

From Siegfried's Ghost to Raven's Tales: Conditions of Possibility for a Derridean Trickster

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This essay represents my attempt to step outside philosophy as I address the themes of openness to alterity, deconstruction, and the trickster, introduced by Jim Garrison. I first offer an ironic sketch of Garrison's essay, in the form of an operatic syllabus. Then I raise a set of three questions, each of which pertains to what I see as discursive conditions of possibility for trickster practices (deconstruction). The first question inquires as to the connection between trickster practices, pedagogy, and discursive competencies. The second asks whether trickster practices are helpful when faced with violence of deception as well as violence of order, and the final question investigates particular political implications of engaging in trickster within a Philosophy of Education Society context.¹

Garrison is not a minimalist. I have often found myself thinking of dance as he delivers a essay; *eros* and agility are always present in his work. Today, however, I find that only opera will do. Engaging his essay, I find myself unable to silence a resounding chorus: "transcendence, transcendence, transcendence." And so, to opera I go.

SIEGFRIED'S GHOST AND RAVEN'S TALES

Composers: Guiseppe Verdi, Richard Strauss, Richard Wagner, Leos Janacek, Ivor Stravinsky, and an as yet to be named hip hop artist.

Characterizations: Siegfried's ghost is an absent presence in the opera. He is a presentation of readerly license and he is a "helden tenor." For non opera buffs in the audience, that means "heroic tenor" which is to say, and here I quote my mother, that "he has to have the equipment to sing the role."² Raven, is a bass baritone. I have in mind Tom Jackson, a First Nations actor, singer, and philanthropist whom you might know as one of the hosts for a now cancelled, CBC Radio show of international repute, *North of 60*.³ Levinas and Derrida both are significant roles, but I will not say anything about them here lest I be forced to acknowledge that they are French, I mean Free.⁴

Synopsis: Act One to this story, is set within the ruins of the humanist quest for an essential self-consciousness. (Picture the banks of the Rhine after the Ring of the Nieberlung has been tossed back to the Rhine Maidens.) A dialogue between the orchestra and chorus establishes "the linguistic turn" as the pivotal moment of release/condemnation in philosophy. The audience is invited to sing along, as the performers sing folks songs reflecting the necessarily local (and one assumes historical) systems/structures of mind/language.

Against this backdrop the ghost of Siegfried projects himself into persistent projects of "creative reflection" and "meaning co-construction." He encounters strangers, individuals more or less embedded in constitutive cultural communities, and sings of arias about the "bottomlessness" of Human Being.

Act One Scene Two shifts to the “bar” or perhaps the “masked ball.” Here there are conversational snippets, cameo appearances from Foucault and Nietzsche. Heidegger is spotlighted; when the ghost of Siegfried meets Heidegger he is clothed in contemporary garb as a hip-hop artist beneath a ball of rotating lights.⁵ Levinas and Derrida appear in the shadows. Baritone and counter tenor, their conversation is present, yet not-present, distinguishable only as the crowd noise is extinguished. The act closes as the two philosophers leave the ball, with Siegfried following.

The major part of the drama takes place in Act Two. Levinas and Derrida appear both on an off stage while, in sequence, their recitatives are enacted in variously lit, sparsely set scenes of ontological violence and radical alterity. Infinity, and “visage,” the face of excess, are danced on ice, Shea Lynne Bourne and Victor Kraatz of course, in front of a stage audience and a panel of Derridean judges.⁶ In the penultimate scene, Bourne and Kraatz are stripped of their medal, as Derrida explains that traces of language have been [discovered] in their urine.

Act Three is a collaboration between the Raven, aka the Trickster, dressed in Siegfried’s cloak, and Derrida. They dance a virginia reel with fantastic figures. Raven/Trickster’s efforts aim at persistent openness to alterity, to Others. Weaving inside and out, under and over, Derrida, Raven, and Siegfried’s ghost acknowledge their locations inside, even as they step outside, of philosophical discourse.

QUESTIONS FOR TRICKSTER TALES

The gaps, — perhaps chasms — in my “outside” representation of Garrison’s project, are more than evident here. Yet, in the last section of my response I want to suggest that the nature of these failings is related to the substance of his essay. In particular, I want to raise three questions that stem from the difficulty, and dangerousness, of what I call trickster tales.

First, what forms of pedagogy make it possible for trickster tales to be intelligible? Myth, no less than opera or philosophy, it seems to me, depends upon narratives that are sufficiently familiar as to be accessible. If linguistic, cognitive, and figurative schemes are necessarily local, the products of indoctrination and cultural practice, then I wonder if it is not necessary to furnish cues to grammatical codes, strategies for recognition of syntax, reading practice, and translation guides, before trickster tales can genuinely operate in the both/and ways that Derrida and Garrison seem to advocate?

Certainly my choice to access myth via opera is strategic as I grasp for straws of familiarity. How much of Garrison’s account of the Trickster do I miss because I am not familiar with the local discourses to which he refers? Is deconstruction, like irony, performed most readily by those who are already conversant with local discourses? Sometimes, we strive to perceive deconstruction/trickster tales by analogy, applying discursive rules, conventions or practices with which we are familiar from other locations. What do we have to do to make those boundaries and the movement across them available to ourselves, and to “Others.” What are the dangers of misinterpretation?

The second question asks: Do tricksters lie? In order to pursue this question I want to introduce references from the media to a new lexicon, introduced since the U.S.

invasion of Iraq; coalition of the willing; preemption; target opportunities; decapitation; and embedded journalism.

If I understand Garrison's (and Derrida's) hopes for deconstruction, they lie in its capacity to facilitate a kind of discursive agility that extends the range of our border crossing. Acknowledging that I share a desire for such mobility, I worry, nonetheless, about the possibility for tricksters to manipulate and degrade our understandings of Others.

I wonder how trickster tales can be played so as to favor not only agility but agility in the name of receptivity to difference. What is the difference between trickster practices that enable boundary renegotiation/ openness to alterity and that that lie? The manipulation of military discourse to make war crimes palatable, and "others" villains, is plainly not a new phenomenon, but arguably, contemporary linguistic sophistication, including that wrought by poststructuralist theory, raises the bar considerably. Frankly I do not know where to begin to address this question, though surely we are in a better position to ask it after having engaged Garrison's reading of Levinas and Derrida. Nonetheless, in the absence of some response to this problem, trickster tales are risky.

Third, what does it mean to invoke/invite a trickster discourse at a Philosophy of Education Society meeting? Raven is the trickster in my opera because Raven is the trickster my northwestern Ontario experience offers as a local discourse. He bears a great deal of resemblance to the trickster that Garrison describes: he appears in many guises and is most often associated with tricky moral lessons, luring people off their path, breaking rules as a means of pointing to them. My good friend Ma-Nee tells me that Raven should always make one pause and look around because he signals that there are lessons to be learned — especially lessons about the difference between what you think you are doing and the actual consequences of your actions.⁷

Very briefly, because I must close this discussion shortly, I want to ask not only about pedagogical issues that arise as Garrison and I invoke our trickster narrative, not only about the ways in which it will be clear that I invoke Raven to respect alterity and not to lie, but also to ask political questions about my right to invoke Raven and my duties, if I am to pursue a search into the cultural meanings of First Nations peoples. Is it necessary to share the metaphysical assumptions of the storytellers that go along with Raven's stories? Do I have a responsibility to inform myself of the cultural grounding of such narrative? As an educator of teachers I am acutely aware of the many significant ways in which educators have contributed historically, and in current circumstances, to the genocidal histories (present) of First Nations peoples on this North American continent. Consequently I believe it is essential that we accept my/our responsibility for ensuring that our efforts to cross boundaries benefit the peoples whose traditions and cultures we invoke/invite.

1. I would like to thank Karen Sihra and Jennifer Logue, Al Neiman, Susan Laird, Eduardo Duarte, Jim Garrison, and Barbara Applebaum for their generous assistance and patience with me through the course of the preparation of this essay.

2. I mean to suggest that, in spite of Garrison's arguments to the contrary, the references to authenticity, a "desire to live a life of expanding meaning and value," and to the capacity to be born again through openness to the Other, can be read as indications that a resurgent humanist subject has been reinscribed via Garrison's text.

3. See the website for Tom Jackson of the *North of 60* series <www.northof60.net/pages/series_cast_tom.html> April 2003.

4. This essay was written and presented in the days preceding the U.S. invasion of Iraq. This ironic reference to "free" French refers to an ill-conceived action taken in a few American cafeterias to rename "french fries," "freedom fries." This action was well-publicized, in contrast to the weekly gatherings of hundreds of thousands of people who protested the United States' invasion before and during that war.

5. Garrison contrasts the response of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida to the linguistic turn. In this image, I mean to invoke the notion of authenticity ironically by having Heidegger perform his part of the conversation in contemporary "hip" clothes. Literally and figuratively, fashion and music are venues of identity performance that both resist and reinscribe governance. See R. Hebdige, "Hiding in the Light," in *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Routledge, 1988).

6. The spoof here is intended to present the dangers of trickster practices (deconstruction, openness to alterity) in a recognizably political, and decidedly non-innocent context. The characterization plays on specific moments in Canadian Olympic and World Championship figure skating history. Jamie Sale and David Pelletier, pairs skaters, were denied an Olympic gold medal in pairs competition by what came to be regarded as jury tampering. They were later awarded a second set of gold medals. Canadian ice-dancers Shae-Lynn Bourne and Victor Kraatz, however, were not only better choices for this particular opera given that I wanted dance to be a persistent trope, but they had recently won a world championship after many years of controversy that focused on judges' reception of their unconventional choreography. Deconstruction, irony, play, are all trickster practices, according to Garrison's account, but I believe the political dimensions of such performances would benefit from further attention.

7. I thank Ma-Nee Chacaby, a First Nations elder originally from *Umbabica* (mother), *kukom* (grandmother), and friend, for her assistance in learning about Raven.