

A Conversation with Paul Friedrich

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Abstract

Paul Friedrich has played a distinctive and multifaceted role within and well beyond anthropology over the past 50 years. He is currently Professor Emeritus in the Departments of Anthropology and Linguistics and on the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Friedrich's research sites have ranged from southwestern Mexico to south India, as well as with Russians. He has also written extensively in historical linguistics, classics, and anthropological theory. Much of Friedrich's writing has focused on the interplay of the practice of poetry and poetically focused analyses of language and interaction. He has published extensively, producing numerous volumes of poetry as well as path-breaking scholarship.

On May 13, 2013, at the University of Chicago, Professor Friedrich was interviewed by Dr. Dale Pesmen, an anthropologist, Russian scholar, artist, and translator who received her PhD in Anthropology at the University of Chicago and worked closely with Professor Friedrich. She is the author of *Russia and Soul: An Exploration* (Cornell University Press, 2000). Their conversation explored the remarkably heterogeneous and imaginative range of Friedrich's work and career, as well as highlighting ongoing core underlying concerns and themes. What follows is an edited transcript of that conversation.

A CONVERSATION WITH PAUL FRIEDRICH

Pesmen: You earned degrees at Harvard and Yale. You did fieldwork with Russian refugees and Tarascan peasants and on Malayalam in India. You've taught at nine institutions, longest at the University of Chicago. You've had something like 13 books published, beginning with *Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village* in 1970. Five of those books are poetry; that's my count. You've translated poems, stories, articles, myths, and philosophy from six languages, and you've taught and written on aspect and Homer, birds in the *Odyssey*, *Onegin* and the Karamazovs, shame and Tolstoy, Chechens and Tolstoy, the Bible and Dostoyevsky, the Gita in Thoreau, Aphrodite and gender, irony, epiphany, ethnopoetics, Proto-Indo-European trees, syntax, kinship, linguistic relativism, tragedy, dialogue, phonetics, phonemics, poetic indeterminacy, politics, etc.

A CV like that is a peculiar artifact. It crams everything inside of one frame. But as impressive as that hyper-richness is when you read it all together in a run-on list, formally, it's misleading. You work, I know, *not* "a little bit here, a little bit there." Could you start by talking a little bit about how you *do* move from one topic to another? It's not just flitting from here to there.

Friedrich: Yeah. There are two answers to that question. One is that, when you're working very intensely in a given area, you think of other things that are connected, so there's the factor of association. That will take you—for example, I was teaching myth for a couple years, and that naturally reinforced my tendency to get back into poetry. The other factor is that people don't realize it, but one is constantly connecting those fields; there are all kinds of connections between those things that are not obvious.

For example, I was very interested in the iconic anarchism of Thoreau. Henry David Thoreau is *the* American anarchist, but when I got to Mexico, I found that the radical group I was studying were partly anarchists, partly communists, partly agrarian. So there you have two things very far apart, but they were connected. I would say in that list that you read, which of course is just partial, there are hundreds if not thousands of little connections, many of them lying very deep. That's very important.

Pesmen: You were telling me about the process of researching and immersing yourself in each of those topics before actually producing something. Could you describe that?

Friedrich: Yeah. I'm a great believer in immersion. It's complicated. But you get started, and then you get very involved. You read things on the subject, you dream, you imagine, but you're also reading collateral material, associated articles, and so forth. By the time you get to writing, you've already thought about two dozen other fields that are connected with what you're doing. I do finally get things together after a number of years.

Then, during about anywhere from four to six months—five to ten months—I take a deep breath and get it all together. That's sort of a crazy period when I don't think of anything else. All—most of my books have been written that way. That is, there was a period of gradual accumulation and internalization, and at some point, you flip the hammer and here you go, Friedrich! I used to call the creative process jags, when you often work 69 days in a row, or more. That leaves you thin.

Pesmen: I'd like to ask some questions about the process of you coming to anthropology and linguistics and about your attitudes and angles on it. You've mentioned hearing, when you were a student at Harvard, that a degree in anthropology is a poaching license. You later wrote that you did indeed see your work that way, but only in part. You said it was also at Harvard that you first read Edward Sapir and found his work seductive. Could you talk a little bit about both the poaching and the importance of Sapir?

Friedrich: Well, I was very excited about Indians when I was a boy and that sort of thing. I really got involved in it when I got a job interviewing Russian displaced persons in Germany that was supervised by the great anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn. He, incidentally, authored that statement about a degree in anthropology being a poaching license. So I was working directed by an anthropologist long before I got into anthropology. When I came back from Germany, I finished my degree in Russian literature and then anthropology and linguistics, so it's sort of a cybernetic system where you're moving from one thing to another.

The same [is true] with linguistics; I think that what really fired me was not just the book by Sapir but the essays by Edward Sapir, which are beautifully written and very profound and are still actually read and excite people today, although linguistics itself has changed a lot from the days of Sapir. I love[d] the idea of exploring and understanding an American Indian language, and that was part of the reward of going to Mexico. I first worked on the agrarian politics of the given region. But then, the second time I went, I worked exclusively on the language. That was very rewarding—deeply rewarding—because I got excited by these incredible words that they build with their structure.

Pesmen: Your introduction to anthropology was different [from how] it very often happens now. What's the difference?

Friedrich: Well, I think, as I said, I sort of was doing it for almost a year before I knew much about anthropology, whereas the typical route today is for students to major in anthropology as undergraduates so they get introduced to all the different schools and the different angles. They find a graduate school that will take them, and they go on the same track. I don't want to brag about it, but I think not having had that background as an undergraduate major actually helped me.

For example, when I went to Mexico, the thing I found that was very exciting was the agrarian politics, but few had worked on that. If I had been conned or disciplined by the field, I just would have ignored it. My image is of somebody who goes to the field to study basket making, and all hell may be breaking loose, but, because he learned about basket making in graduate school, he does basket making. I'm glad I wandered into the field the way I did.

Pesmen: So you sort of find yourself immersed in something and look around and sort of figure out what's actually worth your . . .

Friedrich: Yeah.

Pesmen: . . . what the actual opportunity being offered to you by that particular place and time is. Are there any other scholars that were particularly of importance to you in the beginning? Jakobson? Any other—

Friedrich: Well, Jakobson, above all; he's probably one of the two or three great linguists over the last century, and I took a number of courses with him while I was studying Russian a lot and beginning to study anthropology. He was just great. He, himself, was very connected to anthropology in his own thinking and in his contacts.

Otherwise, I would single out the British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard. I fortunately took two courses when I went to Yale to study anthropology in which I specialized in Evans-Pritchard. He's just a remarkable anthropologist with a remarkable mind. His book on the Nuer and other works are just exemplary. In a way, when I was writing my two-volume ethnography of the Mexican scene, I had the great ethnographies in mind, like Evans-Pritchard and Firth and some of the American Indian work on the Eskimo, the Haida.

Pesmen: As an adolescent, you write, you were “intoxicated with Thoreau and his take on Native Americans.” Then, jump to 2008, you publish *The Gita Within Walden*, which explores interrelations between Indic philosophy and American transcendentalism, among other things. Your relationship with Thoreau seems to be lifelong, and it’s also, at times, pretty informal. In your book of poetry *Wild Symmetries*, which recently came out, in a section called “Pure Evil,” you have a haiku titled, *Really, Mr. Thoreau*. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with him?

Friedrich: Well, in that place, Thoreau was likening the extreme feeling of pain with transcendental bliss. I think if anyone’s had their fingernails pulled out they won’t agree with that particular correlation. Thoreau was, at that point, idealizing to a degree that was not permissible, but in general, I found Thoreau’s take on East Indian philosophy extremely stimulating. In a way, the book that you referred to, *The Gita Within Walden*, was a sort of coming home because, on the one hand, I had gone to India, had worked on the Malayalam language, but hadn’t achieved completion at that period in the 1950s. I felt like there was work undone.

Then, of course, my love of Thoreau began in high school because I went to high school in Concord, Massachusetts. I used to walk around Lake Walden a great deal with my father. I read *Walden* many times and the other works of Thoreau. I sort of had Thoreau under my belt, and I began actually writing papers in the anthropology department that were inspired by Thoreau. They didn’t fit into one professor of anthropology’s point of view too much, but I kept hanging on to Thoreau’s point of view—a very American point of view.

When I wrote the book that you just referred to, it was pulling together my lifelong interest in Thoreau, his thinking, American transcendentalism and my contacts with East Indian culture. When I was there, ostensibly studying the Malayalam language, I was eagerly studying lots of other things. I went to religious rituals and so forth and got a feeling for India that went way beyond the Malayalam—no, in addition to my work on the Malayalam language. I began to see how important it was to study Sanskrit and to get into that. That book, which came out recently—and I don’t think it’s rocked any boats, or maybe that’s because they haven’t discovered it yet—pulled together two strands in my life that needed to be pulled together.

Pesmen: In that Walden book, one of your absolutely astounding lists—and as an inveterate list maker, I’m delighted with some of your lists—on page 21, you itemize “the awesome panoply of Thoreau’s sources,” and it’s an amazingly dense list; clearly an enormous amount of work went into it. Then, in the first chapter, you focus on God and how God, in [*The Gita Within*] *Walden*, you say, is never one simple thing but always several, or one of many. Then, further on in the book, you contrast to Tolstoy’s long sentences the way many of Thoreau’s sentences, you say, “wander” or “meander.” You call that meandering a way of “formally implying infinitude.” What I hear in this are three very different tactics for finding superabundance, in many ways, all over the place. Can you riff on that a little bit?

Friedrich: Well, I’ll start with the figure of speech of the list, because people have often told me when I lecture that I tend to use lists, and so do you. The list is a very powerful trope or figure of speech. It sticks out at many points in Homer, one beginning of our civilization, and it’s very prominent in Walt Whitman. He’s a poet of lists. [*The Gita Within*] *Walden* is full of lists. It’s a very powerful way of speaking of something, because the things in the list are similar to each other, yet they also are next to each other. There’s an ordering there; it’s a complex figure of speech that I’m personally very fond of. And I also can be very succinct.

Pesmen: Could we talk a little bit about teaching? You’ve served on over 70 doctoral committees and were chair of at least 32, including my own. In a 1991 letter to me, you wrote, “Focus both

on the pragmatic sides of your research topic and on semantic analysis.” Then, you add, “One thing I love about your project is that you’ve kept your sights high rather than lowering them and reducing your discourse to discourse.” Could you comment a little bit on “reducing discourse to discourse”?

Friedrich: Well, I had forgotten that phrase. I sort of like that phrase.

Pesmen: Well, there—it’s yours!

Friedrich: That’s my general philosophy in advising graduate students, and I was often in a minority there. To tell a student to think about what’s in himself or herself—what deep thing stirs them to write a thesis and to be true to yourself and not worry about some paradigm or theory that you’ve heard in graduate school. Just delve into your own soul; I think that’s worked in the case of the 70—especially the 30 where I supervised them, because those don’t reflect my personal philosophy. These students seem to have found what matters to them, and they wrote it out in those terms.

What I was saying about not reducing discourse to discourse is to not worry about the standard ways of saying things, not the paradigms, not the jargon and the lingo of graduate school, for God’s sake. Even in the question of chapter headings in your thesis, you should do something that comes out of your own mind and also out of the data, and not be in any way a standard set of categories. Now, I admit that in anthropology and also in poetry, you have a great deal of freedom to do that. If I was teaching chemistry, I couldn’t tell the person to delve into his soul, I don’t think.

Pesmen: To find what chemicals he likes . . .

Friedrich: He may not find anything, or he may find the wrong chemical. History would be another field where my advice would help. There are fields where the personal approach combines looking into your own resources and then combining that with the richness of the information that you get from the outside world. It would work very well in a considerable number of fields, actually—art history and so forth. But anyway, that’s the way I called the shots over all those years. I might say that one of the happiest things that could happen to an older scholar like myself is to have a student of years ago—five, ten, even more years ago—send you this beautiful book, and they thank you for how you helped them. I mean I—it often just moves me to tears when I think of it. I want to give one example of that.

Pesmen: Mm—hm.

Friedrich: I had a very good student—unusual person—Margaret Litvin, who knew Russian, but she specialized in Arabic. She recently sent me a book called *Hamlet’s Arab Journey: Shakespeare’s Prince and Nasser’s Ghost*. She took all the Arabic versions of *Hamlet*, who’s been dealt with in many different Arab cultures, and it found a whole set of brilliant insights into that play, which has been very much worked over by English language specialists. This book arrived, and there it said thanks to me. I was very deeply moved—deeply moved, and the same with your book *Russia and Soul: An Exploration*. There’s no greater reward.

Pesmen: I think it’s—what’s particularly rare, in my experience, is if you come to somebody, and you’re still in the process of trying to figure out what you’re doing, it’s very rare when somebody, including, surprisingly, a teacher, responds well at hearing somebody else’s not-fully-mature thoughts or thoughts that are not yet elegant or fashionable. People have a visceral reaction against the awkwardness of other people’s unfinished thoughts. But you never seemed to get the creeps from that sort of thing. You would hear these things, as early as the versions were, and you’d

sort of turn them over in your hand with genuine curiosity and respect and then try to encourage the person to go further with them rather than reacting and trying to immediately hammer them into some form. I think that's a wonderful and rare thing.

One of your classes—just to touch on your teaching style in one more way—I've mentioned this before, but one of your classes, which was at 8:30 AM, sitting there, involuntarily awake—we suddenly see Paul Friedrich ascending to the classroom, appearing up the stairs, bearing this entire tall floor lamp in front of him, which was—you would bring the floor lamp up into this—I think it was at the top of Harper.

Friedrich: Yeah.

Pesmen: It was very impressive, particularly during a period when advisees might well hear you break into a recitation of Homer in Greek. . . . [A]nd, to run with that image a little, in my experience, not only working with you one-on-one, but in your books, you allow others to see you in the process of searching for something. Academia is absolutely rife with people who present themselves as holding finished, fully virtuous ideas—"This is what I stand for," right? As if they were born that way, or had found the real truth. Not to diminish the value of a brilliant, coherent thought, but very often students and other people benefit much, much more from seeing someone in process and much too excited to hide that fact, right? Which absolutely characterizes every conversation I've ever had with you and the experience of reading your books. Is that—it's very unusual. Is that something you consciously did, or is that—

Friedrich: No. It came naturally.

Pesmen: That's just what you are.

Friedrich: Yeah. The lamp—I think it had the meaning that you just described of it but also I have a long history of various kinds of eye trouble, so I had to—I wasn't imitating Diogenes, it was just—I didn't have the right glasses.

Pesmen: It worked, though.

Friedrich: It still worked.

Pesmen: You got to play that role. Is there one of your books that you'd like to mention in particular, what sparked it, and what role it played in your thinking, going forward from writing it?

Friedrich: Well, that's a hard—yeah. That's a hard question to answer in a simple way. I've been writing for many years, and strangely enough it's the first and the last books that I'm happiest with, so I think of those as bookends to the other books that are in between. The first book became, well, the first part of my thesis, then it became *Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village*. That's still in print. It's still being used. It's being read in Mexico and so forth. That's the one bookend.

At the other side is the two books of haiku poetry, but particularly the earlier one called *A Goldfinch Instant: Concord to India Haikus*. Those seem to me to be finished in the way I want it to be, and they also imply my philosophy and my worldview as much as anything else. In between there are—in between those two bookends, there are a number of works that I could mention, like *The Meaning of Aphrodite* book. But those are the two that I like.

My feeling for the first book, *Agrarian Revolt [in a Mexican Village]*, was brought to life recently when I was quite ill and just back from the hospital. I had always thought, well, that that Mexican

work was OK at its time, but it's passed into the trash can of history like almost everything else. But then a young—well, fairly young—Mexican historian called Lorena Ojéda-Davila came to see me in my apartment, and she said, “No, we love your books. They're reading them in Michoacán. We're using them in my university.” It gave me a tremendous boost to think that my first book had not been forgotten and was being read.

You know there's a saying that if the natives are happy with your writing, that's one of the best tests. Not some Frenchman or Englishman, but somebody who was right there in that situation. They say, “Yeah, yeah. This guy understood us.” It's the way Spaniards generally say that about Hemingway, “Yeah, he understood us. He was like one of us.” Now, have I answered your question?

Pesmen: Oh, yeah. One of the greatest compliments is if people that you've written among and about can actually tolerate what you've done with it.

Friedrich: Yeah. The other bookend is the two haiku. It illustrates the role of accident in being creative because I had just read some haiku, studied them and so forth. I was passing a hay field in Virginia and there were these hay rolls that they had just made—those big enormous rolls. They were scattered all over the field. I came back the next day, and they were all lined up neatly, so I felt this contrast between chaos and order. The only way I could get it together was in a little haiku, so that shows you how accident or chance can work—yeah, that's my point. Actually, I have a lecture on “The Order to Chaos Continuum” that became a chapter in my book *The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy*. So you can see this idea has been on my mind.

Pesmen: In another letter I found from you, you wrote, “One of the most curious things about scholars is that they work hard and almost secretly on projects with zero professional relevance.” Your favorite example of that was a local expert on early Christianity who knew everything about World War I German submarine captains. Somebody else knew about birds, or your political theorist father knew about breeding cattle and dogs. What about birds?

Friedrich: Well, yeah, the birds are important; to name just two of my recent experiences, in my latest hospitalization, a colleague, Ralph Lerner, came to visit me, whom I'm very fond of. He specializes in law and history—American and political history—but he also goes down to Central America to do birding. He gets something—it does something to his soul to see all these different tropical birds with their different colors flying around. In my own case, the bird thing goes way back to my adolescent years when we lived on a farm. I worked on the farm, and one of the sons of the foreman and I used to compete in identifying birds. That was a lot of fun when you're 15 or 16.

Of course, birds were much more numerous then. You could hear whip-poor-wills at night and all kinds of wonderful things—and orioles. That's when it began, and that's why when I began writing and publishing my poetry, I often was inspired by birds. Of course, that's a universal thing. People see birds as somehow metaphors of the soul. The colors of birds are very exciting. So the birds are all interwoven with my poetry. I wrote a book on trees, and I got very involved in Proto-Indo-European trees. That was a great labor of love, and I studied trees from every angle, including the arboretum out here. I never really did anything on birds in a scientific sense, but I could have. Maybe I should have.

Pesmen: Well, but they come up. I mean, they're in—you have a paper on Homer . . .

Friedrich: Yeah. There I did. I'm sorry.

Pesmen: In the *Odyssey*, right?

Friedrich: I noticed that birds are very important in Homer, and of course, Aphrodite, whom I'm very fond of, is also conspicuous in Homer. In fact, she actually runs the show at one level. I wrote a long paper about the bird symbolism in Homer combined with the Aphrodisian symbolism that came out in a prestige journal.

Pesmen: When you say—to get back to scholarly method a little bit—when you say that you value not only the abstract and theoretical but the concrete and practical, what exactly do you mean by “concreteness” there?

Friedrich: Well, that's not an easy question, but I think in general I was faced, when I went into anthropology, by an extremely practical, concrete set of experiences. One, which is very different from anthropology today—one professor walked around the room reciting Oneida stories—Floyd Lounsbury. Another professor told us about world archaeology, but he would do things like hold up a stone implement and say, “This is a Celt,” and that sort of thing. There's this concreteness of earlier anthropology that struck a chord in my heart.

On the other side, I think that I've always felt that theory has to be incarnate in things that you can see and touch. It's not enough to write out the theories. You have to have a lot of gut feeling for what you see and feel and touch and not just in the abstract.

I recently flipped open a book that was given to me because it was bought by my father in 1927. It was [Baruch] Spinoza's *Ethics*. I began reading it, and it was just extremely abstract and just brilliant. But I would prefer a discourse that kept weaving the abstract with the concrete. I guess by concrete, I mean things, as I said, that you can touch and see and hear and feel—empirical matters, you know?

Pesmen: Mm—hm.

Friedrich: There's the beginning of a poem by Wallace Stevens that I'm particularly fond of. It begins like this: “Ariel was glad he had written his poems. They were something seen that he liked.”

Pesmen: You recently described to me a “triangle” of approaches.

Friedrich: Anyway, it's the paradigm that encompasses my whole life work from the beginning of—from college, actually, up until the present, but you can think of it as a triangle. One corner of the triangle involves culture theory and also really nitty-gritty ethnography, where you talk about the color of a pot or the color of an informant's hair—that kind of thing. Or the actual processes of political factualism and getting shot and wounded and that sort of thing. It's very concrete. You have the concrete level, and you have the abstract theoretical level of culture theory. The second corner of the triangle is language. One part—at the concrete level can mean, for example, knowing languages, speaking languages, and so forth—being immersed in them. At the other level, it can be the theories of language, ideas about language. The third corner in the triangle is the poetic one. On the one hand, it can be actual poetry—poetry that you've read, that you've taught, that you have written, whatever. At another level, it can be theories of poetry, ideas of poetics, and so forth. At each corner of the triangle, you have an abstract and a concrete level. I've tried very hard to work in terms of those three corners and the two levels of each of the three corners. It hasn't been very easy.

I'm going to give one example I already discussed with you, which does the trick; the result is quite okay from my point of view, but it's rather dense. It's a poem called “Proto-Indo-European Kinship,” where I reconstruct the kinship terms using the tools of linguistics. That takes you back to 2,000–3,000 BC. That's on the linguistics side. On the cultural side, you're dealing with kinship

terms, which of course is a favorite subject of anthropologists. You have to use kinship theory. I did use kinship theory and the arcane issue that Proto-Indo-European kinship was an Omaha-type kinship system. I used poetry and poetics to write the poem.

Pesmen: To continue on the topic of poetry and poetics, I think that, as valuable as formal approaches to linguistics are for you, you've always insisted on the importance of the poetic aspect of languages. That's not just the poems—in Tarascan poetry, for example, that you describe as—you show as sparked by the morphological system, and in Russian poetry and literature, for example. Poetics is not—you've tried very hard and in a lot of different ways to show the poetics not as an isolated topic but as absolutely continuous, with poetry being the heart of language.

Friedrich: Could I interrupt?

Pesmen: Sure.

Friedrich: The great linguist Leonard Bloomfield, who taught at Yale, and had many fine students—at one point in his book on language, he said, “Poetry is the blazened book of language.” That comes from a man who primarily dealt with very formal aspects of language, with very technical analyses of the phonology, the morphology, the syntax, and so forth, but there you go.

Pesmen: Well, what is the importance? The specific importance of—

Friedrich: Well, I think—you're on slippery ground here because I think—I don't see how someone can concern himself or herself with linguistic structure in any sense and just not hear the poetic aspects of language, but that is, in fact, the case. There was a phonetician here at [the University of] Chicago, about 20 years ago, actually. At the time, I was working on my book called *Music in Russian Poetry*, and he was a phonetician and he specialized in sound, using all kinds of mechanical devices and so forth. I said, “Well, what do you think about the music of language?” He said, “I've never thought about it.” I don't know. He sang in a choral group, too. That was the irony of it.

I'm not going to quote lines, but there are many lines in particular that throw into relief the workings of the sound system and of the semantics. Part of the reason it's difficult to talk about this is that it's to some extent ineffable. In other words, it's not something that you can capture and elucidate explicitly and formally. I try to get at it to some degree, and I don't know if I succeeded or not.

But I wrote an article called “Beyond the Unsaid: Transcending Language Through Language.” There I took the language of Thoreau; I found seven ways in which he used language to allude to levels of meaning that were not actually conveyed explicitly by the language, which I think he did very well. That's one reason people keep reading him again and again. I tend to veer into what people would call mysticism, but there are these facts that we feel about the poetry of language.

Pesmen: Well, and I think you've shown how one can lose so much. It's not just sad; people actually don't get access to so many things that they could have gotten access to.

One thing we haven't talked about too much is your work with Russian language, poetry, and culture; I think that's an area where you particularly show that synthesis of linguistics, anthropology, poetics, and, sometimes, politics. Could you talk a little bit about Tolstoy and the Chechens?

Friedrich: Yeah. Should I talk about my own background a little bit?

Pesmen: Sure!

Friedrich: Well, the Russian thing goes back very early because my mother loved the Russian novel, so I was talking about it with her when I was in high school. Then, I interviewed Russian [displaced persons] for almost a year in Germany. That got me deeper involved in it, so I majored in Russian as an undergraduate. I have this deep love of the Russian language, although my spoken Russian is rusty now. I managed to pursue sort of a multiple career because, while I was moving up the ladder in anthropology and linguistics, I also kept the Russian alive.

I kept giving courses involving Russia, like Russian culture, for example. I gave that many times, actually. I did research on the literature, particularly on Tolstoy, whom I'm very fond of and whom I respect enormously. Some of this was concentrated in a long article called "Tolstoy and the Chechens: Problems in Literary Anthropology." There I discuss Tolstoy and the Chechens, and, in particular, the works he wrote, which are very ethnographic. They are very anthropological. His work gives the kind of detail that a good anthropologist wouldn't want to miss. But it also gives the feeling of the Chechens about Russian invasion and Russian atrocities and so forth, so it gives an aspect of Chechen culture. There's this black-and-white hatred of the Russian empire and by extension probably of all empires that is very relevant to the scene today. That whole world of the Russian writers and the culture associated with them and the language is a whole universe, and I'm glad I swam in it for at least 10 years.

Pesmen: Speaking of Russian and poetry and swimming in it, you've memorized, over the years, a vast amount of poetry. This is sort of an aside, but—since you're not driving at this very moment—and I'm not an officer of the law, may I ask you about memorizing poetry while driving?

Friedrich: Oh, I see. Well, that's—things are given to you by fate. I married a woman that I was very much in love with—Domnica Radulescu, who is a professor at the Washington and Lee University—so for 21 years, I commuted between Chicago and Virginia typically twice a month, which is a lot of driving. One quarter, I commuted every single week to Virginia.

So what do you do when you're driving cross-country? I think I was very lucky: If you take Hyde Park and the fields of grain in Indiana and Illinois, the horse country of Kentucky, the mountains of Virginia and West Virginia, I mean, you have something that Ansel Adams should have looked at instead of hanging out in New Mexico and the Grand Canyon. There's just as much to see there, so I was very lucky to see that country again and again and again and get to recognize all kinds of things in it. That's my connection to—

Pesmen: So you memorized while—

Friedrich: Yeah. Well, it wasn't just Russian, actually. I memorized Russian poetry because I loved it, and I taught it. But at that time, I was also teaching a course on Latin with a colleague of mine called Glenn Most, so I was also, for a while, reviewing my knowledge of Latin and memorizing Latin poetry. But the main thing was Russian poetry, unquestionably. Some talk about the music of language. Russian is so—has such potential for melody, particularly in somebody like Pushkin. You just want to make it part of you. I think that's the way to describe my feeling.

I also got into Greek a lot, and I wrote an article about Sappho, which is in a book of mine called *The Meaning of Aphrodite*. There's a story about Sappho that a group of Greek literary people were lying on their couches, drinking wine and so forth. One of them recited a poem by Sappho, and another one stood up and said, "Stop! I want to memorize it and then die." So it's that feeling that you just have to internalize it—at least try to. Even if you just remember it for one day, it'll be part of you, and that was part of my motivation in memorizing Russian and English poetry. In

fact, I actually have forgotten a lot of it, but it was a wonderful experience to have it be part of me for a day or more.

Pesmen: Barney [Bernard] Bate once reported running into you, and he said you were complaining bitterly that this cop had herded you to the shoulder for a speeding ticket after you had already committed many lines to memory. You said, “I look around. A *lot* of people read while driving. Some read *prose*, of all things!”

Friedrich: Yeah. Well, now they talk on the phone.

Pesmen: Yeah, now it’s the phone.

Friedrich: Texting and all the rest of it, so I think—

Pesmen: The time could be better used.

Friedrich: What I was doing then was sort of exceptional, because it was reading while driving. You read two lines, and then you look up at the landscape. You don’t read continuously, of course, but that wasn’t any worse than what people do today with the various technologies that they have.

Pesmen: No, it’s not. Is there anything else about [*The Meaning of*] *Aphrodite* that you’d like to mention? Because that book dealt with gender as well, at a time when that was just beginning to be—

Friedrich: Yeah, that was a very exciting experience. I got into Greek actually because I had been working in Indo-European, and I felt I should know one of the early stocks very well. So I learned Greek—Homeric Greek—at a relatively advanced age with much help by my friend and colleague James Redfield. It was a journey of exploration and discovery at an age when most people don’t learn new languages. But as I got into it, I found it was particularly exciting to think about the goddess Aphrodite, and I examined her from many points of view in this book *The Meaning of Aphrodite*. It still seems very exciting and very worthwhile.

It’s funny how scholarship goes. There hadn’t been a book on Aphrodite before then, but about three years after it, a whole bunch of books came out about the goddess. Most of them quoted me. Some of them didn’t; but they paraphrased me, so I could tell that they had been using me. The thing that I found particularly challenging was the issue of gender and the meaning of femininity. Aphrodite gives us a theory, which blends the idea of maternity with sexuality. I mean the Aphrodite in ancient sources.

I really got into the question of the degree to which maternity and eroticism and sexuality are often held separate in literature and in normal discourse, whereas in fact they’re very close, and there are also similarities both externally and even physiologically between maternal love and erotic love. It’s a touchy subject, and it will sometimes irritate people. But because of the Aphrodite research, concerned with Greek culture of 600 BC, I got into the questions of gender and of femininity.

Pesmen: You did time in the parachute infantry and worked in a psychiatric hospital and a slaughterhouse. That’s a nice list too, isn’t it?

Friedrich: Yeah.

Pesmen: It was at a meatpacking plant, I believe, that a man, a coworker who was also a preacher, you were speaking to him. . . . I was wondering if you’d be willing to read the poem you wrote about that conversation.

Friedrich: Yeah, I’d be glad to, and I should point out parenthetically that I was still—I was just getting into anthropology, and I read how the great Margaret Mead said that for experience of

other thought worlds, nothing is better than working with people who are mentally deranged or with little children or with people in an exotic culture. So I thought, well, I'll try a meatpacking plant.

It was when I was working in a meatpacking plant,
stuffing sausages, shoveling bologna out of vats.
The only black in the shop was mocked constantly.
You've no idea how it was in those good old days.
"Nigger, ape, coon." Sexual jokes of all kinds:
"I knew you were long, and I knew you were black,
but where did you get those little yellow eyes?"
(about a black who confused his dick with a snake).
But he never lost his cool. He was a large, athletic man.
And he was a minister, and so, since I was a student—
cramming Latin, skimming the *Times* during lunch break—
we became friends and talked a lot in the lulls.
He told me anecdotes about his boyhood and adolescence
in Mississippi that "has four eyes but can't see."
One Monday morning, he seemed tired, and I asked him,
"How'd it go yesterday?" "I preached all day long."
"What do you mean, 'I preached all day long?'"
"Yeah, all the livelong day!" "I don't think it's possible,"
I said. He said, "Listen, it's like the grammar of language:
if you really understand all the eight parts of speech
you can talk about grammar all day long..." And I,
budding linguist, stood there with a frog in my throat.
When I left to go back to graduate school that fall
I went around and shook hands with all the meatpackers
in that sweatshop—mainly Slavs, Germans, and Italians—
even the ones I'd disagreed with and nearly fought with.
When I got to him, he kept shaking my hand up and down
and through the mist I saw the tears in his eyes, on his black face,
wishing me success in my studies, saying I would "make it someday."

Pesmen: Thank you.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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