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Forum: What Shall We Read?: Experience Reshapes the Self, M.K. Gandhi, An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth, Trans. M. Desai

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and political science with an edge on the side of gender justice and a compassion that said that no matter where people stand they are people with something to contribute to conversations. The two books offered two values that shaped my work: one, to speak up for women, and two, to listen to all who might want to talk about the matter. Both Elshstain and Gadamer construct their political philosophies with deep respect for each individual while stressing the importance of community and the common good as part of who we are as fully developed persons. ■

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ONE PERSON'S FAILURE

Albert Camus, *The Fall*

William Neenan, S.J.

Albert Camus' 1956 novel, *The Fall*, has been a companion of mine for decades. That companionship, like all friendships, has evolved over the years. As a young Jesuit, I was attracted to the principal character of *The Fall*, Jean-Baptiste Clamence. His honesty and challenged integrity appealed to the naïve individualism of youth. As an older Jesuit, I am no longer entranced by the ideal of the individual alone in a vacant universe. Camus has been categorized as an existentialist, but personally he is more attractive than his contemporary, the hypocritical poseur, Jean Paul Sartre.

The story line of *The Fall* is simple. Jean-Baptiste in the first person relates how his life centers on one defining moment. While strolling along the River Seine one evening, Jean-Baptiste hears cries from one who has fallen into the river. What to do? Alone with his conscience, Jean-Baptiste realizes he must choose either to respond or not to those cries. "I have forgotten what I thought then. 'Too late, too far...,' or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly under the rain, I went away. I informed no one." I see three falls in this scene: first, a person falling into the Seine, second, Jean-Baptiste's moral fall and third — did Camus envision this also? — an echo of that primal fall whose consequence St. Paul describes "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:19)

After a long Jesuit life, I have come to read *The Fall* in an explicitly Christian context. Thus let us imagine Jean-Baptiste as accompanied that evening by his

fiancée. Imagine further that his fiancée was an expert swimmer but now incapacitated. Thus accompanied, Jean-Baptiste hears cries for help. Would he now be more or less inclined to attempt a rescue than the solitary Jean-Baptiste of Camus? He might have been or not. But in either instance it would merely be a tale of one individual's struggle and not a statement on the human condition. Christians believe we are not alone in the world. God's presence is guaranteed with the Word made flesh. We believe we are embedded within various social webs: family, friends and communities that offer us support and structure. Thus as an older Jesuit I now see Camus' novel the riveting tale of one person's failure rather than a description of the universal human condition. ■

William B. Neenan, S.J., an economist, has been an academic administrator at Boston College for many years. As a young Jesuit, he was schooled in Missouri Valley Thomism at St. Louis University.

EXPERIENCE RESHAPES THE SELF

M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* Trans. M. Desai

Faith J. Childress

It is easy to learn a life lesson from Mohandas K. Gandhi's *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Gandhi, better known as the "Mahatma," is famous for his leadership from the 1920s to the 1940s of the nationalist, non-violent struggle against British colonial rule in India. When I first read this memoir nearly twenty-five years ago, the Gandhi whom I "met" was not yet the Mahatma of later fame. In recounting his experiences in India, England, and South Africa, Gandhi paints a distinctly non-Mahatma-like self-portrait: selfish son, imperious husband, caste-breaker, bad dancer, indifferent violin student, and unsuccessful lawyer.

What, then, was there to learn from a Gandhi with a host of human failings? Gandhi's "experiments," including diet, religion, clothing, simplicity, leadership, non-violence, and service, were part of his quest for "self-realization" and his search for moral principles that transcended culture. In each aspect of his life and career he tried to figure out what constituted the

truth about himself and about the societies in which he lived. He demonstrated the willingness to integrate new knowledge into old, to seek experiences that may challenge the status quo, and to decide what ideas, skills, and personal qualities contributed to a greater sense of self, of purpose, and of worldview. In his experiments, Gandhi did not merely accept the practices and beliefs he encountered, but assessed the strengths and flaws in each culture and society.

Critical of the “superstitions” in his own traditions, in the West he embraced ideals of legal equality (even if imperfectly realized). He was forced to reassess these Western ideals in light of racial and religious discrimination and legal injustices that he experienced. His “experiments with truth” speak of the quest to find moral truths that could be applied to all humanity. He built his legacy by adhering to principle, pursuing a goal unrelentingly, striving for social justice, and believing that people, no matter how far from the seat of power, can change their society by changing themselves.

Through Gandhi, I learned that experiences could be used to reshape oneself. I realized that every culture and society has something to offer and something to learn. These lessons supplement, and sometimes challenge, that with which I am most familiar and most comfortable. If what I learned from Gandhi did not change my life in a single, blinding flash, it certainly shaped my interests, my goals, and my worldview. ■

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A TEXTBOOK, YES. BUT...

Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*

Alice V. Clark

As strange as it may seem to anyone who has survived the music-major history survey (popularly known as “Music Mystery” or “Music Misery”), I have to admit that one of the books that most profoundly changed my life is Donald Jay Grout’s *A History of Western Music*. While I wouldn’t necessarily recommend even the latest edition of this famously difficult book to the unwary, it opened my mind to the idea of music as part of cultural history. I entered college intending to become a high-school music teacher, largely because that was all I knew aside from performance. The notion that music could be studied, like Shakespeare’s plays or Monet’s paintings, allowed me to combine academic interests with the music that I loved.

Of course, Grout is a textbook, so we read it in combination with lectures and an anthology of musical works compiled by our teacher. I therefore have to admit that what excited me may well have been the context in which I read the book as much as the book itself. Ever since then, I suppose much of my most important reading has been a sort of communal act, tied up especially with the act of teaching.

Since part of the purpose of this essay is to discuss books others may want to read, I should suggest some perhaps more suitable for an educated lay audience. The Cambridge Opera Handbook series contains many books that serve a broad spectrum of readers; some technical discussion may be a bit difficult for non-musicians, but there is much in this series that does not require specialized musical training. James Hepokoski’s volume on *Otello*, for instance, has a fascinating discussion of how Arrigo Boito and Giuseppe Verdi developed the libretto from Shakespeare’s play, while Peter Branscombe’s study of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* has the most nuanced discussion I’ve seen of the relationship of that work to Masonic thought. Susan McClary provides a lucid explanation of the musical languages of *Carmen* and their interactions, culminating in the annihilation of both Carmen and her music.

Sometimes we forget that music does the same cultural work as a novel or film and can be studied in similar ways. I challenge you



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