



Art Dewey

Adding Wrinkles to the Text

It was in the rash exuberance of my sophomore year that I decided to write a critical essay on Lady Macbeth. I wanted to break free from the usual interpretations and so I delivered what could be described as a neo-Freudian take on this troubling character. To my astonishment the professor leading our discussion group was not overwhelmed by my brilliant observations. After reading his assessment I sought him out and we talked in his office. He pointed to some very telling lines that I had treated lightly or not at all. Before I left, I turned to him, asking what would help me interpret such texts. “Experience, kid, experience.”

I took his advice to heart. I also began to value him as a friend, who would be honest with me. Yet, over the years, I realized that experience alone was not enough. T. S. Eliot touches on this when he writes: “we have had the experience but missed the meaning” (*The Dry Salvages*, 1941). The psychologist Ellen Langer aphoristically notes that “rather than trying to learn from experience we might be better off to experience learning” (*Counterclockwise*, Hodder, 2010, p. 30). For her *we can respond mindlessly or mindfully*. We can understand our experience according to what we usually think it means or we can go beyond our single perspective to the countless ways in which an experience can be understood. Far too often we settle for an interpretation that comes from what we or others have understood or want an experience to mean. In fact, we often look for confirmation of our interpretation, enabling us to “learn” what we already know.

To settle on the “obvious” or the “tried and true” can condemn us in ways we scarcely imagine. When we mindlessly interpret our lives, accepting what others see, when we do not pay attention to the distinct particulars before us, we are never surprised. Aging, for example, is usually interpreted in a negative frame. We note life’s changes and link them almost immediately to decline and decay. Few of us ever look on our own aging or the aging of our loved ones in terms of development. For isn’t “development” limited to the first half of our lives? And after that isn’t it all downhill? Indeed, such an interpretation is greatly responsible for our country’s treatment of the aging population. If we are simply declining into decrepitude, then it is appropriate to release the elderly from any responsible choice or living. In fact, such an observation proves to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I remember some years ago, as I walked along Washington Street in the shopping center of Boston, seeing a man somewhat on in years dramatically approaching on the opposite side of the street. He was shouting repeatedly, “I’m crazy! They say, ‘I’m crazy’ and I am!” People moving towards him quickly crossed through traffic to avoid encountering him. I stood in amazement. Here was a person released from a mental institution without some half-way house (in an attempt by the Commonwealth to save precious dollars) and left to fend for himself. He accepted the diagnosis and was literally running with it. And so was every person on either side of the street.

This concatenation of memories and meaning emerged from a recent conversation with a Westar Associate Pat Hanns. She called to discuss an insight she had recently acquired about the term *Ioudaioi* (Judeans). This soon led to a brief analysis of the story of the woman at the well (John 4:3–44). I pointed out that this scene was artfully constructed by the writer of the Fourth Gospel, that it probably reflected the Johannine community’s interaction with Samaritans sometime after the death of Jesus, thereby resulting in the Johannine community’s applying the Samaritan understanding of a messiah (the *Tahab*, the one who knows the secrets of God) to Jesus. Such a messiah would be considered greater than Moses and thus become the possible basis for the split between the Johannine community and the synagogue to which they belonged. Those who opposed the Johannine community were termed Judeans (*Ioudaioi*)—a fateful step in the tragic process by which an originally neutral descriptor came to connote the enemies of Christianity. Pat quickly grasped how this negative term arose.

Then she brought up something I had never really considered, nor have I seen it in any commentary. She noted that the woman came to the well at an unusual time (women would go early in the day before the sun got hot). I countered that this might indicate that she was shunned by her community. Then Pat pointed out how many husbands she had, “plus one.” Again I brought up the social stigma surrounding such a situation. But Pat went in a slightly different direction. Could it be that there was something else at work? Yes, the woman might be shunned. But could there be something more?

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a way to think about the dynamic and ongoing interaction of matter-energy. This way of thinking unites matter with energy and avoids the traditional opposition of matter and spirit. For me, being is energy transformation, because energy (which includes what we call mass or matter in concentrated form) is what is real about the universe, and energy is dynamic; it is always changing. The First Law of Thermodynamics says that energy is always conserved; it cannot be created or destroyed. The Second Law is the law of entropy, which says that our ability to do useful work with any source of energy tends to decrease over time. So God is one way to name energy itself, which is infinite and always conserved, even though our practices of thinking and living tend to dissipate and dissolve. This is not a New Age spiritualism, but a language to talk about what is real in secular and scientific terms and yet is also religious in its implications and effects.

Jeffrey Robbins and I collaborated on a book, *Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism*, that sketches out a post-capitalist and post-theistic vision that holds energy at the center. New Materialism is a contemporary movement in philosophy that focuses on matter and body as dynamic and transformational. Materialism does not mean consumerism or the desire for material goods. It means a way to affirm the real, actual things of this world, which are sometimes stranger than they appear.

At the JSOR in Amarillo, I was intrigued by how many participants were exploring non-Western religious ideas as a way to think about God. Many attendees were interested in a more speculative and philosophical conversation. From this experience it seems clear to me that we need to learn from the findings and knowledge of the Jesus Seminar, the Christianity Seminar, and other scholarly seminars. But we also need to convey a sense of why this learning matters. At a time in history when fundamentalisms are resurgent, when global warming is threatening the stability of the planet, and when social and economic upheavals reflected

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in the present White House administration are rocking our world, it is important to question how we can live together. Answering that question reveals much about our theology because it indicates a lot about who we are and how we interact with each other, with other beings, and with the planet as a whole. **AR**



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Pat suggested that the writer might be envisioning an older woman. Certainly the number of her relationships intimated some period of time. Moreover, speaking from her own experience, Pat said that age, perhaps especially for women, gives a curious freedom to do and to say what others are reluctant to see. Indeed, the conversation between the woman and Jesus descends to unexpected depths. Her deepest desire for the “one who will tell all” is met by the side of the well. The woman is portrayed as someone who is quite “experienced.” Age and social stigma ironically provide her with a freedom to declare what she truly desires. In this searching conversation with the Jewish stranger

she discovers that her search transcends the usual definitions of life. In fact, the recognition of such meaning spurs her to return to those who may well have rejected her, thereby leading them to their own surprising encounter. In “aging” this woman, Pat may well be underlining how the Johannine community developed its understanding of Jesus over an extended period of time. By putting wrinkles about that woman’s eyes, Pat reinforced these lines of Eliot:

As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. (*East Coker* 1940)