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November 27 2014

CLASS OBSERVATION OF MICHAEL RUSSO

I had the pleasure of observing the Composition 101 class of Mr. Michael Russo at 11 am on Thursday November 13. I have to say from the outset that, in all the classes I have officially observed in twenty years of service at Rutgers, I have never known the teaching experience to be so richly enjoyable, nor witnessed so masterly a performance by the instructor.

The subtitle which Russo has given his Comp course is 'Dangerous ideas: dissent and debate', and he has lined up both a sparkling series of contrarians, from Christopher Hitchens and Terry Eagleton to Andrea Dworkin, and a fascinating sequence of topics, from atheism to the Vietnam war and the achievements of Martin Luther King. He has further structured the course to alternate analytic focus among Aristotle's three elements of rhetoric: *logos* (reasoned persuasion), *ethos* (credibility from authoritative standing, endorsement by Tradition) and *pathos* (appeal to emotion). Today's class was essentially the judicious combination of *pathos* and the writing of Andrea Dworkin.

Russo opened with Dworkin's life-story: from birth in Camden, NJ through arrest at college in Vermont for protesting the Vietnam war to prostitution (enforced by hunger) in the Netherlands; and subsequent Radical Feminist publications from *Women Hating* (1974) to *Intercourse* (1987), focused in today's class.

Russo first addressed *Intercourse* at the level of *ethos*. It adduces, he pointed out, some five hundred references in its arguments, of which only eighty-three cite historical facts or professional studies of sexuality. The remainder reference works of fiction, from Tolstoy to Tennessee Williams. As such, the basis for Dworkin's reality-claims turns out to be her personal

interpretations of fiction. Next, Russo addressed the syllogisms that Dworkin affirmed: for example, that ‘sex’ is a synonym for ‘intercourse’, and ‘intercourse’ is a synonym for violence; thus ‘sex’ is a synonym for violation. Students found this logic unconvincing, and Russo suggested they focus their misgivings on the premises rather than the conclusion. Eventually, he moved on to ask why, if both her *ethos* and her *logos* are so poor, is her work so famous and influential?

In answer to this problem, Russo turned finally, and for most of the class, to the resounding workings of *pathos*. Dworkin spoke proudly of her works as “throwing grenades into discourse”, and exulted in a language mixing syllogism with profanity. Russo accordingly set the students a five-minute task, to locate the key persuasive words within, or as constituting, the argumentation. This was an opportunity, he noted, to practice their skills of ‘active reading’ and ‘critical thinking’, to address a language of skilled inflammation and emotive manipulation. As they hunted through the excerpt provided from the text, he played a recording, rather appropriately, of Beethoven’s *Pathétique* (Piano Sonata number 8). This music established a serene yet energetic mood for their work. (And I should add that I’ve not known any other instructor use this simple but very effective technique of providing a musical background.)

Resuming classroom discussion, students reported that Dworkin suggests contraceptive and reproductive technology to be essentially “sadistic”: treating women “like lab rats”, and facilitating calculating male abuse of them. Female sexuality should be like the free wandering of a stream, insists Dworkin; not the “hunting down of a creature”. Women “submit in silence” to sex from males, out of physical fear. Women inhabit a “Gulag” of their own, a permanent “Auschwitz”. Dworkin constantly stresses the horror of being sexually penetrated, the trauma of hyper-sensitive physical vulnerability.

Pondering this line of argument, some of the male students confessed that they themselves felt violated by Dworkin's assault on male sexuality, whilst some of the female students suggested that they agreed with Dworkin that men are, in sexual terms, "savages" or "dogs", with no control over their sexual behaviour. Other women noted Dworkin's self-contradictions: for example, that women utilise sex customarily to gain power and freedom, yet that women lack any power and freedom. What was remarkable throughout this discussion, in which an intensely intimate subject was presented by the discussion-text in the most inflammatory of terms, was the persisting classroom atmosphere of fascinated concern for ideas, without simple closure of mind or taking refuge in cliché. The students listened intensely to each other, in a kind of open-ended spirit of exploration, simultaneously amused, uncertain, and utterly compelled. Presiding over this was Russo's calm, quiet voice, his manner utterly relaxed and often provocatively witty: always unpretentious, and wholly *with them* in spirit. It would have been very easy, with such a topic, to have resorted to lordly ridicule of Dworkin's positions, to assume a professorial position *de haut en bas* that dictated student response. Instead, Russo stayed with and within the exploratory contradictions and unsurities, pleasantly gentle, always sincere, and encouraging as *primus inter pares*. The result was that every student in the class participated, and often several spoke at once.

The next assignment I had not expected. Russo asked his students to compose a letter to him which would make him angry. He promised them a grade of one hundred per cent in their next quiz if they succeeded in riling him. Several protested: they liked him too much to want to vilify him. However he insisted upon violent defamation of his character, and as they struggled to find in themselves knockout powers of *pathos*, he played another piece (the andante from Mozart, Symphony 40 in G). Their instructor was, they claimed in reading their letters on

resumption of class, an unkempt substitute teacher, with a foolishly bobbing head, fit only for a hookah pen. These proceedings were, of course, simply hilarious. As the insults unfolded, to cheers of derision, he remained reclined in his chair, wholly relaxed, laughing as delightedly as anyone. The very terms of derogation chosen – the accusation of being an uncaring teacher, an inadequate human being – themselves testified to the huge popularity of their instructor, for the students seemed to squirm at their unfairness even as they threw abuse; and there developed in the classroom a discernible backlash of true feelings of protectiveness and affection. And, as anticipated, they worked almost frantically to develop a language of skewering power.

The next and final assignment was the opposite: to write a letter of appreciation. It was accompanied by the sparkling sweetness of Schumann, *Scenes from Childhood*, opus 15; and it led, predictably, to such statements as Russo's classes being the most enjoyable ever experienced, and Russo being not a teacher, but a friend. Unlike the mixed feelings in the classroom mood when the attack-letters were read, the atmosphere now was unambiguous. It was one of delight and gratitude for creative lessons and passionate teaching; it was almost love.

In summary, Russo's class mingled the *utile* and the *dulce*, the stimulating confrontation of fiercely challenging ideas, with sheer social joy. Both amiable and masterful, Mr. Russo is deeply at home in the exposition of ideas, maintains a climate of quiet control, and is a born teacher. We are fortunate indeed to have him teaching our students.

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