

1-1-2020

## The Bridwell Quill. Issues 15-17: Humpty Dumpty as History

Anthony Elia

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.smu.edu/libraries\\_bridwell\\_publications](https://scholar.smu.edu/libraries_bridwell_publications)

---

### Recommended Citation

Elia, Anthony, "The Bridwell Quill. Issues 15-17: Humpty Dumpty as History" (2020). *Bridwell Library Publications*. 31.

[https://scholar.smu.edu/libraries\\_bridwell\\_publications/31](https://scholar.smu.edu/libraries_bridwell_publications/31)

This document is brought to you for free and open access by the Bridwell Library at SMU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bridwell Library Publications by an authorized administrator of SMU Scholar. For more information, please visit <http://digitalrepository.smu.edu>.

# The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



November-December-January 2019-2020

Issue 15–17: *Humpty Dumpty as History*

Humpty Dumpty would have made a good historian... and an even better omelette! I should explain. It all started last summer when we were in preparation for a visit from the esteemed and thoughtfully engaging novelist Chandrabhas Choudhury from Delhi, India, whom I'd first met at Columbia University some years ago. As I wanted to prepare for the event and discussions, I set out



*He Had a Great Fall, but a Frying Hot Summer*

to read expansively on the themes of Indian literature, history, and politics. When it came time to bring everyone together and listen to Mr. Choudhury's lecture, I was astounded by the articulated aplomb of

his Cambridge patois that staccato'd around the lesser known histories of regional Indian literatures written in dialects of the subcontinent. Especially intriguing was mention of a novel written by a group of men and women more than a century ago, which alternated between narrators and writers. This was a compelling moment that made me re-evaluate much of what I thought about literature, but also broke the vice grip that had held my imagination and enforced the idea that so-called Western and English literature had had over me and my education and training for more than three decades. What does the idea of *literature* even mean nowadays? How have we defined it? And how has it been situated in our minds and lives to dictate what we now say or determine literature to be? Indeed, even the way we see literature today is different with how it is written or influenced by everything from *Fifty Shades* to *The Hate You Give* among various readerships.

But this also demonstrates something else which came

to me not long ago when I was walking around one of my favorite bookstores in Hyde Park near the University of Chicago called Powell's Books. As I wandered the aisles and perused titles, I looked upward to a shelf and spotted a book by a Yale-trained Egyptologist named Darnell-Manassa. In this book titled *Imaging the Past: Historical Fiction in New Kingdom Egypt* (2013), I discovered a fabulous, yet shocking piece of scholarship that explicated the role of historical fiction (in contrast to myth) in ancient Egypt. I didn't know how to register this idea, because I had not even considered historical fiction or any fiction as ever being associated with the ancient world prior to the Greeks and Romans. Of course, biblical scholars might disagree! Perhaps our education trains us to think that prior to a certain time in world history there was no literature. When in fact did "literature begin?" In any case, I was delighted and surprised by what such a revelation meant.

This also got me thinking about *tradition*, and even how we understand ideas today—like Humpty Dumpty. Tradition is both a fascinating and troubling concept. It can muster a deep feeling of connection, and a frightening wall of tribalism; it can bring us into memories of warmth and family, or night terrors of devastating fear. Like the old Chinese maxims about the dualities of life, or the proverbial double sides of coins and swords, there will always be different understandings and perceptions of things, good and bad. It is in our nature and it is what drives us to see and think and do what we experience in our worlds, our communities, our workplaces, and our homes.

We consider the idea of *tradition* often as something rigid, but in fact, *tradition* and *traditions* are quite fluid. There is a tendency in the public square where the rigidity of tradition prompts squabbles and some

outright battles, because some feel that our past is something that is frozen in time, something that cannot be assessed and re-assessed, and that must be honored *as is*. Indeed, perhaps like many moments in world history, this is the tension between the unreflected and unstudied devotion to symbols of the past *and* the desire to find meaningful dialogue with



*Feather Currency, Tevau—Not your average coin*

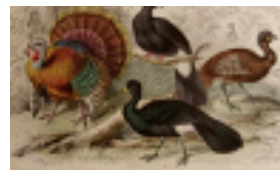
where our families and communities have come from within that same past. This is why, for example, the expression *revisionist history* has a negative connotation, and yet isn't *all history revised in some form?*

Shouldn't our way of looking at the past and our work in the present reflect the critical work and appraisal required to have a better understanding of those remote places in time? Otherwise, there would be no reason to have the field of history. This idea hit me when I visited Indiana University's newly renovated art museum in Bloomington last fall, and I discovered an amazing cultural artifact—*feather currency* from the Solomon Islands called *tevau*. Indeed not all money is paper or metal! Revelations like this, while visiting museums made me realize how we need to continue supporting cultural institutions, but also reinforced the idea that our understanding of history is always changing, always fluid, and always needing to be reconsidered—whether through books, artifacts, or traditions.

Etymologically, *tradition* is a term that refers to giving over specifically to the next generations. That makes sense, but historically, *tradition* also has the meaning of betrayal—which comes (in some accounts of the early Christians) from giving over the books of antiquity to Roman authorities—how appropriate for us! It is also etymologically linked to the word traitor. This certainly affords us some theological and literary license to ponder what *tradition* and *betrayal* (or being a traitor) have in common. The role of tradition plays into the idea of being important enough to pass along

to people—a family or community or a nation—a semblance of togetherness and connectedness and meaning. And yet in that very connectedness and passing down the practices and rituals and stories, there are some acts of both intentional and unintentional betrayals—because the stories don't always stay the same; they don't always portray the truth as it were (in this post-truthiness era to quote Steven Colbert); but instead they alter realities for the benefit of someone or some group along the chain of historical and generational baton-passing.

This came up in a number of ways this fall—the realization that many public schools no longer celebrate Columbus Day, but favor Indigenous Peoples' Day, a conflict arising from that very tension of



*Turkeys for the Ages, or For Dinner?*

how people have *traditionally* viewed Columbus—as a heroic symbol of Europeanism and specifically proto-Italianism—versus his enslavement of and actions against indigenous populations in the Americas. More recently Thanksgiving has come under the microscope and is considered taboo in some public institutions, because it has been whitewashed with nineteenth-century caricatures of happy-go-lucky Pilgrims and Natives as if they were neighbors in an Iowa revival sharing a Bing Crosby Christmas in 1955—rather than studying the expansive colonialist program that eradicated much of what Native American civilization had been. Or even the debates about how we cast the wintery months and holidays in the image of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century industrialized visions of a Dickensian Christmas in contrast to people on the margins, the sick, the homeless, those in need, and the oppressed (which is perhaps a paradox, since Dickens' whole goal was to bring attention to the traumas of prison life, poverty, and destitution). These are not necessarily opposites, but are the easiest symbols and targets of our ire to articulate the concern and frustration and upset to counter the feelings of injustice. Sometimes there is purposeful ignorance

around tradition that affords us both the passing on of traditions and the betrayal of what may lie underneath those traditions. And this also plays into the theological emphasis of eisegesis (reading one's beliefs *into* an account, vision, or representation) and exegesis (reading out of the text the intentions and theological connections): it is a fine and nuanced line of reasoning, but one that requires a far deeper and more studied knowledge and appreciation of the context of things. We know that much of what we see and are aware of among American holidays are inventions of the past, but also of a recent past—the imposing nineteenth-century that gave us the images and imagination of a glorified and glory-soaked Anglo-Saxon patriarchy that was meant to comfort and adore us—as some old hymns would have us believe. At the same time narratives fueled by colonialism in India as evinced by Choudhury's talk and slavery right here at home created images of a world of imperial glory. We want to love the traditions that have embraced us, but many of us can easily ignore the sides that are messy, hard, subjective, and oppressive, because of who we are or what we look like. And that again is part of the conveniences of what constitutes debates around our privilege or not. The *tradition* debate also pops up in churches. Over the winter break I attended a church service with more than a dozen family members,



*Liturgical Chaos? Or, Bringing Kids to Church?*

most of whom were children under twelve. During the sermon I was struck by the dissonance among the world of the pastor delivering a sermon, the world of all the children jumping like erratic sparks in the pews, and the world of the congregants drifting into somnolent fogs. It made me think that our inner and outer worlds don't always meet, that they collide in minor or epical bouts of irrelevance, or drift into places like church, yielding to *liturgical chaos*. Tradition can help us or harm us, but we need to be the stewards who look it in the face and determine

that—and change it, if necessary. Literature too can often be the agent that confronts *tradition*, dissecting and rebuilding the elements of history and narrative. When Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, he produced a gem of a holiday story. What almost no one remembers, though, is that Dickens had an agenda that was not necessarily all that “Christmasy,” and showed up on almost every page—a critique of contemporary writings on overpopulation, poverty, and hunger. So even if *tradition* is portrayed in one way that appears...well, *traditional*, always be aware that there is likely something much deeper behind it.

These metaphors bring us back to Humpty. I was reading Paul Auster's novels recently and in his work *City of Glass* I encountered a curious critique of what Milton was explaining in *Paradise Lost*, as understood by a professor in Auster's novel—a character identified as Henry Dark was described as HD, and modeled after the professor's choice for the most important character in the history of literature: Humpty Dumpty. Yes, Humpty Dumpty, who by all accounts was the exemplar of the purest form of human potential—that which was alive but not: an egg. But for Auster and his evaluation of Humpty and the connection to Milton it was that unbridled idea of possibility in our human spirit that represented the character of the unbroken egg, until it fell and was broken! Humpty may have been many things: for us in the last hundred years he was a child's rhyme about an egg; in 1877 he was a rotund schoolboy on a wall; and in the late 1500s, Humpty was a wall canon at one of King James' fortresses. Humpty Dumpty, therefore, is no mere child's thing. Humpty *is* history. And now you'll never forget I told you so.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

Anthony J. Elia, Director and J. S. Bridwell  
Foundation Endowed Librarian

[aelia@smu.edu](mailto:aelia@smu.edu)

