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Introduction

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Introduction

by Lawrence Wheeler

Alles Gescheidte ist schon gedacht worden, man muss nur versuchen es noch einmal zu denken.

Goethe (quoted in Robins, *Short History of Linguistics*)

To those sensitive to the history of rhetoric, there is perhaps no task already so beleaguered, so little hopeful of success, as that of the introduction. It is a type of epideixis — it may be the *very* type of epideixis — and hence calls upon the writer or speaker to perform a double task: to call the assembled audience into order, yet also to defer attention away from that writer and speaker and toward the “main body” of the work at hand. The introduction is, then, a sign which hopes to snuff its own existence in its moment of utmost effectiveness.

And in its diffidence, its tremulous uncertainty about the level of force which it ought to assume; there is something akin in the problem of introduction to the problem of beginning. Indeed, our exquisite unease at beginning may mark one of the true indicators of the “modern” (or the “post-modern”); it occurs in many writers, almost as a standard trope; even as learned a thinker as the late Michel Foucault invoked the unease of “beginning” again and again, perhaps nowhere so poignantly as in his inaugural lecture to the Collège de France (*L'ordre du discours*, usefully translated and

published as the "Discourse on Language" in an appendix to Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*):

I would really like to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture, as into all the others I shall be delivering, perhaps over the years ahead. I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne away beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings; instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path — a slender gap — the point of its possible disappearance.

Here, elevated to one of the most signal honors any French intellectual can hope for, Foucault asks to be perceived only as voice, and as a voice merging itself indistinguishably with another already speaking, thus to be caught up in the web of mind already woven. It is an opening becomingly modest, indicative, perhaps, both of Foucault's character and of his understanding of classical rhetorical form, for it is also a consummate expression of Aristotle's ethical proof, the demonstration that the speaker is a man of good character, wise and yet not overly proud in his wisdom. But which is it? An innate sign of Foucault's character, or a witty allusion to that sister-art of cosmetics (as Plato has Socrates damn it), rhetoric? Foucault's interviews are full of this kind of self-effacement (in one famous conversation recorded in *Le Monde*, Foucault remarked, "...plus il y aura d'usages nouveaux possibles imprévus [de mes livres], plus je serais content... tous mes livres sont, si vous voulez, de petites boîtes à outils..."), and the accumulating literature of his biography is charged with examples of his personal humility and dedication to the good of others; yet we must recognize that Foucault was past master, not only of the history of systems of thought, but also of the history of rhetoric, and more than capable of this kind of glancing allusion to the Aristotelean corpus. Perhaps it is both — that placement of the

self within an intellectual tradition which is both an insistence on the profound importance of continuity, and a keen recognition of the significance of the personal, the unitary self.

In a sense, this is the problem confronting us in teaching the humanities today — do we adhere to the canon, knowing that the canon is no longer the unquestionably central series of texts it once may have been? Or do we teach the way in which the canon came to be constructed? If we take the latter pathway, how much emphasis ought we to give those individual works we might choose to retain, if only to impeach? In an age in which a dear friend of mine — an eminent classicist who shall remain nameless — can claim that no student any longer knows how to read, in any way relates to the *word*, how do we go about the teaching of reading, and its necessary confrère, the teaching of writing? The change in the academy is as profound as the change in the character of its students; in the last twenty years we have seen a sweep in the teaching of — for example — English composition which went from the unquestioned authority of Strunk and White, the “little book,” to Peter Elbow’s extraordinarily successful *Writing without Teachers* (and ponder the implications of that title being offered as a required text!) to Elbow’s recent *Writing with Power*.

Much of the writing in this first volume of *Anthos* (the word is, of course, Greek, and means a shoot, a sprout, a bud or blossom) comes from the core humanities course of the Honors Program at Portland State University. It has long been my hope to be able to publish some of the writing which comes out of that course; students need to know, in just such a concrete form, that they are engaged in a task the equal of any professional writer’s work. There is much good writing — direct, crisp, lucid, vivid writing — done in the humanities courses of any university, and it is one of the unfortunate consequences of the modern industry of mass education that only the course instructor gets to read this shapely prose. A large number of the papers presented here grew out of the first year’s third writing assignment in that core humanities course — the assignment of suggesting how one of the writers being read during the spring quarter (Euripides, Virgil, Augustine) makes use of a predecessor. I invite the students to define the idea of “predecessor” very broadly, suggesting that they not confine themselves to thinking of forerunners as persons only,

but that genres, cults, educational systems, a myriad of things, can act for an imaginative writer as points of origin and as milestones to set oneself in tension with. It is a theme they have been (perhaps unknowingly) preparing to deal with since the beginning of the year's work in pre-classical Greece, and their first examinations of Homer, Hesiod, and the literary traditions the Hellenes re-shape out of the received materials of the Near East. They have another opportunity, winter quarter, to reconsider the question of the individual and tradition, when they explicate one of a group of the Platonic dialogues (the *Phaedrus*, the *Phaedo*, the *Cratylus*, or the *Protagoras*). Here, I ask them to give special attention to the way Plato uses allusion to Homer to extend and deepen the effect of the exchange among the dialogue's characters; it has long been customary to point out, for example, that the opening of the *Republic* allusively sets the dialogue's action in the underworld, but it is also necessary to point out that the *Republic's* exploitation of the topos is only part of a vast tissue interconnecting all the dialogues, that Plato frequently alludes to Athens as a kind of underworld in which Socrates (and his true hearers) hope to suffer into truth. When we show students that the dialogues are more than a series of logical statements to be drily abstracted and summarized, then in a sense we return some of the philosophical power into their hands. We do so at the risk of frightening them by arguing that the dialogues may offer us an indeterminable range of meanings, rather than one unassailably true statement, but we return readerly power into their hands and invite them to participate in lively exchange with the text. And by recognizing the deftness with which Plato has exploited the corpus of Homeric tradition, they begin to deepen their understanding of how any single work can only exist meaningfully as part of a larger network or system.

The notion is that, of course, of intertext, and we refer to it as such when teaching the course; indeed, these students get a rather large component of "theory" in the curriculum of the Honors Program, starting from the very first day. The obligation to supply the theory which informs the choice and presentation of any particular work is, it seems to me, inescapable. We begin with the reading of the Homeric poems, and begin by setting them, insofar as it is possible, within their cultural context. Hence we try to take account of the oral nature of the text, of the disquieting (to modern

tastes) ways the Homeric narrative can move in fits and starts, of the way the poem oversupplies us, at moments, with detail. By so concentrating on the traditional nature of the poem, we are also forced reflexively into an examination of our own current expectations in reading the text, and into an attempt to construct the variety of ways in which the text has been read during the centuries intervening since its composition. This necessarily places us into a lively debate with the students (and, very frequently, with the other faculty members of this team-taught course) over the assumptions and presuppositions of the reading experience, of the way in which one's own culture and context shape and determine what one will bring out of any particular text. Students are introduced to questions of genre, of reader-response theory, of Receptions-geschichte, of "deconstruction."

Obviously, the temptation is to spend more and more time on fewer and fewer texts, and it is a difficult temptation to resist. The core humanities course has changed and grown during the years since it first came into being under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities; one of the major differences is the number of texts now dealt with, compared with those dim beginnings. At that time the course, in one quarter, moved through some two thousand years of the western experience, and some three thousand pages of written material. By contrast we now take an entire year to treat (still, unfortunately, in all too sketchy fashion) the classical period, and we move through far fewer texts.

Some others of the papers found in this first volume draw upon the upper-division and graduate courses offered by the faculty of the Honors Program, among them the work by Gill, Merrow, Matthews, and O'Reilly. Most of these papers also took shape in connection with the ongoing Visiting Scholars' Project of the Honors Program, which has been bringing noted American and foreign scholars to Portland State since 1976. Each year we invite the faculty of Portland State to propose upper-division seminars which will examine texts and other background material to the visit of a lecturer chosen by the instructor of the seminar. Our visitors have frequently remarked, in accepting their invitations, on the novelty of offering such a program for undergraduate students and this aspect has, I think, influenced many lecturers' decisions to attend. We have offered colloquia in specific treatment of one rather minute aspect of contemporary thought, and also year-long

series treating and developing many aspects of a larger question. The lecture series and colloquium offered in 1988-89 on the work of Blaise Pascal were collected and published as a special number (number 56) of *Biblio 17ème: Papers on Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Paris, Seattle and Tübingen: 1990).

In short, then, we offer to you, the reader, this first volume of a shoot we hope will continue to grow and develop; with continued luck this will be only the first slender origin of a long tradition. It is not inappropriate here to mention that 1990-91 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Honors Program of Portland State University, and to reflect here on those who have long given their efforts to its support. We should certainly like to thank both the Rose E. Tucker Foundation and the Portland State University Foundation for continued generous support over the years; indeed, without them, the Visiting Scholars' Lectures would have remained only a dream. The Program must also thank, for ongoing support and encouragement, former President Joseph C. Blumel, Executive Vice President Margaret J. Dobson, Provost Frank Martino, and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences William Paudler. No list would be complete that did not include Vice Provost and Director of Honors, Michael F. Reardon; without his guidance and vision the Program would never have accomplished a fraction of what we already have seen.

In recognition of a new beginning at Portland State, and on the occasion of her inauguration, this first volume of *Anthos* is dedicated to President Judith A. Ramaley.