

Reading Journal for “The ‘Q’ Question”, Richard A. Lanham

Our last reading was challenging because it was difficult to understand. This text, however, is challenging because it comes straight for beliefs and holds no punches. Here is the most challenging line, where Lanham is calling the reader smug for answering the Q question with the Weak Defense: “From this golden age [of the humanist myth], we have declined into the present one of mass illiteracy and swinish ignorance, from which we are to be rescued by what Graff calls ‘MLA Jeremiads,’ impassioned defenses of the humanities which have the ‘ritualistic aura of the Sunday rebuke’” (173). This quote attacks the heart of any Weak Defenders. Lanham draws the reader in – “Yes, I am with you. Society is failing.” – as any Weak Defenders like Bloom would be arguing, but then he throws the punch – “If all you have as an answer is go read a book, then you are both smug and preachy like your pastor on Sunday morning.”

Ultimately, Lanham is answering yes to the Q question, as any humanist does. His “yes” answer is given credibility by how ruthlessly he attacks people with the same answer as him but do not give a good defense.

Lanham’s Strong Defense formulation: “The Strong Defense argues that, since truth comes to humankind in so many diverse and disagreeing forms, we cannot base a polity upon it. We must, instead, devise some system by which we can agree on a series of contingent operating premises.” Lanham continues to explain the best example of this rhetorical system is the western system of jurisprudence. You try a case and a jury decides the verdict. That decision sets the precedence for future cases. When we answer the Q question in this fashion, we are also reaffirming our belief in our western form of democracy, which was attacked on January 6th, 2021, and continues to be attacked with the re-election of Donald Trump (who pardoned the people trying to overthrow our system of rhetoric and fired the members of the DOJ and FBI who prosecuted those same people).

If I came into this reading skeptical of the idea of a good man speaking well saving the state, I leave convinced that our state is designed for good people speaking well, and so if the answer to the Q question is “Yes,” hopefully we find some way to keep our republic (in our continuing reply to Benjamin Franklin’s response to Elizabeth Wiling Powell).