

Cauldron in the Museum

Ian Angus

The suddenness of Jerry's sickness and death stunned me as well as many others. I was lucky to have a last word at his bedside, telling him all that he meant to me, as much as I could remember about our work together, as much about others' feelings and words as I could bring to mind. There was present something of that understanding that is beyond words, or beneath them. Simple presence of our whole time together, not summed up, but ending, a gratitude.

I've written before about my friendship with Jerry, in the *Festschrift* that I edited for him at his reluctant retirement when he was pushed out at 65. Of everyone I know, he is the one who would have sat in his office surrounded by books until the last minute. It was his place and he deeply resented being thrust out of it. The *Festschrift* was an attempt to show him how much I, and many others, appreciated his role in our lives. I struggled there to express our friendship through speaking of Kafka's story *The Burrow*, which Jerry once pressed on me, to speak of secrets, silence and retreat, not of communication.¹ Probably he had mentioned the story in conversation as if I had the vast history of European literature as close to hand as he. I scurried home to ponder over his meaning. His utterances were often like that: opaque, requiring homework, pondering, returned to time and again, but rarely exhausted. Sometimes, I have to admit, too exhausting to follow through sufficiently. One can lose one's way in another's garden and must guard one's own secret.

I will not speak again about our friendship but about his influence. He was a teacher, academic organizer (mainly through the Institute for the Humanities), speaker, and writer. In that order, I

¹ Ian Angus, "Sharing Secrets, or On Burrowing in Public," in *Anarcho-Modernism: Toward a New Critical Theory, in honour of Jerry Zaslove*, ed. Ian Angus (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001), 363-376.

would say. The university was his milieu but he was deeply convinced of its relevance to, and dependence on, the wider community. In editing the *Festschrift* I found that I could count on the enthusiastic participation of people that I had never met simply by mentioning his name. Jerry motivated a passionate response, just as his own work was suffused with a simmering yet palpable *eros*. That was most evident in his teaching. He responded to many different bewildered souls at sea in bureaucratic corridors of the disciplined intellect, and encouraged them to trust the wellsprings of their own reactions and to develop them into adequate forms of expression. Those who have been thus aided in their own thinking could never forget such a debt—not only to the professor, or even the teacher, but to the man. We find Jerry's students in the arts, in activism (especially the peace and social justice movements), writing poetry in solitude, as well as in the university.

Such engagement was connected to his approach to literary studies—a connection which made them humanist not only in theme but in relation to the reader, student, or writer. He was a radical contextualist. He deployed a certain reception theory of literature which wasn't focussed on the text-in-itself, as it were, but on the reader's response to the text—which took one to the context of the reader and the difference in interpretations across time and space. Many of us will remember his piling of phrases upon each other to evoke a historical period in his talks so that we could appreciate the way in which a text was read at a certain time or place. This placing of others as readers allows and demands each reader to do the same. It means that each teaching is not the induction of students into the reading of a classic text but the self-exploration by the students/readers of their reaction to the text. Jerry was a wonderful midwife of such self-exploration.

Assembling a contextual constellation was something of a method not only in his criticism and his historical presentations but also in his work for the Institute. His first move was to scout out people around a given topic, then to assemble a group, to talk in a free-form manner, have lots of meetings, and only at the last step speak of people to invite to a conference, to give a talk, or arrange the form. The Institute, under his direction, was always a cauldron of bubbling ideas that would spark events almost unexpectedly. He conducted his intellectual activity, apart from teaching, almost entirely through the Institute. The context was always changing. It is telling that only now is a collection of his essays about to appear, when it has stilled.

I can't escape saying that he could also be a difficult person. He was at times insistent when I could not fathom his motivation. There was a pressing unconscious at work. It kept our conversation from ever retreating into politeness. It drew me out as well. In our last extended conversation, I spoke to him of what I had learned from Joel Whitebook's biography of Freud. That Freud had lost his mother figure early which accounted for the lack of a maternal dimension to psychoanalysis. Jerry was as engaged as ever and hoped to read the book. I eagerly anticipated further conversations on this and other matters. But it was not to be. He will remain in my internal conversations. My life is richer for having known him.

If I were to try to characterize Jerry, I would have to speak of Jewish messianism, but he would demur, I'm sure. Indeed, he ducked any question having to do with his own Jewishness. Yet his abiding interest in exile, hope, utopia, and Benjamin, Kafka, Bloch, Adorno, Freud, could not be explained just by curiosity. I sensed an identification in which the Jewish aspect was not absent. But it was never spoken between us. He liked to tell stories, in some of which he was a character himself, but he did not use himself as an example. He was objectifying, or perhaps historical, in that sense, never confessional. Perhaps he doubted self-consciousness as any Freudian would. So

the secret remained veiled. Still, utopia was very important to him: critique of actuality from an image of perfection. That image could be found in the hopes of the past—never realized but always there. He found in any student, collaborator, or text some hope for improvement of the world or of themselves. He pushed that hope further toward healing the world: Tikkun Olam.

The texts, the talks, the teaching were all essential but not fundamental. All form came from a contextual cauldron brewing an ongoing present. One needs the form, the institution, but it only preserves as in a museum. What stirs is always elsewhere.

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