penetrated. It has complexity and depth. And the student (the American student) can readily begin to plumb that depth through recourse to a common cultural and intellectual heritage. This is the dominion of 'philodoxy'.
8. Here we may find support in an analysis of Gerald Manley Hopkins conceptions of 'instress' and 'inscape', or in Paul Klee's theories of 'induction' via *andacht zum kleinen* (a devotion to small things) the goal of which is stated as 'exactitude winged by intuition' - but those are topics to be developed in another paper.
9. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets. Burnt Norton, II*.
10. John Dewey, "Art as Experience" in *Aesthetics: a comprehensive anthology*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), p 296-316.

11. A brief litany of possibilities might include: window, door, floor, entry, sequence, procession, edge, corner, material. It may be beneficial to consider more than one scale: the street, the plaza, the urban room, how a city meets the water.

12. It is however unconditionally the right of the faculty to insist that whatever the student chooses be approached and investigated with academic rigor.

13. I am indebted to Herman Hertzberger for the conversations (had on and around 24 March 2008) that clarified my thoughts on this matter.

14. This is what can be so difficult to avoid in studio-based programs where the students (and perhaps even the faculty member) are naturally prone to carry on as if they were 'at home'.

15. Although it is conceded that, in some very few, very rare cases, each may constitute the other.

16. And with this we're confronted with the difficulty of knowing when, within the curriculum to offer the opportunity to study abroad. We would, most probably, expect the student to have some nascent knowledge of architectural history, and some degree of graphic literacy. And so the opportunity tends to come later in the curriculum. After Core Courses and General Education Requirements have been dispensed with. But is that late? Or even too late? What might the student be possible of achieving if they could engage the study abroad experience - this vital pregnant experience - at the *beginning* of their architectural education? What might they be able to accomplish if they could pull from this store of experience throughout their education?

17. And maybe a sense of humor. It's not always natural to find the amusement in paying to use a toilet, suffering strikes amongst public transportation workers, and discovering that the building you admire most is either clad in scaffolding or closed for renovations.

18. Here I speak of skills beyond those of immediate necessity, e.g., the ability to plan, organize and execute a program, and to provide for the logistical requirements of a sizeable contingent of students. I further acknowledge the possibility that these skills can be assembled from amongst a collection of faculty members each possessing their individual and particular skills.

19. It is preferable that the program itself be equally flexible; balancing group tours with sufficient time for individual pursuits and visits to projects of the student's choosing. And that the program provide ample time for students to See and Meditate and Discuss and Sketch.

20. And then they must guard against students aping their techniques.

21. I do not pretend that this method (itself extrapolated from a method that does not claim to be able to guarantee its ultimate delight) to be fool-proof. This argument is intended to be more provocative than conclusive. I do contend that the purpose of a study

abroad program ought to be to learn how to see, but I offer the above explication as a threshold for a greater discussion on how that purpose is to be most effectively achieved.