

# 1

## TO GRASP THE WORDS AND DIE

Zen has always emphasized the essential identity or, perhaps, intimate linkage of appearance-disappearance, life-death in an unbroken chain. Death comes out of life, and life appears out of death or non-existence. Which is the true reality?

—Winston L. King, *Zen and the way of the sword*

Uma Swamy entered my office for her half-hour writing conference and placed her essay in front of me.<sup>1</sup> Uma believed that she was not a good writer: her attitude manifested itself in her writing in the form of careless errors, inferential leaps, and “awkward” sentences. When she reviewed her writing during conferences she often was able to correct and revise her work satisfactorily, so I surmised that her problems with writing were due primarily to her negative feelings about the activity. Because when reading her work I could see her struggling, not so much with the language as with herself, I tried to be as tactfully positive, and at the same time helpful, as possible.

Uma and I over the past several months had spent a great deal of time working on her writing, and I had consistently stressed the importance of paying attention to detail, yet as I read through the essay I noticed a number of what I perceived to be careless errors as well as an overall lack of focus. “Oh oh,” Uma remarked “your forehead’s wrinkling. I guess it’s not too good, huh?” Without looking up from the page that I was reading I handed her the first page of the essay. She began making corrections and audible comments like “oops,” “hmm,” and “what did I mean by *that*?” With that statement, we both looked up and laughed.

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"How's the semester going?" I asked.

"The usual," she replied. "You know, I stayed up until three o'clock writing this."

"And you can see where it needs improvement, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know why I don't see these things while I'm writing. I see them now."

"Attention to detail, Uma," I said, watching her frown and roll her eyes as if this were the thousandth time she'd heard me make the same remark.

"Yeah I know, but it's hard. And I'm trying. But you know I'm not a good writer." This time I frowned, and gave her my most tactful "I don't want to hear that" look. "So, what have you been up to lately," she asked, trying to match my tact by changing the subject.

"I'm working on an essay about the importance of teaching rhetoric and criticism called "To grasp the words and die."

"Why are you calling it *that*?"

"Initially I got the idea from the words of Kato Kiyomasa, a samurai warrior who wrote that when one is 'born into the house of the warrior, one's intentions should be to grasp the long and short swords and to die.'<sup>2</sup> When one is born into the house of rhetoric," I explained, "one's intentions should be to grasp the words and die. Rhetoric is how we grasp the words. Criticism is how we die. In order to be a good writer you've got to give something up, like the belief that you are not a good writer. You do that by reflecting on the process that you're involved in and the way you feel about it. You can't let the rules of writing scare you; you have to master them, control them, so that they don't control you. Language is like a double-edged sword. It's how power is created and maintained, and yet it is also how power is called into question. Historically, rhetoric has been the best way of calling power into question because it is first and foremost a critical activity. That's why I teach rhetoric and criticism, because they deal with both power and empowerment."

I mentioned how Georges Poulet's essay, "Criticism and the experience of interiority," related the process of reading to "dying," and explained Paulo Friere's belief that the teacher must experience a 'death of consciousness,' must "make his Easter" in order to provide students with a truly liberating and liberalizing education. Finally, I admitted: "I like the way it

sounds," and continued to read Uma's essay, making sure not to wrinkle my forehead.

"Uma," I said after reading through the essay, "you know how to deal with the mechanical problems and spelling errors, so we're not going to spend too much time on that. But you still need to be more focused and organized: remember, almost every essay you write will be critical, and you can use the three points of criticism as an organizing scheme. Start out by telling the reader what you are going to do through *description*, then present your analysis through *interpretation*, and finally tell the reader why what you've presented is important through *evaluation*."<sup>3</sup> I wrote the words one on top of the other in the margins of her essay, underlined the first letter of each, then circled all three in order to indicate that they all worked together to form a single process.

"Die," she said.

I couldn't believe it. There it was, the answer to her question concerning the title of my paper: the justification for which I had been searching. And it made perfect sense. But I never saw it. I had struggled with the problem of connecting criticism to dying, had arrived at some marginal justifications, had rationalized some seemingly reasonable connections, but had missed the most obvious explanation, perhaps because I had looked too hard. *Description. Interpretation. Evaluation. Die!* I was reminded of Shunryu Suzuki's comment in *Zen mind, beginner's mind*: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

## RHETORIC AND MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE

I was in the last year of my doctoral program in rhetoric at the University of Massachusetts when I discovered Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. I had written an essay on the shift between pre-Socratic and Platonic thought in ancient Greece and how it accounted for a problematic view of language in Western culture. During my three years of course work I had come to believe that there was something very wrong with the understanding of rhetoric that we had inherited from the Greeks as it was articulated in the Platonic dialogues. I believed that an understanding of rhetoric's bad reputation could be found

in Plato's preoccupation with *essential* reality. My professors explained to me that I should "just read the dialogues and know what they say. You can re-write the history of rhetoric *after* you get your degree."

When I had completed the paper, I asked my roommate to read it to see if it made sense. About an hour later she returned and exclaimed, "you have to read this book I just finished. It deals with a lot of the same things your paper talks about." She handed me a copy of *Zen* and pointed out the section on rhetoric and the ancient Greeks. As I read through it I felt a strange mixture of excitement and disappointment: Pirsig had indeed dealt with the same issues, but far more clearly and articulately. I had thought that I had discovered something original only to find that it had been done before, and had been done more effectively at that. Nonetheless, Pirsig's treatment of rhetoric's connection to "Quality" made me realize that I *had* discovered something, that what I had to say was important, useful, and perhaps even true.

To paraphrase Pirsig, I had been doing it right all along. I began reading more about the Sophists and pre-Socratics, and making connections between their views of language and many of the contemporary conflicts in social, political, and literary theory. I also made another important discovery: that the view of language in Western culture paralleled the views which Europeans had of Africans and African culture. Henry Louis Gates provided support for this view with his observation that "[e]thnocentrism and 'logocentrism' are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse as old as the *Phaedrus* of Plato, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness as an absence, a figure of negation."<sup>4</sup> And I found many more connections which suggested what contemporary black thinkers call the "Afrocentric" view of communication paralleled perspectives articulated by many of the early Sophists.

My dissertation became an exploration of the problem of racism using contemporary theories of language and communication. I began to believe that racism might be best understood as a participatory activity negotiated through symbolic interaction, based upon an agreement to disagree which I described as "complicitous." This conclusion was in many ways at odds with some contemporary theories of race relations, which view racism as a "white problem" (Bowser and Hunt, 1981), but consistent with views of theorists like David Wellman, who sees racism as a

manifestation of the same competitive behavior that whites engage in with each other (1980), and Albert Memmi, who asks in *The colonizer and the colonized* "Who can completely rid himself of bigotry in a country where everyone is tainted by it?" (1967, p. 23).

It was the work of Vincent Crapanzano, who follows Memmi's line of argument,<sup>5</sup> that provided me with the concepts and vocabulary necessary to articulate the relationship between rhetoric and racism that I had been trying to explain. Crapanzano's discussion of "essentialism" and its connection to racism had at one and the same time both clarified and complicated the connections I had drawn between rhetoric and race. Rhetoric, when seen from an essentialist perspective is problematical precisely because it calls into question a singular reality, what Richard Lanham calls "serious reality" (1976). Race confronts that same reality by posing differences which call into question the assumptions which "serious reality" engenders, differences that can only be explained within the contexts of relative and contingent "rhetorical" realities.

Essentialism attempts to "free us from rhetoric," but as Richard Lanham explains "we cannot be freed from it" since freedom from rhetoric would force us to "divest ourselves of what alone makes social life tolerable, of the very mechanism of forgiveness." Lanham's explanation suggested that rhetoric offered a vehicle for transcending the black and white judgments of essentialist thought through its recognition that, ultimately, to be true to ourselves, we have to judge others as we would have them judge us. Lanham's "rhetorical ideal of life" provided a "Golden Rule" of judgment that, I believed, could humanize the problematic discourse of negative difference.

I began to believe that the problem of race, like the problem of rhetoric, was basically a problem of judgment based on *essentially* negative differences, differences that were at the very core of Western thought. The assumption of ontological difference, of a world composed of separate and distinct beings has, since the ancient Greeks, been axiomatic in Western thought, and it has shaped and defined both descriptive and prescriptive assertions about the nature of reality. Both physical and human nature have been viewed from the standpoint of a logic of identity that strives for certainty, that attempts to determine reality in the last instance, to discover final truths. Both philosophical idealism

and realism, and the foundationist and externalist epistemological strategies they often emphasize, assume the existence of a justificatory ground separate and distinct from human beings and situated in the formal or substantive properties of reality.<sup>6</sup> And yet, this seemingly self-evident assumption has not brought us much closer to understanding our selves or the world in which we live in any enduring sense, for we continue to judge and act against the Other, whether we define that Other in terms of class, gender, language or race, in ways that we would never apply to ourselves.

This became most apparent to me when, in writing my dissertation I asked the following questions based upon the conclusions at which I had tentatively arrived: if racism is based on the problem of negative difference, then am I not perpetuating that problem when I argue for positions that assume that whites are *essentially* different than blacks? How can I know that, as Robert Terry<sup>7</sup> suggests, "*to be white in America is not to have to think about it,*" without accepting the assumption that whites and blacks are *in fact essentially different*? If I assume that I possess some knowledge or faculty that a white person does not, have I not committed the same fallacy that whites have been accused of committing against blacks, the fallacy of special pleading, which occurs when "one disputant tries to reap the benefit of an argument which he later pleads has a special reference to his own case but which somehow does not apply to others"?<sup>8</sup>

In short, I began to reflect upon the implications of judging a white person, or any other person for that matter, on the basis of standards and assumptions which I could not likewise apply to myself. Such a judgment would violate what Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts Tyteca call "the rule of justice," which "requires giving identical treatment to beings or situations of the same kind."<sup>9</sup> If black people and white people are "of the same kind," then to make a judgment about whites that I could not apply to myself would be to make a consciously bad judgment. And yet, as I reviewed the literature on race, and examined blacks and whites discoursing on racial issues, it was clear that the rule of justice was consistently being violated by all of the participants in the discourse. The problem of race, I concluded, needed to be addressed not only as a problem of language, but as a problem of epistemology if its solution was ever to be isolated.



This conclusion led me to a line of thinking in contemporary physics which suggests that the problem of negative difference has had a profound influence on human symbolic action and material interaction. David Bohm proposes that the belief that the physical and social worlds are composed of separate and distinct entities, or "fragments" as he calls them, "is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion." Bohm relates his discussion to the relationship between essence and race when he asserts that

the widespread and pervasive distinctions between people (race, nation, family, profession, etc., etc.) which are now preventing mankind from working together for the common good, and indeed, even for survival, have one of the key factors of their origin in a kind of thought that treats *things* as inherently divided, disconnected, and "broken up" into yet smaller constituent parts. Each part is considered to be essentially independent and self-existent.<sup>10</sup>

I would discover later that Bohm's research in physics pointed to the importance of coherent dialogue as a vehicle for transcending the limitations of epistemological strategies that emphasize reductionistic and fragmentary notions of essence.<sup>11</sup>

My initial confrontation with Bohm's work, however, provided a physical parallel to the symbolic manifestations of negative difference, and further implicated essentialist thinking in the problem of racism. I began to wonder whether or not the material divisions perpetuated by racism were the result of a way of thinking, and this insight returned me to the book that had first inspired me to explore the relationship between rhetoric and race, Pirsig's *Zen*. In his discussion of the birth of rational philosophy in the time of the Sophists of ancient Greece, Pirsig eloquently explains the problem of negative difference when he argues that the divisions of "mind and matter, subject and object, form and substance" are "dialectical inventions": perhaps the "illusions" of which Bohm speaks? The legacy of these divisions and illusions continues to haunt us today in the realm of race relations in particular, but also in the realms of human relations in general. As a student of rhetoric I had discovered that the same language that had created these divisions could potentially remedy them, and as a teacher of rhetoric I believed that I could offer

students a chance to enter the discourse well armed, able to protect themselves, and with an understanding of the incredible responsibility the power of the word entailed.

### RHETORICS OF POWER AND EMPOWERMENT

In empowering students it became clear that the complicity of reason and the university needed to be exposed. Robert Pirsig's previous personality, a character he calls "Phaedrus," refers to the university in a series of lectures to his students as a "Church of Reason," the primary goal of which is "Socrates' old goal of truth, in its ever changing forms, as it's revealed by the process of rationality. Everything else," he writes, "is subordinate to that" (p. 133). The metaphor which Pirsig uses to characterize reason is a knife, an instrument that dissects and categorizes the world, defines it in terms of its essential elements. Pirsig's Phaedrus becomes obsessed with only one side of the blade of this knife, however, the side that discriminates and subordinates parts to the whole. Although he seeks a critical sensibility which emancipates, his search for essential reality leads only to a critical sensibility by which he is himself enslaved, a critical sensibility defined by an almost fanatical faith in the power of reason.

It was this same faith in reason that I saw as central to the discourse of negative difference and its impact on our understanding of rhetoric and race. It was also central to the relationship between students and their teachers, and like Pirsig, I began to see it as a vehicle for creating followers instead of leaders, consumers instead of critics. "The student's biggest problem was a slave mentality which had been built into him by years of carrot-and-whip grading, a mule mentality which said, 'If you don't whip me, I won't work'" (p. 175). Like Pirsig, I began to believe that this mentality arose out of a certain way of looking at rhetoric, and consequently, of looking at the world.

And I found support for this belief in *The trial of Socrates*, in which I. F. Stone argues that Socrates "and his disciples saw the human community as a herd that had to be ruled by a king or kings, as a sheep by a shepherd" (p. 38). The ancient "philosopher king" of both Socrates and Plato, the only person wise enough to know that he knows nothing, is replaced by the



teacher in modern essentialist education. The result is an educational praxis that is both elitist and oppressive. As Stone explains:

It followed—at least for Socrates and his disciples—that since virtue was knowledge and knowledge was unattainable, ordinary men, the many, had neither the virtue nor the knowledge required for self government. By this labyrinthine metaphysical route Socrates was back to his fundamental proposition that the human community was a herd, and could not be trusted to govern itself (p. 40).

Stone concludes his chapter on “Socrates and Rhetoric” by suggesting the logical end of the Socratic rejection of rhetoric: “The negative dialectic of Socrates—if the city had taken it seriously—would have made equity and democracy impossible. His identification of virtue with an unattainable knowledge stripped common men of hope and denied their capacity to govern themselves” (Stone, p. 97). This negative dialectic, which for centuries masqueraded as dialogue, reduces rhetoric to a slave of philosophy, and creates in the minds of the many a “slave mentality.”

Pirsig recognizes that this “slave mentality” arises in the student’s mind precisely when rhetoric is reduced, as both Socrates and Plato had done, to a simple set of techniques used by those who have discovered the “Truth,” for persuading those who cannot learn it on their own. Unlike Plato and Socrates, Aristotle saw in the human condition a capacity for self-government, and viewed rhetoric as a critical activity, defining it as “the faculty [power] of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion.”<sup>12</sup> The question then becomes one of ends: *why* do we discover these available means of persuasion? To persuade others? *Or to understand how others are attempting to persuade us?* The answer, of course, is both; but for centuries emphasis has mostly been placed on the former, and the latter has suffered so greatly that it has only been recognized in the privileged discourses of contemporary critics that rarely reach students, most of whom in any case have been persuaded that they “do not yet know enough” to understand what these critics are saying anyway.

Pirsig’s character Phaedrus decided to emphasize the latter, and began by asking himself and his students the question which

circumscribes all means and ends: "And what is good Phaedrus, and what is not good—Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?" In a society which asserts that we do indeed need someone to tell us these things, to explain what is good and what is not good, such words are subversive. They call into question the need for teachers and critics and other sources of externalized authority which negate the individual's sense of self and ability to make decisions on her own.<sup>13</sup> In a society in which schools are a place where "you let the dying society put its trip on you," where they "teach you by pushing you around, by stealing your will and your sense of power, by making timid square apathetic slaves out of you—authority addicts,"<sup>14</sup> the calling into question of externalized authority is dangerous.

And because one of the purposes of rhetoric is this calling into question of authority, it becomes a dangerous subject to teach, unless of course one can disguise it as something less dangerous, as a simple system of "forms and mannerisms," as a way of talking about the world, but never as a way of creating it. So schools don't teach rhetoric, at least not until it is much too late in a student's career to enable them the openly question and criticize the teacher in a legitimate search for "truth."<sup>15</sup> Pirsig's Phaedrus attempted to subvert this system by teaching students that they *did* know what is good and what is not, that they *did* have something important to say, that rhetoric was more than forms and mannerisms. Rhetoric, for Phaedrus, was *the Good*, the edifice of Quality that held society together. The price of this insight for Phaedrus was, for all intents and purposes, mental death—madness.

But Phaedrus survived his ordeal, and became the personality we know as Pirsig, and explained it all in *Zen*.<sup>16</sup> Using his experiences as a teacher of composition he argued passionately that schools don't teach students to seek the truth, but merely to believe what they are told. And what they are told is that they do not know enough to know what the truth is, but that one day, if they work hard and listen to their teachers, they will be able to know: they will have access to the privileged discourse that, as David Bartholomae explains, allows them to "invent the university": the discourse of essential knowledge. They will then become writers "who can successfully manipulate an audience," who can "both imagine and write from a position of privilege," and who can "see themselves within a privileged discourse, one

that already includes and excludes groups of readers." They will become players in a system of power relations in which self and Other are at odds and in conflict, and thus they "must be either equal to or more powerful than those they address" (1986. p. 9). They must not only learn to exercise power, but also to maintain its well-defined parameters.

What Pirsig and Bartholomae do not explain, however, is how this problem of privileged discourse relates to the problem of race. For that we need to consider Jerry Farber's essay *The student as nigger*. School for Farber is a place where students are forced to submit to the system and its disempowering methods of instruction, where the goal is to achieve good grades and "please the teacher." In a discussion of rhetoric as it is traditionally taught in the writing class he argues that the "very essence of Freshman English is that term paper they force out of you," a paper defined by grammatical rules and divorced from rhetorical implications: "In perfect order, impeccably footnoted, unreal and totally useless—that term paper, that empty form, is pretty much the content of the course: submission—alienation—learning to live a pretend intellectual life, pretend caring about pretend things" (p. 23). This is precisely how Lanham describes rhetoric when viewed from a "serious" or essentialist perspective: "Hold always before the student rhetoric's practical purpose: to win, to persuade. But train for this purpose with continual verbal play, rehearsal for the sake of rehearsal" (p. 2). This is the "empty rhetoric" both condemned and at the same time constrained by philosophy, the good slave that loves and mimics its master to survive, and accepts a subservient position never to be called into question.

But this acceptance, Lanham explains, runs counter to rhetoric's critical impulse, and rhetoric when defined within the context of its own coordinates, offers a type of emptiness more consistent with the philosophy of the East than the West. Such rhetoric offers

a training in tolerance, if by that we mean getting inside another's skull and looking out. It offered the friendliest of advices on how to tap into any and all sources of pleasure. It habituated its students to a world of contingent purpose, of perpetual cognitive dissonance, plural orchestration. It specialized less in knowledge than in the way knowledge is held, which is how Whitehead defines wisdom" (p. 7).

This is a rhetoric not only of persuasion, but also of inquiry; not merely a counterpart of dialectic, but also a vehicle of dialogue. It is a rhetoric based upon a reality of diversity and contingency, that recognizes a variety of complementary truths, no one inherently better than the others, and all implicated in each other. This is a rhetoric capable of interrogating the essentializing consequences of physical and psychological division, one that is equally able to consider the evidence of personal experience as that of authority, a knife capable of cutting through the illusions and delusions of rational and material reality to a coherent theory of knowledge situated somewhere between "a positivist reality and a Platonic, between realism and idealism."<sup>17</sup> Equipped with this double-edged sword of the word, I left graduate school, took my first teaching position, and found myself following the way of the warrior.

### THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

Through the train's/ unwashed window,/ snaking slow over/  
 Longfellow,/ I spy the river/ wrinkling;/ an unfinished/ por-  
 trait/ sketched by some/ psychotic artist/ living on the Hill/  
 amidst the swell/ of tenements up/ into skyscrapers—/  
 scratching/ the muffled blue,/ and drinking/ the symmetry  
 of sky./ Home is a place/ where you may find/ a reason/ to  
 love life,/ or find the/ difference/ between dreams/ and what  
 dreams/ seem to be, or/ find the hurt/ of knowing,/ too, that  
 else-/ where so much/ more of life/ is longing/ to be loved;/  
 and that may be,/ of all things/ found, the/ hardest hurt to/  
 have to learn./ Yet even now,/ as this same/ train accepts/  
 the subtle/ promise of a tunnel's/ northward/ darkness,/ I  
 hope that home,/ my tendril heart,/ forgives me/ for my  
 dreams./ But dreams/ are not an/ easy thing/ to be/ forgiven  
 for.

I had written the poem "Between two cities" in my junior year in college, and analyzed it for the first time when working on my master's degree. As a writer I had intended to honor the form of my favorite poet, Robert Penn Warren, whose poem "Pondy Woods" had inspired me to begin writing poetry at age thirteen. As a critic, armed with the knife of analysis, I discovered that,

beneath its surface, "Between two cities" spoke to the tension and tensiveness of being between two states of thinking and being. As a teacher, returning to the school from which I had received my undergraduate degree, I hoped to offer my students some sense of the stylistic and substantive experience of a reader and writer caught in between two cities of the mind.

I began in an introductory literature course by explaining Pirsig's notion of the dialectical knife, and what he calls the "classic-romantic dichotomy," the split between science and art. At the top of the board I wrote "classic" and "romantic", and began listing dichotomous terms below them: philosophy and rhetoric, yes and no, right and wrong, black and white, good and bad, true and false, male and female. With this last set I heard a loud gasp, and turned to see a young man staring at the board. "That's it," he said, "Oh my God, that's it." Most of the other students, those who were paying attention, looked at him quizzically, but he just stared at the board in rapt contemplation, discovering something that he had already known. I continued my list, and concluded it with the final definitive pair: teacher and student. The young man who had gasped left the class quickly with a disturbed look on his face.

The next several classes involved an amplification of the dichotomies, their connection to literature and criticism, and the relationship between language and power with an emphasis on its role in the classroom. At the conclusion of one class I indicated the assigned readings, and explained that each student would focus on one text and report on it to the rest of the class. Instead of everyone reading all of the poems, short stories and plays in the anthology, I explained, I thought it would be more useful to have each student focus on specific texts and play the role of "teacher" for her peers by presenting her own critical insights to the rest of the class. As I looked around the room, I noticed that several students looked uncomfortable with the assignment, especially one young woman sitting in the last seat to the right in the front row.

"Is something wrong," I asked?

I heard her say, very quietly and without looking up, "You are an asshole."

"O.K.," I said, pausing and taking a slow breath. "I just thought that this would be the most productive way of using our class time, and that it would allow us to deal with some of the

issues concerning rhetoric and criticism that we've been discussing. The only other alternative that I can see is having everyone read everything, and I just felt that we should focus on quality instead of quantity. In any case, if you have another alternative I'd be more than happy to hear it, and if the class would rather do that, then it's fine by me." The student seemed a little less exasperated, and eventually said, "I guess that's a good way of doing it."

"So, do you still think I'm an asshole?"

The young man who earlier in the semester had experienced his epiphanal moment, gasped again.

"What's wrong," I asked.

"I've never heard a teacher say asshole before!" he said.

"What do you mean," I said. "She called me an asshole."

The young woman looked me, shocked and horrified. "I said you are *impossible*."

"Oh," I said, "I thought you said I was an asshole."

The young man looked at me, incredulous. "But would you have *really* reacted that way if she had called you an asshole?"

"I reacted the way I reacted," I said, trying to sound like a Zen master. "Whether she believes I am impossible or an asshole, she is entitled to say how she feels. If I had reacted in any other way; if for example I had berated her, or thrown her out of class, and lectured you all about respect when addressing the teacher, and found out in the course of the discussion from one of you that she said that I was impossible, then what could I do? Accuse you all of lying to protect her? Then, I really would be an asshole, wouldn't I?" It was, I felt, a lesson in the rhetorical ideal of life, of power, empowerment and tolerance.

Unlike a Zen master, however, I wasn't able to maintain the same mindset in all situations. I was crossing Longfellow Bridge on the train that runs between Cambridge and Boston reading Allan Bloom's *The closing of the American mind*. As I read Bloom's discussion of race relations in the university I became very angry. "This man," I thought, "is a racist. This is textbook racism: blaming the victim, claiming that white students have done all they can to remedy the problems of racism, arguing that affirmative action leads to mediocrity! I've been to the University of Massachusetts, where black students were attacked by a mob of white students following the 1986 World Series, and the University of Michigan where a series of racist



incidents occurred during the same year. *This man does not know what he is talking about.*" I began thinking of the essay that I would write in response to this obviously bigoted book, when I realized that I had suddenly fallen into the abyss of my own analyses. I was guilty of special pleading, had fallen prey to the rhetoric of racism. The problem of negative difference had again reared its ugly head, and it was looking right at me! I had tossed tolerance out the window because I didn't agree with what Bloom had to say. So much for practicing what I preached!

*"You are an asshole."*

As the train approached "the subtle promise of a tunnel's northward darkness," I realized that I had been duped, drawn into an argument that I myself had claimed was problematical. Once again, I had to reflect on what it meant to live between two cities, to live with myself and what I claimed to believe in. Two years later I found myself between two cities once again as an instructor in a basic writing course at a large midwestern university. I was the second reader for a group of student portfolios, and the assessment director had asked us to record our responses. I had received the portfolio of a student who described himself as "vice president of college Republicans," and who had written essays on the university's proposed mandatory racism class and on a request by students of color for "minority lounges." He opposed both, and I had to make an "objective" assessment of his writing, regardless of how I felt about his politics. The following excerpts from the response I gave to his portfolio give some sense of what I experienced as a critical reader and teacher in a position of power.

"This cover sheet is very interesting. The student begins, 'Like a highly-gilded sword, the written word is both art and weapon.' I like this. I find it both creative and insightful, but I know that this is a part of my own bias about words and swords. As I read through the cover sheet I find the writing clear, organized and interesting, even though I've been told that the writer is the 'vice president of college Republicans,' and that his essays deal with racism. At this point, I think I know what I am in for, but read on, through two revised essays and the impromptu. All the way through I am sure that this student is a 'very good' writer, although I know that many of his arguments are fallacious at best, and having done a great deal of research into the relationship between language and race, racist by any reasonable standard.

"Nonetheless, when I finish my first reading of this portfolio I give [the student] a score of '1' because, regardless of how much I disagree with his position, and regardless of how well I can argue against it using both formal and substantive 'critical' analyses, his writing in my mind, based on the assignment, and our collective 'general characteristics of effective writing' standards, is quite good, and in fact, superior. At this point I go back to the two revised essays and give them a second read, trying to make sure that I have not overlooked any complex structures, insightful arguments, or stylistic uses of language. Here I see some holes in the argument, some leaps in logic, and an interesting mixture of fact and fallacy.

"[He] writes in 'Look Who's for Segregation Now': 'When a handful of [student assembly] representatives had the courage to cite that this violated [the Student Assembly's] constitution because it discriminated on the basis of race, [one student organization] sent in a small army of thugs to [the Student Assembly] the following week, savaging the offending representatives with unfounded charges of racism, and in general intimidating the hell out of [them.]' *Thugs. Savaging.* This is, in my mind and based on my knowledge of the subject, textbook racism, but the argument that he is making prior to this is textbook argumentation—one of the Aristotelian special *topoi*, using an opponent's argument against him or her—and in fact, it's not a bad argument in terms of form and substance. So [his] first score remains a '1', and at this time I am sure of this score. I do not need to reflect on what kind of '1' this is, high, medium or low, or whether or not a workshop is in order. It is a strong '1'. The kid is a good writer.

"This is the most interesting part of this process of reading a portfolio. I saw lots of strengths, few weaknesses, and three pieces of writing that were written by a very capable writer who had understood the assignments given to him and composed to the best of his ability. I also saw a student who knows how to traffic in argumentative racist discourse in a way that, in its own right, exemplifies this thing we call 'critical thinking.' I think anyone who 'objectively' reads this portfolio would feel the same way. Perhaps [the student] puts it best. 'One essay deals with the mandatory racism class, the other with minority lounges. I argue against each for reasons I hope you will agree with. If not, I'm sure you will at the very least enjoy how they are written. . . . So as to you dear reader, I offer up these gilded swords. If you be not

a warrior, then by all means simply revel in their beauty.”

Reading this student's portfolio was like reading Allan Bloom's *The closing of the American mind*: both challenged me to reflect *critically* on my own beliefs concerning what it meant to be “open minded.” Both confronted me with the experience of being “aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, *no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter.*”<sup>18</sup> I could easily judge either of these two individuals in terms of *their* ignorance, of *their* not knowing what *they* were talking about: but I knew that, by doing so, I would be subscribing to the myth of difference, of *negative difference*, that is at the root of those discourses that we choose to term “racist.” I knew that to do so would be to knowingly and willingly violate the rule of justice, to reaffirm my own smug sense of superiority; I knew that to do so would make me, *essentially*, no different than those I would condemn.

And I knew that I derived that knowledge from a critical faculty, one which discovers “in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion,” one which enabled me to understand race as a *rhetorical* phenomenon. Thus, I had to see Allan Bloom and the student as individuals who, like me, make judgments based upon their experiences and understanding of a world in which we all live. To see my own opinions and judgments as somehow superior would be to impose my own agenda on them, and to limit the possibilities of discourse to the mutual exclusivity of truth and falsity that is at the heart of essentialism, of a serious reality that would do away with the rhetorical capacities of tolerance and forgiveness. Allan Bloom induced me to recognize my epistemic complicity; the student influenced me to “make my Easter,” to look into own beliefs about what it means to be a human being who treats others as they would treat me. They helped me to look into myself and *Die*.

This is the type of death that results, I believe, from what Habermas calls the “emancipatory cognitive interest,”<sup>19</sup> the human capacity for critical self-reflection, a process which enables us to move beyond argumentative essentialism to some common ground of understanding. I experienced how wonderfully radical this notion was when working with a student who had been assigned to write on Friere's “Banking Concept of Education.”<sup>20</sup> At one point during our discussion she asked: “isn't he just changing the currency?” From her own perspective she

believed that Friere's "radical" approach to education substituted one agenda, "the liberation of the oppressed," for another, "the oppression of the liberated." Who was I to tell her different?

She saw through the discourse of negative difference to an underlying agreement to disagree, and recognized the same inconsistency that Charles Paine has commented on in his essay, "Relativism, radical pedagogy, and the ideology of paralysis." Paine suggests that many 'radical' critics "do themselves a disservice by conceptualizing ultimate goals and rigid political positions; and at times they seem surprisingly naive in thinking that sound method or correct content by themselves will lead to the creation of desirable political values and to successful radical teaching" (p. 558). In short, they participate in the same essentialist discourse that they attempt to overthrow, without recognizing—or acknowledging that they, in fact, are simply "changing the currency."

Paine's essay does much to highlight the paradoxical position of radical pedagogy in terms of its relationship to criticism. "That is, critical thinking—the ability to transcend limited or oppressive consciousness, becoming critically aware of the status quo, one's society, and one's own consciousness as historically contingent—is fundamental" to the agenda of 'radical pedagogy' (pp. 558–59). Certainly the self-reflexive function of criticism is central to the radical pedagogical agenda, but a recognition of its self-legitimizing function must also be addressed to offer students the full range of "alternative possibilities"<sup>21</sup> presupposed by critical thinking. Paine concurs: "We perhaps should make it clear that we are teaching one type of critical thinking among potentially numerous types, one that allows us to recognize the oppression of the dominant order" (p. 564). He warns against the dangerous possibility of shifting from one form of essentialism to another, and demands that we interrogate, and take responsibility for, the justificatory strategies upon which we base our arguments for emancipation and empowerment:

Since we acknowledge that there are no transcendent anchors to consult, no transcendent goals to justify the way things are or the actions we take, and no transcendent goods to teach our students, we must cultivate the courage to assume full responsibility for our actions, influence, and belief, which we try to pass on to our students. (p. 569)

Paine offers a powerful challenge to those who wish to engage in radical and emancipatory pedagogy. He invites us to tread the path of the warrior by asking the question with which Pirsig prefaces his "inquiry into values:" "*And what is good, Phaedrus, and what is not good—Need we ask anyone to tell us these things!*"

### FACING THE GODS?

*Need we ask anyone to tell us these things!* Traditionally, the philosophical answer to the question has been, "Yes, we do. We need the dialecticians, *those who know the truth*, to tell us what is good and what it not good." This is the answer which we have inherited through essentialist educational philosophies, that has been justified by the Socratic injunction that the one who knows—the teacher—should rule, should decide what is good and what is not. The rhetorical answer has, however, been far less clear-cut and—at least for most philosophers—far less satisfactory. It defies the logic of essentialism, of "true and false discourse," by offering what Jean-Pierre Vernant identifies as the "logic of polarity," that is exemplified in the rhetoric and the "anti-logic" of the Sophists, the *dissoi-logoi*.<sup>22</sup> One sees a similar "logic of polarity" in the Zen notion of the "center of being." As Herrigel (1974) explains in *The method of Zen*: "The center of being is *beyond* all opposites just because it dwells within them, and *within* all opposites just because it 'is' beyond them. It is without contradictions and yet full of contradictions" (p. 80). One also sees it in the realms of "plural orchestration," and "perpetual cognitive dissonance" that are the essence of the "rhetorical ideal of life."

And just as the "logic of polarity" can lead to "the center of being," the "rhetorical ideal of life," which necessitates surrendering the central self, can lead to the "egolessness" that the student of Zen seeks. "The essential thing is," writes Herrigel, "to become egoless in a radical sense, so that 'egotself' does not exist any more, either as a word or as a feeling, and turns into an unknown quantity" (p. 93). In Zen, this "unknown quantity" that goes beyond words and feelings is situated in the lived experience of the here and now, and is, at least for Herrigel, foreign to rhetoric. Herrigel's understanding of rhetoric is, however, a rhetoric defined in "serious" terms, a rhetoric that has haunted us since the "triumph of philosophy and the end of tragedy."<sup>23</sup> And

this, suggests Lanham, is the tragedy of rhetorical education in the West. "The recurring attempts to make rhetorical training respectable in serious terms all go astray. The contribution rhetorical reality makes to Western reality as a whole is greatest when it is most uncompromisingly itself, insists most strenuously on its own coordinates" (p. 6). Rhetoric and language have been neglected and negated, precisely because their paradoxical natures could not be adequately explained in "serious" terms. The result has been the creation and perpetuation of oppressive social and pedagogical situations which use the power of words to disempower, and undermine the transformative capacities of language.

This potential for transformation is explained by James Hillman: "The relation between word and force is also reflected in society, suggesting to me that the rule of coercive violence increases when our art of convincing words declines. *Peitho* takes on an overwhelming importance both in the healing of the soul and the healing of society" (p. 20). *Peitho*, the ancient art of rhetoric, empowers precisely because it offers the possibility of change, and the possibility to negotiate the contexts and constraints of communication between persons, of reality, and of power: "Through words we can alter reality; we can bring into being and remove from being; we can shape and change the very structure and essence of what is real. The art of speech becomes the primary mode of moving reality" (p. 21). Only recently have we begun to transcend an understanding of rhetoric as "mere words," and moved to the painful recognition of the words at the center of our social and psychological worlds.

Indeed, even contemporary critical theory, perhaps the most powerful manifestation of the "serious" premises of reality, has returned to the centrality of language and its emancipatory possibilities: Habermas, echoing the ancient Greek rhetorician Isocrates, contends in *Knowledge and human interests*: "What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus." This "unconstrained consensus" is manifest in what Habermas calls "the ideal speech situation," an environment which is free of constraint and domination in which true and productive dialogue can occur.<sup>24</sup> Habermas connects this ideal speech situation to the emancipatory function of critique: "In self-reflection