

“Of Mortal Importance”:¹ Re-Educating the Imagination²

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We are educating the next generation in a multi-religious, violent world where narratives bearing non-literal or mythic truth can foster or undermine “spiritual or other flourishing” — to borrow David Carr’s apt term. Recognizing the “mortal importance” of this situation’s challenges to present philosophical work of educational consequence, he has challenged our field’s secular bias. Neither theoretical nor evidentiary, such literary and mythic narratives are often but not exclusively religious or scriptural. Even if identity-constitutive, they are, Carr claims, still possibly ethically universal, not always intended for cultural self-authentication and ethnic exclusivity as much as for moral self-critique and improvement. He worries that schooling for religious tolerance could miss such rich educational possibilities. Such narratives must be “properly understood” on his view, requiring readers to seek their “objective truth,” wary of postmodernism, gnosticism, and naive literalism. Therefore he wants philosophers of education to conceive with care human rational capacities for evaluating them, regarding which, he does not consider Deanne Bogdan’s notion of “embodied criticism,”³ as I will do here.

When I first read Carr’s essay, imminent war on Iraq dominated conversation and news, posing for my reading of it what Bogdan has named a “feeling, power, and location problem”⁴ (henceforth FPLP). FPLP is not a critical fault, but a (perhaps painful, perhaps ethical or political) psychic difficulty posed by a reader’s own location in relation to a text. Thus I confronted Carr’s philosophical narrative of normative sense-making about Indo-European, Judaeo-Christian, and British canonical texts that shaped my own (Anglican and secular) liberal education and English Teacher preparation. That juxtaposition of evidentiary and philosophical narratives raises some questions about the pragmatics of Carr’s plea for “proper” understanding of myths and stories in light of the presently haunting ancient narrative of Sarah and Hagar (henceforth *SH*) variously retold by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — in *Genesis* (16-17, 21:1-21),⁵ in Paul’s letter to *Galatians* (4:21-31),⁶ and in *Tales of the Prophets* (*Qisas al-anbiya’*) of *al-Kisa’i*.⁷

Do postmodernists read *SH* as epistemically equivalent to social-scientific research reports on women’s and children’s health and welfare or to *The Guardian*’s report that water in Basra was scarce after war began? Is postmodernism itself some grand narrative or philosophical “axis of evil”? Who represents poststructuralism and postmodernism? Oddly, not Jean-François Lyotard, who argued in *The Postmodern Condition* that

It is...impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different. Lamenting the “loss of meaning” in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative.⁸

Perhaps some postmodern inquiries concerning cultural dynamics and social consequences of epistemological legitimation and deligitimation offer more pragmatic

accounts of how, why, and with what effects upon whom various subjects might claim to “know” than can more orthodox inquiries that take inadequate account of how (as Lorraine Code argues) subjectivities always somehow mitigate truth claims’ objectivity.⁹ Carr’s premise insisting upon epistemic differences among diverse narrative types has pragmatic wisdom. Exemplifying what Lyotard calls “traditional” or “customary” rather than scientific knowledge, *SH* demands his explicitly “postmodern perspective” that “even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.”¹⁰

Carr’s and my common language, imperialist heritage, and religious acculturation cast us as the Sarah-and-Abraham referents in this story and Iraqis as the abject referents Hajar and Isma’il. Several Oklahomans have voiced literal readings of Paul’s symbolic dismissal of Hagar’s people in *Galatians* along with millennialist belief that God speaks through Paul and *Revelation* directly to the present conflict. Carr would dismiss such literal truth-claims as fatuous, but what might he consider a “proper” reading? The Islamic *hajj*, or pilgrimage, celebrated on this war’s eve, involves ritual re-enactment of Hajar’s story at its actual site. Despite Saddam Hussein’s secularism, Islam’s *SH* makes me wonder if his broadcasts promising victory might suggest to his people’s mythically trained ears some divine miracle like Zamzam, the eternal spring that saved thirsty Isma’il’s life after Hajar had frantically wandered seven times between the mountains of Safa and Marwah in the desert heat in search of water for her son.¹¹ Islamic websites read Hajar as the model woman who survives not by angrily confronting her abusers, but by keeping faith in Allah. Meanwhile, at least one rabbi online has read Sarah’s murderous jealousy in the *Genesis* version precisely as Carr suggests — as textual provocation and guide to moral self-critique.

Uninformed by comparative religious hermeneutics that might foster “proper” understanding of *SH* within each of its scriptural traditions, my own direct response to it reads it as a culturally even if *not* individually universal, symbolically cautionary account of how deadbeat dads possessing some means can be seen as nice guys and rewarded with almost divine patriarchal power while single mothers and their children go hungry, with few resources aside from blind faith in divine providence. Alternatively I read in it a cautionary tale about surrogate motherhood ethically akin to Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Perhaps Carr could justifiably call these direct responses to the story “gnostic”; Bogdan might call them “embodied.”¹²

Carr does not say whether the objective knowledge and truth he proposes to teach through story and myth recognizes some subjectivity. *SH*’s various retellings implicitly support notions of mythic meaning that (in Code’s words) “make it appropriate to ask of any ideal of objectivity” applied to this story, Out of *whose* subjectivity has this ideal grown? Whose standpoint, whose values does it represent? The point of the question is to discover how subjective and objective conditions *together* produce knowledge, values, and epistemology. It is neither to reject objectivity nor to glorify subjectivity in its stead.¹³

Such objectivity unavoidably complicated by some subjectivity, but not totally displaced by it, allows that *SH*'s three versions do not express a singular significant truth, though they all reflect *cultural* commonalities — monotheistic faith, patriarchal gender relations — not necessarily *moral* commonalities. Carr cites justice as a universal moral value, but is either justice among nations or races or justice to women and children a core value in *SH*? or even a core value in the faith traditions that have variously preserved it as “The Word of God”? One version's “justice” includes divine approval of sex-slavery; another's, divine approval of arrogant, implicitly heterosexist “Promise-keepers” — not to mention a concept of “freedom” that may help explain George W. Bush's perplexing invocations of that concept since September 11th. Popular but epistemologically and ethically problematic literal reading sympathetic to the divinely ordained patriarchs, indifferent to their intimates' and slaves' suffering, and antipathetic to their ancient enemies is a cultural fact of educational life whenever scriptural text is open to classroom engagement in Oklahoma. A metaphorical reading's greater epistemological or ethical credibility as compared with a literalistic reading may not guarantee its pedagogical or cultural credibility. Even where one hermeneutic asserts hegemony, many religious cultures and degrees and kinds of hermeneutic naivete and sophistication may assemble in one classroom. At her peril a teacher advances a “proper” reading.

Carr is concerned about education for human and social flourishing, so these postmodern difficulties raise Plato's concern about literature's corruptive power. That concern pervades Carr's orthodox Christian critique of gnosticism, whose contempt for the body he judges unethical, although he does not make clear how bodies enter either into his concept of reading myth and story for “proper” understanding or into his concept of moral learning. Carr rejects gnosticism's manicheanism and disembodiment, but in taking a manichean stance toward both postmodern and literal readers, he risks dismissing their embodiment as inconsequential with his insistence upon “proper” reading.

Bogdan shares Carr's ethical concerns about both manicheanism and disembodiment. Critical of the disembodied character of Northrop Frye's “educated imagination,” she studies numerous censorship cases — like Carr's example of public concerns about witchcraft in *Harry Potter* — where contested values pose complex questions concerning what, why, and how literature should be taught. Her concept of the “re-educated imagination” as embodied rests upon two premises consistent with Carr's concern that contempt for the body may foster easy endorsement of self-destructiveness or harm to others. First, direct response to the text is not only psychologically prior to critical response, but also logically prior insofar as it bears significant ethical freight to the reading and grounds critical response to the text in the social, political, and psychological theoretic of readers' own situations.¹⁴ Second, that priority entails ethical engagement of FLPs encountered in embodied relation to the text and to other readers of it. Such embodied reading involves complex epistemological discernment, but does not aim for “proper” understanding. Who can say what a “proper” understanding of *SH* is? That question does not imply *SH* lacks meaning or educational value for Carr's project of spiritual flourishing. By

working through the FPLPs of direct responses to the myth and testing their knowledge within relevant theoretical frameworks, student and teacher readers may engage their own histories in interdependent relationship with one another as their lived experiences of the myth, both recognitions and misrecognitions, recall them. Is such engagement not more likely than pursuit of some idealistic “proper” understanding to foster moral education that respects human bodies as well as diversely acculturated souls?

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1. Thanks to John Green, Catherine Hobbs, Rita Keresztesi, Amir Jaffri, Jane Martin, and Joseph Meinhart for helpful critical discussions of this essay, whose faults are mine alone.
 2. Deanne Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1992).
 3. *Ibid.*, 244.
 4. *Ibid.*, 140-60.
 5. *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 22-24, 29-30.
 6. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 1994), 268-69.
 7. W.M. Thackston, Jr., trans., *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa'i* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), 151-54 and Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 17.
 8. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 26.
 9. Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 2.
 10. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.
 11. M.J. Akbar, *The Shade of Swords* (London: Routledge, 2002), 14.
 12. I refer not only to this reading's transgression of divine authority, but also to gnostics' practice of sexual egalitarianism, which contrasts sharply with imperial Christian practice founded upon gnosticism's suppression. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
 13. Code, *What Can She Know?* 70.
 14. Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination*, 243, 264.