

## LITERARY CRITICISM

# Where there is no why

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Alberto Manguel

CURIOSITY

392pp. Yale University Press. £18.99 (US \$30).  
 978 0 300 18478 5

Like the tales told to Dante by the souls he meets in *The Divine Comedy*, literature provides us with mirrors to discover our own secret features, Alberto Manguel argues. The quest to figure out who we are and what we are here for, explains our delight in the tales of others. In this search for self-knowledge, literature does not provide all the answers, “but rather a trove of more and better questions”, questions that unite and elevate us in our search. According to Manguel, it is Michel de Montaigne’s inquisitive motto that best sums up what curiosity is all about: “What do I know?”

Here Manguel charts the development of his own curiosity, as a writer, translator, editor and critic, through the readings that have guided him. In each of his passionately eclectic seventeen chapters, he tackles a different question: What is curiosity? What do we want to know? How do we reason? How can we see what we think? How do we question? What is language? Who am I? What are the consequences of our actions? What comes next? The result is a Dantean expedition through the intellectual world.

Each chapter begins with an anecdote from the author’s life and proceeds with a free-associative exploration of the question at hand. Dante’s visit to the Heaven of Jupiter, Sumerian clay tablets and the way in which the ancient Incas used threads of different colours to communicate all help him to address the question “how can we see what we think?” Talmudic scholars, Franz Kafka, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, Thomas Aquinas, Olympe de Gouges, Olga Sedakova and Caravaggio populate *Curiosity’s* pages. The author dashes between the shelves of his library, which contains more than 30,000 volumes, pulling down as many volumes as possible to support the dazzling ideas in his book.

It is Dante, however, who takes the lead. Landscape is essential to the *Divine Comedy*; “where things happen is almost as important as what happens there”. In the seventh circle of

the *Inferno*, Dante meets the souls who have sinned against nature: because they never recognized their responsibility to the natural world, they must run eternally on burning sand in the afterlife, surrounded by a desecrated landscape. Manguel swiftly relates this scene to the current issue of climate change. In recent years, a new branch of psychology, eco-psychology, has explored the relationship between the human psyche and the environment. Echopsychologists argue that since we are an intricate part of the natural world, separation from it through neglect, indifference, violence or fear “results in something like psychological suicide”. Our behaviour determines nature’s fate as well as our own.

In Dante’s hell, every punishment has a reason. But reason, sense and language cannot explain the unfathomable torments of Auschwitz. Manguel cites the arrival of the twenty-four-year-old Primo Levi at the concentration camp in the midst of a “terrible winter”. Levi – “sick with thirst, locked up in a vast, unheated shed” – sees an icicle hanging outside the window. He reaches out and snaps it off, only for a guard to snatch it from him, throw it away and push Levi back into his place. “Warum?” asks Levi in his poor German – “Why?” “Hier ist kein warum”, comes the reply. For Manguel, this infamous response is the essence of Auschwitz. Unlike in Dante’s hell, there is no why.

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, meanwhile, offers some curiouser and curiouser suggestions about identity. On her journey, Alice meets a large blue caterpillar that sits on top of a gigantic mushroom and smokes a hookah pipe. They look at each other in silence. At last the caterpillar takes the hookah pipe out of its mouth to address her and says: “Who are you?” Alice responds: “I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since that”. The caterpillar asks her to recite a poem to test her memory. Alice and the caterpillar know that our memories are our biographies – they “hold our image of ourselves”, Manguel writes.

In one of the most intriguing chapters, Manguel turns his attention to the questionable



reputation of the sophist. Philosophers such as Hippias and Alcidas travelled and taught for money, and the term sophist referred to their profession as teachers, rather than a particular school of thought. Before Plato, the term *sophistes*, meaning “wise” or “wisdom”, had a positive resonance. After Plato, it came to mean “a reasoning that is plausible, fallacious and dishonest”. The “Sophist’s wit” became the ability to distort the rules of logic. Aristotle viewed sophists as slanderers and thieves. Thanks to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, sophists did not enjoy “a happy place in the history of philosophy”.

Manguel points out, however, that the divide between the followers of Socrates and the Sophists was mainly one of class. Plato, who was of aristocratic descent, scorned those teachers who made themselves available to the middle class. The philosophical work of the Sophists did not survive, except in the work of their fiercest critics. Yet even in such unfavourable sources, Manguel manages to unearth passages that show us a nuanced picture of their gravitas. Hippias believed in a practical kind of political cosmopolitanism – “a universal solidarity that justified opposing even national laws for the sake of a better relationship with all men”. Alcidas went as far as to challenge the institution of slavery, something Socrates and his followers would have never dreamt of, because they believed in the right of a select few to govern. “The question of democracy is not something that Socrates would, even for a moment, consider”, as Manguel observes. The Sophists’ writings vanished, as did most information about their lives. But their depictions in the work of others, Manguel argues, “reveal a

thriving desire to know more in a complex constellation of ideas and discoveries”, including the refusal “to follow the apparent logic of the man who called himself ‘the midwife of thought’ up a particularly devious garden path”.

Darwin saw the imagination as an instrument for survival, and Manguel considers curiosity to be inextricably linked to imagination. To cope with the pitfalls and dangers of the world, *Homo sapiens* developed the ability to picture external reality in the mind. This is how we can conceive of situations we could encounter before encountering them. Armed with these mental maps we can choose the best way to act. “We imagine in order to exist, and we are curious in order to feed our imaginative desire”, Manguel writes.

Literature in some way resembles the Talmudic form of argument, a method of reaching knowledge through more and more difficult questions. (In the eighteenth century, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav could say that a man who has no questions about God does not believe in God.) But what is happening to this essential ability to ask questions? Sadly, our educational institutions are interested in little else than efficiency and financial profit, Manguel believes. They no longer foster thinking for its own sake and the free exercise of imagination. Schools and universities have become training grounds for skilled labour, rather than forums for discussion. Education teaches us how to ask “How much will it cost?” and “How long will it take?”, instead of “Why?” Here is testimony to what is thus lost. Alberto Manguel’s book, a song of praise to the art of asking questions and exploring answers, curiously escapes categorization.