

Book Reviews

Zena Hitz. *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 240. \$22.95 (cloth).

Asceticism is making a comeback. Nietzsche had observed that intellectual life is necessarily ascetic, but Zena Hitz takes it a step further in *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*. For her, the asceticism characteristic of the love of learning is a key aspect of human flourishing. As with a garden, self-cultivation requires “uprooting and drying out parts of ourselves” (110). For Hitz, asceticism—a willingness to endure suffering and accept limits on our freedom—is fundamental even to human dignity (98). Follow Hitz in her elegant and absorbing argument and you will see that your own happiness depends on deliberate abstention from certain available indulgences. Specifically, Hitz wants you to see that the disinterested pursuit of learning—the particular form of asceticism she calls “intellectual life”—is in fact your best and highest interest.

The remarkable thing about *Lost in Thought* is that it makes these rather dreary propositions not only palatable but also compelling. Hitz doesn’t just want to persuade you; she wants to win over your heart. Beyond introducing a whole range of interesting thinkers and arguments, from Aristotle to St. Augustine, from Albert Einstein to Elena Ferrante, from John of the Cross to Simone Weil, Hitz is out to reorient your life toward useless pursuits and deliberate self-denial. Read this book at your own risk.

One of the unifying themes of the book is that of escape from what Hitz calls “the world.” In these degenerate times, “the world” is the arena in which we strive for accomplishments, recognition, wealth, and power; its dominant values are competition, acquisition, and obsession with the self. The book presents intellectual life—“the love of learning”—as an escape from this endless and degrading striving, an oasis for human dignity and a nursery for human splendor. Hitz argues that the values of “the world” have come to dominate the academic profession and have extended their grubby tentacles even to the church, an institution whose importance in her life she unguardedly foregrounds when it becomes relevant to her arguments, which is often.

Ambition, self-deception, instrumentalization of the pursuit of truth, the thirst for spectacle, the comforts of conforming to prevailing opinion—these are the all-too-seductive snares of “the world.” Beware, Hitz warns, for they will hollow out your life and cripple your intellect, robbing you of the splendor and dignity to which your humanity entitles you.

One might expect that this kind of thing would appeal to professors cloistered in their ivory towers. But I suspect that many of Zena Hitz’s colleagues, especially the high-prestige ones, are going to dislike this book. The feeling will be mutual. The book loses no time in calling out the culture of competition, humiliation, and self-aggrandizement that pervades the ladder of academic prestige. I hear that this is especially nasty in the inherently contentious field of philosophy, the discipline in which Hitz was trained and in which she started a successful, if conventional, career as a professor. That career came to a halt under the weight of existential questions that made her professional accomplishments feel pointless and vain. This experience animates the book’s sharp critique of the corruption of intellect in our academic institutions, where “high-prestige academics compete for the jobs in which they can teach least and travel to Europe and Asia most” (200).

Hitz’s prologue describes the “brutal competition for status and prestige” that characterized her graduate studies (at Cambridge University, the University of Chicago, and Princeton) and the appetite for “public acts of competitive humiliation” that drives the profession. “These were a currency of success,” she adds, “not despite but because of their cruelty” (9). Hitz was jolted out of her intoxication with these gladiatorial games on the morning of September 11, 2001, when she saw the South Tower of the World Trade Center collapse. It would be some years before her deepening disillusion with academia prepared Hitz for the religious awakening that, in time, gave birth to *Lost in Thought*.

This book would not have come into being had Hitz not found, on the other side of a spiritual crisis, the vital thread that had drawn her into academia in the first place: the love of intellectual life for its own sake rather than as an instrument for attaining this or that success. The backbone of Hitz’s encomium to the life of the mind is this story of spiritual death, conversion, and rebirth. The book shows an impressively learned mind at work, settled in the philosophical habits of clarifying, making distinctions, and rigorous argumentation. But as Hitz details in its prologue and introduction, the book is the product of insights nurtured during a three-year residence in an ascetic community in Canada. Its power comes from being not just an intellectual exercise but also the expression of a personal commitment to an entire way of life.

Opening the book with a personal story of loss of faith in the academic profession and embrace of a traditional faith (Catholicism) is courageous. Hitz knows full well that it will prompt many colleagues to discount the value of whatever

she has to say. And that opening move toward intimate disclosure, vulnerability, and the nothing-to-lose indiscretion of a whistleblower is characteristic of the whole book. Hitz is not interested in academic or scholarly questions per se. Her interest is in the human heart, her own and her reader's—those inward qualities that are nourished through seclusion and disinterested pursuit of learning.

In the spirit of the classical tradition to which she often turns, Hitz uses examples as one of her main tools of argument. Early on there is a beautiful meditation on the Christian tradition that emphasizes Mary's love of scriptural study—a bookish tendency to withdraw from the world that makes her a fit vessel for carrying the incarnation of God. We see the young Albert Einstein treading professional water, unable to find work in a university, but using his time as a clerk in a patent office to work out the key breakthroughs of modern physics—for the love of it. We witness the self-transformation of Malcolm X in prison, and we hear of the groundbreaking insights of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who sought, also in prison, “to occupy myself intensely and systematically with some topic that absorbs me and centralizes my interior life” (68). Hitz gives us many more examples, always with an eye to the way in which “ordinary people” can live lives of serious reflection and intellectual depth, for, as she tells us, “intellectual life . . . belongs in taxicabs . . . as much as or more than it does at universities” (24).

Toward the end of the book Hitz singles out one particular corruption of intellect that is much in vogue in the contemporary academy: the subjugation of the love of learning to the love of social justice (189). Hitz argues that the intellect is perverted by subjugation not only to the naked pursuit of self-interest but also to the high-minded pursuit of social justice. Given the strength of our impulse for self-aggrandizement and the intoxicating satisfaction of feeling morally superior, “the impact of the dedication of intellectual life to social justice is perverse” (163). Well acquainted with the Christian doctrine of original sin, Hitz sees the influence of self-interest distorting even our best intentions. Moreover, if you think that your intentions, your ideology, and your politics are purified of self-interest, you are probably deluded—and actually on worse moral footing than the weak-willed serial offender who is ruled by impulse.

Lost in Thought is not a perfect book. Sometimes the writing stalls, drawing out particular distinctions or demonstrating what seems like a minor point with an extended discussion. The habit of academic argumentation is hard to shake. Some parts of the book feel like they have been imported from elsewhere, producing an awkward change in tempo or a loss of momentum, as happens with the otherwise solid section on the life of Dorothy Day. Overall, however, the book shines. Like this reader, you might walk away from it with a little more clarity, a little more conviction, and a little more dedication to what really matters in your life.

Hitz's book and career are in the lineage of St. Augustine of Hippo, whose *Confessions* she lovingly and brilliantly opens up to a general reader. Like the saint, Hitz has migrated from the academic mainstream to its outskirts, from which, grounded in a transcendent vision, she offers a penetrating critique. The book's closing exhortation could have come from him as much as from her: "Let us give free play to the human intellect and the human imagination, in an attempt to ground all that is in our hearts in what matters most" (205).

Roosevelt Montás, *Columbia University*

Kimberly A. Hamlin. *Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage, and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardener*. Kindle edition. New York: Norton, 2020. Pp. 400. \$28.95 (cloth).

Free Thinker, the first biography of Helen Hamilton Gardener (1853–1925), is a difficult book to review and must have been an even more difficult project to complete. It is a long book (386 pages), exhaustively researched, with innumerable descriptive details about not only the life of Gardener but also the many people with whom she came into contact. Consequently, my review focuses on the aspects of Gardener's career that struck me as the most interesting. It is not intended to include every facet of the biography. At least part of the reason that it must have been such a difficult book to write is the scarcity of information about Gardener in the historical documents. It turns out that she ordered all her personal papers to be burned after her death, and her niece carried out the request. Although Gardener played a key role in the activities that culminated in the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, she remains relatively unknown. With this work, Kimberly A. Hamlin, professor of history and global and intercultural studies at Miami University, promises to bring Gardener out of obscurity. Her biography constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the impact of the patriarchy on women's lives in the nineteenth century, the history of women's rights, and the intricacies of the campaign for woman suffrage.

Born in Virginia, Gardener was known as Mary Alice Chenoweth until 1884, when she moved from Cincinnati, Ohio, to New York City and became a dedicated advocate for women's rights. With the encouragement of Robert Ingersoll, she began to give public lectures challenging the dominant religious and "scientific" theories of women's inherent inferiority. After challenging the myth of the creation of woman and Eve's sin that expelled her and Adam