

recognized that if the proof had no errors or gaps, it could help determine the shape of the universe. "The atmosphere was tense," writes Donal O'Shea. "Everyone knew how delicate and subtle the speaker's arguments were, and how easy it was to go astray. Everyone wanted them to hold." The Stony Brook audience also included a few reporters who, unlike the mathematicians, were mainly interested in the question of the million-dollar Millennium Prize to be awarded by the Clay Mathematics Institute. What was Perelman's attitude toward the prize? Would he accept it?¹

In March 2010, some newspapers reported, under sensationalist headlines, that Perelman had turned down the million-dollar prize: "World's Cleverest Man Turns down \$1 Million Prize after Solving One of Mathematics' Greatest Puzzles"; "Strange Russian Genius Declines Million-Dollar Prize from U.S.A."; "Grigory Perelman, Reclusive Russian Math Genius, Refuses \$1 Million Prize"; and more. Readers argued about whether he was a fool or a sage. Some called him selfish (he could have accepted the money for his mother's sake, after all); others called him noble. A reader, "Ana," from El Salvador quoted from the film version of *Doctor Zhivago*: "[he was] the kind of man that the world pretends to look up to and in fact despises." Few had anything to say about Perelman's discovery. Whether they praised him for his higher values or derided him for his lack of common sense, their focus was on the prize, not what it stood for, and on his mental state, not his intellectual work.

The point is not that Perelman is just an ordinary man (he isn't) or that his decisions make complete sense to outsiders (they needn't). The point is that journalists and the public felt compelled to explain his actions. What would be wrong with simply leaving Perelman alone? Why so much chatter about his motives and mentality? What bothers people, it seems, is not Perelman, but rather his violation of the social codes of success.

Success has meant wealth, virtue, excellence, wisdom, personal contentment, or any combination of these, but its definition has flattened over

time, particularly in the past few decades. A combination of economic anxiety, aggressive advertising, ubiquitous ratings, and verbal vagueness has led to an emphasis on the external aspects of success—money, status, and appearance. Ranking is especially important. A "successful school" (in education discussion and reporting) is one that has raised test scores; a "successful teacher" or "successful reform" has done likewise. A "successful student" has earned high grades, landed a job with a high salary, or both. In research studies, newspaper articles, and general education discussions, there is far more talk of achievement than of the actual stuff that gets achieved. What strikes the listener is how blithely the term "success" is used, as though there were nothing wrong with it and nothing missing. In a *New York Times* article titled "Is Going to an Elite College Worth the Cost?" Jacques Steinberg asks, "Do their graduates make more money? Get into better professional programs? Make better connections? And are they more satisfied with their lives, or at least with their work?" He ignores the possibility that education might have benefits other than prestige, connections, earnings, or even personal satisfaction. William Deresiewicz, who sat on the Yale College admissions committee, described the recently admitted students as "great kids who had been trained to be world-class hoop jumpers."² Our society has come to worship the god of blatant accomplishments and overt results.

Or is it a god of fantasy? The philosopher Luc Ferry argues that the contemporary world "incites us to daydreams at every turn" (by "daydreams," *rêves éveillés*, Ferry means imitative fantasies). He writes, "Its impressive train of stars and spangles, its culture of servility in face of the powerful, and its immoderate love of money tend to present daydreams as a *model* for life."³ Indeed, our view of success includes an element of make-believe—the conjured notion that we can succeed *as others do* and that we deserve it. It also involves devotion to metrics: the modern "science" of measuring everything we do, in order to increase our chances and our profits. School districts measure