

Pedagogical Pepto: Some Late Night Musings of an Overworked Writing Teacher *

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I often get hungry late in the evening when the house is quiet and I am alone, grading papers. After all, a quick sandwich with a bit of wine beats another dangling modifier any time, and of course, it is a simple matter to delay returning to work by making playful metaphors, in this case food metaphors.

Quick sandwiches, fast food, shallow thoughts—it all runs together a bit when the mind is tired and the wine red. Fast food, like propaganda, is convenient: precooked, preseasoned, almost predigested (somewhat disturbing image, heh?). It requires of the consumer no knowledge of nutrition, no exercise in shopping or selection, no understanding of the process of preparation (no chopping, slicing, mixing, measuring), no skillet skills, no concern for presentation—no "client side" software, if I may borrow (and mix) a metaphor from the world of web developers.

Yet the mixing seems appropriate here, for in many ways web pages are like fast food: preselected, prearranged, predigested. And like the menus of those "value meals," they come with a rather specific range of options: click here for a newsletter, click there to take part in a poll, click in another place for more information—cheeseburger, biggie fries, and a Coke.

The metaphor expands into other areas of modern discourse and thought, television for instance. News is cut into bite-sized, preprocessed nuggets, variously seasoned perhaps by whether you are watching FOX or CBS, but after all, "Parts is parts." No doubt, you've detected that much of television news is not just "almost" predigested, but seems to have undergone the full process.

It isn't just Big Macs, Nestlé's Quick, and Bacardi's Frozen Daiquiri Mix that exhibit this cultural phenomenon; CNN, Yahoo, and Cliff's Notes are all "fast food." While none of these are in themselves necessarily bad (with the possible exception of CNN), a steady diet of fast food (both literally and figuratively) enfeebles anyone. Push the "predigested" metaphor a bit and we have a steady diet of excrement—physically, politically, economically, theologically, socially, philosophically, and in any other sense you wish to consider.

Is it any wonder that our students' papers are often incoherent? The students don't know any better. Everything they have been taught is "fast food," preselected, precooked, prepackaged.

Even the best of what they've been given—the "educational" videos on history, literature, science, art—are all too often just intellectual fast food, giving an illusion of understanding without requiring the effort of actually learning a discipline. What does it really mean to learn a discipline like history or political science?

Let's go back to the food metaphor. One summer when I was a mere lad living on a small farm in the Ozarks, my father became too ill to work and my mother had to take an extra job. I chose a plot of about two acres. I plowed it, planted it, and tended it. I harvested peas, beans, corn, squash, and all the other produce of a typical Ozark "truck" garden. I also gathered wild black berries, raspberries, grapes, and black walnuts. I spent a little time standing the chilly headwaters of the White River fishing for large mouth bass, and unbeknownst to my parents even tried my hand at a bit of home brew. I cleaned, cooked, canned, froze (and bottled) all this. I prepared and served the meals and cleaned up afterward. I learned a discipline, from beginning to end. It was one of the best academic lessons I ever had. Emily Dickinson seemed to understand something of this when she wrote

Essential Oils—are wrung
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed—by Suns alone
It is the Gift of Screws

Ideas—good ones at least—come hard. They are not Emerson's simple "Corn and Melons in the Sun." They are a sumptuous meal on a plate, or as Dickinson saw it, fine perfume in a cut glass bottle. Ideas—the ability to think—must be cultivated slowly and somewhat painfully. The ancient Stoic, Epictetus, put it this way:

Nothing great comes into being all at once; why, not even does the bunch of grapes, or a fig. If you say to me now "I want a fig," I shall answer, "That requires time." Let the tree blossom first, then put forth its fruit, and finally let the fruit ripen. Now although the fruit of even a fig tree is not brought to perfection all at once and in a single hour, would you seek to secure the fruit of a man's mind in so short a while and so easily? Do not expect it, not even if I should tell you so myself.

Patience is required, waiting for something to ripen, or nibble at the bait (or just ferment, in the case of the home brew). Then things must be gathered, cleaned, cut, cooked, and served pleasantly. The intellectual gourmet understands this and appreciates the effort; the intellectual

junk food addict will, almost literally, swallow anything pleasantly wrapped in printed paper. Can you really wonder why our students (or our whole society) will "swallow" almost anything? We are giving them books, essays, and news stories as raw ingredients—onions and tomatoes from our point of view—and expecting them to use these things as part of a larger process. They see each item set before them as a finished product, a Big Mac or a taco, put forward for their acceptance or rejection. Most will buy it; sometimes some will reject it. Almost never will they see it as something to refine, to build with, or to build on. Their acceptance or rejection comes down to personal preference rather than intellectual analysis and judgment; and in this age of social, cultural, intellectual, and moral relativity, the ultimate argument is always a matter of personal preference, of how we "feel" about something, not what we think. They would tell you that eating at MacDonald's is a religious experience if you want it to be, and that "everyone" has a right to "their" opinion—irrelevant observations at best; for the metaphor, just more excrement.

Unfortunately, our response as educators has been disturbingly similar. We look for the quick fix: fast acting antacids or Imodium Extra Strength. Our approach is curative rather than preventative, mercantile rather than agricultural. The structure of our educational system enforces this approach; we have a problem to solve within a single semester, analogous to those pizza delivery services that promise to have a hot pepperoni combo at your door within thirty minutes or it's free. No doubt the employer will deduct some of the extra costs from the employees' salaries (we all worry about academic budgets) and pass others on to the consumers (taxpayers and students). Of course, if an individual deliverer delays too much, he's out of work. Perhaps my years as a "freeway flyer" (disturbingly analogous to pizza delivery) have distorted my perception a bit, but our educational system does resemble the fast food industry: keep the customers returning, fill those seats, give them what they ask for, regardless of what they need. Plato may never have ordered a pepperoni pizza, but he did suggest the problem was similar to confusing cookery with medicine.

However, that metaphor, too, seems insufficient, at least since that brief but intense episode of food poisoning I had last spring. (Sorry, Aristotle, but when it comes to Salmonella, mixing the "pure" with the "impure" doesn't make things wholesome.) The teacher becomes a kind of health care worker dealing with an outbreak of intellectual dysentery: give a dose of syllogism here, a regimen of outlining there. Run up and clear up that problem, Professor Pepto, Instructor Imodium—fast acting, pleasant tasting (we don't want the cure to be too unpleasant,

lest student evaluation comments are overly negative). Is there an ounce of prevention in all those pounds of cure? Plato may have missed the gymnastic aspect of his own metaphor.

Sitting down with a large stack of essays, I sometimes I feel like the porcelain pot into which a great deal of excrement is simply dumped. Yes, occasionally, I observe a subtle change of metaphor, though not quite the "paradigm shift" of Thomas Kuhn. The customer starts flinging the bun as a Frisbee or stacking the french fries into a pyramid, pretty bad but probably better than swallowing it; any idea seems better than none. Give that one an A.

Perhaps I just suffer from diminished expectations.

The farmer in me wants to plant and water and weed, to stimulate growth, but all that agricultural metaphor is lost in a digital age, along with the idea of apprenticeship to a craft. I am as outdated as a printed book. I require too much work, as one student recently told me after I had assigned less than a dozen pages of William Bradford. The student doesn't "like" all that "Old English"; he doesn't "feel" that any of it is relevant to his career needs; besides, the Puritans were a bunch of white male European bigots, so we should never read anything written by them to begin with; and, of course, all those Biblical references and allusions violate the principle of separation of church and state: a plateful of predigested clichés, cooked up by others, and swallowed whole without a thought and without a question. Dropping the class, the student went off in search of a different menu—Taco Bell rather than Jack-in-the-box from his perspective.

I had a different metaphor in mind: I recall reading in an old book somewhere that some seed falls beside the path and some amid the thorns and some in good soil—not a very appropriate metaphor in a digital, consumerist, fast-food, techno-babble, "tolerant" society.

Well, the wine is gone and the sandwich eaten, so I assume I have rambled on enough. Back to the stack.

* with apologies to the following:

Emily Dickinson. J675.

Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Nature*, Chapter IV.

Epictetus. *Discourses* 1.15.

Aristotle. *Politics*, Chapter 11.

Plato. *Gorgias*.

Thomas Kuhn. *The Copernican Revolution*.