



Grand Allusion

By ELIZABETH D. SAMET FEB. 3, 2012

A good friend recently treated me to one of the preposterous yet mostly true tales for which I prize him. This one involved the Texas Tech University mascot's horse, Double T., skidding on the turf during a pregame gallop and careening into a stadium wall. While my friend described the fatal accident, I recalled the scene in "Anna Karenina" in which Vronsky's horse — whose name I had momentarily forgotten and was desperately reaching for — falls in the steeplechase and must be put down.

"Like Vronsky's horse!" I announced. "You know," I stumbled on, "Vronsky's horse . . . injured at the races . . . has to be shot. . . . What's the name of Vronsky's horse?"

"Who's Vronsky?" my friend shrugged, and I was reminded that each unhappy allusion is unhappy in its own way.

There's a brisk, largely invisible traffic in allusion going on all the time all around us. Because the most successful allusions require only tacit acknowledgment — or, at most, an allusive reply equally opaque to the clueless — we are frequently saved the embarrassment of recognizing our own ignorance and exclusion. Allusions tend to become visible only when, for some reason, they demand a response yet, like unreciprocated handshakes, fail to be grasped. When someone simply has to ask, to the discomfort of all, "Who's Vronsky?"

"Oh, just some guy I know who had a horse named Frou-Frou."

When they fail, allusions leave us exposed: either enmeshed in inelegant, patronizing explanations or cast adrift with insufficient provisions on the

murky seas of a childlike half-understanding. Failed allusions produce feelings of betrayal on all sides because they reveal mistaken assumptions about shared frames of reference and like-mindedness. Parties embroiled in an allusion gone wrong eye each other with suspicion across a newly opened chasm and wonder who is really at fault: is the speaker a snob or the listener a dolt?

Some people know exactly who you are when you say, “Don’t make it sad, Cricket, I don’t feel that way,” or, “Gimme a whiskey. . . . And don’t be stingy, baby.” They laugh when you mention Charles Dickens with two k’s, the well-known Dutch author. They are by no means nonplused when you growl in frustration, “Bastard Normans, Norman bastards.” In other words, certain friends have the training to appreciate a good part of the idiosyncratic tapestry of film, literature and other materials you’ve woven together over the years — and the patience and generosity to unravel the rest. When they don’t, and you, preferring the Scylla of the swindle to the Charybdis of condescension, suffer whatever rolls trippingly off your tongue to pass for something original, you’re no longer clever but a cheat. Unlike most tricks, the allusion triumphs only when people know precisely how it is done.

If allusion courts various personal and social risks in everyday life, in the classroom it has its own special dangers. Teachers, especially English teachers, train students to spot allusions everywhere. It is a mark of arrival to know that the title of Fitzgerald’s novel “Tender Is the Night” refers to Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” or that the title of Stanley Kubrick’s 1957 film “Paths of Glory” alludes to Thomas Gray’s wildly popular 18th-century “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Some of the best moments in class occur when a student, seeing something that once was invisible, draws her own potentially enriching connections. Yet such discoveries have become increasingly rare.

The Internet has turned students into supremely efficient trackers who grow up believing there is a seamless web of Google-ready allusion waiting to be exploited. Perhaps like spelling, memorizing phone numbers and reading a map, recognizing allusions without technological assistance is becoming an obsolete skill. Today any quotation can be identified in seconds, any suspicion of intertextuality immediately confirmed or denied. Well, almost any. Some

authors play with this very assumption by planting red herrings in their work: David Foster Wallace, for example, or Arthur Phillips in his recent novel, “The Tragedy of Arthur.” By intermingling manufactured and verifiable allusions in the same poem, Robert Pinsky has baffled several keyboarding Natty Bumppos of my acquaintance.

Allusion can feel like something of a parlor game even in the best of times. In the 1940s, in a discussion of T. S. Eliot’s densely allusive poem “The Waste Land,” the formalist critics William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley questioned prevailing assumptions about the value of allusion-hunting. Eschewing the role of literary detective, they rejected the notion that we “do not know what a poet means unless we have traced him in his reading.” “Eliot’s allusions work,” they argued in “The Intentional Fallacy,” “when we know them — and to a great extent even when we do not know them, through their suggestive power. . . . It would not much matter if Eliot invented his sources,” as Walter Scott and Coleridge had done. Wimsatt and Beardsley’s warning that identifying an allusion does not amount to the same thing as understanding its significance has renewed urgency in the current age of allusion-automation, for if the Web makes it that much easier for the allusion-hunter to bag his quarry, it does not necessarily tell him how to dress it.

Reacting against the insider trading characteristic of so much 20th- and 21st-century literature in the wake of modernism, some students refuse allusion altogether. Their impatience can extend beyond arguably esoteric literary references to the period details an author might invoke. Some of my students recently expressed frustration with Frank O’Hara’s elegy for Billie Holiday, “The Day Lady Died.” Who cares, they asked, about the brand of cigarettes O’Hara smoked, the literary journals he read, the train he caught or the jazz club he frequented? I think they resented O’Hara’s personal catalog of 1959 New York City, and they were largely unmoved by a classmate’s claim that the apparent triviality was precisely the point. We read O’Hara’s poem in an anthology that identified many of the references, but what use is a footnote that simply inventories the unfamiliar landmarks of an alien world? In trying to illuminate an allusion in class, I sometimes feel as if I’m opening one

nesting doll after another until there's nothing left at all.

Confronted by a vertiginous cascade of allusions, each one pointing to yet another unknown, retreating to the snail shell of the mind seems a whole lot more attractive: a poem responds to you, you don't respond to it. In a letter she wrote the day she died, Elizabeth Bishop complained to the editor of an anthology that included some of her poems about the notes that had been appended: "If a poem catches a student's interest at all, he or she should damned well be able to look up an unfamiliar word in the dictionary. . . . You can see what a nasty teacher I must be — but I do think students get lazier and lazier & expect to have everything done *for* them." Bishop saw in her students' resistance evidence of a bias against knowledge in favor of feeling: "They mostly seem to think that poetry — to read or to write — is a snap — one just has to *feel* — & not for very long, either." She closed, "If you can get students to *reading*, you will have done a noble work."

Sometimes I read that letter with students. They "get it" — absolutely — even when they have to ask, "Who's Elizabeth Bishop?"

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