

Theory

The man looked familiar. His clothes were ratty, his hair disheveled, and he was ranting about something, but he looked very familiar. He was pacing in the plaza in front of the old Water Tower on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, a place frequented by panhandlers and performance artists. Professor Jorge Martinez had just come out of the downtown branch of the University when he noticed the man, and because he looked familiar he stopped and watched. He reminded Jorge of a fellow faculty member at the University, but because Jorge was a law professor and didn't mix much with the faculty of the academic schools, he wasn't quite sure.

There was a typical afternoon crowd on Michigan Avenue: shoppers, vacationers, the occasional business person, and most hurried past the raving man with nothing more than a passing glance. A few stopped briefly to listen, but the throng flowed past. Jorge had to stand against the building to keep from being swept away. He watched and listened to the man yelling.

Hermeneutics sees interpretation as a circular process whereby valid interpretation can be achieved by a sustained, mutually qualifying interplay between our progressive sense of the

whole and our retrospective understanding of its component parts. Two dominant theories that emerged from Wilhelm Dilthey's original premise were that of E. D. Hirsch who, in accord with Dilthey, felt a valid interpretation was possible by uncovering the work's authorial intent, though informed by historical and cultural determinants, and in contrast, that of Martin Heidegger who argued that a reader must experience the inner life of a text in order to understand it at all. The reader's being-in-the-world fraught with difficulties since both the reader and the text exist in a temporal and fluid state. For Heidegger or Hans Georg Gadamer, then, a valid interpretation may become irrecoverable and will always be relative.ö

He was expecting gibberish, but the words seemed coherent, though Jorge couldn't figure out what they meant. He went on in a similar vein, the busy afternoon crowd rushed past paying him no mind. Most people probably assumed he was either a lunatic or performance artist.

öJurgen Habermas, for example, introduces a political note into this quandary of interpretation. Habermas suggests that the embodiment of understanding of any text can only be understood in terms of the interpreter's political paradigm and resulting inherent biases.ö

Jurgen Habermas? Jorge knew the name. He'd taken a class on legal philosophy in law school, and remembered the name Jurgen because it was like Jorge. As he listened to the guy he tried to figure out who Jurgen Habermas was. It seemed like he had something to do with the interpretation of language, or maybe something to do with how language is used to define ideas. And that seemed to be what this guy was talking about. What he said sounded on one hand like nonsense, but on the other hand sounded a lot like what you'd probably hear in a senior philosophy lecture. The more he listened the more he realized that the guy wasn't ranting, he was discussing the use of language in literature. He was giving a lecture on literary theory.

Literary theory. Literature. English Department. It finally came to him. He did know

the guy. He was an assistant professor from the English department. Bolton. Jorge thought for a moment as he stared at the guy, and finally it came to him. Dan Bolton. But what was he doing here, dressed like a bum, and giving a lecture on literary theory.

Jorge pushed through the crowd, and up to Bolton.

“Professor Bolton?” he asked.

The man looked at him for a moment, then replied. “Oh, hi.”

Jorge couldn’t tell if he recognized him or not.

“Professor Bolton, from Loyola?”

“Yes,” Bolton said.

“English Department?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Professor Martinez, from the Law School. I think we met once or twice at faculty retreats. I thought I recognized you, but couldn’t quite place the face.”

Bolton extended his hand. “Dan Bolton.”

Jorge looked down at it for a moment. It was dirty, and extended from a tattered army field jacket. Jorge worried that his hesitance would be obvious, so quickly grabbed and shook Dan’s hand. “Jorge Martinez.”

“Are you OK?” Jorge asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Bolton said. “Why do you ask?”

It seemed like an odd reply given the circumstances.

“What are you doing here?” Jorge asked.

“Oh,” Bolton looked down at his clothes and laughed. “This. I’m doing a study.”

“A study?”

“Yeah,” Bolton replied. “I’m studying the response of people to the insane. I’ve been trying to determine if people respond to the less fortunate differently depending on a variety of factors: weather, season, holidays, things like that.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ve been doing it here since the summer. The only constant is the location, but I assume a certain uniformity of the population here. There’s a good racial mix, which seems constant, but the crowd is generally affluent, which presumably indicates a higher level of education.”

Jorge was a bit surprised by the lucidity of Bolton’s response. He taught law, and had little more than a layman’s understanding of psychology, but he was familiar with the concept that psychotics have lucid periods when their behavior is completely normal. He couldn’t help but wonder if Bolton was having such a period.

“Is that why you’re lecturing on literary theory?”

“Pretty funny, huh?” Bolton said. “Even my students don’t get it. Most people never think about the theory of language ó how we use words ó the concepts are so foreign. So I assume most people just think I’m a ranting lunatic.”

“You’ve been out here since summer?” Jorge asked.

“Yeah,” Bolton said. “I got a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for the study.”

“You got a grant to act crazy and wonder around downtown Chicago?”

Bolton laughed. “Sounds crazy, doesn’t it.”

“Yeah,” Jorge said.

“Then you’ll like this. I’m also working with one of my students on an NEA grant.”

“NEA?” Jorge said. “Isn’t that an art organization?”

“Yeah,” Bolton replied. “One of my students is working on it as a performance art project. She’s standing over there, by the Omni Hotel.”

Bolton pointed, and Jorge followed his arm. A young woman standing on the sidewalk across the street near the entrance of the hotel holding a small camcorder waved at them.

“Art project?”

“Yeah. We’re doing a video montage of people’s reactions. It’s a commentary on the absurdity of consumer culture. I represent disorder amongst a morass of people trying to buy order, but the real absurdity is that all the stuff they buy just creates more disorder. I particularly like standing outside “Crate and Barrel” and lecturing on Marxist Literary theory. It’s almost as much fun as lecturing on Feminist Literary Theory and the objectification of women outside “Victoria’s Secret.”

“So you’ve got two grants to act crazy?” Jorge said.

“Well, that’s not the half of it,” Bolton said. “I also got a grant from the Department of Education to write a paper about writing grant proposals, and these two grants are case studies.”

Jorge kept staring. “That’s bizarre.”

“Yeah, but that’s not all. I also got an advance from a book publisher ó Regnery, you know them? They publish all those right wing nut job books. I’m writing a book on the ridiculousness of the academic granting process. It fits perfectly with their worldview on how disconnected academia is from real life.”

“Let’s see if I got this straight,” Jorge said. “You’ve got two grants to wander around Michigan Avenue acting crazy?”

“Yeah.”

“You got another grant to write about getting the two grants?”

“Right,” Bolton said.

“And you got a book advance to write a book about how screwed up the granting process is?”

“Exactly.”

“Jesus!”

Bolton laughed. “Well I should also tell you that I am talking with agents about selling my story as a memoir.”

“A memoir?”

“Yeah,” Bolton said. “About how I single handedly brought down the academic granting process by running a number of scam grants, and then exposing the whole system as a sham.”

“Brought down?”

“Well, I am hoping it is like the Jason Blair thing at the Times, you know, reveal the hypocrisy, that sort of thing. Editors and literary types love that stuff.”

“Jesus, that is crass,” Jorge said. “How can you hold your head up around campus?”

“Hey, I am just playing the system, playing the game. Notoriety is replaced substance as the sin quo non of success.”

“That is ridiculous.”

“Are you kidding,” Bolton said. “My chair loves this. It is so meta. I am showing the strings behind the whole process. If this all work out, I will get tenure, no problem.”

“No way,” Jorge said.

“Yeah, and maybe even an endowed chair. Write my own ticket. I am on the money train of academia.”

“That’s crazy,” Jorge said.

“No kidding,” Bolton replied. “These people think I’m nuts when I babble. But the scary thing is that what I’m saying is really a well thought out academic lecture. What’s nuts is that these very people are paying me to do it, with their tax dollars. Every time they buy something, a few of the pennies that go to the state end up in my pocket in the form of a grant.”

“But isn’t sales tax a state revenue?” Jorge asked. “How does”

Bolton cut him off with a loud laugh. The crowd that had filled in around them as they talked now moved away. Jorge took a step back as well.

Bolton pointed at a “Lord & Taylor” shopping bag a young woman was carrying as she walked by. “Ka-ching!”

“Coach!” he yelled, pointing at another shopping bag and winking at Jorge. “Ka-ching, Ka-ching!”

“Wooo. Saks!”

The End