

Bridges between Cultures

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Ties and Knots

Edited by

Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech,
Ewa Borkowska and Tomasz Kalaga

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TIES BETWEEN LANDS AND CULTURES

EWA BORKOWSKA, TOMASZ KALAGA,
AGNIESZKA ADAMOWICZ-POŚPIECH
AND TOMASZ BURZYŃSKI

The present volume investigates the dialogic (perhaps dialectical as well) relationships between socially dissimilar and topographically distant cultures. The metaphor of **bridges** becomes a scholarly construct gesturing towards globalization processes which – as the cultural understanding of the term wishes to indicate – pave the way for the intensification of cross-cultural and cross-ethnic interactions taking place within global socio-political systems whose scope goes well beyond the well-entrenched boundaries of local traditions or regional political structures chief among which is the national state.

The idea of bridges is also an invitation to theorize on the processes of individual and collective identity formation with respect to contemporary multicultural societies (Great Britain, the USA, Canada). The processes, philologically speaking, are necessitated by the willingness to understand and accept the language/languages of the Other, to *bridge* the chasm of mutual misunderstanding, distrust or suspicion. In this way, approaching the Other cannot be conceived as a purely linguistic challenge. Its cultural and moral (ethical) dimensions are also manifested by the critical imperative to overcome cultural differences by means of postulating a shared sphere of symbolic resources whose norms and values may pave the way for the emergence of multilateral relations, generalized trust expectations and communicative rationalities.

Additionally, the volume is an attempt to explore various methodological frameworks for discourses and theories that purport to conceptualize cultural spaces which – as opposed to objective, geographical areas – are characterized by the propensity to *bind* topographical distances by means of symbolic *ties* which foster and facilitate the familiarization of geographical places and subsume them within the perimeter of shared discourses of culture. The metaphor of *knots*, however, is also inviting a

discussion of bonds that are so tightly entangled as to become problematic and, perhaps, irresolvable.

When approached from a different perspective, ties, knots and bridges may function as metaphors illustrating methodological challenges and opportunities associated with cross-disciplinary discourses, projects or disciplines in the humanities, arts or social sciences. The conference, consequently, aims to explore processes by which supposedly dissimilar theories, concepts or notions are yoked by scholarly ingenuity to create the *discordia concors* of contemporary academic practices. More specifically, the chapters address possible juxtapositions and intersections of spatial and temporal dimensions of cultural practice; religious and ethical “ties and knots” between lands and cultures (**Patrick Madigan**), inter- / disconnections between historical/literary/cultural epochs (**Nancy Schultz**, **Ewa Borkowska**), cross-cultural relations that are problematically entangled together (“cultural knots” or “Gordian knots” across cultures (**Steven James Joyce**, **Joanna Skolik**), discourses of cultural entanglement and cultural ensnarement, both on individual and social levels (**Elizabeth Kenney**, **Agnieszka Podruczna**), discourses of globalization (**Bożena Kilian**), hybridization and cultural assimilation (**Kaushal Sanjay**), technology vs. humanities (**Sonia Front**), spaces and places as phenomenological categories (**Paulina Mirowska**), aesthetic bridges between various cultures in music, poetry and visual arts (**Anthony Barker**, **Rafał Madeja**, **Eric Starnes**).

The first two chapters by Steven James Joyce and Nancy Schultz were keynote addresses made at the *Ties and Knots. Bridges Between Land and Cultures* international academic conference held at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. They analyze the idea of cultural mediation and intercultural bonds between Europe (Poland in particular) and the US. **Steven James Joyce** attempts to identify the causes of contemporary failure to understand the world outside our borders at the same time identifies the cultural knots that define us and hold us in our cultural orbits. The insidious malaise that poses a fatal threat and imperceptibly deforms our culture is according to Joyce “the placement of self in the centre of all activity” which might lead to the erosion of the texture of society. He frames his ruminations with one prevalent metaphor of a journey; a journey we all take in our lives which “involves creating meaning that undergoes a process of change, dispersion and deferral.” In a meditative poem “Lord of Ithaca” the story of Odysseus is re-visioned and the concepts of hope and homecoming are poetically redefined: “Hope is an integer rather / whose square root repeats forever this talk exponential [...]. / I’ve reached the saturation point / conventional wisdom tells me.”

The ancient traveller may become a patron of all those who search for bridges between cultures, who want to “to achieve some kind of geo-political rapprochement with those cultures that remain other to western values.” Yet the contemporary *Lord of Ithaca* differs in his exhaustion from his Victorian counterpart – Tennyson’s Ulysses who though old, is “strong in will” and, refusing to make a lasting homecoming, pushes onward relentlessly: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” Intriguingly, the figure of Odysseus hovers also over some other chapters in this volume (Ewa Borkowska’s among others) and the metaphor of a journey is crucial for Joanna Skolik’s or Elizabeth Kenney’s reasoning.

Nancy Schultz’s article is the embodiment of the spirit that guides this volume. Meticulously ploughing the field of praxis, the author rewards the reader with a surprisingly bountiful harvest of ties and parallels that bind the short but turbulent history of Salem with the painful history of Polish struggle for independence and national identity. The spiritual parallels of the literary past constitute the foundation of the intertwined futures: the author points to remarkable similarities in two of the nations’ masterpieces – Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables* and Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*. Literary deeds of bravery are reflected in historical reality, as two Polish national heroes, Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski, join the American Revolution to fight for the newly born nation’s liberty. In less spectacular, but very tangible manner, Polish migrants plant their roots on the Salem’s soil, and in nurturing their hybrid “complimentary identity,” knot the two nation’s cultures and “become an integral part of Salem.”

Ewa Borkowska argues that nowadays all connections with the previous epochs have been severed and though the postmodernist thinkers try to re-link the present with the past, all they attain is simulation of linkage, not a true and in-depth bond with human heritage. She perceptively analyzes the loosening of ties from the end of the Middle Ages until the present and outlines the causes of the disintegration of the modern world, basing her analysis on the works of Eugenio Trias, Roger Scruton and Charles Taylor, among others. The ties that seem to have bound people together were, in Borkowska’s view, religion and respect for tradition and history. The diagnosis of the contemporary intellectual life, reiterated after Roger Scruton, is overpowering: there are no value principles, all we are left with is doubt and scepticism. Yet the conclusions are not entirely pessimistic since “the spiritual odyssey of man can be crowned with success provided there is a constant pursuit, be it intellectual or physical, to “strive and seek and find” the goal of life which, as history

progresses, can be found through the interaction between past and present, tradition and modernity.”

The deterioration of contemporary culture is diagnosed by **Patrick Madigan** and **Joanna Skolik**. Similarly to Borkowska and Skolik, Madigan endeavours to delineate the causes of the default life style of our times which he dubs “expressive individualism.” He singles out as one of the causes the modern mad pursuit of fame and fortune which “is worn proudly and defiantly in the hope that others will identify with it, thereby branding the performer a cultural hero. This popular strategy [...] holds that the supreme ethical imperative to which other obligations must be subordinated is for each to bring forward their hidden noumenal core, the only source of value, into the phenomenal appearance where it may be admired [...]” Madigan regards our culture as revolutionary which rejects all neo-classical restrictions and is permeated by the trivialized concept of genius. The Byronic hero (the rebel) emulated by thousands of novels and movies spread to the entire population becoming egalitarian. And indeed Kurtz and Colonel Kurtz are the heroes of our age: the deformed individuals, deeming themselves geniuses, who rebel against the whole world and believe that they were born “to set it right.” Madigan argues that the figure of the Miltonic Lucifer became the dominant archetype for modern imagination and mode of behaviour. Skolik’s contrastive analysis of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* corroborates this argument and reveals the unspeakable havoc wrought by man if he declares “I know none before me. I am self begot” (*Paradise Lost*).

The physical collapse and ruin of man-made artefacts, bridges in particular, serve as a point of departure for **Anthony Barker’s** kaleidoscopic overview of films which revolve around the figure of a bridge. This structure more often than not became a powerful symbol and unquenchable source for cultural (cinematic for that matter) signification. Thus the chapter’s aim is to offer a taxonomy of metaphorical use of bridges in popular film culture. In his classification Barker distinguishes, among others, the following categories: the bridge as frontier, as a military target, as a perfect example of human technological advancement and as a place of despair and death. Barker’s survey encompasses both light-hearted comedies and gloomy documentaries and surprisingly reveals that though bridges are emblems of connectedness *per se*, they have spurred reflection on human disconnectedness.

Yet some bridges may crumble under one’s feet to open up an unexpected abyss. In **Agnieszka Podruczna’s** analysis of a short story “Lingua Franca,” by Carole McDonnell, the bridges built across chasms

are only illusory. Regarding science-fiction as one of the modes of post-colonial writing, the author emphasises its subversive, revisionist practise over the visionary one, a practice that offers no easy and expectable solutions for the problems of the present. The hybrid identities of the colonised, constructed both through the cultural domination of the colonists and the bodily modifications implanted to impose a language that is inherently alien to the *physis* and the psyche alike, fail the invested hopes. The conciliatory role of a hybrid identity is contested, and instead of raising a bridge, it reveals a widening gap, as the hybrids become inevitably alienated, unable to fit even into the margins of the dominant hegemony, being at the same time dispossessed by their own kind.

The theme of identity and ethics is the main concern of the paper by **Kaushal Sanjay**, who perceives the contemporary discourses of the self as constructing an identity that restricts and misdirects an individual through its insufficient address of the Other. The Self and the Other, tied in the 20th century philosophy into mutually binding knots, engage in a self-defining dance, whose steps echo the melody of closure and exclusion. What is needed instead, is a stance of ethical responsibility, that will turn the binding manacles of identity into ethical ties that actually untie, opening the Self to the Other through a linguistic opening that is made possible by language different from everyday speech – that of literature.

Intertextual knots are explored by **Paulina Mirowska** in her study of Sam Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse*. The “quintessentially American” playwright, whose plays “function as a storehouse of images, icons, and idioms that denote American culture and an American sensibility,” is portrayed as engaged into a complex game of double references. On the one hand, the play is Beckett's *Endgame* set in possibly the most unlikely setting imaginable – the American prairie, the badlands – and thus becomes a theater of ultimate nonsense. On the other, it is a revision and re-examination of Shepard's negotiation of American identity. Is the playwright interrogating the frictions between the values of the American culture, or is he conducting a critical dialogue with his own life's artistic work? Such are the knots that Mirowska's interpretation attempts to untie.

Eric Starnes explores the “ties and knots” of current American ideas on “armed insurrection, rebellion and revolution.” He analyses the extreme political movements against government, international corporations and mainstream media as exemplified by historical novels of Stuart Archer Cohen and Harold A. Covington. Along rebellion, Starnes singles out other intensely controversial issues of social grievances expressed in this

fiction: class and race. His point is to examine the ideology, depicted in the novels, of the opponents of the so-called ‘progressive’, multicultural Western society and reveal the “cracks that continue to fracture the United States.” The conclusions drawn from the analyzed fiction as well as recent events in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City are bleak; they show “the ever widening gap” (unbridgeable gap?) particularly between black/African-American and white/European American.

Elizabeth Kenney endeavours to reveal the reciprocity between the general and the particular, the society and the individual by placing individual lives in broad historical and social contexts while at the same time exposing the impact of large historical movements and events on the lives of ordinary men and women. To unravel the intricate bonds between the seemingly insignificant particles of society and the global changes in societies, she painstakingly clarifies the intriguing vicissitudes of two American families: the Jarvies and the Harts through the prism of the correspondence of Mrs Sarah Jarvis. By discussing its rich content and providing a broad panorama of the contemporary social and cultural life both in America and in Europe (Italy, France and Poland) Kenney in fact re-visions and divulges HERstory: a story of an “un-famous” woman trying to pull the strings on the political scene in America. Here an *alternative* story arises of women who corroborated in circulating enlightenment ideas between cultures. Kenney’s close reading of just one letter “of impassioned appeal for the women of the US to support the Polish people [...]” shows how an American woman managed to bridge several lands and cultures and linked “individual American lives [...] with a transatlantic exchange of political ideas, and [...] indicat[ed] a role that not-yet-enfranchised women could envision for themselves in constructing those bridges.”

Is there a need for bridges, when “everything is connected to everything else”? Reading Andrew Crumey’s *Sputnik Caledonia* through the lens of quantum mechanics and Goethe’s theories on consciousness, **Sonia Front** explores the labyrinths of “multiplicity in unity.” Split-identity, or multiple identities? Is it the consciousness that creates reality through perception? If so, what of ethics – the question of responsibility for one’s actions still remains, despite the possible fragmentation of the world in the eye of the beholder and the very identity of the beholder. Perhaps the more connections exist, the greater the moral burdens of an individual – not a bridge builder, but a bridge keeper, not an engineer but a guardian.

Bożena Kilian’s paper asks questions about the “restless” status of a tourist and of tourism in the age of globalization. Not only does

tourism exert economic and social influence over the target countries, but the tourist's identity itself undergoes changes in the act of travelling. Is a tourist building real bridges between countries, or is he/she forsaking the familiar home to become exposed to the danger of becoming an unwelcome vagabond? The act of observation changes the observer? Nothing seems certain and fixed in the fluidity of globalized economy.

And finally, in **Rafal Madeja's** anthropological study, string figures. In today's pragmatic reality, can one conceive of something more trivial than this game of the Kwakwawa'wakw people, the Northwest Coast First Nations? There seems to be nothing useful or productive in this apparently childish past-time of creating shapes with string wrapped around one's fingers. But the universality of the symbols that those figures represent forbids such a conclusion. Symbolic of the most primal human emotions, needs and relations in each individual form, the idea of the figures themselves becomes the most universal symbol – a tie that binds all nations and all human beings by their ancestral traditions, which although different, ultimately pertain to the same common denominators of humanity.

ENLIGHTENMENT AND REPATRIATION: THE CHALLENGE OF OTHERNESS¹

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When Professor Borkowska sent me the initial announcement of the conference, I was intrigued by the dual aspect of ties and knots on the one hand and bridges on the other. The timeliness and importance of a conference that aims to “investigate relationships between socially dissimilar and topographically different cultures” as well as discuss the problem of individual and identify formation in multi-cultural societies cannot be overstated. Certainly, in the US we continue to struggle with the idea of identity formation in our own multi-cultural society as well as struggle with the difficulty of comprehending the world outside our borders. Failure to understand the world outside our borders remains an obstacle on the road to achieving any kind of enlightened geo-political *rapprochement* with those cultures and societies that remain *other* to the western way of life. Failure to remove that obstacle is one that neither we nor any member of the global community can afford to remedy. I applaud the conference planners for their perspicacity and interest in bringing these issues to this forum for discussion and hope that it will spawn more forums that do the same.

During the flight to Katowice, I had time between watching several films to think a little about the idea of this *Keynote Address*. As a comparatist, I tend to be a little disparate in my thinking and construct essays and addresses the same way a child might make a bead necklace

I have tried to string together intellectual beads that, in aim, complement each other in color and tone. In constructing this rhetorical necklace, I choose my various themes from a repository of disparate ideas and short anecdotes that allowed me a fair degree of latitude in putting together this address. I came to the conclusion that personal anecdote is probably the best vehicle for this since it allows me to violate the

¹ This is a *Keynote Address* delivered at the *Ties and Knots: Bridges Between Land and Cultures* International Conference, University of Silesia, September 2014.

conventions of logical segue or sustained development without significantly routinizing the message. The texture of the address, I hope, will have the feel of a journey with stops along the way that are both planned and serendipitous.

In drafting this address, I thought about the reception it would have as it is filtered through *your* personal, professional and cultural experiences. I also thought about how our commonalities and differences might alter, complement, and even distort what I planned to say. How we communicate with each other, how we convey our thoughts filtered as they are through the various cultural skeins and assumptions that background our diverse experiences, remains a central premise of this conference and one we must be aware of whenever we attempt to communicate our ideas or bridge the significance of our experiences with the experiences of others.

I will begin with a statement of identity and from there attempt to focus on experiences and ideas that have shaped both my thinking and sense of who I am in an attempt to articulate some of the cultural and ideational assumptions with which I understand the world. Moreover, I hope to touch upon several concerns that I see as crucial in navigating the difficult times to come. I will end with a poem entitled “The Lord of Ithaca” which I hope complements this address by suggesting that life journeys we all take involve creating meaning that undergoes a process of change, dispersion and deferral.

I grew up in a small rural farm community in Northeast Wisconsin, a state bordering on Lakes Michigan and Superior and formed during the Last Ice Age from glaciers the covered much of North America. Wisconsin is situated very near Canada – so near Canada that Wisconsinites are often mistaken for Canadians on the basis of linguistic idiosyncrasies like the “eh” that punctuates most questions and statements and imperatives. “It’s cold outside, eh?” “Dat’s true, eh?” And then there is the long drawn out “o” vowel which sounds like a tunnel vowel, changing timbre and tone depending where and how one hears it, as in “Oh no” or the *aw* sound as in “about.” Proximity to Canada has shaped how we speak and to some extent who we are.² And the effect is reciprocal.

Growing up as part of a large Irish-Catholic family in the small rural community of De Pere, Wisconsin, named by French fur trappers and Jesuits exploring the area as early as the mid-1600s, I was aware in a

² Thomas Purnell, Eric Ramey and Joseph Salmons, *Wisconsin Talk: Linguistic Diversity in the Badger State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 8.

sleepy way of the patchwork nature of our small farming community. Many of our farm neighbors had odd sounding names like Koslovski and Warpinski and Zahorski as well as Vander Zandens, and Vande Heys and Vandenheuvals, not to mention O'Brians, and O'Connels and Joyces. There were German names like Obermeier and Grippentrough, Reinhardt and Steinmuller. In the mix were the Native Americans of Northeastern Wisconsin – the Chippewa, the Algonquian, the Oneida, the Sauk, the Fox, the Potawatomi – tribes that had occupied this area for hundreds of years before Europeans ever set foot on the continent.³ Without the perspicacity to draw extended sociological implications of this cultural and ethnic admixture, I did notice nonetheless, differences, which somehow seemed to be subsumed by powerful commonalities and powerful ties and bridging structures that brought together farmers of Polish, Irish, German, Belgian, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish and French descent. From a distance the effect appeared metaphorically as a kind of cultural quilt which placed people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds next to each other, creating a colorful and rich heterogeneous cultural textile. Seen close-up, the cultural differences between the farmers of various European descent appeared as colorful patterns and textures which defined each cultural swatch of this community quilt. The German and Dutch farms tended to be neat and orderly. High hipped barns were always painted a brilliant red, edged by white highlighting. The popular Holstein cows had names and sometimes wore stylish bell-neckwear. The German and Dutch farmers kept their mowers, and planters and choppers and balers in top working order. The Irish and Polish farms, however, were much different than the German and Dutch farms. Neatness and upkeep were less important than what only much later in life suggested to me a postmodern narrative – a jumble of always already ever deferring knowledge focused on the *transit mundi* as well as on a signifying absence which imparted an ethereal quality to these farms.

The rusted machinery, dilapidated buildings and broken down houses which, generally speaking, characterized these farms became objective correlatives to a kind of parallel world where dissolution and return suggested a model of life that had deep spiritual significance. There was also something of an Alice in Wonderland strangeness about these farms that fired the imagination and made farming a far more aesthetic experience than I or my brothers would ever have admitted to at the time. My father, however, who was a dairy farmer as well as a reformatory

³ Patty Loew, *Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2013), 99–118.

guard, did not see much aesthetic in farming and atypically for the times and for the area made sure that all the boys in the family were sent to a private boys school to be taught by French Premonstratensian fathers, who had been brought to Wisconsin from France to counter heresy propagated by a sect called “Old Catholicism” in the peninsula of Wisconsin.⁴ It became a little ironic that several of these articulate scholarly white fathers ended up in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco during the notorious summer of love in 1969, while many of us muddled our way through the complexities of the Vietnam conflict, which left many of us cynical, rebellious and confused.

Yet, it was our life on the farm life which seemed to offer the most lasting and poignant lessons. We began to think differently about life – more along lines of the comi-tragic than the tragic comic. We began to sense this parallel universe anytime my grandfather would show up to fix things. He employed two tools to make any kind of repairs – the four-inch spike and strands of smooth baler wire-later he moved on to baler twine. A repaired gate was crisscrossed with wire or wrapped mummy-like in baler twine. One side would inevitably droop and the latches remained out of alignment and rusted. Larger projects required the four-inch spike – roof repair, barn repair, even machinery. My grandfather lacked both the finesse and the interest to repair anything properly. He viewed paint as a pointless extravagance, a kind of sinful indulgence. Replacing rotted lumber was for him little more than a waste of imagination.

Our farm and our grandfather’s Irish farm remained works in suspended progress, abstractions that bypassed a realistic or naturalistic repair phase. We began to see our farm as a work of sophisticated art not unlike that of a Picasso or Du Champs or Gauguin. As an evolving iconic abstraction, the farm alerted us to alternate views of reality and culture that provided alternate bridges to understanding who we were. My grandfather in his trademark fedora hat and blue coveralls preferred talking to farming. He was a great teller of stories but a profligate steward of the land. Even his cattle were different – he preferred the shaggy rust colored Scottish shorthorn to the black and white Holsteins. These animals, as far as we could see, were closer to bears than to cows and ostensibly offered nothing other than the promise of wrecking fences in spring and wandering where ever they pleased. While the Holsteins were Apollonian in temperament, the Scottish shorthorns were Dionysian and provided us with hours of entertaining destruction.

⁴ Edward Looney, “Called to Evangelize: The Story of Adele Brise and the Mariophany that Changed her Life,” *Marian Studies*, vol. 62 (2011): 119–138.

Before I stray too far from the point completely, I will sum up this formative experience as an introduction to the discussion of cross cultural bridging and the ravelling that that bridging entails. What we experienced in all this was a kind of rich heterogeneity, a cultural quilting whose stitching was the occupation of farming and the practice of religion, back-grounded by a sense of opportunity and destiny – already a kind of rural exceptionalism.⁵ On a typical Sunday after our entire family of 12 caravanned to Sunday mass, my father would come home and turn on the TV to hear Alvin Styczynski and his Polish orchestra that came live from the Sunday Pulaski polka festival. When you are young you are sure that that is what the entire world is doing at that time. So here you had an Irishman who married a German whose best friends were Dutch and whose musical affinities allowed preferred Polish polkas. The cultural bridging that both these bridges and affinities has begun to disappear and with it the richness of culture I felt growing up.

When Professor Borkowska invited me to participate in this international conference with this intriguing title of “Ties and Knots, Bridges between Land and Cultures,” I was re-reading a work that I continue to use in an English composition course with the theme of American identity. The novel entitled *The Shipping News* written by Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Proulx describes the stop and go odyssey of a modern anti-hero as he makes his way from a brutal and loveless childhood to an early adulthood marked by an abusive and dysfunctional emotional attachment.⁶ Finally, however he arrives at a tentative sense of repatriation, a kind of homecoming to a self that lay in potential. The central character’s name is a fanciful version of the word coil (his name spelled Quoyle). His name indicates his existential and spiritual posture and is apt since it names that kind of nautical rope that lay coiled on a ship deck and is readily walked upon by deck hands as Quoyle is walked upon by others throughout his life. Quoyle’s emotional landscape is a kind of killing field of the spirit. He feels that his loveless past, his large and awkward appearance, his failure to attract friends or hold a job as well as family genetics bind him, sentence him to a life of emotional and spiritual deadness. These aspects of his life are the knots that extricate him so tautly to his sense of failure. For Quoyle, love is the feeling of unreciprocated desire framed in pain and humiliation. He is sure he is in love only when he feels degraded and humiliated. His wife with

⁵ Charles Murray, *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*, (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2013). This work provides a fine overview of the Enlightenment ideas that lead to the formation of the concept of exceptionalism.

⁶ Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

the name of Petal Bear, certainly with characteristics more of a bear than a flower, snags his desire for love and exploits him even to the point of attempting to sell their two children into white slavery, so that she could then elope with a used car salesman. Quoyle feels that a little love is better than no love and that pain is simply part of the deal. This knotted protagonist sheds light on the theme of this conference, in particular calling attention to the nature of our attachments – emotional, spiritual, social, intellectual, and philosophical attachments. The metaphor of the knot also draws attention to the nature of the knot itself. Just as Quoyle lives his life attempting to understand and loosen the suffocating knots that bind him, he looks to bind himself to a life that promises normalcy – a life of human warmth, personal dignity and ennobling responsibility. He looks to tie the knot with a woman who has all the characteristics of a Penelope in waiting. Quoyle learns that the knots that bind him as well as the knots to which he willingly submits are only as effective as the tension they create. The tensions and anxieties and fears he experiences are emblematic of the tensions that are inherent to being human. In the Freudian sense Quoyle reveals the difficulty in dealing with that part of his and others' personality that Freud referred to as "a cauldron of seething expectations." And we must struggle to reign in these destructive ID tendencies as well as struggle to sublimate them. As Quoyle finds out, being human requires an ongoing negotiation of that which composes ego, superego and id – that part of the human personality riven with contradiction and anxiety as well as inhibitions, wants, desires and fantasies. Quoyle seeks to balance these competing demands but not in any kind of mindful or articulate manner. He simply wants to feel at ease with himself and others, to have now and then a backyard barbecue with friends, to experience a little love.

Proulx's introduction to each chapter of *The Shipping News* is marked by a short description of a specific nautical knot which she quotes from the *Ashley Book of Knots*. Each knot has a different function and is attached to an object in a specific way that suggests the workings of an inner tension that binds an object in a particular way and for a particular purpose. Thus each type of nautical knot is defined by its purpose, the tension it creates, and its ability to hold an object in place. The knot metaphor washes over the central conflict of each chapter suggesting the emotional affiliations and psychological gremlins that bind Quoyle and other characters to their personal dysfunction. The value of her work is the literary insight she provides into the nature of our psychological selves.

It seems to be a global characteristic that we struggle either to extricate ourselves from the knotted cultural, ideological, political, or spiritual knots that paradoxically both bind us and provide stability to our

lives or we struggle to seek out circumstances of extrication that meaningfully tether us to that which provides significance to our lives. In many ways Jonathan Swift already suggested this metaphor when he depicted Gulliver bound effectively but ridiculously by the miniscule Lilliputian humanoids, each rope an irritating tether, each an objective correlative to the many inhibitions and obsessions that restrain and restrict who we are and who we might be, yet in the aggregate appear comical.

Yet, this particular cynosure, the focus on a self that struggles to achieve balance in life and to find significance in who we are is not one that is universally shared. The realization of his enlightenment concept remains hampered by a recidivistic tendency in some cultural communities to form enclaves that not only exclude others but also demonize others. Although we live in a global culture, we have travelled only a very short distance along the road of the Enlightenment. While part of our global culture seems to have made advances along the lines laid out by our Enlightenment forefathers, other parts of the global community have reverted to intolerance and autocracy, brutality and self-willed blindness. Many areas of the contemporary world have returned to a level of primitive existence that seems barely possible in the 21st century.⁷

We hear much about the “unfinished project of the Enlightenment” and have plenty of evidence at hand that *unfinished* may be too generous a term to use to describe what yet needs to be done to realize fundamental human guarantees of life, liberty and dignity. And there are other obstacles in the way of bringing the Enlightenment up to speed in our times. The malaise that typifies contemporary life, even in the most advanced of nations, where we attempt to navigate the currents of consumerism and attempt to avoid running aground on the shoals of comfort, egoism and superficiality, present yet another challenge to our sense of self and life.

Joan Didion writing about the dynamics of the family echoes this observation when she states that the family and the community are the source of meaningful but problematic tensions.⁸ She suggests identity formation is both difficult and elusive.

Our attachments to family imply attachments to culture, to religion, to politics to ideology, which can collectively bind us so inextricably that we begin to suffocate and feel the onset of emotional or

⁷ Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). This work provides a masterful overview of the radical shift in worldview that, the author asserts, has led to a rejection of Enlightenment concepts and to the rise of radical nationalism.

⁸ Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays*, “On Going Home” (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968) 164–170.

spiritual paralysis. Yet, while we garner meaning from these attachments, rarely do we reflect on the nature of the knots that bind us or what possibilities exist for extrication. This view of human life, certainly in line with Freudian views on human nature, seems at odds with our Enlightenment legacy. We launch ourselves into a world into which we hope to insinuate our wishes and desires, our hopes for normalcy and consumer dignity and significance that is not superficial. Like Quoyle we seek approbation, acceptance, love and loyalty on the one hand and the promises of enlightened consumer culture on the other. Also like Quoyle we seek what remains importunate but inarticulate – a sense of alignment with meaning that is larger than what we imagine ourselves to be.

At existential ground zero, many of us find ourselves feeling the effect of career ravelling, existential ravelling, and emotional ravelling. On the broader plane there are political and ideological knots that not only bind others but also serve to repudiate fundamental concepts of the Enlightenment that tout the inviolability of the human being and guarantees human dignity and the right to life and liberty. In short, the value and importance of this conference and others like it is to develop and nurture a civil and all-encompassing discourse that will serve to ease those tensions which exist in us and in the communities and culture of which we are a part. However, the process of unloosening the knots of intolerance, autocracy, corruption, and violence is a slow and frustrating process, one that requires slow and mindful insistence on agreeing on common values and ensuring that we continue to loosen those ties that garrotte our sacred selves.

Recently at The Ohio State University in Columbus Ohio the Departments of English, comparative studies, the center for Folklore studies and the Mershon Center of International Security studies (The Mershon Research network in Cultural Resilience) put together a colloquium entitled “Sustainable Pluralism: Linguistic and Cultural Resilience in Multiethnic Societies” a colloquium that parallels in theme and concern the conference in Katowice. The center question of this conference was how to sustain and nurture minority languages and cultural practices in a pluralistic society. The expression “sustainable pluralism” implies a set of complex ties and connections as well as a set of dissociations that further imply extrication from the dominant culture of amalgamation. It is tricky cultural business to accomplish the goals identified with this endeavor, even trickier business to ensure identity formation that retains its distinctiveness while participating in a not well understood evolving cultural model of personal freedom and consumer orientation. This metaphor has a wider applicability as is reflected in the

possible themes of the conference. The idea of loosening cross cultural knots or disentangling various kinds of historical, cultural, religious Gordian knots, or the knots and ties inherent in the process of globalization or the very unfinished Enlightenment project.

Heading the final chapter of Proulx's *The Shipping News* is this quote from the *Ashley Book of Knots*: "There are still old knots that are unrecorded and so long as there are new purposes for rope, there will always be new knots to discover."⁹ That the human condition implies degree wise some kind of willing bondage is a truism that carries with it the caveat to be thoughtful and circumspect, careful in what we choose to think about and how we choose to think about it. Moreover, we must be thoughtful and circumspect to what we attach our thoughts, beliefs and goals and aspirations.

A colleague and Byzantine scholar at the Ionian University of Corfu, in summing up the significance of a course in Western Civilization to Ohio State study abroad students, presented a theory of history and culture that went far in elucidating the contradictions and paradoxes we see in our global community. He stated that culture flows much like a deep river. On the surface, the current moves swiftly through trending economic systems, ideas, ideologies, fashion, discoveries, political systems, technological advances, and spiritual paradigms which shape how we live our daily lives. However, at a much deeper level there exists a broader and slower cultural current that remains constant despite what occurs at the surface. This is the current of capital *C* culture and ethnicity that is aligned inextricably to religion and belief. This seemed to me a profound explanation of history that satisfactorily explained a number of observable contradictions and disparities we see in the global community. To illustrate the insightfulness and utility of this theory of history, I offer a short anecdote. One of our group excursions in Corfu City on the Island of Corfu was to the Byzantine chapel of St. Spyridon, which was a follow-up to a lecture on the Byzantine Empire and orthodox Byzantine churches. A young man dressed in jeans and a T-shirt was among a number of orthodox pilgrims visiting the church. Like them, he made his way to the glass coffin of St. Spyridon; he made the sign of the cross multiple times as he walked around the glass coffin of St. Spyridon. Outside before he made his way to the narthex, he genuflected before the iconostasis and bowed his head in prayer. Finally, he took several small pieces of paper and on each wrote a small prayer, which he then placed in a small prayer

⁹ Proulx, *The Shipping News*, 324.

container for that purpose. He then genuflected again, made the sign of the cross several more times and turned to leave the church. It was then that I saw what was written on his T-shirt – a grunge rock-shirt that quoted lyrics from the grunge rock group “Cold Cave” and said in bold letters: “You people are Poison.” This was a refrain to lyrics that go like this: “You better die something, that means ain’t probably nothing [...] these people are poison [...]” While it remains difficult to take that out of context, it is equally difficult to make grammatical sense of it. On the one hand this could have been simply an oversight and the young man may have not been aware of the glaring disparity between his religiosity and the sentiment written on his T-shirt. On the other hand the young man may not have sensed any contradiction whatsoever. The T-shirt and the implied participation in pop culture may well have been seen as quite dissociated from the far deeper current of religion and culture.

There are many examples of these two currents existing simultaneously at two different levels. On 16 April 1994, roughly 1500 Africans were massacred in the Rwandan village of Nyarubuye, a massacre involving both Tutsi and Hutu moderate Catholics. One photo focused on a week old cadaver clothed in a western sweater and jeans. It revealed a tag against the back of a skull that read “wash warm with like colors.” The strange disconnect and casual heinousness of the massacre stood in relief to that metaphor for progress and enlightenment embodied in the tag giving direction for washing clothes. The sheer number of incidents like this is staggering to comprehend.

In all this there is an important role that the university must play in establishing the basis and foundation for intercultural discussion and understanding. The university as a global phenomenon not only disseminates information but also must create an academic venue that ensures that the discussion will continue and advance. In an Ohio State special publication entitled “The Future of the University,” written already in 1990, Professors Richard Bjornson and Marilyn Waldman in the Department of Comparative Studies charge that the university must go beyond creating knowledge that merely emphasizes “technological innovation and vocational preparation,” an emphasis which since has become more pronounced in many states.¹⁰ Reminding the reader of the difference between education and training, they cite Alfred North Whitehead who asserted that the university has a greater obligation than purveying knowledge which is the pursuit, dissemination and utilization of

¹⁰ Richard Bjornson and Marilyn Waldman, eds., *The University of the Future*. The Center for Comparative Studies (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 3.

wisdom in creating a world that is both humane and ennobling. This requires “wisdom that is grounded in an attempt to comprehend nature and the purpose of human existence.” While certainly a high-minded goal, it is not one easily attained. The authors take issue with two prominent “conservative” educational / philosophical thinkers of the time, William Bennett and Allan Bloom, who argued that US education had been weakened precisely by relativistic, interdisciplinary studies that “failed to emphasize fundamental skills as well as neglected to emphasize the study of that body of literature referred to as the great masters of Western literature.” Both Bennett and Bloom asserted that the failure to contribute to establishing and articulating a set of shared cultural values that makes “enlightened discourse possible,” represents a move away from Enlightenment values.

The Closing of the American Mind, Allan Bloom’s controversial work, was even more direct than Bennett in stating that analytic reasoning was the sole vehicle in arriving at wisdom and that non analytic modes of thinking and understanding including those of nonwestern cultures and minorities did not measure up to the task of revealing wisdom and therefore university courses employing non analytic modes of thinking could not be taken seriously as legitimate curricular offerings.¹¹ Both Bloom and Bennett attacked this openness to and emphasis on interdisciplinarity and nonlinear modes of thought as inimical to the goal of higher education in seeking and establishing wisdom. Bloom likened higher education that aims at uncovering wisdom as an archeological undertaking that reveals through painstaking examination and thought our intellectual past, taking us back to the roots of our Western heritage. He believed that the return to the great thinkers primarily of Western civilization and the establishment of a common values based on that return would have a significant impact of the formation of the national character.

Bjornson and Waldman present these arguments by way of setting up a rebuttal that I feel resonates with the aim and goal of our discussions yesterday and today. I quote:

Our world is complex in the sense that diverse human societies have generated a multiplicity of cultural models. In many of them, individual and collective motivation may derive from assumptions we do not share. If we desire to avoid conflict and to engage in meaningful dialogue with people from these cultures, we will have to make the effort to comprehend

¹¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 284–93.

their motivations, and this can be done only if we are aware of their cultural assumptions. Furthermore, the discovery of the other, the exotic and the strange can serve as a vehicle that opens our minds to a deeper understanding of ourselves. Our world is also complex in the sense that it is an intricate web of interrelated phenomena. Acting upon one part of this web will have consequences for other parts as well; the Euro-American cultural heritage and an analytical rationality can profitably be complemented by non-Western and nonlinear modes of thought as we seek to deal responsibly with such complexities. In other words, if students are to acquire wisdom for living in a culturally and ecologically complex world, they must become familiar with far more than critics like Bloom and Bennett are prescribing in the curricula they are proposing for the University of the Future.¹²

While we seem to move forward propelled by the success of science and technology, we struggle to achieve the kind of wisdom that realizes the Enlightenment tenets touting the dignity and significance of every human. At the same time, deep and violent cultural and religious currents exist that militate against this realization, currents that move virulent enmities into our own times that have been responsible for atrocities virtually incomprehensible in terms of their abject brutality.

All of us have our personal stories charting the distances we have come in our times and in our circumstances. Part of each story has to do with the connections we make in life, with the ideas that both bind and liberate us in our thoughts and in the way we live our lives. One of the authors I most admire is David Foster Wallace, a truly renaissance writer with a talent for minute cultural observation and analysis as well as a sophisticated sense of the postmodern logic of 21st century life. In much of his writing he identifies the cultural knots that define and hold us in our cultural orbits. He goes even further however, in analyzing what is at the center of the knots that hold us culturally.

One of the constant cultural concerns in his work is the idea that the placement of self at the center of all activity creates a tension that has a far reaching ripple effect, oftentimes leading to a state of solipsistic disfunctionality capable of eroding the texture of society while creating a sense of emptiness and disconnect. In short he examines the idea of selfhood as we understand and practice it in the US – an Enlightenment idea that has mutated and now seems to imply bourgeois concern with the consumer self and little else. Certainly we are all acquainted with the argument. What sets David Foster Wallace apart is the immediacy and

¹² Bjornson and Waldman, *University of the Future*, 4–5.

poignancy with which he presents the idea of selfhood as it appears in our global consumer society. He identifies a number of cultural knots that are in need of unravelling and new knots that we might consider in binding us as a culture and as a people.

In a commencement address to the very privileged students of Kenyon College, David Foster Wallace reminded students precisely of the dilemma of bridging learning and wisdom, mind and heart. He urged students to set aside the poses that they and we oftentimes assume in life – poses steeped in blind ambition, personal concerns and egotistical longings. He urged students to practice empathy and understanding with others and challenged them to globalize their thinking while learning how to empathize with others.

Kenyon College is an elite private college located in the rolling hills of central Ohio, very near our Ohio State Mansfield regional campus. It tends to attract intelligent and talented students from wealthy and privileged east and west coast families. At first glance, the campus appears as kind of intellectual Eden built on the model suggest by John Henry Cardinal Newman in his work entitled *The Idea of the University*. In fact, walking around the campus one has the sense that one has exited present time and contemporary culture and has entered another parallel but idyllic world in which students think and explore, open themselves to new ideas and experiences, grow intellectually and ethically and spiritually in a way that ultimately transforms them into thoughtful leaders and mindful caretakers of society. Sometimes, it is best to leave at that point because there are other sides of the campus and its students that are not as idyllic or as ethically charged as a first glance might suggest. David Foster Wallace saw this side and took it upon himself to urge strongly that students recalibrate their moral compasses to become what many commencement addresses urge students to become – thoughtful, creative, moral stewards of self and others. Many of the students who come to Kenyon come with an attitude of privilege and superiority, an attitude of entitlement and a sense that they will inherit a privileged place in society. Many are prepared to take their place in a tacitly understood pre-ordained order that promotes an old world order of gathering in wealth and maintaining that wealth. When David Foster Wallace agreed to deliver the commencement address at Kenyon in 2005, he was well aware of his audience and the many unexamined ideas and assumptions that colored their view of life. His 2005 commencement address has gone down as one of the most poignant, heartfelt, sincere, and wise commencement addresses of the time and will no doubt be often quoted in the future. It continues to remind us all that we need to examine periodically the directions we are taking and

advises us to make the necessary re-calibration of our collective moral compass where is prudent to do so. Forgive me if I quote a long passage from his address but it is so wise and so immediate, I cannot avoid it. Wallace begins with a homely parable:

Here are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?” [...] The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. Stated as an English sentence, of course, this is just a banal platitude, but the fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance, or so I wish to suggest to you on this dry and lovely morning. [...]

Because we prize tolerance and diversity of belief, nowhere in our liberal arts analysis do we want to claim that one guy’s interpretation is true and the other guy’s is false or bad. Which is fine, except we also never end up talking about just where these individual templates and beliefs come from. Meaning, where they come from INSIDE the two guys. As if a person’s most basic orientation toward the world, and the meaning of his experience were somehow just hard-wired, like height or shoe-size; or automatically absorbed from the culture, like language. As if how we construct meaning were not actually a matter of personal, intentional choice. The point here is that I think this is one part of what teaching me how to think is really supposed to mean. To be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties. Because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will, too. Here is just one example of the total wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realist, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it’s so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real. Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education – least in my own case – is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualize stuff, to get lost in abstract argument inside my head, instead of simply paying attention to what is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me. Worship power, you will end up feeling

weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about much in the great outside world of wanting and achieving. The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.¹³

Tragically, his own wisdom could not overcome the clinical depression that had been plaguing him for years, and he took his own life in 2008 three years after this address.

The water which surrounds us, the world of self which binds us to partial truths and questionable aspirations as well as the inability to step outside the prison of ego – these are the subtle but dangerous monsters we encounter on the journeys we take. They stand in the way of homecoming and repatriation of self to others.

Lord of Ithaka

Ithaka has always been
in a spin time-wise.
I come at it oddly
from far away as always
with sleight of hand
tricks I'm famous for

¹³ David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).

gifts I regret giving
 that still creak and howl
 that wheel time
 and again through massive gates
 heavy with the laughter-entangled logic
 of destructive love and goddish feud . . .
 Some gifts cannot be taken back
 I've learned
 Calypso still weeping,
 my tears aubergine
 dark and glossy droplets in the sand
 swollen with heightened occasion and emotion
 engorged with yeasty infidelity
 the sand rises, the bread of dreamy misery,
 manna floating on weather across my face flash
 floods, a torrent of tears, mudslides, things swept away
 regrets and no insurance . . .

a different kind of weeping
 the storms come and go preternaturally
 I point them out as blank simulacra
 that see nonetheless deeply
 into the camera's eye
 Cunning weatherman, my crew
 breaks the wind
 I have bagged for my return home
 the smell of greed and plot manipulation
 that takes me elsewhere . . .

Hope is certainly a shimmer
 on these seas
 when they are calm,
 from afar I see lines of tourists descending the gangplank
 dots of color moving downward,
 my lordless land swallows them up
 credit cards and all
 I study their movements
 from this distant time . . .
 and conclude mathematically:
 Hope is an integer rather
 whose square root repeats forever
 this talk exponential, consoling
 these years of monumental wandering.
 I've reached the saturation point
 conventional wisdom tells me.

Twenty-two years ago
 I left my bride still a bride
 my vision ample and powers deep
 the lord of Ithaka marauding
 the deep valleys and lush deltas.
 When I left her I fell
 into the mists of time bound others –
 warriors and women monsters and men
 When I left her
 the horizon was wide,
 the seas blue-green not wine-red
 and every day filled me
 like a sail (a sailor suggests)
 but somewhere in this filling
 I became filled,
 and that, I conclude,
 with the residual space I have for wisdom
 is the sadness that clots the sand.

There is a point if the mathematicians are right
 where the doing and undoing merge
 where the texts of regret ache for passage
 for bright and startling images
 Polyphemus
 munching my men like popsicles
 that wooden horse,
 guts goofy with Danaans
 filling the belly of hungry death
 stinking harpies like bees with bad breath . . .

The question loses tension at times
 the tautening cables that attach and hold
 break and relax on rough seas.
 You know He nearly got the homecoming right
 the big tree in the middle of the bed,
 the scar she traces with wifely fingers.
 I lash myself to these moments like I did before,
 different Sirens but as deadly.
 I was near disbelief in convincing her, listening
 to Agamemnon I tried
 to tell her that I was I
 my book in hand
 I had no strength of feeling
 already washed ashore many times
 dead to the hope of return.