On the Occasion of T. K. Seung’s Retirement as Jesse H. Jones Professor in Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin
May 8, 2015
The Great Theme of Thomas Seung

Jack Balkin

I met Tom shortly after I had taken a job at the University of Texas Law School. You should talk to him, I was told—he's interested in some of the same things you are. "What do you write about?" he asked. "Hermeneutics, deconstruction and law," I said. He paused and said, with a slight tone of skepticism: "Come to see me on Monday. We will talk and then have lunch."

One talk led to another and then to another, and soon I was coming to see him every week at eleven in the morning, followed by lunch and a walk. He plowed through what I had recently written, asked many questions, then asked for other things to read on legal theory. We read a bunch of legal articles, but he knew that my background was philosophy so we soon turned to that. We read, and read and read some more, every Monday or Tuesday or whatever day it was that week that fit our schedules. We started with contemporary philosophers—Derrida and Foucault and Rawls—but we were drawn back, repeatedly, to Kant and Plato, always Plato. Everywhere we looked we found Plato. We discussed the history of art and music, the cultural themes of the past and their reappearance in the modern world. We discussed the connections between the classical philosophers of China and Greece. We read drafts of the book that would become Tom's Intuition and Construction: The Foundation of Normative Theory. Over and over Tom would slap my knee and exclaim with delight: "Do you see this connection? Do you see this? No one sees it! No one has ever thought of this!" But of course, he would also insist that people had seen it, they just did not understand what they were seeing.

I had studied philosophy for some time, but Tom really taught me philosophy; or rather, he taught me a certain way of doing philosophy that has enriched my work greatly over the years. It is historical but rigorous, it values clarity over complexity; its goal is to state problems in the simplest possible terms so that everyone can understand them. It is organized in great themes and recurrent tropes, which appear in each generation in ever new guises, but which can be traced back to their sources in the philosophical origins of the West and the East. These themes and tropes vanish and reappear; they produce their opposites and struggle with them. Like biological species in a challenging environment, these themes mutate and disguise themselves but they are never fully vanquished.
Call this approach thematic philosophy. Thematic philosophy is about the movement of ideas through history, their transformation and combination, their submergence and resurgence. Thematic philosophy, unlike much of the philosophy of the twentieth century, does not proudly abstract from history and circumstance; it is embedded in history by its nature. It is a child of time, and does not seek to escape the font of its creativity or disdain the source of its nourishment. Quite the contrary, we best understand philosophers by encountering them in their own eras, in the tangled trajectory of their lives, and through recognizing the problems that they and their culture faced-- or believed that they faced. The thematic approach understands that great philosophy, like great science and great art, emerges from history and particularity to proclaim the timeless and the universal. Only by returning philosophy to history do we recognize these truths.

Tom could well have applied his own method to himself. "I have left North Korea," he once said to me, "and I could never go back. But I am not home here either. I am a wanderer." But wanderer is far too modest a title; explorer is far more apt. A wanderer moves from place to place without aim, but an explorer moves with determination and purpose. A wanderer wanders from dissatisfaction or ennui, but an explorer is driven by courage and will.

Tom Seung is always on a quest. The path is always changing but the goal is always before him--for the Way that can be described is not the constant Way. He is a great man exploring a world of great ideas, bringing boons to his fellow creatures. He has found within himself the gathering place of the great themes from East and West, which speak to him and through him. He has traced them back to their sources, felt their oscillations in his breast, expounded them in his writing, bore witness to their struggles in history, and marveled at their inexhaustible creativity. This is the Way of his virtue. This is the great theme of his life.
I don't remember exactly when I first met Thomas Seung, but it was probably sometime in the late 1960’s, around the time I joined the UT Philosophy Department. Tom's interests are very broad, and his work distinguished, but others are more suited than I to comment on his extensive accomplishments. I wish to describe him as a colleague and good friend.

My strongest impression of Tom is that he is always in his office writing. It is no surprise that he has published so many books. Knowing his writing habits makes it easy to locate him at work, but he never seems to mind interruptions if one suddenly drops in on him to talk about anything.

From time to time Tom does emerge from the comfort of his office, and he roams the corridors as an itinerant philosopher. I had many encounters with him when he was in this mood. He will ask a question about some philosophical issue, or express an idea on his mind, in order to strike up a relevant conversation. It seems to me that he usually does this in order to get feedback about something he is writing, or perhaps just contemplating.

Tom is often very animated in discussions, and when he really wants to make a point, he reminds me of a Tae Kwon Do master. A philosophical argument with Tom can be exhausting. Fortunately, I don’t recall ever having a strong philosophical disagreement with him. Perhaps this is because of the topics of our conversations. We often talk about scientific matters. Sometimes we discuss contemporary science news. Sometimes we consider topics in the history of science. Tom is a fan of the writings of Sir Arthur Eddington. Recently we have exchanged e-mail discussions of neuroscience research performed by his son, Sebastian, and others.

Many years ago Tom gave me a good piece of advice. I was probably asking him to volunteer for some departmental committee, and he said something like, “I don’t volunteer for anything. I learned that in the South Korean army.” Now that I am much older, I have a stronger appreciation of this counsel. But, of course, he was joking. He served honorably in the army, and he has always been a good citizen of the department, doing excellent work in many capacities.

We shall all miss Thomas and his talented and charming wife, Kwi. I am honored to congratulate them and wish them a long, enjoyable, and well-earned retirement.

Bob Causey
I first met Thomas Seung when he showed up at my office door one afternoon in the mid nineties and asked me a series of pointed questions about Greek literature and Plato. The next thing I knew, I was translating and explicating long stretches of the *Gorgias* and *Republic* with him during repeated office visits. At the time, I was about to go up for tenure, and at first I just liked showing off my skill at sight translation to a senior colleague; and I was also a little amused that he was attempting to write a book on normative philosophy in Plato through the lens of cultural thematics. What I quickly came to appreciate, however, was his energy and enthusiasm, and dogged determination not to leave my office until he was satisfied that he thoroughly understood the passages we were reading. In time, I came to find our conversations so rewarding personally that I truly missed them when he finished his project. In return, he did me the enormous honor of writing a letter in support of my receiving tenure at UT; and I will always be very grateful to him for that. I did not see much of Thomas for a few years afterwards, but then he started dropping by again as he worked on two further book projects. I have to say that I remember our discussions of Goethe’s *Faust* better than those about the Presocratics and Homer! Unfortunately, I left UT before those projects came to fruition. Indeed one of my real regrets on leaving UT was that I knew I would fall out of contact with Thomas; and he remains one of the handful of colleagues whom I have sincerely missed in the years since. When he makes a new connection, or even just describes one, Thomas lights up the room.

Erwin Cook
Trinity University
Happiest Thoughts to Thomas Seung

I owe a double debt to Thomas Seung for which this brief commendation can hardly repay.

First, intellectually Thomas has helped open my eyes to the thinking of a close friend, whose writing I had always imagined as already transparent to me.

Plato is a thinker to whom I have dedicated my career and life because he is the most complex and happy and interesting mind that I can ever imagine having wandered our world. There is no end to the puzzles and paradoxes that will hound one who enters the rich and wonderful labyrinths of his works. I had always imagined that, because I was a left handed wrestler with a background in teaching geometry I had a unique access and contact with my true teacher. That is until I was privileged to read the original and insightful commentaries of Professor Thomas Seung.

Thomas has developed a vision of Plato that finally addresses and illuminates many of the most intractable difficulties for a Plato scholar. Protagoras is often portrayed as the arch-rival and ultimate competitor to Plato for his espousal of the relativist claim the each of us the measure of his own truths. But Thomas has uncovered the great debt and convergence between the greatest philosopher and the most renowned sophist. They both understood that knowing the world, in some significant sense, changes the world. And as we progress to know ourselves, we equally begin to construct a place within our souls from which we may reconstruct the world as it someday should be.

This view of Plato as ethical, constructive realist is as aberrant a view as one might ever arrive at. Most readers of Plato, including a fair number of respected Plato scholars, remain loyal to the early dialogues and their model that it is only the immutable forms that can be the objects of knowledge. That Thomas was courageous enough in his reading of Plato to see a living contact between the great minds like Kant and Heidegger and Whitehead, attests to his expansive vision and his unwillingness to ignore those Platonic insights that just did not fit the simpler articulations. His view will someday be the norm, because it opens up for us a Plato who can most fully comprehend the conversations and worlds he left for us.

My deeper debt to Thomas is the caring and open friendship he offered to an unknown and insignificant scholar who happened to spend a sabbatical semester
pestering him at Texas. He spent many mornings walking and sharing meals with me as I struggled to fully understand the wisdom of his deep insights into the dialogues. He is the truest testament to that saw that great minds are never guarded of their wisdom, but joyfully attempt to share it with all. I thank you Thomas and celebrate with all of your friends and colleagues on this wonderful occasion.

Mark Faller
Recollections of Tom Seung:

I first met Tom Seung when I arrived in Texas in the summer of 1985. We shared a deep interest in political theory. We even both had our early academic origins as undergraduates in the same residential college at Yale—Timothy Dwight College. We also soon discovered that we shared a passion for the same non-academic pastime—tennis.

These interests led us to many excursions combining political theory and tennis. However, I soon discovered the rigors awaiting me. Tom was absolutely remarkable in his dual capacity to continue a rigorous philosophical argument and a focus on hitting the tennis ball. Rigor, Energy, Concentration, and, I might add in a nice way, Competitiveness!

The terms were set the very first day. He took me out on the court at 1pm on a typical August day. In the 110-degree heat of the Texas sun, I soon felt both the argument and the game slipping from my grasp. In New Haven I had never played inside an oven turned on high.

Finally I fainted losing all consciousness. Collapsed on the ground, I eventually came to hear Tom standing over me saying, “Welcome to Texas!”

As the years went on, we learned to play early in the morning and I found that the energy, intellectual rigor and warmth of our friendship sustained me for the entire 18 year period in which I lived in Texas.

Warmest congratulations to Tom and his family on the occasion of his retirement.

Best regards,

James Fishkin
Janet M. Peck Chair in International Communication and Director, Center for Deliberative Democracy
On October 1 1997, I approached Professor Seung for the first time. I sent him an email with an attachment that contained a long letter describing a proposal for a PhD project on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. I eagerly wanted him to look at the project before applying for a three-year grant at the University of Aarhus in Denmark. What followed on October 2, when I opened his reply, is the most exciting, inspiring, and challenging period of my life, and it continued for the next four years. This is the time I spent writing my PhD dissertation, which later became a book and four articles. Emails went back and forth often several times every week, and I still remember the excitement whenever I found a new message from Seung in my inbox. Right from the start I felt I had struck gold.

As perhaps not known to everyone, in 1962 Seung published a unique and forceful interpretation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, for which Seung’s mentor, the highly respected Dante scholar Thomas G. Bergin, would have given his entire academic career, as he once told a person close to Seung. Already then, Seung showed extraordinary talents, and his integrity as a scholar was complete. While still a graduate student of philosophy at Yale University specializing in Plato and Kant, he found the time to write a 430-page long book on Dante – *The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl: Dante’s Master Plan* – because he had a completely new theory of what constitutes the unity of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. This is characteristic of all of Seung’s publications: Original and thoroughly contemplated ideas pervade his work, and just like Dante, he presents them with astonishing precision and beauty.

I was puzzled by the fact that here was a Dante scholar who said something very different and entirely new about Dante’s epic and argued to have solved the problem of its unity. Yet few Dante scholars ever mentioned or referred to Seung’s Dante reading. I wanted to dig into this mystery. Why were his interpretive theory and Dante reading neglected? At the time I did not fully understand his theory and its staggering implications, but my unscientific gut feeling, often the fuel of scientific discovery as well as failure, told me that it was worthwhile going down this road. Today I no longer regard the neglect as a mystery. In my view Dante studies simply do not live up to the scholarly
standards of systematic examination of interpretive theories and comparative evaluation of their merit. In fact, if these standards were endorsed, some Dante scholar would have examined Seung’s Dante reading a long time ago. Instead, coincidence would have it that a thirty-year old Dane came to scrutinize what a thirty-year old Korean-American philosopher had proposed thirty years earlier. Hence internalization was on the move some twenty years ago.

In many ways, 1997 is not long ago. Yet it seems far away due to the digital turn in the last decades. Back then, I was a teaching assistant in Italian literature at the University of Copenhagen. I had a computer, but I could not afford an internet connection. So in order to be online in the digital world, I went to an office for graduates, and in that office there was one computer with an internet connection and a shared email address used by a number of people. For that reason, whenever I sent a message, I afterwards printed and deleted it, and whenever I received an answer, I did the same – this was the only way I could try to keep some privacy although most of the time everything was accessible to everyone in the office. But as a result of my print and delete practice, I still have on paper what Seung wrote to me in his reply on the same day he received my first message, while I have lost track of how many computers I have used since then.

I am not sure he would not approve of me quoting him without first asking, but one passage was decisive to me and my relationship to Seung:

“I am much delighted to have your message. Your long letter is thoughtful. It clearly shows how deeply you have thought through the difficult issues in the interpretation of Dante. Your proposed project is highly promising. If you can execute it, you can make yourself famous overnight. If you get the grant, please feel free to come to Austin. I will do my best to further your research.”

To be sure, I had hoped Seung would approve of my project before writing to him. But to be honest, I had never dreamt he would encourage it in this manner. Moreover, his encouragement never decreased but increased as the project developed. As the most natural thing in the world, he took on the responsibility to ensure my Bildung as well as my Ausbildung, as the Germans would say, while being his PhD student and thus a privileged member of his academic family. Seung was an exceptionally considerate adviser who, moreover, became a friend and gave me important advice on being a parent and making family life balance with professional obligations. Maybe it is not true in every case, but working with Seung made me think that being a scholar is in one particular way like
being an artist – you only become one truly if you somehow cannot stop doing what you do.

Seung always told me straightforwardly whenever I was on the right track or simply lost having made some terribly unsound detour into irrelevant territory. Once I asked him whether I should follow a course on logic, and he gave me a short answer: “Oh, my God, it’s so boring!” Sometimes today I use this sentence, when I find something terribly boring, and I even imitate his tone of voice in emphasizing the distaste of boredom. Another time, when I thought I was onto something important, he replied: “I fear that you have been reading too much and thinking too little.” This sentence became a guideline for me. Even today when I hear someone in academia polluting the air with rubbish, I find myself thinking and sometimes saying out loud: “I fear he’s been reading too much and thinking too little.” For the important thing is not how much you have read and how good you are at quoting what others have written. What counts is how capable you are of thinking through the few things you have read carefully. No doubt, some would have found some of Seung’s remarks hard to swallow. I never did. On the contrary, I always found his wit sharp and to the point. For example, once I told him that official duties, at the moment, prevented me from committing myself fully to the task ahead, he simply answered:

“To cope with the distraction of official duties is about the biggest problem for any serious scholar. Now you are getting acquainted with this problem. That means you are getting initiated into a professional career of scholarship.”

On December 8 1997, I received a three-year grant starting on February 1 1998. Early the next day Seung sent me his congratulations apologizing the briefness of his message since it was the busiest time of the year. In January 1998, we exchanged emails about me coming to Austin in the spring of 1998. For instance, Seung would write:

“Although Austin is a decent city, its summer is unbearably hot. If you come here in May and stay for a few months, you will be getting roasted in a Texas Inferno. The humidity is very high and temperature hovers around the upper limit of 90 degree Fahrenheit. The Austin weather begins to cool off about the beginning of October, and the city becomes a truly beautiful place for the next seven or eight months. For these reasons, I strongly suggest that you should think of coming here when the cool season begins. This is my considered advice.”
For a descendant of the Vikings of Northern Europe, who always fears being roasted in the sun, this was good advice. In May 1998 I made the first of two trips to Austin staying each time for two to three weeks. I could not stay longer since I had two small children back in Denmark. During these stays, I met with Seung two to three hours every day, except on the weekends, and we went through Dante’s Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise back and forth time and again and discussed all types of interpretive problems in Dante studies. During these meetings, Seung would write down various key concepts of ancient and medieval philosophy on the back of recycled sheets of paper and make several drawings of Dante’s cosmology. I still have some 40 sheets containing, on their front, pages of chapter one and two of his *Plato Rediscovered*, perhaps my favorite Seung book along with his *Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics*, in which he outlines, in the last chapter, his resourceful theory of thematic dialectic.

In November 2002 I finished the dissertation, in May 2003 I defended it, in June 2004 I received the Aarhus University Research Foundations prize for the best 2003 PhD dissertation in the arts and humanities, and finally in 2007 my book on Seung’s Dante theory was published – almost ten years after I sent him the first email. I do believe that, in the end, I came to execute something far better than outlined in my original proposal, and I learned to think through what I carefully read. All this thanks to Seung’s attentive and firm guidance, him being at the same time my Virgil, my Beatrice, and my Bernard, that is, for those not familiar with Seung’s Dante theory, the three guides who lead Dante through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise and, most significantly, symbolize the holy trinity and their power. To be sure, I did not become famous, as Seung had predicted. I can live with that, since I never expected it, and since Seung never meant it literally.
I've had the pleasure of being Tom’s colleague for over thirty years. To say that he has been a lively interlocutor would be an understatement, as all who know him would surely attest. Conversation with Tom over the years has kept me on my philosophical toes and been consistently illuminating. We have had long discussions, in particular, about Nietzsche, and I have been genuinely thrilled to have a colleague who is as enthusiastic about the intricacies of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as I am.

I have also long admired Tom’s looking out for those he is in a position to help. For example, I have been impressed every semester when Tom has taken the initiative to encourage his colleagues to write in support of members of our administrative staff when nominations for staff awards are being solicited. But let me recall more personal examples of Tom’s animated interaction and his considerateness.

Meeting Tom was one of the reasons I accepted the job at the University of Texas in the first place. After I received the job offer, I came to visit the department. Bob Causey, who was then Chair, showed me the philosophy listings in the course catalogue and asked which of the courses I might be interested in teaching at some point. I noted one that focused on philosophical anthropology, and I asked what sorts of things were done in the course. Bob said I should ask Tom, who was the main person who taught it, which I did at a reception that was held later in the day.

Tom’s first response was, “I’ll never teach that course again! I’ve changed the syllabus many times, but I have never been satisfied with it.”

Bob asked him what texts he’d used, and Tom reeled off various combinations he’d tried, concluding with the books he’d used in the most recent incarnation of the course, one of which was “Motorcycle.”

Another colleague, Doug Browning, asked Tom, “Are you talking about *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*?”

Tom said, “That’s right! That is a great book! I don’t read that many books outside of research, but that one – I couldn’t put it down, which is more than I can say for the *Critique of Pure Reason*.”

Doug laughed and asked, “Let me get this straight: Are you saying that *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is a great book and the *Critique of Pure Reason* is not?”
“That’s right!” Tom replied. I was delighted by Tom’s willingness to stand his ground, and this gave me the impression that the department was a hospitable place for unorthodox views and light-hearted conversation. This gave me confidence that I could be comfortable in such a place.

If that surmise later turned out to be true, it was due in part to Tom’s strategic interventions. Although we usually engaged in philosophical discussion when we ran into each other, a few times soon after I arrived he came to my office to alert me to problems he could see brewing. On one of these occasions, he told me that he heard of one of my senior faculty members asking me for secretarial assistance. He said that I must insist on being treated as a colleague, and that it was crucial to convey this message to be taken seriously as a candidate for tenure. At another point, he advised me to change one texts listed on one of my course descriptions, since the book I had in mind was too advanced for the level I was teaching. More recently, Tom’s solicitude toward me after the death of my husband, our colleague Bob Solomon, further illustrates his thoughtfulness and his tendency to take the initiative to help.

After so many years of enjoying interacting with Tom and pondering his sometimes wildly original insights, I am sad that he is moving. But I wish him a wonderful retirement, which, knowing Tom, I’m sure will be retirement only in name.

Kathleen Higgins
It is a great loss for me personally for my friend and colleague Tom Seung to be leaving the department, and the area. I don’t get to discuss such big picture historical questions, alongside with matters of fine logical detail, with other colleagues as often and as freely as I can with him. I will miss him tremendously. I congratulate him on an intellectual life of the first rank. No one else in history, as far as I am aware, has plumbed the depths of the great Medieval poetry of Dante’s and also penetrated the depths of both continental philosophy, analytical philosophy and metaethics, ancient philosophy (especially Plato) and Kant.

Tom brings an unorthodox and original perspective to whatever he studies, and sees things that other great scholars miss. Part of what makes him special is his exceptionally broad and deep knowledge of the history of philosophy and of ideas more generally. But he combines this with an unusual attention to detail. He does not neglect the fine points of very complex views, and because of this he can cut through layers of opacity and misdirection, cutting to the heart of the matter. He is adept in slashing through the defenses, to the core of a position, as did the great swordsman Musashi, except that Tom’s sword is his mind and his opponents are within the abstract realm. (He has a mean right uppercut as well, as my colleagues and I have long known. His body shots to the spleen and middle torso are less frequent now than twenty years ago, but one still sees them from time to time, particularly in front of the elevator in Waggener Hall. It is always best to leave your left flank protected when talking with Tom in the hall.)

Tom has been a wonderful colleague in other ways as well. He often has given me sensible advice concerning many matters, from questions of departmental administration and political matters to matters of life and career. When I first came to the department over twenty years ago, my wife met Tom in the main office and he immediately asked her ‘So, when are you going to have some children?’ Following that exchange, I pretty much had to have some children, and since then have two fine sons. Tom helped me to see the big picture, as always, whether with advice about my choice of subjects to pursue in my studies or how men can deal with various mid-life crises. I often think of him as my life-sensei.

Tom’s son Sebastian is a neuroscientist who is searching for the Connectome, the connection structure of an entire human brain. With Tom in the office down the hall I have felt that I have had the rare privilege of access to a ‘Connectome of ideas’. Tom seems to have a clear vision of a truly vast swath of intellectual and philosophical and literary history of mankind as a whole. This connectome of ideas that Tom has built will be missed by our department.
and by the intellectual community as a whole. He will undoubtedly continue to work on his connectome and bring to light further insights within the next couple of decades. I hope that he also is able to rest and enjoy his children and grandchildren in his new home in the Northeast. I will sorely miss my wonderful friend and colleague, and think of him often.

Sincerely,
Cory Juhl
Reminiscences of Thomas Seung

By Robert Kane

I first met Thomas when I entered the graduate program in philosophy at Yale University in the early 1960s. Thomas was a year or two ahead of me in the program and we eventually became friends. He was something of a legend at Yale at the time because he had been an undergraduate at Yale before entering the graduate program and especially because he had had an unusual and interesting history before that. I was told that he was originally from North Korea, but that he had defected from the north to South Korea at the time of the Korean War and joined the military of South Korea in its war against the communist North.

When the war was over, he came to the US and enrolled as an undergraduate at Yale, where he graduated a few years later at the very top of his graduating class. Hence the high regard in which he was held in the department and university. He was also at the time I first met him a Fellow of one of the Yale Colleges and lived in a suite at the college. In addition to studying philosophy, I learned that he was writing a book on Dante's Divine Comedy. His mentor in this project was a world renowned Dante scholar whom he had studied with as an undergraduate and who encouraged him to write the book because its thesis was highly original. The book was eventually published a few years later under the title, The Fragile Leaves of the Sybil. It offered an entirely new interpretation of Dante's great poem, which came to be known in scholarly circles as a "Trinitarian" interpretation. The book did not get a great deal of recognition at first, until a couple of decades later, a number of noted scholars of Dante in Europe recognized its originality and it became thereafter a much-discussed interpretation of the Divine Comedy.

My future wife (Claudette Drennan Kane) was also at Yale at that time as a graduate student in the School of Drama, and also knew Thomas as well. He attended our wedding when we were married in the St. Thomas More chapel at Yale in 1965. Thomas himself was making frequent trips at the time to New York City to visit a lovely young woman who was a student at the Juilliard School of Music and who eventually became his wife.

After leaving Yale and teaching for a short while at institutions in New York City and the Philadelphia area, I was offered a position in philosophy at The University of Texas in 1970. As fate would have it, Thomas had accepted a position in the department a year or two earlier and so our friendship has
continued as colleagues for the past 45 years. Over that time, we have had many lively and fruitful conversations about his philosophical work. He is a spirited debater, pacing up and down in his office or mine, pointing his fingers and jabbing at the air as he paces, as if he were playing a Shakespearean role on stage, or better, as if he were interrogating a prisoner of war, one of the tasks he had performed we were told as part of his war experience!

We also both taught for many years in the University's Plan II honors program and I would sometimes invite him to give guest lectures to my class, particularly when we were discussing some Eastern philosophers with whom he was familiar. These sessions were always exceptionally lively. Particularly memorable where his visits to my class to discuss Confucius. He insisted on not giving the usual classroom lecture because that was not in the spirit of Confucius. Instead he would proceed in the manner in which he was instructed in Confucian thought as a young person in Korea. That is, by asking a series of questions of students and selecting students at random to answer the questions rather than choosing those who raised their hands. This was a bit unnerving to the students at first, especially those called upon and battered with a series of questions. And it took them a while to get use to these unusual methods. But they benefitted immensely from it and always came away impressed.

Thomas wrote many books in philosophy in the course of his career and I have read and discussed the subject matter of many of them with him, both before and after publication. I have always regarded his philosophical writings, like his earliest book on Dante, as brilliant and original. His book on Plato and another one on Kant offer highly original and insightful interpretations of these great philosophers. The same can be said of his book on Nietzsche. And his other philosophical writings are equally creative.

It has been a pleasure to have known Thomas and to have had him as a colleague all these years. Many ideas developed in conversations with him have made their way into my own works. Such is my admiration for him as a philosopher. We have also been pleased to have had him and his wife as friends these many years and to see their children, whom we have known since their youngest years, go on to such successful careers of their own.
Some Thoughts about T. K. Seung

Tom Seung was one of the two faculty members who first invited me to lunch not long after I arrived at UT in September, 1973. David Miller, who was one of the grand old men of the department, a principled and wise person, asked me to have lunch; and either he invited Tom to go along or Tom invited himself. I mention David because Tom’s association with David is a strong indicator of Tom’s own good qualities.

At lunch, the discussion was pleasant until Tom said, “You are teaching a course on Medieval Philosophy. How can you teach a course on Medieval Philosophy? You never took a graduate course on Medieval Philosophy. You do not know Medieval Philosophy.” I was disconcerted. Years later the deep strangeness of Tom’s remark sunk in. Tom has written many books about subjects that he never took in graduate school. ... Hark, I hear Tom objecting that he has written books on Dante, Plato, and Kant, and had graduate courses on these people. True. But setting aside the fact that he also wrote books about Jacques Derrida and John Rawls, and possibly others about whom he never had a graduate class, it is irrelevant that he had classes on Dante, Plato, and Kant, because his interpretations of those thinkers were dramatically and incisively new! His views about these philosophers were not learned from his professors or fellow students. They were the occasions upon which he came up with ideas about those people, either then or later. I believe Tom was an autodidact even when he was a student.

Tom worked out many of his books in my office and in the hall. Although they had the form of discussions, he was really airing his ideas, which eventually became books.

During the 1970s and early 80s, Tom and I played a lot of tennis, almost always at the intramural courts at 51st and Speedway, although sometimes at the city courts at Lamar and 24th. He played me left-handed and beat me every set for years. At first I thought he was left-handed; but at some point he told me that he had tendonitis in his right arm and was resting it until it was healthy again. That may have taken two years; and he beat me every set. When his right arm recovered, he played me using his right hand; and slowly, slowly, but inexorably I was getting closer to beating him in a set. Eventually, the day came when I beat him in a set. He yelled, “You have not beaten me! You have to win two sets out of three to beat me.” It may have taken me another two years, but eventually I won two sets from him in a single outing. That was the last time we played for years. I remember only one occasion afterwards. He invited me to join him with his two sons, Sebastian and Justin. We were mostly hitting the ball around in quasi-doubles style; and I doubt that we were keeping score. At some point, Tom wanted to play a set with Justin. So Sebastian and I moved to the adjacent court and played a set. I beat him. He was 15 or 16, and strong. He would return my shots at about 150 MPH. When the ball was fair, I used my racket as a shield. But most of the time, he was hitting the ball into the net, over the fence, into another court, at 150 MPH. So concerning tennis, one of my proudest claims, aside from the claim that I beat a tennis player, who beat a tennis player, who beat Jimmy Connors, is that I beat Sebastian Seung.

In the years before I beat Tom at tennis, he tried to get me to improve my game. He cajoled me until I brought my racket to the department. In the hallway just outside the classroom WAG 420, Tom was drilling me in popping the ball up in the air forehand, backhand, forehand, ... He had both of us doing it. Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop ... Periodically, he would critique my form. The door to WAG 420 was open and Father Robert Sokolowski, a visiting professor from Catholic University of America, was teaching. After about ten minutes, Father Sokolowski, a gentle person, walked to the door, glowered at us and said, “I’m teaching.” He closed the door. I said we better quit, but Tom thought we had not yet practiced long enough.

Tom is proud of his children; and over the decades he has reported their achievements to me. But. Occasionally, I would discover something about one of them and report it to Tom, who invariably poo-pooed the achievement. A few years ago, I told him that someone had written a poem in Poetry about Sebastian’s theory of connectomes. “How do you know that?” “I was reading Poetry.” “Why were you
doing that?” he asked. “I like poetry; so I occasionally read it.” “That’s a very odd thing.” Somehow the fact that a poet had written a poem, published in Poetry, the foremost poetry journal, about a scientific theory, created by his son, did not impress Tom.

The breadth of Tom’s knowledge is difficult for me to describe accurately because I don’t know enough to do it. And he has an outstanding debt to me. We were talking about Chinese philosophy three or four years ago, and he said that he had the correct understanding of the notoriously enigmatic opening lines of the Daodejing: “A Way that can be followed is not a constant way. A name that can be named is not a constant name.” He said that he would explain it to me some day. I anxiously await it.

Tom would sometimes make unsolicited pronouncements. About six months ago, he walked into my office and said, “You wasted the first ten years of your career. That philosophy of language stuff. No good. You should have started with Hobbes. You should have studied Hobbes from the beginning.” I briefly explained why I thought he was wrong. Perhaps something of what I said motivated him to soften his original comments. He told me another colleague has wasted his entire career specializing in X. I had wasted only a decade.

Occasionally Tom would come to me for information about various things. I don’t remember what the topic was, but after talking to him for a while, I said, “Look, I have all of this written down in notes that I give to my students in Philosophy 305 [Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion].” A week later, he came to me excitedly and said, “This is the best thing you have ever written!” Hmmm. Notes for first and second year undergraduates, material I never intended to publish (and haven’t). Was Tom complimenting or insulting me?

Tom can be exasperating. About four months ago, I met him on the stairwell between the third and fourth floors. We stopped to chat. I may have asked him to give me a draft of what he was working on. He said, “You’ve never read any of my books.” I said, “I’ve read at least five of your books.” “No, you have never read any of my books.” I was irritated and walked to the fourth floor without a word. I pass over the fact that he thanks me for my help in Cultural Thematics, Intuition and Construction, Semiotics and Thematics, and Structuralism & Hermeneutics. That’s four. I also read The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl. I also pass over the fact that I read parts of some of his other books.

For the last ten years or so, Tom has sent an email to his colleagues suggesting that they write a letter of recommendation on behalf of one or another staff member for an annual staff prize. He recognizes the great contribution of our staff and does something specific to support them. At least three of them have won; the latest is Michelle Botello, last week.

These anecdotes can’t capture his wit, his laugh, his learning, his insight. He has been one of my closest friends in the department for more than forty years.

Al Martinich
April 27, 2015
To be honest, my first impression of Dr. Seung was one of fear. I signed up for his Plato seminar my first semester at the University of Texas and could immediately tell I was in for a rough ride. We dug deep into Plato’s metaphysics and slogged our way through his most difficult dialogues. Dr. Seung, furthermore, had no patience for easy standard interpretations of Plato’s dialogues and challenged us to take seriously alternate approaches, including his own. I had trouble keeping up. In most of my graduate seminars, I was supremely confident I understood the material and at times eagerly tried to show off my supposed brilliance, as graduate students are wont to do. In Dr. Seung’s class, I knew my place—it was to be a student, period. My visits to office hours were equally intimidating. Dr. Seung’s office is wall to wall books, all of which obviously had been read numerous times. The bindings were all cracked in several places; as with his students, Dr. Seung puts his books through their paces. I also noticed he would purchase several copies of the same book and would discard one edition when it became too beat up and went to work on another. As can be well-imagined, I chose my questions and my comments carefully. Thankfully, I managed to get through the class and indeed was grateful for how hard I was pushed. I learned much about Plato and for the first time understood what it took to do original research—not merely publishable research. Still, I went back to my home in the Government department and had little contact with him. I figured I had probably seen the last of Dr. Seung.

When it came time to write my dissertation, however, I could not find an advisor who was in the slightest bit receptive to my ideas. At that time, I had realized perhaps I had learned Dr. Seung’s lessons too well. I came to eschew standard interpretations and wanted to write on topics that were not all that fashionable. At the urging of my good friend, David Williams, I visited Dr. Seung to discuss my ideas for a dissertation. As I started laying out a plan for a thesis, I saw him approvingly nodding his head. When I finished, he said the most extraordinary thing to me: “You are going to scare people. You are writing on something no one else is even considering. And, that is a good thing. If you want to do someone else’s work, you might as well work in a bank and get paid for it.” All of a sudden, I was the one inspiring fear! Over the next few years, he guided me along in my dissertation. He helped me find my voice and formulate my question, but he also made sure not to write the dissertation for me. He would prompt me to develop ideas without trying to insert his answers to my questions. Of course, he was critical and never stopped pushing me. I continued to be intimidated by his outsized intellect and remarkable ability to get straight to the heart of an issue. As with his Plato seminar, however, I was supremely grateful to develop as a scholar. Fear can be a useful emotion, and Dr. Seung was a master at directing it for positive purposes.
Dr. Seung, of course, was more than just intimidating. He also has an inviting personality and, let’s say, a unique sense of humor. He inspires fear and awe in his students, but is quite good at making them laugh. As any former student can tell you, when he senses he has the better of an argument, he will smile and excitedly, almost playfully, exclaim, “I’m telling you!!!!!!!” Although it is never fun to lose an argument, it is impossible not to laugh at such moments—it as almost if he mocks the competitive nature of philosophical discussion with his false bravado. As he reminded me many times, the point of philosophical exchanges is to learn and we are better off learning something than being right. And, when those moments come, I suppose, there is no reason we cannot laugh at the same time.

Michael Locke McLendon
California State University, Los Angeles
To: Thomas K. Seung

From: Alex Mourelatos

On the Occasion of Thomas’ Retirement from UT Austin and in Anticipation of Kwi’s and His Move to Princeton

May 8, 2015

My Very Dear Friend and Colleague Thomas,

That I shall miss you enormously I think you know and you understand. With the exception of your years at Fordham and the occasions of concurrent appointments elsewhere—either yours or mine—we have been together for an amazing sixty years! So, as you leave Austin, I would like you to take with you two documents, which you find attached to this letter.

The first you may have retained from the celebration of your seventieth birthday; but then again you are a firm believer in avoiding clutter; so I cannot complain if you have discarded it. On this year’s other milestone event, however, I would like to make sure you have it, so you may be reminded of what I said fifteen years ago.

The other document you have not seen, as it was addressed to a third party “in confidence” thirty years ago. Well, even in archives there is waiving of confidentiality after so long a stretch of time. Here I want to add that all the praise in that recommendation letter applies to you thirty times over today. Yes, Yes, I know, recommendation letters are often suspected of hyperbole or of clever ambiguity. But there was no reason for either trope in your case. And as I read and re-read my letter, I am utterly confident that I spoke the truth and that I meant every single word in it.

What is implicit in these earlier statements ought to be said more plainly here. It is magically wonderful talking philosophy with you. Our approaches and our methods are so greatly different, and yet the conversation flows. And all that frequent (perhaps I should say “incessant”) interrogating you do of me about the meanings of Ancient Greek terms has had the effect of deepening my understanding of Ancient Greek semantics in ways and to an extent that go beyond what I have learned from reading Greek texts and technical sources in classical philology, or from relying on my Modern Greek intuitions.

Neither of these earlier tributes has provided the occasion for speaking about Kwi. For I shall also very much miss her. The occasions when she and I enjoyed
playing music together were few but precious. And I am forever grateful to her for the help she gave me in selecting a grand piano for my living room. The process stretched not over days but over weeks. Whether in telephone discussion, in personal consultation, or in joint visits to showrooms, Kwi was generous with her time, sage and skillful in her evaluations, and brilliant in her ultimate selection of the Yamaha grand that enriches my home and my life to this day. Every time that piano is played, either in accompanying an ensemble or by itself, I also hear in my mind Kwi’s beautiful playing of it and of our mutual (hers and mine) delight as she bestowed upon the instrument her approval.

The two of you have also been prized and comforting counselors at the difficult time of my divorce. And I am proud now to confess that Kwi has sometimes solicited my advice about coping with your (i.e., of you, Thomas) sometimes cantankerous ways.

Olive and I will be looking for opportunities to visit with you in Princeton. And when that bleak season of cold, rain, snow, mud, and skeletal trees comes to the north, remember that Newark and Philadelphia are not far from Princeton. Kwi and you can hop on the plane to sunny, green, and florid Austin and you can stay in our guest room for a respite.

Love,

Alex
Toasting Thomas Kaehao Seung In Celebration of His 70th Birthday
by Alex Mourelatos

I am under stern warning, from both Sebastian and from our birthday colleague himself, not to exceed the limit of 5 minutes. So, as you can see, I have decided to distribute half of my speech as a hand-out. No, actually, neither of the hand-out sheets contains my own words. On the first one, there are two excerpts from a valedictory essay Tom wrote on the fourth year after his coming to the U.S.; they show how brilliantly skillful he was in using the English language even near the start of his life in this country. But they also reveal a romantic side of his which probably no one in the present company—with the exception of Kwi—has had the good fortune to appreciate. The second hand-out is a text that deserves to be better known among Tom's friends. It is the salutation, on the occasion, in 1988, of his being awarded the Wilbur Cross Medal, the highest award by the Yale Graduate School Alumni Association.

It is my privilege and my joy to have known Tom longer than anyone here, longer than even Kwi has known him. He and I met—almost exactly to the date—forty five years ago, in late September or early October of 1955. Amazingly, he was already quite famous then—as you can verify by glancing at his Yearbook biography.

The earliest and most insistent admonition I received in my first week as a Freshman at Yale was: "Oh, you must meet Tom Swing." So said Miss Norton, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions. So urged Mr. Ellsworth, Director of Yale's Foreign Student Office (No, we were not "international students" back then). At the convocation for Freshmen, Dean Harold B. Whiteman, Jr., had barely finished the ceremonial hand-shake with me when he issued this opinion: "There's a brilliant foreign student we admitted last year, Tom Swing. The guy is a genius. You'll want to meet him."

Meeting the genius—that was easier said than done. Back then Yale Freshmen were physically segregated in the Old Campus, and they took their meals together in the Commons, an enormous central dining hall. Last year's Freshmen would now have acceded to the exalted status of Upperclassmen; and they lived in separate class-cohorts in one or another of Yale's residential colleges.

But, as luck would have it, my work-scholarship assignment was changed after the first or second week. From toiling as a dishwasher in the big Commons, I was transferred to the higher station of bus boy at Timothy Dwight College. By
the third or fourth day on duty, I had noticed this pattern. Almost at every meal, back in one of the alcoves, there would be this oriental guy, engrossed in some profound-sounding conversation, mostly with a faculty member, a Fellow of the College, sometimes with no lesser a personage than the master of the College, Thomas Bergin. The oriental guy smoked a curved pipe, and he would often inhale and puff as he paused between profundities. Needless to say, he soon became quite unpopular with all the bus boys in the dining hall. Long after we had cleared and washed all other tables, after we had swept nearly all of the floor, tidied up all the chairs, there was still that one occupied alcove in the back—its ashtrays, dessert dishes, coffee cups, unwashed table, and unswept area delaying our release from duty.

At one point I heard the stern Miss O'Brien, the College dietitian and our supervisor, grumble when she noticed the delay in closing the dining hall: "Oh, that Tom Swing again." It was from Miss O'Brien's gruff voice I learned that the guy who was holding us up was none other than the Deans' genius, the upperclassman I was supposed to meet and emulate.

It still took me a few days to muster the gumption to introduce myself to the famous upperclassman. I explained that Yale's higher authorities had instructed me to seek him out. Diverting his gaze from the Olympian heights of the upper curve of his pipe, he looked at this bus boy Freshman with an expression of perplexity and bemusement. Still, he was nice enough to let me eavesdrop on his conversations, whenever I worked on nearby tables. Well, it didn't take too many weeks of bussing tables for me to decide I had to change majors. Philosophy was Swing's major, and the stuff he was talking about in that alcove seemed irresistibly interesting. Fortunately, the Deans who held up Swing as my mentor and model saw no difficulty in allowing me to combine my pre-med status with a philosophy major.

In later months and years I sought Tom's advice about all sorts of topics—from which courses to take, or what sense to make, say, of Benedetto Croce or St. Thomas Aquinas, to whether or not to accept a tap from one of Yale's secret societies. You see, from faculty stars to college sport jocks, from the riches of the Sterling Library to the folkways and mores of extracurricular activity and social life—Swing knew everyone and everything of Yale—which, as I know realize, was the beginning of his life project of learning everything about everything.

When he told me he was going to Law School, I thought long and hard about giving up plans for medicine and following him in law. I even took the first step by rooming with three of his Law School class-mates. But within less than a
year, he tells me that he's disillusioned with Law School and is returning to philosophy. Well, Organic Chemistry had been giving me a lot of trouble. So, Tom's rebound was just the extra push I needed to decide to abandon medicine and to join him in pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy.

But it was high time I should declare my independence from my Korean mentor. I knew that his interests were in large-scale themes of intellectual history, in Dante and the medieval world-view, in the Faustian ethos, in F. S. C. Northrop's work on the meeting of East and West. So, I resolved that my own studies would be different. I worked on Wittgenstein, but also on Kant, and even on a musty early 19th-century treatise in Faktur font, *Die neue oder anthropologische Kritik der Vernunft*, written by an obscure Neo-Kantian whom probably none of you have ever heard of. I even started a dissertation on the "Logic of Transcendental Arguments" — but I got nowhere with it. Not long after this debacle, Swing had already finished a dissertation on Kant, and had gone on to produce a book (and not even his first one) on *Kant's Transcendental Logic*.

My next career strategy was to become a specialist in ancient Greek philosophy. I figured, since Tom did not know Greek, I'd be safe to create for myself a niche in that specialty. Well, you all know what happened. It was Tom who wrote that fine book on Plato, not I.

"Il resto no l'dico; gia ognuno lo sa." You all know the rest of the story. So, let me not transgress further on the assigned limits. It is with enormous pleasure, pride, and with no small measure of awe and humility, that I now invite you to join me in raising our glasses in this first toast to our dear colleague, Thomas Kaehao Seung. We salute this omni-philosophical spirit, this panto-gnosist and panto-logist, this truly Renaissance man among us, this ever-inquiring mind who has himself learned, and then has taught others, to transcend and bridge differences — to cherish and to exploit the intellectual riches of West and of East, of analytic philosophy and of its Continental rivals, of history and of logic, of metaphysics and of ethics, of the ancients and of the moderns. And I personally and lovingly salute my mentor, my wise counselor on matters both of the intellect and of the heart, my fellow foreign student, fellow-convert to America, and fellow Yalie, my friend — Tom.
November 27, 1985

Professor Michael S. Roth  
Chair, Hartley Burr Alexander  
Search Committee  
Scripps College  
Claremont, CA 91711

Dear Professor Roth:

This letter is in support of the candidacy of Thomas Kaehao Seung, for the Hartley Burr Alexander professorship.

I cannot offer you an assessment of scholarly specifics of Seung’s book on Kant, or of his recent books on hermeneutics and the philosophy of culture. I am an expert in none of these fields. But having known Seung nearly thirty years, I can confidently give you an opinion on his general philosophical ability, his qualities as an intellectual and as a person, his effectiveness as a teacher, as well as comments on the unfolding direction of his academic career.

Seung is an intellectual dynamo. His mind is not just quick; it shows extraordinary resourcefulness, stamina, and vigor. His philosophical imagination is explosive. Seung constantly drives himself to the discipline of major projects—not articles or monographs, but books and book sequences—projects that entail elaborate and detailed evidential controls. He subjects himself to these controls—texts, historical data, logical structure—with the discipline and dedication of an athlete training for the Olympics. Voracious as a reader, he will pursue a line of investigation wherever it may lead—even if the end result call for the undoing or redoing of sizable parts of a project.

I have never known anyone who works as hard as Seung does. Nor have known anyone who is so sincerely, and self-effacingly devoted to his intellectual pursuits. He lives every day of his life with the intensity of a twenty-five-year-old who’s on the home stretch of completing a Ph.D. dissertation.

He and I were classmates in Yale College, and again classmates in the Yale Graduate School, fellow instructors at Yale, and since 1968, fellow department members at UT-Austin. I do not know exactly what his standing was in the 1,000-strong class of 1958 at Yale, but I am sure he was #1, or #2, or #3. At any rate, the rest of us viewed him as the most powerful intellect in our class.
The Yale philosophy department of the 1960’s was—as it has also been at other times—ideologically split. Students found themselves caught in the cross-fire between “analysts” and “speculative metaphysicians” in the faculty. Most of us ended up taking sides. Not Seung. He could profit from, and philosophically hold his own with, both Paul Weiss and Wilfred Sellars, both John Smith and Alan Anderson. Years and decades later—I’m speaking of today’s scene—it became common for philosophers to point to the deeper affinities between, say, Russell and Husserl, or between the later Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Long before the publication of Rorty’s *Mirror* or Cavell’s *Claim to Reason*, Seung had cut through to deeper issues that transcend the familiar dichotomies. In the early 1960s, he was expounding all this to his instructors and to his fellow students at Yale.

The theme of transcending differences runs through the whole of Seung’s scholarly career. In his 1958 Scholar-of-the-House thesis in Yale College (which became the 1962 book on Dante) he bridged philosophy and literature; and he did this again in his two books on hermeneutics. Throughout his work he bridges and synthesizes not just the dichotomy of “analytical” and “speculative (or “continental”), but, more broadly, philosophy and history, philosophy and anthropology.

The roots of this pattern is, no doubt, in his remarkable personal transcendence of the East/West distinction. Approaching Western culture from the outside, he is now steeped in the West’s humanist tradition—knows the ideas, the movements, and the texts better than many a European or American humanist. He has spoken to me of his hopes to complete the cycle someday by developing a theory of the differences between Eastern and Western modes of thought. There simply cannot be many individuals in the history of the world who combine the analytical-conceptual acuity, the vision, and the historical and literary learning such a project would require. I believe Seung does have these assets and gifts, and this likely capstone to his already impressive career should win him international acclaim.

Seung is superbly effective as a teacher. I base this judgment both on my attendance at some of his seminars that interested me and on the official record of the student evaluations. He has the manner of an athletic coach. In the classroom, he works on motivation, sets high standards, gives “pep talks,” demands performance, scolds, sometimes patronizes and even derides the inattentive or ill-prepared student. Yet the students worship him.

In the crucial questions of “comparison with other instructors” and
“comparison with other courses,” the compilations of our University’s Measurement and Evaluation Center place Seung generally in the 80th or 90th percentile—as high as the 98th percentile. Amazingly, some of his highest scores in these questions are in classes in which the students’ responses place Seung as low as the 6th percentile in “sensitivity to feelings of students.” The written comments dispel the paradox. The same student who finds Seung occasionally “insulting” in his handling of members of the class describes him as an “incredibly brilliant man whose energy stings your mind into thought.” Then this same student expands with a page and a half of adulatory comments. Both sorts of comments occur through the whole record: “impatient with students,” “intimidating,” even “terroristic,” but also, and preponderate by far, strongly appreciative comments, of which I give a sample here:

- “inimitable teaching style”
- “incredible ability to explain the most difficult material”
- “cares very deeply about his students and he shows it by making them bring out the best effort they can”
- “wonderful orator”
- “instructor was fantastic”
- “The greatest quality you possess is your ability to show your students your LOVE FOR WHAT YOU DO. You have me on the edge of my seat, excited about what’s next”
- “the rarest combination of classroom teaching ability and scholarship that I have ever encountered”

If your university should succeed in luring Seung away from Texas, it will have scored a major recruiting coup. Naturally, my affection for Seung makes me want to defer to his judgment as to where he may be best situated so that he may realize his full potential. But my admiration of him and my strong sense of his value as a member of our department will drive me to emphasize to him the advantages of his staying in Texas.

Sincerely yours,

Alexander P. D. Mourelatos
I first met Dr. Seung in a graduate class I was taking in Game Theory. The class was in kind of an odd room. We were in a semi-circle in student desks facing a portable blackboard. The desks were haphazardly arranged in roughly three rows. Dr. Seung and I occupied the back row. I didn’t know who he was. Of course, it turned out that he was just “sitting in.” Like most graduate classes, it met once per week. This class was in late afternoon. Dr. Seng attended a number of sessions. What was intriguing was the fact he asked questions, lots of them. However, he only directed a few at the professor teaching the class. Most of them he directed to me. In retrospect, he was probably avoiding monopolizing the class time, especially by another professor who was just auditing. I will admit, that at first I found the questions distracting and somewhat annoying. That may have been mainly due to the fact that I didn’t know the answers. But I quickly realized they were good questions, resulting in many little sidebars between the two of us. I was impressed by his curiosity in a subject somewhat removed from his research. I was also impressed by his quick grasp of the subject. It made me work harder to stay up.

My next encounter came as his student in a class on Kant. In one of the seminar periods he directed us to write a couple of paragraphs on Plato. It was turned in the following week. The next week he brought the papers back to class and gently threw them down in the middle of the conference table we sat around. He proceeded to tell us that our problem was, we could not write except one. He had his arm extending pointing a finger. He swung around and his finger pointed to me. To this day I don’t know if he really intended to tell the class I was the only one who could write or whether he just landed on me, much the way a spinning arrow in a board game has to land somewhere. He suggested we all get a copy of A. P. Martinich’s *Philosophical Writing* and study it carefully. As a result, I am sure we all, I know I did, became better writers.

Dr. Seung later served on my dissertation committee, graciously agreeing to serve officially as a co-chair when my chair left UT Austin for another institution. He went out of his way to locate me when a publisher contacted him regarding publishing my dissertation. He could be hard, but always in the interest of making better thinkers. I am grateful for the conversations, the teachings, and the assistance. He embodies the notion of a scholar and a gentleman. It was pleasure to have been his student.

Rex C Peebles, PhD
on Professor T. K. Seung
by Nevitt Reesor
March 2015, Austin, TX

I first met Professor Seung at the University of Texas in Austin as a student in the Continental graduate seminar, which, if I understand correctly, together with the Analytic seminar was supposed to provide beginning students with the philosophical background formerly acquired by studying for comprehensive exams. I was an electrical engineer and had never studied philosophy, so I was quite anxious, and the list of philosophers on the syllabus gave me no comfort.

Prof Seung was without question the most entertaining graduate instructor, though, to paraphrase Aristotle, “entertainment” must be explained. Unlike other instructors, Prof Seung moved around the seminar room, meaning that he walked back and forth behind students seated to his left at the oval table. He would occasionally bend down to shout a question into some student’s ear or exclaim loudly into another’s. Most exciting for those of us on the other side of the room, he would not infrequently slap a student hard across the back or a shoulder for no apparent reason. Since this habit kept him reliably on the left side of the room, I habitually say on the right. Those on the left, however, seemed to enjoy the weekly assaults and never made efforts to move from their customary positions. Perhaps this left-side tendency could have been a predictor for certain kinds of academic writing, though I never did the necessary research.

Though the material was terribly dense and difficult, Prof Seung insisted that once one actually understood the arguments they would seem obvious. This claim initially struck me as absurd, but over the course of the semester it proved generally true. I still take this as a hopeful principle when studying new material that seems impenetrable.

That seminar was so engaging that it solidified my philosophical interest in Continental philosophy from that point on. Prof Seung was exploring Nietzsche at the time and nurtured my own fascination with him. I eventually wrote a dissertation under Prof Seung’s direction, exploring Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

My experiences with Prof Seung in the Continental seminar encouraged me to work with him in other ways. He agreed to let me serve as his teaching assistant in Problems of Knowledge and Evaluation, a two-semester introduction to philosophy reserved for Plan II honors students. Prof Seung was one of only three professors in the UT Philosophy Department for whom I served as a TA,
who made any effort to help me perform this job well, and he was by far the most active, available, and helpful. He taught me how to grade essay exams. He taught me how to deal with difficult students. We met frequently to talk about my small-group discussions. He actually wanted to know whether students understood his lectures so that he could address their questions. This, again, was unusual in my experience as a TA at UT.

Prof Seung used full primary texts in his Plan II class, which I very much appreciated, having studied at St. John’s College, which takes the Great Books as its curriculum. Several years later I was offered the opportunity to teach introduction to philosophy as an Assistant Instructor at UT. I adapted Prof Seung’s syllabus, changing primarily the type of written assignments. When I worked for several years as an adjunct at Southwestern College in Georgetown, TX, I used the same syllabus. I now teach at Texas State University in San Marcos, TX, and I use the same texts: Plato’s Republic, Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy, Hume’s Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Kant’s Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, and Mill’s Utilitarianism. Initially I used these texts for the simple reason that, after Prof Seung’s class, I knew them fairly well. But the more I’ve taught them, the more I’ve come to appreciate their foundational character and how many essential philosophical ideas and themes appear in this short list of books. I am grateful not only for Prof Seung’s gift of these texts but also for the implicit lesson they represent in how to choose texts for any class. Finally, teaching these texts almost every year has deepened my own understanding of fundamental philosophical ideas in ways I would never have guessed such a few books could do.

I don’t remember how or when I asked Prof Seung to direct my dissertation on Nietzsche. Some of my classmates were surprised, given that Prof Seung was not among the several UT Philosophy faculty known for Nietzsche scholarship. What I and others did not realize at the time was that he had for some time been actively researching Nietzsche in preparation for a book-length study.

My own preference for Prof Seung was based on several factors. By this time I had developed an immunity to his various eccentricities, such as shouting at students, striking students, occasionally insulting students, and telling odd jokes. I also had developed an appreciation for the breadth of his philosophical, literary, and historical knowledge and his ability to integrate these into a more comprehensive totality than is typical among philosophers. Furthermore, he read texts critically and as far as possible without prejudice, which is more unusual than one would like to think.
This last characteristic, when translated into the process of directing a
dissertation, proved to be perhaps the most important from my perspective. It
seems quite common for faculty implicitly or explicitly to expect students
working under their tutelage to follow the lines of interpretation laid out by the
directing faculty. My general sense of Nietzsche was not entirely consistent with
the interpretation of the UT Philosophy faculty known Nietzsche scholarship.
This was clearly a potential problem. Thus, rather than making a more obvious
choice, I asked Prof Seung to direct my dissertation, hoping his open-ended
critical approach to texts would allow me to go wherever I believed Nietzsche’s
texts wanted to take me. My faith was not in vain. Prof Seung, of course,
challenged me frequently and vigorously, but if I could mount sufficient textual,
analytic, and historical evidence, he always supported my interpretation.

The writing process was long and grueling, but Prof Seung stuck with me,
reading draft after draft, making corrections, suggesting changes of direction,
engaging me in critical discussions, and so on. I took very long to write the
dissertation, but he never abandoned me. As the date for my defense drew near
I was quite anxious. I took some comfort in the fact that one of his Plan II
undergraduates had discovered he served as an intelligence officer during the
Korean war, apparently as an interrogator. (When the student announced this
discovery one day in class before Prof Seung entered the room, numerous
students made comments of the sort, “Wow, that makes so much sense!”) He
was the guy one wanted on his side rather than against him. During my defense
a couple of committee members seemed particularly hostile to my dissertation. I
did not know exactly how hostile, though as I stood outside the door awaiting
their judgment, I heard what sounded to me like a great deal of shouting.
Eventually Prof Seung opened the door, held out his hand to shake mine, and
said, “Congratulations, Dr. Reesor!” Apparently the former Korean officer had
won the day.

I owe much to Prof Seung, as I hope this brief remembrance makes clear. He
supported my work as scholar, as an instructor, and as a man. We had many
conversations on many topics, and I will forever be thankful for what I learned
through those years. I wish for him the best possible life and a joyous
retirement. God knows he deserves it.
Mein Doktorvater: T. K. Seung

David Lay Williams
Associate Professor
DePaul University

It was 7:00 on a typically steamy Austin summer morning when I was awakened by the ringing of my phone. I groggily reached for the phone and barely mustered a “Hello?” On the other end was my very alert dissertation supervisor – T. K. Seung. “David,” he demanded, “what are you doing right now?” “It’s 7:00 in the morning, Professor Seung. I’m barely awake.” “Good,” he replied, “then do you have a car?” “Yes,” I managed to answer. “Then come over to my house and wear your work clothes.” I dragged myself out of bed, found some ratty clothes, and headed up to the northwest corner of Austin, wondering what was in store for me.

When I arrived at Professor Seung’s house, he was waiting for me in the driveway. With a pickaxe. I don’t think I was fully out of the car when he began telling me of his plans for the day. He was working in his garden, but had encountered some significant obstacles: rocks. Big rocks – many of them. They would have to be dug up, busted into pieces, or removed in some other fashion. And it was now my job for the day. I don’t know if I counted precisely how many rocks we removed from his yard that day, but it was a considerable number. While I worked with the pickaxe, Professor Seung would alternately provide guidance on how to wield an axe correctly and how to read texts with an eye to what he called “cultural thematics.” I can’t promise that I learned either lesson very well that morning, but the more I reflected on this strange day, the more I realized it came to symbolize much of what I adore about Professor Seung. Specifically, it was a lesson in the importance of three matters: 1) determination, 2) exertion, and 3) pedagogy as horticulture.

Seung’s ambitious gardening project was, of course, borne of utter determination. The Texas land is famously difficult to tame. The early European settlers had initially been fooled by the rich topsoil that promised great fertility and bountiful crops. They discovered shortly thereafter, however, that such ambitions were foiled by the thinness of that topsoil. Down just a few inches were rocks everywhere. And no sustainable crops of great substance can grow from that. This is why the settlers quickly redirected their ambitions from agriculture to cattle. Cows could sustainably consume the grass growing on that
thin topsoil. But very little else could take root in it. Seung did not view things the same way. Like the Faustian Individual he describes in his *Cultural Thematics* and *Nietzsche’s Epic of the Soul*, Seung chose instead to exercise his radically autonomous will over the land, bending it to his own ambitions – albeit (partly) by recruiting graduate students for the purpose.

This determination was merely one manifestation of a temperament that has long informed Seung’s scholarship. He has never backed off of a challenge. One career strategy of professional scholars, for example, is to focus on relatively obscure figures – quickly making a name for themselves as the expert in a field where no one else can challenge their authority. This has never been Seung’s approach. Each figure to whom he has dedicated significant portions of his scholarly career has been canonical: Dante, Kant, Rawls, Plato, Nietzsche, Goethe. And anytime anyone enters the scholarly landscape of the accompanying canon-oriented secondary literature, one encounters minefield after minefield, with obstacles lurking around every corner – much like the rocks in Seung’s garden. But he has always welcomed – indeed relished – these challenges. For his purposes, there is little point in embarking on a new project without an establishment to challenge, threaten, and upend. And he simply won’t stop until he has completely mastered the field and demolished those obstacles, remaking the objects of his scholarship in the only ways that ultimately make sense to him. That’s determination.

The second lesson drawn from my gardening expedition with Seung was the importance of exertion. Anyone who knows him knows that he has always maintained remarkable fitness. I don’t know whether this was first acquired from his days in the ROK, or elsewhere. But enduring fitness of that kind, of course, only results from great exertion. As Jim Fishkin testifies, as an illustration of this point, 110-degree temperatures could never deter Seung from his regular tennis matches. Nor could the young graduate and undergraduate students, who challenged him to racquetball matches at Gregory Gym. His fitness has been borne of tremendous exertion. And as any physiologist can confirm, fitness is built through the tearing and rebuilding of muscles. This tearing and rebuilding process is experienced as soreness – a necessary, if occasionally painful, price to pay for greater fitness.

---

1 While on this theme of cows and grass, I cannot resist mentioning that Seung thoroughly enjoyed teaching Nietzsche’s metaphor of “chewing the cud” from the preface to the *Genealogy of Morals*. But perhaps I will save this lesson for another occasion.

2 Where they would inevitably lose – even when Seung took pity on them, playing left-handed as a volunteered handicap.
But there is another kind of exertion that Seung excelled at developing in others – mental exertion. Just as an effective fitness trainer pushes out-of-shape gym members to lift their barbells an additional five times beyond their comfort level, Seung pushed his students to stretch their minds in seminar and office visits. Perhaps the most valuable pedagogical lesson I have ever learned came early under his supervision in his office. I had asked him an interpretive question about Plato, knowing full well that he could feed me a beautifully satisfying answer, as if I were watching Socrates on the stump. But truer to the real Socrates, he refused to answer. He chided me, “*Come on, David,* there is little point in my answering this question for you. You have to work to find the answer yourself. You will never become a great scholar until you work your own way through your questions.” He was entirely right, I quickly realized. And once I accepted that I would have to think my own way through my questions, I finally felt I was capable of becoming a scholar.

I must emphasize this was hard work. It wasn’t easy – like wielding that pickaxe! I struggled and stumbled. I pursued many blind alleys. These struggles were particularly acute in seminar when he would inevitably put each of his students on the spot with difficult interpretive questions – such as, drawing here from his Plato seminar, “*Why are Plato’s characters walking in the* Laws?” “Why is Socrates absent from the dialogue?” And “Why does Plato even bother with a second long dialogue on a subject he already thoroughly addressed in the Republic?” These interrogations made us uncomfortable. They made our heads hurt. But there was a stunning benefit in his method. I swear that I became smarter. Not in the metaphorical sense that I figured out some specifically interesting matters related to my research. Rather, I mean this literally – I would swear that my IQ (perhaps not so formidable upon entering graduate school) rose at least one standard deviation under Seung’s relentless pushing and my resulting exertions. My enduring memory of these sessions is the sensation I had departing Waggener Hall for my one-mile walk home under the hot Texas sun. Throughout each walk – without exception – I felt my mind buzzing with ideas. Again, I do not mean this metaphorically – but rather emphatically literally. I wasn’t quite dizzy, though it resembled that sensation. My brain was continuing to work in search of the connections between the various threads of our conversations. I would swear that my brain tissues had been torn in seminar and in office visits, only slowly to reconnect with greater mass and vigor once I had recovered my bearings. It was a sensation I have felt no other time in my life. And although I have acquired priceless wisdom from others, no one else has ever made me smarter.
Finally, returning to the garden once more, the very fact of Seung’s interest in gardening offers valuable lessons. While it is easy to buy flowers or fruits at the florist or grocery store, there is something deeply more satisfying in cultivating these things oneself with one’s own hands (or sometimes an extra set of graduate student hands!). Anyone can purchase flowers or food without a thought as to the necessary labors to bring these beautiful objects about. But working with one’s own hands transforms the meaning of those objects – and makes them more beautiful in the process.

Gardening is a fertile metaphor for what I most adore about Professor Seung. Both scholarship and teaching require the same attributes that one acquires in gardening. Just as a gardener must be self-reliant, so too must be a scholar. Seung always reminded his students, “I’m telling you! – don’t read the editor’s introduction! This is not the way to learn a text. You have to do the hard work of interpreting the texts yourselves. Otherwise, you will never learn.” Reading the secondary literature would be like buying the fruit at the grocery store. Yes, it is easy and convenient – but true knowledge or appreciation of the fruit will remain obscured. Real appreciation of a fruit can only come from cultivating it oneself. And furthermore, purchased fruit can in some instances be simply bad. It could have been picked too soon; it could have been grown in the wrong soil; it could have been kept at improper temperatures. Likewise, reading the secondary literature before coming to one’s own terms with a text can forever pervert and mislead the reader. Just as there are bad apples, so too there is bad scholarship. But one can only assess and evaluate that scholarship on confident footing with the benefit of a prior direct engagement with the text itself.

I eventually came to realize that Seung treated each of his students as a kind of horticultural project. Many of us came to him as very weak saplings. But if he saw the slightest promise, he would variously push us, make us uncomfortable, encourage us, tend to our idiosyncratic needs, and generously offer us all the time it took for us to realize our potential. I want to emphasize that he always had time for his students. He knew that mentoring students required much

---

3 Emphasis in the original! This is undoubtedly a phrase that rings in the ears of all Seung’s students for the remainder of their lives.

4 My favorite memory of Seung’s own engagement with secondary literature was from his Nietzsche period. Without naming the author, Seung’s assessment of one Zarathustra commentator was, “I feel like I am observing a cockroach attempting to tame a cat. He is totally overmatched by Nietzsche.” I think Nietzsche’s great appeal to Seung was the sense that he was engaging a formidable and worthy peer. In the end, I think this was the reason he chose to study the philosophers and poets he did. Dante, Kant, Plato, Nietzsche, Goethe – these have been Seung’s peers.

5 Noting, of course, that his students quickly learned never to knock on his door during the nap hour of 1:00-2:00pm.
exertion on his own part—both in the short bursts of intellectual engagement in his office and in the years-long project of shaping us into thoughtful scholars. He once shared a secret with me about teaching and parenting: “David, I treat my children like my students and my students like my children.” I can only wonder what it might have been like to be one of the Seung children, treated as his pupils. But I do know what it was like to be a Seung student, treated as one of his children. I genuinely feel like I have a father in him. For this reason, I always hesitate to use the English term, “dissertation supervisor,” when describing him to others. I much prefer the German word, “Doktorvater” — a dissertation father. This much more accurately represents my debts to Seung. Everything I most value about my professional and intellectual life simply would not exist without Seung. In the end, virtually anything I do right as a scholar and a teacher was born in his lessons.
Professor T.K. Seung has been a valuable presence in my life ever since I came to Texas in 1973. He was the ideal colleague for a young philosopher. He read my work, noticed what was unusual about it, and helped me stand up to the criticism of those who expected more conventional writing. Even now, after so many years, I seek his advice on Plato, on Kant, and on many other topics. He discovered my interest in classical Chinese poetry and philosophy and gave me wonderful advice on how to learn more. He encouraged me to take on administrative duties early, asking me to volunteer to be department chair. That led to other duties, and then, many years later, he urged me to return to full time academic life. I have always felt that he took the time and trouble to appreciate my eccentricities. Words cannot express the full measure of my gratitude to him.

Paul Woodruff