

ONCE AGAIN, THE CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

When students in a foreign language department struggle to understand the actions and motivations of characters in a literary text, they are usually urged to read imaginatively and enter its world. We suggest that this exercise, though perhaps useful for those who think it a moral duty to extend their sympathy to those who are not like themselves, has little place in the foreign language curriculum. Though a language department might well have a humanistic mission when the language in question is the mother tongue for most of its students, in our case—we teach in an English department in northern Palestine—the department’s mission is simply to teach the language. Though we recognize that a language cannot be divorced from the culture of its users, we argue that the focus of instruction should be on the language its, and that the texts traditionally taught should only receive attention to the extent that students can understand why social interaction (and discourse) in English-speaking countries takes the forms it does.

Key words: discourse, culture, curriculum, literature, EFL, language

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Sometimes students just don't understand. Why didn't Elizabeth Bennet tell her mother what she had learned about George Wickham, they ask; why didn't Brutus sit down with Caesar and tell him what people feared? It does no good to point to Mrs. Bennet's foolishness, and the damage her gossiping could do to the reputation of a young man who might—for all Elizabeth knew—have reformed. Mrs. Bennet was her mother, they say; she should have been told. It does not help to place Caesar's assassination in its historical context—to note, for example, how contemporaries thought Caesar a threat to the state (a man who, “to gain that sovereign power which by a depraved imagination he had conceived in his fancy, trod underfoot all laws of gods and men” – Cicero 1913, 1.26). Caesar was the head of state, they say; he should have been respected.

Perhaps they are right. Perhaps Elizabeth should have told her mother what she knew. Perhaps tyrannicide is wrong. But it is clear nonetheless that while Jane Austen did not expect us to have any respect for Mrs. Bennet: she was, we read, a woman of “weak understanding and illiberal mind” (Austen 2001, p. 155), Shakespeare expected us to have some sympathy for Brutus: “the noblest” of the conspirators, the only one amongst them concerned for the “common good” (Shakespeare 2003, 5.5.68-72). Should we insist therefore that our students recognize, with Austen, that some mothers can be ignorant and foolish; should we use Shakespeare to extend the scope of their sympathy to those who murder their friends?

We feel that we should not, and that this is an ineffective teaching strategy. We do not pretend (and they do not think) that Palestinian family life is perfect, even on its own terms, or that assassination never has a place in Arab politics. But talking about failure leaves students uncomfortable; Arabic discourse is “indirect,” with speakers concealing their desired wants, needs, or goals (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1988), and in Palestinian society transgressive

practice (even bad parenting, never mind assassination) is not publicly discussed. Discussion would imply societal acceptance or approval of actions that violate social norms. We can note that Austen thinks Mrs Bennet unworthy of respect, but to affirm that she was (and by implication, all mothers obsessed with marrying-off their daughters are) is to become social critics—and our students have every right to object that they are students of English, not of sociology. We can note the praise of Brutus that Shakespeare gives to Mark Anthony, but to wonder whether Anthony was right invites the objection they have not signed up to study moral philosophy.

Of course it could be argued that they have, for reading literature can extend our sympathy and get us thinking about moral issues. It is not surprising that Shelley's argument in "A Defence of Poetry" that morality follows from love (from "a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own") and people therefore need to "imagine intensely and comprehensively" if they are "to be greatly good" (Shelley 1951, p. 502) has been thought to justify its study. We think Shelley overstates the case, and feel uncomfortable with the way his argument absolves the reader of any need to *act* morally: after all unbounded sympathy might be thought to inhibit action. If prompted by Shakespeare's account of Brutus, why not by Mick Jagger's account of the Devil ("If you meet me, have some courtesy, have some sympathy, and some taste" – Jagger and Richards 1968)—and how can we act ethically then? But be that as it may be, even if Shelley's argument is granted it hardly justifies the place of literature in an EFL curriculum (for a counter-argument, see Oster 1989). An English department in Palestine is no more a guardian of morals than a law school, and it is no more its job to teach ethics than it is that of colleagues teaching mathematics. If we really thought that students studied English "[t]o see complex ethical

dilemmas dramatized within a narrative structure and to watch imagined characters sort through them” (Schwartz 2008, p. 35) we would push for an imaginative reading of Shakespeare and Austen. But let us be honest: they do not. They come to us to learn the language, not explore another culture’s literary canon, and some other strategy is necessary.

The very idea of a canon is controversial, of course, but as long as we find the idea of national cultures useful it makes sense to talk of literary canons as well. If we define nationality in terms of what is remembered and forgotten by the individuals that claim it (Renan 1996), a canon can show us what has been held on to (even treasured) by elites, and what has been let go. It can be a useful starting point for reflection and debate. But that is a conversation that others do not need to join. For all their importance for native speakers, works that help a nation define its history and values can seem strangely irrelevant when read by those whose history and values are entirely different.

Consider “the matter of Britain.” Should it be on the syllabus in our department? We should not doubt that the story of Arthur has gripped the imagination of readers in the West for a thousand years, or that it was natural for C. S. Lewis to explain that, when the Pevensie children made their second visit to Narnia, “it was (for the Narnians) as if King Arthur came back to Britain, as some people say he will.” It was even natural for him to add, in a sly criticism of post-war British society, “And I say the sooner the better” (Lewis 1970, p. 24). But such tributes seem very strange when read in *Jenin* (what, we wonder, is admirable in a king who fights a man just because he cannot explain the meaning of his coat of arms? – Malory 2004, 2:1)—and they seem even stranger when we move beyond the king to his court. When Lancelot tells his king during the siege of Joyous Garde, “that my lady, Queen Guinevere, is as true a lady unto your person as is any lady living unto her lord” (Malory 2004, 2:478) he is either lying, being ironic (all women

are unfaithful to their husbands), or claiming that Guinevere can be true to Arthur and yet sleep with another man. This is not as improbable as it might seem (being true to the person of the king could always mean political loyalty, not sexual fidelity), but even so we might well wonder why the question should engage the attention of those uninterested in the history of medieval Europe.

It is not just that praising infidelity seems bizarre (if not offensive); even if that were not the case, the issues that drove Malory to write can seem irrelevant to those who are studying to secure a better future for themselves—particularly when this future includes national liberation. Though Lenin is little known and rarely quoted by our students they would not quarrel with his words to the First All-Russia Congress on Education in 1918: education is “indispensable . . . for the victorious conclusion of their struggle” (Lenin 1965, p. 87), and education so understood does not require an understanding of the three estates of medieval society. Interesting though Lancelot’s words are, both in themselves and as a marker of difference when we come to the Tudor court, they hardly offer a crux that students and their families pay tuition fees to resolve. If the late fifteenth century has any interest for them it is for the final stages of the *Reconquista*, not the way the Wars of the Roses lurched to at an end at Bosworth Field.

To be sure, most of our students realize that they have to study “authentic” usage if they are to go beyond the grammar book and discover how English is actually used. They recognize, as others have done (see Stringer and Cassidy 2009 for this), that formal mastery of a foreign language cannot guarantee communicative success. They also concede that to do this they must engage with native-speaker discourse—either directly, or at a second remove through its representation in novels, films, law cases, and other cultural artifacts. But still: students are interested in the Englishes of today, not those of Malory, or Shakespeare, or Austen. The lexis, grammar and style of those authors hardly helps students communicate effectively in twenty-first

century London, New York or Canberra.

That being the case, we wonder again why students should be forced to engage with what is an alien literary canon. Although some degree of “cultural literacy” is necessary if students are to understand those for whom English is a native language, they do not need to master the code. What E. D. Hirsch thinks necessary for responsible citizenship (Hirsch 1987)—knowledge of the works that have “normative claims” for native speakers (the phrase is from Altieri 1990)—is, we suggest, only relevant to language learners when it can help explain why things are said the way they are today on TV, in blogs, or on the street. Past literature is only relevant to the extent that it has helped shape contemporary discourse. Its intrinsic (literary) value, or the ethical insight that it contains is otherwise by the way. We grant that students might want to read Malory or some other retelling of the story of Arthur for pleasure (after all, many of ours have enjoyed watching *Merlin* on TV), and that they might wonder why the story has been so influential and to what extent the assumptions embedded in Malory’s work still shape behavior in the West today. But we insist that if it is to be studied it is because of its usefulness, not because it is important in literary terms.

It is not hard to imagine objections to such claims. Faced with the demands of globalization some have felt the need to create a “dance” between cultures in which partners, understanding and respecting each other’s values, give and take to create a new *Gestalt* (Cambie and Ooi 2009). But though the reading of literature would no doubt have a part in this process, as it helps us know better what we bring to the dance—as Daniel R. Schwarz has noted, “reading is a way we come to know ourselves” (Schwartz 2008, p. 2)—it would be *our* literature that we should engage with as the band strikes up. It is questionable whether we find more than a distorted image of ourselves in works shaped by other cultures. Prufock’s protest that he is “not

Prince Hamlet” (Eliot 1963, p. 7 [ll. 111-13]) is perhaps just a refusal to take center stage (he is, he insists, just “an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two”), but it has a larger resonance for our students. They are not Prince Hamlet in any sense. Studying the Dane does not show them themselves

Again, some have thought that a close reading of literary texts can improve a learner’s command of representational language—in John McRae’s definition, “language which, in order that its meaning potential be decoded by a receiver, engages the imagination of that receiver” (McRae 1991, p. 3). No doubt it can. But do students who do not choose to take an elective course in creative writing want (or need) to move beyond the referential to the representational? Mark Forsyth has dismissed the idea “that the aim of writing is to express yourself clearly in plain, simple English using as few words as possible” as both “bleak and imbecilic” (Forsyth 2014, p. 201), but we doubt that students struggling to do just that need to venture into fields where litotes and zeugma bloom.

Is there then any place for literature in the curriculum? Perhaps surprisingly, we feel that there is. As we have suggested, students need to understand the values and concerns that control discourse in contemporary Western society if they are to join in the conversation—and their understanding can be enriched by the study of how these ideas came into prominence. Works of philosophy, letters, essays, sermons, newspaper articles, blog pages, and tweets would all have their place in the project, of course, as would film and television, and there would be a place for literature along with the rest: but in each case what justifies inclusion is the text’s explicative value.

Given this demand for relevance, it should not surprise that the texts chosen will often be non-canonical. If, for example, it is America culture that concerns them, students would probably

learn more from *The Maltese Falcon* (Hammett 1929) than from the following year's *As I Lay Dying* (Faulkner 1930); they would do better reading *The Europeans* (James 1878), a "slight" work by Henry James, than any the author included in the New York Edition of his novels; they would even learn more from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain 1876)—especially if they contrast the behavior thought appropriate for Tom with that approved, four years before, for Katy Carr in Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (Coolidge 1872)—than they would from its more celebrated sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884). The most useful texts for cultural analysis are not necessarily those most valued by literary critics.

Of course even these suggestions might be challenged on the grounds that contemporary works would be more useful than historical ones; after all, as we noted above, we assume that students are primarily interested in language use today. But if they are to understand the reasons for contemporary usage they will sometimes need to step back and see where the ideas underpinning this have come from—and for those interested in an etymology of meaning historical texts have a part to play. As Valentin Vološinov observed, a book is "a verbal performance in print" which "orients itself with respect to previous performances" (Vološinov 1986, p. 95). (We talk of "etymology" rather than *archeology*, as in Foucault 1972, because we are not trying to impose a philosophy of knowledge; we are trying to understand the values presumed in contemporary speech.)

That being the case, those interested in changing attitudes to women might consider Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Sobbin' Women" (1937). For literary historians it is a minor work, usually only noted for its being a source for the 1954 Hollywood musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*; however, for those interested in contemporary American attitudes to women, it offers a useful starting point for reflection. Its lightly comic retelling of the story of the rape of

the Sabine women provokes question after question. What led Benét to think the original story a subject for comedy? Why were the girls who were to be abducted by the six unmarried Pontipee brothers, “crazy to get married”? (Why were they so desperate, and why in any case were they “girls,” not women?) Why, if they were half-attracted by the men, were they “scared of [them] being backwoodsmen, and scared of the work, and . . . scared of being the first to leave the others”? Why do they get over the shock of being kidnapped as quickly as they do? Answering these questions gives us an entrance into the world-view of Benét’s audience (their cognitive environment, if we prefer the terminology of Sperber and Wilson 1986)—and a short-cut to understanding what many Americans find unacceptable today.

Some might hesitate here, and argue that we would do better to focus on non-fiction; that, if we want to understand the second-wave of American feminism, we should engage with harder-hitting texts like *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1963) rather than tease out the implications of a rather minor short story published when Betty Friedan was 16. They might even wonder if we should encourage such short-cuts to understanding. But this is to misunderstand our purpose. We might legitimately worry if we were approaching Benét’s work as literature. As the Czech author Milan Kundera notes, each assertion in a novel “stands in a complex and contradictory juxtaposition with other assertions, other situations, other gestures, other ideas, other events” (Kundera 1996, p. 201; cf. Barthes 2000, p. 261), and we could claim the same for a short story. Just exploring the sexism in “The Sobbin’ Women” gives Benét short shrift.

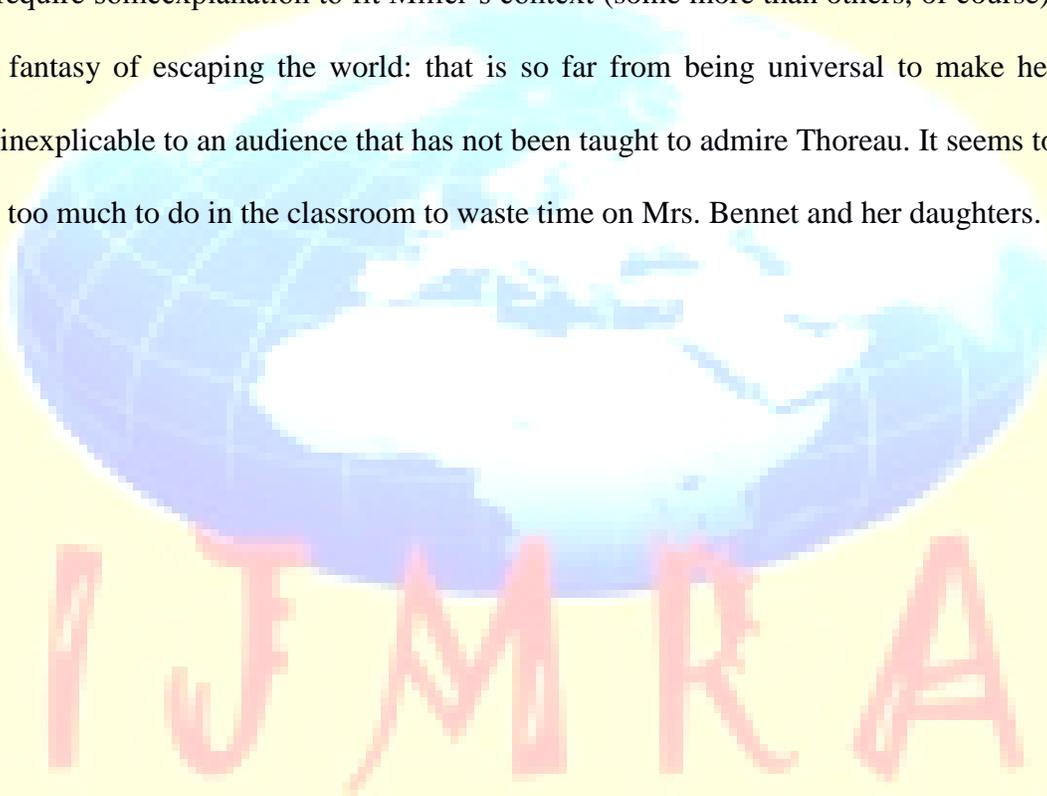
We might also worry if this were the only reading we did was driven by the need for discourse analysis. Some years ago, the Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter pointed to “the importance of reading books that are difficult. Long books. Hard books. Books with which we have to struggle” (Carter 2009; cf. Schwartz 2008, p. 35). And he went on: “The hard work of

serious reading mirrors the hard work of serious governing—and, in a democracy, governing is a responsibility all citizens share.” Setting aside the question as to whether democracy is necessarily what we hope for—after all, constitutionalism need not be defined in democratic terms (Walker 1997; cf. Landes 1998)—Carter’s argument seems relevant to any society in which decision-making is diffused. And it takes us back to Kundera: “Only a slow reading, twice and many times over, can bring out all the ironic connections inside a novel, without which a novel remains incomprehensible” (Kundera 1996, p. 201). However, important though this kind of reading is, it not the kind required by the project we have in mind.

It should not be thought that we would be letting students off easily. Our interest in the ideas that shape contemporary discourse necessarily leads us to what goes unstated in a text as well as what is explicitly affirmed. Students need to recognize the values of the authorial audience—the ideal readers imagined by an author; the ones who can understand the text and know how to read it. The importance of this audience as “a heuristic literary construct” was first affirmed in a 1977 essay by Peter J. Rabinowitz, but our approach can be traced to Paul Grice’s suggestion that in conversation we make our contribution “as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange”; we do not make it “more informative than is required” (Grice 1989, p. 26). Remembering this, and extending the model of conversation to all texts, we can assume that what goes unstated but is nonetheless necessary for comprehension was presumed to be already known. Uncovering this layer of meaning would hardly be an easy task. It would require active reading, even if not of long, hard texts.

Easy or not, the task would fit with the remit of a foreign language department better than would a study of that language’s “great works.” Students have every right to expect to be able to make sense of what they read or hear today, and there much for them (and us) to discover.

When—to choose an article at random—we read Laura Miller’s account of a young man’s life as a hermit for two years, we risk overload in less than fifty words. “The kind of solitude [he] imposed on himself is regarded as torture by some prison rights activists and as a threat to mental stability by many psychologists. But it’s also a fantasy. Who hasn’t longed to say goodbye to the incessant, yammering company that crowds our daily lives?” (Miller 2015). Kinds of solitude, prison rights, a prescriptive idea of mental stability, psychologists as figures of authority—all would require some explanation to fit Miller’s context (some more than others, of course); and as for the fantasy of escaping the world: that is so far from being universal to make her words almost inexplicable to an audience that has not been taught to admire Thoreau. It seems to us that there is too much to do in the classroom to waste time on Mrs. Bennet and her daughters.



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