

Phenomenological Writing – Etymology

“Transformation”

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My focus of attention or theme of application for the duration of this Phenomenological Writing seminar is a “Transformation Intensive” which I am conducting concurrently, both of these being constituent to a larger KA*753C study investigating first-person methodologies. Therefore, my etymological question naturally concerns the origin and usage of this term “transformation.”

I approached the librarian desk at Western Washington University’s Wilson Library and asked whether there might be such a thing as an “Etymological Dictionary?” The librarian smiled and very accommodatingly led me to the reference section where was stored shelves upon shelves of dictionaries and encyclopedias of every persuasion. She went directly to the 20-Volume set of the Oxford English Dictionary – I was amazed to discover that so many pages could be filled describing the meaning of English words!

After I got inside this dictionary I was a little disappointed; for, there was no more discussion about the ultimate origin of words than can be found in any functional dictionary. There was, however, a fascinating chronology of the usage of words through the centuries. Here’s some of what I discovered:

- transform (verb): 1) to change the form of; to change into another shape or form; to metamorphose; *example from 1660* – “When Magicians shall have power to transform a humane body.” 2) to change in character or condition; to alter in function or nature; *example from 1675* – “Love...transformes the most virulent affections into smooth, healing, pefective pleasures.”
- transformation (noun): 1) the action of changing in form, shape, or appearance; metamorphosis; *example from 1432* – “Monstrous transformaciones of men in to bestes be made...thro charmes of wicches.” 2) a complete change in character, condition, etc.; *example from 1602* – “Something have you heard Of Hamlet’s transformation: So I will call it, Since not th’ exterior, nor the inward man Resembles that it was.”

Isn’t it interesting that “transform” was early associated with the work of “Magicians” and “wicches,” and also to the onset of Hamlet’s psychosis? This suggests a negative predisposition toward change in general, I would surmise. Yet, the actual definitions do not necessarily

portend anything drastic, for “transform” may just as soon apply to simple outward changes in appearance, like adopting a new hair color. Somehow, I was intending something more from my Transformation Intensive, something deeper, internal, longer-lasting. In that sense, the above definitions provided a lead by including “metamorphosis.” Searching for the origin of this rather expressive word, I consulted *Dictionary.com*. Here’s what I discovered:

- metamorphosis (noun): 1) *Biology*. a profound change in form from one stage to the next in the life history of an organism, as from the caterpillar to the pupa and from the pupa to the adult butterfly; 2) a complete change of form, structure, or substance, as transformation by magic or witchcraft; 3) any complete change in appearance, character, circumstances, etc.

This is a lot more what I had in mind by a “Transformation Intensive,” this sense of profound transitioning from one life stage to another, a more complete change such that one could look back and observe a definite passing away of a prior state of being. Having learned this, I suspect that it would have been more accurate to plan for a “Metamorphosis Intensive” – yet that combination does sound odd since metamorphosis is already intense.

Looking further, here’s what *Dictionary.com* has to say about metamorphosis in their subsection “Word Origin and History:”

1530s “change of form or shape, especially by witchcraft” – from Latin metamorphosis, from Greek metamorphosis “a transforming,” from metamorphoun “to transform,” from meta- “change” + morphe “form.”

Why so much reference to the occult? Isn’t such profound change an internally initiated, self-organizing process?

I also discovered that meta- can be a prefix meaning “higher, beyond.” This certainly aligns more fully with my intentions than does the prefix trans-, which simply translates as “across.” A meta- rather than a trans- could be the change of changes, as reflected most accurately in the word *metanoia* – “a profound, usually spiritual, transformation.” This is much more what I had in mind – though it seems that we can’t avoid recursively defining one term with another!

The ultimate statement might come from my Osho Tarot Deck. The major arcana card #13 in most decks is called “Death” but in the Osho deck it’s called “Transformation.” Perhaps it would have been more revealing – in a personal development sense – to label the card “Metamorphosis?” Then we could be more assured of a movement “higher” or “beyond” to an augmented form of being, as a butterfly among men.

References:

- The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (1989). Volume XVII, "Thro – Unelucidated," Oxford: Clarendon Press