

## ORIGIN

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Wes Anderson's film *Moonrise Kingdom* tells the story of two runaway children in love— orphan Sam Shakusky and Suzy Bishop, the daughter of emotionally detached lawyers— on the fictional island of New Penzance. The film follows the children on their journey as the adults of the island try to put a stop to their flight. As the tension rises, a great storm of nearly diluvial proportions sweeps the entire island. In one shot, we see the two children facing St. Jack's church. The camera zooms out to reveal a black, rectangular frame around the two and continues to zoom out, finally revealing a stained glass window depicting Noah's ark on the interior wall of the church. We discover that the frame we previously saw around the two children has become the ark's window. We can't help but draw the connection between the two children and Noah and his wife standing at the front of his ark— perhaps a poignant representation of two children facing The Great Flood of adulthood.

The juxtaposition of the two images draws a profound and concise connection between two types of beginnings, two conceptions of the notion of origin. The first is the beginning of every life: childhood. The second is archetype: a narrative taken from the book of Genesis. And yet these two beginnings also connote a corruption, an end. In the film, the characters experience the passage from childhood to adolescence through their first encounter with love. Adult disapproval ascribes the notion of corruption to the children's innocent encounter. In the Bible, God asks Noah to create an ark so that He can wipe out the wickedness from the world that He created. What do these two senses of origin and their subsequent transformation represent for us? Do we yearn for a lost sense of purity, of "wholeness" reminiscent of the first stage of our lives (Chabon)? Or do we yearn for a more ancient ideal: the time before the Great Flood, before "The Fall" (Berger 83)? Or is it merely a sense of ignorance from the perils and evils of the world that we yearn for? Do we long for a time in which our actions were not

tainted by the prospect of mortality or affected by the appearance of wickedness, only driven by a desire for understanding and connection? If so, is attaining a sense of origin a way to foster a sense of empathy?

Michael Chabon begins his essay "Wes Anderson's Worlds" by offering a definition of this first sense of origin: "The world is so big, so complicated, so replete with marvels and surprises that it takes years for most people to begin to notice that it is, also, irretrievably broken. We call this period of research 'childhood.'" Chabon relates childhood to the sensation of awe at the newness and mystery of the world and introduces the idea of "brokenness." Awe can be defined as "reverential wonder, tinged with latent fear, inspired by what is terribly sublime" ("awe"). Chabon describes adolescence—or in broader terms, the end of childhood—as the period of realization that "the world has been broken for as long as anyone can remember." As the two 'children researchers' of *Moonrise Kingdom* attempt to live out the whims of their imagination, they find themselves face to face with characters out of a "broken" adult world: an indifferent social worker, feuding parents, and a lonely police officer. Chabon thus describes childhood as the process in which awe veers into disappointment. And yet this disappointment is never absolute because the researcher can remember a time in which it seemed that the world was indeed whole. "[T]he ache of a cosmic nostalgia that arises, from time to time, in the researcher's heart" is for this lost sense of "wholeness": "a memory of the world unbroken." This "wholeness," Chabon suggests, stems from the memory of the awe and innocence experienced in childhood.

And yet perhaps children have always known that the world is broken. *Moonrise Kingdom's* protagonist Sam Shakusky is described as emotionally damaged, having had to face the struggles of foster parenting throughout his childhood. Suzy Bishop, despite her privileged background, has lived out her childhood amidst emotionally unavailable parents. So when Chabon speaks of nostalgia for lost wholeness, perhaps he is speaking of an imagined time, of the archetypal sense of origin before the appearance of wickedness: the time before The Flood. Chabon is speaking of wholeness as an ideal rather than a reality. Is he proposing that this ideal could be attained if, like children, we could experience awe despite the knowledge of brokenness?

Naturally, the first obstacle that presents itself is time. How can we, as adults, reconnect with our childhoods in the first place before attempting to reconcile it with our brokenness? In an excerpt from *Swann's Way*, the first of his seven-volume novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust explores the impalpable nature of the past and its relationship with the palpable world of objects. The narrator begins with an excerpt from Celtic folklore. Past souls inhabit an object until a loved one recognizes them in it, freeing them. He explains that, in the same way, the only remnants of our past are contained in material objects. The past cannot be contained by the intellect; it goes beyond the grasp of our minds. Proust believes that the only way the past can be experienced is "in the sensation which th[e] material object will give us" (57-8).

Proust's narrator goes on to describe this occurrence in his own life. He describes feeling an overpowering sensation upon biting into *une petite madeleine* dipped in tea: an "all-powerful joy" that goes beyond an expression of pleasure and rids him of his sense of mortality, suffering and irrelevance. As he describes it, "the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to [him], its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory" (Proust 58). Proust seems to describe an experience that cannot be reduced to sensation or even emotion and could perhaps be described as a moment of transcendence, an "elevation or extension beyond ordinary limits" ("transcendence").

What exactly is Proust able to transcend? He describes his attempts at finding the source of the experience. He finds that the tea and madeleine act as a catalyst for an "unremembered state" (Proust 59). He realizes that he has called upon the childhood memory of when his aunt would give him madeleines dipped in tea. Proust describes how suddenly the landscape of his childhood came flooding in with all its vibrant colors, like a Japanese paper flower floating in a bowl. One can define wholeness in Proust's experience as a moment in which linear time can be transcended and past and present can exist simultaneously. Proust's "unremembered state" recalls a time in which the world's brokenness was less present, generating a connection with the first sense of origin: childhood. However, Proust also experiences a sense of immortality as he removes the shackles imposed on him by the passing of time. Proust is calling upon a greater sense of origin, of attaining a place beyond time.

And yet paradoxically, this breaching of time is encapsulated in a moment. If this transcendence is ephemeral, what can we really gain from it? Does it really constitute wholeness if it does not provide, beyond a sense of return to an origin, a more permanent sense of belonging? Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Amélie* depicts a similar experience to that of Proust's madeleine. In Jeunet's film, 50-year-old Dominique Bretodeau is reconnected to his past with the help of a dusty tin box. When the introverted Amélie discovers a box containing fragments of Bretodeau's childhood—photographs, a toy bike, glass marbles and other relics—her life takes a dramatic shift. The narrator describes how “only the first man to enter the grave of Toutankhamon may understand how Amélie felt when she discovered the treasure that had been hid by a little boy,” evoking the sense of wonder and awe experienced by Amélie. She echoes the way that Chabon compares children—not of archeological ruins, but of the ruins of our condition. Comparing the discovery of a dusty tomb—a mythological relic—with a relic from childhood evokes the idea of rediscovering a fragment of the “lost [sense of] wholeness” expressed by Chabon.

Amélie is set on finding Monsieur Bretodeau in order to return this treasure to him. She places the box inside a telephone booth. Bretodeau hears the phone ring and enters the booth to find this forgotten piece of his childhood. He is overwhelmed by a surge of memories: watching his first Tour de France, watching his aunt change through a peephole, and the woeful day at school when he won all the marbles only to have them rip through his jacket pocket. As with Proust's narrator, an object permits Bretodeau to transcend his present and experience an overwhelming emotional re-living of his past. And yet, Bretodeau's moment is not only a sensory experience leading to an individual revelation, as Proust's was, but one with a wider implication: communion with others. Bewildered by the passing of time, Bretodeau declares while sitting in a bar that he will try to reconnect with his estranged daughter. This moment establishes a more permanent quality of time, as it goes beyond a momentary merging of past and present. It instills in Bretodeau a desire to change the present through a re-living of the past.

At the core of the film is Amélie's desire to help others. She cannot transcend her shyness, and so she establishes connections with others using her imagination, her capacity for awe, and her child-like sense of wonder. The

film permits us to see the world through her eyes through Jeunet's use of saturated colors, accordion music, and a poignant focus on detail. *Amélie* is deeply fascinated by the myriad of individual universes, obsessed by personal quirks and idiosyncrasies. The film thus delves into these personal universes, reveling in them while it explores deeply lonely characters like Amélie's glacial father and her elderly neighbor who has not left his apartment in decades because his bones, fragile as glass, could break at any second. Amélie, by offering these characters a return to the wonder of childhood through clever stratagems brings Proust's personal transcendence to the collective realm.

And yet *Amélie* in itself is a film: a work of fiction, a work of art. It plays with the implausibility of the situations it depicts. It relishes in its delightful and unlikely coincidences: Bretodeau just happens to walk into the empty telephone booth where the phone is ringing. After examining the presence of brokenness in our world, Chabon proposes that works of art (such as *Amélie*) are the only response to "brokenness." He uses Wes Anderson's films, Vladimir Nabokov's novels, and Joseph Cornell's boxes as examples. Chabon proposes that we must build our own little worlds, "scale models" of the world. He introduces the idea of the Cornell box to highlight this effect and express the importance of artifice in art. For Chabon, the most important element of a Cornell box is the box itself. The box creates a sense of inescapability; it "mediates the halves of a metaphor." The box attempts to reconcile the two distinct facets of a metaphor: the object and the thing it is being compared with. By doing this, the box shows explicitly that it is only a metaphor. For an instant we see the two children of *Moonrise Kingdom* aboard Noah's ark, only to realize, a moment later, that they are standing behind the stained glass window of a church. Chabon describes how, in this way, artifice is the only true form of authenticity because it tells us that we can never escape our broken world.

Art, for Chabon, can provide scale models of our "beautiful and broken world." Here, Chabon assumes that the world is inherently beautiful despite its brokenness, just as in *Amélie* where awe, fantasy, disappointment and loss coexist in the same color-saturated universe. A paradox arises: Chabon presents wholeness as the ability to see brokenness whole, to apprehend immense concepts. He gives the example of grief, which "at full scale, is too big for us to take [. . .] in; it literally cannot be comprehended" (Chabon). It is here that

the idea of scale becomes essential. The artist must use detail in order to reduce distance and allow different elements within the work to exist in poignant relation. The artists Chabon speaks of do this by producing extremely personal work: Nabokov puts his experience of exile in the context of a family. Anderson's films very often include family conflicts, inspired by his own parents' separation. We feel empathy because we can comprehend these emotions. We are given the possibility to grasp our irreparably fragmented experiences and to come to terms with them; this in itself is wholeness. In *Amélie*, Bretodeau is reconnected with a sense of awe from his childhood and this reverberates in his life. In *Moonrise Kingdom* the adults manage to better understand the two children, demonstrating a sense of compassion at the end. Chabon does not speak of transcending the barriers of time as Proust does. He denies us the possibility of return to the archetypal origin, giving us instead the possibility for reconciliation with our broken present through art. However, is reconciling with our brokenness the only path to transcendence? Does art, because of its 'inauthentic' nature and its inescapable frame, always deny us the possibility of return to the archetypal origin?

In his essay "The White Bird," John Berger explores what moves us and why through the relationship between nature and art. Berger describes the urban tendency of fostering a "sentimental view of nature," which posits that nature can be framed and looked upon from a distance (82). He points to the necessity of seeing nature, however, as something "which lends itself as much to evil as to good" (82). Berger weaves his reflection on the carelessness of the natural world within a biblical framework. His conceptions of Good and Evil recall the ideas of wholeness and brokenness present in Chabon's essay. Chabon reflects on the time before wickedness, before "The Fall" (83). But how do we make sense of the biblical notion that nature was created to serve a divine purpose when we experience it as "fearsomely indifferent" to our survival? (82). Here, Berger introduces beauty as an attempt to understand and deal with the careless natural world: "[u]nder the fallen boulder of an avalanche a flower grows" (82).

Berger speaks of the aesthetic emotion we experience in front of certain sights as based on a double affirmation. Beauty is found in the moment where nature coincides with our perception and creates recognition between what is

and what we see and feel. By seeing nature, we affirm its existence, and, as we are the ones perceiving, it also affirms ours. He relates this double affirmation to God's position in Genesis. When God molded the world, He imparted purpose and order. Berger proposes a transcendence of time not on an individual scale, as Proust does, but on a biblical scale.

For Berger, this transcendence is the resolution of an ontological tension that has existed since the moment of Creation. Beauty exists in the moment when this fundamental tension is resolved, when "[f]or an instant, the energy of one's perception becomes inseparable from the energy of creation" (83). For Berger, this same principle applies to art. He describes works of art as "a derivative of the emotion we feel before nature" (83). If this sign of purpose exists only in the instantaneous, art is an attempt to render it permanent. Beauty no longer becomes "an exception" but rather the rule, "the basis for an order" (83). This is, for Berger, the transcendental face of nature and subsequently art, an affirmation of our "ontological right," our right to exist with purpose (83). At first, we cry out against the carelessness of nature, its indifference. But, Chabon and Berger speak of the hope of art as a possibility to transcend our "broken world." But unlike Chabon, Berger proposes that transcendence exists as an exception to our brokenness, or our evil, not in harmony with it. Berger gives us a possibility of return that Chabon denies. For Berger, art is defined by the possibility for escape, not for a reconciliation.

If these ideas are sometimes abstract, it is perhaps because they seem so far removed from the immediate hustle of daily life. Perhaps they remain endlessly appealing for this reason. They appear to us only in a glimmer. My grandmother suffers from severe dementia. Most of the time her gaze seems to be looking beyond you, as if between her and the world there is a distant mountain range drowned in fog. And yet the skies of her mind seem to clear to reveal a vast array of song lyrics. There's always music playing in her house. Ballads hang sweetly on the dusty air, the Mexican ballad singer Chavela Vargas' voice trembling in the suspended sigh between present and past. My grandmother croons along. Her favorite song is "Sin Ti," by Los Panchos. She knows it by heart and sometimes she can still play a few notes of it on the piano. I can only speculate, but I feel that she experiences these ballads as Proust's Marcel describes his experience of the madeleine: an

entirely sensory, deeply personal return. The memories of my grandmother's youth no longer exist in her rational mind, and yet perhaps through music she can call upon the warmth of their colors. This is the sort of sensorial memory which Proust describes in *Swann's Way*: one that cannot be attained through empirical reasoning.

Yet the moments that I find the most poignant when I observe my grandmother are when she listens to music unrelated to her past. My grandmother was not a connoisseur of classical music. Chopin never meant much to her during her life, but my mother will sometimes have her listen to his Nocturnes. I have an image of my grandmother gently clutching herself, her head nestled in enormous headphones, her eyes closed. She seems completely and sublimely enraptured. And in this moment, I see her as a being who has transcended space, time, and memory and has entered a realm where only the senses exist: as she sways gently between the reverberations of a C and a G, only Nocturne No. 2 is relevant or real. I like to think that in this moment my grandmother has understood and felt Chopin as no one else has. Perhaps this is the way in which art can lead us to experience transcendence in our daily lives: by creating a moment of profound connection without any common associations. My grandmother and Chopin will never meet each other, nor know anything about each other and yet they have shared this sublimely intimate moment. When I think of my Grandma and her Chopin, I have the hope that the artwork has created a form of permanence, a space beyond time. As long as Chopin's Nocturnes exist, there is forever a possibility for awe, a possibility of return.

I believe this exchange is the sense of empathy that art can create, a moment of connection between artist and spectator sometimes held together by nothing but the artwork itself. Perhaps art creates this form of empathy when it takes us to an origin that transcends all personal, philosophical or rational pre-suppositions. Perhaps art really is a return to the moment of Creation, not for the purpose of reclaiming an ontological right as Berger proposes, nor in the strictly biblical sense, but to the moment in which any new thing—be it a star, a God, a child, an idea or a work of art—begins to exist. Perhaps the creative force behind any artwork is of the same fundamental energy from which all beginnings derive; a return to one origin is a return to all origins. Perhaps art grants us the ability not to apprehend the immense,



as Chabon proposes, but rather to be born again with it, to be swept away with child-like fear and reverence by the cosmic tide of its inception.

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