

INTERPRETATION AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

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A memorable presidential address sets out an agenda that helps people explore new issues in new ways. This has certainly been the effect of Clive's paper on me and I want to use the occasion of the response not to pick apart this paragraph or to applaud this insight, but to display how my own thought has been stimulated by his paper. Hence, I see this presentation as more of an extended footnote to Clive than a critical response. In this footnote I want to point out a tension in the implication of postmodernism as a cultural and a political movement, and I want to do so by highlighting a tension in two of the general commitments that Clive alluded to. These commitments are first, the priority that is given to first person accounts and second, the denial of the essential self. Let me illustrate my concern by describing a recent incident that occurred at the University of Illinois.

A few weeks ago a woman doctoral student and a Fellow in the Program for the Study of Cultural Values and Ethics, which I direct, was giving a paper before our Fellow's seminar on the topic of La Malinche, a native woman who, when she was perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old, was presented as a slave to Cortes. Malinche knew both Aztec and Mayan languages and this knowledge enabled Cortes to take advantage of dissension within Montezuma's Aztec empire and to eventually gain Mexico as a Spanish Colony. Some say that if Cortes is the father of Mexico, Malinche, his concubine, slave, translator, consort and informant is its mother.

Needless to say Malinche has undergone considerable reinterpretation since the conquest, depending upon whose light is shining brightest in the rich collage which comprises the Mexican and the Mexican American national identity. Spaniards and Natives, men and women, conservative and revolutionaries have¹ all staked out a claim on La Malinche. She is savior and traitor, whore and saint, oppressor and oppressed, all rolled into one and, it seems that debates about Malinche are debates about the very heart and soul of Mexican identity. Here is a model for the kind of inquiry which Clive describes as postmodern. Those who study her are, as he says, often "'developing a working understanding' of reality and life, one which suits our purposes" and, as Clive notes, "what we arrive at is in part autobiographical, it reflects our 'personal narrative.'" This autobiographical character then raises questions, even suspicions, about the role of expert knowledge. The expert gaze can, like the evil eye, bring the subject under the power of another, destroying its capacity for self definition and control.

Paintings of Malinche show her to be dark, with broad features; and, depending on whether it is a Spanish or a native depiction, she is respectively either small or large, dwelling in the background or the foreground, passive or active. The student who related these events, Ann Storm, is tall, with red hair, light eyes, narrow features, and neither looks nor is Mexican. When she ended her presentation about Malinche, she related some of the criticisms she had received, as an Anglo woman, for undertaking to study this Mexican icon. She has been told that Mexican culture should not be studied by Anglo women and that to do so is but another example of white feminists exercising hegemonic power over their Third World sisters.

Anne's experience illustrates the cautionary note sounded by Clive. To paraphrase him: even the whitest, wealthiest male among our scholarly ancestors was struggling with basic issues of how humans are to survive, flourish, and find meaning in life. And surely Anne, hardly a paradigm of

male scholarship, is open to the richness of experience and interpretation represented by Malinche. I believe that in exploring the question as to whether Anne, a white, Anglo woman, has a right to do her dissertation on Malinche, we can begin to see some of the more general assumptions about human nature and culture which are entailed by certain commitments of postmodernism and which Clive rightly signals as a basic concern in his analysis of postmodernism.

I can think of three possible reasons that people might give for prohibiting a person from studying and writing about another culture. One of them is obviously legitimate, but uninteresting. The other two are both interesting and controversial.

The legitimate reason is that if a person does not have the prerequisite background knowledge, she is likely to simply get it wrong. What follows from this, however, is a word of caution about how to study another culture, not a prohibition against such study. After all, one of the reasons that we study another culture is precisely to gain such knowledge. And the reason we write about it is to communicate that knowledge to others. The general principles which Clive mentions are likely to be found in two other possible reasons. One of these is political. The other is epistemological.

To begin with the political, there are some very concrete material benefits that are at stake in who gets the right to interpret whom. After all, university positions are staked out on the basis of who is worth interpreting and who gets the right to interpret. Yet if this were the whole story, then the right to interpret or to be interpreted would simply be a matter of power. But if there is anything to the present objections being raised against third person narratives, it is that the right to interpret is wrongly granted to the powerful and denied to the powerless. The claim is based — it would seem — on some conception of right and wrong and not just on whether or not one has the power to interpret another.

Yet what is the basis of such a claim? Why should not the interpreter and interpreted just be a matter decided by inclination and interest? Why should rights — not usually a concept associated with postmodernism — be an issues at all? Answers to these questions often turn on very specific conditions which have to do both with the fragileness of a culture, and the status of its people — whether they occupy the position of oppressed or oppressor. Franz Fanon suggests something important when he proposed that the first job of the colonized is to get the colonizer out of their head, but just what is it that he is getting at? Is it that the colonizer's interpretation is simply and always false or is it something more?

We must recall that the demand that is being made — at least as Anne heard it — is not just that we all have a right to interpret ourselves, but that others have an obligation to refrain from interpreting me. But why would someone believe that they have an exclusive right to interpret themselves and why would they want to claim it? Exploring these questions may bring us closer to a glimpse at the general truths that Clive rightly suspects lie behind some postmodern commitments.

Let's begin with the assumption that, for whatever reason, some groups do have an exclusive claim on their own interpretation, and ask: Why would they want to exercise this right? Is one's culture something like one's home, where only members of the family have a legitimate right to dwell but where others must be invited in? After all, not all cultures seem concerned about asserting their right to self interpretation. The English seem quite happy when Shakespeare plays in Peoria or even in Nagoya, and the Irish do not as a rule complain when Joyce is studied in Moscow or even Urbana. Of course, these are, one might argue, the best products of a given culture, whereas with Malinche we have a much more ambiguous exemplar.

This is part of the problem, but only a part. Clearly, Benedict Arnold or Al Capone are not model exemplars of the character of the United States, but I see nothing inappropriate about some Mexican or Scotch person offering an interpretation of their impact. Indeed, some of the most astute interpretations of this country were performed by foreigners — Crèvecoeur, Toqueville and Myrdal come to mind.

The difference is that today the demand for exclusivity is made largely because the very status of a colonized people often means not just that they have incorporated the interpretation of the colonizer — as lazy, or stupid, or dirty — but that they have accepted the role of interpreted to the colonizer's interpreter. When this fear is justified, it means that the oppressed stand as an object to their own history — enabling the other to expropriate its meaning. In other words, in this demand for exclusivity of interpretation is what Clive speaks of as a general commitment to a specific conception of culture, value and inquiry. Here the commitment involves a subtle complex of principles that essentially says that dominant cultures have an obligation to provide dominated cultures with the space to inquire into their own history, and that when a culture is fragile and when its fragility is the result of a colonized past, priority must be given to its self interpretation.

The conception of rights developed here is not exactly like the right a home owner has to expel an unwanted guest. It is rather the right that a victim of an assault has to be given the time and the space to heal. And the concept of respect that is entailed is not the same as that which the phone solicitor exercises when she says thank you, good bye after the first rebuff. Here respect requires an understanding of the healing process and the need for autonomy. It does not necessarily mean that one must accept the vision of thick cultural boundaries and bounded interpretive borders which are sometimes insinuated into the understanding of this process.

Clive observes that terms such as “eurocentric” or “patriarchical” are bandied about too much, and if using these terms does in fact lead one to overlook the masses of oppressed European peoples — both women and men — then he is certainly right. If, on the other hand, their use is taken as a shorthand reminder of other voices and other experiences, then it has an important place in the discourse. The difficulty with the claim that is made for exclusive interpretation is not that it labels certain kinds of systematic distortions as paternalism or eurocentric. It is that it assumes that there is some real, inside-the-group interpretation which can be accessed only by members of the group themselves and which must be appropriated spontaneously and without interference from the outside. Yet this assumption rests upon a view of an essential, internal, spontaneous self which is both essentialist and romantic — two qualities which most postmodern theorists wish to reject.

Moreover, self interpretations need not always be liberating interpretations. Consider tribal groups which view colonizers as simply instruments of some larger force serving to punish them for transgressions against the spirit world. For self interpretation to be liberating, the self that interprets must at least see the self that is being interpreted as part of a process where liberation is a possible outcome. Yet this kind of interpretation is always relational and diachronic. Self is connected to the interpretations of other and therefore inevitably ascribes to others motives, interests, pressures and world views, but this requires understanding of the self-understanding of the oppressor. And it requires a vision of self over time in which there is a reason for challenging, interrogating, altering, dismissing, reincorporating and transcending these self interpretations.

In this process, interpretations and self understandings of the oppressed as well as of the oppressor undergo change in light of a new flow of previously disrupted interpretations. Hence the possibility of a self interpretation on the part of the oppressed which is not informed by the changing self interpretation of the oppressor is limited, although politically and psychologically it may serve some useful functions. To assume more — to believe that self interpretation necessarily reaches deeper or represents truer — is to accept both an essentialist's and a romantic's view of self, which goes against most of the tenets of postmodernism.

Postmodernism's rejection of the essential self does not fit well with the insistence that there are epistemic boundaries² that give priority to first person interpretations — whether the first person be singular or plural. The soundness of the postmodern view that self is relational and should be understood as denying priority to first person interpretations — if only for the reasons that not all relations have been actualized and that selfhood always contains evolutionary and deevolutionary potential. Hence, the self is more than its past and present manifestations, and the interaction of first

and third person interpretations are essential to the development of both individual and collective selves. The problem with colonialism is not that it rendered wrong interpretations, as if there were some essential, hidden self which blows a horn and rings a bell when we don't get the "right" interpretation. The problem is that it silences alternative interpretations and therefore curtails the first and third person dialogue. And the problem with silenced dialogue is that it destroys the very diversity that is required for the epistemic and ontological development of both oppressed and oppressor.

Hence, as Clive says: in addition to anti-racist, feminist, anti-ageist scholarship we need individual scholarship — Jane Doe scholarship, Jose Sanches scholarship, Shiu Chun Leung scholarship and, may I add, Anne Storm scholarship. And we also need Jose Sanches interpreting Shiu Chun Leung, and Shiu Chun Leung interpreting Anne Storm, and Anne Storm interpreting Jose Sanches. One does expect that any scholar operating in the postmodern world will be sensitive to dimensions of racism, sexism, ageism, classism, and will be alert for new and unnamed forms of discrimination. One expects too that scholars will seek to hear the voice of the other and seek to accept responsibility for the effects of the gazing that we do. But in the long run, the solution to any malady brought on by gazing in the way we experts gaze is to find ways to engage the object as subject, to see self as other, to help the healing process and reduce the need for oppressed cultures to build fortresses to protect their identities.

So ends my footnote to Clives' presidential address. Whether my own thoughts on postmodernism and interpretation are or are not correct, I believe that others reading his thoughtful and reflective presentation will find other issues to ponder in his rich analysis of post modern theory.

¹ Appreciation to Anne Storm for this informative presentation

² I am indebted for this insight to a comment by David Blacker.