

Keru Cai
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“Life’s Delirium”

I borrowed the title of my speech from a passage in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, which I read over J-term. Edna, the protagonist, is contemplating the lifestyle of her friend, Madame Ratignolle. Chopin writes, “She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, — a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium.”

In *The Awakening*, Edna yearns to experience “life’s delirium”: she does not just want a normal, humdrum lifestyle, with a husband and children and a respectable house. She wants to realize her potential as an individual, and do exciting things that defy societal expectations. I think Edna ultimately realizes that this is, for her, an unattainable goal.

The Awakening was the second book I read last term that implied the inaccessibility of “life’s delirium”; *Madame Bovary* was the first. In Emma Bovary’s imagination, life’s delirium consists of exotic landscapes and intense passions, like the rapture that saints are said to have felt, or the fiery romances set in far-away castles that heroines of romance novels experienced. Madame Bovary strives for this kind of delirium in marriage, in motherhood, in extramarital affairs, in music, and in religion, but everywhere she finds only mediocrity.

Two other novels I studied last semester advocate a kind of tranquil, unambitious, “undelirious” lifestyle: first, *Sense and Sensibility*, in which Marianne learns the hard way that relinquishing sentimental ideals for common-sense values is more conducive to happiness; second, *Middlemarch*, in which domestic harmony and modest professional aspirations are the pinnacle of attainable success.

According to all these novels, then, are we to give up on “life’s delirium”? Are we to resign ourselves to a comparatively “colorless existence?” After all, most of us are going to do very formulaic things with our lives: find a job, get married, have kids, take an occasional vacation. Are we doomed to miss out on “life’s delirium?”

I would argue that this kind of humdrum life does not need to cut us off from excitement, exalted experience, or the exhilaration of “life’s delirium.” In *Anna Karenina* the trials and joys of Levin and Kitty’s domestic life are portrayed as epic. For example, the marriage ceremony, having a baby, even giving the baby a bath. Mundane things are as worthy of earnest pursuit and narrative absorption as the heroic deeds or voyages of Homeric champions. Philip Fisher, one of my favorite professors in the English department, has referred to this representation of domesticity as

the [SLOWLY] spiritualization of the quotidian: that is, when everyday things take on elevated spiritual dimensions.

After all, in our daily lives, there are things we can do at any time to achieve “life’s delirium.” This happens a lot in Tolstoy’s fiction. Philip Fisher claims that Tolstoy has a penchant for portraying his characters operating at peak capacity, doing things that demand not just zombie-like half-awareness, not just tepid exertion, but complete emotional, physical, or spiritual investment. He doesn’t just show Natasha talking - he shows her singing a barcarolle. We don’t just see Denisov walking - we see him dancing the mazurka and riding his horse into battle. Levin doesn’t just give directions about the harvest - he spends an entire day, from dawn to dusk, mowing hay with the peasants.

There are certain activities that demand us to stretch or awaken ourselves from our habitual conditions of physical or psychological sleepiness. For me, reading a poem is one of these activities. Helen Vendler has said that poems don’t show us anything we don’t already know about; but a good poem gives us a fresh new way of thinking about or looking at common objects, situations, or feelings. I know what stars look like, and usually I look at them without actually *seeing* them. But when Keats likens the star to “nature’s patient, sleepless Eremite,” then I actually take the time to picture the star in my mind’s eye; I contemplate it with care. Poetry alerts my mind to the potential vividness of experience. Going for a run is another of these “awakening” activities. I have a body that 95% of the time I don’t bother to stretch to the pinnacle of its ability. But athletic activity allows me to “fill out my vessel,” as a friend of mine would say.

I love activities that stretch me, whether physically, intellectually, or emotionally, because even as they make me intensely aware of some aspect of the world around me, they allow me to lose self-consciousness. As the German philosopher Schopenhauer tells us, self-consciousness and the concomitant strivings of our will can be a burdensome thing indeed. Activities like reading a novel, working out, dancing, singing, and playing the piano are simultaneously self-perfecting and self-effacing. I think the moments when I do these things are the moments of my most vibrant aliveness, of my life’s delirium.

I think it would be a good idea for all of us, myself included, to do things that are demanding of thorough exertion and thorough involvement as much as possible. It just seems a better way to live, more awake than asleep.