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Mirror, Mirror: *Outliers'* Mass Appeal

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Since the publication of Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers: The Story of Success* in 2008, the book has been subject to numerous, almost endless, reviews: here is yet another. Inasmuch as *Outliers* has proven its mass appeal through its presence on the *New York Times* bestseller list (for 68 weeks as of the writing of this review[1]), his popular analysis of the criteria for success, which claims to debunk older ideas of talent or genius and instead show that "the values of the world we inhabit and the people we surround ourselves with have a profound effect on who we are" has also proven wildly popular among a mass of reviewers as well.[2] Indeed, the sheer, unending quantity of these reviews from publications as diverse as the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Physics Teacher* should in itself indicate that there is some niggling suspicion or discomfort about Gladwell's argument that the public, both general and specialized, cannot let alone. The lack of variety among reviewers' concerns is likewise telling; from stylistic analysis to statistical critiques, most reviews obsess over the degree to which Mr. Gladwell's definition of "outlier" remains inconsistent, his sample population insufficient,[3] or his dearth of counterargument irresponsible.[4] But underneath these particular, overt sticking points regarding form and method lies another, more insidious issue that informs the book's fixation for readers and reviewers alike: its classic, cathartic appeal to vanity. Even as Gladwell argues explicitly for the primacy of opportunity over talent, the notion of work he uses to frame the book spreads across the surface of his many narrative examples, forming a mirror that flatters every reader, regardless of degree of talent or success.

Although Gladwell's explicit argument focuses upon discovering examples of that

perfect storm where opportunity meets effort, his text itself instantiates yet another argument—that when it comes to work, quantity supersedes rigor. Gladwell's explicit formulation of "work" is, like most of his book, not particularly earth-shattering or new; like most of the *Outliers*' ideas, it is not so much the concept itself as the delivery that charms and seduces. Glossing over his outliers' innate talents or levels of interest, Gladwell develops a concept of work via entertainingly dramatic stories that, regardless of subject or context, emphasize time more than effort: young Canadian hockey players born during the early part of the year get more time to play, practice, and therefore, become successful in their field; Bill Gates as an eighth grader in 1968 benefits from the utterly unique opportunity to spend extraordinary amounts of time coding and writing his own programs; as a young band, the Beatles play for eight hours a stretch—if not quite eight days a week—in Berlin, amassing 270 nights of five to eight hours of performance in just over a year and a half.[5] These and other comfortingly quantifiable examples lead to the soothing democratic idea that expertise becomes nearly inevitable after ten thousand hours of practice.[6] (Are you adding up your hours in college or graduate school? Your teaching hours? Your hours spent playing video games, grading papers, or cooking dinner for your family?) By reducing his examples' efforts to the simplistic formula of time-plus-opportunity, Gladwell's dramatic—and dramatically oversimplified—anecdotes imply that anyone can achieve the dream of extraordinary success.

While Gladwell's book does include the caveat that the ten thousand hour rule "doesn't address why some people get more out of their practice sessions than others do," it does so obliquely, preferring to allow neurologist Daniel Levitin provide the aside—and even then, the thought lies buried in the middle of a paragraph-long quotation which Gladwell never expands upon.[7] In fact, not only does Gladwell treat the topic of quality of practice superficially, but he also rejects it utterly, explicitly claiming, "the thing that distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works. That's it."[8] "Hard work," however, is not only time but, as expanded in another recent popular treatment of success by Geoff Colvin, "[it] is activity designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher's help; it can be repeated a lot; feedback on results is continuously available; it's highly demanding mentally… and it isn't much fun."[9] Colvin's clear concern for distinguishing rigor from repetition emphasizes that while quantity matters, so does critical attention to the design of that practice. Thus, in Colvin's more fleshed out version of the principle, more isn't necessarily better; it's just more, and worse, uninformed hard work can be actively damaging.[10] That idea—that quality of effort and critical intention matter as much as quantity—gets barely a nod in the first half of *Outliers*. Indeed, because Gladwell's version of work seems to rely more on happy accidents of circumstance—magical birthdates, lucky breaks, and the ever-admirable quality of sheer determination—than assiduous attention to method, manner, and improvement,

instead of disproving the fairy tale of genius, Gladwell replaces it with a fairy tale of opportunity: a pretty story, but one that is ultimately as shiny and as flat as the tale of genius.

To be fair, Gladwell does make explicit from the outset that he seeks to highlight the outliers' contexts, not their gifts. And, to his credit, even amidst litany of entertainingly accessible anecdotes about Gates, Mozart, the Beatles, and hockey players, Gladwell pauses to point out that "ten thousand hours is an enormous amount of time" and that "it's almost impossible to reach that number all by yourself," observing that poverty, among other conditions, prohibits extraordinary achievement most often for the simple reason that a young person who must devote themselves to survival, who works at a part-time job or must care for siblings, cannot find the extra six hours a day for five years required to succeed.[11] At the same time, however, Gladwell's formulation that "practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good"[12] presents an alluring representation of the work-to-opportunity ratio: it so thoroughly seduces his mass audience because it presents a magic mirror that so thoroughly validates the reader, regardless of that reader's field or degree of expertise. If you are an "outlier" of some kind yourself, you can feel validated that it is your hard work that got you there; if you are not, you can obtain some comfort, however cold, from the fact that it's not your ability or work ethic that is at issue—it's the lack of opportunity.

Just because the idea is seductive doesn't mean it's mistaken; many hardworking people lack sufficient opportunity to exploit their drive or gifts, and many successful individuals have been as hardworking as they've been lucky. But it's important to recognize that Gladwell constructs his argument on a foundation of emotion, entertainment, and a concept of "opportunity" that might as well be talent, because the opportunities he describes depend as much upon an accident of birth as talent itself; the main difference, practically speaking, is that talent doesn't provide as much dramatic narrative grist for Gladwell's mill. Compared to opportunity, talent just *is*; flat and motionless, it leaves little scope for the story or drama afforded by serendipitous parentage, background, or date of birth.

The fairy tale that at first only slowly emerges from Gladwell's adroit shift from talent to opportunity is eventually thoroughly exposed when Gladwell concludes his pleasant argument with a question—a questionable move in itself—asking, in effect, if more people could be changelings, afforded the opportunities extended to the lucky few whose stories he describes, "how many more would now live a life of fulfillment, in a beautiful house high on a hill?"[13] This rhetorical question reveals the extent of Gladwell's reluctance to confront his readers with the uncomfortable implications of his argument or to apply those implications where they belong: specifically, he neglects to draw attention to his readers' newfound awareness of their responsibility as privileged individuals who, upon understanding the magnitude of their place in the social structure, could and

should do their utmost to support those less fortunate since the system Gladwell has so dramatically portrayed will clearly not do it for them. Instead, as he closes his argument, Gladwell becomes wistful rather than critical and wishes for that impersonal system itself to somehow turn into a fairy godmother and bestow extraordinary privileges of culture, resources, and skin tone upon those without, so that they, too, can have that "beautiful house high on a hill." This happy ending soothes the soul as it gratifies one's sense of drama and democracy, and Gladwell presents it an easy, agreeable idea of opportunity for all; however, he fails to notice that there is no actual fairy godmother to provide the magical, transformative object and merely flatters the reader by inviting his audience to share in his general good will. Like *Outliers*' pretty stories of success, this conclusion fails to challenge either the audience or the system; instead, it ends the argument much as it pursued its argument: superficially, without engaging in the hard work required to take pretty ideas and put them into deliberate practice.

Notes

1 "Best Sellers: Hardcover Nonfiction." *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/21/books/best-seller/besthardnonfiction.html?ref=books [accessed March 15, 2010].

2 Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success.* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 11.

3 As one review pointed out: "you can't learn anything about populations from an n of 1. It's not a sample, it's an amusement." see Carol Travis, review of *Outliers: The Story of Success*, by Malcolm Gladwell. "Except When They Don't." *Times Literary Supplement*. March 2009: 25.

4 See especially Sue Halpern. "Making It." Review of *The Snowball: Warren Buffett and The Business of Life*, by Alice Schroeder, *Outliers:The Story of Success*, by Malcolm Gladwell, and *Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else*, by Geoff Colvin. *The New York Review* 56, no 9 (May 28, 2009): 8-10.

5 Gladwell, *Outliers*, 15-68.

6 While Gladwell popularized this idea, he did not invent it; the idea shows up as well in Colvin's *Talent is Overrated*, which was published within months of *Outliers.* Both books use strikingly similar examples of outstanding musicians, and both cite various works by K. A. Ericsson, including "The Role of Deliberate Practice in Acquisition of Expert Performance," *Psychological Review* 100, no. 3 (1993): 363-406 and "The Historical Development of Domains of Expertise: Performance Standards and Innovations in Music," in A. Steptoe, ed., *Genius and the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), respectively.

7 Gladwell, *Outliers*, 40.

8 Gladwell, *Outliers*, 39.

9 Geoff Colvin, *Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else*. (New York: Penguin, 2008), 66.

10 Colvin, *Talent*, 65-79.

11 Gladwell, *Outliers*, 42.

12 Gladwell, *Outliers*, 42.

13 Gladwell, *Outliers*, 285.