



4-1-2009

Men in Black: Or Notes Towards and Intellectual Autobiography

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OR, NOTES TOWARDS AN INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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The idea of requiring the students in HIST 398 to submit an intellectual autobiography was not my own; I borrowed it from my colleagues Julia Rudolph and Robert Engs. The goal is to get students thinking about influences on their intellectual development as a way to stretch their minds and prepare for the challenge of developing their own large research projects.

I had not originally intended to write my own essay, but as I prepared for the meeting at which students turned in their autobiographies, I decided to present one. Pedagogical motives played a role, but also a sense of academic solidarity; if students were going to reveal something of themselves at the start of our three semesters together, it was only fair that I should do the same. Of course, the challenge is also to do it in 1500 words or less, which requires one to be both selective and creative. With such limitations in mind, I offer this brief essay as my contribution to our common enterprise.

I grew up in a family that, while not self-consciously intellectual, appreciated learning. My father was the first member of his family to graduate from college, and my mother had graduated summa cum laude herself. Mom has always been a voracious reader who made regular trips to the library to scoop up books on whatever subject happened to catch her interest. My father was never much of a reader beyond newspapers, but was deeply interested in politics, current events, sports, and the trivia that accumulated around those subjects. I remember very well the joy that came with getting my first library card when I was six years old, just as I remember joining my father in shouting answers at the television when watching the Art Fleming version of “Jeopardy!” Over time, we moved from watching quiz shows to quizzing each other, building what became a sometimes contentious but always enriching conversation that ended with his much too premature death in 1998. My family taught me the value of knowledge, and the rewards that come from pursuing it, putting me on the path that has led me to Penn.

As influential as those memories are, however, there were two other important influences on my intellectual development, the “Men in Black” of my title.

The first “Man in Black” is fictional, and I met him when I was about ten years old. Tall and thin, with a penetrating gaze and the bearing of a European aristocrat, he represented mystery and danger, especially to those who did not understand the nature of his evil, or the proper means to fight it. He was Count Dracula, as described by Bram Stoker in his novel. I was fascinated. Soon, however, my attention turned not to the Count himself, but to the rather unlikely figure that would lead the successful opposition to him. This was no superhuman creature, just a man who possessed not only the knowledge that would save his friends, and the world, but also the ability to explain that knowledge to skeptical audiences. Professor van Helsing became my hero, both for what he was able to do and for what he represented. He was a man of science and a man of letters, and also, at the end, a rather unlikely man of action. His approach to knowledge required an open-mindedness that his younger and more modern friends, with their practical and scientific inclinations, were unable to match. Only he was able to make the jump from diagnosing a medical problem to recognizing a deep existential evil, and to devise the proper means to defeat it.

Over the years I have re-read *Dracula* many times. With the help of several scholars (especially the writings of my Penn colleague, Nina Auerbach), I have come to understand the multiple subtexts of that immortal (or, more appropriately, “undead”) work, and I know it now as more than the adventure story that thrilled me as a child. Nevertheless, some things that I took away from my first reading have remained with me ever since. That includes an abiding affection for a certain kind of film (though my image of Van Helsing owes much more to Peter Cushing than to Anthony Hopkins, let alone Hugh Jackman), but also an attachment to a certain approach to knowledge, one that values both broad curiosity about the world and the joy of sharing that knowledge with others.

For all the specialization my own work requires, I try to be open to new ideas, and to encourage students to do the same. That is part of the appeal of teaching History honors, to be able to help students with a wide range of topics. It encourages me to learn new things, and to push students to explore unfamiliar terrain as well.

Learning new things, however, is not worth it if there is not also an opportunity to share that knowledge. As improbable as it may sound, Van Helsing

ing offered me a model of the importance of teaching, the ability to communicate even complicated subjects to others for the benefit of all. Of course, even the most exciting History seminar probably cannot match chasing an undead Wallachian Voivode through the Carpathians, but the struggle against ignorance is just as vital to human survival, and it is only possible if teachers enthusiastically embrace their responsibility not only to learn for themselves, but to share their learning with their students and colleagues.

Which leads me to the other man in black who haunts my past. He was a teacher. Also tall and gaunt, with disturbingly bright blue eyes, long fingers, and a curling enigmatic smile, James Greer, S.J. taught European history at Canisius High School in Buffalo, New York. Even though I attended Canisius in the early 1980s, an era in which most of the strict traditions of Catholic boys' schools had been replaced by post-Vatican II urbane laxity, Father Greer was a link to an older, bygone world. Unlike many of his clerical brethren, who treated even the wearing of their Roman collars as a matter of convenience, Father Greer insisted on wearing his traditional black Jesuit cassock every day. Gliding down the corridors with perfect posture, occasionally taking note of the chaos around him, he would enter a classroom without looking at us, who were expected to stand and begin each class with a prayer.

Father Greer was the sort of teacher who becomes the basis for school-boy campfire legends to scare younger classmates. He was the teacher who once included on a test a map of the Habsburg Empire, requiring students to name and locate each of the eleven separate nationalities of that polyglot realm (a true story that I admit to using to awe students to this day). His tests usually ran to multiple pages, with brief questions mingling with longer essays to torment the unprepared and trap the most studious. We were all afraid of him, and he knew it. His classroom demeanor, however, was relaxed, even conversational, as he delivered lectures that combined historical detail with asides about contemporary politics and society. Despite his efforts to maintain an aloof distance, there was often a twinkle in his eye when he asked and answered questions, or when made some devastating remark about a historical figure, or about our collective failure to live up to his standards.

I remember the first test I took in his class, in the fall of 1982. It included a range of questions on the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, a bewildering array of facts to organize and arguments to develop. I left the room exhausted, and utterly unsure of the result. The tests were ready for us only a

few days later. I sat in my seat as he returned them, in apparently random order, nervous anticipation mounting. When he held out the test, his hand covered the grade. I looked up at him, and he raised an eyebrow as he let the paper drop and I saw the “100” he had written on it. I sank back in my chair, in happy disbelief.

After class was over, I walked up to his desk, test in hand. I think I mumbled “thanks.” He tapped the paper with a long, nicotine-stained finger and said, “Granieri, you have an unfair advantage in this class. In the first place, you can read,” he began with an ironic smile. “More importantly, you obviously enjoy history. Good for you.”

Father Greer set high standards for his students, but genuinely enjoyed watching us succeed. I cannot say that my classroom demeanor is a copy of his—I am not nearly as good at haughty disdain—but the memory of his ability to combine broad historical narrative with telling anecdotes, and the obvious enjoyment he got from sharing his knowledge with us, has stayed with me. I would not be the person or the educator I am today without his influence.

English novelist Graham Greene (another powerful influence) once remarked that an autobiography is only a “sort of life,” since the author, despite intimate knowledge of the subject, cannot say how the story ends, and may not enjoy the proper analytical distance to draw useful conclusions. Any life is a work in progress, and any autobiography, especially one as brief as this, is necessarily incomplete. At other times, in other places, we can discuss other influences. For now, I am happy to have had the chance to pay small tribute to the men in black.