

The Oxford Experience

We arrive at Oxford train station and are spat out onto the rain-drizzled pavement. The scummy yellow fluorescence of the station lights soon melts into the puddles of water that spatter the cobbles. ‘What do you think of Oxford?’ the tutors will ask. ‘It’s wet.’ I wittily reply. This rejoinder goes down uncommonly well. ‘A sterling wit!’ they cry, ‘a biting intelligence!’ ‘Have her we must!’ they rejoice as we settle down to discuss the merits of Elton over the relativism of Carr and the sweaty imprint Queen Anne’s buttocks left on modern historiography. I simper softly to myself, leaning back into the steady grindings of the taxi-cab as we gently roll through the streets. Quietly confident, yet refreshingly deprecating. A sturdy alternative to the phalanx of shiny Harrow ponytails that trudge daily into seminars and tutorials, with an inferiority complex the size of Bangkok on my shoulder and the tempting aroma of state schools and Scottishness about my person. The PR guru’s dream — a shoo-in.

The spires of Christ Church college glower disapprovingly as we blitz past; the sulking granite bishops of St John’s huddle under mildewed sandstone auspices, rain gathering at their stony feet. Their eyes are blanketed in darkness, melancholy black holes overlooking the square where, centuries ago, erring clergymen far from home were cleansed in the purifying fires. The taxi draws up outside the college buildings. I breeze past the porters in their pompous embellished blazers, like bloated umpires refereeing a highly pretentious and select cricket match. I carry on with the steely resolve of the hardened imposter, but my traitorous heart makes great empty lunges like a fist reaching out for a hand to clasp but instead closing in on itself, gasping and grasping. Collect the keys and through the grounds and up the stairs and in the door and bang, I have arrived. And it’s only later, when the doors close and the rain stops and the streetlights dim to a dull throb and everything is silent; then, when I am alone with my thoughts and they drift back to those unwelcoming spires; then, when the screams of those other wayward travellers from a bygone age are carried heavenwards in plumes of smoke; then, that I falter and want to go home.

As I walk into the tutor’s room, I wonder idly at the dimensions of the place. Two of the walls are wholly obscured by books. Probably, there are no walls at all, and the room is constructed out of nothing more tangible than the spidery writings of historians long dead, a crumbling and mysterious mortar. Great leather bound Gothic spires, generic paperback high-rises, elaborate and illuminated minarets cast shadows across the plasterboard skyline. A stale electricity trembles in the dust. This impression gives the room a fleeting temperance, like some illusion unfolding from a magician’s box of tricks. The don himself has something of the street magician’s assistant about him. His simian hands, blurs of movement that solidify into a glimpse of hairy forearm, rest uneasily in his lap. A fez of grey hair sits jauntily atop his jet-black eyebrows. His face splinters into a smile as I enter — I catch a glimpse of glinting incisor and, though those writhing tentacles remain folded in his lap, I feel them on my neck. He talks as though to himself,

quizzing me with ‘I wonder what you would say if I told you...’, or ‘I wonder what your reaction would be...’ and then, ‘How might you answer...’. His questions are semi-fluid musings, typical of a man who has spent longer conversing with the ghosts of Bismarck and Oliver Cromwell than with disappointingly corporeal dollops of sinew and cartilage like myself. I leave my interview wondering if it is I, rather than my interrogator, who is the illusion here.

Applying to Oxford is like having an ulcer on the roof of your mouth — it brings weeks of agony, but there is nothing quite so satisfying as reaching out and running your tongue over its fleshy skin, biting your lip and savouring its acrid taste. There is something deliciously masochistic about plunging headfirst into an unfamiliar and unfriendly environment. It is an opportunity to live entirely outside of yourself for just a few days — to throw yourself into a part of your personality that you wouldn’t dare show at home, for fear of invoking derision or contempt. It is a blank canvas, a clean slate, a chance to open yourself up to a barrage of criticisms and cultural knock-backs that will hopefully obscure, reshape or hammer out all the other dents and flaws your personality has acquired over the years.

Oxford, like any prestigious university town, is rich in the architecture of deception — people build walls, erect battlements obscuring their flaws and protecting their weaknesses. Others do not put up defences, but retreat behind them. When trying the hardest to let the most closely guarded, the most prized parts of your own personality shine through, it is amazing how quickly you become someone else. Here, among the ancient city walls and crumbling Norman towers, you can rewrite your own history, and wander round those cobbled streets safe in the knowledge that no one, least of all your own parochial and yobbish self, can ruin it for you.

But history is taking over in Oxford. On the streets, the past is literally rising up to devour the present. Tudor houses and archaic city walls have nosed their way up through the cobbles, ancient empty mouths swallowing modern shops whole and lodging them midway into their gizzards. The Gap sits partially digested by wattle and daub — Starbucks is locked in the cast-iron jaws of Edwardian redbrick. The past is the occupying force, breathing down the necks of the inhabitants. Even those like myself, outsiders just passing through, are shadowed by their forgotten selves. Perhaps it’s even worse for us — we aren’t used to this uninvited presence that haunts our every move. It is constantly there, dogging our steps, and this perhaps is the reason why we are so poorly adapted to ‘the Oxford experience’. We are so far removed from it, that we have more history to hide, more demons with mangled accents to silence. The more we try to run away from our past, the clearer the malformed shapes that hover just outside our line of vision become. The irony is that as we gradually put more energy into obscuring these unpleasant parts of ourselves, our own personalities are left behind, and in their place is a mere shell, a negative of a person. We become the very things we tried to rail against.

So, while I sit and shiver in the corner of some College Common Room, trying to keep up with the twists and turns of the conversation and welcoming even the most stale and unfunny jibe about the ‘Scotch’ as being at least better than this tumour-inducing mental

stupor, my doppelganger, my evil twin whom I left behind when I came to interview, is engaged in an assertive and impressive one-woman rant about the evils of devolution, back in my history classroom. As I wait for my ‘true self’ to shine through, she is living my life, while I blunder through interviews, seeing things through a stranger’s eyes, trapped in an unfamiliar body. I realise that these glitches and eccentricities I had been storing up for such an occasion as this were never actually part of me at all, just enviable snippets pilfered from other people. I never have been and never will be one to talk metaphysics over a glass of Pimms. Years of suppressing what I thought was a yearning for what others saw as pretentious intellectual conversation have only left me with an aversion to what I can only see as pretentious intellectual conversation. This desire is now so inverted, so deep-seated that I wonder whether it ever really existed at all. Perhaps my needs for cultural stimulation were in fact met some time ago — with the publishing of Harry Potter, most probably — and my mind has since plateau-ed. Perhaps I just know myself too well to be fooled by the too-smart blazers, the too-rehearsed opinions. Either way, there will always be something that traps me between the stale electricity of a tutor’s room, the quiet thrill of spires against the sky at night, and just another rainy day in Oxford.