

A View from a Visiting Scholar

By John Kaag

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Nestled back on its corner of Norton Woods, the House of the Academy struck me on my first day as a page out of Frank Lloyd Wright’s draft book – one of those rare structures where ancient materials take on genuinely novel forms. The architecture of the House, which is a cross between classical villa and American arts-and-crafts, reflects one of the leading ideas of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, namely that the old and new must cohabitate for academia to remain both grounded and fresh. This was my first lesson as a Visiting Scholar.

I remember on my first day at the Academy opening the heavy oak front doors to the House. John Adams, the second President of the United States, greeted me – at least his nineteenth-century portrait did. It hangs in the central atrium between a selection of acceptance letters from Academy members: Albert Einstein, Richard Feynman, and Robert Frost, among others. I felt totally out of place. A security guard in a blue blazer approached and kindly explained: “the offices for the Visiting Scholars are upstairs.”

“And in the future,” he added, “you can use the back stairwell to get there.”

At the time, his suggestion seemed a little rude for all of the obvious reasons, but over the course of the year it began to make very good sense. There were seven Visiting Scholars that year, and as the months rolled on we became increasingly chatty and, I will only speak for myself, ill-kempt. But we also became increasingly productive. The Visiting Scholars would trundle up to the second floor of the Academy, arguing about the state of religion in America, or about how to construct a really compelling first sentence, or about the speaker that we had heard last Tuesday. And on these afternoons I was glad we did not have to lower our voices. After all, we were using the back staircase.

The Visiting Scholars had learned very different things in graduate school – how to be professors of English, history, law, political science, and philosophy. But we had also learned a common lesson: how to work in perfect isolation. It took us a number of months to overcome this lesson of graduate school, to realize that research is done best when it is done with others. This is a given in the sciences, but the advantages of collaboration and discussion are often downplayed in the humanities and social sciences, which take the monastic model of scholarship rather seriously. So it took us a little while to realize that intellectual isolation wasn’t a good in itself.



To be clear, I’ve never had as much academic freedom as I had as a Visiting Scholar. I was free to visit every library and every archive on Harvard’s campus. And I did. I was free to write, or not write, exactly what I chose. And I did. Of course, I was secretly terrified by this freedom, but I could always walk back to the Academy and commiserate with budding scholars (smarter than I was) who were just as scared. I could also look to distinguished scholars who had managed to face this freedom without going to pieces. One of them was Patricia Meyer Spacks.

Pat is indefatigable. A member of the Academy and one of its former presidents, Pat also directed the Visiting Scholars Program during my tenure. If she was not editing the latest collection of Jane Austen, she was writing a book on rereading, or during my year at the Academy, reading yet another draft manuscript from a Visiting Scholar. She didn’t have to do any of this, especially, I often thought, read materials from junior scholars who were trying to find their voices. But she did. Pat was our constant companion during our time on the second floor of the Academy. Her office – exactly the size and shape of my own – was right next door, and her door was always open. Without Pat’s daily encouragement, I would have never pursued, much less completed, my first book, *Idealism, Pragmatism and Feminism*. My interactions with Pat imparted the most important lessons that I learned as a Visiting Scholar: new forms do not survive without the help of established ones; new forms eventually become old; and when they do, there is some indebtedness to the new growth.

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I will not forget these lessons. I will also not forget the little kitchenette on the second floor of the Academy where Joy Rohde, David Sehat, and I had lunch on a daily basis. This is the place where Joy's manuscript on the military implications of social science research took form (published with Cornell in 2013), where I provided David what he has called the most important sentence of his preface to the *Myth of American Religious Freedom* (published with Oxford in 2012), and where David, a historian, gave me, a philosopher, what remains the most constructive critique of *Thinking Through the Imagination* (which I will publish with Fordham in 2014).

By this point, it should be obvious that the Visiting Scholars Program does not operate like an intellectual "Upstairs, Downstairs." Its participants, most of them either post-doctoral fellows or untenured assistant professors, are fully integrated members of Academy life. We were encouraged to attend informal lunches held once a week on the first floor of the Academy where Academy members who lived in the Cambridge area would gather to chat about their research. The members, most of them distinguished full professors, many of them Nobel laureates, regarded the seven of us as intellectual equals or, if not perfect equals, then as very promising junior colleagues. Graduate school is meant to prepare a student to become a scholar in his or her own right, but it often only cements the rigid hierarchy between professor and pupil. As a Visiting Scholar, however, one thing was clear. I was no longer just a student.

This does not mean that I didn't still have much to learn – like how to write a successful book proposal, how to write for an audience larger than a doctoral committee, and how to understand the responsibilities of being a public intellectual. And the Visiting Scholars Program was geared to help me acquire this knowledge and the practical tools that would allow me not only to become a scholar in my own right, but a truly good one. Every Tuesday Pat would arrange an afternoon speaker for our group, who would address some aspect of writing or research. Graduate students spend a great deal of time writing, but not enough time thinking about the process itself. So these were much needed conversa-

tions. Robert Pinsky, the United States Poet Laureate, came to talk to us about style and voice and all of us listened. Very. Carefully. Reading and writing, if I understood Pinsky that day, is always an existential affair, one that is necessarily and profoundly personal. An academic author who overlooks this fact will tend to write books that are easily overlooked. This general suggestion was restated by a literary agent the next week, Wendy

Strothman, who explained the concrete and very specific guidelines that she used to judge popular academic writing – hook a reader, motivate a topic, write what you know, and avoid all semblance of jargon. She urged us to keep these guidelines in mind as we developed our next projects and invited all of the Visiting Scholars to send her draft proposals. Many of us did and we received extensive feedback.

The invited speakers, often established academics from all over the country, have changed over the years; this fall Harvard history professor and *New Yorker* author Jill Lepore came to talk to the Visiting Scholars. I had heard that she was coming to the Academy and was more than a little jealous of this year's cohort. So I contacted Lepore to give me a hint of what I had missed, to give me a sense of the advice she had given this year's Scholars (such is the audacity of a former Visiting Scholar). "The word on the academic street," Lepore said, "is that what you ought to do is to write a dissertation to satisfy your graduate school advisor, turn it into a monograph to satisfy your discipline's tenure requirements, and then, and only then, write the way you'd like to write." This was also the "word on the street" a few years ago when I went through graduate school: defer the questions of style and motivation and voice until after all of your disciplinary hurdles are cleared. Lepore continued: "There's absolutely nothing wrong with writing a highly technical dissertation and a very specialized monograph; that sort of work is crucial to the production of knowledge and the exchange of ideas. But if, all along, you wanted to write differently, you should do that from the start. Saying you'll write something soaringly beautiful after you get tenure is like saying you'll spend time with your kids after they're grown."

The Visiting Scholars Program has provided the space for young humanists and social scientists to remember that they might have once aspired to the highly technical *and* the soaringly beautiful, and that such aspirations are not to be put off until some distant day. I am grateful to have been one of these young scholars. ■

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