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Ideology in the Classroom: A Case Study in the Teaching of English Literature in Canadian Universities

This paper was written in order to articulate the sense of personal anguish and alienation I feel as a teacher of literature whose sex, race and birth in a newly independent Asian country set her constantly at odds with the consensus that appears to reign in the departments of English in universities across Canada. The terms of this consensus, it seems to me, are not so very different from the ones prevailing in American universities as demonstrated, for example, by Richard Ohmann in his *English in America*.

Generally speaking, we, the Canadian university teachers of English, do not consider issues of the classroom worth critical scrutiny. Indeed, there is hardly any connection between our pedagogy and our scholarly research. A new teacher, looking for effective teaching strategies, will discover to her/his utter dismay that no amount of reading of scholarly publications will be of any help when she faces a class of undergraduates. In fact, the two discourses — those of pedagogy and scholarly research — are diametrically opposed and woe betide the novice who uses the language of current scholarly discourse in the classroom.

As an outsider, it has never ceased to amaze me that Canadian literary scholars do not seem perturbed by this doublespeak. Not having the same skills myself, I gape with open mouth at my colleagues who switch so easily from one to another. Perhaps, blessed with what Keats called “Negative Capability,” they are able to hold two completely contradictory systems of thought in suspension.

Edward Said, in his essay in the volume, *The Politics of Interpretation*, says that the “mission of the humanities” in contemporary American society is “to represent *noninterference* in the affairs of the everyday world” (28). He charges the American practitioners of the humanities with concealing, atomising, depoliticising and mystifying the “unhumanistic process” that informs the *laissez faire* society of

what he calls "Reaganism." The classroom experience I narrate in this paper concretized for me the ahistorical realm in which American and, yes, Canadian, university teachers of literature ply their trade.

What I have recounted here is not unique at all and I continue to come across student papers that share the innocence about history I describe in this paper. However, this particular experience was a watershed in my personal history since it allowed me, for the first time, to articulate to myself the lineaments of my disagreement with the dominant academic discourses.

The case study presented here is taken from 1983-84, when I was teaching at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan. A large part of the teaching done at the Department of English of that university consists of English 100: Introduction to Literature. It is a compulsory course whereby the professors of English supposedly infuse first year students with a love of literature. Since the aim of the course is to acquaint students with prominent literary genres, almost all teachers of the course use anthologies that contain short stories, poems and, at times, plays and novels as well. Quite often, the anthologies are American.

The short fiction anthology I used for my introductory English 100 class — I deliberately chose a Canadian one — includes a short story by Margaret Laurence entitled "The Perfume Sea."¹ This story, as I interpret it, underlines the economic and cultural domination of the Third World. However, even though I presented this interpretation of the story to my students in some detail, they did not even consider it when they wrote their essays. While the story had obviously appealed to them — almost 40% chose to write on it — they ignored the political meaning entirely.

I was thoroughly disappointed by my students' total disregard for local realities treated in the short story. Nevertheless, their papers did give me an understanding of how their education had allowed them to neutralize the subversive meanings implicit in a piece of good literature, such as the Laurence story.

The story, from my point of view, is quite forthright in its purpose. Its locale is Ghana on the eve of independence from British rule. The colonial administrators are leaving and this has caused financial difficulties for Mr. Archipelago and Doree who operate the only beauty parlour within a radius of one hundred miles around an unnamed small town. Though the equipment is antiquated, and the parlour operators not much to their liking, the ladies have put up with it for want of a better alternative.

With the white clientele gone, Mr. Archipelago and Doree have no customers left. The parlour lies empty for weeks until one day the

crunch comes in the shape of their Ghanaian landlord, Mr. Tachie, demanding rent. Things, however, take an upturn when Mr. Archipelago learns that Mr. Tachie's daughter wants to look like a "city girl" and constantly pesters her father for money to buy shoes, clothes and make-up. Mr. Archipelago, in a flash of inspiration, discovers that Mercy Tachie is the new consumer to whom he can sell his "product": "Mr. Tachie, you are a bringer of miracles! . . . There it was, all the time, and we did not see it. We, even Doree, will make history — you will see" (221).

The claim about making history is repeated twice in the story and is significantly linked to the history made by Columbus. For Mr. Archipelago is very proud of the fact that he was born in Genoa, Columbus's home town. The unpleasant aspect of this act of making history is unmistakably spelt out: "He [Columbus] was once in West Africa, you know, as a young seaman, at one of the old slave-castles: not far from here. And he, also, came from Genoa" (217).

The symbolic significance of the parlour is made quite apparent from the detailed attention Laurence gives to its transformation. While the pre-independence sign had said:

ARCHIPELAGO
English-Style Barber
European Ladies' Hairdresser (211)

the new sign says:

ARCHIPELAGO & DOREE
Barbershop
All-Beauty Salon
African Ladies A Specialty (221)

With the help of a loan from Mr. Tachie, the proprietors instigate hair-straightening equipment and buy shades of make-up suitable for the African skin. However, though the African ladies show much interest from a distance, none of them enters the shop. Two weeks later, Mercy Tachie hesitantly walks into the salon "because if you are not having customers, he [Mr. Tachie] will never be getting his money from you" (222). Mercy undergoes a complete transformation in the salon and comes out looking like a "city girl," the kind she has seen in the *Drum* magazine. Thus, Mr. Archipelago and Doree are "saved" by "an act of Mercy" (226). They have found a new role in the life of the newly independent country: to help the African bourgeoisie slavishly imitate the values of its former colonial masters.

These political overtones are reinforced by the overall poverty story describes and the symbolic linking of the white salon opera

with the only black merchant in town. The division between his daughter and other African women who go barefoot with babies on their backs further indicates the divisive nature of the European implant. Other indications of the writer's purpose are apparent from her caricature of Mr. Archipelago and Doree, a device which prevents emotional identification with them. The fact that both of them have no known national identities — both of them keep changing their stories — is also significant, for it seems to say that, like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, they represent the whole white civilization. The story thus underplays the lives of individuals in order to emphasize these larger issues: the nature of colonialism as well as its aftermath when the native élite takes over without really changing the colonial institutions except for their names.

This, then, was the aspect of the story in which I was most interested, no doubt because I am myself from a former colony of the Raj. During class discussions, I asked the students about the symbolic significance of the hair straightening equipment, the change of names, the identification of Mr. Archipelago with Columbus, the *Drum* magazine, and the characters of Mr. Tachie and Mercy Tachie. However, the students based their essays not on these aspects, but on how "believable" or "likable" the two major characters in the story were, and how they found happiness in the end by accepting change. That is to say, the two characters were freed entirely from the restraints of the context, i.e., the colonial situation, and evaluated solely on the basis of their emotional relationship with each other. The outer world of political turmoil, the scrupulously observed class system of the colonials, the contrasts between wealth and poverty, were non-existent in their papers. As one student put it, the conclusion of the story was "The perfect couple walking off into the sunset, each happy that they had found what had eluded both of them all their lives, companionship and privacy all rolled into one relationship." For another, they symbolized "the anxiety and hope of humanity . . . , the common problem of facing or not facing reality."

I was astounded by my students' ability to close themselves off to the disturbing implications of my interpretation and devote their attention to expatiating upon "the anxiety and hope of humanity," and other such generalizations as change, people, values, reality etc. I realized that these generalizations were ideological. They enabled my students to efface the differences between British bureaucrats and British traders, between colonizing whites and colonized blacks, and between rich blacks and poor blacks. They enabled them to believe that all human beings faced dilemmas similar to the ones faced by the two main characters in the story.

Though, thanks to Kenneth Burke, I knew the rhetorical subterfuges which generalizations like “humanity” imply, the papers of my students made me painfully aware of their ideological purposes. I saw that they help us to translate the world into our own idiom by erasing the ambiguities and the unpleasant truths that lie in the crevices. They make us oblivious to the fact that society is not a homogeneous grouping but an assortment of groups where we belong to one particular set called “us,” as opposed to the other set or sets we distinguish as “them.”

The most painful revelation came when I recognized the source of my students’ vocabulary. Their analysis, I realized, was in the time-honoured tradition of that variety of criticism which presents literary works as “universal.” The test of a great work of literature, according to this tradition, is that despite its particularity, it speaks to all times and all people. As Brent Harold notes, “It is a rare discussion of literature that does not depend heavily on the universal ‘we’ (meaning we human beings), on ‘the human condition,’ ‘the plight of modern man,’ ‘absurd man’ and other convenient abstractions which obscure from their users the specific social basis of their own thought . . .” (201).

Thus, all conflict eliminated with the help of the universal “we,” what do we have left but the “feelings” and “experiences” of individual characters? The questions in the anthologies reflect that. When they are not based on matters of technique — where one can short circuit such problems entirely — they ask students whether such and such character deserves our sympathy, or whether such and such a character undergoes change, or, in other words, an initiation. As Richard Ohmann comments:

The student focuses on a character, on the poet’s attitude, on the individual’s struggle toward understanding — but rarely if ever, on the social forces that are revealed in every dramatic scene and almost every stretch of narration in fiction. Power, class, culture, social order and disorder — these staples of literature are quite excluded from consideration in the analytic tasks set for Advanced Placement candidates. (59-60)

Instead of facing up to the realities of “power, class, culture, social order and disorder,” literary critics and editors of literature anthologies hide behind the universalist vocabulary that only mystifies the true nature of reality. For example, the editorial introduction to “The Perfume Sea” considers the story in terms of categories that are supposedly universal and eternal:

Here is a crucial moment in human history seen from inside a beauty parlour and realized in terms of the “permanent wave.” But while feminine vanity is presented as the only changeless element in a world o

change, Mrs. Laurence, for all her lightness of touch, is not “making fun” of her Africans or Europeans. In reading the story, probe for the deeper layers of human anxiety and hope beneath the comic surfaces. (Ross and Stevens, 201)

Though the importance of “a crucial moment in history” is acknowledged here, it is only to point out the supposedly changeless: that highly elusive thing called “feminine vanity.” The term performs the function of achieving the desired identification between all white women and all black women, regardless of the barriers of race and class. The command to probe “the deeper layers of human anxiety and hope” — a command that my students took more seriously than their teacher’s alternative interpretation — works to effectively eliminate consideration of disturbing socio-political realities.

This process results in the promotion of what Ohmann calls the “prophylactic view of literature” (63). Even the most provocative literary work, when seen from such a perspective, is emptied of its subversive content. After such treatment, as Ohmann puts it, “It will not cause any trouble for the people who run schools or colleges, for the military-industrial complex, for anyone who holds power. It can only perpetuate the misery of those who don’t” (61).

The editor-critic thus functions as the castrator. He makes sure that the young minds will not get any understanding of how our society actually functions and how literature plays a role in it. Instead of explaining these relationships, the editor-critic feeds students on a vocabulary that pretends that human beings and their institutions have not changed a bit during the course of history, that they all face the same problems as human beings. Thus, another anthology used by several of my colleagues divides its subject-matter into four groups called “Innocence and Experience,” “Conformity and Rebellion,” “Love and Hate” and “The Presence of Death.” The Preface justifies the classification thus: “The arrangement of the works in four thematic groups provides opportunities to explore diverse attitudes toward the same powerful human tendencies and experiences and to contrast formal treatment as well” (Abcarian and Klotz, xiii).

The problem is that it is the editors’ *fiat* that has decided what the “powerful human tendencies” are and how they should be treated. The introductions to the four sections talk about “the protagonist” and “tendencies” in a language that conveys to me that literature is about initiation and loss of innocence, about the lone rebel fighting against such authoritarian agencies as the state and society, about love and hate between men and women, and about the inevitability of death. Literature, according to this line of thinking, is obviously not about the problems of oppression and injustice, about how to create a just

society, about how to understand one's situation in society and to do something about it. Literature does not speak about people as social beings, as members of political or social alliances that they have voluntarily chosen.

I would not like to act naive and ask, like Barbara Kessel: "Why is it impossible for liberal critics to conceive of miserable, oppressed people freely choosing to struggle against their own oppression?" (539). The reason is that it is far more comfortable to hide behind a vocabulary which, on the one hand, overlooks one's own privileged position and, on the other, makes everyone look equally privileged. It creates, in the imagination of the user, a society "free, classless, urbane," by lifting the work of art from "the bondage of history" (Frye 347-48). And if, my students, who come mainly from the privileged section of an overall affluent society, perform the same sleight-of-hand, why should I feel unduly disturbed? After all, as Auden says, "Poetry makes nothing happen." The only remaining question, then, is what am I doing in that classroom?

Terry Eagleton says that "explanation and interpretation 'come to an end' . . . when we arrive at a certain interpretative logjam or sticking-place and recognize that we shall not get any further until we transform the practical forms of life in which our interpretations are inscribed" (380). He makes me realize that I can't fight a Quixotic battle in the classroom for historicity and politicization. In fact, I have at times been accused by some of my outraged students of "bringing politics into a literature class." In a similar vein, a very well-respected Canadian scholar in my field intimated to me that my research was "old-fashioned," i.e. "sociological," and that if I wanted to consolidate my precarious foot-hold in academia, I should think about doing some "fashionable" research, i.e., "semiotics," "deconstruction," "feminism" etc. (I found it interesting that feminism to him was only another "fashion.")

My feeling is that the transformation of the practical forms of life which Eagleton speaks of is not around the corner in Canada. Those on the margin face an uphill task in terms of sheer physical and moral survival in the system. Once accepted, they face the prospect of being typecast as the "token black," or the "token ethnic," or the "token feminist." Their "diversion," then, becomes a nice variation in the vast edifice of cultural reproduction that goes on in departments of literature and literary journals.

Said talks about the need for a "fully articulated program of interference" (31). This paper is a partial attempt in that direction. I have hoped to generate a debate over issues that are very important to me as a teacher and a non-white woman from the Third World. I am glad, let

me add, that this paper has finally found an audience. It was submitted, in an earlier version, to the "Literature and Ideology" category of the annual conference of the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English (ACUTE) held at the University of Guelph in 1984. While ACUTE may have turned down this submission for reasons other than ideological, what I found really disturbing was the total lack of attention to pedagogical issues in the conference programme. After all, the bulk of our jobs are provided by first-year English courses and the communication strategies we adopt in our classrooms should therefore be an important part of our discussions when we meet for our annual conference, and it should be recognized that the responses of our students constitute an important mirror both of our performance and of our values. It does not behoove us as scholars to be oblivious to the social repercussions of our activities in the classroom.

If one looks at the 1984 ACUTE conference programme, one gets the impression that the only officially sanctioned valid response to literary works is structuralist-formalist. The following topics are representative of the kind of fare conference participants were treated to: "Sedulous Aping?: Redefining Parody Today," "John Webster's Jacobean Experiments in Dramatic Mimesis," "What Does It Mean To Imitate an Action?" "Whalley on Mimesis and Tragedy," "Interruption in *The Tempest*" and so on. Even the "Literature and Ideology" category was appropriated for formalistic preoccupations: the two papers in this section were entitled "Christianity as Ideology in Rudy Wiebe's *The Scorched-Wood People*" and "Dickens' Good Women: An Analysis of the Influence of Social Ideology on Literary Form."

Surely, literature is more than form? What about the questions regarding the ideology and social class of the writer, the role and ideology of the patrons and the disseminators of literature, the role of literature as a social institution and, finally, the role of the teacher-critic of literature as a transmitter of the dominant social and cultural values? Have these questions no place in our professional deliberations?

NOTES

1. Margaret Laurence, "The Perfume Sea," in Malcolm Ross and John Stevens, ed., *In Search of Ourselves* (J.M. Dent, n.p., 1967) 201-27.

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