

On Usefulness

“Uh-huh” followed by a smile comprised the depth of what Ella volunteered to the conversation. She was trying hard to avoid chatting with *Gossip Georgia*, as Ella nicknamed her co-worker, Georgia. A decade her junior in age and an additional amount in lesser wisdom, *Gossip Georgia* did not inspire confidence. Perhaps she only heard rumors, or perhaps she was unable to spread news – *as heard*. Either way, Ella viewed her chat as marginalia on Middle Ages’ books: useful contextualization when unable to read the scribe’s script.

Physically sitting behind the front desk in the reference office, Ella’s mind was always away building pyramids of knowledge no one seemed keen to notice. When *Gossip Georgia* induced the first well-enunciated “uh-huh” out of Ella’s oral cavity, Ella had been contemplating continuing her reading on the difference between “usefulness” and “utility.” She had been searching for a moment of solitude, which that morning should have arrived once her student appointments had finished. The last student had just left right when Georgia entered the reference area and vied for the empty seat next to Ella. As if reclining caused her talking, she started bringing up stuff better left dusted.

Ella could have made up a reason to officially shut her down – “The dean just emailed with an impossible request,” or something similar. She didn’t. Instead, she clenched her teeth and fixated the computer screen, forcing her brain to remember whether Bentham or Pierce would provide the answer to her quest, when Georgia said:

“...chose Melvin” Ella stopped to understand the meaning of that sentence. She finally made up its subject: “Mary-Jane chose Melvin...”

As if pulled back by forceps, Ella had to acknowledge Georgia’s presence. Sitting at the front desk in the reference office, an area carved out of the entrance to the library, Ella’s time was fair game. She was expected to offer moral support to people in search of a moment to breathe between classes and help those hunting for some obscure reference -- often obscure only because a brief Google search had proved fruitless seconds earlier. Her highfalutin moment gave way to the mundane, to what she did for a living. Obliquely, she observed Georgia’s nails. So badly bitten down, she started studying her own. With age all nakedness looked rough. She made a mental note to have them painted in a color that encouraged strange, escapist conversation:

“Nice nails. Rouge noir. Is that the recent shade of noir Chanel’s promoting?”

“...out of all of us to update Mary-Jane’s research book.”

Her moment of fun gone, Ella wondered why *Gossip Georgia* couldn’t just retire to her cubicle. The time on the computer screen indicated twenty minutes to noon. What about getting ready for a lunch appointment? Exasperated, Ella tried another “uh-huh” aloud. Useless. Her concentration disappeared. Anything but Pierce and Bentham. Gone. “What about Dewey?” Ella blinked. A brazen but failed, second attempt to put a smile on a dreary day. Her co-worker was now

comfortably sprawled in the chair reserved for those with ontological questions: “Where can I find this book?” “You mean the one you are holding?” had been Ella’s dreamed-about exchange, until then imaginary. But *Gossip Georgia* had no questions. Only answers and guess-work. Ella could ask her politely to leave the chair empty until a rightful occupant would show up. Then again, to ask that Ella would have to be someone else, someone whose utilitarian motives rested on a mechanical power struggle of the type postal office workers engage in, in French movies. “Do as I say, because I can make you do it.” Nope. Ella took the high way and sighed. She moved around in her chair and the paper cup hidden nearby almost spilled. She caught it and tried a sip. Half filled with a rotten mocha now undrinkable: cold and reminiscent of her workplace and its small-minded rules everybody seemed to enjoy: “No food, and especially, no drinks allowed.”

Gossip Georgia was still at it, talking. Ella refused to stop wonder about the reason for their encounter. The power of fate, probably. Could her budding resentment towards her co-worker have anything to do with her own choices? Probably. She still had to figure out how she ended up behind a reference desk when as a child, Ella’s relationship with her public library blossomed like winters in Siberia. There was no point on falling down that memory lane, but there she was 11-year old Ella, whose reading pleasure was confined to Podunk’s public library. Accessing it required making herself vulnerable to questioning by the middle-aged prosaic female sitting on a high chair behind the circulation desk which doubled as reference point. The tank-looking woman, whose mouth seemed always in motion, mostly chewing sunflower seeds, was able to spot anybody daring to come in. Young thirst for leisure reading and pleasure irritated the otherwise inflexible female. Ella learned fast how to strategize her visits so she could pass by her desk while the beast was at work eviscerating the family stories of another kid with good grades and treacherous upbringing, filled with potentially splendid future failures. She did all that while sucking the seeds out of the shells stuck in between her elongated, yellow teeth. Those moments her large smooth face hypnotized young Ella: the fearful guardian of knowledge resembled a giant sponge, until her words melted into poison.

“Has your dad stopped beating you?” or the less intense, “How much does he drink nowadays?” became the hallmark of librarianship for Ella. When she would catch “Is the bastard out of work?” Ella thought the library must have hired a caring, if not useful, assistant.

Gossip Georgia was still talking. Ella looked around moving her head as if a bee was bothering her. She yearned for the tactile security that came with holding the *Bentham Reader* she skimmed the day before. That was it. That was the Holy Grail she could neither remember nor find, now that the buzzing *Gossip Georgia* exuded while engaged in office schadenfreude became more and more intense by the second:

“That’s news to me. I did not know Mary-Jane was updating her research book.” Ella volunteered.

“Really?”

“Nor that she’s replacing her co-author.”

“More like adding Melvin. He will update it.”

“News to me.”

“That’s because you needed to ignore it. I haven’t been around half the time you’ve been here, and the news stung me. It sure hurts you like hell.” *Gossip Georgia* used to be a contract attorney and she enjoyed precision of language.

“Andrea must have been equally hurt. She was Mary-Jane’s favorite when she taught her class last spring.” Ella swiftly deflected the attention.

“Ouch, you still remember that?” *Gossip Georgia* looked surprised. “Then Mary-Jane hurt you mortally twice.” Ella blinked as if dust flew into her eye. “How could Mary-Jane have chosen Andrea, who’s the youngest and least experienced, and not you, the oldest in the department?”

“She did hurt me,” Ella acquiesced like Ivan’s heretic under pressure from the Grand Inquisitor.

“Do you think Mary-Jane did it on purpose?” *Gossip Georgia* went for the scoop.

“Probably,” Ella offered a second before she could wonder whether it was true, whether she believed what she had said. Partially she did. Partially, like an adopted child who could never really want to learn the reasons behind her adoption, Ella could never really seek the truth behind Mary-Jane’s actions if she wanted to maintain relative emotional comfort in the office.

“But then, you didn’t graduate from this law school, as both Mary-Jane and Andrea have.” Georgia added the obvious.

“By that logic, Andrea hurts even more because Mary-Jane passed her up for Melvin,” unwisely, Ella continued the conversation.

“As you said, Mary-Jane likes hurting people.” *Gossip Georgia* shared with Ella how the news would be spread from then on.

“Not to mention Dorothea, correct?” Ella went on, her resentment having taken over her senses, making her deaf to *Gossip Georgia*’s previous misstatement.

“Dorothea has much too much on her plate right now, don’t you think so?” Ella’s contribution to office gossip was unexpectedly rebuked. Administratively at the same level with *Gossip Georgia*, Dorothea was Ella’s direct supervisor, one notch below Mary-Jane. Cornered, Ella was saved by an email alert for a printed article. Faculty members would often email links rather than click on them in their rush to get the attachments behind. The materiality a PDF provided satisfied their quest for knowledge in a way that a link apparently could not. Ella clicked on the link provided and the PDF

behind it opened up on her screen like a flower in full bloom. Impressed she became more agreeable.

“You may be right.” The materiality of the task dried out all her insecurities. “Dorothea produces weekly documents, office papers, that is true.”

About a decade ago, Ella occupied Dorothea’s supervisor position, a two-year rotation in her department. The office managerial team meant to give all employees some administrative duties so they could apply for more demanding jobs elsewhere. Ella chose to stay at the end of her rotation. In exchange, she put up with the successive rounds of colleagues she would hire and who would eventually boss her around temporarily until they found promotions away and left her behind with a belief that she had nowhere to go. It was partially true, and partially impossible to assess, like a morning cup of coffee meant to make everything go smoothly after a long restless night.

Ella finished her task and strengthening her back looked at Georgia, almost as if inviting her to wrap it up and move along. Quite a nice change, which her co-worker met with a gambit:

“Do you think Mary-Jane hurts people willingly?” Ella looked up bewildered. A neon light was blinking above her head, and she briefly wondered why the library didn’t use LEDs. “Ella, could it be that her actions cause us pain because she’s reckless, or is she oblivious to the departmental dynamics?” Ella stopped her mental fidgeting. *Gossip Georgia* had brought the meaning of time wasted to a new level of significance, the almost philosophical discussion.

“I don’t know.”

“I bet she starts with what’s most useful to her.”

Ella’s mouth dried up instantly. The mocha was smiling at her from the cup at the bottom of the garbage bin. She fought off the passing impulse to lift it up and drink it. “Would that be useful?” she attempted right before succumbing to *Gossip Georgia*.

“Just think about it. Mary-Jane picked Melvin to update her new edition for one obvious reason: Melvin had positioned himself on the tech committee roster. She sees him in action and believes he’s the most useful candidate to update her book.”

Submissive, Ella nodded. She had become a puppy on a short leash. *Gossip Georgia*’s interpretation, true or not, made sense. Research had come to rely mostly on databases. In admiration, Ella leaned her heavy head slightly away from her co-worker. It proved enough to open her sight of the opposite wall with its neatly organized books, where the *Bentham Reader* had been shelved the day before.

“What do you think?” Ella heard as she was furtively exiting her co-worker’s gossip confines.

“Useful,” she revealed her thoughts, standing up to further expand her gazing range.

“Yes,” Georgia’s clarification came, “useful to Mary-Jane, not to us.”

Ella made eye contact and walked to the book shelf, where she had shelved the *Bentham Reader* at the end of her evening shift. She eagerly opened the dog-eared page:

“By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual then the happiness of the individual.”

Deeply satisfied, she read it twice before closing the book. She put it back on the shelf to avoid any discussion. Retreating to her desk she looked over the head of *Gossip Georgia*. Students were entering the library. She looked at the clock, ten minutes to noon. Smiling she whispered to herself “dialectical utility,” reprising her favorite sport: mental jogging. “Mary-Jane’s actions were driven by her own quest for happiness.” No doubt. “But, they did hurt everybody else.” Not Melvin. “Wait until her next move, when another favorite will appear.” A surge of elation seized the moment. Her mental exercises paid off. She had an epiphany beyond her writing. Utility – her job - could benefit and harm her simultaneously; it befell on herself to bring happiness where others caused her pain.

“Then I realized that it must have hurt you most,” Georgia repeated the reason she stopped by Ella’s. “Haven’t you published most in the department?”

“On law?” Ella could have pretended to be coy, but the moment of daunting insecurity had come and gone. *Gossip Georgia* proved useful after all, Ella realized. She delivered both the gossip and its antidote.

“Hey,” a former student of Ella’s entered the reference office. She had an ash mark on her forehead. Aloud, the three women engaged in pleasantries.

“Lent had started,” Ella thought and started an inventory of pleasures she did not care about abandoning. “What about my sea of insecurity?”

“Sit down,” Georgia finally invited the student, an avid library user, and rushed out the office.

“Lunch later, Ella?”

“Sure,” the reply came swiftly and unexpectedly. “Simona, how can I help you, today?”