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The Ivy League Lament

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The past few years have witnessed the inception of a new genre of affluent lament—a kind of marriage of our disparate cultural obsessions with the misery memoir and the university. The progeny of this union is the memoir of the elite university education that confers status but destroys souls. The plot of such memoirs almost always begins with a young scholar thirsting for wisdom who encounters our meritocratic educational apparatus, excels by its standards but is morally disfigured by them, wins admission to an Ivy League school, discovers that the place overlooks his secret cravenness and grants him success with professors and attractive women anyway, and is driven to the extremes of existential angst for a brief period by this discovery. When our wiser and more cynical scholar finally recovers, he concludes that elite education is rotten, graduates from the school, and proceeds to a brilliantly successful career as a writer, abetted by the publication of his memoir decrying the rottenness of his elite education. If these books don't make obvious the devastating costs of an Ivy League education, what could?

The genre seems to have taken off after the publication in 2005 of Ross Douthat's *Privilege*, a memoir of his undergraduate years at Harvard. It was followed by David Samuels's memoir-disguised-as-reportage, *The Runner*, in 2008; the most recent contributor to the cause is Walter Kirn, whose *Lost in the Meritocracy* indicts Princeton. If one were inclined to include former Yale professor William Deresiewicz's partially autobiographical 2008 essay, "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education," among these laments, then all three bulwarks of American status-lust—Harvard, Yale, and Princeton—will have come in for a beating. It may be a partially or, if you're really cynical, wholly deserved beating, and our clever meritocracy lamenters unfurl their verbal whips in so many directions that they do hit some of the truly rotten parts of our elaborate educational mechanism, but the requirements of memoir always direct their thoughts back to crafting narratives of their innocence and corruption.

Where there is great lust for the status conferred by these schools, there is likely to be at least an equally fervent resentment of it. Such takedowns of meritocracy play to both sides, offering glimpses of a coveted life alongside satisfying condemnations of it. It's a brilliant marketing strategy

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that manages to unite the feuding camps of America's tastemakers into a single receptive audience—liberals who hate the Ivy League's production of a capitalist elite as well as conservatives who hate its domineering leftism; principled populists and thwarted Ivy League aspirants alike—and the authors make sure to scratch these readers in all the right places.

All remark on the class disparities and the snobbery among the student bodies. Douthat and Kirn register the now-ubiquitous complaint against radicalism and obscurantism in the humanities, Kirn and Samuels home in on the arbitrariness of the system of standardized tests and melodramatic personal essays that selects Ivy League admits and condemns the rejects to a life of dullness and obscurity with state-school diplomas, and so on. But there remains something implausible in these authors' combination of purported naïveté about the meritocratic game and their canny manipulation of it. They manage the impressive feat of becoming unwitting victims of the same system they so cynically and effectively exploited, and then they ask us to sympathize with the raw deal they've gotten.

The trouble starts when every one of them admits at the outset that he has spent nearly his entire pre-college education gaming the system in preparation for college admission. Kirn describes an incident in the fourth grade when his classmates were given a series of essay cards designed to promote "reading comprehension" and scientific curiosity. Kirn and two of his classmates quickly distinguish themselves by the speed at which they read through the essays and answer the questions. Kirn becomes obsessed with beating his two rivals, so he begins to cut corners—first skimming the cards for numbers and quotations more likely to appear in the subsequent questions, and then skipping the essays altogether to look at the questions first, "and circling back to the essays to find the answers." One boy is immediately vanquished when it turns out that he isn't interested in competing in the first place; he "read for the reasons I only pretended to read—for understanding, out of actual interest—and sometimes he looked up from his cards as though he were truly reflecting on their contents." Kirn's remaining nemesis finally loses to him, but only because she doesn't have her glasses.

This, for Kirn, is meritocracy in action. It is a ruthless, pointless competition for external accolades at the expense of true learning. Instead of inculcating the sincere desire for knowledge, it teaches the necessity of cultivating the mere appearance of it. It is this same view of meritocracy that leads Samuels to wonder in *The Runner* whether there is really any difference between the Ivy League aspirant and the professional con artist besides the institutional imprimatur granted to the former. The Ivy League offers its students the opportunity "to become someone new,"

Samuels suggests. "In turn, the university will testify to the social legitimacy of your actions by putting its name on your diploma." But Kirn was no innocent naïf, tricked by adults and their nefarious system of empty rewards into playing a game he did not understand. He knew even in the fourth grade that what he was doing was cheating, that there was no necessity to behave this way; and when his classmate rebuked him for reading the questions on the cards first, he decided against all rationality that "the harm that she seemed to feel I'd done myself (finding an angle, and then playing it) wasn't within my power to give up."

This precocious knowingness is essential to the genre. Unless one has been cursed with the kind of crippling cultural deprivation associated with backwoods religious homeschooling and a name like Jedediah Purdy, it's nearly impossible to make an unironic claim to childhood innocence. So these writers admit to knowing all along that meritocracy is an elaborate status game, that college admissions is about faking the appearance of achievement and intellectual seriousness. But even as they concede that their outsized lust for admission to elite schools deformed their character, these writers insist that they seriously believed that attending these schools would make them whole again. As Douthat puts it, after the trials of being unpopular and overlooked in high school, Harvard "became a beacon of hope to my semi-alienated teenage mind. . . . At Harvard, athleticism and good looks and popularity would count far less than the things that really mattered: native brilliance, and intellectual curiosity, and academic achievement." College would transport them away from the craven striving of their high schools to a world of integrity, refinement, truth, and beauty. How such an idyll would be created out of a class of craven strivers exactly like themselves seems not to have come under their consideration.

Small Man on Campus

Unsurprisingly, once they arrive on campus and confront a place full of perfect reflections of themselves, all their pleasant illusions are shattered, and they indict their classmates as phonies. The rich—targets we love to hate because all Americans, and particularly the readers of such Ivy League laments, are supposedly part of the long-suffering middle class—come in for the harshest attacks. Douthat's formative Harvard experience consists in being rejected from a club so exclusive that no nonmember has glimpsed its interior for two centuries. Samuels is tyrannized at Harvard by his roommate's vast collection of neckties. But it is Kirn's account of the cruelty of the wealthy that most absurdly plays to popular resentments—

he alleges that during his junior year, he was led into a car by "a handsome blond campus prince—the descendant of a legendary industrialist," blindfolded, and driven for hours out into the country. When he removed the blindfold, he found himself in front of "an actual castle, with countless tall windows, pediments, and columns." In the middle of New Jersey. "My family's estate. Behold, poor serf! Behold a power you will never know!" the scion told him, and drove off leaving him stranded.

To make this narrative plausible, Kirn downplays his own elite background. His father was also a Princeton alum and an executive at the 3M corporation; his bizarre lifestyle choices—not poverty—were responsible for the family move to rural Minnesota. To dwell on these facts would betray more in common with his vile Princeton classmates than Kirn could bear to admit. Douthat faces a similar credibility problem when he admits that he comes from an, again, strange, but affluent and highly educated family, and his main claim to disadvantage is that his own well-regarded private school "existed in the long shadow" of the even more elite Choate Rosemary Hall. To their credit, neither Kirn nor Douthat omits these facts from his book (Samuels is more cagey), and Douthat is up front about being a fair prototype of the smart, ambitious, well-positioned child destined for the Ivy League. But couched in the context of these admissions, it becomes harder to sympathize with the authors' descriptions of being socially adrift in a hostile sea of affluence.

Here again, the conventions of memoir undermine the meritocracy lament's broader argument against elite education. All these writers want to drive home the quite valid criticism of the hypocritical "diversity policy" at these schools, which Deresiewicz describes as "the heartwarming spectacle of the children of white businesspeople and professionals studying and playing alongside the children of black, Asian, and Latino businesspeople and professionals." The superficial diversity of race and ethnicity masks the underlying social homogeneity that arises from selecting a student body almost exclusively from America's wealthy suburbs, its elite urban enclaves, and its top hundred high schools. The dominance of affluent culture at elite schools may be a real problem, but not for these authors, who are themselves the children of white businesspeople and professionals. But how else to demonstrate the problem in a memoir except to inflict it on your subject, who happens to be you? The results are barely believable claims of victimization of the rich at the hands of the *really* rich that do little more than provoke a pointless game of poorer-than-thou, in which the authors' own claims to victimhood can be easily contested on the grounds that other students have it even worse.

The rich are just as corrupt as we'd like them to be in these stories, but, as blogger and English professor Margaret Soltan has pointed out, these caricatures can backfire: "One reasonable conclusion to draw from *Lost in the Meritocracy* is that only extremely rich people should go to schools like Princeton. Kirn describes a college culture in which the vast majority of the students—rolling-in-dough Percodan-snorters—are happy and well-adjusted, and the tiny minority of middle-class students like Kirn are miserable and alienated." Indeed, Kirn himself points out that this is a problem inherent in the idea of meritocracy: "A pure meritocracy, we'd discovered, can only promote; it can't legitimize. It can confer success but can't grant knighthood. For that it needs a class beyond itself: the high-born genealogical peerage that aptitude testing was created to overthrow." Possibly to ward against such a reactionary conclusion, Kirn and his fellow Ivy League-lamenters take aim at every other student type as well—the radical activists and the establishment politicos, the ethnic priders and the anglophiles, the prude and the prurient, the women and the men, the studious and the lazy—all phonies.

Now, since meritocracy visits its soul-destroying power on all strivers equally ("We all showed aptitude. Aptitude for showing aptitude, mainly.… Nobody told us it wouldn't be enough," Kirn despairs), their classmates' pathetic hypocrisy should garner some sympathy from the authors. But, while they prove quite willing to confess their own sins—which involve abusing the elite school trinity of drugs, women, and po-mo jargon—they possess that uncanny ability of memoirists to ascribe their own transgressions primarily to an excess of innocence, while everyone else's are more likely to be the products of intractable mendacity. Only Douthat admits solidarity with and affection for his classmates (even going so far as to dedicate his book to them). He remains good friends with a dormmate who made it into the club from which he was rejected and admires the student activists who staged a twenty-one-day sit-in to demand higher wages for campus workers. They are compelling, he suggests, because they are serious about something other than their own status climb. Kirn and Samuels, though both have had about two decades longer than Douthat to get some perspective on their lives, seem to revile their classmates with the same reflexive adolescent resentment they harbored while still in school.

This contradictory hatred forms the crux of the problem with the meritocracy lament—the authors urge us to save the elite university but describe no one in it as worth saving. The misery memoir makes a terrible platform for serious social commentary—it is too bound up with the author's own ego and his effort to distinguish himself from the mass of

his very similar peers to be able to offer much insight. What they seem to be aiming at is the authority and historical vision of Allan Bloom, but the result is something that rarely gets beyond the pint-sized resentment of Holden Caulfield. In reality, as their own logic inexorably leads us to conclude, the authors are really no better than their classmates, and if they want to expose the rottenness of elite education, they must either excuse themselves from the story and shine a light on these schools objectively, or they should do us the service of finding the kind of students who are what they wish they had been—sincere, honest, diligent, and intellectually independent—and figuring out how they got to be that way.

Status and Seriousness

Part of their difficulty lies in the fact that sincere, serious, and intellectually honest students persist beside them—a handful among their own classmates, but more often, at other schools—and their character proves difficult to fit into the meritocracy lament paradigm. Theoretically, no one should be able to pass through the system and remain whole, so how did these students manage to do so? One answer is that they sought after some purpose besides head-patting from adults and distinctions for their résumés.

For some, that purpose is salvation. Religious students are anathema to Samuels and Kirn, who share in common early repudiations of their own faiths. For Samuels, admission to Harvard was his ticket out of the repressive Orthodox Jewish world of his childhood, and Kirn claims to have discovered early on that the Mormon Church was just another branch of the meritocratic system, rewarding shallow displays of oratory with hot chicks to make out with in the parking lot after services.

But religious colleges in America have been sources of explicit opposition to the decadent, established elite ever since Yale was founded in 1701 to preserve Puritan orthodoxy against what some viewed as the increasing laxity of Harvard's faculty. The social status of these schools seems to vary indirectly with their denominational orthodoxy—the Newman Guide to Catholic colleges, for example, heaps its praises on such schools as Christendom College and Franciscan University of Steubenville for their "vibrant and pervasive spiritual life," but that's not enough to sneak these schools into even those backhanded "best colleges you've never heard of" guides, not to mention the canonical *U.S. News* rankings. At the same time, the Newman Guide laments the decline of Notre Dame into degenerate secularism, and Georgetown University, perhaps the highest-status Catholic school in America, doesn't even merit a mention on the Newman list.

And yet, if the meritocracy lamenters wanted to find serious students in America, Christendom College might be a good place to start. The kind of student who chooses to attend a school like Christendom or somewhere similarly obscure in the Advanced Placement circles of Westchester and Grosse Pointe is one who either rejects status games or to whom this worldview never occurred in the first place. (To be sure, there are also plenty of apathetic and distracted students at these schools, as there are everywhere.) At the other end of the spectrum, there are the incubators of the radical left—places like Hampshire, Evergreen State, and the recently-defunct Antioch College—as unconcerned with their social status as the religious schools (though with decidedly worldlier ends), and committed to a purpose that transcends the pursuit of a life befitting a *New York Times* wedding announcement.

Perhaps, as Samuels would have it, we can just hand the keys to the kingdom over to these students in reward of their sincerity and intellectual passion, but of course it would never work out that way. As Helen Rittelmeyer has written in *Culture11*, "As long as an Ivy League diploma grants automatic access to the upper class, there will be students (or parents) willing to do what it takes to get their hands on one.... Yale could make a fervent passion for ideas the sole criterion for admission, and ambitious careerists would only find a way to fake it." And it helps to remember that philosophers and poets can be ambitious people too, to a degree that might stun and awe the average investment banker, who, in his most ambitious mood, typically wants only to overthrow the prevailing wisdom about derivative trading rather than the entire state.

Adult Supervision Required

Where the meritocracy lamenters come closest to getting at the source of the moral distortions perpetuated by meritocracy is where they put their personal grudges and ambitions aside to report on what is actually happening at these universities. From these accounts emerges a common thread of abdicated adult responsibility. In part, the theme arises out of the conventions of memoir as well—these are all coming-of-age stories, and coming of age is always to some degree a process undertaken alone. However, it is no coincidence that some of the most memorable absurdities described by Kirn and Douthat are moments in which adult authority is notably wanting.

The most fascinating part of Douthat's book is the chapter about Suzanne Pomey—a popular Harvard student who, in 2002, was caught embezzling nearly a hundred thousand dollars from the Hasty Pudding

Theatricals, a campus musical troupe of which she was producer. She was eventually dismissed from Harvard and sentenced to probation for felony larceny. Such instances of substantial theft from the school's clubs have taken place with impressive frequency in the past twenty years. Douthat's account of Pomey's rise and fall at Harvard is itself interesting, but one question the episode raises is how it would ever be permissible at any university for undergraduates to, as Douthat describes, "regularly manage budgets in the hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars, whether the money belonged to the *Crimson* or the Pudding or the Model U.N.'s parent organization . . . which boasted its own substantial investment portfolio."

Who would leave this kind of money to the sole discretion of a bunch of nineteen-year-olds? It might be said that such responsibility is good practice for a future in which graduates of these clubs will go on to manage even larger sums in investment banking portfolios and national budgets, and perhaps that's true, at least for those who aren't caught pocketing the loose change first. But at bottom, the Suzanne Pomey incident illustrates the refusal of adults at Harvard—and, indeed, outside of it—to exercise not just punitive but moral authority over what Douthat calls "the high-IQ club." Douthat describes the glee with which the campus derided her after the embezzlement was made public, and suggests that justice was served when she was sentenced to probation (the judge argued that "no purpose would be served by a sentence of incarceration") and denied her Harvard diploma, a punishment that amounts to, as Douthat puts it, being "expelled from the paradise of the American overclass."

Only that's not quite how it worked out, or how it ever works out with the children of the meritocracy. Once one attains the requisite credentials—the GPA, SAT, and hours of tutoring underprivileged children—then it becomes increasingly difficult to justify exclusion from elite circles on the basis of mere character flaws. Pomey, like the more recent Harvard disgrace Kaavya Viswanathan, who was found to have plagiarized portions of her much-touted first novel in 2006, fled to the shelter of an elite law school to rebuild her respectability after the Harvard embezzlement flap. Gina Grant, whose admission to Harvard was famously rescinded in 1995 after it became known that she had murdered her mother (a fact she omitted from her application), graduated instead from Tufts. Moral considerations should not stand in the way of a person's clearly demonstrated "potential," which may be the only thing the adults in these books value in education and the only realm in which they are willing to exercise authority.

The same indictment of adult authority appears in Kirn's description of his time at Princeton:

> I simply had no idea who ran the place. It allowed me to imagine that no one did.... Yet Princeton was orderly, orderly in the extreme.... Even the outbursts of petty student anarchy felt orthodox and premeditated.... Princeton felt like a school without a principal where students were free to issue their own passes, police their own behavior, and grant their own pardons if necessary. I concluded this was by design. For if, as the university asserted, we were indeed our nation's future leaders, then what better way to prepare us for the task of framing, interpreting, and defending its laws than letting us...operate as laws unto ourselves?

Immediately following this, Kirn describes his ridiculous encounter with Princeton's "Honor Committee"—a peer jury responsible for adjudicating violations of the school's honor code—when he is hauled in for cheating on a Spanish exam. His trial consists in being treated to soda and pretzels in a fellow student's dorm, after which he is asked to confess to changing an incorrect answer on his exam to the correct answer on his neighbor's, which he cagily refuses to do. The encounter is concluded in the kind of stalemate inevitable in a world void of authority: Kirn points out to his student judge, "You tell me to choose, but the words I'm meant to choose from—'innocent,' 'guilty'—aren't my only choices. I choose another one. 'Unconvictable.'" And he is let off the hook.

Citizen and School

Kirn alludes to an alternative to this organized anarchy. He begins his childhood narrative with the story of a retired navy admiral who lived down the street from him when he was four years old, and gave him a "two-year private tutorial" in history and science while his parents were too busy working and studying to attend to him. "Uncle Admiral," as Kirn calls him—"my first teacher and my first love"—was a cartographer and possessed of a cartographer's faith that the world could be surveyed and settled, known and understood. What Uncle Admiral was that no parent, teacher, professor, or figurehead, no subsequent adult in any of these meritocracy laments comes close to, is an *authority*—not an arbitrary tyrant who rules by force or an equal who rules by persuasion, but a figure who commands obedience through respect, who does what Hannah Arendt called "taking responsibility for the world" by introducing it as a coherent, intelligible place that he helped make to the child who just arrived in it and must be trained to maintain it.

In her essay "The Crisis in Education," Arendt described education as the situation in which "authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers." And Kirn himself corroborates the value of such authority after he suffers a karmic bout of muteness caused by his lifetime of abusing language to get ahead: "What I learned from [Uncle Admiral], his master lesson—the one that would help me reconstitute my mind after it dissolved at Princeton, worn down by loneliness, drugs, and French philosophy—was that the world could indeed be grasped and navigated if one met it with a steady gaze. Matter wasn't truly solid, no, but it was packed tightly enough to set our feet upon."

This is essentially what the adults in these books have removed from the curriculum and from education more broadly. No longer certain of anything about the world, the adults of the last two generations have given up trying to pass it on—the culture, politics, and institutions that have constituted American civilization as a species of the West—but they have found nothing with which to fill the holes left behind. They have lost credibility, and, regrettably or happily depending on whom you ask, ceded authority so that succeeding generations can start from scratch and figure out how to fix things. One of the notable products of this abdication of responsibility has been the rise of the educational meritocracy that continually rewards "aptitude," which seems like something everyone can still agree is good to have and adults are willing to reward, even when they cannot agree on the essential question of what is worth directing one's aptitude towards. The result is a system that produces an elite that has no clear idea of its own purpose: "I'd been amassing momentum my whole life," Kirn explains, "and I knew only one direction: forward. . . . No one ever told me what the point was, except to keep on accumulating points, and this struck me as sufficient."

This is the problem that should be the core of the meritocracy lament instead of the never-ending complaints about SATs and exclusive roommates and lame parties, but its full articulation requires stepping out of the resentful solipsism of youth and thinking beyond the long mope of one's own college years. But none of the meritocracy lamenters are completely uninsightful critics, so one can still hope that the meritocracy lament itself will mature into a more fruitful adulthood of its own, one in which the writers abandon the dubious perspective of the innocent babe led astray by the system and take responsibility for these schools themselves.