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Class and Race in Humanities Teaching and Criticism

IF ANY ONE DOUBTS that we are living in changing, even revolutionary, times, then I suggest that he read the latest cure for the woes of Freshman English, that most universally taught college course in the United States. As expressed by Louis Kampf, next president of the Modern Language Association, the new cure-all is a socialist revolution.¹ And a socialist revolution which will compel English teachers to stop preventing the rise of lower class students by dubious grading systems.

But the winds of change are not only blowing in the colleges. Fredson Bowers, speaking of graduate education at the Brown University Commencement (June 1, 1970), though not so sure as Louis Kampf about the coming revolution, conceded that "Involvement with life, not isolation in the pursuit of knowledge, is the current watchword."²

As for myself, I at last have a hazy recollection of some one on J. Edgar

Hoover's ten most wanted criminals list. My bedside reading is Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. In the mornings I struggle with Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*. For lunch I have Lewis Mumford, *The Megamachine*, Volumes I and II.

Yet for better or worse, I am not what the late Hugh Kingsmill once called a dawnist. A dawnist believes that if only we adopt organic gardening, transformational grammar, communal group gropes, peyote, or socialism, a new dawn will come and all our troubles will be over. If the newly-founded Rhetoric Society has taught me nothing else, it has convinced me that every society has gone through ghastly agonies in its attempts to hand on to the next generation a complex yet elegant form of its written language. I expect this lamentable state of affairs to continue. As P. G. Wodehouse once said, these sufferings are sent to us to make us more spiritual.

Nor am I what I call a Zen Buddhist. By Zen Buddhist I mean the scholar whose primary goal is the elegant paradox. Once you have heard the sound of clapping with one hand, you need no longer hear the cries of black children whose brains have been damaged by starvation. I hear these cries, we must all hear these cries, or we, as well as our buildings, deserve to be fire-bombed. As Hans Sachs says in *Die Meistersinger von*

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¹"Must We Have a Cultural Revolution," CCC, 21 (October, 1970), 249.

²"The Dilemma of Graduate Education," PMLA, 85 (October, 1970), 1118.

Nürnberg, speaking of the Guild rules for writing songs:

Doch einmal im Jahre fänd' ich's weise,
dass man die Regeln selbst probier',
ob in der Gewohnheit trägern G'leise
ihr' Kraft und Leben nicht sich verlier'.

Still once a year I call it wisdom
To test the very rules themselves
To see whether in the dull routine of
habit
Their strength and life haven't become
lost.

Probably for most of us it is fairly easy, thanks in part to the alliterative *Piers Ploughman* rhetoric of Spiro Agnew, to expose what Lewis Mumford in *The Megamachine* has called "the dubious alliance between scientific determinism and authoritarian control that now menaces human existence." That rightist menace is now more and more clearly shaping up as an almost mindless computer-controlled corporate capitalism. But on the left that menace comes also from Maoist grammarians, scholars who argue for an intellectual élite to govern us, and those who claim that "recent [literary] criticism usually expresses the values of capitalism in its monopoly phase."³ Along with Rima Drell Reck,⁴ I don't want a revolutionary establishment any more than I want a Spiro Agnew establishment. I don't want any establishment.

If I may judge this proposed revolutionary socialist establishment, which first began to give birth to itself at, of all the accouchement halls one could imagine, an MLA business meeting, and if I may compare it to those socialist establishments I saw at first hand in Hungary and Czechoslovakia this summer (1970), then I fear it will ultimately wish to put lim-

its, and conscious limits, on what we think.⁵

How then can the 80 percent of us in America who, black and white, are moderate and middle class, like Hans Sachs, *test the rules*, without encouraging an establishment, right or left? How can we blow apart the university and keep it intact? To paraphrase Alfred North Whitehead, how can we simultaneously preserve our traditions and yet accept eagerly the most radical innovations? One rule-testing ground is already here—it is what we must do about class and race in our humanities teaching and criticism.

How can we get the most recent anthology of American literature to acknowledge the existence of a reputable black literature in the 19th century as well as in the 20th? How shall we encourage study of the complex racism of Mark Twain, or of the sophisticated anti-Semitism of T. S. Eliot, without losing the benefits these authors have to give us? How shall we encourage the study of black literature, by blacks and for blacks when desirable, without producing academic pocket ghettos in our colleges and universities? Recently a white teacher of black literature was asked by his black students to form a separate section from which whites were to be excluded. What would you do to be innovative and traditional in this situation? When a black argues, as one did at the MLA

⁵To speed up the enraged debate which this kind of non-dawnist remark invariably calls forth, may I anticipate by pointing out that Sweden is not a socialist country; only about 5 percent of its industry is government-owned. India, in which I have lived and taught, and which has at least a semi-socialist or socialist-trending state, has kept the preventive detention laws of colonial days. Under these laws dissenters against the government may be kept in prison without time limit or trial; I knew of several such cases at first hand, but there were many such.

³Frederick Crews, "Do Literary Studies Have an Ideology?" *PMLA*, 85 (May, 1970), 427.

⁴"The Politics of Literature," *PMLA*, 85 (May, 1970), 431.

meeting in Denver last year, that only blacks should teach black literature to blacks, what do you say and feel as whites?

Here I can only mention four innovative steps which have helped me. I guarantee no new dawn from them. Nor will they help you in your Zen Buddhist meditations, or in the struggles towards the new socialist utopia. They do make life and teaching more innovative; yet, as I see these four steps, they do not abandon some very usable traditional teaching methods. I have some evidence that these four steps may ease, though they do not solve, our great questions of class and race as these concern the humanities.

1. *Grades*

I am now, however reluctantly and slowly, convinced that grades of any kind, College Board, high school, college, or graduate school, do far more harm than good. They are especially harmful to minority students. A genuine letter about a student is far more effective than any grade, both for the student himself, and for any future employer or admissions officer. In fact, I will go so far as to say that I now believe (I admit I did not always think so) a low grade is a mark of teacherly rather than student incompetence; probably for every grade he gives below B a teacher should be fined one percent of his salary.

Once we give up grades completely, we will have to accept a far wider range of minority and working class students than we do even now. Here the humanities have a special responsibility. I cannot imagine that any physicist I know would take seriously the idea of a "correct" physics, yet how many English teachers, at every level, believe still in a "correct" English, which very few minority or working class children know.

2. *The Open Classroom*

As rapidly as possible I think we should give up any kind of class in which a student is unable to go through the subject at his own speed, and in his own order of content. The worst offenders are the lecture class and the so-called Socratic dialogue class,⁶ the one a cultural lag from the middle ages, and the other from the Athenian law courts.

As James Squire and other observers have noted, especially at the Dartmouth Conference, the open classroom has been used with some success in English secondary education. Far more than other students, the minority and working class student benefits from the open classroom, in which he can find that part of the subject which interests him, and in which he can develop at his own pace. In an open classroom we might have six or seven tables, each heaped with attractive materials clustered around a sub-topic of the general course subject matter. Under the roving and sympathetic guidance of a teacher, a student might work on any of these, as deeply as he chooses, and move to another, in any order which is best for his own development. As Charles Silberman has said, observers of the open classroom can hardly believe it is an educational situation because the students are enjoying themselves so much, yet it is far from an unstructured or random educational experience.

3. *Linguistics*

Experts in communication usually theorize that at best only 75 percent of any message gets across. A recent study of what students are actually thinking about

⁶By Socratic dialogue I mean one in which the teacher pretends to allow genuine give and take (Kenneth Burke's discussion rhetoric), but in fact the whole debate is a put-on, because the teacher intends to compel the student to a foregone conclusion.

in class suggests that 20 percent of the time they are not thinking of your latest critical insight—they are thinking, even in these relaxed coeducational days, of sex. When we add to these limitations the problems of communication between a middle class teacher and a ghetto or working class kid, we have a linguistics and communications difficulty which is probably far more baffling than what happens when a Frenchman hears my French.

Even worse than these communications difficulties, is the probably unconscious sorting of students which we carry out, based on our instinctive reactions to their dialects. As William Labov has observed, department store clerks are consistently assigned to jobs on the basis of their dialect, especially their [r] usage. The girls with the supposed working class [r], or rather non-[r], wind up on the cheaper floors of Saks or Macy's, or are rusticated *en masse* to Klein's.⁷ Probably many English teachers regard as impoverished a certain kind of working class clause structure, which Labov has demonstrated is as logical, and certainly more vivid, than the typical clause structure of middle class kids.⁸

Now that every teacher in the humanities has minority and working class students as never before, I wonder how responsible we are if we neglect the study of minority and working class English, *and the effects of our attitudes towards this English in our teaching?*⁹

⁷Discussed in William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966), Ch. III, "The Social Stratification of (r) in New York City Department Stores," pp. 63-89.

⁸*The Logic of Non-Standard English*, Georgetown Monograph Series on Language and Linguistics, No. 22 (Georgetown, 1969).

⁹I have found especially helpful the articles, too numerous to list here, of J. L. Dillard, Wil-

4. *The history of class and race in humanities teaching and criticism*

For the last two years, at MLA business meetings, at New University Conference meetings, even in the formerly conventional pages of *PMLA*, *CE* and *CCC*, we have heard a variety of charges about racism and class oppression in humanities teaching and criticism. When I have heard or read these charges, I have been struck by the absence of detailed historical information on what we have in fact taught or criticized over the last five decades.

Wiser observers than I will have to explain why we maintain higher standards of history for the study of Chaucer than for the study of our discipline of the humanities. But I should like to recommend that we undertake a systematic historical and sociological investigation of what we have said and done about race and class, whether explicitly or implicitly, first in the pages of *College English* and *PMLA*, and later in other noted critical journals over the last half-century.

I can only guess at what we have done, but, based on a very imperfect sampling, here is my guess.

Perhaps without our realizing it, much of our traditional literary history, our study of *evolution* as a biologist might term it, has had strong tinges of social Darwinism. Great periods and types (Elizabethans, romantics, more recently the modern novel) have been taught to the exclusion of so-called lesser periods and types (18th century, heroic poetry, 19th-century black autobiographies—so-called slave narratives). Great languages and cultures (English, European) have

liam A. Stewart, and Joan C. Baratz. Books and articles can be obtained from ERIC, and from the Center for Applied Linguistics (1717 Mass. Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036).

pretty well wiped out so-called lesser languages and cultures (Asian, Afro-American). In recent departmental conferences I have attended, the fate of the Milton course or of Lady Murasaki's *Genji* has reminded me of the way biologists talk about the dinosaur.

In the thirties, by my time reckoning, came a shift, or rather a parallel movement, to new criticism and to the study of the internal dynamics of literary works, which a biologist might perhaps call a shift to *cell biology*. I cannot recall any work of black or Asian literature which was deemed worthy of this close scrutiny, in those far off days at Harvard, but since Burns, a far greater poet than T. S. Eliot or Blake, was not deemed worthy either, that might have been a curious kind of compliment. In this kind of criticism, as I knew it, one always had the sensation of a gentle but unyielding *Führer prinzip* or leadership. That is, the critical pastor had to drive his sheep into just the right critical pasture; straying sheep were far from welcome.

Today, and remember that I am continuing to guess at this history, we have a third shift or rather parallel movement, to the study of the interaction of literature and society, and not just of the interaction of literature (and the humanities) with society, but of the interaction of the *teaching* of that literature with society. A biologist might perhaps say we have gone from a major concern with evolution and cell biology to a new concern with *ecology*—that is, to the study of class and race in our humanities teaching and criticism.

I would guess too, that for the next three decades we are going to be keenly aware, not only of the evolution, or of the inner dynamics of, say, Melville's *Benito Cereno*. We are also going to be

keenly aware of class and race in that work, and we are going to be aware of what we are doing, by our teaching of that work, to the class and race of our students.

And to mention only my own particular interests, those of us who in the past have taught only De Toqueville about America, are going to find him teamed with an equally brilliant observer of American culture from the slave's point of view, Frederick Douglass. And the subject of slavery is going to lead to discussion of the kind of slavery that the Womens Liberation Movement protests against, or of subtler kinds of slavery that are felt by all kinds of minority groups in America.

But these are only guesses, when we could have genuine history. The more we innovate, ecologically speaking, the more we need to know what we did in the past. Hans Sachs, in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, was a singer and teacher from the older generation. Sachs warned Walther, a singer of the new generation, that after his first burst of creative imagination, he would need the rules if he was to go on singing into middle and even old age. But after hearing Walther's first song, he generously said:

Wollt ihr nach Regeln messen
was nicht nach Regeln lauf,
der eig'nen Spur vergessen
sucht davon erst die Regeln auf!

If you wish to judge according to rules
Something which doesn't agree with your
rules,
Forget your own ways—
First you have to seek *its* rules.

And as we plunge now into several decades of teaching and criticizing on the basis of class and race in the humanities, we shall want to know our past, and we shall want to forget that past and seek these new rules of the future.