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For Openers: Work of Art

Editorial Board

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Work of Art

Maybe it's because I write this on Labor Day, but I find an extraordinary emphasis in this issue of *Conversations* not only on works of art, but on the art of work. Michael Flecky writes of a student in a photography class who, when asked a question about her plans for her work, answered, "I have never thought of work as my own!" I suspect that a great many, if not most, of the students coming into our colleges and universities would share this student's astonishment about being asked about *her* work. As Wislawa Szymborska put it in her 1996 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "Most of earth's inhabitants work to get by. They work because they have to. They didn't pick this or that kind of job out of passion; the circumstances of their lives did the choosing for them. Loveless work, boring work, work valued only because others haven't got even that much—this is one of the harshest human miseries."

For Szymborska, "inspiration" is the gift that allows one to flee the life-sentence of loveless work. It is by no means limited to poets and artists. The "group that inspiration visits" is "made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination." The distinguishing mark of these people is their approach to work as a "continuous adventure" born of an energetic response to the knowledge that they don't know everything there is to know even about the most ordinary of experiences. In fact, Szymborska suggests that for such people there is no such thing as the "ordinary." "Ordinary" is a term we use to denote that to which we are too lazy or too unpracticed to pay close enough attention.¹

It is here, I think, that the attitudes toward art expressed by our contributors most fruitfully come in contact with the visionary educational program of Saint Ignatius Loyola. As J. Robert Barth writes in our lead essay, the sensational success and lasting fame of the Ratio Studiorum has gained Jesuit education a reputation for excellence in "logic and rigorous analytical thought." While educators in the Jesuit tradition are justifiably proud of that reputation, however, there is also from the beginning of the Society of Jesus a strong emphasis on the power of the imagination. "Whatever you may hear to the contrary," Barth writes, "Saint Ignatius Loyola was a man of imagination." The Spiritual Exercises are, on one level, a program for cultivating the sort of attention to experience that Szymborska (or, as in Barth's example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge) sees as revealed most obviously, but certainly not exclusively, in works of imaginative art. (This is presumably what English poet laureate Ted Hughes was thinking of when he called the Spiritual Exercises "gymnastics for the

imagination").² The Exercises insist that we all have our work. Our ability to discern what that work may be, to accept it wholeheartedly, and to persevere in it joyfully requires our full attention and response—mind, heart, soul, and body—to a world fashioned by Divine love.

The pages of this issue of *Conversations* tell repeatedly of the powerful roles that art education and works of art can play in a tradition that strives to free its students to choose their work. Gerald Cobb's tour of the Chapel of St. Ignatius at Seattle University presents a building that demonstrates spectacularly the continuing ability of sacred art to carve out places in our midst that are, to echo a phrase quoted by Barth from Coleridge, "translucent" to the Eternal. Cynthia Caporelli surveys a few of the many ways that music can participate in opening up our students' sense of possibility while it fosters community. In providing a sampling of the richness of the D'Arcy Gallery of Art at Loyola University Chicago, Sally Metzler introduces us to a collection designed to liberate its viewer from a modern sense of the ordinary, by making available art from the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods. Philip Rule reminds us that reading imaginative literature has itself long been regarded as among the chief of the liberal arts, and argues for the primacy of imaginative literature in cultivating the sort of interiority, self-awareness, and reflexivity upon which the development of a "moral self-consciousness" may depend. In the reflections by the three Jesuit artist and teachers that follow, Michael Flecky (a photographer), Joseph Sobierajski (a sculptor), and Michael Tunney (a painter), each speak, albeit in different ways, to that spirit of "continuous adventure" that Szymborska sees as the sign of the human being who has found real work. Flecky's story of Ulla, his student who had found "her work" as an artist just as she began her battle with the disease that would prematurely end her life, is a moving story involving nothing less than a spiritual conversion. The teaching successes that Michael Tunney highlights through his "portraits" of his students may be less dramatic, but in the wonder of one of his students upon looking closely at the human form as if for the first time, or in the tiny epiphany of the student who "discovered" a "new" color on her palette, we may see no less clearly strong evidence of the liberating power of art.

¹ Wislawa Szymborska, *Poems, New and Collected, 1957-1997*, trans. Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1998) xiii-xiv.

² Ted Hughes, "A Word about Writing in the Schools," *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (New York: Picador, 1995) 25.