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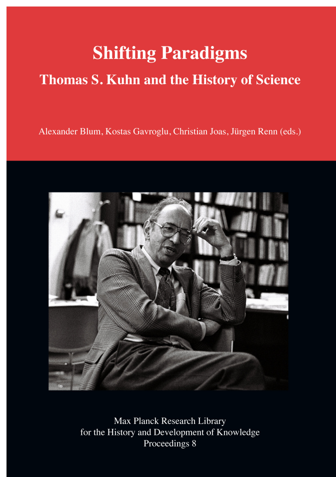
William Shea:

Thomas Kuhn: A Man of Many Parts



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Chapter 3
Thomas Kuhn: A Man of Many Parts
William Shea

I cannot claim to have belonged to the inner circle of Thomas Kuhn's friends, but I was occasionally privileged to see him outside the limelight in which he was compelled to bask. Allow me to recall two incidents, one when he was very angry, and the other one when he was greatly amused. The first one occurred in the 1970s when I happened to accompany Tom to a European university where he had been invited to give a lecture. We were met at the entrance to a large auditorium by the organizer who told Tom that he would escort him to the front row. I attempted to stay behind (front rows always intimidate me even when I am the guest speaker) but Tom insisted that I stay with him and that we pursue the topic we were discussing. When the chairman went to the podium to introduce him, I glanced behind me and saw that there were about a thousand people eagerly awaiting his appearance.

The talk was on one of Kuhn's varied attempts to render incommensurability commensurate. I had expected that it would be followed by the usual question period. But no—! the chairman informed us that we would now hear three "brief" comments. The first speaker rattled on for twenty minutes on how some people might think that Prof. Dr. Kuhn had fallen into "a deep well" of uncertainty, if not contradiction, but that they need not worry because he was going to get him out of there. When the second post-mortem speaker was announced, Tom turned to me and said, "Let's get out of here!" I pretended not to hear but he repeated, "Let's get out of here," in a louder voice. I had my misgivings but I whispered, "Okay." He sprang to his feet and I sheepishly followed him to the entrance of the auditorium in the hope that the audience would assume that we both had a prostate problem and were badly in need of the bathroom. When we reached the lobby, Tom exploded: "I can't stand it anymore! I have become a sounding board, an opportunity for people to preach their own ideas under the guise of discussing my own. I can just hear them saying,"—he added with a suitably professorial tone of voice—"Kuhn is not sufficiently bold or clearheaded!"

Tom felt that he was caught between competing teams who had only one thing in common: their determination to point out where he had gone wrong.

Sociologists thought that he did not go far enough and philosophers asked whether he knew where he was going. "I usually keep my calm," he added, "but enough is enough!" I believe this emotional outburst tells us something important about this great man, and the pain that he endured at the hands of people who damned him with faint but apparently loud praise.

If Tom could unexpectedly become very angry, he was also capable of greatly enjoying a joke. A couple of years after the meeting I have just mentioned, I attended a small gathering in Sweden where the guest speaker was Tom who, after giving a splendid lecture, remained to hear a colleague who gave a talk on a topic that Tom was exploring at the time: the claim that history and fiction obey the same rules. Tom thought the illustrations were hilarious. He burst out laughing several times during the coffee break, muttering things like "great joke, great truth." I had never seen him in this excited state and I never saw a repeat performance. Since it sheds light on his personality, let me attempt to reconstruct, however badly, the story that he found so funny.

The speaker wanted to illustrate his claim that to be credible, history must comply with the rules of fiction, and he referred to Nancy Partner's delightful essay, "Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History," in which she enlists the aid of P. G. Wodehouse, a writer dear to Anglophile academics, including Tom and myself. The hero is a man named Jeeves but the narrator is Bertie Wooster, who is also the fictional author of his own adventures. The part that amused Tom hinges on one sentence: Bertie has just entered the drawing room of his aunt Dahlia who is reading a Rex Stout detective story. Here is how Bertie describes his aunt's reaction: "Oh, it's you," she said, "which it was of course" (Wodehouse 1971, 128).

This fleeting joke brought a smile to Tom's lips. He grasped the serpentine implications of this one line, or rather of the five words, of the relative clause ("which it was of course") because the elusive but lingering funniness does not turn solely on the simple joke of a narrator so fluffy-minded that he has to assure his readers that he is, in fact, identical with himself. It punctures, as Nancy Partner puts it, "the fundamental conventions of narrative" and the ways in which language establishes a continuous world of concordant identities.

> Silly Bertie points to himself, a thing of words, here a few equated pronouns: "It's you […] which it was […]", and *we* fill in the fictional reference and smile at Bertie's dimwit literalness (which he literally is)—and the joke is on us and our earnest assent to fictional reality. We know so certainly that this Bertie, who has just walked through aunt Dahlia's house and entered her drawing room, enjoys a continuousness of identity just like our own. The final, "of course", has just the right note of fatuous emphasis, a conversational tic gone

> wildly wrong if connected to a statement turning on the essential condition of human identity […] Here in this narrative within a narrative—for Bertie is the fictional narrator of his own inventions, and Bertie is Wodehouse's fiction—Wodehouse, as author, takes only the dumb joke for himself, that Bertie is a bit of a twit, and generously allows Bertie the witty joke on our eager gullibility to have the printed page merge so seamlessly with our own sense of reality. So aunt Dahlia looks up from one light fiction to encounter another: "Oh, it's you", she said. Which it was of course. (Partner 1986, 98–99)

Now what can this explication overkill have to do with the serious business of historical writing? The speaker gave a number of examples but the one that struck Tom concerned William the Conqueror while he waited for the wind to change so that he could set sail from France to England in 1066. Contemporary writers describe his supplications for a change in the weather, and picture him as constantly gazing towards the vane of the church of St. Valérie. The speaker suggested that the historian might want to add something to the description of William waiting for a favorable channel wind. He offered us three choices:

First choice: William felt secretly anxious because he did not know how to swim.

Second choice: He began to embroider a nice tablecloth with scenes depicting his connection with the English monarchy.

Third choice: He experienced frustration and impatience.

Normal professional logic can countenance only the third, "He experienced frustration and impatience." The second choice, "He began to embroider a nice tablecloth with scenes depicting his connection with the English monarchy," is too interesting to even consider, while the first choice, "William felt secretly anxious because he did not know how to swim," is dismissed because contemporary writers did not say that he did not know how to swim.

The moral is perhaps that historians should not become guilty of what Thomas Huxley called "plastering the fair face of truth with that pestilent cosmetic, rhetoric" (Chesterton 1913, 39). I can only guess that Tom would have said that Huxley was laying it on a bit thick, and he would have enjoyed our chuckle.

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