

But What's the Right Answer? Bottom Lines in Teaching the Humanities

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From the vantage point of 2008, we can say with some confidence that neither side won the so-called culture wars that rocked the teaching of the humanities in American universities during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Those who wanted to abolish the predominantly white male canon (the Great Books of Dead White Males) did not vanquish the defenders of the Western tradition. But the defenders also witnessed a significant expansion of that canon to include a more diverse set of thinkers and writers and a widespread acceptance of the principle that the canon should be continually revised. Now that we humanities scholars have achieved relative consensus about our objects of study, we can, I believe, benefit from looking more closely at an unsettled controversy that has garnered less attention but whose stakes are equally high: what exactly should we be teaching our students about this diverse and expanded canon? After all, we often strenuously disagree with each other when it comes to the practical task of interpreting and evaluating a literary work, a painting, a film, an historical event. Furthermore, we have a meta-disagreement, that is, we disagree about whether so much disagreement is a good or bad thing. Since the days of the culture wars, Gerald Graff has been arguing that the best response to all this disagreement is to bring it into the classroom by, in his phrase, "teaching the conflicts." This move will, in Graff's view, have two positive effects. It will increase students' engagement with their objects of study, thus enlivening classrooms for professor and student alike. Teaching the conflicts will also convey the lesson that in many areas of human experience we cannot find a single right answer but instead must learn how to choose among competing alternatives—or, indeed, come up with our own new alternative. But others argue that in our post-modern, post-structuralist age, we have mistakenly celebrated the proliferation of possible answers, thereby sending the message that ambiguity and uncertainty are all we know on earth and all we need to know. The trouble with teaching the conflicts is that its overriding effect is to reinforce this relativism by sending the message that, in the final analysis, no position is right.

Our disagreements and our metadisagreement, as Graff himself has pointed out, often put our students in a difficult position. As they move from course to course, they do not encounter consistent assumptions about the nature of knowledge but instead must learn which assumptions are in force in each class. As Stanley Fish notes in telling the anecdote that gives the title to his book about interpretive communities, the bolder student will occasionally voice the collective quandary by asking a question such as "Is there a text in this class?" which turns out to mean "in this class do we believe in poems and things or is it just us?" (49). Furthermore, students often have legitimate objections to the compromise that many faculty now profess and that ultimately underlies Graff's approach to teaching the conflicts. This middle stance position stipulates that we do not seek single, right answers but we do distinguish between better and worse answers. Presented with this view, some students ask, if there are no grounds for saying that some answers are right and others wrong, how can there be grounds for distinguishing better and worse? If you can spell out these grounds, then why aren't they good enough for distinguishing between right and wrong? If you can't spell out these grounds, then isn't the whole idea of better and worse just an evasion that keeps you from admitting that all answers are equal, that is, equally subjective and thus neither right nor wrong? In other words, if the bottom line is that there are no bottom lines, then can't I appeal to that meta-bottom line to say that my answers are as good as any one else's?

In this essay, I propose to contribute to this debate by suggesting that it needs to be put on a different footing. Rather than conducting the debate by trying to determine the best position on the spectrum running from the dogma of the single right answer to the relativism of all-answers-are-equal, I believe we can advance our understanding of the issues - and - better communicate them to our students - by recognizing that we humanists ask different kinds of questions and that these questions have different kinds of appropriate answers. Furthermore, as we teach our students to identify these different kinds of questions, we can also give as much attention to the question of how to answer them as we do to the answers themselves. In so doing, we will be fulfilling one of the most important purposes of education in the humanities: linking bodies of knowledge with skills for working with that knowledge—in other terms, teaching both knowing-that and knowing-how. In order to keep the discussion concrete and manageable within the short space of

this essay, I will focus on just two kinds of typical questions, ones that get asked within my discipline of literary studies, though the first has the advantage of also being primarily a historical question. When was William Shakespeare born? What is the meaning of *The Tempest*? As I analyze these questions and various ways of answering them, I shall also be demonstrating what I mean by "knowing how" —in this case "how to draw larger conclusions from reflection on critical practices."

"When was Shakespeare born?" is clearly a question that aspires to a right answer. Most *Jeopardy* contestants and many undergraduates who studied Shakespeare in high school would be able to supply the standard answer: April 23, 1564. But what many who know this fact do not also know is that this apparently right answer is not definitive. Researchers have not found a birth record for Shakespeare, but they have found a baptismal record dated April 26, 1564. They then chose April 23rd as the answer to the question for three main reasons. (1) In Stratford in the 1560s, babies were typically baptized shortly after they were born. (2) April 23rd is the feast day of St. George, the patron saint of England. (3) April 23, 1616 is the date of Shakespeare's death. Knowing this information leads us to the following conclusions:

1. The question, "When is William Shakespeare's birthday celebrated?" has one right answer: April 23rd.
2. The question "when was William Shakespeare born?" also has one right answer, but it may be different from the answer to "when is Shakespeare's birthday celebrated?" and to this point that one right answer is not fully known.
3. Nevertheless, many possible answers to "when was Shakespeare born?" are wrong—indeed, any date after April 26, 1564 is wrong as is any earlier date that would indicate Shakespeare lived a significantly longer life than any of his contemporaries.
4. A few not-wrong answers are better than most others: April 22, 1564 and April 24, 1564 are better than all the rest except April 23, 1564, and, indeed, the degree of their superiority increases as the temporal distance between the proposed dates and April 23, 1564 increases.
5. The choice of April 23, 1564 shows that among equally right answers, sometimes we can still determine one as better or best.

This fifth conclusion is worth pausing over. Since the search for the right answer has not produced documentary evidence to allow us to choose between April 23rd and April 22nd or April 24th, we can say

that they are all equally correct. Nevertheless, when forced to make a choice, the 23rd easily emerges as the best. It is best because it has both symbolism and symmetry, two qualities that humanists cherish, on its side. How fitting that England's greatest poet, her secular saint, should be born on the feast day of the country's patron saint. And how elegant that Shakespeare, the careful craftsman, should have the same birthday and death day.

We can test this conclusion that April 23, 1564 is both partially right and the best among other partially right answers by considering its fate once we note that it is still relative to the framework for tracking time provided by the Gregorian calendar. There are, after all, other valid ways to measure time, including the Julian calendar, which would put the date at April 13, 1564, or/and the Hebrew calendar, which would put the date at Iyyar 2, 5324. To what extent does shifting the framework destabilize the answer? A little reflection reveals that the best answer to that question is "not at all." All the answers share the assumption that there was a knowable event called Shakespeare's birth that happened in a particular time and place. That the different frameworks assign different dates to that event does not change the event or its location in time, just as our expressing the speed of an automobile in miles per hour or meters per minute does not change how fast the automobile is actually going. At the same time, the test also introduces another conclusion, one that is significant both for this question and the next one. Any answer exists within some larger framework, and sometimes the questions we ask presuppose an understanding of that framework. (Note, for example, the question assumes that the William Shakespeare in question is the Elizabethan playwright and not, say, the bloke who now operates a barbershop in Greenwich.) Consequently, answers that remain within the framework of question will typically be better than those that are outside the framework. If I know only the Gregorian calendar, and you answer my question about Shakespeare's birth by saying "Iyyar 2, 5324," then your accurate answer will be incomprehensible to me, and thus worse than either an accurate or a near-accurate answer within the Gregorian framework.

Now your answer may inspire me to learn about the Hebrew calendar and I may eventually be more grateful for your answer than for "April 23, 1564"—thus apparently transforming a worse answer into a better one. But notice that the transformation depends upon the intermediate step of my shifting my question from "when was Shakespeare born?" to "what is

the Hebrew calendar and what can I gain by learning it?" Consequently, your answer was still worse for the question I asked even as it was a valuable spur to my new learning. The larger points here, then, are that all our knowledge is situated within some framework, that one criterion for determining better and worse is the fit between the framework of the question and that of the answer, and that there can be benefits in learning new frameworks.

As I turn to the more standard literary-critical second question, "what is the meaning of *The Tempest*?", I would like to note that how critics answer this second question typically depends on their being able to answer the first. Knowing when Shakespeare was born allows critics to put *The Tempest* in the context of both his age and his Age, that is, his stage in the life course and the larger cultural context of early modern England, and those placements help identify the play's meanings. But the differences between the two questions are more salient than their potential interdependence. "What is the meaning of *The Tempest*?" focuses on a different object of study and draws upon a different set of intellectual operations for determining its answer(s). Whereas fixing Shakespeare's birth date requires one to dig through historical records and to learn some information about birth and baptism customs in sixteenth-century England, interpreting the meaning of his play requires one to abstract a larger gestalt from the multiple significations of words, characters, scenes, events, and episodes of the play. Just as important, the relation between the frameworks within which each question gets asked and answered is different. Whereas the answers given by the different calendars are translatable into each other, an explication of the meaning of *The Tempest* as, say, Shakespeare's meditation on his own career cannot be as effectively translated into, say, an explication of its meaning as a commentary on England's colonization of the New World in the early seventeenth-century. Furthermore, to ask which framework will generate the right answer to the question of the play's meaning is to call for only one kind of knowledge about the play, and that call violates its multiple signification.

The answers within different frameworks are not translatable in this case because they do not simply place the same objects upon a different scale designed to measure the same thing. Instead, the frameworks construe the objects in very different ways because they are different kinds of scales, interested in "measuring" different things. For the same reason, the two accounts cannot simply be added together to produce a

more comprehensive reading. For the inquirer into Shakespeare's self-reflection, Prospero will be a figure of Shakespeare himself, an artist of considerable powers who is able to use them to bring order out of disorder. For the postcolonialist critic of the play, however, Prospero will be a figure of the oppressing colonialist, one who exercises his power to dominate others and even to wrongfully subjugate them as he does with Caliban.

At the same time, the different frameworks do not wholly create the play but instead are accountable to its details and their significations. Consequently, the results of the frameworks can be beneficial to each other, because each one is likely to call attention to aspects of the evidence that the other has neglected. The metaphor of lenses or "seeing as" is helpful here. When I look through one set of lenses, certain features of my environment stand out, and when I look through another, different features stand out. Those features are always present, but I do not give them the same attention. But after looking through the second set of lenses and reassuming the first, I can continue to notice what I had overlooked before.

There is currently a text on YouTube <<http://www.dothetest.co.uk/>> that nicely illustrates the point. The video begins with a voice-over that declares "This is an awareness test," and it continues by showing a line-up of 8 young people facing the camera. The first four from left to right are dressed in white and the next four are dressed in black, and one member of each group is holding a basketball. The voice-over then asks, "How many passes does the team in white make?," and the eight people start to move in a shifting circle, as both teams pass the ball to each other and the paths of the individual members of the two teams frequently cross. After a short time, the video pauses and the voice-over says, "The answer is thirteen. But did you see the moon-walking bear?" Then the video rewinds and plays what the viewer has just seen. If you are intently focused on counting the number of passes, you are likely to miss the person in the bear costume who moonwalks through the rapidly moving circle of people passing their basketballs. (I know because I missed him.) Once the voice-over has called your attention to the bear, however, you can't miss him. In other words, if you are seeing the text only as a test of one's ability to track the number of passes made by the team in white, then you are likely to miss part of the text. At the same time, if one is intent on following the bear's moonwalk through the circle, you are likely to lose track of all thirteen passes. However, if

you are trying to give an account of the whole text, you need to include both elements of awareness in the account—as well as the larger point that the text is designed to make it difficult to give both elements equal attention. This latter point is reinforced by the end of the video, which puts two messages in white upon the background of a black screen: "It is easy to miss something you are not looking for" and then "Look out for cyclists."

The "Awareness Test" illuminates the relation between framework and text in our efforts to answer "What is the meaning of *The Tempest*?" in the following way. Although I cannot simply merge the accounts of the play as a self-reflection by Shakespeare and as a commentary on English colonialism, I am likely to improve each account after I have looked at it from within the other framework. This second way of looking is likely to make me pay more attention to evidence that the first way of looking either missed or de-emphasized. Indeed, seeing the play first as Shakespeare's self-reflection and second as a postcolonial critique is likely to bring to light evidence that initially seems recalcitrant for each interpretation. One useful criterion for determining the adequacy of each reading—where it falls on the better or worse scale—is in its ability to show that what initially seems recalcitrant actually can be accounted for.

Moreover, within any one framework, some questions will have right answers and some will have better or worse ones. Within the postcolonial reading, for example, the question of whether Ariel should be seen as another character through which Shakespeare is exploring the question of colonial dominance has a clear affirmative answer. But the question of whether the Ariel-Prospero relationship should be seen as more similar to or more different from the Caliban-Prospero relationship cannot be settled so easily, and here the post-colonial critics would seek not the one right answer but the better answer. In addition, the search for this better answer is likely to take us further into the workings of the play than our arrival at the right answer about the representation of Ariel as part of Shakespeare's take on colonialism. The search will take us deeper into the play precisely because the juxtaposition of the Ariel-Prospero relationship with the Caliban-Prospero complicates our understanding of each as well as our understanding of his view of colonialism.

In determining better and worse answers, we can employ multiple criteria, in addition to their ability to account for what initially appears

to be recalcitrant evidence. How comprehensive are the answers, that is, how much of the relevant textual evidence do they account for? How precise are they, that is, how specific can they be in their explanations of why the relevant scenes are the way they are and not some other way? How coherent are they, that is, how well do the explanations of the evidence fit together, and how does their larger account fit with a more global understanding of the play? Nevertheless, these tests will not lead us to the one right answer precisely because of the multiple significations of the play. To put this point another way, the question, what is the meaning of *The Tempest*, is one whose answer depends upon multiple acts of interpretation, and whenever we are interpreting, we are always dealing with degrees of probability rather than with certainty.

If I had more space, I would take up yet another kind of humanist question such as "What is truth?", but considering that question would add another layer to my analysis, not lead me to revise it. So I will conclude this essay by returning to my larger purpose of proposing that we put the debate about right and wrong answers in the humanities on a different footing, and by reflecting upon the kind of claim I want to make for that proposal. Have I found the one right position in the debate, the one best footing upon which to carry it forward? I am sure that many of my fellow humanists would answer "no," with some objecting that my argument goes too far in its advocacy of right answers to some questions, others objecting that it goes far in its insistence on the value of no single answers for other questions, and still others raising different objections. More significantly, perhaps, I do not myself want to claim that I have arrived at the single right answer precisely because I believe the debate about right answers is one which does not have such answers. Rather than settle the debate, I hope to have contributed something useful to it. And I hope that rejoinders to my attempted contribution will teach me some new things about the status of answers in the humanities—and some new ways of thinking about those things—that I can in turn pass on to my students so that they too might be able to contribute to the debate. Let the conversation continue.

Works Cited

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