

Among the Young Aesthetes

by Con Chapman

We sit at rectangular tables, formed into a square.
The others, more women than men,
have woolen coats, frizzy hair,
spiral notebooks, felt-tipped pens.
We wait for the professor of aesthetics
to tell us how to spot the beautiful when we see it.

He hurries in, kept late by a student entranced
by his talk or starved for attention.
Breathless, he begins: The first art was dance
according to Collingwood. He mentions
movement and gesture--a woman squirms;
I hope to know her by the end of the term.



I think of Plato's cave, and how the light
from outside cast shadows against the wall.
It is January, and what sun we get is bright
but we are shades who walk the halls.
He is homely, dark and short;
like Socrates, a questioning sort.



To Croce, he says, art is the expression of emotion.
This does not come as a revelation
To the woman beside me who looks on with devotion
That borders on veneration.
He distinguishes sentiment from sentimentality,
She scribbles on, tracing a shadow for reality.



The progress out of the cave is tedious and slow.
By hour's end the yearning for beauty is dispelled.
And in its place distinctions invidious are all we know
Among mind and soul, and the body where they're held.
She stops to chat him up afterwards,
earnest furrows across her forehead.

I found him on the internet the other day,
His air laconic, the beard now ashen grey.
Three decades hadn't doused the fire, only banked the coals,
His look facetious under heavy-lidded folds.
I saw within the dark of his eyes' squint--
Dry tinder that needed only a flint.

