

Going Deep

Robert E. Terrill

If I were pressed to choose a favorite among the many essays that Janice Hocker Rushing wrote with her coauthor and soul mate, Tom Frenzt, it would be their essay called "The Gods Must be Crazy: The Denial of Descent in Academic Scholarship," published as the lead article in the August, 1999, issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. It is a remarkable work indeed. This essay has served as a guidepost in my own academic life, I have assigned it to graduate students as a cautionary tale about their own academic futures, and I shall use it here as a touchstone for exploring some aspects of what I understand to be one of Rushing's and Frenzt's most significant contributions to our understanding of the relationship between rhetorical text and rhetorical critic. While Rushing and Frenzt—and especially Rushing—are identified with a critical practice rooted in myth and archetype, I argue that their *attitude* of textual interpretation offers an exemplar for cultural critics regardless of methodological approach or theoretical foundation.

I begin in liminality. This is where things generally begin and, truth be told, where they end. Transitions, translations, transformations, and transactions all take place in liminal spaces—or, perhaps better, liminality is a consequence of all such things. The prefix "trans" refers, of course, to "crossing," and liminal spaces are simultaneously spaces to be crossed and spaces that foster crossings. Following others, I suggest that the interaction between reader and text fosters this sort of liminal space. I then offer "The Gods Must be Crazy" as an exemplar that illustrates the way that Rushing and Frenzt, in and through their critical practice, invite their readers into a liminal space where neither reader nor text retains complete control; insightful cultural criticism, as they argue and illustrate, requires this liminality. In Janice Rushing's eloquent single-author essays, she further theorizes and demonstrates the critical potential of this dialogic approach to the text. Dialogues can be engrossing and productive; they also can be unpredictable and disruptive. I conclude by suggesting that Rushing and Frenzt

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have challenged us toward a dialogic critique that offers, in its intrepid unruliness, our best hope for contributing to cultural insight and advance.

Liminality

Victor Turner (1974) reminds us that a liminal space occurs “betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life” (p. 51), a period or phase during which the everyday rules are temporarily suspended in order to foster the “creative imagination” (p. 53) necessary for the renewal of individuals and communities. These are situations “in which new models, symbols, paradigms, etc., arise”—they are “the seedbeds of cultural creativity” (Turner, 1982, p. 28). Liminal space is where the world (or individual) as it was comes into contact with the world (or individual) as it will be, and it is the time when neither is yet ascendant. Though the presumption is for progress and growth, there is a moment when things could go either way; the boy could reemerge and remain just a boy, the moribund culture might resist rejuvenation, the repressed feminine might not be recovered, the fisher-king might fail to return. It is precisely this threshold of unpredictability, this following of a suspended and undetermined trajectory, that can lead toward insight. Hans Blumenberg (1987) suggests how liminality fosters rhetorical invention: “Lacking definitive evidence and being compelled to act are the prerequisites of the rhetorical situation” (p. 441).

Wolfgang Iser (2000) notes an analogous moment in the interpretive act: “each interpretation is an act of translation that opens up a space between the subject matter to be interpreted and what the subject matter is transposed into.” Because this moment in space and time “is to a certain extent independent of what is translated and of what it is translated into,” Iser marks it as a “liminal space” (p. 146). Any act of interpretation involves this moment of indeterminacy, as the matter being interpreted is no longer what it was yet still is in the process of becoming what it will be. This is an “empty” space, Iser tells us, “and yet something seems to arise out of it” (p. 147); it is “charged with a dynamism that strives to discharge itself into something” (p. 148). The transformative crucible that characterizes the liminal space of interpretation is fired by the frictions between text and reader, between the matter-to-be-interpreted and the terms and categories into which it is being translated. As Iser puts it, “this processing does not develop solely according to what the subject matter is like and what the register wants it to be but also according to a force that gathers in the liminal space itself” (p. 148).

The vast potential for reconstruction and rejuvenation that liminality promises can mask the compensatory destruction that also is inherent to liminal space. “Only in this way,” Turner notes, “through destruction and reconstruction, that is, transformation, may an authentic reordering come about. Actuality takes the sacrificial plunge into possibility and emerges as a different kind of actuality” (1982, p. 84). To invoke the transformative potential of interpretation, a reader must be willing to take this sacrificial plunge. Liminal spaces offer potential access to potent cultural depths, but gaining access to these depths requires muting individual will and self-directed control. External forces and attractions must be given the opportunity to

take over—or at least to exert their influence—or there is little possibility for insight. In other words, insight in interpretation requires a dissolution of self-control that is inherent in a truly liminal space. The critic who would contribute to social change cannot protect herself from being altered in and through the encounter with her text. In order to reveal in a text those qualities worthy of emulation, a critic must take the sacrificial plunge of symbolic immolation.

The work of Rushing and Frenz exemplifies this willingness to lose oneself in the act of interpretation and so leave oneself vulnerable to insight—to *go deep*. That is how I would name the critical attitude that characterizes their work, articulated succinctly in their book, *Projecting the Shadow*: “The activated unconscious, typically felt as heightened affect by the critic, fixates upon some textual meaning that is important for the critic’s own individuation process, and, if the critic is in touch with the cultural psyche, for the maturation of the community also” (Rushing & Frenz, 1995, p. 51). The critic is attracted viscerally to some cultural artifact; engaging that artifact addresses some psychic need, whether the critic acknowledges this or not; and the residue of that encounter between critic and text is presented to the culture as model and goad for collective improvement. This is the journey of a mythic hero—answering the call away from the world of the everyday, traveling down to commune with (not to destroy) some essential textual other, and then returning to the world with a boon to share (Campbell, 1949, pp. 30–34). This critical journey—going deep—takes place within the liminal space between critic and text, a space that is both required and constituted by the interpretive act. It is, in other words, in and through the engagement between critic and text that the cultural depths necessary for social transformation are accessed. “The Gods Must be Crazy” exemplifies this critical attitude, not only in its explicit argument but also through its form.

Thresholds

Rushing and Frenz begin their essay in the world of the excruciatingly mundane, at an end-of-semester address by a new campus chancellor. The address takes place on a recent “‘Dead Day’—that blessed, if meager, allocation of a twenty-four hour liminal space between the Scylla of term papers and the Charybis of final exams” (1999, p. 229). But this liminality is ironic at best, for this “Day of the Living Dead” and the speech that mars it are designed not to invite communion with cultural depths but indeed to close off access to them. In Turner’s terms, this is an instance of “structure” crowding out the productive chaos of antistructure and *communitas*. But then as a compensatory counterbalance the authors provide us with a momentary glimpse into the mythic realm that always shadows the mundane, retelling the tale of Dionysus’s revenge on King Lycurgus. And then, just as abruptly, we are engaged in a conversation, in the present, with the collective “we” of the authors as they outline the scope and purpose of the essay. Through shifting among scenes these critics begin literally to shake us off our familiar footing and begin the invitation toward

liminality. These opening passages also introduce, dispositionally, a motif that echoes the larger argument of the essay: between the mundane and the mythical enters the personal critical voice. Their argument is that “the academy values ‘up’ over ‘down,’ speech over deliberation, and quantity over quality,” and in so doing “it defies the one (Greek) god with a *human* parent—Dionysus.” This is fundamentally counterproductive, because “Dionysus embodies the truth that all genuinely good work demands periodic descents into the chaotic underworld where arid creative impulses might be slowly fertilized” (Rushing & Frenzt, 1999, p. 231). It is impossible, for example, to produce the “good work” that the academy now expects as an outcome of the sabbatical because what was once figured as an opportunity for Dionysian “down” time has been usurped by Apollonian expectations. By hitching its wagon to the bright, rational, and “up” attitude of Apollo, the academy has established an ethical universe wherein it cannot accomplish its own purposes. Paradoxically, excluding chaos makes breakdown inevitable; splitting Apollo from his doppelganger Dionysus eliminates the potentially liminal space between them, and thus closes access to the depth required for renewal. But this lopsided state of affairs cannot sustain itself indefinitely. One of my favorite lines in all of Rushing’s and Frenzt’s *oeuvre* sums it up perfectly: “Whether we honor him or not, Dionysus always has his day” (1999, p. 231). The remainder of “The Gods Must be Crazy” is organized as a series of threshold crossings, enacting the liminal oscillation essential for insight. Productive cultural criticism does not merely explain a text but models for its readers a way of thinking; in this case, the “text” is academic life, and by guiding us into a liminal space wherein we might regain contact with repressed Dionysus, Rushing and Frenzt show us what to do. They judge the Apollonian contours of contemporary academic life and find them wanting. “If creative processes, life contingencies, bodily desires, feminine frameworks, other fields of study, and even teaching must be forced down for the academic edifice to rise up,” they ask, “what is left of the ‘human dimension’ in academic life? Taken as a whole,” they conclude, “the answer seems to be: not very much” (Rushing & Frenzt, 1999, p. 231). Again, the problem here is not merely that such scholarship may not be very good, but that it is incapable of *doing* good. Void of Dionysian intuition and insight, such scholarship lacks the ability to “move” its readers.

We are then led across another threshold as Rushing and Frenzt invite us to “time-travel back to classical antiquity” from whence they plan to “return to today’s academy with some hints of a habit of thinking and a way of living” that held “up” and “down” in a perpetual and productive tension. Myths, they say, “can liquefy the solid borders we erect to keep one step up on chaos” (1999, p. 256). Typically, this is not merely a journey through time but also a crossing of conceptual space, as Rushing and Frenzt ascribe to mythic analysis generally some qualities often associated with one mythological figure particularly—the *trickster*. Trickster inhabits liminal spaces, working to keep such spaces open through persistent disruption of rigid boundaries. As Lewis Hyde puts it, “What tricksters like is the *flexible* or *movable* joint. If a joint comes apart, or if it moves from one place to another, or if it simply loosens up where it had begun to stick and stiffen, some trickster has probably been involved. In several

different ways, tricksters are joint-disturbers” (Hyde, 1998, p. 256). Just as Rushing and Frenzt (1999) turn to myth because, they say, it offers a “loosening” that can “in-spire” them toward inventive insight (p. 235), Hyde (1998) reminds us that trickster tales foster in their listeners “a loosening and breathing of the psychic boundaries” (p. 267). The depths cannot be plumbed through a narrow sphincter, and trickster frees the flow.

Dionysus, clearly, bears a family resemblance to trickster figures, and perhaps especially to trickster figures specifically linked to interpretation, such as Hermes and Legba.¹ But the point Rushing and Frenzt are making here is that mythic criticism *in general* performs a tricksterish role—or perhaps that productive criticism always is tricksterish (Ivie, 2002). If the task of the cultural critic is to shake loose the temples of calcified assumption and cast the ruins down upon the soil where they might be transformed into new and better ways of being—then cultural critics must inhabit liminal spaces.

As promised, Rushing and Frenzt return from their excursion “down” into the Greek myths that quite literally undergird Western culture carrying a boon back across the threshold and into the present day. This boon, like so many, takes the form of a task: we are to “live on this razor’s edge and not surrender our humanity to either god,” to “balance” the influence of the twin gods Apollo and Dionysus (Rushing & Frenzt, 1999, p. 238, 240). “Every person who has ever tried to create something good,” they remind us, “out of whatever materials, knows that one’s ardor for form must, like the god, be periodically dismembered, that one must become *possessed*, just a little bit crazy, or the muses will not speak” (Rushing & Frenzt, 1999, p. 242). Therein lies the doubled meaning—tricksters often traffic in doubled meanings— of the title of the essay: the gods *must* be crazy, because they have placed academics in an impossible position; the gods must *be* crazy, for otherwise they would lack sufficient wisdom to be gods. Critics must read in such a way that invites their text to exert its influence, to possess the critic, in order to foster a liminal space; and liminal spaces must be fostered, or the critic never can gain access to the cultural depths that are the resources of insight. In this essay, Rushing and Frenzt engage in persistent and tricksterish border-crossing, they sojourn through a mythic underworld, and they return to the everyday with a boon that really is a task. In this way, they model the critical practice in which we must engage if we are to “be good for people” (Rushing & Frenzt, 1999, p. 244).

This remarkable essay does not mean to show us that we *can* be good for people if we are willing and able to find the needed “down” time; it does not admonish that we *should* do so. Rather, and more dramatically, this essay argues that productive cultural criticism *requires* being “down,” and perhaps for extended periods of time. This is the challenge that Rushing and Frenzt lay before us: the purpose of cultural criticism is to engage in mutual dialogue with a cultural artifact, and thereby to open access to our cultural unconscious; to face, unarmed but unflinching, the awesome figures that dwell there; to retrieve what gifts might be made available; to resist hoarding these gifts for the enhancement of one’s own ego, and instead to share them unselfishly; and all the while to model the wisdom, judgment, and grace that will be

required for those who come after. Liminal spaces provide access to psychological and cultural depths, and we cannot perform productive critique unless we are willing to enter those spaces. The message of Rushing and Frentz's essay is that the purpose and the fundamental necessity of cultural criticism is to *go deep*.

Persephone

Other critics and other essays of criticism sometimes share the critical attitude and interpretive process modeled in "The Gods Must be Crazy." But nowhere else in our journals and, I am convinced, nowhere else at all, is it articulated more eloquently than in the works of Janice Hocker Rushing.

In her analysis of the film *E.T.*, for example, Rushing's stated purpose is to bring her readers into contact with the "ground of being, from which we came and to which we return" that she believes is an essential part of comprehending the boon that *E.T.* has the potential to bring to our culture (1985, p. 190). That's going pretty deep. In this case, access to that ground is gained through negotiating a liminal space between the visual spectacle of a Spielberg blockbuster and the perennial philosophy in which it participates. As Rushing puts it, critics addressing such texts face a difficult task because "visual media are more addressed to the *eye*" and "that ironically keeps us from 'seeing' " (1985, p. 199). The task, then, is not to disregard one register (the visual) for another (the mythic) but to see both at once, or to see each through the other, without either gaining the upper hand. Rushing argues *E.T.* is symptomatic of a need for transcendence, for atonement, and for reunification with a mythic wholeness—it presents "a plea for change in addressing the contemporary form of the ultimate exigence of fragmentation" (1995, p. 198). Seeing this message requires the liminal oscillation that Rushing enacts; and this is essential, for "practical debate . . . must be derived from the vision rather than vice versa" (1995, p. 200).

In her study of the New American Frontier, Rushing attends specifically to the "deep structure" of the myth of the frontier in American culture, treating it as the architectonic narrative through which the contemporary variations can be understood. As in "The Gods Must be Crazy," she leads us repeatedly across thresholds, from the "surface" manifestations of the myth as it is manifest in films such as *The Right Stuff*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *Star Wars*, to the "deep" structure of the myth through which these fragmentary stories might be linked into a single narrative statement. This interpretive strategy resonates with the argument, for it reveals the sites of ambiguity and overlap—the liminal spaces—that contain the most productive possibilities for transformation. As she explains, "It is important to locate such temporal points of overlap . . . in relation to an underlying unity of terms, for only in such a context are the transformations themselves meaningful" (1986a, p. 291). Only by tacking back and forth between the surface and the depth can insight be beckoned.

In her critique of Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" address—published in the same year and constituting an elaboration and application of her "New Frontier" thesis—Rushing (1986b) again sets in motion a vibrating oscillation between the text of

Reagan's address and the mythic narrative in which it participates. This vibration shakes loose the strategies through which Reagan attempts to contain "technical reasoning" with "social reasoning," and allows Rushing to reveal Reagan's sleight of hand: in his advocacy of a space-based missile defense system he *seems* to be deifying science as the solution to the vexing problem of world peace, but *actually* is scripting for the scientists a proscribed role that limits their inventional range. Put another way, when Reagan calcifies and disambiguates the role of the scientists, he blunts their ability to do good work. Rushing concludes by noting that we "could do worse than to search for a myth that brings us back to the human scales of space and time, even as we imagine their true transcendence." In her essay she shows why Reagan's vision cripples the search for this myth, and she models a critical mode that has the potential to foster it.

Rushing begins her analysis of the films *Alien* and *Aliens* with an intricate critique of the repression of feminine archetypes; as with her analysis of Reagan's speech, this mythic narrative is presented as the ground against which to judge these particular films. The films are drenched in images of *descent*, and as such they hold out hope that the long-repressed feminine might be reintegrated. Though it seems the films might present a model for achieving cultural and psychic wholeness, that promise comes to naught because the mother is a monster. The film presents, Rushing argues, "a rhetorical warning: if the modern conquering hero is too infused with *hubris* to recognize the Goddess's regency, she will burglarize his temples and befoul his shrines, eating away their core until they collapse with decay" (1989, p. 14). Further, the patriarchal narrative in these films requires the heroine, Ripley, to destroy the chthonic mother (at least until the next sequel), so that the film offers a second warning: because "the matricide is perpetrated by a *woman*, such as Ripley," the wrath of the repressed will continue to fester. Like Dionysus, the Goddess will have her day.

Rushing's (1998) reflection on the death of Princess Diana is one of her most personal and lyrical essays—and a personal favorite of mine. She again leads her reader across multiple thresholds: In just the first three paragraphs Rushing directs our attention first to Diana's funeral, and then to one of her own dreams, and then to a confession that she had experienced the entire weekend as "a time of descent" in which she alternately "gave into my own sadness and tried to contain it by writing up the seeds of this essay at my computer" (Rushing, 1998, pp. 150–151). Having thus positioned herself, and her reader, in an appropriately liminal space, Rushing proceeds to both model and advocate a mode of criticism that positions the critic's purpose as attempting to allow the repressed cultural other to speak its boon into consciousness. Referring to the vertical metaphor worked out in "The Gods Must be Crazy," and making its gendered implications (and imagery) more explicit, she writes that "Being 'up' implies a preferred attitude toward the text—a certain tone read between the lines as well as in the words. I would describe this as more skeptical than inspired, more cynical than tender, more impersonal than personal, more distant than close" (Rushing, 1998, p. 159). Such an attitude, she continues, "silences and limits certain critics and texts, persons and experiences—namely, those historically coded *feminine*" (Rushing, 1998, p. 161). This is the attitude of the hunter, and

it is the antithesis of the attitude Rushing displays in this essay. She argues instead for the need to realize the “necessity” sometimes of “setting aside” the concepts and theories that we have been “taught to honor,” to descend “from their heights” so that we might become “one with what we study, if only for a little while” (Rushing, 1998, p. 165). And like the extraordinarily generous mentor she always was, she does not tell us what to do but has shown us, in this truly elegant essay, how to learn what it is we should do.

Conclusion

In the commentary that Rushing and Frenzt (1994) included with their essay “The Frankenstein Myth in Contemporary Cinema” in *Critical Questions*, they stress the importance of allowing themselves as critics to engage with a text in a dialogic relationship: “For us,” they say, “this intuitive feeling is the purest ‘moment’ in which the opposition between the critic-as-subject and the text-as-object is broken down, and it generally provides the ‘seed crystal’ for the unfolding of the more reasoned aspects of the critique” (Rushing & Frenzt, 1994, pp. 155–156). If you want the text to talk to you, you can’t go in expecting to kill it—or even very much to discipline it. You have to be willing to allow it to take possession of you, and you must surrender yourself to the possibility that it might do so, as well as to the possibility that it might not.

It can be comfortable to distance oneself from a text, to view with a sort of relief the inevitable and insulating layer of theory, jargon, or other such critical apparatus as it springs up to guard our *selves* from our work. It can be thrilling to watch the critical machineries that we have so carefully crafted rise up from the slab and set to work, seemingly autonomous, to produce another “publishable” essay. It can be a rush to look away from the entrancing glow of a computer screen in the wee hours of the morning to survey the smoking rubble of yet another of the textual apparitions through which power is made manifest.

But it is really dangerous, as so many mythic heroes have shown us, to allow yourself to become possessed, even for just a little while, by the spirit of the other. It can be frightening to turn control of your own text over to the seductions of some other text that you do not yet—and never will—fully understand. But by doing so critics infinitely increase the likelihood that Dionysus will not be utterly overshadowed by Apollo, that insight will not be totally eclipsed by spectacular images, and that artful cultural critique will not be silenced by a sterile application of theory to text. In art as in life, there are no guarantees, as those who knew Janice Rushing have been so vividly reminded. And so the challenge persists—we must be willing to *go deep*.

Note

[1] Hyde refers to Legba, a Yoruba trickster that survived the “middle passage” into African American folk tales, as a “cosmic linguist” who “translates among the spheres” (1998, p. 259). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes Legba as “the guiding force of interpretation itself” (1988, p. 23).

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