

On Erasing*

Whenever I erase a line or a marginal notation I always remember my father, who taught me how to erase well. Today I think that erasing well is just as important as writing well.

It began when I was about eight or nine years old. Our classroom teacher would dictate a simple sentence and all the pupils would have to fill their composition books with large cursive letters expressing such profound aphorisms as “The mother hen and her chicks peck at the yellow corn” or “The little kitten plays with the big ball of yarn”, etc. As we were pupils in a working class school in a poor Latin-American country, none of us could afford expensive materials.

Our pencils were probably cheap Chinese knock-offs with those useless, pasty pink erasers encased in their little tin cups. And, being a very nervous child, I was in the habit of chewing on the erasers heads, mixing my saliva with the poor-quality eraser gum. Being also by nature a sloppy child, whenever I noticed a mistake, I would try to erase it, holding my pencil like a dagger, chaffing the cheap paper and leaving horrible black and reddish blotches all over the text.

One day the teacher noticed the pitiable state of my notebook and was horrified. Seeking an impressive punishment, she ordered me to the principal’s office –the first time I had ever visited the dreaded sanctuary of Dr. Beltrán. We were all terrified of the Great Director –for us children he appeared as kind of a cross between Count Dracula and Generalissimo Franco. He was, as they would say today, “old school”: believing in strict quasi-military discipline and medieval correction practices. Walking through the courtyard that morning over to the lion’s lair was, to my tender mind, the equivalent of the endless mile before execution.

Surprisingly, Dr. Beltrán was somewhat bemused and understanding of my plight. (It may have been a slow morning.) He rebuked me gently, and gave me a new *Mirador* brand pencil with a shiny new copper eraser head, and recommended that I never chew on a pencil again. That day I acquired a wholly new respect for erasers, and have never “fallen off the pencil-chewing wagon.”

Later that week, my father –who made his living as a draughtsman and commercial artist– found out about my ordeal (probably from my aunt Rosalía who worked at the school as a secretary). He decided to teach me the fine art of erasing well. My father sat me down and asked me to write a simple sentence. Then he asked me to erase it with my shiny new pencil. Afterwards, it was obvious one could still see traces of the original sentence.

My father then erased the sentence properly, patiently moving the eraser gently up and down as well as in a neat circular motion until no trace remained on that paper. It was indeed as if it there had never been any writing on that immaculate sheet. I was grateful and lost in admiration of his artistry.

I remember that my father's drafting table was always impeccable; and his hands were always remarkably unsullied considering the messy art materials he worked with. Looking at his work, it became clear to me that he erased as much and as often as he traced lines or contours on the vellum or poster board. He would use very light gauge pencils to draw almost invisible guidelines before applying the inks to compose the final image. Then, after successfully creating the intended figure, he would neatly erase the guidelines. His sentences would be constructed like an architect's blueprint full of geometrical precision –horizontal lines encasing the circles and rectangles that would later become Roman script or Gothic calligraphy for an illuminated manuscript-style diploma. Without completely erasing those guidelines, he would have never been able to achieve such perfection.

Over the years since my father died, the works that he produced have been forgotten or annihilated by time and destiny. I have written much and read even more, but the memory of that loving lesson has never been erased.

Erasing well is a lost art or science. Deleting, by the way, is *not* erasing. With modern computers it has become too easy to delete a text at the touch of a button or a flick of the mouse. On the other hand, to erase a line with an old eraser requires deliberation and commitment. The ancients could not easily erase once their chisel chipped the marble or their ink touched the papyrus. The canvas of the old masters still shows the pentimento under which the original image is partly hidden. The treaties of old kings and emperors are riddled with unsightly crossed-out passages. Many a scribe was killed for the crime of misrepresenting Pharaoh's decrees. Long and careful thinking and soul-searching was invested before committing the nib of a quill to parchment. Writers wrote in their own blood, every line a Faustian gamble. That is why so much of the old scripture and literature is still read and studied today. As in life, once a mistake is made, it cannot be undone. I am convinced that there will come a time when our lives and thoughts will be as easily deleted as digital files disappearing into cyberspace limbo.

Many of the books in my private library are hand-me-downs from old friends or lovers now forgotten. Some of these I've read twice or three times over periods spanning in some cases twenty or thirty years. Often I run across someone else's underlined passage or marginal notation. This annoys

me to no end, as I've always refused to assimilate someone else's analysis or running commentary on a text before I've had the opportunity to read and digest it. Therefore, I always erase the intrusive lines or marginal scribbles. Many years ago, I'd erase these ugly lines or notes with an ink eraser. Today, I use *White-Out* or *Liquid Paper* which is neater. Yet I always feel a certain sense of guilt at thus wiping out a thought or inspiration that the previous reader might have had at the moment of reading. Sometimes as I'm re-reading a passage after many years, I decide to erase my own previous lines or marginal observations, which have now become embarrassing to me. This sense of guilt is mixed with a feeling of dread that some unknown in the future will do the same to *my* exegesis.

And this yet again is linked to a silly fantasy I've had ever since I first read the annotated texts of famous writers: Shakespeare's plays, for example, where practically every line is marked by a tiny number signaling a footnote explaining at the bottom of the page or at the end of a scene that "in Elizabethan parlance a nunnery was also a house of prostitution" or some such insight.

My fantasy involves the certainty that someday, after I've passed on to that heavenly salon where the literati and famous thinkers of all time dwell, some future critic or post-graduate student writing his doctoral thesis on my oeuvre will decipher my marginal notations and make his name and reputation on his analysis of my obscure references and brilliant insights into the Big Questions (Life, Death, Love, God, etc.) and how they affected my life and philosophy.

He or she will then publish many books, poor photocopies or printouts of which in turn will be read, underlined and annotated by his or her students –the contents of which will in good time be erased from their memories –as will his or her life and ideas, as well as mine.

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