

Thinking More Critically About Thinking Too Critically

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Once when I returned to Hyde Park after a long trip abroad, I dashed off to the Cop, of blessed memory, to restock the larder. As I waited to check out, I overheard the conversation of two undergraduates standing in line in front of me. “No,” said one to the other, “but that’s not what Aristotle meant by that.” “Ah,” I thought with a happy sigh, “I’m home.” It was not merely the subject of their debate—Aristotle, the poster boy of the Common Core--that identified them as my people, but the style in which they were debating, the contentiousness of their discourse.

That intellectual style is one of the things for which the University of Chicago is justly famous, our cultivation of the hawk eye that pounces on the unexamined assumption, the false logical link, the shoddy piece of evidence. And we are right to be proud of that training. A former President of this institution, Hannah Gray, used to say that the Real World is not the marketplace outside, but the University of Chicago, where we talk about what really matters to us, and say what we really think about it. Often this entails sharp criticism. But if we stop there we have not done enough, for it may leave us in danger of making two big mistakes. First, it may inhibit our own creative courage, and second, it may lead us to overlook much of value in the thinking of people in whom we have rightly identified serious errors. Only if we go on past that first, essential stage of critical thinking to another, equally essential stage of appreciation can we do our own best work

and enrich our lives with the widest possible range of the works of others. I want to urge you all to think more critically about the dangers of thinking too critically.

Consider the first danger, that of inhibiting our own creativity. The same training that makes us too critical of others can make us too critical of ourselves, and afraid that others will attack us as we attack them. It may hobble another, even more precious intellectual virtue for which the University of Chicago is also justly famous: the courage to take risks, to boldly go (as Star Trek always used to say, boldly splitting the infinitive) where no scholar has ever gone before, to formulate the sorts of imaginative ideas that get you the Nobel prize, ideas that in their early stages are often risky. We may paralyze ourselves with the realization that we cannot, for instance, really know what happened in the past, or even use certain basic words at all (or have to barricade the polluted words between scare quotes, like a pair of hands held up for mercy).

But the Chicago mind can also give us the courage to make mistakes, the sort of courage that sustained Thomas Edison when he spent months trying to make a light-bulb work, testing one material after another in an evacuated bell jar before he finally got a carbon filament to burn long enough to do the job. According to a well-known story, he failed more than 1,000 times (or 5,000 or 700, depending on the version.) When asked about it, Edison allegedly replied, “I have not failed 1,000 times. I have successfully discovered 1,000 ways to NOT make a light bulb.”ⁱ

As for the second danger, of being supercritical of others, I want to focus on one particular sort of criticism, namely our awareness of the racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, élitism, and other serious desecrations of human values in the writings of authors in earlier ages and other cultures. The writer Adam Gopnik remarked about some

of the Western classics, the stuff of the Common Core, “A lot of the skill in reading classics lies in reading past them. . . The obsession with genetic legitimacy and virginity in Shakespeare; the acceptance of torture in Dante--these are not subjects to be absorbed but things you glide by on your way to the poetry.”ⁱⁱⁱ We must also “glide by” Shakespeare’s anti-Semitism (in *The Merchant of Venice*) and sexism (in *The Taming of the Shrew*), and the anti-Semitism of Dickens’ *Fagan* and of Wagner’s operas, and Raymond Chandler’s racist language, and on and on. That’s a lot of gliding. Indeed, David Tracy once remarked that if we ban every English author whose ideas were racist or sexist (let alone imperialist or élitist), writing before, say, 1950, we can read only George Herbert. And then there is the embarrassing matter of their personal lives: we are shocked, shocked to discover that Tolstoi was filthy to his wife, and Heidegger was a Nazi; I have also heard rumors that Hemingway drank rather a lot. I think we are forced to accept Adam Gopnik’s advice, or that of Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “Use every man after his desert, and who shall ’scape whipping?” It’s badly educated people who have to show you how much they know by showing you that they can find fault in everything; the truly well educated go deeper into it, taking it for granted that all those faults are there, and that *still* one can learn more from Shakespeare than from George Herbert.

Edward Said, so famously critical of the imperialist project among scholars and writers, wrote an astonishingly appreciative introduction to the novel *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling (1901). On the one hand, Said demonstrated how deeply embedded, indeed coded, in *Kim* is the racist and imperialist view for which Kipling--who coined the term, “the white man’s burden”--became notorious. But, on the other hand, Said spoke of Kipling as “a great artist” whose “own insights about India” blinded him to the vision of imperial

India that he had set out to advance. Said found *Kim* “profoundly embarrassing”ⁱⁱⁱ—for Said, and for us, for any readers caught between their warm response to the artistry of the book and their revulsion at the racist terminology and ideology. Salman Rushdie, too, remarked, “There will always be plenty in Kipling that I find difficult to forgive, but there is also enough truth in these stories to make them impossible to ignore.”^{iv} And the poet W. H. Auden wrote that Time pardons “Kipling and his views.”

We need to balance what literary critics call a hermeneutics of suspicion—a method of reading that ferrets out submerged agendas—with a hermeneutics of retrieval, or even of reconciliation (to borrow a term from the literature on the aftermath of genocidal wars in Africa and elsewhere). And this must include some sort of reconciliation to our own shameful American agendas, our own relationship with slavery and with the destruction of the native Americans, not to mention our present imperialism. And then we can begin to read our own classics differently, with what the philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur called a second naiveté: where, in our first naiveté, we did not notice the racism, and in our subsequent hypercritical reading we couldn’t see anything else, in our second naiveté we can see how good some writers are despite the inhumanity of their underlying worldviews. If their works really are great literature, they will survive this new reading. In a lighter vein, Woody Allen once satirized the way that we re-read the same classic differently at different times, in a short story about a Jewish businessman from New York who got into Gustave Flaubert’s novel, *Madame Bovary*, and had an affair with Emma Bovary at the Plaza Hotel in New York, so that anyone who read the book at that time read about the businessman and the Plaza Hotel. A Stanford professor, encountering this new character and new episode, explained to his class, “Well, I guess the

mark of a classic is that you can reread it a thousand times and always find something new.”^v

Our moral discomfort becomes more complex if we extend our second naïveté to cultures other than our own, and try to appreciate things in them from which we might otherwise recoil. We bump headlong into moral relativism, the belief that each culture’s ideas must be judged moral in their own context. Take the case of suttee, the Hindu practice by which some widows are burnt alive on their husbands’ funeral pyres. When the British ruled Inja, they occasionally tried to stop women from committing suttee. Some years ago, when I was invited to teach a class about Hinduism to a group of high school students here on the South Side, I talked to them about suttee and asked them to imagine that they were in India and saw a woman about to be burnt in this way: would they try to stop it? Their unanimous reply was, “No. I wouldn’t mess with someone else’s religion.” This answer came, I think, out of the Chicago students’ own experience of identity politics. But moving beyond the first naïveté of the British attitude (which Gayatri Spivak has characterized as white men saving brown women from brown) and then also beyond the relativist reaction (“I wouldn’t mess with someone else’s religion”), we might aspire to a more complex second naïveté, balancing our respect for the Hindus as complex moral beings (many of whom protested against suttee) with our own sense of human rights, which insists that the women should not be burnt.

In our more general understanding of religion, too, we need to move beyond the first naïveté of the traditional religious view that all the people of *our* religion are kind and moral, and then to move beyond the widespread secular view that anyone who believes in god (any god) does nothing but blow up abortion clinics and towering buildings in New

York, to a second naiveté, the view that there are, in all religions, as in secularist groups, alongside the fanatics, kind and moral people.

Let me close by returning to the poem in which Auden pardons Kipling. It ends:
In the prison of his days,
teach the free man how to praise.

The walls of that prison are made of the prevailing prejudices of the times we live in. Auden, too, was caught in the prison of his days, when he referred to the “free man”; what about the “free woman,” Mr. Auden? The purpose of a great liberal education—and, in case you haven’t noticed, that is what you have just gotten--is to free us not only from our own prejudices but from our prejudices about other peoples’ prejudices, to teach us to see through the walls of both our prisons and theirs. That’s what is liberating about “liberal” education. Above all, it teaches us not just how to criticize but how to praise.

ⁱ Or, "When I have eliminated the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work." Sometimes it is said that this quote was in response to a question from a reporter for the *New York Times*. The World Bank World Development Report 1994: Infrastructure for Development. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1994.

<http://www.hyperhistory.net/apwh/bios/b4edison.htm> or
<http://www.medleague.com/Articles/president/topquotes.htm> or
<http://darwin.nap.edu/books/NX006728/html/35.html>.

ⁱⁱ Adam Gopnik, “A Purim Story,” *The New Yorker*, February 18 & 25, 2002, p. 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edward Said, Introduction to Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987); later published as "The Pleasures of Imperialism" in Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); p. 45.

^{iv} Salman Rushdie, “Kipling.” In *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and New Criticism 1981-1991*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991; p. 80.

v. Woody Allen, "The Kugelmass Episode," In *Side Effects*. New York, 1975; p. 72.