

An excerpt from the dissertation:

The Pointless Revolution: Frivolity and the Serious Business of Subversive Creativity

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Introduction

To the Point of Pointlessness: Just “Disserts”

“Can’t a girl dance in the wilderness?”

Gweneth Moore, aged six,

*when told by her mother (my sister) that it was time to come in
from playing in freshly minted snow.*

The word “frivolity” has Middle English origins, with its root in the Latin *frivulus*, meaning “trifling, or worthless.” In this dissertation, I will be agreeing with the first part of that definition (mostly), but I will be questioning the second part. There is worth in trifles. As Lynda Sexson suggests in *Ordinarily Sacred*, “the frivolous can be another form of truth” (45). From my point of view, put simply, frivolity is a move off center. It is a turn left when a world suggests that it is most responsible to move forward. There is, I believe, a similar worth in that turning.

Frivolity: Personal and Cultural

As I cast about for an entry point into a discussion on the cultural implications of frivolity, I will turn left towards the trifling, and begin personally. I came to graduate study burning with a need as an artist to find a way to comprehend and influence the dialectic between creative and academic thought in the hopes of helping to understand the roles and responsibilities of the arts and artists within a culture. I have been vastly frustrated by the seeming cultural lack of a sense of importance and validity of art within the United States over my lifetime. Art has been struck as a curriculum from our schools,

lost funding from government and foundations, suffered slings and arrows from a deeply conservative element in this country, and, perhaps even worse, been numbed down into the blank and tasteless entertainment of current pop culture, its trite inanities echoing in the pre-packaged, merchandised “Frankensteining” (a bizarre compiling of silicon parts both literally and figuratively into something ultimately unsatisfying and unsettling) of such so-called artists as Brittany Spears.

Part of this failure, I believe, is the fault of the arts community. In my opinion, artists as a community have not represented art’s mission well, content to sleep with a strangely conglomerated bedfellow of ego and Apollo. As a modern dancer, for example, I watched choreographers and dancers wrap themselves in self-righteousness and glory in their arcana. Small audiences were rationalized by brilliance: obviously, this work so far exceeded the pedestrian population’s insight that they could never hope to understand, let alone enjoy, its genius. So audiences stayed home, and while the dance community (myself included) grumbled about lack of interest and support, there were only rare moments of questioning of why.¹

Eventually, however, that cycle of abstruseness and isolation was unfulfilling to me, and it occurred to me to wonder why the arts seem to be evaporating from the awareness of most Americans. One way to do this is to enter into the debate of the point of art, and challenge fellow artists to see their work with a context to culture(s) and

¹ As a caveat, I am not arguing that overly simplified art defined by the lowest common denominator is a viable answer to this issue in the arts world. There is a most legitimate place for esoteric art, particularly since a definition of esoteric depends much upon the beholder. However, I believe that the arts community has work to do in identifying the origins and intentions of its instincts towards arcaneness and in its responsibility to communication as a viable goal of art.

advocate on behalf of some sense of larger responsibility to their audiences, and that is something that I continue to work.

However, for the purposes of this discourse, what intrigues me is the manner in which the arts community attempts to justify itself in the face of its detractors. In my opinion, those artists and supporters of the arts who have attempted to remind their communities that art is vital have generally played to art's weaknesses rather than its strengths. For example, it is touted with great excitement that music strengthens mathematics skills, or that drawing can become a pathway to understanding science. Both of these are laudable, even valuable bits of information, but they miss the point: the attempt is to justify art's existence by pointing out its servitude to other, more utilitarian disciplines. In this very argument, artists devalue that which they do, forgetting that it has the grace both to shape and reflect the world in its own right. It can be its own point.

Feeling that I needed a deeper language with which to communicate art's *ethos* and the self-validation of its poesis, I sought out graduate school and matriculated in a program about myth. Some interesting reactions from friends and acquaintances followed me there. "So what are you going to *do* with a PhD in myth?" "What is the point?" These questions were sincere, concerned, and generally accompanied by a deeply pained look. I had gone off the deep end this time, turning way too far left.

And so, in this context, I found frivolity. What better way to champion that which is deemed trifling than by championing the trifle? If I was to get a doctorate in something that many of my contemporaries deemed frivolous, why not take the process full circle and celebrate that frivolity rather than apologize for it? Or, perhaps, an

apology is exactly in order, in the sense of the word as a formal argument or justification: a dissertation as an apologia for frivolity.

As I intuit frivolity beyond its left-hand turning, it lives enfolded in the embrace of paradox. It is trifling, but richly valuable, slight but vastly important. There are a wealth of concepts and energies at play within the idea of frivolity, including imagination, aesthesis, a certain magic, and a nostalgia for a mythic era of joy and a certain simplicity. Frivolity must, by its very definition, be somehow subversive, acting outside the mores of a given cultural expectation on some level, though the level of that subversion is impacted by the nature of the culture itself. It is polymorphous in its temperament, acknowledging the possibility of a different momentum than the norm. Ultimately, frivolity is beyond rules, and celebrates the point of pointlessness, carrying within it the paradox of being without use and deeply necessary at the same time. It is non-linear, liminal, and if the frivoler is very lucky, can invite the numinous.

Interestingly, even as I have held aloft the banner to go to battle on its behalf, frivolity has emerged as my ally. As I work it, it works me, becoming a personal daemon that assists me in my own struggles to understand myself.

I find, for example, that I am often drawn to frivolity's buoyancy when my life is too weighty. It is a small moment of rebellion, a place to go when I have had enough of the rules, of adulthood, of expectations, of productivity. I find that even to write about frivolity with passion frequently means landing first in a place where the world around me becomes too heavy and my heart somehow heavy within me. It is the mercurial assumption of lightness when what one really, obviously, seems committed and expected to do is heft the weight of one's own existence.

While those around me might suggest that I carry this lightness to an extreme, I have also spent a lifetime trying to dodge many of the obvious bullets of culture's pull towards seriousness, including a distinct inclination towards depression. The sense of Saturn and Hermes pull at me respectively, and as I stare down the backside hill of the second half of my life, a hermetic move of soul beckons me away from being squashed underneath my own gravitas. What began as an inclination, a societally questionable personality trait, this move towards lightness has become, literally, a lifeline.

That lifeline has, of course, like any perfect archetypal momentum, has its shadows. I am forever following the flight of the butterfly, meandering rather than striding forward with external and vigilant purpose. As it has for Lord Peter Wimsey (whose ancient family motto is 'as my whimsy takes me') in Dorothy Sayers' delightfully frivolous murder mysteries, the "world [has] presented itself as an entertaining labyrinth of side issues" (*Clouds of Witness* 74). I am a seeker of many paths over the one, polyphonic rather than monotonal, which both has its rewards and its costs, especially in a culture that glorifies the specialist.

However, as I wrestle not only with the role of the arts in the culture around me, but with my own identity as an artist, I am finding that the rewards of my daemon far outweigh its costs. In American culture of this era, the artist is looked upon with a bizarre mixture of fascination and contempt, but rarely as someone who is truly serious. Beyond any failing of the arts community to lobby on its behalf, I believe this distancing reflects American culture's uncertainty about creativity. As Thomas Moore writes in *Care of the Soul*, "throughout human history the expression of individuality has been felt as a threat to the status quo. For all its championing of the individual, our culture in many ways

favors conformity” (128). As an artist, I have reflected one manner of individualism within a larger cultural context, and have paid the “othered” price for that individuality.

But with frivolity clasped lightly in hand, I have had the pleasure of navigating a life that has not been about servitude to a job that crushes bone and soul underneath itself; I find that I have less patience than almost anyone I know for the confines of an adult job that demands unilateral devotion and commitment. There is puer in this, I know, and it has been qualified and quantified, not only by outsiders but myself as well, as childish, irresponsible, and somehow inviting of a sense of failure—on some level I deserve anything that I get, particularly disappointments. Like many artists, I have felt the tugs inherent in playing outside the system, and intuitively knew, even as a child, that I could not expect the system to support me if I did not join in lockstep with its structures and strictures.

What I did not anticipate, however, was the single-minded effort of a culture to smash those who deflect its constructs. Naively, I thought there would be a rather benign disinterest, without foreseeing the fears that any construct would have about its core eroding towards those whose chose not to play by its rules. It is here, for me, that frivolity births rebellion. It becomes a creative aesthesis rising up against Goliath with a gaily-colored stone and bespangled slingshot, its very smallness being its greatest weapon. And I, as a frivoler, have a chance to make it through: my similar smallness becomes my strength, and I just might be able to thumb my clown nose, slip through the cracks, and take the Titans down.

The subtitle of this thesis is “subversive creativity.” On some level all creativity is subversive. In one archetypal image, creativity can be seen as Promethean, damning

the rules and the consequences and making fire, whether for personal glory, human need, or just because he could. And, to follow the analogy, it is not surprising that the creative is bound to the rocks by the gods of conformity, tortured for his daring, destroyed for his ability to create. That said, frivolity captures the subversion inherent in creativity and imagination in an important way, for it revels in that subversive energy, bringing it up from submersion to the surface of the water with perfect effervescence.

The Frivolous Dissertation

How then, to weave that submersion and subversion into an academic process? My entrance into the intellectual dialogue around frivolity has become an exercise in glancing sideways, catching a glimmer of meaning or a flash of understanding from a weaving of the thoughts of others and of my own. I specifically say “around” rather than “on “ frivolity, for little discourse exists directly on frivolity and its merits, and it rarely engenders more than a passing condemnation by its detractors, its lack of value in their eyes reflected by the casualness with which they flick it into oblivion. It is, after all, “worthless.” The dictionary says so.

And, maybe more to the point, or to the pointlessness, frivolity itself defies being looked at too closely: stare too directly and it is off, flipping itself like a sunbeam dancing on waters, daring the gazer to separate it from all of the sunlight around it.

As a result of frivolity’s insouciance, this exploration has become a journey of multiple and lost paths, skipping steps away from and back towards the point, a dance between what I intuit as the vastness of frivolity’s import and the minuteness of its poeisis. This process is, I have discovered, no linear journey of logic, but instead a

mythical nautilus of swirling and interconnected ideas, the challenge in finding meaning inherent not in the anticipated dearth of resources, but instead, as Bachelard writes, a “voyage into the land of the infinite” (*Reverie* 23). It is a process that presents itself to my imagination as a koan, its truth emerging as paradox.

How does one acknowledge the interplay between infinity and its tiny crystal, frivolity? And then, how does one organize one’s thoughts and write a definitive paper on several thousand years of thought (or non-thought) on a topic? In Harry Nilsson’s 1971 marvelously comic film about a little boy named Oblio, who lacks the pointed head of all of his friends and relatives, and who with his dog, Arrow, goes in search of a point, the narrator states, “When Oblio and Arrow went to the Pointed Forest, they found that having too many points was the same as having no point at all” (*The Point!*).

It is on this pinhead of point and pointlessness, meaning and non-meaning, upon which this particular slice of the conversation revolves. As David Miller shared with colleagues at the 1998 Conference on Values in Higher Education:

There is no learning outcome in ideas. Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* called the goal of thinking ideas a "purposeless purpose [*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*]" (55). In this sense every course in arts and ideas is purposeless. Useless, at least in a utilitarian sense (“Nothing to Teach”).

This purposeless purpose is at the heart of my koan: the pointedly purposelessness of pointless frivolity and its intersection with that most serious purposeless of exercises in thinking ideas, the dissertation.

As I attempt to tease this out, perhaps some more definitions would be useful. The word “dissertation” comes from the Latin *dissertus*, past participle of *disserere*. Its root, *serere*, means “to join or arrange, to link together.” This arranging has shifted in its import, or at least its perceived heft, by 1657, when to dissert came to mean, “to speak or

write at length.” Not an image of brevity, or levity! How then, does one arrange at length those crystals of thoughts on frivolity, capturing the infinite of imagination, myth, and philosophical thought? Perhaps, first, with a koan freshly-minted with beginner’s mind to meet the occasion:

A Humble Dissertation Writer wandered one day through the forests of thoughts.
She turned a page and happened upon a Frivolous Imaginary Zen Master.
She also asked him, “What are the paths to the small and the infinite?”
And he replied, “Steal some cake.”
And so she asked, “Can’t a girl dance in the wilderness?”
And he said, “On either side of the mirror.”

It is this dance on each mirror side that is my ultimate challenge in this piece: in this instance, one side of the mirror the logic of academic discourse, and one being the logic of creative expression. If I write about frivolity and imagination and creativity only through an intellectual lens, I echo the inadequacies of arguments on behalf of art through its servitude to other, more rational, more prosaic (and intimated, more important) disciplines. I feel frivolity-bound to push at those boundaries, and attempt a discourse that interweaves creative and intellectual processes. As Helen Luke writes in her analysis of Dante’s *Commedia*, “The great danger of a psychological approach to a work of art is that it may kill the poetry; in which case such an undertaking is worse than meaningless” (Luke xvi). My inclination is to agree with Luke as she wonders about the myopia of gazing at art through too narrow a psychological lens, and I find myself simultaneously wondering about the challenges of gazing at art and imagination with too intellectualistic a lens.

Religious studies scholar Wendy Doniger references novelists who utilize “mythic tropes” as “mythmakers” who can move the understanding of myth forward, and in so doing, she intimates that mythmaking is a legitimate methodology in the study of

myth (Doniger 11). By extension, art making is a legitimate methodology in the study of art, and frivolity is a legitimate methodology in the study of the frivolous. When I seek to know the archetype through its own ethos, that knowledge can only be richer, deeper, and more complete.

Again referencing Dante, in the introduction to her translation of *Purgatorio*, Dorothy Sayers argues “we must abandon...the distinction we have grown accustomed to making between ‘poetical’ and ‘prosaic’ subjects” (*Purgatorio* 12). While she is arguing for the subject matter of poetry, i.e. whether the “everyday” can indeed be imbued with poetry, her statement stands true from the other direction. My challenge is to find ways not to distinguish ‘prosaic’ or ‘academic’ analysis as separate from and somehow superior to poetical forms, and celebrate a multiplicity of approaches to imaginal work.

This move is, I believe, one with which the academic community at large currently wrestles, particularly at the confluences between art, the humanities, and psychology. It is a question of making meaning, which in the wonderful way that frivolity’s paradoxes work iconoclastically and become more meaningful: in an effort to explore non-meaning, I make meaning by embracing the non-meaning itself. This is, I believe, particularly true when attempting a dissertation on frivolity: how to sing of frivolity that both captures the ethos of its creative flippancy while still meeting the qualifiers of academic writing.

I am addressing this conundrum, in part, by choosing to create a dissertation that includes creative elements, the freedom to do so being an unusual gift from an academic institution permitting production-style dissertations. In a celebration of the multifaceted nature of frivolity, the production aspect of this dissertation takes several forms,

including prose, fictional narrative, poetry, and visual art. This compendium of frivolous flotsam is a *Handbook for the Pointless Revolution*, offering a variety of heuristic invitations into frivolity as a way of being, using the premise of the paradoxical or mock encomium as its inspiration. Production elements include:

“The Serious Business of Subversive Creativity: A Righteous Rant on the Point of Pointlessness”

This short essay is an exploration and editorial on the vagaries of the need for frivolity in 21st century American culture, delving into frivolity’s poeisis and aesthetics, and its impact in a fear and productivity driven culture.

“The Queen of Frivolity: A Fairy Tale for Grownups”

This section is a picaresque short story, with original illustrations, set in modern context about the adventures of the Queen of Frivolity as she fights the forces of the Evil Lord Blah, bringer of boring organization and sameness to the world. I have drawn from classic wonder tales, nonsense literature, the illustrated works of Dr. Seuss, Jules Feiffer, Edward Gorey, and James Thurber, fantasy literature, hero myths, and magic realism as inspiration on content and style. As Henry David Thoreau may well have said if he had thought about it long enough, “in frivolity is the preservation of the world.”²

“Psyche and Eros: A Retelling of a Myth of Frivolity Wherein Psyche, Discovers the Rewards of Frivolity, Finds True Love, and Gives Birth to Pleasure”

² The original quote is “In Wildness is the preservation of the World” (“Walking,” *The Major Essays of Henry David Thoreau* 174).

A retelling of the central story of Psyche, based on the work of Apuleius, that proffers a vision of Psyche's final commitment to desire as the act that frees her to achieve her desires.

"Frivolic Hymns: Odes to the Frivolous Aspects of a Handful of Archetypes"

In the tradition of the Homeric Hymns, a set of blank verse poems celebrating Aphrodite, Hermes, Dionysus, and Pan, invoking their links with frivolity.

"The Language of Frivolity: A Herd of Words Frivolous and Frivolously Defined"

This portion of the frivolous miscellany is an original dictionary of approximately 170 words pertaining to frivolity definitions in limericks, epigrams, blank verse and the occasional one-liner, in the spirit of Ambrose Bierce, Ogden Nash, Edward Lear, and Edward Gorey.

"In Search of Silliness: A Frivolity Ritual"

Based on a modern the model of a modern Wiccan ritual, a light-hearted exercise in inviting frivolity in the reader's life.

So I will put on my dancing shoes, seek out a little wilderness, and begin the pointless revolution.

