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Reader with a Cause

Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life

By Zena Hitz

Princeton University Press 240pp £18.99 order from our bookshop

The middle of a pandemic is a tricky time in which to proselytise for intellectual life. At its best, Zena Hitz's *Lost in Thought* is an inspirational attestation of the ability of intellectual activity to dignify oppressed lives. Hitz presents intellectual life as both a refuge and a retreat, offering an escape into self-examination and a recognition of humanity's shared heart. We are called to seriousness and to loving service. We should be reading Herodotus and listening to Bach. Perhaps this is a necessary clarion call. But its reverberations jar at a time when even Hitz's comfiest academic peers (tenured, cultured, well up on Plato) are struggling with the electronic substitutes for the lectures and tutorials that normally occupy their time. More discordant still are Hitz's vaunting vignettes of playing at poverty on a religious retreat, particularly at a moment when multitudes are jobless, foodless and finding neither dignity nor inspiration in the experience.

In Hitz's view, the proper subjects for the intellect consist primarily of the Roman Catholic Church and the works found on the Great Books curriculum of St John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, her alma mater and employer. That curriculum is based on an almost unvarying roster of titles (Austen, Eliot and Woolf are the only Great Women). Hitz's book is almost a prospectus, to which the author's mind adds interest and flair: the best passages of *Lost in Thought* are those that are autobiographical. When she turns to the matter of improper subjects for the intellect, Hitz comes across as a gargantuan snob. She appears to have had some scarring formative experience with video games and equates them quite seriously with the uses of heroin and pornography. She also shudders at theatre: throughout the book 'theatrical' is a terrible slur (see also 'drama'). Her Augustinian disdain for *curiositas* (the love of spectacle for its own sake) inevitably leads her to condemn 'the unwholesome community of spectacle', and this slides into a general mistrust of performance. Here, some of Hitz's severest judgements are to be found: the person who, dying from a long illness, fails to face death 'with clear eyes, with gratitude' and with 'dignity of "thought," as Pascal puts it', and instead seeks to control 'the time or the manner of the end' is guilty of 'staged theatrics'. Perhaps this too would read better were we not mid-pandemic.

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The moments of missing self-awareness are especially disappointing because Hitz is at her most interesting in frank self-examination. Towards the book's end, she interrogates the poverty tourism of (among others) the philosopher Simone Weil and the Catholic activist Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Hitz recognises the element of 'thrill seeking' in Day's sojourns among the impoverished, but not in her own. Playing at poverty on a Catholic retreat in Ontario, she helps gather roadkill squirrels to make paintbrushes; beset by ennui as a young academic, she becomes a tourist among 'fascinating strangers who lived outside of middle-class conventions', a euphemism for poverty. Hitz notes an 'attraction to the hidden world of suffering', but the reality facing the people she encounters remains hidden from the reader. A greater degree of self-recognition on the part of its author might have made *Lost in Thought* into something of an ouroboros, but it might also have made it a better book.

In the final chapter, Hitz decries the presence of politics in contemporary education. This is disappointing for two reasons: first, such standard conservative Twitter complaints are unworthy of inclusion in an otherwise original, innovative book; second, what Hitz longs for instead of politics is... politics. She deplores the pursuit by 'progressive activists' of a form of education 'that seeks primarily social and political results rather than the cultivation of free, thoughtful human beings', as if liberty and consciousness-raising are not political goals with social effects. 'Politics on campus should be rare, and almost always extracurricular,' she asserts, a page after wishing education would ask such 'fundamental questions' as 'What makes a community just?', as if the answers could remain apolitical.

Hitz's interrogation of what 'making a difference' really means correctly reminds the reader that rubbish collectors make the most fundamental difference to our daily lives, providing sanitation in place of nauseating putrefaction, and that this is nonetheless not a contribution that society rewards. If the pandemic teaches us one thing, it should be that our lowest-paid workers are also among our most important. But as with Hitz's central tenet – that intellectual endeavour dignifies oppressed, undervalued lives – this hymn to the value of waste disposal feels like a sleight of hand: the kind of hostility she feels to 'learning for social utility, for the sake of "making a difference"' militates against challenging the status quo for the benefit of the lowest paid.

Much of this book is beautiful. I share Hitz's conviction that academics must shorten the distance between what we research and the interests and concerns of the working world. I very much enjoyed the extracts from Jonathan Rose's work on impoverished lives transformed by study from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries. I have even downloaded the St John's College Great Books curriculum reading list. But Hitz's paean to poverty and her condemnation of the comforts of YouTube are unfortunately timed. In a while, we may feel



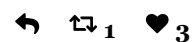
@Lit_Review




Whitman 'licensed poets to put themselves centre stage in their prose, from Adrienne Rich in *Is Found There* to Susan Howe in her prose-poetry hybrids.'

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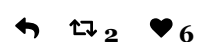
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
My review of James Hankins' "Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy" this month's @Lit_Review
<https://literaryreview.co.uk/rule-hunting>



differently about her book. *Lost in Thought* presents itself as the bearer of lasting truths, but its vision of eternity unluckily contrives to miss the mood of the moment.

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