

Matters of Interpretation

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Once you've uttered the word "quarrel"—or better, the more tradition-haunted *querelle*—you don't really need to add that it's between order and adventure. Can there be a quarrel about anything else? The "ancient quarrel between the philosophers and the poets," between Ancients and Moderns, between classic and romantic, between phallogocentric reason and the aleatory sex that is not one, these are all just new excuses for picking the same old fight. But if we can achieve any distance from our partisanship on such occasions, we begin to sense how easily the terms in our duality of choice can change places (you might hear "the adventure of order" promoted in this or that educational keynote address, or perhaps "the order of adventure"); and we also begin to sense how easily each term can harbor both sides of the quarrel within itself. For example, deconstruction, presumably an adventure contrasted with the orders of semiotics or semantics, nevertheless itself produces both a discipline, "rhetorical reading," and a gay science, the "seminal adventure of the trace."

Or, as to this last point, think of the detective novel: If you invoke the sequence Dupin, Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Umberto Eco's William of Baskerville, you seem thereby to invoke the forces of order, the dream of reason's little gray cells marshalled against superstition and muddleheadedness; whereas if you name the providential Father Brown, the dithering Miss Marple, the mystical Campion of *Tiger in the Smoke*, the apocalyptic Con Op of *Red Harvest*, and the unintelligible Marlowe of *The Long Goodbye*, you thereby produce, within the same rule-bound genre, an offsetting rhetoric of adventure, an equally stubborn insistence on the importance of bold intuition. But what is the difference? In Agatha Christie's novels, Poirot (for all his faith in little gray cells) and Miss Marple (for all her faith in intuited predictive homologies among village behavior patterns) are both equally successful in the last chapter because they both perform exactly similar feats of deduction from empirical data. It is precisely in the final analysis that the quarrel between order and adventure—Poirot and Miss Marple or Tony Hillerman's comparable Leaphorn and Chee—goes up in smoke.

Among ourselves—that is, in the contest of the faculties—the quarrel between order and adventure is noisiest where it seems least dialectical; that is, where it is a quarrel between authority and dissent, with dissent seizing authority in the academy even while authority cries out in dissent on the best-seller list of every commercial press. In “La jolie rousse,” the Apollinaire poem from which the title of our panel has been borrowed, even though there is a respectful politeness toward “those who have been the perfection of order,” the choice of adventure nevertheless goes almost without saying.¹ And for us, too, despite the absence of both the bohemian friskiness and the urbane forbearance of Apollinaire from our “interventions,” the supposed choice of adventure is what preconditions our binary approaches to gender, race, class, and colonial subjection. Such approaches as these have not gone unchallenged by a kind of deconstruction from within (there will always be revisionists who qualify the polemic of their intellectual allies so severely that their whole enterprise finally seems pointless); yet they still set the terms of much thinking in the humanities: power vs. subversion, monoglossia vs. heteroglossia, precept vs. situation in ethics, political vs. social historiography, preconceived vs. thick anthropology, literate vs. oral, science vs. narrative, modern vs. postmodern, discipline vs. the inter- or non-disciplinary, truth vs. what counts as truth. In legal studies, similarly, the quarrel between the foundationalist “truth” sustained by strict construction with Leftist or Neo-pragmatist versions of “what counts as truth” (a single premise authorizing both politicized deviance and arbitrary adherence in interpreting precedent) has dominated many journals and at least some classrooms.

Now, do I want to say for all these antinomies too, as for the detective novel, that in the moment of problem-solving—insofar as for us there exist problems that can be solved—all such distinctions go up in smoke? Certainly I do want to say that whatever merit they have had or have in themselves, the myriad calls to adventure encoded in the right-hand terms on my list of binarisms have inevitably resulted, such is the nature of institutional reproduction, in a tiresome order, a protocol of redundancy, that suppresses adventure.

So you see, when it comes to rhetoric I’m on Apollinaire’s side, too—as who wouldn’t be?—but I’m not happy with his terms. If we agree with the Althusserian argument of Pierre Bourdieu in *Reproduction* that the formulae of dissent in the academy can only reinforce the hegemony of those institutions that seek to co-opt dissent as their main objective (and I for my part acknowledge the force of this cri-

1. Guillaume Apollinaire, “La jolie rousse” (“The Pretty Red-head”), *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, ed., with facing trans., Roger Shattuck (New York: New Directions, 1948), 195.

tique without fully sharing its political discomfort), then I think we have to look around for another way of describing the quarrel. We must find a way that allows the two sides to remain genuinely and not just rhetorically in conflict, a way furthermore that can permanently and not just intermittently reflect both the university's internal quarrels and its replication of those quarrels in its interactions with the mass media. For "order" and "adventure" I should like to substitute the words "custodianship" and "criticism," having first recalled certain commonplaces defining the university itself.

Dr. Johnson defined the university simply as a place where everything known gets taught (this is the "universum" emphasized in Giuseppe Mazzota's talk), and this definition persists in the first sentence of Newman's *Idea of the University*: "a University is a place of *teaching universal knowledge*. This implies that its object is . . . the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students."² Here, in this extraordinary pronouncement, you have the attitude of college alumni everywhere, of our own undergraduates whose total indifference to the value of research whenever a tenure controversy reaches their ears would convert the faculty into a kind of genteel upstairs servant staff, and of the public at large with its immemorial outcry, as old as satire itself, against professorial pedantry and incomprehensibility. On this view, derived for the modern philosophy of education from Newman, the function of a university faculty is custodial, and such a faculty exists at odds with the public it directly or indirectly serves only insofar as practical-minded folks are ever inclined to scorn—and surely not without reason!—the value of polite knowledge.

But already in Newman's time the workplace of a faculty thus defined was what other informed persons were calling a *college*, not a university. When President David Starr Jordan of Stanford argued, for instance, in agreement with President Daniel Gilman of Johns Hopkins, that—in the words of the late George Pierson—"he thought a college antipathetic to the whole spirit of a university,"³ he was invoking an altogether different sense of the university as a place where original research is conducted and advanced degrees rewarding such research are conferred. And why, under the disapproving gaze of Newman, should such a place exist? Because custodianship constantly shrivels into the codification of received ideas unless it is

2. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*, ed. I. T. Ker (1889; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), ix.

3. George W. Pierson, "American Universities in the Nineteenth Century: The Formative Period," *The Modern University*, ed. Margaret Clapp (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), 71.

revised or periodically resituated by "criticism." I do not see this emphasis on criticism as a naive return to the adversary stance of Adorno and Horkheimer in the Fifties (as Umberto Eco suggested yesterday), because the unique political quietism of the postwar years is no longer what needs to be criticized—as Adorno himself unhappily realized by the late sixties. And I do not say—to avoid another confusion—that the practice of criticism is not properly carried on in undergraduate teaching as well; but in that setting criticism—even the teacher's own critical contribution to scholarship—is already the repetition of a received idea, whatever its success may be in converting students from the received ideas to which their parents had been converted by their teachers' predecessors. In the *university*, as I have here defined it in opposition to Newman, teaching, which is undoubtedly the commodity offered by a college, is not a commodity but rather plays the role that advertising and sales play in business. (In saying this, I attempt a more accurate version of the sententious comparison of schools—and governments—with for-profit businesses that one hears daily from people who think they are paying too much for them.)

Every time something is discovered or reinterpreted en route to becoming the subject matter of teaching, a custodially received idea is being criticized; there is no exception to this rule, which governs all authentic re-search, regardless of whether it is the reassessment of order that discredits the banality of adventure or the independence of adventure that lays bare the slavishness of order. Criticism in this sense by itself is not, however, enough. To preserve a record of such criticism, not least to observe its forgetful redundancy—that is the necessary custodianship of the university. Thus encompassing both custodianship and criticism, the function of the university is always to interpret past orders and adventures. But how do we go about this, whether the ord-venture in question be a poem, an event, or a predecessor's understanding of high-density cholesterol? Well, in one of two ways, according to the two great traditions of hermeneutics. Custodially, we encounter the object in and for itself, while critically we encounter it in and for ourselves. For each approach an ethical defence, a claim to integrity, can be and has been splendidly articulated. Each defence is irreducibly opposed to the other, unlike the claims of order and adventure.

Let me conclude by putting these claims side by side. First the custodial claim, which I suppose we would now call the old historicism, defended by E.D. Hirsch:

Kant held it to be a foundation of moral action that men should be conceived as ends in themselves, not as instruments of other men. This imperative is transferable to the words of men because

speech is an extension and expression of men in the social domain, and also because when we fail to conjoin a man's intentions to his words we lose the soul of speech, which is to convey meaning and to understand what is intended to be conveyed.⁴

This credo with its ethical pathos enjoins us to let be, to respect the independence of the other by suspending judgment, and I do not need to remind you that the rhetoric of this position is invoked with equal fervor by many among us aligned both with the forces of order, upholding the idea that we can understand the past "as it really was," and the forces of adventure, who use equivalents of Hirsch's argument in their attack against objectifying stereotypes of otherness.

Now here is the opposed argument, affirming the hermeneutic circle as a merger of horizons in which interpretive subjectivity is necessarily involved, defended by Hans-Georg Gadamer:

The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint, i.e., place ourselves in the historical situation and seek to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find, in the past, any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves. Thus the acknowledgment of the otherness of the other, which makes him [the other] the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his [the other's] claim to truth.⁵

And this moving position too we hear proclaimed with equal fervor by the forces of order, as in Gadamer's own classicist defence of "tradition," or of adventure, as in the impatience of multi-culturalism with the *laissez-aller* politics of just letting the other be. (Gadamer's classicism could itself easily be adapted to an attack on tradition, since declaring that the classical text speaks false at least holds open the possibility that it could have spoken true.)

So just think: even though there is no real difference between order and adventure, we are all pretty sure which side we should take; whereas although there is a very real difference between custodianship and criticism, a difference embodied in the rival claims just cited, we are by no means certain—in Auden's words—which side we are supposed to be on, or indeed even which side we *are* on. And this very indeterminacy as to what we are doing and why, thus revealed, just might serve to minimize the viciousness of our contemporary hermeneutic circles, our custodial failure to see ourselves in our accounts

4. E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 90.

5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (1960; reprint, New York: Crossroad, 1982), 270.

of the past and our critical failure to see beyond ourselves in the past, thereby restoring substance to interpretation in the university.