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### ***Via Contemplativa: Andrzej Wierciński's Poetics of Plenitude***

**ABSTRACT** This article addresses Andrzej Wierciński's philosophical hermeneutics while attempting to intuit his inimitable *via contemplativa*. Pondering his career as a scholar, mentor, and poet, I recognize the singularity of his academic and spiritual journey as one that can unmistakably be called the poetics of plenitude. It is not only the trajectory of Wierciński's ever-expanding area of research, from philosophy, theology, and poetry, to architecture, art, medicine, and law, or the fecundity and splendor of his writings, but it is the gravity of the *conversational* and *trans-formational* nature of his tutelage and the overflowing generosity of his spirit that inspires me to recognize his creative odyssey from *here* and *now* to *home* as one of superfluidity and luxuriance. Exploring the incomparable way of Wierciński's reading of the hermeneutic tradition, with Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur at the top, and endeavoring to grasp the essence of his doing hermeneutics (*Hermeneutik im Vollzug*), I draw on my experiences as his disciple, as well as our long and fruitful collaboration, co-thinking and relishing the contemplative path as the genuine participation in the heart-breaking and heart-elevating beauty, sacredness, and intensity of our human existence.

**KEYWORDS:** hermeneutics, poetics, plenitude, *via contemplativa*, Wierciński

“And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,  
that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall  
not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”  
(Psalm 1: 3)

#### **In Lieu of Introduction. The Life of a Philosopher: The Pathway of Wisdom and Plenty**

The longing for fruition, for a life of thriving and abundance, is a lifelong dream that has always engaged human spiritual and physical energies while simultaneously showing us acute incompleteness and impasse in fulfilling all our earthly longings. Contingent upon history and culture, our finite lives call for what transcends the materiality of our being-in-the-world. When viewed as irreplaceable gifts, life vicissitudes, circumstances, and hardships are a chance for personal growth, whence our innate capacity to be more present meets the ongoing, inexhaustible flow of divinity, and our own vulnerable and wounded humanity can paradoxically be the fountain of healing. In the continuous opening (*effata*)<sup>1</sup> to the newness and

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<sup>1</sup> Effātus (*masc.*) (*fem.* effāta, *neut.* effātum). 1. Having to be spoken, about to speak, having to be said out, uttered. 2. (*of augurs*) Having to be determined, defined, fixed. “effata” – WordSense Online Dictionary (3rd June 2023) URL: <https://www.wordsense.eu/effata/>

unrepeatability of our life experiences and the Other in all her/his otherness, walking the path of a wise man/woman (φρόνιμος), we discover not just our potential for self-realization and happiness, but the truth that our very existence is forever open to that which is coming in profuse voices and possibilities. This openness and endless waiting for what is to come are profoundly constitutive of our being as human beings:

Being on the path as a human being expresses the *modus existendi* of a *homo viator*. In fact, *status viatoris* connotes not so much moving toward a designated place to be reached, but the very structure of a human being as a temporal and historical being with all the “not yet” dimensions of a finite being. What is fascinating in human history is the possibility, or even more, the reality of hope in this “not-yet” of the eschatological promise. (Wierciński 2019a, 19–20)

To view our contingent existence as one of a *homo viator* also means to absolutize contingency and to experience each moment as eternal—we are on our way *home*, and, at the same time, our journeying *home* can be viewed as already dwelling in the eternal.

Stranded between finitude and infinity, we attempt to grasp the meaning of our lives and make the most of them, while the questions of generosity and richness come along with those of love, friendship, and accomplishments that encompass the realization of what is desirable, righteous, and noble. As human beings, we are continually invited to not only cater to our basic needs but to transcend actuality and to think of higher aims and values (*semper supra*). We are invariably stirred by a call on us to remain open (*semper apertus*) to what is ahead of us, to be vigilant, and to practice thinking listening: “Still, it is a matter of understanding the way we *are* as we *are in the world with others* as thinking listening (*das denkende Hören*) and listening thinking (*das hörende Denken*)” (Wierciński 2022, 4). We do not merely take our reality for what it is, but we are ceaselessly creating it in an alive and attentive tuning to, or even, at times, desperate longing for what it might be. If we are all invited to walk the path of wisdom and courage while doing so, it is the task and gift (*Auf-gabe*) of a philosopher who, more than anyone else, succumbs to the desire to pose queries and search for answers to the prescient questions we face daily. If the inimitable route of a philosopher is one of openness and vigilance, Andrzej Wierciński’s life and *oeuvre* effusively and profoundly convey its tremendous beauty and singularity.

How does it feel, and what does it mean to live out the vocation of a philosopher? Wierciński’s pathway brings to mind Hermann Hesse’s excruciating soliloquy, disclosing his

love of trees and the most subtle image of the solitary tree that is destined to fulfill itself according to its own law, to represent itself:

For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone. They are like lonely persons. Not like hermits who have stolen away out of some weakness, but like great, solitary men, like Beethoven and Nietzsche. In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfill themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves. Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. (1981, 51)

The unique unrepeatability of human existence is always a mystery rooted in the infinity that calls for interpretation, for intuiting and grasping the core of a person's giftedness. Our human uniqueness touches our solitude, and the reciprocal relationship between those two becomes the spring of our reflective thinking and creative activity. Wierciński's life and *oeuvre* show that distinctiveness, characteristic of a scholarly pathway, is not a murky solitariness, but rather it is a mode of being that transcends emotional barrenness and the poignancy of solitude, as it is the path of rewarding productivity and ever-blossoming joy ("whatsoever he doeth shall prosper," Psalm 1: 3).

Wierciński's overwhelming proliferation in writing and teaching, his unwavering faithfulness in following the imperative to understand human existence in its grandeur and idiosyncrasy inspires us to think of him as the philosopher of plenitude. Although it is not just ethical goodness that is at stake here, one can immediately think of Thomas Aquinas's famous dictum of good as self-diffusive (*bonum est diffusivum sui*).<sup>2</sup> In Wierciński's life and writings, his astuteness and foresightedness forever infuse anyone whose path crosses with his. His overwhelming love and desire for wisdom present an ever-fresh and irresistible intellectual and spiritual challenge. Wierciński's doing of hermeneutics (*Hermeneutik in Vollzug*) follows the ancient Greek understanding of philosophy: "Hermeneutics is philosophy in the Greek sense of the word, the love (φιλία) and the desire for wisdom (σοφία), i.e., as comprehensive an understanding of human existence as is possible." (2019a, 10) Thus, his philosophizing brings us nearer and nearer to an understanding of our being-in-the-world in its diversity, sacredness, and the reconciliation of the irreconcilable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g., Waldstein, *bonum est diffusivum sui*, accessed May 29, 2023; see, also, Jossua (1966, 127–153).

<sup>3</sup> The topic of the incommensurability is a recurrent and rich area in Wierciński's writings, suffice to mention his outstanding meditation on philosophy and theology belonging together (2010).

One might pose a query about the roots of the admirable synthesis of Wierciński's prolific writing and splendid teaching career. His creative reality is a palpably and profoundly poetic world of fragility and strength that reaches beyond the easily classifiable or even high-ranking philosophical reflection. His writings are beguiling, resplendent portals into the invisible world of wisdom, undergirded with love. However, it is not banal sentimentality that moves the stirrings of our hearts, and it is not merely the expected depth of discourse or argumentative and linguistic excellence that speaks to our minds. What inescapably draws us into Wierciński's philosophical, theological, and poetic realm is the immersive, aesthetic experience of our participating *here and now* (*participatio actuosa*) in the pure joy of a genuine reality that is greater than we are (*die Sache selbst*); the reality that speaks to our defenselessness and innocence and makes us probe the contemplative empowerment of silence and thinking. Embodying the interplay of vulnerability and capability underlying our finite existence, his works go through the center of our human fate and evoke our capacity for love. As Wierciński confesses, susceptibility to being hurt is simultaneously our strength and a testimony to our humanity:

Like in Rainer Maria Rilke, "in the end, it is our unshieldedness (*Schutzlosigkeit*) on which we depend." (It is something very flawed yet necessary for life. It is precisely love, which is "like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears" (Oz 6: 4. 6). This love costs life but is also life-giving by bringing us into the infinitely resourceful horizon of possibility and making us eager to embrace our thrownness into the Open. (2022, 7–8)

Thinking with Wierciński empowers us to speak from the core of our identity, which is not curtailed and dominated by the delimiting schemes and clichés to navigate our strengths and transform what we discern as calling for *trans-formation*.

The love that lies at the heart of Wierciński's creativity is not an obsession with one-to-one relationships but a conscientious response to the call to inhabit this world fully, and to both dwell in and abide by the contemplative traditions that have nourished, enriched, and sustained human existential journey throughout centuries. Nonetheless, Wierciński's *via contemplativa* does not merely reflect imaginatively, as one might assume, the grand meditative traditions of Christianity. Endorsing the Heideggerian distinction between contemplative (*bessinliches Denken*) and calculative thinking (*rechnendes Denken*),<sup>4</sup> his through-and-through hermeneutic

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<sup>4</sup> In *Discourse on Thinking*, Martin Heidegger differentiates between two dissimilar kinds of thinking: "Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that

sensibility encourages us to see that contemplative thinking enables us to hold the opposing sides of our human predicament together: patience and urgency, humility and conviction, admiration and denial, without losing track of our human dignity and our heart-felt responsibility for ourselves and the Other (cf. Wierciński 2022, 26).<sup>5</sup>

Addressing the exigency of contemplative thinking in the age of globalization, massive disquiet, and speedy technological advancement, and with academia not free from the draconian practices of competition and profit, Wierciński upholds the indissoluble connection between contemplative thinking and our humanity:

Contemplative thinking, to the contrary, does not solve problems but inspires us to confront the world we live in with sensitivity and care (*Sorge*). In fact, it rather allows for *seeing* problems and creates the possibility of understanding them. The vulnerability of thinking calls for our persistence and courage to be contemplative beings, to remember that we are not only sensual (*sinnliche*) but meditative beings (*besinnliche Wesen*). (2019a, 30)

The courage and persistence to be contemplative beings mean to respond to the call of love generously and to persistently follow the pathway of practical wisdom (φρόνησις), to recognize that all our faculties: desiring, wanting, loving, thinking, understanding, and remembering are subtly and generously choreographed to make us transcend the acuteness of being exiles, to reach out for divinity, and to make us ultimately find our *home*.

Above all, the human capacity for loving liberates in Wierciński's writings and teachings the inexhaustible abundance of wisdom. The love that shines forth in Wierciński's philosophical-theological meditative discourse is the love that benevolently risks itself in undeterred words and courageous deeds, not expecting reciprocity or easy gratification. It is this kind of love that W. H. Auden powerfully captures in his poem "The More Loving One:"

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well  
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,

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is. There are, then, two kinds of thinking, each justified and needed in its own way: calculative thinking (*das rechnende Denken*) and meditative thinking (*das besinnliche Nachdenken*). This meditative thinking is what we have in mind when we say that contemporary man is in flight-from thinking" (1966, 46); See, also Wierciński (2019, 44, 186).

<sup>5</sup> When we brood upon the notion of *bessinlichen Denken* as the essence of Wierciński's philosophizing, we may employ the fascinating image of an artist (here an artist of thought and word) compared to a tree, offered by R. M. Rilke: "Being an artist means not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree which does not force its sap, but stands securely through the storms of spring, unafraid that summer might fail to follow" (1995, 11).

But on earth indifference is the least  
We have to dread from man or beast.

How should we like it were stars to burn  
With a passion for us we could not return?  
If equal affection cannot be,  
Let the more loving one be me.

Admirer as I think I am  
Of stars that do not give a damn,  
I cannot, now I see them, say  
I missed one terribly all day.

Were all stars to disappear or die,  
I should learn to look at an empty sky  
And feel its total dark sublime,  
Though this might take me a little time.

Auden's poem conveys the paradoxical reality of love and suffering belonging together when the drama of unrequited love intensifies the pain. Going into the depths of the disturbing stirrings, recognizing "total dark sublime," Auden revives the old truth that being the more loving party is what gives some mysterious impetus to an outstandingly lavish flow of creativity and prompts us to acknowledge that even the indifference of the natural world can unleash in us those energies that are the very source of imaginative productivity and grandeur we are seeking.

Wierciński's philosophical hermeneutics deeply resonates with Auden's phenomenology of love in keenly responding to the difficulty of steadfastness, radicality, patient awaiting, and participating in the unfolding of that which needs to be understood, but also of that which needs to be loved. Understanding arises from love that transcends its romanticized and often banalized face, and love stems from understanding, as upon understanding, we come to love someone or something. The fragile subtlety of the interweaving of love and understanding is potently expressed in Wierciński's gloss on the intimacy of friendship and love and the inexorable interplay of power and powerlessness in a loving relationship: "The lover does everything possible to offer a hiding space for the beloved, even if it is so little as to hide the beloved's face in his embrace. This protection from the exposure

of pain and suffering of the beloved is the expression of the power of love, which does not boost the exposure of emotions of the beloved” (2022, 12). This ultimate sense of human care, the guarding of the emotional rapture, is commensurate with the protection of wisdom at the peak of understanding, whence consummation equates with overwhelming enlightenment. The epiphanic moment (*Augenblick*) of understanding sensitizes us, at the same time, to the reality of incompleteness, enigmatically and provocatively expressed in two lines from Emily Dickinson’s poem: “The Missing All—prevented me from missing minor Things”<sup>6</sup>—in the horizon of finitude no longing for understanding and nor yearning for love can be fully satisfied, the poignancy of missing cannot be quenched. It is mystical sensitivity that can lead us to the inevitability, but also uncanny practicality of downplaying or letting go of minor things.

### **The Beauty of the Inexhaustible and the Power of *An-wendung*: Following in the Footsteps of My Teacher**

I first met Andrzej Wierciński in 2015 at the Ricoeur Congress in Kraków, organized by the International Institute for Hermeneutics, of which he is the President. I clearly remember seeing my future mentor walking fast down the corridor of Collegium Novum of the Jagiellonian University. We literally and metaphorically met at the foot of the stairs, and while walking up we were conversing for the first time. Needless to say, I felt the exquisite uniqueness of the moment and remember saying that the place of the encounter bears a symbolic meaning. This walk proved prophetic and foreshadowed my ascending the ladder of wisdom as Wierciński’s disciple in hermeneutics in the subsequent years. The three-fold reality of discipleship: learning, grasping, and disputing<sup>7</sup> has become the texture of my academic relationship with Wierciński. Certainly, unbeknownst, at that time, as his future mentee, I did not know that this metaphorical image of a passageway to a higher level of consciousness and understanding anticipated the fruitfulness and profundity of our collaboration, which surpassed any of my expectations.

Undoubtedly, the beauty of the unexpected and the risk of thinking-the-difference (*Differenzdenken*) has drawn me so much to Wierciński’s philosophical and theological hermeneutics. The empowerment of thinking he recognizes as arising from thinking-the-difference (Wierciński 2008, 162–204) has become my own track of reasoning. He has wholly

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<sup>6</sup> See, Dickinson, “The Missing All—prevented Me,” <https://kalliope.org/en/text/dickinson20010830985>, accessed May 18, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> The Meriam-Webster entry for “disciple” offers a very fitting insight into the etymology of the word: “...traditionally explained as a derivative of *discere* “to learn,” but the second element *-pulus* is neither a known word nor a suffix. According to an alternative explanation, the base is nominalized from an unattested verb *\*discipere*, putatively, ‘to grasp, comprehend,’ from *dis-* **DIS-** and *capere* ‘to take, seize’ (cf. *disceptāre* “to dispute, debate,” supposedly a frequentative from this verb),” accessed April 21, 2023.

reoriented my reflective thinking from one that originates from the outside to one that is being gradually unveiled from the inside. Thus, the passage from ‘without’ to ‘within’ has transfigured my philosophizing. Ever since, I have become radically open to a boundless encounter with my inner self, with the wisdom that resides in the deepest recesses of my soul. Speaking poetically, like in Rilke’s piece of advice to a young poet, my new consciousness has been operating according to an inner desire, and one that can not be quenched or stifled:

Go within. Find the reason that you write; see if its roots lie deep in your heart, confess to yourself you would die if you could not write. This above all, ask yourself in the silence of night: must I write? Dig deep for an answer. And if it should be in the affirmative, if you can meet this solemn question with a strong and simple I must, then construct your life in accord with that need; your life in its most trivial, its least important hour, must be sign and witness to this urge (Rilke 2020, 6).

Since I have had the pleasure of reading many of Wierciński’s outstanding writings and, above all, being in conversation with his significant accomplishments published in 2019: *Existential Hermeneutics. Understanding as the Mode of Being in the World* and *Hermeneutics of Education: Exploring and Experiencing the Unpredictability* (2019), I could also, bit by bit, taste the rhythm and candor of his hermeneutic creativity. Entering a dialogue with the exuberance and brilliance of Wierciński’s unprecedented achievements was a true epiphanic moment in my scholarly journey. The reinvigorating power of his philosophical, and, at the same time, poetic disclosures of Being *through* and *in* language gave rise not only to my two essays written in the form of a dialogical response to his books: “The Poetics of Education: In Conversation with Andrzej Wierciński’s Hermeneutics of Education” (2019) and “The Welcoming Gesture of Hermeneutics: In Conversation with Andrzej Wierciński’s *Existential Hermeneutics*” (2020), but to my continuing existential response—my new way of being—satiated since then on with an infinite sense of hermeneutic responsibility (*re-spondeo*) for myself and the Other. Wierciński’s one-of-a-kind, insightful, and unsurpassable doing of hermeneutics (*Hermeneutik im Vollzug*) opened a new leeway in my scholarship, vivifying my interest in Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the human subject as *l’homme capable* (capable human being) (cf. Hołda, 2018) and Gadamer’s phenomenology of art as play (cf. Hołda, 2021).

Revolutionizing my thinking, Wierciński’s two major books and the entirety of his writings and conference talks created for me a fresh set of possibilities, a true awakening, or to put it in a different way, an alternative consciousness ready to subsume novelty, paradox, and unfathomable richness of human lived experience while deriving an unfaltering pleasure in interpreting and understanding. His intellectual prowess has thrown me into the reality of



*existentia hermeneutica*, in the fulness of its diversity and radiance. Wierciński's major books: *Existentia Hermeneutica* and *Hermeneutics of Education* are not just quintessential for his philosophical hermeneutics, but they are works of wisdom, spiritual guidance, polymath shrewdness, and intellectual *pro-vocation*. Over the past eight years, I also have had an opportunity to read Wierciński's savvy introductory papers to the volumes he edited, as well as other articles and shorter texts. Year by year, his Christmas and Easter messages have proved to be of no less significance, as, in a remarkably intense way, they have become the beacons of light, nimbly bringing to my consciousness the vitality of our human being-in-the-world as responsible beings, and creatively catching the glimpses of our homesickness and *home-coming*. Saturated with theological acuity, these messages reveal eschatological sensitivity and passionate veneration of the divine (*bonum est confidere in Domino, bonum sperare in Domino*, Psalm 118: 8–9), woven into the poetic and artistic imagery, and combined with far-reaching insights into the pressing issues of today.<sup>8</sup>

The experience of reading Wierciński's virtuoso writings overwhelms me. Dismantling our preconceived ideas, it superbly rejuvenates anyone engaging with philosophical hermeneutics and keeps faithful to the inner call to apprehend our human condition (*conditio humana*). Endlessly impressive, his works take the reader on a revitalizing and unprecedented journey of discovery that is always an illuminating self-discovery (*Selbstverständnis*). Consciousness-electrifying and life-giving, his texts are the *events* of Being disclosing itself *in and through* language. In the uncanny contiguity, the completely new and the apparently familiar, unfolding in the act of reading, pierce the reader's consciousness and (re)open the fountain spring of thinking. To read Wierciński's books and articles is to enter an aesthetic encounter. Like a beautiful piece of poetry or painting, they absorb us and put a claim on us.<sup>9</sup> It is no coincidence that Wierciński's powerful gloss on Gadamer's hermeneutics of conversation in *Existentia Hermeneutica* (2019) occurs alongside an explication of Gadamer's phenomenology of art as play. The proximity of his musings on the epiphanic and transformative power of Beauty, instantiated by recourse to Rilke's poem that ends up with the powerful statement "You must change your life"<sup>10</sup> (which succinctly conveys the inexorable *change* that occurs in an aesthetic encounter), and his profound insights into the centrality of

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<sup>8</sup> Let me just mention the last Easter message (2023). "The Time of Love: On Allowing to Happen (*Geschehenlassen*) and Transforming Life," accessed May 28, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., Gadamer (2007, 196). Gadamer's hermeneutic aesthetics rests on his acknowledgement of art's claim to truth that exerts an irresistible power on the viewer in an aesthetic encounter.

<sup>10</sup> See, Gadamer (2007, 131).

the trans-*formative* character of conversation in Gadamer's philosophy, leave no doubt about the direction of Wierciński's own philosophizing.

The lingering fashion in which we contemplate an artwork has its meaningful counterpart in the tarring, mindful, and deliberative approach to thinking that pervades the mind of a hermeneutician. Wierciński encapsulates the gist of Gadamer's hermeneutic aesthetics in the following way: "The work of art begins to talk to us. Moreover, it expects an answer (*Antwort*) from us. Hence comes our *responsibility* (*Verantwortung*). We cannot fall silent in the face of the revelation of Beauty" (2019a, 54). This call-answer dynamics potently reflects the nature of his hermeneutic interrogation. Tracing the legacy of the twentieth-century giants in hermeneutics in Wierciński's *oeuvre*, one can also notice that his patient, unrushed probing and savoring of philosophical issues takes after Paul Ricoeur's way of philosophizing, aptly explicated in the passage quoted below:

A true hermeneutician is a wandering thinker and debater, one who sets his sights on intellectual trips, moving away from the one-dimensional, simplified reaching of the main thought. ...the model for hermeneutic discourse is not thinking in shortcuts but, as Ricoeur says, through detours, *per viam longam*. It is very often the detours that allow us to see something new that we would never notice if we were going straight or the shortest way to a visible goal. It is clear that, where the fastest reaching of the target point is the top issue, every detour (*Umweg, Umleitung, detour*) is seen as a loss, a stop, and an impediment. It is a loss in the dimension of calculative avarice. (Wierciński 2019a, 54)

This wandering and meandering way of thinking has the capacity to awaken and sensitize us to the very foundations of understanding, to its inexhaustibility (cf., e.g., Wierciński 2019a, 135–146). Illumined by the sincerity and vivacity of our quest for truth, we can fully recognize and surrender to an understanding that is neither calculated nor schematized. Speaking poetically, it is worthwhile to recall Rilke's evocative words that resonate with Wierciński's supreme regard for every thought contributing to the unfolding of the meaning of our lives, to the palpability of the unveiling of the ontological, existential, and metaphysical mysteries of our existence: "no experience has proved too trivial, and the slightest even unfolds as if fated, and fate itself is like a marvelous broad web in which every thread is woven by an infinitely tender hand and laid beside another, and is held and supported by a hundred others" (Rilke 2020, 20). This path of abiding by nuanced thoughts, in which we do not begrudge time to *think* our human predicament, is our genuine and generous response (*respondeo*) to the challenges to our integrity in our highly competitive world, afflicted with the ethical, ecological, political, and economic crisis.

Much in the vein of Ricoeur's persistent advocacy for *per viam longam*, as an enduring tutor and friend, Wierciński has been reminding me continuously of the need to disbelieve facile judgments and to avoid easy shortcuts in thinking, not to begrudge time to make thinking disclose that which needs to be uncovered and learned. Novelty and alterity are not to be treated as a threat to our integrity but to be welcomed and embraced in all their diversity, unexpectedness, or even shockingness:

The ethics of hermeneutic conversation makes us sensitive to the need (and even the obligation) to respect the otherness of the Other and does not allow for oversimplifications and shortcuts on the way to understanding. An exaggerated longing for harmonious unity—but also an artificial boosting of diversity—cast a shadow over the uneasy *topos* of conversation. (Wierciński 2019a, 40)

As speaking partners, we are unceasingly called to bear witness to the richness and beauty of hermeneutic conversation, in which none of the parties has the last word,<sup>11</sup> and finality morphs into an unending challenge to discover more and to learn more. As Wierciński's disciple, I am continually experiencing the Gadamerian dictum of openness to the Open,<sup>12</sup> the art of inclusivity, the transition from the confusing externality to the subtle shades of interiority, from the long-standing patterns of thinking and speaking to the non-schematic embracement of the tensions that undergird our existence as *existentia hermeneutica*, wherein apprehension denotes both awesomeness and comprehension.

### ***Sapientia Ianua Vitae: Wierciński's Existentia Hermeneutica and the Being of an Interpretative Being***

Wierciński's *oeuvre* is too singular to be subject to any easy classification or reductive interpretation. He offers a pathway of forward-thinking that is deeply immersed in the ever-unfolding possibilities and one that sensitizes us simultaneously to recognize the indispensable role of tradition in creating our present world. *Existentia Hermeneutica: Understanding as the Mode of Being in the World* (2019) is an inspirational and perceptive book that prompts us to

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<sup>11</sup> In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer states: "it would be a poor hermeneutician who thought he could have or had to have the last word." (2000, 579). Cf. Wierciński (2019b, 59, 90, 146, 223, 376, 391). See, also MacIntyre (2002, 155–172).

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer expresses the exigency of an openness to the open, for instance, in this way: "A genuine conversation takes place only where it constantly leads into the open of other possible ways to continue it. The other person's answer can be a surprising one. This puts a new openness before us, an openness in which what is question-worthy presents itself. The possible answers are numerous. The conversation goes forward and one has the feeling of being on the right path, the feeling that one is getting somewhere" (2007, 392).

acknowledge that our being is an interpretative being, and interpretation entails transformation, which, if taken seriously, can offer a genuine possibility of finding fulfillment in our lives.

An internationally acclaimed philosopher and theologian, a poet and teacher, lecturing in many renowned universities around the world: Freiburg, Augsburg, Toronto, Mexico, Warsaw, and Phoenix, to name but a few, in his enactment of hermeneutics, Wierciński follows the Gadamerian claim of the universality of hermeneutics:

The core of hermeneutics is the happening of understanding (*Geschehen der Wahrheit*): Something is occurring in us and to us, and it affects the whole of our experience of the world. This very happening is not that dependent on our desire to know and the wish to understand. It is much more the nature of what needs to be understood that makes the eventing of understanding not only comprehensive but universal (*der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik*). (2002, 3)

Gadamer's statement stands firmly at the center of Wierciński's philosophical hermeneutics, indicating the direction of his restless pursuit—his thinking path, which is, at the same time, expressive of the rudimentary human need to devote oneself entirely and without resentment to uncovering that which needs to be uncovered, even if a continuous and poignant sense of incompleteness satiates our human attempts to understand and to live our lives. It is the back-and-forth movement of our thinking and our thinking together that creates the space of creative enchantment in which the prosaic, the banal, and the simplistic do not win over in our meticulous or even laborious explication of the world, ourselves, and the Other. Staving off depressive and pessimistic thoughts, our engagement with hermeneutic thinking enables us to bear witness to the living truth of our being-in-the-world:

By facilitating hermeneutic thinking, hermeneutics contributes to thinking with each other, rethinking what has been thought, and thinking on to what is yet to be thought. In this play of *Mitdenken*, *Nachdenken*, and *Weiterdenken*, hermeneutics shows itself as the practice of φιλοσοφία, of listening to oneself, the tradition, and the other, with the devotion (*Hingabe*) that expresses our self-giveness to the living truth. (Gadamer 2000, 1–66) (2019a, 10)

As interpreters of the world, ourselves and the Other—as the practitioners of the art of interpretation (*Ars Interpretandi*)—we partake of the wholeness of interpretation, dwelling in interpretation, and are *existentia interpretativa*.

Interpreting is not a mere adornment of our lives but the very bloodstream and texture of our existential journey to truly seek *home*, to understand our origin and *telos*, to question our diligently and persistently constructed worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) so that we can notice a wider spectrum of possibilities while honoring both sameness and difference and being grateful for both. Wierciński cogently emphasizes the interweaving of thinking and thanking, which involves our responsibility to complete the task of thinking in its inescapable incompleteness. It is this inherent entanglement of thinking and thanking that is powerfully expressive of the very crux of our being as rational beings. The inseparability of thinking and thanking testifies to the splendor of our humanity and to the captivation of our giving a radical response to truth and being radically responsible for truth:

Confronting the way Heidegger thinks that which needs to be thought, reminds us that thinking is an event (*Ereignis*) that is renewed every time we think and continues to be renewed (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). Participating in this event makes us think and thank. It reminds us that thinking is thanking (*Denken ist Danken*). If thinking is thanking, this means that thinking *receives* (*empfängt*) its thoughts. Thinking fills us with deep gratitude. “What do we have that we did not receive?” (1 Cor 4: 7). This solicits a response from us. Thinking is responding (*re-spondeo*), which puts us into the moral horizon of radical responsibility toward truth. If “questioning is the piety of thinking,” this piety is compliant to the covering and uncovering of truth. The more generous our response, the more thinking transforms us, and we become witnesses to the task of thinking. (2019, 29–30)

Our individual response to the mutuality of the intrinsic relationship between thinking and thanking that is bestowed on us in the sacredness of our hearts makes our lives abundant in meaning. As Wierciński accentuates, the transformative power of thinking is related to the generosity of our thankfulness. Gratitude arises from our incessant tuning to the rhythms of thinking—the flow of our thinking both propels our ever-new thinking and results in our being grateful. The reciprocal nature of thinking and thanking unveils the truth about the inexhaustibility of understanding, which continually reflects our inerasable desire to think more, understand more, transcend more, and ultimately attests to our insatiable quest for self-understanding.

The *eventing* of thinking remains in concert with the primordial interconnectedness of thinking and speaking. In this light, the dialogical nature of our thinking—thinking as a dialogue with oneself (*soliloquium*) and the Other (*colloquium*)—emerges as the underlying mode of our being-in-the-world (*modus vivendi*). To participate in a dialogue, to be true inter-*locutors* means to taste and savor the beauty of the intellectual, emotional, and existential *ex-change* that

involves the *change* of the initial position, the joy of transformation that happens within rather than without. The possible radicality of *con-versation* is brought about not in excessive ambiguousness of utterances but in our exercising of attentive listening to the Other and following the paradigm of a play in its back-and-forth movement, whence our minds are fed and let themselves be fed with the enormity and grandeur of human experience, guided by the issue to be resolved (*die Sache selbst*):

As partners in dialogue (*colloquium*), we always experience a back and forth movement; listening to each other, understanding our prejudices, and verifying our positions, we are led by the very dynamics of the dialogue: after participating in a hermeneutic conversation, we are not the same anymore. The hermeneutic conversation becomes a *modus vivendi* for our life, a communion in the self-understanding of humankind, and in sharing, together, the world in which we live. (Wierciński 2019a, 26–27)

The backward and forward movement paradigm in dialoguing illuminates our understanding, and our understanding grows and thrives in knowing that we are understood. The internal logic of our thinking and speaking calls on us to remain humble in the face of possible misunderstanding but also empowers us not to strangle the unknown and the incomprehensible. The profusion and confusion of voices in us put a claim on us, as in our creative response, we are called to be profoundly devoted to the transformative process in us. As Wierciński emphasizes: “Life challenges us with ever new situations, and we are expected to face the given situation with radical responsibility since no one can give the answer for us” (2022, 26). And thus, the fear of exposure must be overcome, what is denied or hidden must be faced, and what needs action must be seen to. The individuality of our response bespeaks the singularity and uniqueness of our being-in-the-world.

The dialogical and transformational dimension of our lives is constitutive of our being in its most resonant way. The dialogical nature of our existence—the “conversation that we are” (Cf. Gadamer 2000, 378)—however, does not preclude the moments of silence and powerlessness in expressing that which needs to be expressed. Moreover, the power of the unspoken (*das Ungesagte*) discloses our genuine immersion in language and the urgency and exigency to speak away, to express the inexpressible. Heidegger would famously say: “*Das Gesagte ist das Dürftige, das Ungesagte erfüllt mit Reichtum*” (alongside the spoken that which is unspoken participates in the fulness and abundance of Being).<sup>13</sup> Our human existence as *existentia hermeneutica* incessantly calls on us to convey the unconveyable, which is always an act of translating our thoughts into language. Thus, it is always an act of interpretation.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Heidegger (1991, 249).

Re-affirming the centrality of interpretation in our lives while encouraging us to ponder such versatile themes in *Existential Hermeneutics* as “The Hermeneutic Retrieval of a Theological Insight: *Verbum Interius*,” “Trinity and Understanding,” “Language and the Event of Incarnation, Gadamer and Theology,” “Phronesis as the Mediation between Logos and Ethos: Rationality and Responsibility,” to mention but a few, Wierciński not only substantially contributes to the hermeneutic philosophy of religion and philosophical hermeneutics *par excellence*, but invites us to participate in the beauty and bountifulness of our being-in-the-world unwaveringly. His hermeneutics of religion is, at the same time, a poetics of plenitude, as he encourages us to dwell in the horizon of a grace progression, of learning and knowing, of understanding and (mis)understanding, as it is only the immensity of our engagement in interpreting, interwoven with the limitlessness of the mystery of our lives, that can truly bring us closer to explaining the unexplainable magnificence of our humanity in all its fragility and brokenness.

### **Dynamic Intimacy: Wierciński’s Teaching about the Art of Teaching**

Shining forth with the liveliness of surprise, Wierciński’s *Hermeneutics of Education* is the source of unflagging brilliance and radicality in thinking and teaching for anyone who is interested in education. The multifaceted essays brought together in one volume both *reflect on* and *reflect* the risk and beauty of the unpredictable in education understood as an ongoing formative and trans-formative process. Recognizing many fulfillments that education can effectuate, including unforeseeable ones, Wierciński sensitizes us to the exigency of viewing the practices of teaching and learning as a possibility of participating in an enriching dialogue, in which the educator and the educated remain open to what is unfolding for them. This kind of enrichment rests on transcending the mere formal participation in dialogue and expresses a response to a call on us to engage in the fullness of who we are as human beings:

To be in a conversation with the other means to be involved directly in a dialogue and not only formally participate in it as if from the outside and merely surveying from a distance what is happening. The hermeneutic horizon in which we discover the dynamics of conversation (δύναμις meaning power) discloses the decisive characteristic of the hermeneutic spirit of conversation. (Wierciński 2019b, 27)

Wierciński’s deep hermeneutic dive into our educative experiences uncovers a path of deliberation, gravity, and development. In his conscientious approach, he revitalizes the idea of Platonic dialogue, seeing it as essential for learning and knowing (Cf. e.g., Wierciński 2019,

27–28). Significantly, his understanding of education eschews the clear-cut and oversimplifying divide between educators and the educated. Instead, he proposes a non-dual, inclusive approach that provides for both parties to participate in the process of learning actively and creatively while continually remaining open to the new and the astonishing.

One can say that Wierciński's hermeneutic model of education is a pathway of *re-enchantment* that fully upholds the value and beauty of teaching and learning in today's world dominated by profitability and easy gain. He sees teachers and students as legitimate creators of a challenging, mind-opening, and energizing educative enterprise destined to facilitate the discovery of the world and self-discovery. The double focus in his attentive re-modeling of education: discovery and self-discovery, (re)cognition and self-recognition, appreciation and self-appreciation is not a thing of tactics or smartly introduced novelty, but it is a hermeneutically inspired understanding of education as a life-long, all-embracing, and profoundly changing venture:

It becomes clear that an understanding of oneself, having a lingual character, is a life-long process. Setting off for life on a journey (and a journey of life), we must be ready to confront our own expectations with the facticity of our experience (*die geschichtliche Faktizität der menschlichen Existenz*). All our worries, pains, and anxieties are products of our own insufficiencies. Our task is to understand that we carry these anxieties in ourselves, and it is us ourselves who place them in the center of our existential dilemmas. What we need is to learn to deal with all the things that make the broadening of the horizons of seeing and understanding ourselves and the world we live in impossible. Education is the way we choose to make this happen, with the hope that it will be a long way, full of adventures and new experiences. (Wierciński 2019b, 150).

Wierciński follows and embodies Gadamer's stance that understanding is always self-understanding (cf., e.g., Gadamer 1986, 129), and, thus, we can fully appreciate his energizing (re)awakening us to understand deeper that each act of learning is self-disclosive and self-empowering. The task and, at the same time, the reward of education (*Auf-gabe*) is the rejuvenation of the spirit, the experience of being touched by what one is learning to such an extent that it is changing one's life: "Education becomes a prayer, an intensification of concentration, a readiness to clash with everything that touches our spirit and our body. In an educational dimension, it is imperative that this process is seen to apply to a human being in the totality of his/her existential conditioning and points of reference" (Wierciński 2019b, 150–151). The sacredness of education equates with the sanctity of life; our ennoblement is not



something that remains unreachable, but rather, it is continually open to us in the practicality of teaching and learning.

The pinnacle of Wierciński's hermeneutics of education is the recognition that our lived experience is not separated from learning/teaching. Just on the contrary, the two are inextricably interwoven, and it is precisely this interlocking character of learning/teaching and life experience that propels, nourishes, and brings to fruition education in the never-ending revelation of possibilities of further growth. Clearly, Wierciński's hermeneutic approach to education is the hermeneutics of hope, as the setting of goals is not the aim of teaching as such. Still, it is the patient unveiling of the possibilities that arise when tutors and students embark on a journey to understand something crucial to their lives. In the humble succumbing to what is unfolding, hope is the only anchor that holds the teaching and learning parties together. Václav Havel's seminal words on hope potently apply to Wierciński's attitude:

Hope... is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpromising the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. (1991, 181–182)

Proposing a closer look at manifold themes in his *Hermeneutics of Education* such as “Cultivating the Hermeneutic Eye and Ear: Education as the Care for the Self,” “Hermeneutic Notion of a Human Being as an Acting and Suffering Person,” “Narrative Turn in the Hermeneutics of Education: Toward a Hermeneutics of Lived Time,” “Hermeneutic Education to Understanding: The Imperative of Self-Education and the Willingness to Risk Failure,” and “Hermeneutics of Hospitality: Goodness and Generosity,” to mention but a few, Wierciński fully endorses and faithfully follows Gadamer's understanding of human existence in its primordial conversational character (“the conversation that we are”). After his master, he sees hermeneutic conversation as the true possibility of staving off the hazards and menace of a technology-driven civilization: “Gadamer emphasizes that dialogue is the last chance for humanity to defend itself against the self-destruction that inhabits technical civilization. Therefore, we can talk about the hermeneutics of hope (*Hermeneutik der Hoffnung*), which is a feature of a hermeneutic existence. (2019a, 51) Dialogue is the point of entry into the perpetually alive spaces in which our worldviews collide and can be shattered and redeemed, avowed, and authenticated.

Against the mania of perfectionism, on the one hand, and resentment and succumbing to confusion, on the other, Wierciński proposes a dialogical model of education in which tutors and learners alike are sensitive to taking true care (*das Sorge*) of self and the Other, but also one in which awareness and willingness to risk failure, instead of being obstacles, go arm in arm with achievement and help us oppose the tyranny of continuous and uncurbed progress. Instead of putting on the mask of flawlessness, Wierciński's model speaks to our wounded humanity and prompts us to deepen our response to who *we are*. Significantly, the processual aspect of Wierciński's model of education pays tribute to Gadamer's understanding of the role and magnitude of dialogue in our lives: "Through every dialogue, something different comes to be. It is not really we ourselves who understand: It is always a past that allows us to say, "I have understood" (Gadamer 1976, 58). Wierciński's understanding of education as a collaborative enterprise, firmly embedded in human temporality and oriented toward a fuller understanding of the world, the Other, and ourselves, is one of the major facets of his hermeneutics of lived time.

Wierciński's *Hermeneutics of Education* traces out the many lessons that we can learn by not just studying a panoply of thinkers but thinking with them while we are moving with him from Hegel to Ricoeur, from Heidegger to Gadamer, from the richness of the philosophical to the profundity of the theological. The ongoing back-and-forth movement that governs the revision of our pre-judgments precipitates the exigency of our ongoing engagement with self-education and self-understanding. Teaching us to appreciate the invaluable strength of revisiting that which we have understood and learned, Wierciński's dialogical model of education, at the same time, evocatively and passionately underscores the ethical dimension of education—respect and openness to the otherness of the other entails mutuality and responsibility. Being respectful and open is a prerequisite for a genuine discovery of one's identity and, simultaneously, builds the ground for the transformation of the speaking partners:

Hermeneutics invites us to investigate the ways in which we find ourselves in the world with a strong focus on the singularity of each human being, who is called to somehow finally and incommunicably understand him or herself in a challenging existential involvement with the other. This task of interpretation reveals the need to understand—through the otherness of the other—the otherness that we ourselves are. In a true hermeneutic conversation, the discovering of one's own identity leads to the transformation of the partners involved. (Wierciński 2019b, 27)

In his ethics of education, Wierciński advocates for the Gadamerian explication of the genuine character of human bonding as resting upon the capability of listening and hearing: "In human relations, the important thing is... to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook

his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather anyone who listens is fundamentally open (Gadamer 2013, 369). This *letting say* and *letting hear* express the gist of the teacher's and learner's participation in the educative community *through* language and *in* language. It is not an exaggeration to say that the human capability of bonding provides the footing for an effective teaching/learning process. On innumerable occasions, I have had a chance to experience the astounding beauty and challenge of a hermeneutic conversation (the Summer School in Philosophy and Education organized by Wierciński yearly, being one of the most pertinent instances), and to taste the perils of education that involve the risk of letting others say something to us.

### **In Lieu of Conclusion: "... and Be Thankful"<sup>14</sup>**

It is hardly possible to conclude the inconclusive narrative of this illuminative journey that I embarked upon when I first met Wierciński. If one needs to enter the penultimate part of this essay and select just one word that would articulate the sublime beauty of this mentor-and-disciple relationship, it would be *gratitude*. And if the exigency of concluding makes this one word: *gratitude* sing in my soul, it is not merely a customary, which could possibly be even facile, tribute that students pay to their teachers after having completed their studies. As both his disciple and a scholar myself, my indebtedness to Wierciński embraces the scintillating intimacy of sharing our lived experience of an academic path. The manifold possibilities of intellectual exchange with my mentor amounted not to my accumulation of knowledge (though, undeniably, being better versed in many topics was an outcome) but have become the intimate space of self-development and self-understanding (*Selbstbewegung*). Wierciński has become my point of entry into the hermeneutic journey of self-knowledge and self-cultivation, whence the vast interiority of my experiences as a human being has coalesced with my professional path as a researcher and teacher.

Wierciński's inimitable way of being a scholar and viewing the life of a community of scholars can be best rendered in his own words:

A community of scholars who understand themselves as being addressed by the matter at hand. Here the German *Angesprochensein* is understood not as a kind of mysterious, undefined call by Being but as a personal responsibility to give an answer to the voice that addresses me, an individual in the community

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Col 3: 15 "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful," accessed March 11, 2023, <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Colossians-3-15/>.

of thinkers. This voice is an unmistakably recognizable συντήρησις, the intuitive knowledge of what is right, the divine spark of the soul requiring my comprehensive answer (*respondeo*). (2019a, 25–26)

The manifest strength and clarity of Wiercinski's voice in contemporary philosophical hermeneutics show his application (*An-wendung*) of the apparently lofty ideal of an individuated response to the matter at hand, his readiness to bear witness to *verbum interius* that demands to be recognized, fostered, but also transmitted to others (*contemplata tradere*) (cf. Wierciński 2019b, 106). Working at the crossroads of philosophy, theology, and poetry but also devoting his time recently to in-depth research in the field of the hermeneutics of art and architecture, medicine, and law, Wierciński's pathway demonstrates the exceptionality of his scholarship, which is saturated with an ever-growing capacity for including more and more areas of inquiry, revealing thus the universal character of hermeneutics *par excellence*.

To name Wierciński's scholarly pathway of a philosopher, a poetics of plenitude, is without a shadow of a doubt, a well-grounded and sound statement, as his edification in providing anyone who is truly open to hermeneutically explore his/her being-in-the-world, with everything that is needed to both nurture and protect our human capacity for thinking (*homo capax*) is remarkably rich and varied. The outstanding versatility and scope of Wierciński's research but also his nonconformist, idiosyncratic, and inclusive addressing of the prescient issues in today's academia bespeak the idiom of his philosophical thought and education. Wierciński's poetics of plenitude teaches us that we will not always be able to consummate our longing for uncovering precisely that which we would like to be disclosed in the astounding vastness of possible *thinking* the world, us, and the Other. Still, we can always pose new queries and seek new ways of understanding, bearing witness to the superabundance of the meaning of our existence that awaits to be unraveled and does not cease to intrigue and enchant us.

The reality of allurements and amazement is heightened in Wierciński's writings by frequently interspersing his philosophical discourse with his poetry readings. Being a poet himself, he treats us to blissfully immersive interpretations of Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, T.S. Eliot, C.P. Cavafy, to mention the most important names, threading together the intricately intersecting paths of philosophy, theology, and poetry. Wierciński's poetics of plenitude, expressive of his fidelity to pondering and interpreting human existence in its bewildering boundarylessness, makes his philosophical and theological discourse powerfully resonate with the lyrical and narrative beauty of the poems and psalms he interweaves in the mainstream of his texts. Wierciński's poetics of plenitude is the pathway of self-expansion, which features an unflagging and heartfelt invitation to our own growth and

self-actualization, and in which we can marvel at and fully appreciate the miracle of being-with, thinking-together, and apprehending the poetic disclosures of Being.

Human relationships can be just and as much as a moment (*Augenblick*), in which and through which we encounter a reality greater than our expectations and longings, in which the epiphanic and the transformative are the lasting and all-embracing power. Realizing that the magnitude of Wiercinski's scholarly enterprise, his ever-new and ever-more-profound understanding of that which needs to be understood, will always put me miles away from him, I shall be more grateful for and more attentive to what I have already learned and what his teachings will disclose to me in the future. Learning from Wierciński means that one truly goes past the close horizon of what one's mind comprehends, as his ongoing hermeneutic welcoming gesture enhances the re-positioning of our initial position in thinking and facilitates the renewal of our keen interest in the primordially of our lingual being-in-the-world. Gadamer emphasizes that the horizon is "something into which we move and that moves with us" (2000, 303). The continuous change, the *metanoia* we experience, becomes the true fabric of our lives. Bearing in mind that it is proper human bonding that facilitates our endless *metanoia*, I should like to conclude this essay with Wierciński's words on friendship "the greatest gift, which gives us the courage to be authentic in all life stages and circumstances" (2022, 8). With Wierciński, we may experience the truthfulness of those words, as his *via contemplativa* is an ongoing hermeneutic invitation to anyone who has the courage to recognize and accept his/her unique life path (*amor fati*), and generously share its fruits with others.

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It is the back-and-forth movement of our thinking and our thinking together that creates the space of creative enchantment in which the prosaic, the banal, and the simplistic do not win over in our meticulous or even laborious explication of the world, ourselves, and the Other.

**Here you could make a reference to back and forth movement of waves in your book on Virginia Woolf.**