

Interview with Roderick Williams

On the Life and Teaching of Ernest L. Fortin, A.A.

Interviewed by Peini Feng

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Editorial note: This transcript has been lightly edited for punctuation, capitalization, repetition, and readability while preserving the substance and character of the speaker's remarks. The recording itself is not published; this transcript is prepared for the Ernest Fortin Society's public archive.



Roderick Williams

Thank you, Peini, for inviting me to speak about my relationship with Father Ernest Fortin. I'll begin by saying that I didn't really know him very well. And I'll add that it occurred to me when I was thinking about speaking with you today, that I've spoken to a couple of other people recently who are also associated with your project having to do with Ernest Fortin's life and teaching who also said they didn't know Father Fortin that well, either. This suggests that Fortin kept others - at least some others - at a distance from his personal life.

Now I came to Boston College in 1987, entering its Political Science Department's doctoral program. I didn't know much about Ernest Fortin then, who was teaching in Boston College's Theology Department, other than that he had written a couple of chapters in the Strauss-Cropsey *History of Political Philosophy*. I had the second edition; I don't know whether he was in the first edition.

Peini Feng

He was not.

Roderick Williams

So he first appears in the second edition with two chapters: one on Aquinas, the other on Augustine.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Roderick Williams

So that's as much as I knew about Ernest Fortin coming to Boston College. I first became acquainted with him through the Bradley Lecture Series, which was well underway at Boston College when I arrived. So far as I can remember, Boston College's Political Science and Theology departments as well as with assistance from the Philosophy Department were involved in hosting the Bradley Lecture Series. I believe that every semester's Bradley lectures had a theme, so the aforementioned departments would invite speakers to speak to that theme. The format was straightforward: almost always, a paper was distributed that the speaker would either read or speak about at the public lecture; following the lecture, questions from the audience, answers from the speaker. Then we would most often adjourn to the Faculty Dining Room in the McElroy building, where we would have dinner.

After dinner, a respondent would comment on the lecture. Following the response, the floor would be opened up for questions and answers. The lectures began at 4:00 in the afternoon and the event would last until 8:30 in the evening. It was, I believe, meant to be a feast for the ears and the mind.

Fortin played a central role in facilitating the Bradley Lectures. Among other things, most often he would be the one to introduce the speakers. His introductions were enjoyed by almost everyone. I heard a story about Fortin introducing someone who had a big reputation - we had many speakers who came to us with big reputations. In this particular instance, and I don't remember who the speaker was, Fortin said that he had read this speaker's book and it was the best book he'd ever read.

Everyone who was listening was thinking "My goodness, with all that Fortin has read, he is now saying that this is the best book he's ever read!" But then in typical Fortin fashion, he followed shortly after by saying, "It's the best book I've ever read this past month." So going from the best book that he has ever read to the best book that he has read this past month was a comedown. Of course almost everyone was laughing. Fortin then quickly added, "But I don't even know if I can say that because I haven't read all the books that have been written this past month." Quite a comedown from where he had started. And now much more laughter. So that gives you some idea of the character and flavor of his introductions.

He was a mirthful man who liked to have others laugh along with him. Of course, there was a seriousness underneath that humor.

The first class that I took from Fortin was on *Nietzsche and Christianity*. It was well-attended. Fortin was looking at a great thinker, Nietzsche, who had leveled a devastating critique against the great faith of the West, namely Christianity. Fortin, a Catholic priest, made a strong case for both Nietzsche and Christianity. He knew each side well, and presented each side fairly. He left the student to make up his own mind not only about how Nietzsche and Christianity stood toward one another, but whether one offered a more compelling case for life than the other. That was a tribute to his teaching of a very sensitive subject and also a testament to his credibility as a teacher.

About his teaching style: a friend of mine who was also in the doctoral program at this time, who had come from the University of Chicago where Allan Bloom was teaching, said to me that he thought that Fortin in the classroom was like Allan Bloom in the classroom. Which is to say, both were engaging speakers and learned men, so each could incorporate and weave together a fascinating and thoughtful narrative, so to speak, when each was presenting the material at hand. Bloom, like Fortin, had a sense of humor. He, too, liked to laugh and have others laugh along with him. It should go without saying that with Bloom, too, there was seriousness underlying the humor.

I have heard that Fortin and Bloom became friends when they were younger men. I've not read Fr. Fortin's collected volumes, but I have heard that Fortin speaks there about first meeting and getting to know Bloom in Paris.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Roderick Williams

I heard that Fortin was impressed by Bloom's intellect. I might have heard him say this about Bloom himself. It was probably Fortin who invited Bloom in the mid 1980s to come to Boston College to speak to faculty about Nietzsche. These conversations are available on YouTube. You hear Allan Bloom jest with those already in the room as he waits for others to join them - Ernest Fortin, Fred Lawrence, Pheme Perkins, are there, along with some others. All in the room ask questions about Nietzsche's diagnosis of the time they were living in, with Bloom leading the discussion.

Peini Feng

That sounds very interesting.

Roderick Williams

With Father Fortin I also took courses, or audited courses, that he co-taught with Christopher Bruell: on Maimonides, Spinoza, and on the Bible and Politics. Bruell and Fortin were close to and respected one another. Fortin, when speaking about things in the Maimonides, Spinoza, and Bible and Politics classes, usually would speak more to the Christian understanding. And perhaps Bruell would speak more to the Jewish understanding. I say "perhaps" because I cannot be sure that he did. He did speak to the classical Greek understanding.

The format for the classes they taught together was as follows: one would begin by presenting some of that day's material, and then there would be time set aside for questions. And then the other would do a presentation of the same material, coming at it from a different point of view. During the question period, Fortin and Bruell would frequently go back and forth with one another while trying to come to a better understanding of the matter at hand. I found these exchanges fruitful.

When it came time for me to begin work on my doctoral dissertation, I asked Fortin to be my advisor, because I wanted to write about Nietzsche. I remember him saying there are two kinds of dissertations: either you could look at something and make a novel argument about it; or your effort would be simply to try to understand what it is that you're looking at and communicate your understanding of it to your audience.

During the time that I was working on my dissertation, Fortin and I would meet periodically to talk about what I had submitted. In my case, he advised with a light touch. He offered encouragement and perhaps might say to think about this or that. He left me mostly on my own.

I attended my convocation ceremony in May of 1996. After the ceremony, the graduating doctoral students next gathered in Boston College's Robsham Theater Arts Center. Each graduate was called in alphabetical order by last name to go up on to the stage. The graduate went up on stage from one side; the student's advisor went up on stage from the other side. Student and advisor would then meet center stage, student with diploma in hand. A photographer photographed the two of you standing together. The two students who preceded me were younger women and their advisors were older women. When they met center stage, they gave each other hugs and smiles - a big display of affection. Somehow that set a precedent for Father Fortin and me. We had never hugged before, but there we were, at that moment on center stage, hugging.

It was as awkward a hug as I can imagine.

Fortin had a stroke in 1997. Afterwards, he was cared for in St. Patrick's Manor, located in Framingham. I would visit him occasionally. He wasn't happy there. Among other things, he was now unable to read. In the meantime, I had read something in *The New Yorker* magazine written by Saul Bellow that had come out in 1997. It was the first chapter of a forthcoming book that was titled *Ravelstein*. Soon after I had begun to read it I realized it was about Allan Bloom.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Roderick Williams

I thought I would take the *Ravelstein* chapter with me the next time I visited Fortin and read it to him. As an aside, I'll say that when I visited him in his office at Boston College, his health was already faltering. Often he'd be tired. Sometimes he'd fall asleep while we were talking. I didn't take that personally - maybe I should have? But when I read the *Ravelstein* chapter to him, he sat upright and listened. When I finished, he said, "That is Bloom." I heard years later that someone else eventually read the novel to him. That must have been a wonderful way for them to have spent time together.

Fortin passed away on October 22, 2002. I never asked him if he had any thoughts about what happened on 9/11. In any case, my wife and I went to his funeral, which was beautifully done.

That was it, I suppose, for my association with him. He continues to be part of my life. I think a good teacher continues to live in one. I feel fortunate that when I came to Boston College I met teachers who made a difference to me in the life that I led following.

Peini Feng

That is a beautiful story, which I enjoyed very much. It has a sense of completeness. My question concerns the details of something you mentioned. You said that a good teacher can continue to live in one's life. Could you be more specific about the ways Father Fortin still lives in your life and the ways your own teaching has been influenced by him?

Roderick Williams

Now, Fortin did make a difference to me, but as I mentioned to begin with, I never really was that close to him. How is it that a good teacher continues to live in one's life? I suppose in ways that are both tangible and intangible. Certainly they affect you in the way they present the material and themselves; but also in the way you perceive them to think about things and the passion they have for what they do as well as how you see them with others. Your perceptions of them play a role in shaping who or what you become. How you remember them impresses itself on you. For example, I often imagine that good teacher sitting with me as we look at something together. With that teacher, I want to be at my best.

I believe that good teachers inspire one to try always to be better than one is. That's what I have in mind when I speak about how a good teacher might continue to live in one's life.

And I'll add that through the teachers who make a difference in your life you'll also meet others - perhaps fellow students, who share interests similar to yours. You spend time with them and in the most fortunate cases you develop friendships that can last a lifetime.

Peini Feng

What you have said is very beautiful. I also heard from others who were in the Bible and Politics course who suggested that the course was not as satisfying as they had hoped. According to one account, Christopher Bruell and Ernest Fortin were too polite to each other and did not make their disagreements as deep and clear as the students might have wished. Another account suggested that some Christian students were relatively unhappy because Christopher Bruell pointed out apparent inconsistencies in Scripture, while Ernest Fortin did not respond to all of those objections as fully as the students hoped he would. These people also thought there was simply not enough time for Bruell and Fortin to put all their cards on the table. As you said, they either co-taught each session or alternated sessions, so they could not fully develop their positions.

They thought it might have been better for Bruell to teach the material in one semester and Fortin in another. What, then, was the atmosphere of the Bible and Politics course?

Roderick Williams

Now that you mention it, I remember some dissatisfaction with the way the class was held. But I'll defend both the procedure of the class as well as the manner of Fortin and Bruell. I'll speak first about Bruell. He was generally careful and circumspect in his presentation of sensitive matters. In particular, when looking at the Bible and raising questions about politics, Bruell understood that there were students before him who were more or less philosophically inclined. These students, and perhaps this was the greater number of them, he probably thought would be better off with their opinions refined, not overturned. I suspect that the same thing could be said of Fortin. Furthermore, though Bruell and Fortin were friends, they would not for that reason avoid disagreement.

Each was interested in trying to understand what was true, but each would in a public setting proceed cautiously in doing so.

Might you have gotten a better understanding of things or a fuller presentation had they taught the course separately? I don't know, but it seems to me that when the two were teaching together you were present to a dynamic that could only have happened when the two were together. That dynamic, whatever you might have thought of it, would have been lost if the alternative format had been followed.

Peini Feng

That, I think, is a good answer. I am also curious how you learned that the Nietzsche and Christianity course was being offered. Father Fortin taught in the Theology Department, while you were in Political Science. How did you hear about the course?

Roderick Williams

Well, Ernest Fortin was a great friend of the Political Science Department. People in the department were always aware of what was being offered by Ernest Fortin in the Theology Department. At that time, the Political Science Department's doctoral program was structured in such a way that you, the doctoral student, would cover one major area of study and four minor areas. Theology was then accepted as a minor area by the Political Science Department.

Peini Feng

That is very interesting. About the Bradley Lecture Series, you have described the speakers and Father Fortin's memorable introductions. What was the atmosphere among the attendees, and who generally attended the Bradley Lectures?

Roderick Williams

Well, we had some big-name speakers coming through the Bradley Lecture Series, which were well-attended by Boston College faculty and students as well as faculty and students from area universities. A more memorable lecture for me was when Allan Bloom came to speak in the fall of 1988, I believe. In any case, it was shortly after the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind*, which came out in 1987. The presentation was in McGuinn Hall 121, the big lecture auditorium. The auditorium was filled to overflowing and there was tremendous electricity in the air. Bloom's book had taken the world by storm, so to speak. He said he thought the book would be read by a small circle of people - friends. But it captured the public's imagination - I believe it was a New York Times bestseller.

Of course there were people who loved and hated it. And some of those people who hated it were at Bloom's Bradley lecture. Some of them verbally tangled with Bloom, which made for great theater. For Bloom was, to paraphrase Nietzsche, a philosophic platform brawler, a willing combatant who could duke it out intellectually with anybody.

Peini Feng

My final question concerns Father Fortin's roles as both a thinker and a priest. I heard that students would discuss whether he was more a priest or more a thinker or philosopher. What were those conversations like when you were students? Father Fortin seems to have wanted his teaching to leave students wondering why he remained a priest, and he regarded his remaining one as an important testimony in an age of diaspora. How was this issue actually discussed at the time?

Roderick Williams

Many people who knew Father Ernest Fortin might have wondered what he believed in his heart about the relationship between philosophy and theology. It was in a class that he and Bruell were teaching where I was introduced to a piece of writing by Leo Strauss called *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*. Fortin, I think I can safely say, lived the life of conflict that Strauss speaks about in *The Mutual Influence*: he was a theologian open to the challenge of philosophy and a philosopher open to the challenge of theology. This mutual influence points to the heart of the dynamism that animates the West. It became clear to me

while at Boston College studying with people like Bruell and Fortin how closely related theology and philosophy are to one another.

Theologians and philosophers are speaking in many cases to the same questions and perplexities. They have much in common. Still, it is likely true that what divides them is ultimately more fundamental than what divides most other people. At any rate, to get together and talk about these things can, in the right circumstances, provide the opportunity for a remarkable education. I was fortunate to find those circumstances at Boston College. Moreover, the teachers at Boston College I was fortunate to study with were students themselves. Students at a higher level, of course, but who were nonetheless spending time reading the same books and thinking about the questions they raised. By their example - Fortin's was one - they showed that this is a worthy activity for a lifetime.

This reminds me of a story about Leo Strauss who is supposed to have said always assume when you're a teacher in a classroom that there's someone in the classroom who knows more than you. That is the one whose book it is that you yourself are trying to understand and teach. Before these great thinkers whose books you are reading, you want to be at your best - you have to be at your best, and no small part of your effort as a teacher is to try to help others on the path to be the same.

Peini Feng

Thank you very much. I appreciate your sharing these memories.