Hand-Me-Downs:
Or The Traditionalization of Thought[1]

In speaking we lose hold of
the import of what we say.
Native American proverb[2]

"I have access to myself only by again
apprehending the aim of my forefathers."
Paul Ricoeur

I

Some time ago when thinking about this address, two rather odd images popped into my head, one about an old sweater, another about the game of telephone children play.

My brother had a sweater...once. He had received a wool sweater as a gift from a girlfriend. It had been purchased in Paris and came to mean a lot to him.... Then, my mother washed it.... It shrunk. Being the younger brother, I found myself the unintended recipient of my brother's girlfriend's gift—there are some advantages to being the younger brother. In time this hand-me-down became a favorite of mine as well. I wore it often, so much so that it developed holes in the elbows. We tried to mend these, and when that proved inadequate, we patched them. Moths too did their work. As time past it thus became even more tattered and frayed. Such is the history of the sweater that came to be mine.

If you were to see the sweater for the first time—I thought of wearing it today—what would, what could you think...other than that it is the worse for wear? All one would see is the aftereffects of years, not the gift in its original fullness. Could one tell that it had shrunk? Indeed, since one hadn't seen it at the outset, could one know what it originally looked like? These questions bothered me.

Even more troubling was the image of the 'game of telephone.' Remember, when younger, we used to play this game. One person would think of an idea. He or she would then whisper it into the ear of the person next to them, who in turn would whisper it into the ear of another, who in turn ...etc. Then the last person would say what he or she had heard. Inevitably it would be different, sometimes very different from the original. Often it would be so horribly and laughably transmogrified that one couldn't imagine how what was heard at the end could possibly have originated in what was whispered at the beginning.

Perhaps you are wondering why I mention these. Because the story of the sweater and that of the game of telephone are both images of inheritance.

You too are about to inherit hand-me-downs. We call them 'Great Books.' These things too, one might suspect, have been through the wash or affected by the series of transmissions they've undergone. The above examples raise this troubling prospect. They seem to suggest that there is no way that we could receive our rightful inheritance, for sweaters wear out or cannot be un-shrunk, and thoughts can become so transmogrified that they no longer even remotely resemble the original. Thus one is brought to wonder whether we can be sure, when reading, that we 'hear' the author. You might reply that we have the original texts, the Greek, the Hebrew, the German, the Russian. But the question is the deeper and even more troubling one: **though we 'have' the original words, 'have' we the original thoughts?**

II

Here's why this question should become a question for us all.[3] In the middle of a reflection on how ideas 'persist' and live on—and not simply scatter with the winds of time as are so many of our human accomplishments—one of the authors on the program identifies a curious process that works against such persistence and thus against our ever being able to learn from the past.

Modern existence moves within numerous traditions, he notes, traditions of customs and traditions of thought (354). What this means is that most of what we think we know is like 'a found object.' All we had to do is 'receive' them 'ready made.' We say they were 'handed down' to us, and although we've done little to possess them, we still call them 'our own.'

So, one might ask, what is the problem? After all, a thinker, perhaps even a great thinker, has already thought these thoughts. All we have to do is 'hear' what they have to say. We thus act as if thoughts, once thought, are thought 'once and for all,' 'forever identically repeatable.'[4] We come to say that things are 'familiar' to us – 'clear,' 'obvious,' 'plain,' 'understood [*selbstverstandlich*].' We come to take them 'for granted,' 'as given.' Yet here there may only be a false comfort to be had. To take something for granted means not to be spurred on to think about it for oneself.[5] The problem, then, might be that we see no problem.

Indeed all that such 'familiarity' might bespeak is a **concealing clarity**. We all have an intimate sense of the shallowness, the depthlessnes of such 'familiarity' and of its profound insufficiency especially when trying to understand ideas or works of consequence, Aristotle or the Bible, Goethe or Einstein. Beneath the patina of the 'obvious' are original meanings long lost sight of or not yet fathomed, layers, indeed histories of intentions and 'residual concepts (9)' nested within that do not show themselves to what this author calls 'lazy reason (16).'[6] Things 'long understood' are thus not necessarily well understood.

With time, ideas--and the words we use to convey them—acquire a kind of **unrevealing opacity** about them. In being handed down, they lose their evidence, their significance, their validity[7], and become—as Plato would say—**shadows of their former selves.**[8] No longer apparent are **the pregnant and revealing evidences**[9] the originator had present to him that led to the inaugural discovery. Thus, though the **words** are transmitted, the **thinking** that brought the ideas to life is left behind.[10] Emptied of meaning, all originality is thus at risk of becoming obscurity, and all thought in danger of becoming thoughtless.[11]

Still another dimension to this problem, according to this author, is that not only are our inherited thoughts often but **half thoughts**, these half thoughts in turn assume a **priority** in our view of the world that is undeserved. So much so that our straightforward, primary comportment

in the world--our everyday mode of life--is obscured, and by means of a 'surreptitious substitution' (49-50) overridden by these unthoughtful thoughts.[12]

For all the husks of thought before our minds, we no longer see the direct evidence before our eyes.[13] Indeed the 'garb (51)[14] or disguise (52) of ideas'--as this author calls them--now provides the lenses through which life is experienced, causing us to make the effort no longer to see things in their own right. Amidst this false familiarity, we lapse into unoriginality, that mode of careless being characterized by empty talk, superficial reading and careless facility--that is the ingrained attitude of 'the taken for granted' ('passive association'). We have fallen victim, he says, to 'the seduction of language' (362) or, we might say, to 'the seduction of thought.' Yet in so doing we bypass our own primacy, our own resourcefulness as thinkers.[15] Plainly put, we have become 'sophisticated' and, sorry to say, 'learned.'[16]

This is not a happy picture. Especially as the author stresses that this twofold process of superficialization[17] and overlay is unavoidable (362).

III

What is not happening when we simply 'receive' what is given? The model of this today is the reading of the morning newspaper (perhaps now also the textbook). These we 'peruse' or 'skim' in order to get the 'gist' or an 'overview.' We read for 'content,' now reduced to 'information.' However what might be sufficient in the morning with a cup of coffee is counter-productive for the rest of our day; it encourages in us the habit of passive assimilation ('association').[18]

What is lost when everything is 'taken for granted' and thought of as 'information' is what used to be called insight. We have forgotten that what is presented to us now as a *fait accompli* was once unthought and unknown and thus had itself to become a matter for discovery. To understand that discovery would mean to understand the mode of thought that was so pregnant that it gave birth to something hitherto unthought. To gain insight into another's thinking would thus require more than that we rehearse (repeat and memorize) their thought formulations. It requires that we ourselves undertake to think as the author would have thought.

This means not only that we 'think for ourselves'—not enough--but also that we do so in such a way that we ourselves reenact the founding discovery of the idea in all its originality and consequentiality.[19] We must bring ourselves to the point where we undergo what the original thinker [Husserl: inventor[20]] underwent for himself or herself, re-mining and re-staking the claim to the insight in our own right. (In so doing, we are thus to be likened to good actors who become their subjects, not to bad ones who mindlessly mouth their scripts.) In short, we recapitulate in our own person the thought process as well as the thought.

The author calls this mode of deep thought 'reactivation.'[21] In contrast to sweaters apparently, lifeless, thoughtless handed-down ideas can be restored. But only if we do our part.[22] To do so we need to undertake this renewing kind of thinking[23] that seeks to de-fragment and de-sediment the fractured and accumulated elements of meaning ("bringing the total validity to active performance" [364]). [24] Only by becoming such a co-thinker will we have access to the original gift in the tattered remnant.

This parallel ('concurrent' [360]) production on our part—co-thinking--moreover, makes possible that coincidence of our ownmost thinking with those of thoughts past that we all recognize as the 'Yes!' of understanding, that profound experience of concurrence that what we

now realize in ourselves is indeed what was intended. Reactivation thus re-actualizes the thought, resuscitates it, re-wows it.[25]

IV

But what concerns our author even more is the long-term effect that this 'passive attitude to learning' has on the state of our capacity for meaning recovery or reactivation. Like ideas, we tend to think that 'capacities' are simply 'given.' We even speak about IQ (Intelligence Quotient) as if we had only to turn on a switch and, boom, we're smart. While there surely are different abilities, what is equally if not more important, we've seen, is **the process of actualization of that ability.**

Considering acts of thought not in isolation but as part of a larger process, the author observes (somewhat obscurely): "**co-established** with the act of reactivation is the **capacity** for reactivation" (360). That is to say, with each specific act of revealing thought (Husserl: 'back reflection'), **our general capacity for thoughtfulness** is heightened. Not only do we gain an **insight**, we become, ourselves, more **insightful.**

He continues (again somewhat obscurely):

> ...Without the **actually developed capacity** for reactivating the original [cognitive] activities contained within its fundamental concepts...a **tradition [of thought becomes] empty of meaning**.... If we ourselves did not have this capacity, we would never know whether [anything we thought we knew] had or ever did have a **genuine meaning**, one that could be 'cashed in.' Unfortunately...this is our situation and [that] of the whole modern age (366).

Thus the concern is not only that we have become unused and hence disinclined to be reflective about what we think we know, though this is dreadful enough in this author's view. Even more consequential is that "...the **capacity** for reactivating the primal beginnings [of our traditions of thought]...has **not been handed down** with [them]" (367).[26]

Yet unless each generation is so enabled and can put itself in a position to 'cash in' on the wealth of its traditions—that is, to identify the 'genuine meanings'--to see the original gift in the tattered remnant—then traditions, no less than ideas, become externalized and superficial. And as traditions become empty of meaning, so too, to that extent, do we become less capable of insight.

Here we see his deepest criticism: the failure of modern culture--and its educational institutions--to hand down more than a static, externalized body of knowledge, and thus its failure to perpetuate a living and thoughtful tradition. This is one of the roots of what was called 'the **crisis of European culture**' and that, at the time of the author's writing (the 1930s), threatened all that had ever been valued in the West. Europe lost its way, he concludes, because it had **lost its capacity to find and keep its way.**[27]

V

The question for us today is what this means for our education. Is there a mode of education that takes such concerns seriously?

Is there a form of education that is designed to counter our deeply ingrained habits of passivity? Is there one concerned not simply to impart skills or methodologies but one whose principal focus is the development of our capacity for thoughtfulness, one that would enable us to see for ourselves 'whether [anything we thought we knew] had or ever did have a genuine meaning'?

And that we not live in unsuspecting ignorance of our true inheritance, is there a form of education concerned not simply with the re-appropriation of the past, nor even with the re-certification of traditional insights, but one which, aiming still higher, seeks to enable its students to see the original gift in the tattered remnant that they in turn may assay whether the hand-me-downs they have received contain the stuff that gives depth and true direction to human lives?

We ask you today to join us in our search for such a form of education.

VI

Let us end with a caution, one necessary for such a venture.

Plato, in his dialogue *Phaedrus,*[28] recounts a story about the Egyptian god Theuth. Among other things, he is said to have invented letters and writing. Theuth came to the king of Egypt, Thamus--also a god--to show him his wondrous inventions.

> 'This invention, O king,' said Theuth, 'will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered.'...[King] Thamus replied, 'Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention [writing] will produce forgetfulness in the mind of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing produced by external characters which are not part of themselves will discourage the use of their own memory [faculties] within them. You have invented not an elixir of memory but [at best] of reminding; and you offer [your] pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom....

Books are wonderful, great books truly so. But as we have seen, along with these hand-me-downs comes the responsibility for renewal.

We ask you today to join us in this great venture of renewal.

Thank you.

Oh, one last thing: take better care of your sweaters.

Endnotes

1 A convocation address given on June 14th, 1998 to open the 32nd summer session of the Graduate Institute in Liberal Education, St. John's College, Santa Fe. The final version of this talk has benefitted from a number of conversations with my colleague Frank Hunt.

2 Though I've heard it several times, I've not been able to find the exact formulation or the source of this saying.

3 This talk will concern itself largely with an essay by Edmund Husserl written in 1936 given the title (by Fink) "The Origin of Geometry [as an intentional-historical problem]." All references are to *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology,* translated by David Carr, Evanston, 1970, pp. 353-378, where it is found as appendix VI; a few references will be made to the larger discussion. Every reader of Husserl encounters this paradox: his attempt at recovering the eclipsed, primary world of human experience (*Lebenswelt*) entails a humanly forbidding and over-technical mode of speech. His return to the human, in short, speaks a language no human would ever speak.

4 We unthinkingly presume that they "can be taken up again at first merely passively and [can] be taken over by anyone else" (p. 362).

5 Thoughts, like coins, lose their contours with wear. We cannot be spurred on to think about differences that no longer appear evident to us. Cp. Plato, *The Republic,* VII 523af.

6 Inherited words are thus always 'esoteric.'

7 The validity (*Geltung,* worth and import) of another's thought is actually 'destroyed,' Husserl says, from our own lack of effort of regeneration (pp. 361-2).

8 The word Husserl uses for this degradation of access to the original meaning is 'sedimentation.' The word Heidegger uses to give us access to this process of concealment is 'forgetfulness'—though paradoxically a 'forgetfulness' that was never preceded by full awareness on our part. The statement "Sedimentation is always somehow forgetfulness," though omitted in Biemel's and Carr's subsequent editions, was included in Fink's original edition of "The Origin of Geometry" (see Jacob Klein, "Speech, Its Strength and Its Weaknesses," *The Lectures and Essays of Jacob Klein,* Annapolis, 1985, p. 372). "We hear a great deal today about pollution—the pollution of air, water, and land, which burdens our lives. But we hear rarely about the pollution of our language, which burdens our understanding" (p. 373).

9 "*Evidenz* means nothing more than grasping an entity with the consciousness of its original *Selbst-da* [self-thereness or presence]" (p. 356).

10 Language is implicitly presumptuous. Spoken and written words presume that the originative thinking underlying them is as available and transparent as the words themselves.

11 Cp. "The signifying function of a word has, by its very nature, the tendency to lose its revealing character. The more we become accustomed to words, the less we perceive their original and precise 'significance:' a kind of superficial and 'passive' understanding is the necessary result of the increasing familiarity with spoken and written words" (Klein, "Phenomenology and the History of Science," *The Lectures and Essays of Jacob Klein,*" Annapolis, [1940] 1985, p. 77). "...Every actualization of the task threatens the loss of the task...success is ambiguous..." (Paul Ricoeur, "Husserl and the Sense of History," *Husserl,* translated by Ballard and Embree, Evanston, 1967, p. 158). "In the moment of writing, the sign can always empty itself, take flight from awakening, from 'reactivation,' and may remain forever closed and mute" (Jacques Derrida, "'Genesis and Structure' and Phenomenology," *Writing and Difference,* translated by Bass, [1968] 1978, Chicago p. 166). "...There may be some things I can't see without losing sight of others" (Frank Hunt, "Husserl and The Crisis of the European Sciences," St. John's College Lecture, p. 8).

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12 These are replacement entities, stand-ins, uprooted and secondary 'shadows,' thought holograms.

13 Cp. Husserl, ***Crisis***, p. 127. It is a life removed from the specificity of things and thus no longer in immediate contact with the 'truth' or immediate evidence of experience. It is to be compared, Goethe says in one of his plays (***Goetz von Berlichingen***), to one who from pure learning does not know his father. "So we find people who can neither see nor hear, through sheer learning and hypothesis. They are so preoccupied with what is revolving in themselves, that they are also to be likened to a man in passion, who passes his closest friends in the street without looking at them."

14 ***Kleidung***: clothing or 'garb' (in this translation) from the outside; focusing or distorting lenses from within.

15 Rousseau proposes this frightening image: We become, he says, "nothing more than the plaything of others' opinions" (***Emile or On Education***, New York, 1979, p. 168).

16 Here we see the presumptuousness of such presumption (cp. Plato's notion of the 'conceit of wisdom'). Sophistry is thus inevitable for all of us. Husserl's critique--that we have misthought ourselves into thinking that the world of our abstract thoughts is the world of our lives--thus extends beyond modern science to modern thought more generally.

17 ***Sinnesverausserlichung***: externalization or superficialization of meaning (p. 44 n.13).

18 Though we criticize television, and now computers, for inducing in us a general state of mental passivity, this is no less true of such inattentive or lazy reading.

19 'Thinking for oneself,' that much-overused phrase, here requires making the effort to go beyond oneself. In this sense, thinking for oneself allows us to reach a height and depth of penetration one could not if one were simply 'on one's own,' simply 'original.' In this way true originality may thus require that we re-appropriate that of others. Cp. the opening quote from Ricoeur.

20 For Husserl, thinking is first and foremost a human accomplishment. Its sources remain available to us. Thus it can in principal be re-thought in all its fullness (see note # 24).

21 This capacity for reactivation "...belongs originally to every human being as a speaking being" (p. 361). To speak means to be able to re-speak; to learn means to resuscitate and rejuvenate. To understand another is to make their intentions ours. This is the foundation of communication and community.

22 In accordance with the truism, what we receive from our traditions of thought is no less proportionate to our own efforts of appropriation.

23 Cp. Klein, "Phenomenology and the History of Science" and ***A Commentary on Plato's Meno***, Capel Hill, 1965, pp. 3-53; Levine, 'Plato's Arithmological Ordering of Being,' ***Southwestern Journal of Philosophy***, 1980, XI, pp. 110-115.

24 The story is, of course, more complicated than these first formulations. The very effort of unearthing the original from out of the sands of time opens up other complications. Beside the fact that meanings may not be simple, and intentions not univocal, their effects may well be multiple, unintended, confused, and even 'contradictory' (cf. p. 74). Thus there can be no question of a simple recovery and return (cp. Hunt, p. 4). The hope of some that 'one step back of meaning retrieval' will enable 'two steps forward of renewed discovery' has been questioned by others who see our inheritance as inevitably transmogrified and the worse for wear and thus such 'back reflection' as leading to an indeterminate number of steps in an indefinite direction.

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[25] Lest we judge the original by the tattered remnant, this recapitulation of the discovery is indispensable. For only once we have done the work of the co-thinker, can we be in any position, philosophically and responsibly, to evaluate the thought in question.

[26] Paradoxical though it sounds, most higher education today is derivative, secondary education; what is needed is a return to 'primary' education. This requires that education seek to be liberating—'liberal education'—have as its primary concern the actualization of incipient capacities of the mind and the development of intellectual habits (in Aristotle's sense).

[27] In Husserl's view, our profound sense of rootlessness today has something to do with our own failure to 'put down' roots. It is partly our own doing that we have become intellectual vagabonds.

[28] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c-5a (translation by H. N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1960).