

situation definition:

POWER/POWERLESSNESS AS TELLERS OF ETIO-TALES ----- ELLIOTT #2065

Every human being remembers certain heard/overheard bon mots and oft repeats some of them. I oft repeat a chuckle of that grand old liberal-activist leader under whom it was my privilege to work, Truman Douglass: "I don't care what happens at the meeting as long as I get to write the minutes." Historiography (usu. "history") is the perpetual writing of the past as usable past, ie, with a view to sense-making (as power, as enlightenment, and as entertainment) in the present. This thinksheet is about one strand in this braiding of the cord of memory, viz, the motive/motif of (1) narrating the cause-reason-origin of something now present (2) in the interest of either defending or attacking present power arrangements. My aim is humanizing: to increase, in the soul of the hearer of an etio-tale, reflective distance from unexamined belief; and to increase, in the teller of the etio-tale, both humility of claim and the sense of responsibility for at least some of the un/intended consequences of the telling.Etio-tale? My coinage for an account-story-myth of origin or cause, no matter (1) the truth/fiction content thereof or (2) the teller's knowledge/belief vis-a-vis the truth/fiction content thereof.

1. As this thinksheet's title indicates, I'm talking about etio-tales as political action--by the powerful to maintain power and by the powerless to gain power. What occasions my thinksheet on this is my distress on observing the gullibility, even of otherwise sophisticated persons, in both hearing and telling power-oriented etio-tales. History's disciplines, esp. hermeneutics, should liberate scholar and student from captivity to one-sided origin-stories ("etiologies")--so why are some of my fellow-Biblical-scholars among the worst offenders in unreflective political storytelling about the world we're now living in? I suspect it's because they let the Bible's religiomoral interpretation of history subvert the Bible's concern for truth, integrity, honorable dealing, fairmindedness: their hot prophetic hunger for "justice" overwhelms the cool sapiential concern for a situation-appropriate objectivity.

2. Often a single word signals a whole etio-tale. Eg, right now (June/86), "racism" in S.Africa "explains" apartheid and the whole schmeer. When a simplistic analysis like this is accepted as The Truth, strings of inferential syllogisms dismally follow--to take just two examples: (1) Racism is evil; Pretoria is racist; therefore, Pretoria, the gov't. of S.Africa, is evil; and (2) Apartheid is racist; racism is evil; therefore, apartheid must be destroyed, and the sooner the better. An accompanying emotion to this simplism is outrage (though such simplism is not the only cause of outrage: I'm subject to bursts of outrage, but I hope never because of simplism). At our just-ended UCC-MA annual meeting (1,160, almost all of them delegates), only I spoke out against disinvestment (divestment) in the debate on S.Africa; I had almost no support; and the most powerful voice for divestment expressed "outrage" immediately after my speech. Organized Christianity, denominational and conciliar, at home and abroad, massively, almost unanimously, damns Pretoria--as if relieved finally to come upon a clear moral issue subtending an unambiguous program of action. For "il furioso" (the furious man), it's Reinhold Niebuhr's prophetic realism be damned. Contrast Izaak Walton's prescription against hot self-righteous activism: "All who are lovers of virtue, be quiet and go angling." (Buddhistic quietism? But contrast hothead Byron: "No angler can be a good man." SIC ET NON!)

3. When traveling (with the mind, with or without the bod), seek out both sides; it's shameful that church-organized junkets seldom do (in consequence of which, church returnees from, say, Nicaragua, come back more ignorant than they were when they went, though now crammed with "facts").

OVER

Into the past, we can't travel with our bods: we're dependent on epigraphic (written) and anepigraphic (artifactual, "archaeological") evidence to know what happened, ca.1250 BC/BCE, at "Sinai" and "Troy." (Public Television's 1986 "The Search for Troy" series is, vis-a-vis the latter, a model of entertainment/education on sophisticated viewing of etio-tales past and present.) Here and there on our globe I've listened, with mind and bod, to both sides. Eg, in 1958, to both sides of Israel/Jordan and Israel/Egypt--meeting with both state leaders and church-synagogue-mosque leaders; and I hear nothing of the MidEast now without hearing those voices then. How about this for an invitation to humility: All the etio-tales were then, and are now, plausible. Everybody has (in the noncynical sense!) a "good story" to tell, and everybody tells it evangelically (ie, as good and important and urgent news). To put it adversarially, any story anybody can tell on one side--in the MidEast, in S.Africa, in Guyana (my most recent mind-bod experience)--I can counterpoise with a "good story" on the other side. But this doesn't make me cynical. Just cautious. And contemplative. And, to honor God and bless humanity, eager to share my point of view (knowing that "The best laid plans of mice 'n men / Gang aft aglay").

4. The danger with illustrating my point in this thinksheet is that, in doing so, I can be so easily lassoed by a sociology-of-knowledge and/or special-pleading rope, even though the point I'm making is valid no matter what my particular point of view. The ideolog will have rejected my plea before reaching section #4, so I need consider him/her no further.

5. I adduce Avery Dulles as a model-example of the God-given human ability to escape captivity to the power/powerlessness tellers of etio-tales. My experience is direct: in 1970, he and I were the (respectively) Catholic and Protestant WCC-N.Am. theologians-on-exhibit; he was then, and is now, humble-responsible both to his chosen heritage-community and to humanity, both to past and to future. In contrast to his father, John Foster (designer of our "containment," anticommunist foreign policy), and his uncle Allen (founder of the CIA), he is gently anti-ideological. I can't resist quoting Reinhold Niebuhr on Avery's father (NEW REPUBLIC, 1Dec58): "Mr. Dulles' moral universe makes everything quite clear, too clear....self-righteousness is the inevitable fruit of simple moral judgments." I prize my correspondence from RN, and from these others who comment as follows on JFD: (1) Walter Reuther (JFD, "the world's longest-range misguided missile"); and (2) I.F. Stone (JFD, "wily and subtle...unctuous...monstrous pompositives...cold, arrogant and ruthlessby his constant invocation of Christianity and freedom (he) has succeeded in making these ideals suspect in the minds of uncommitted millions"--24Jan53, in JOHN FOSTER DULLES: PORTRAIT OF A LIBERATOR). Ironically, my ideological opponents on present global anguishes exhibit the same moral smugness, ethical tightness, self-righteous certainty that, though positioned on almost all issues opposite him, JFD did. The fundamentalist mentality is possible, and alive, all across the political spectrum. It is a set of the soul and a captor, jailer, of the mind. And it is in all cultures-religions: Am. Biblebelters, Islamic terrorists, JDL/Israeli orthodox screamers,....

6. Elsewhere in my thinksheets I have told / will tell my preferred etio-tales on the country's and the world's current anguishes (but never without having in mind the anti-tales to my tales, else my tales would be my prisons: fishes need somebody to tell them they're in the water). Here, in this thinksheet, my concern is to make a cultural-philosophical observation about the human condition vis-a-vis political storytelling of the etiological sort. May the good Lord deliver us from the sanction of antiquity: antiquity must not privilege error; and from the sanction of the camera-trendy: novelty must not prejudice truth.