

7 PM - 1970s On literature evolving

“A student said something intriguing today. She said, ‘A lot of things are helping my future, but mostly it’s JROTC.’ When I asked why she liked JROTC she said, ‘They bond together and would do anything for the colonel.’ And then she added, ‘They find strength in the weaknesses others have that they try to help to overcome.’”

“That’s a turnaround. Reserve Officer Training Corps was forced out of schools in the 1970s.”

“There were some regrettable actions then.”

“The most negative effects of the Vietnam War had less to do with the war in the field and more to do with many who stayed home. Deferments from serving in the military were extended to those who entered academic careers for which they were not suited. It’s a double whammy. The teachers of today’s students would have included those who escaped the draft during the Vietnam War in the 1970s, and the parents of today’s students were colored by those times as students themselves in the 1970s and 1980s.

“Following the intellectual vacuum of the 1960s, the 1970s were a kidney stone of a decade, warped by multiculturalism, misguided attempts at social justice, and activist incursions trampling through cultural institutions like schools and the press.”

“How were they warped?”

“Edward Said’s major book, *Orientalism* written in the 1970s, led the popular charge of Post-colonialism. His notion was that cultural bias might be incidental, but not when held by the major political and economic powers of the day. To Said, expansionism, historical confrontation, sympathy, and classification lead to modern prejudices, but to make his point he

compressed history, as if 200 years of hard work meant nothing, and he discounted inconvenient plausible evidence to the contrary.

“The problem with the Eurocentric view, according to Said, is not that it isn’t true, but that the value of that truth must be questioned. Edward Said was familiar with the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, and believed that culture works not by exerting physical force on civil society, but through the unspoken consent of the language used to construct opinion. Foucault distinguished police power from the power that makes knowledge authoritative and determines how knowledge is transferred. Ostensibly, that which is perceived as free is actually infused in people by structure that lulls them into docility. Critics who assume this point of view numb others with discussion of Hegelian master/slave dialectic and ambivalence of both the colonizer and the colonized. But they fail to address when one doesn’t respect a culture, what it is specifically that one does not respect. Nor do they address what betokens consent by the colonized, what fosters that consent, or, on the other side, how coercions and seductions enslave, and what to do when the slave enslaves.

“Undermining the whole process, if one culture has no yardstick to challenge another, no one is in a position to value truth. Racism turns out to be in the eye of the beholder. Said himself never took a position on whether, for instance, the bias of a man writing about a woman was worse than the preconceptions of a woman writing about someone. His popular but flawed concept, still in use today, fails to distinguish a difference between culture and society. People need to determine how disparate cultures can relate and function so as to avoid an inescapable morass of moral relativism unable to support a process of peaceful problem resolution.”

“What would make Post-Colonialism more tolerable?”

“What views are intolerable? When does tolerance become a disease? When does multiculturalism become nihilism? When does passivity become resignation to the fates? Take criticism of men, for instance, but it could as well be Euro-centrism, race,

gender, or something else. That criticism was superseded by criticism of women's criticism of men's treatment of women—and relativist looping began. The sheer accretion of it all! And to what end? Orientalism fails to demand you make your choice to become a victim or weigh in. Become a voice. Don't study the problem; remove it. Present your view. Give those who follow some purchase. Then be multi-cultural wherever a better idea does not take hold.

“Meanwhile, muddying notions in the 1970s, John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* proposed a modern welfare state, charged to distribute wealth ‘fairly.’ That may have sounded good to ears tuned to the 1970s, but ‘fairly’ turns out to be a euphemism for disproportionately, with some central authority as the arbiter of fair. For Rawls it was important that the thumb on the scales of justice be hidden behind a veil.”

“But other cultures *do* have value.”

“Of course they may. Other cultures have value, but only where value can be evaluated. Value cannot be presumed simply because you are different than me, which gives you some special legitimacy that I can't possibly understand.”

“That's a diss.”

“Should I listen to you because you are loud and in my face?”

“Another diss.”

“There is a long history in literature of advocates trying to elbow their favorite book into the literary canon. There *is* no single canon and crosspollination fosters continuous competition. If Post-colonialism—PoCo—has something to say, its message should stand on merits independent of culture of origin and absent that culture's authority to decide who can talk. Jacob Bronowski explained it is possible to respect and dignify without conceding unproven validity.”

“When did Post-colonial literature start? Will it end? What is it?”

“By the time Post-colonialism gained popularity outside literary circles—by the time Edward Said wrote politically in the

1970s—pseudo-intellectuals who invoke him had forgotten what Post-colonialism means but not how to wield it as a weapon. Post-colonialism presumes that colonial expansion was a one-way street—that the mother country suppressed any cultural expression from each subjugated country.”

“Colonial powers did suppress cultures.”

PoCo arguments work both ways, as the rediscovery of *Gilgamesh* ought to teach us. *Gilgamesh*, perhaps the earliest book in the literary canon, was ‘lost’ because a conquering power has two options—either assimilate the conquered culture or stamp it out. In the case of *Gilgamesh*, it was among tens of thousands of cuneiform clay tablets from the royal library recovered from the rubble of Nineveh. Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC by a sister nation of Persians, much as citizens of Nineveh destroyed other cultures that earlier they themselves had conquered. ‘West versus East’ as pushed by Samuel Huntington in *Clash of Civilizations* is an inaccurate confrontation. Prof. John Bowers advises that “Assimilators versus destroyers’ is a much more descriptive label. Assimilation is a two-way street, as contemporary music clearly shows.”

“I'm not convinced.”

“Okay, move from *Gilgamesh* forward to the early 1500s, shortly after Gutenberg's printing press liberated books from tedious handwritten transcription. Erasmus, paying an extended visit to Sir Thomas More, convinced him to write a light-hearted spoof that was eventually published under the title *Utopia*. In the book, a diplomat from an imaginary foreign ‘colonial’ culture explains that his country imported books from the famous Italian Aldine Press. How colonial, you might say. But the diplomat adds that they also imported presses and paper to print books of their own. Clearly, then, cultural ideas travel in both directions.”

“That was a fantasy.”

“Move forward still further. Herman Melville wasn't a fantasy. Ironically, his writing was made possible by luxury economics—the market for ambergris and oil. Melville wrote probably the first Post-colonial novel, *Moby Dick*, around 1850, that was

immensely popular in the mother country of Great Britain. Filled with radical multi-cultural characters and rituals, including homosexual marriage, it went far beyond what the home culture would have produced.

“Regional voices speaking above the level of cultural competition—is nothing new. Daniel Owen, in the Dickensian tradition, wrote to preserve the culture and institutions of Wales. Oscar Wilde wrote for the Irish. Willa Cather wrote in the voices of Native American tribes in her frontier novels of the Southwest.

“But Post-colonialism has been abused by its practitioners, its advocate academics, and its political opportunists. PoCo may have something to say, but legitimacy for what is said belongs to its truth, not to its accent. Simply because PoCo is PoCo, it cannot presume to be the only voice to talk. PoCo needs to drop the trendy conceit that claims it is better than those who have gone before. PoCo, because it is PoCo, cannot slip into a mantle of multi-cultural moral relativism that renders it immune to scrutiny.

“The tragic fault of Post-colonialism is to presume that geo-political fault lines are the difficult ones that must be understood and navigated. Fault lines are found everywhere. How do you learn to cross the more pressing and immediate fault lines of family and neighborhood?”

“You’re suggesting Post-colonial concerns are misplaced?”

“Amongst all that is not the case, PoCo deserves to be recognized as an opportunity to expand horizons. As difficult as it is to give the Dutch word *gezelligheid* meaning in English, the word’s feeling of warm hospitality can be generated for English-speaking people who have no single word for it. Post-colonial awareness is more than an opportunity to learn; it is a necessity. ‘Holier-than-thou’ doesn’t build society; it destroys it. Understanding is what constructively builds society.

“Today’s elite seem to reward meandering. Repeating themes run through Nobel awards—PoCo cultural clash, superficiality, linguistics, history, values, class dignity, literary theory, and

imagery. The Nobel Literature Prize committee seems to prefer and reward imagery in their selections, but what about reality? As a result, today there seems to be more fantasy in real life than real life in real life: the frame, the narrative, and the selective recollection of facts. Build the fantasy, force it on others, and if you don’t like my fantasy, I’m offended, and I’ll make that a crime.”

“What are you criticizing?”

“Novels have played the important part of educating the masses not by their logic, but by their emotions. The characters feel through their compressed lives the consequences of events and decisions. Characters don’t so much project into the future as they have, in 300 pages, a lifetime of future compressed upon them. Non-readers cheat themselves of lifetimes of experience compressed into books. They lack the tools to reach beyond themselves and rationalize they lose nothing for it. Feeling the experience of others, readers live an injection of life lessons as entertainment. For many readers novels bypass mental mechanisms of logic.

“Look at 100 years of award-winning novels. Too many held up as excellent have been praised for style rather than content. It would be pivotally important if we could recalibrate. A novel should be more than a pass time.”

“What else should it do? Not every piece of literature needs significance. Dickens was entertainment—the *90210* or *Dallas* of its time.”

“Henry James would have said that the novel has always served a moral purpose. How vague. Good guys win and bad guys lose? Moral instruction? Aristotelian poetic justice? Rewarding virtue and punishing vice is not instructive. Correlation is not causation. It is the moral equivalent of the cartoon character who pulls back the speedometer dial to slow the speeding train.”

“Not every novel rewards virtue. Thomas Hardy certainly didn’t.”

“Character shouldn’t have to be a silent subtext in a novel. It’s an artistic affectation to expect the reader to work hard for an

insight for it to be valued. A book can leave you hanging, but hanging shouldn't be an excuse for an absence of understanding.

“Henry James believed the novel had an ability to expand perception. In an effort to do so, he developed the stream-of-consciousness style. In *The Art of Fiction* James said that the moral sense and the artistic sense lie close together because ‘. . . the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer.’ Never does James address the question of what the moral sense is. To James, as an artist, ‘perception and sensitivity to experience’ take precedence over morality.

“Meanwhile, Joseph Conrad’s Marlowe is ambivalent about history and morality. Marlowe said Jim was not clear to him, as we are not clear to ourselves. Both James and Conrad put the reader in the action, full participants in uncertainty and subjectivity that for us came to a head after World War II. Conrad, after the Congo, turned away from the idea of idealism. Some 50 years later after World War II, absent an absolute framework, existentialists had no idealism they could turn away from. They were in no position to see clearly culture or personality they called character.

“Understanding character is different than understanding human nature. James and Woolf urge understanding human nature but they do nothing to explain what to do about it.

“Conrad’s Colonel Kurtz was an educated man with refined values, but hollow character. ‘He had something to say.’ ‘He had judged.’ ‘The horror.’ Conrad’s Marlowe says Kurtz had gone mad, but he did not nail down why. Conrad may encourage self-knowledge, but he encouraged readers toward self-knowledge without providing a compass. His readers wandered in the wilderness for another century. Conrad challenged idealistic colonization, but succeeding writers have yet to do more. Literature is always pitched as a way to understand people better, yet books frequently present a high school sophomore’s understanding of human nature.”

“Literature gives you the leeway to come to your own conclusion. It’s not necessary that the author unravels everything that should be taken from reading it. In *Turn of the*

Screw, Henry James wants the reader to think of different outcomes.”

“But suppose Henry James didn’t have an answer, much less *the* answer? Suppose it’s only effete pseudo-intellectuals who presume he knew where he was going but didn’t say? Suppose many authors are like pretend artists who pile some crap together with a supercilious attitude and dare you to claim there is no art in it to be found? Suppose the emperor has no clothes? Suppose that in this house of cards there are rooms for each of the subjects in the curriculum, rooms for educationists, politicians, and do-gooders.

“My concern for literature is not that every book needs some moral thread or needs to advocate for society, but some do, and if schools overlook the need to draw those threads together, if politics does not advocate for those threads, along with families, and churches, we must remember that Lady Fortune does not care.”