

practicing mortality art, philosophy, and contemplative seeing

**Dustin, Christopher A. and
Ziegler, Joanna E. 2005**

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A beautiful idea lies at the center of each chapter of Christopher A. Dustin and Joanna E. Ziegler's book. This conceptual nucleus serves as a tiny sun around which the various aspects of the chapter revolve, forming a constellation of insights on contemplative seeing and the practical art of living well. The methodological model underpinning the text can perhaps best be described by the Greek term *kosmos*, which denotes a well-ordered universe based on a harmonious sense of balance, pattern, and form. *Practicing Mortality* represents the artful interweaving of Dustin and Ziegler's conjoined *kosmos*.

Etymology plays a key role throughout the text, and nowhere is its largesse more evident than in the authors' introductory discussion of theory as *theōria*. Linked philologically to theater and theology—to the ancient festivals of the goddess (*theá*) and to Martin Heidegger's modern philosophical conception of a "reverent paying heed to the unconcealment of what presences" (p. 10)—theory emerges as at once a contemplative intellectual art and a performative sacred spectacle.

The first and final chapters of the study read like Transcendentalist bookends that frame the text from the perspectives of Emerson's spiritually based sense of materialism and Thoreau's conception of "the living poetry" of the earth as an exemplary model of mortality, as colorful beds of autumn leaves may teach humans how to live and die with grace and gentleness. From the earth, the authors move to flowers, which, as the curator Okakura Kakuzo notes in *The Book of Tea* (1958), are crucial elements in the Japanese tea ceremony. Drawing on the spiritual insights that thread through Okakura's classic study of the practical application of the ideals underpinning traditional Japanese aesthetics, which he describes as "the adoration of the beautiful among everyday

facts," it is not surprising to read that the ritual process of drinking in beauty promotes the deep internalization of human values such as simplicity, regularity, and humility. What is more unexpected is to learn of the ethical agency that the authors attribute to flowers as embodiments of ephemerality. With their lives intimately linked to natural seasons and cycles, the transient beauty of flowers evokes an exquisitely heightened sense of the consciousness of mortality. Through insights such as these, *Practicing Mortality* performs the aestheticized rituals that it analyzes, and in the process, makes a ceremonial offering to its readers.

The intertwining of the ethics of nature with the existential practices of contemplative seeing represents a leitmotif in the book. These themes are integral to the authors' discussion of the American naturalist Eric Sloane, who saw the craft of woodworking as an extended metaphor for one's ability to shape the physical world, just as the objects that are produced intimately shape both one's outer life and inner being. These ideas artfully recur in the concluding discussion of John Singleton Copley's portrait of Paul Revere (1768) as a silversmith grasping a teapot while surrounded by his tools. For both Copley and Revere, the painting exemplifies the human project of crafting oneself through the objects of one's own creation, and subsequently, beholding them in, and as, a form of contemplative seeing.

Building on the premise that it is possible to perceive worlds of meaning embedded in finely crafted objects, ceremonial performances, and the origins of words, Dustin and Ziegler link Eric Sloane's practice of working in wood, which the latter characterized as "a substance with a soul" (p. 122), to Plato's vision of the philosopher as a craftsman, a beholder, and a "shaper of beautiful things (including, first and foremost, his own soul)" (p. 137). In the *Republic*, Plato described the craft of education as the process of turning the soul around. Such a thematic emphasis is appropriate, given that much of this book derives from the authors' own pedagogical practices in philosophy (Dustin) and art history (Ziegler) at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, where their teaching can be seen as an extended exercise in developing the *kosmos* within themselves and their students.

The authors devote extensive sections of the book to Heidegger's writings, particularly his critique of technology as being instrumental in creating a mode of modern life that is alienated from its own sources of being in time and place.

In contrast, Heidegger advocates a measured existence in orderly human “dwelling” that restores and preserves the boundaries that make a meaningful life possible. Thus just as modern technology can lead to fantasies of omnipotence, accepting the limits of our own humanity leads to a profound connection to that which lies beyond the confines and parameters of human control.

As all this suggests, an essentialist conception of the relations between the physical and the metaphysical domains—the divine foundations of the universe and the nature of the human soul—forms a discursive pattern that is woven into the very fabric of the text. The shadow side of these discourses manifests as a polemic against postmodernism, a phenomenon that has shaped the specialized world of the academy and the general landscape of American popular culture. The authors observe that, while academia tends to eschew questions of “fundamental values” (p. x), our larger cultural

practices are characterized by a sense of forgetfulness, destruction, and disposability. Although Dustin and Ziegler resist the claim that *Practicing Mortality* represents a polemic against postmodernism, the text itself repeatedly performs such a critique precisely because its subject requires this, even as their ritual performance of cultural refutation is notably softened by their spirit of generosity, nostalgia, and hopefulness.

Ultimately, the aim of *Practicing Mortality* is to promote the ability to see differently and “to restore our faith in appearances” (p. 90). The Latin term for these processes is *mirari*, which beautifully evokes both admiration and miracles, as it signifies our ability to gaze in wonder at the extraordinary sights before us. *Practicing Mortality* not only explicates these processes intellectually; it also performs acts of *mirari* for its readers, contemplative processes in which practices of admiration become acts of revelation.

a pocket guide to superstitions of the british isles

Roud, Steve (ed.). 2004
Harmondsworth: Penguin

penguin guide to the superstitions of britain and ireland

Roud, Steve (ed.). 2003
Harmondsworth: Penguin

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372

It may be an obvious point to make in relation to a reference work, but size matters! I make this point because, having expected to review Steve Roud’s *Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland* (2003), Penguin eventually sent the *Pocket Guide to Superstitions of the British Isles* (2004)—and it is a quite different beast. The latter would make an excellent gift for anyone generally interested in, or wanting an instant guide to, some aspects of cultural tradition and popular belief relating to specific

topics—The Cycle of Life; The Human Body; Domestic Superstitions; The Occult; and The Natural World—which is how the book is arranged. However, the problem with this grouping of the material is that it is not obvious where to find things or how things have been arranged. Information on the color green being unlucky is to be found under the Clothes and Accessories subsection of Domestic Superstitions for example—despite the fact that green cars are also implicated in suspicion of the color in that entry and also under “wedding colours” in the Marriage subsection of The Cycle of Life. In fairness, a good index helps one through some of these taxonomic complexities, though I was puzzled by the lack there of colors other than red and green. Being a “pocket guide” means that the number and variety of examples of phenomena are severely curtailed, and, most seriously, that there is no room for references. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the academic usefulness of *A Pocket Guide to Superstitions of the British Isles* is limited.

Nevertheless, despite my apparently grumpy overview, there are redeeming features. Steve Roud was for many years Honorary Librarian of The Folklore Society, and is an assiduous bibliophile and experienced fieldworker with a broad range of interests in folklore, including traditional drama, contemporary legend, and children’s folklore. In the necessarily short introduction to the *Pocket Guide*, Roud does