

Tradition and Change

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1981. The one comment on a paper I submitted on something by Wordsworth (we were all lit majors then, allowed to dabble in rhetoric and comp, but the emphasis was on the literary periods):

“Nonsense.”

That didn't raise my confidence. I could quit (and in fact I did, but only for that quarter; recovered, and then I returned) or I could speak with the professor (and in fact I did). After some chit chat about the politics of the time, he told me (1) that I have to learn to survey the forest and look for the daylight. Got it: see what's been written and find what's missing. And (2) that I must stop attempting novelty. That professor had committed—twice—what the New Criticism of the 1940s would call the “intentional fallacy”: that he knew Wordsworth's intentions in the poem and that he knew *my intentions*. Reader-response criticism wasn't yet in the discussion (Jane Tompkin's book would come out within a year or two). Had reader response been legit, my response as a reader couldn't have been nonsense. He might have disagreed, or I might not have been persuasive, but not nonsense. What's more, I had not intended to be novel in my reading of the poem. I did not even know my reading was unconventional.

Over the most recent decade or two, I have met more students like I was: of color, first generation, from poverty, new to the culture of the university, the veteran who wasn't a commissioned officer, a high-school dropout. Add to that, I have come to meet the occasional recipient of an online undergraduate degree, disallowing for the kind of learning to be had in classrooms. And the university, to some extent, has responded: students' right to their own rhetorics (to their own language has been theoretically accepted but rarely truly enacted, it seems), translanguaging, counterstory. But the traditions also remain. Some of us, however, try to look at traditions differently, and in so doing, change the traditions, perhaps.

The professor had assumed a kind of incompetence rather than difference in my writing. Unconscious of my rhetorical “difference” in those days, I hadn't prepared the reader that what I was describing were *my* views, hadn't explained how I had arrived at that reading in some general sense. I simply asserted my reading but hadn't set it up. Today, despite a rising consciousness about diversity among students and professionals, the deficit presumption far too often remains in assessing students. It's a tradition in need of change. But since the tradition remains, we can't afford to forget the forest, even when looking less for an opening but looking for a way out of the woods.

Recognizing that the master's tools can have alternative uses is important, a matter of thinking and writing in terms of the totality rather than binaries. There is a Same to the Othered that has to be recognized, less an assimilation or an accommodation—and certainly not a compliance—than a recognition, that identification begins with the commonalities no less than the differences, the overlap between identification and division that Kenneth Burke sees as place where rhetoric takes place.

And this gives rise to another concern—another memory. There was an article published in *CCC* back in 1983 by someone in the position that I'm in now: a former leader of Cs, retired, contemplating the trends back then: Robert Gorrell's "How to Make Mulligan Stew" (vol. 34, no. 3, 1983, pp. 272-277). He argued that though it's true that one can't know much about writing through the product alone, one also can't know much through the process alone, that the processes and the products come out different every time, like a Mulligan stew. The change in focus to the process still requires some attention to the tradition of assessing the product. That line of thinking would be taken up by others and reappear as "post-process." Now, I'm not so concerned about process and product here. I am more concerned with Mulligan stew and theoretical binaries. Having been told to do my homework back then, to survey the forest, I went out of my way to review the lit for whatever I was writing. I was thorough, every source till the sources started looping back. And I've seen that same kind of thoroughness in countless dissertations and first attempts at publishing monographs during my stint as editor. But thoroughness in and of itself can be a problem. It can lead to contradictory sources. A Mulligan stew.

Or let me put it this way. One of my professors in rhetoric, William Irmischer (also a former Cs chair), responded to a paper of mine that included a very dense forest. He handed me the paper and asked me if I didn't think eclecticism was a cop out ("cop out"). I didn't have an answer, mainly because I knew it really wasn't a question. Still, I had to wonder why he would suggest that, given that it was Irmischer who had introduced us to Kenneth Burke in graduate school, a Burkean acknowledged in *CCC* by Burke himself about Irmischer's use of the pentad in teaching comp ("Questions and Answers about the Pentad," vol. 29, no. 4, 1978, pp. 330-335). Can one get more eclectic than Burke? Well, William Rueckert in *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* writes that Burke is *syncretic*. Tomatoes, to-mah-toes. Or is it? Eclecticism doesn't necessarily assume an overarching order. Mulligan stew. Pot luck. Syncretism can be consistent, even when dense. Bouillabaisse (or zarzuela, the Spanish stew, *¡Que rico!*). There is an overarching set of principles to Burke, characterized, perhaps (and I'm being necessarily simplistic here) as symbology.

So what am I getting at? I am suggesting, even urging, that as one begins as an academic in rhetoric and writing that one must work to create one's con-

sistent, underlying conceptual framework or foundation. Now, when Irmscher prompted me to find my own conceptual framework, my first impulse was apostolic. What I mean is that I tried to decide which philosopher or theorist I would follow, like a disciple. I began with Burke, of course, since graduate students can tend to continue the work of mentors, at least at first. But to follow Burke I had to follow Marx or Nietzsche or Schopenhauer or Aristotle or so many others. And then, early in my career, I discovered Gramsci. That's it! I will follow Gramsci. His concepts seemed to me to fit well with rhetoric, and my need to try to flesh out how racism is maintained when race is so clearly a myth, smoke and mirrors. But that started to fall apart, or rather, to grow: to Marx (again) and Althusser and Lukacs and Chantal Mouffe and Erik Olin Wright and Manning Marable and Castro and el Che, Fanon, Paulo Freire, and on and on. And each discovery connected to some other scholar, philosopher, thinker. Lost in the woods again. Now what?

And then came the realization that I did not want to be thought of as a "Marxist." When someone would identify me as one, I'd say "No; I'm a Catholic." It was a quick way to get a laugh. But it wasn't merely a joke. The term, Marxist, runs the risk of invoking a dogmatism, an absolute Truth (even, ironically, as that truth counters idealism).

One more story. I had published on Gramsci and on Freire and some of those I just mentioned. About that same time, a colleague where I was a young assistant professor died. Someone who had been something of a mentor to me in those days had been the colleague's close friend. She suggested I go to his funeral service, saying "Don't worry; it'll be nonsectarian." Her assumption was that since I was a Marxist, I would be agnostic, at best, if not an atheist (which is a misinterpretation, I'd say, of Marx's "opium of the people" comment). We had been to each other's homes, had a reading group, been friends. But she nevertheless saw me a certain way. And it wasn't a way that felt comfortable to me. Do I tend toward the materialist thinkers? Yes, I do.

For me, there is no other way to work through racism as rhetorical, and if rhetorical, ideological, and if ideological, then hegemonic, with real political economic consequences, despite race being smoke and mirrors. But I cannot accept materialism to the exclusion of the spiritual. No spiritual equals no faith (even faith in humanity is spiritual). At bottom, I'm a teacher. A teacher has to have faith, faith in the possibility of something better. So, even though the term is no longer heard, my philosophical framework is a material Catholicism, a personal, Americanized Liberation Theology.

I'm trying to demonstrate here the differences among three terms: philosophy, theory, concept. A philosophical framework is simply a set of beliefs. That set of beliefs, once one becomes conscious of them, becomes a part of how one arrives at particular theoretical frameworks. A theoretical framework

provides the set of theories that inform empirical research, calling on theories that already exist. A conceptual framework, however, is a consistency we formulate for ourselves.

In all of this that I'm saying here I'm suggesting that it is important to know something of one's philosophical framework in order to act—in scholarship, research, teaching, in all one does—within the consistence of a conceptual framework. The problem with eclecticism is that it's flexible to a fault. The problem with eclecticism is that it leaves open the possibility of a reactionary response when challenged. Reactionary. Not simply reactive. When pushed and shoved, it's way too easy for an eclectic to respond by calling on known assumptions, conservative, even dogmatic. So think through your tendency, discover the overarching principles that can lay a foundation. Often, I'll ask graduate students or young professionals to create a personal phrase, brief, even absurdly short, but one they can test themselves with. Mine has been "Tradition and change for changes in tradition." I still ask myself if that's what I'm doing.