10 PM - 2000s On rust never sleeps

"But what does it matter? Do your concerns really matter?

"They matter if you can't trust so-called experts who don't show their work, and who won't make you an expert. It might be clearer if you look at it this way. A good portion of our literary canon was lost for a thousand years and not missed. How was it lost? Why was it lost? Why, for so long, did no one know it was lost, or care?"

"I didn't know it was lost."

"Discussing the history of our literary canon, Prof. John Bowers reminds us that in 500 A. D. Severinus Boethius wrote about major literary and philosophical tracts by Homer and Aristotle that faded away in Europe and were not rediscovered for a thousand years. If the wisdom had been spread wider, imagine the quality of life that might have been had by the people who lived then had a thousand more years worth of study of those books."

"We'll never know."

"What have we lost over the last 100 years and why might that not be any different? The fog drifts silently in, unnoticed."

"What about award-winning literature?"

"Awards celebrate those who make all the right moves, not necessarily those worth celebrating. We award ourselves into stupidity and call it excellence. Journalism isn't any better. Journalism plans to survive whether we live in good times or bad. Absent any real news NPR recently reported as news that hard economic times actually bring more business for some such as cobblers."

"But what does it matter?"

"We are at a cusp. Today's children have diverse cultural

experiences that were unavailable to their parents thrust upon them, yet they are seldom equipped with the tools to put those contacts into context. Does liberty matter? Does civilization matter? What kind of freedom are you willing to trade for security? How much of your life do you want the self-obsessed political class deciding for you? What of your country are you proud? Of what principle are you proud? Can you name one? Can you explain why you should be proud? What is important to you? Anything? Are you alive? How do you know?"

"Are you seriously asking all these questions?"

"If you don't know if I'm serious, you better find out. You better learn enough not to have to take my word for it. You better learn enough because you have put your future and that of your family in the hands of people who care more about themselves than they do about you. If you can't hear shuck and jive, you are the problem. You are the problem if something is not a lie just because you believe it, if fake but accurate is okay with you, if you are willing to believe anything bad about people with whom you disagree or dislike, if you can't tell that 800 years of progress since the *Magna Carta* is at risk by smooth-talking fear mongers.

"You are the problem when you can hold two contradictory ideas in your mind simultaneously and accept them both. That behavior is not unusual. Thomas Jefferson could be for slavery and against it at the same time. Orwellian doublethink is most sinister when it seems natural to con yourself into being able to tell deliberate lies, know they are lies, and believe so strongly that because you are you it does not matter so you can discard any inconvenient fact that gets in the way. Deny the elephant in the room and walk around, knowing its location and dimensions to studiously avoid hitting it. To tamper with reality and deny doing so when caught in the act is everyday doublethink. Should you laugh or cry when people lie and then lie about lying because the only failure is to admit that to have been caught?

"You are the problem when unreason in high places goes unchallenged by the press and then its readers.

"You have to love Washington, where everyone except the power class are held accountable for their actions. Bankrupt the

country? That's okay. Store bribes of cold cash in your refrigerator? A natural mistake. Misstate evidence? Not a problem. Run a gay prostitution ring from your apartment? What creativity. Untaxed homes? Trivial. Mistated income taxes? No consequence. Contributions from loan companies while legislating on an issue? Not an ethics violation."

"For the most part, I don't differentiate between the political parties. It is more useful to disaggregate the kinds of politicians. Some are enablers of poor behavior. Others are high-end looters. Still others are low-end looters. Some . . . no, most . . . are bullshit artists. Others will partner with any coalition, agency, or business to milk others in return for power and money.

"One party is like a younger child, impetuous, easily convinced, slave of passion, demonizing the opposition, empathetic, greedy, game oriented, simplistic, and who believe everyone is like them. The other party at least tried to have principles, if only built on sand, but they have had their own power looters, too.

"Is such decay inevitable? Does Gresham's Law apply? Must the bad drive out the good?"

"When did skeptic become a dirty word even in the world of science? The problem is not new is it."

"Four hundred years ago, unreason in high places lead to Sir Thomas More writing *Utopia*. Bowers warns that More's main character was Raphael Hythloday, a last name that means 'knowing in trifles'. Yet, as More wrote tongue-in-cheek, 'I do not know if there be anywhere to be found a more learned and a better bred young man; for as he a both a very worthy and a very knowing person, so he is so civil to all men, so particularly kind to his friends, and so full of candour and affection, that there is not, perhaps, above one or two anywhere to be found, that is in all respects so perfect a friend: he is extraordinarily modest, there is no artifice in him, and yet no man has more of a prudent simplicity.' In our time similar decay seems inevitable."

"But what does it matter?"

"Currently lingering Post-colonialism in literature is a one-way street. It gives voice to the multicultural views of multicultural

authors. How politically correct! Reminds me that my old college class paraded to defeat a stupid-ass racist incident, and used the occasion to set up a racist house I could not join, and no one seemed to see the hypocrisy.

"I don't have the street cred to be a PoCo author. I can't pass. I can't make character overgeneralizations as racist as others can. I can't focus on trivial truths at the expense of big ones. Great literature can bring important, sound ideas to consciousness. A book doesn't need a special character, much less one with a cultural accent, if it celebrates the ember of a worthwhile idea by blowing sufficient oxygen on it that it bursts into flame.

"In 2005 in *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith borrowed a style from Forster's *Howard's End*, right down to the opening letters. No need to contrive a plot. Find an old one, create some tension, and out come award-winning little-t truths wringing with passion."

"Is contemporary literature moribund?"

"Surprisingly, no. You won't see J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series winning a Nobel Prize for Literature but it obviously has struck a chord with readers throughout the world. It touches on all that we have been talking about—dysfunctional government, journalism that has lost its way, anti-social behavior that goes unrecognized and unchallenged."

"Are you going to call Harry Potter a great book."

"I am not experienced enough to say it is a great book, but it certainly is a useful one. *Potter* can compare to classic epics like *Gilgamesh* that address the significant moral questions of the day. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* Harry faces death and come to terms with it. The book warns of the danger of hubris, because that which the villain does not value he does not take the trouble to comprehend. One character, Professor Lupin, considers Socrates' premise whether dying for a principle is a moral position to take."

"Today, for all the media connectedness, people are incredibly politically naïve. There is a millennial presumption—a casualness wherein some of the brightest people seem to travel at right

angles to reality. But this is not new. Paris before World War II was a haven for the intellectuals of the day. These were the Post-moderns. The last of the realists—the Moderns—had flowered in the 1920s and gone to seed. The writing reflected minds that had gone baroque, creating fawning stylistic excess. They fell in love with ideas at the expense of reality. And when reality struck in the form of a Panzer tank, their ideas acquiesced. The ideas were, literally, unfounded—without foundation. Linguistics, assisted by Wittgenstein, sent Philosophy reeling. Everything became relative. True, some intellectuals fled the onrushing tanks, but more remained and rationalized themselves back into comfort and excess in the shadow of the absurd.

"Fifty years later, the chains they forged rattle in the minds and works of the pseudo-intelligentsia. The presumptuous are special, not because they are smart, but because they are degreed. They presume to themselves special expertise not because they know, but because they know each other. Others are wrong, not because they are wrong, but because the select can find rationalization to discount consideration of them.

"Today's millennials believe conventional wisdom correct simply because it is popular. Cosseted in their lifestyle, they may be wrong, not know it, not know how to find out, not care, and fight tooth-and-nail to remain that way. The cell phone has supplanted the parent. Support is more often than not provided by peers, not mentors. Problem solving advice comes from a cloud of scores of inexperienced peers in a social network. By all their measures—now-ness, technological connectedness, and talking points—they need nothing more. For them, history begins at dawn.

"Boomers were the first generation with the technology—16mm film, followed by 8mm with sound, video recording, and cell phones—to have the feedback to re-watch themselves. Unfortunately, the technology available to post-Boomer generations X, Y, and Z enables narcissistic superficial reflection, not self-reflection. Comfortable Gen-Xers, young adults in the 1980s, and Gen-Yers of the 1990s, together fostered Gen-Z, the young adults of the 2000s, a zombie generation who, although at

home in a digital world, are unpracticed when it comes to look in a mirror, take criticism, assume responsibility, or easily change."

"In the absence of substance, style is entertainment. Hollywood is an act. Hollywood is the entertaining substitute. Actor and activist George Clooney's fantasy is his reality. Comfortable in his popularity, he can, for instance, believe the blather he says in interviews on Edward R. Murrow, but that is no reason anyone else should be so gullible, and certainly not any journalist. Clooney has proved demonstrably creative about past events, yet, celebrities like him are paraded out by Washington politicians who either think so little of us they would play the fiction for real, or perhaps they believe the crap themselves.

"For Umberto Eco, Post-modernism toys with double irony, with double-coded Easter eggs planted as a tip of the hat to the sophisticated reader—a game of special knowing only the privileged can play. But if these authors and readers are so sophisticated they can play games, why is the scope of what they choose to see so narrow? Interpreting an author need not always leave the reader ambiguous results. Eco believes that the imagined—so prominent in Post-modern literature—and real coexist to reinforce each other, and that the purpose of fiction is to educate us what is the case—a notion of truth we pretend to take seriously. But do we take it seriously, or do we let it take us away from that which is important?"

   "Does one have to surrender one's 'self' to the fiction? Does the author? How much must be surrendered and for how long?"

"Eco believes the ethical purpose of fiction is to fix in the mind that events do happen—that things go the way they go. Fiction teaches us about fate and death and about how we can live life, if we so choose. Fictional characters live in a granular world, defined only insofar as it is laid down in the text, but fixed exactly for being laid down in the text.

"To understand granular, look up graph theory. You'll see information held together by links in a representation that looks something like a jungle gym. Rather than swing from bar to bar,

in a graph you swing from node to node. A dictionary is a graph. Every word is defined by links to other words and no more. A dictionary is granular, too. So it is with our graph-theoretic world. Our mental map of reality is granular. We know what we know about the world and no more. We know things with a degree of probability. We can't know what we can't know. But we can do our best to prune away that which is tested and found wanting, and to hold down purposely injected noise. The Foucaults and Derridas of the world are so transfixed by uncertainty that they busily manufacture concepts—creating new nodes in the graph to define it—but in the end, their world is still granular, and rather than improve insight for the most part their information is also noise of little practical use.

"Eco reminds us that mythical creatures are real insofar as they have impact. When they become cultural habits, he says, they are as real as some Christians might take the Holy Ghost. Readers, for example, can dredge up a character from a book to powerfully label someone a Scrooge.

"In this world you either make your fantasy reality or let others overrun your reality with their fantasy. And if you make your fantasy real, you have a responsibility to discover for yourself the principles that make it stable or you become just another animal in the jungle. Sound ideas have to push back or the world of bad ideas is more likely to come about. You have the obligation to narrate the world you move about in as precisely as possible or risk becoming like astroturfers or Axelturfers, not a liar, but a fraud who recasts the narrative toward that which is demonstrably false."