

**Memory and Nostalgia in Woody
Allen's "Midnight in Paris"**

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Memoria y nostalgia en "Medianoche en París" de Woody Allen

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Abstract

Woody Allen's recent "Midnight in Paris" describes a Paris that has as many identities as there are observers to ascribe them. Indeed, there is no one, true Paris that everyone objectively shares; Paris, in Allen's film, exists only in the phenomenology of the observer's perception, a perception often marred and made unreliable by an escapist need to withdraw from the present in order to take shelter in a glorified, utopian past. Allen thus criticizes the nostalgic impulse, the "Golden-Age thinking" (as it is called in the film) that forces various characters simultaneously to inhabit two worlds, that of a prelapsarian past and that of the fallen present. His protagonist's journey back and forth between the present and the idealized Roaring Twenties is everyman's journey, the sometimes surreal voyage between reality and imagination, between the world actually inhabited and the world artificially constructed for oneself. Yet it is when Allen's protagonist finally discovers nostalgia within his nostalgia, a longing within his longing, that he recognizes the flawed thinking behind his almost mythologized perception of the past, reflecting everyman's realization that the past is ultimately the expression of our present needs.

Keywords: Woody Allen; Paris; Nostalgia; Memory; Emancipation.

Resumen

Uno de los films recientes de Woody Allen, "Midnight in Paris", describe un París que tiene tantas identidades como observadores hay a quienes atribuirlos. De hecho, no hay un París auténtico que compartan todos. París, en el film de Allen, solo existe en la fenomenología de la percepción del observador, una percepción con frecuencia dañada/arruinada y realizada poco fidedigna por una necesidad escapista a retirarse del presente para refugiarse en un pasado glorificado, utópico. Así Allen critica el impulso nostálgico, la idea del "pensamiento del siglo de oro" (tal y como viene a ser llamado en el film) que obliga a que varios personajes residan en dos mundos al mismo tiempo: el de un mundo anterior a La Creación y el del presente caído. El viaje del protagonista entre el presente y la época idealizada de "los felices años 20" es el viaje de un hombre cualquiera, el viaje

a veces surrealista entre realidad e imaginación, entre el mundo donde reside y el mundo artificial construido para sí mismo. No obstante, en el momento en el que el protagonista de Allen finalmente descubre nostalgia dentro de su nostalgia, una añoranza dentro de su añoranza, él reconoce el pensamiento erróneo detrás de su percepción casi mitificada del pasado, reflejando así la realización de un hombre cualquiera que el pasado no es nada más que la expresión de nuestras necesidades en el presente.

Palabras clave: Woody Allen; París; Nostalgia; Memoria; Emancipación.

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It is said that every man has his own Paris, and Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris" offers us a glimpse of his very own, personalized Paris—a Paris of monuments and cafés, of rainy strolls and glistening lights, of panoramic views narrated not by words but by music—the familiar, dulcet tones of the traditional French chanson. Indeed, the opening scenes of the film require no words at all, for it is the supremacy of the image that matters, Paris the Beautiful, Paris the Silent Object of our sustained, almost hypnotized, gaze. It is Paris the Muse that Woody Allen is offering us, Paris the Mistress, Paris the romantic inspiration for creative genius. As Owen Wilson's character states in the opening scenes of the film, Paris is "drop-dead gorgeous," a description perhaps more befitting a lover than a city, but the metaphor is not lost on the viewer: Paris is a beautiful woman—silent, mysterious, and breathtakingly beautiful—a worthy object of our admiration and devotion. And because she does not speak, Paris may have ascribed to her whatever identity an individual may wish to impose; Paris is an empty page that men will want to write on.

Thus Woody Allen inscribes himself into a long tradition of films that celebrate Paris almost as a principal character, as an ever-present love interest with whom the viewer enters into an implied and torrid love affair that lasts throughout the film, and perhaps beyond. Classic films such as "An American in Paris," "The Last Time I Saw Paris" or "The Flight of the Red Balloon"—which really has no plot other than that of a celebration of a Paris revealed to us neighborhood by neighborhood as a stray red balloon glides throughout the various contours of the city—or more recently, the film "Paris, I love you," like Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris," almost include Paris in their cast of characters, placing the city's very existence squarely at the center of the plot. The point is that there is no one, true Paris that all observers objectively share; Paris is malleable, a "moveable feast" as Hemingway famously points out (in the film as in real life), and lets one make her one's own. She lives and flourishes in the subjective subconscious of our imaginations.

This is why Rachel McAdams's character, Inez, tells Owen Wilson's character, Gil, that he is "in love with a fantasy"—that the Paris that charms him so is a Paris

that does not objectively exist; it exists only in the phenomenology of his own perception, a perception marred and made unreliable by his own escapist need to withdraw from the present in order to take shelter in a glorified, utopian past. Gil and Inez, planning to be married, have joined Inez's parents on an extended trip to Paris, where Gil spends his evenings in Rousseauesque solitary reveries, wandering about the city in search of inspiration for his own writing, and discovering it when he mysteriously enters the expatriate Paris of the Roaring Twenties, encountering luminaries such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein. He feels a kinship to these characters; the Paris they inhabit is one even more glorious and desirable than the Paris of today, a fact only underscoring the "fantasy" of Gil's perception. Indeed, when Gil mentions how comfortable he is in Paris, he states, "I feel like the Parisians get me," an unusual remark given that Gil rarely ever interacts with the Parisians of his day and speaks no French. Clearly, his love affair with Paris is mostly one-sided and somewhat imaginary, revealing an erotomania perhaps not altogether unlike (though decidedly less toxic than) that of Audrey Tautou's character in Laetitia Colombani's 2002 film, "He Loves Me... He Loves Me Not (A La Folie... Pas du Tout)." Gil is the victim of what Paul, the pseudo-intellectual professor whom Gil and Inez encounter, calls "Golden-Age thinking," the notion that the present is a fallen, corrupted, counterfeit version of a glorious age of the past by which the present must be measured and found wanting. It is an escape, a kind of attempted vacation or sabbatical from the present; as Paul says in the film, "[N]ostalgia is denial of the painful present."

Indeed, Gil's Paris is the very personification of memory and nostalgia, a point further underscored by the fact that the novel he is working on is about a man who works in a nostalgia shop. "'Out Of The Past' was the name of the store, and its products consisted of memories: what was prosaic and even vulgar to one generation had been transmuted by the mere passing of years to a status at once magical and also camp" read the opening lines of Gil's book, and while this passage reveals the reasoning behind his nostalgia for things past, his sentiment that he was "born too late," it also simultaneously underscores an important realization that Gil will make later in the film, that his longing for the past is based on an idealization rendered illegitimate because of its shaky reliance on the "mere passing of years." His opening lines thus already reveal a subtle, if still burgeoning, recognition that modern-day depictions of the past are essentially unreliable, because their nostalgic gaze towards the past does not always sufficiently take into account the objective realities of bygone eras, glorying in prosaic vulgarities that lose their kitschy quotidian character only through the passing of time.

Gil's nostalgia, his longing for the past—for the Golden Age of the Roaring Twenties Paris of American expatriates, intellectual café life, and Surrealist inspiration—is also a way for him to navigate his own mortality, to overcome his fear of death: he confesses to Hemingway that death is "[m]aybe my greatest fear, actually." By glancing backward rather than forward, Gil's nostalgic gaze avoids

the inevitable encounter with his own mortality and safely burrows himself in the calm reassurance of a glorious, if fictionalized, past. Writing, Gil's profession and avocation, has itself been recognized for millennia as an exercise in immortality, a means of engraving in perpetual memory the lives and deeds of notable figures and the authors who write about them. Hemingway, it turns out, shares this writer's passion for immortality, and in the film he advises Gil that "you'll never write well if you fear dying." Only as Gil learns that the past is no safe refuge from the travails and difficulties of the present, that the past comes with an army of challenges and discomfort all its own and that its prosaic realities do not transform themselves into poetic romantics through the mere passage of time, does he emancipate himself from both his fear of death and its concomitant nostalgic longing for a romanticized past.

Perhaps this is precisely why Allen's film subtly castigates the Tea Party; like Gil's utopian fantasy of 1920s expatriate Paris, the movement's vision of a glorious revolutionary past that has been all-too-neglected in the present is, for Allen, too firmly ensconced in a kind of Golden-Age mentality that longs for an imagined past even as it is forced to confront the painful present. When John, Gil's erstwhile future father-in-law, protests that Tea Party Republicans are not "crypto-fascist airhead zombies," as Gil asserts, but rather "decent people trying to take back their country," he engages precisely in the kind of Golden-Age thinking from which Gil by the end of the film manages to emancipate himself as he bravely faces the present with all of its recognition of his impending mortality.

Yet for all of John's narrow corporate orientation, shallow materialism, and facile, reflexive Francophobic patriotism, which ultimately make him an unreliable character and one whose utterances must immediately be considered with suspicion, like other of Allen's flawed characters, John is nevertheless allowed sufficient (if brief) moments of clarity that help to emphasize the central nostalgic theme of the film. True, his stubborn penchant for California wines and Hollywood movies amidst the splendors of French viticulture and cinema, his dislike for French politics, and his privileging of the commercial over the artistic make of him the comfortable and unwitting Ugly American. Furthermore, his sizing up of his future son-in-law—"I mean, I've seen what he earns, but sometimes I think he's got a part missing"—reveals a man who assesses value in quantifiable and commercial terms, a wealthy but essentially petit bourgeois businessman who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing (because for him, the value is the price), the petty and superficial man of commerce for whom "to have" and "to be" are near-synonymous. Thus when Gil expresses a longing for experiences of a less quantifiable nature—midnight promenades through Paris, writing a literary novel rather than lucrative Hollywood scripts, meeting with writers and artists in 1920s Paris—John, who cannot understand this longing, becomes suspicious of what he cannot comprehend and hires a detective to follow Gil around on his nightly reveries through Paris. Yet in spite of John's essential unreliability, he, like other unreliable characters in the film, nevertheless is permitted his own moments of clarity that move the plot

along and underscore the central theme of the essential unreliability of nostalgia. After the breakup between Gil and Inez, as Gil is exiting out the door and out of their lives, John tells him to “Say ‘hi’ to Trotsky” on his way out, indicating not only John’s distrust and otherizing of his almost-future-son-in-law but perhaps also a subtle recognition that Gil’s meanderings in the past represent a stubborn rejection of the present. Communism, an ideology which he (falsely) ascribes to Gil for his disinterest in commercial ventures and for his artistic sensibilities, is thus revealed to be, for John, a thing of the past, a political and economic system that has run its course and has been revealed by human progress to be grossly deficient. To be a communist is thus not only to subscribe to a system inimical to the capitalism which has led to such great prosperity in John’s own life; it is also to reject the progress of the present, to be mired in a backward, unenlightened ideology that belongs essentially to the past. John rightly asserts that Trotsky might be found among the cast of characters in a distant Paris of the past (Trotsky had spent time in Paris during 1915-16 and 1933); thus in subtle fashion, John’s character, for all of his mock-worthy unreliability, further underscores the perils inherent in rejecting the present in favor of an idealized, subjective past and thus contributes to one of the central themes of the film, that of the rejection of the painful present and impending mortality which nostalgia represents.

Similarly, Paul, the pedantic pseudo-intellectual whose familiar type recurs in Allen’s films, makes utterances and speeches that cannot be trusted, yet ultimately also helps provide the necessary clarity for Gil to become liberated from his nostalgic longing and concomitant fear of his own mortality. Though his (lost) arguments with a more knowledgeable tour guide, his ineptitude at explaining a Picasso painting, and his constant false modesty that actually reveals a true deficiency in his knowledge (note his many iterations of “If I’m not mistaken” and other such qualifying remarks which, on the surface, appear as false modesty, but which also belie an actual ignorance) bespeak a man whose declarations must not be accepted too credulously, his pontificating about “Golden-Age thinking” actually undergirds the central criticism of nostalgic thinking that the film develops. When Gil dreams aloud about an idealized Paris of the past, Paul abruptly reminds him of the unromantic reality of tuberculosis in the former Paris that Gil idealizes, adumbrating Gil’s own realization near the end of the film about how Belle Époque Paris had no antibiotics and thus could not fully merit the glorious praise which Adriana, his 1920s love interest, lavishes upon it—a realization that ultimately leads to Gil’s abandonment of his nostalgic avoidance of the present and of his own inevitable mortality.

Gil’s back-and-forth travels from the expatriate Paris of the 1920s to the Paris of today reveal that he is a man who inhabits two worlds. One is the world of a more objective, contemporary reality; the other, an imagined world, a sphere that exists really only in his own mind, a largely fabricated and artificial world. When he tries to explain to the circle of Surrealists he meets in a café that he simultaneously inhabits these two worlds, they find nothing unusual about this hybrid state of existence.

They recognize that many people inhabit more than one world at a time (and the film is chock full of such persons, whether it is Tea Partiers living both in the present and in an imagined Revolutionary past, or Adriana, who does not see her own 1920s era as the Golden Age that Gil perceives it to be, but prefers rather the Paris of the Belle Époque, 1890s Paris with its horse-drawn carriages and great artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin). The point is that even today, many of us live simultaneously in the present and yet within some kind of remnant of an imagined, idealized past. Gil's journey, the sometimes surreal voyage between reality and imagination (and Gil's dream-like, visionary state as he moves in and out of his two Parises—Inez tells him that he seems "in a daze" the first morning after his midnight time-travel— seems to correlate closely with Surrealism's emphasis on dreams, trances, and visions) is everyman's journey to one extent or another, for all of us live, on some level, in imaginary worlds largely of our own making. "[D]ie Welt is meine Vorstellung," Schopenhauer wrote (Schopenhauer, 1911, p. 20)—the world is as we perceive it to be—and this film underscores precisely the subjective phenomenology of our own existence, the highly individualized world-making in which all of us participate.

And yet it is when Gil discovers nostalgia within his nostalgia, a longing within his own longing, that he begins to see that his own views of a Golden Age are limited and not fully correspondent with reality. He gradually begins to emancipate himself from the fanciful notion that the present must always signify a rank perversion of a paradisiacal *status quo ante*, the danger inherent in Proust's famous observation that all paradises are lost paradises. It is the escape within his escape that teaches him that nostalgia is only a fantasy. That Adriana, for example, wants to escape the Twenties in order to flee to the Belle Époque Paris of the 1890s reveals that Golden-Age thinking is an individualized construct; as Gil observes Adriana's fascination for Belle Époque Paris, he recognizes the artificiality of her utopian construct, and consequently the artificiality of his own idealized views about Roaring Twenties Paris. This point is further underscored when the painter Paul Gauguin, in Belle Époque Paris, expresses his nostalgia for the Renaissance, itself deeply embedded in a longing for a glorious, idealized past in Antiquity, thus revealing another escapist fantasy launching Gil (and the viewer) into an infinite regress of unfulfilled longing. Gil suddenly realizes that the utopian past does not exist ("utopia" in Greek, of course, means "no place"); after all, the Belle Époque had no antibiotics! The past thus becomes an expression of our unfulfilled desires; nostalgia becomes the symbol of human longing.

Indeed, the artificiality of Gil's 1920s Paris becomes further evident when we consider how easily he glides into and out of this essentially foreign world. Gil does not seem to stand out very much in 1920s Paris, and this despite his clearly twenty-first century garb, haircut, and very gait. That the rhythms of language and cadences of conversation of Gil's 1920s Paris are firmly rooted in a twenty-first century dynamic that would have been utterly foreign among the expatriate American community

of the 1920s—to say nothing of the French Parisian community of that decade—further evidences the notion that this Paris exists only in Gil’s imagination. (Indeed, one wonders what would happen if Gil’s vocabulary were put through Prof. Ben Schmidt’s Anachronism Machine [see Hertzberg, 2014]). Perhaps this is also why he cannot take his fiancée with him to the 1920s—it is his Paris, a Paris that he has built for himself and that cannot be shared with anyone else.

He does, however, manage to enter Belle Époque Paris with Adriana, and here again, two characters from a different time seem to enter too seamlessly into the social, linguistic, and cultural worlds of a previous, and thus essentially foreign, era. No one they meet at the café—not Toulouse-Lautrec, not Edgar Degas, not Paul Gauguin—remarks or even seems to notice their out-of-place appearance, mannerisms, or other foreignising socio-cultural indicators. Adriana’s Flapper appearance, replete with shockingly bobbed hair, should have elicited at least some comment, even among the perhaps approving *fin-de-siècle* bohemian set, yet only passing references are made about her very modern sense of fashion, with nary a mention of Gil’s overlong hair, twenty-first-century reposeful posture, or his Californian pseudo-adolescent conversational rhythm, pacing, and tone more befitting the early millennium than 1890s French café culture. Indeed, Owen Wilson’s non-East-Coast-establishment aspect and persona seemed to Woody Allen to be so deeply embedded that he rewrote his lead character: originally an East Coast intellectual, Gil was rewritten after casting to fit better with Owen Wilson’s personality and manner (Allen, 2010). Time, after all, is a place with its own topography and *habitus*, and to enter another epoch is to enter a foreign or distant land. That the vertiginous disorientation inevitably resulting from the cross-cultural encounter—what the French call *dépaysement*—is largely missing in both Gil’s and Adriana’s time-traveling reveries suggests that the Paris of the past they encounter is one largely of their own making, a Paris of phenomenological experience that privileges certain characteristics while suppressing others. Perhaps no other city in the world is as iconic, as multi-faceted, and as subject to highly individualized perception as Paris, making it a fit location for a film about the construction of a fictional, personalized world.

Interestingly, the Paris of 2010 that frames the film is itself an artificially constructed Paris—the Paris of Woody Allen’s imagination. As Allen stated of his film, “I just wanted it to be the way I saw Paris—Paris through my eyes” (Bagnetto, 2011). It is the Paris familiar to wealthy (and famous) Americans, the tony *arrondissements* with their *hotels particuliers* and recognizable Haussmann imprimatur. Nowhere in the film is there any description or depiction of the working-class *quartiers* like the eleventh or the twelfth *arrondissements*, or of the rich diversity of multi-cultural immigrant neighborhoods such as the eighteenth *arrondissement*. In fact, Allen’s contemporary Paris seems to be populated only by wealthy, white Parisians, a reality more pretended than real, further underscoring, perhaps unwittingly, the point that Paris is, to Woody Allen as to most everyone else, an iconic symbol that dwells essentially in the realm of individual subjectivities. Lost in this selective imagination

are the many textures and layers, populations and identities, which have long come together to form the complexity of what Paris is today. Yet ironically, Allen's depiction of Paris, while ostensibly personalized and limited in its portrayal of a full and textured city, nevertheless seems also to subscribe to all of the tropes and commonplaces of cliché—his Paris is one of touristy monuments and locales, highly recognizable boulevards and street cafés, and wine tastings where the Eiffel Tower serves as a backdrop. Allen's Paris is still the city of lovers strolling in the rain. In this way, his Paris is not so different from the stereotyped Paris which much of the populace already shares. His is a vision of the city to which almost all have access already, and there is little in Allen's Paris to suggest a fresh or new perspective: his journey through the city largely follows a path already well-trod.

Along the way, Woody Allen also manages to point out some important Franco-American cultural differences, or at least to resurrect some old, anti-American clichés. Inez, Gil's fiancée, states that she "could never live outside the United States"—a swipe against the kind of comfortably patriotic American who cannot imagine that other places in the world could have much to offer. Similarly, Inez's father points out that he prefers California wines to French wines—another subtle, ironic swipe at overblown notions of American hegemony and supremacy. And Americans' relationship with the arts comes under scrutiny as well: Gil is concerned that he has become a "Hollywood hack," someone who pumps out movie scripts that are beloved by the masses but that contain little artistry or intellectual merit—one of Tocqueville's maligned "retailers of ideas" (Tocqueville, 2004: 544). But when he expresses his desire to remain in Paris to write a meaningful novel, his almost-future mother-in-law becomes concerned and confused that he does not want to live in Malibu, where he can perceivably keep feeding the script-writing assembly line he has developed for the mass production and mass consumption of his literary product. The fate of such drivel we can only assume from the mother-in-law's review of the American movie they saw in Paris (and who but an uncultured troglodyte would choose to see an American movie in Paris?): she couldn't remember any of the actors' names, or much of what the movie was about. Clearly, the experience was, to use Simon Cowell's words, utterly forgettable, a fate Gil wants to avoid as he aspires to create a novel, a work of art that will resound and have meaning and not end up almost instantly in the dustbin of history. Here Gil's longing for the kind of immortality that transcends the quotidian and the trite reveals itself to be at the heart of his nostalgic longing for the past. And Inez's father, the Tea Party bobblehead, is so completely confused by Gil's longing to create a meaningful work of art that he calls him a communist; recall him telling Gil to "Say hi to Trotsky" as Gil is on his way out of their apartment and out of their lives.

All of this seems to have a faint whiff of Tocqueville about it: Tocqueville, too, in his monumental *Democracy in America* criticized the paucity of American artistic and intellectual accomplishments. He famously wrote in his chapter "On the Literary Industry" that "Democratic literatures are always crawling with authors

who see literature as nothing more than an industry, and for every great writer there are thousands of retailers of ideas” (2004: 544). Gil sees his writing of Hollywood scripts as a mere industry, not as an artistically worthy endeavor. He wants to abandon this essentially “retailing” job and pursue something more purely literary, in Paris, a longing that his fiancée’s thoroughly American family cannot seem to understand. Indeed, when Gil starts telling his fiancée his thoughts about Fitzgerald and Hemingway, she tells him to “quit the idle chatter,” implying that talking about art or literature is an impractical idling away of time that could be put to use in more practical or utilitarian ways. (As we have seen recently, even progressive Presidents are known to disparage the value of the arts, in favor of more “practical” pursuits [Epstein, 2014]). Again, we hear faint echoes of Tocqueville, who, in his *Democracy in America*, contrasted a simple, unostentatious Puritan work ethic in America with the kind of aristocratic dynamic in France that allowed for greater investments of both time and means to be devoted to literary pursuits. As John Adams, himself deeply steeped in the Puritan ethic that has woven its way into American identity, famously wrote, “I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children, a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain” (Adams, 1780). In the American tradition, the arts are what we study after we have studied everything else, having earned the luxury through the hard work of our generations.

Furthermore, the conspicuous absence of African-American expatriates in Roaring Twenties France, which mirrors the conspicuous absence of any minorities in Woody Allen’s film as a whole, further underscores, perhaps unwittingly, that the image of Paris one receives is beholden to individual subjectivities. To be sure, the film includes a brief scene in which Josephine Baker dances for an enthralled audience in a nightclub, and Gil makes a passing reference to a desire to visit Bricktop’s, the legendary Paris nightclub of the past run by African-American Ada “Bricktop” Smith. Yet even these faint acknowledgements of the vibrancy of African-American cultural and intellectual life in Paris during the 1920s still reveals itself to be part of Woody Allen’s personal construction of the Parisian *imaginaire*: Bricktop herself had made a cameo appearance in Allen’s 1983 mockumentary film “Zelig” and thus the brief reference to her existence in “Midnight in Paris” reads more as an example of Allen’s cinematic self-referentiality than it does as a recognition of the vibrant contributions of African-Americans to the Parisian expatriate intellectual community in the 1920s. The important and interesting work of scholars like Tyler Stovall (whose book, *Paris Noir*, 1996, is an authoritative reference) and Christopher Endy renders any serious discussion or depiction of 1920s Paris seriously compromised if it fails to acknowledge the significant contributions of African-Americans to the expatriate community specifically and Parisian cultural life generally during that period. If Woody Allen is quick to find the cosmopolitanism of his ugly Americans

lacking, he is nevertheless slow to recognize the limitations of his own subjective rendering of Parisian identity.

Thus, this film emphasizes the escapism inherent in the construction of Paris in the individual mind. Seeking to emancipate himself from the fears and foibles of the present—which includes the fear of his own mortality—Gil, like the Tea Party, the Surrealists, Adriana, and all of us, buries himself in an idealized past, and what better place to immerse oneself in a glorious past and avoid the painful present than in Paris? Yet it is ironically as this nostalgic, “Golden-Age thinking” proves incomplete and ultimately unfulfilling that Gil discovers its limitations and thus liberates himself from its grasp. As Gil emancipates himself from Golden-Age thinking, he more ably navigates his own fear of mortality and becomes liberated from his fear of the present.

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