The Road to Bourgeois

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My seven-year-old cousin always shows off his armory of toys when I pay a visit to my uncle’s. The spacious storage room under the stairs becomes his arsenal, occupied by his army of colorful gadgets, some big, some small, some newly enrolled, some long retired. It is the place where he, the commander, spends most of his time (other than kindergarten or bed.) Adult that I am, I can hardly summon enough enthusiasm to pick up the toys, divide them into opposing forces, and direct a fictional war between them. Rather than detecting the soul my cousin imagines inside every figure (the Lego warriors, a Japanese superhero named the Ultraman, various different kinds of monsters, Gundam model robots), I can only smell the undesirable odor of plastic and guess how much each trinket has cost his parents. I can only think to teach him that a crane is used for construction rather than for war and to help him work out a jigsaw puzzle, actions I hope will make him smarter. He then inevitably labels me a boring playmate, and I join in conversation with my relatives who have also lost interest in such toys.

An adult is not supposed to play with toys. Toys, in the eyes of adults, are a naïve and monotonous use of time (my relatives label most of them “gigantic superheroes”). Toys have no life in them—they are mass-produced, common, and some of the ones in my brother’s collection still carry price tags. The French critic Roland Barthes would go so far as to attribute a “bourgeois status” to my cousin’s beloved soldiers, as he does in his essay “Toys” (690). “Bourgeois,” a word used mostly in sociology to indicate the middle class or, more broadly, the negative effects of capitalism, is unprecedentedly applied by Barthes to toys, highlighting an intrinsic characteristic of toys that is closely related to the whole of society. “Selfishly materialistic or conventionally respectable and unimaginative” is the exact meaning of the word (OED). Current toys seem unimaginative to Barthes because they are highly “socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life” (689). They are also too functional. Their main characters are often restricted to
certain occupations, and the scenarios in which they are set are basically real life situations. Thus, the toys “literally prefigure the world of adult functions,” establishing a “microcosm” of adult life so “there are, prepared for [children], actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy” (689). My cousin, then, serves as a perfect “victim”: shrunken athletic equipment (for mini-golf, mini-basketball, and soccer), model cartoon cars, toy guns and play-house gadgets occupy most of his play space. Indeed, toy-makers no longer have to think to engage children—all they have to do is make real life objects into cuter and smaller models. Toys have in a sense become nothing but a tool for pre-school education: behind the toys are “selfishly materialistic” manufacturers and designers. Most toys nowadays are not even bred or borne from joy, as their creators do not sketch outlines or find optimum materials with the intention of making children enjoy the final products; instead, they are producing products under the huge influence of marketing and toy designers’ own dreams to make profits off children.

I was wandering in the signature toy store in Times Square the other day, intending to relax and recollect a sense of childhood happiness. I found all the toys sorted in several sections. Most were based on bestseller cartoon characters or enduringly popular superheroes. The smile on Wendy from “Toy Story” looked routine, even hypocritical. What I saw in the organized, colorful, derivative toys, as I’ve seen in my cousin’s armory, is how toy factories and companies hardly make an effort to entertain their potential customers. They lack “the spirit of do-it-yourself” because most of the product models come directly from Hollywood studios and favored cartoonists (Barthes 689).

I did, however, have a flashback to my own childhood when I was lingering around the section of toy guns. When I was a kid, my parents didn’t buy many toys for me because they said toys were meaningless and a waste of money. One of my few priceless memories is of a black plastic toy gun that my grandmother bought as a Children’s Day gift. With that toy, I would often imagine myself as a righteous policeman and amusingly aim toward a dog and say, “Don’t move!” I once took it to a kindergarten festival and was regarded as the most popular participant in the “Toy Exchange” session. Even as I grew up, whenever I bumped into the gun, covered in dust, in my bedroom, I always had to smile at how funny I’d been back then. I wanted to experience at that Times Square store the same enthusiasm for my coveted gun that I had felt as a child in the small toyshop. This was my ultimate goal in that enormous store, but I failed to achieve it. I’ve grown up. I am not able to appreciate toys anymore. I am not supposed to play with them, and my former joy has long subsided.
But as a kid, even if I had learned the word “bourgeois,” I would never have related it to toys. They provided me with so much fun that I still view them as the most loyal playmates of my childhood. Now, as an adult entering the store, I can only think of such words as “fancy,” “commercial,” and “uncreative.” I had always up to this point identified myself as a schoolboy, the son of my parents and a person who loved to play. I felt lost between those racks, troubled that such an identity had always been just a vague illusion, and that I’d already changed drastically in this last decade of my life, somehow and somewhere, undesirably and inevitably. In a sense, it was unavoidable that I wouldn’t even realize the changes while I was actually changing—I didn’t choose to change.

The essayist Bernard Cooper describes such “inevitable” transition in his essay “Labyrinthine” when he discusses the different roles labyrinths have played in his life (347). At first he was so preoccupied with mazes that “[he] had to stop and rethink [his] strategy, squinting until some unobstructed path became clear,” and he found enjoyment in labyrinths since “even when trapped in the hallways of the maze, [he] felt an embracing safety” (345). He then began to find imagined mazes in everyday objects, in “the mahogany coffee table,” “the fabric of [his] parents’ blanket,” “veins of the marble heart,” and so on (345). Cooper grew so invested in mazes, in fact, that they became for him like Barthes’s “invented forms,” which Barthes himself seems to regard as “very rare” nowadays, and which help a child become a “creator” rather than just a “user” (689). Moreover, Cooper starts to make mazes on his own with passion and a sense of accomplishment, solidifying them as the signature of his childhood, a choice that would likely be praised by Barthes in the zealous “spirit of do-it-yourself” (689).

However, no matter how passionate he once was, as soon as Cooper grew up, his attitude toward mazes altered. Mazes had served as the fountain of imagination and fun in his childhood, but the labyrinth quickly became the portrait of his life journey. As he grows out of juvenile naïveté and into middle-aged anxiety, Cooper gradually gets lost in the labyrinth of adult life: “Recollecting the past becomes as unreliable as forecasting the future” and there soon comes “the endless succession of burdens and concerns” (346). A labyrinth finally becomes something “as slippery as thought, as perplexing as the truth, as long and convoluted as a life” (347). He has, with maturity, lost his childhood joy with labyrinths and is not likely to preoccupy himself with, find, or create with any more.

Everybody has toys as significant as mazes were to Cooper. For me, it was the toy gun; for my young cousin, it might be one of his model super-
heroes. However, at a certain point in life, everyone has to undergo an inevitable transition, a transition in which former passion is replaced with disinterest, in which childishness is replaced with social conventions and loss of imagination, in which uniqueness is lost and you become “bourgeois.”

Such a transition comes silently and unconsciously. When I was a kid, all my relatives would converse at reunion dinners and say that I was so creative and lovely, and that as a smart boy I was likely to have a prestigious occupation—as a novelist, a scientist, a musician. I would, however, arrogantly choose to leave the table, impolitely, without saying thanks, and enjoy cartoons alone. As I grew into school age, all the dialogue suddenly turned to grades: how I should strive more for a higher rank in class, how outstanding my peers and my relatives’ friends’ children were. No matter how full, no matter how little I liked the conversation, I felt obliged to stay at the table out of either etiquette or respect. As I grew up, I became one of the boring conversation starters, enthusiastically instructing my younger cousins to do better in school, based on my own experience (only to receive their silence and gray faces). I talked about the features of adult “bourgeois society”—social networking, business projects, celebrities in town, how to make money. In what seemed only a moment, I had passed the watershed moment into adulthood, becoming a garrulous teacher instead of a naughty, inquisitive child without even realizing it. Somehow, my childish arrogance had been replaced by mediocrity and humbleness.

The transition, even if unwanted, is certainly predetermined. It seems that there are certain genes one might inherit: in childhood they are not expressed, but as one grows up, such age-dependent genes are gradually expressed. I do happen to have such genes, and they started to shape me as a person when I was still of school age. Once in a while someone would say that I was becoming more like my father, the man I understood least in my childhood. I couldn’t, for instance, understand why he was not interested in anything I loved. We did no sports together, let alone watch movies or play games. We had a great generation gap between us. He was such a workaholic that I couldn’t see if there was anything done for fun in his routine life. Now, years later, I have begun to understand his job and his personality, and gradually feel compassion for him. After all I have the same genes. I have become a “studyholic” and stopped playing games. I have abandoned my few childhood toys. I instantaneously react with “Junk food!” when my friends have burgers and fries for dinner. My former passionate and sunny outlook has been replaced with responsibility and diligence.
It is not a genetic mutation that creates new traits and new species, but regular gene expression inherited from older generations. I see the shadow of Cooper on myself too: when he proudly showed his masterpieces, his “do-it-yourself mazes,” to his parents as a child, their indifference and disinterest overwhelmed him. “It was inconceivable to [him] that someone wouldn’t want to enter a maze, wouldn’t lapse into the trance it required, wouldn’t sacrifice the time to find a solution”; but thirty years later, he understood his parents refusal: “Why would anyone choose to get mired in a maze when the days encase us, loopy and confusing?” (346). His latent genes were finally expressed, and he mourns, “Mother, Father . . . I suppose it was inevitable that, gazing down at this piece of paper, I’d feel your weary expressions on my face” (347).

In the labyrinth called growing up, one will always get lost when one’s brain begins to mature. One is encouraged and even forced to have an objective and a destination: at the center of the labyrinth lies a notable college diploma, a powerful position in a company, or a grandiose mansion. A genuine sense of direction, however, is somehow missing. Calculations take the place of critical thoughts. Hectic schedules and designated tracks make one operate like a machine, following the prescribed path into bourgeois society. One becomes, like French toys, “entirely socialized,” and the sense of inventiveness and creativity disappears (Barthes 689).

To attempt to escape this aimless, sweeping current, to get out of the vortex of adulthood, I tried to go back to nature. A few weeks ago I visited the Monet’s Garden exhibition at the New York Botanical Garden at a close friend’s invitation. I wanted to find an asylum, a refuge from the hectic city lifestyle, and I certainly managed it. An hour’s ride away from downtown, true nature exists, a place to purify a New Yorker’s bourgeois mind.

Different from the primal beauty of an African preservation zoo, the small pond there represents the elegant beauty of nature; it not only impresses me with the splendor of its scenery, but also provides a sense of kindness that keeps me lingering. Blooming water lilies of various colors coexist in the pond despite the looming midtown skyscrapers. The contrast of color is obvious: even with the deep blue water reflecting the gloomy sky, big shining green leaves holding various species of water lilies arrest my vision—the yellow ones are sacred, the white are pure, the pink are vibrant, the purple are noble. Their vibrancy is not stained by the mud beneath, nor affected by the dim sky.

The garden has left me not merely with a sense of a functionally green planet, but with real nature—beautiful, primitive, and pure. It made me put
to rest all the stresses of my adult life. This kind of serenity and return to the natural state of things is exactly what I needed to put things in perspective, the kind of scene that promotes “art for art’s sake,” that inspires masters like Monet to create glorious pieces like his triptych *Water Lilies*, one of the most outstanding of all impressionist works. As Monet himself claimed, it was his garden and pond in Giverny that inspired him most throughout his life, because they provided him with a shelter outside bourgeois life (MoMA). Barthes also found nature to be the epitome of real life, indicated by his admiration of wood; as a toy material, he hails it for the “natural warmth of its touch” and claims “it is a familiar and poetic substance” (690).

Nevertheless, nature is a rather scarce commodity, and our connections to it are always fleeting. Wood used to be a predominant part of human manufacturing in a time when people were not as materialistic as they are now. It is, however, being fast replaced by artificial chemicals as demand for different products always increases. Barthes describes the undesirable transition of materials by pointing out that “many [toys] are now molded from complicated mixtures; the plastic material of which they are made has an appearance at once gross and hygienic, it destroys all the pleasure, the sweetness, the humanity of touch” (690). Regardless of wood’s “firmness and its softness,” its “warmth,” it’s being inevitably replaced by plastic; no matter how clean and sacred water lilies are, flower-buyers prefer roses and lavenders; no matter how beautiful Monet’s Garden is, it’s still only a place for a one-time weekend outing (690). The illumination of and perspective on life that nature provides is impressive but ultimately ephemeral. Visitors at the garden walked past the lily pond and kept walking into the labyrinths of their own lives: I was one such visitor. On the train back to campus, it occurred to me that the garden served as an asylum from complication, but only an asylum. It was not an exit from the labyrinth of maturity; that maze is so enclosed and its twists and turns are so convoluted that few find the way out. I eventually returned to the real world, to where it seems I belong, and walked the uneven paths in the populous, winding puzzle that is New York City.

The road to the bourgeois life is so smooth and silent that one hardly realizes what’s happening. Like a timed software program, the road of growing up is planned and determined by parents, by society, and by genes. As the memories fade away, the destinations become distant and unclear. Everyone endeavors to be a high-hearted water lily, rising from the mud and standing out elegantly, but subsumed by the crowd and the raging current of life. Many turn out to be dandelions in the wind, fallen leaves in vortex, or pebbles in quicksand—lost in the everlasting progression, in the overwhelming
labyrinth. This is a mandatory lesson about growing up. This is the bitter transition that is the road to bourgeois.

WORKS CITED


