

**Keynote speech for English Dept. Awards Ceremony, April 15, 2008**

**Teaching, Politics, & Me**

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I've been asked to look back over my career in this highly political season, and I've decided to share with you some thoughts about my work in English and its relationship to politics. I think in many ways my career has been quite typical of many English professors, but some of our ideals and practices have been the target of criticism from some colleagues who have different ideas about the proper relationship of politics to English studies, and that's the subject I want to explore.

I'll begin with a well-known quotation from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*:  
*The truth is rarely pure and never simple.*

As a young teenager who loved books I was fascinated by Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy. What a concept! Bookish scholars not only understand the course of history, they can secretly shape it. Talk about being the "unacknowledged legislators of the world"! I read it a half-dozen times.

But then I read Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, which scrambled my brain and rendered me an unfit reader for Asimov's simplistic fantasy. The complexity and vividness with which the Russian author conveyed the contradictions, tensions, convolutions of human experience blew open a window that gave me new idea of what fiction could do.

As a Comparative Literature Ph.D. student at Indiana University in the 60s, I learned not only how to read literature across national, linguistic, and temporal boundaries, but also how to relate

literature to music, art, and philosophy. My interests gradually shifted to the history of ideas as reflected in the arts, and that is the course I have pursued ever since, in a variety of ways.

Part of situating literature in history is situating it politically, and my MA thesis was a exploration of the unique achievement of Emile Zola's *Germinal* in exploring the complexities of the labor movements and various radical philosophies fermenting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, the Vietnam War was heating up, and when I arrived in Pullman in 1968, I plunged headfirst into the anti-war movement, writing an anti-ballistic missile poem, radical critiques of conservative religious thought for a small activist group, and numerous letters to the editor. I was the only really active faculty member of the local Students for a Democratic Society chapter, and wound up as a delegate at the disastrous 1969 Chicago SDS convention where the organization tore itself apart as the University of Wisconsin chapter sprang to its feet waving Mao's little red book at every opportunity and the national leadership unveiled the manifesto of what was to become the terrorist cell known as the Weather Underground.

It was routine in that period to speak of liberals with scorn, and to escalate the ideal status from dissenter to radical to revolutionary—although these terms were seldom clearly defined. For a while I was influenced in the same direction, but my basic political beliefs and instincts have always remained essentially liberal. I'm just not ashamed to say so any more. Years of close study of Marx and Marxism and visits to the Soviet Union and China convinced me that although Marxist analysis can provide useful insights into problems and issues, Marxist solutions are usually worse than the problems they purport to solve.

As certain voices in the movement grew more and more extreme and irrational, they progressively shed their following, until the group optimistically shouting "the people united

shall never be defeated” were a pathetic remnant speaking for almost no one. My own political activities shifted to support for the nascent women’s movement (I was an officer in the Pullman NOW chapter for several years), and I began a long career of exploring and teaching about women writers, composers, and artists which has continued to the present.

All during this period, while introducing Zola, Marx, Lenin, and other radical texts into my teaching, and offering courses on utopian topics, I continued to revel in the opportunity to share with my students the complexities and nuances of writers whose concerns were very different: Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, and Virginia Woolf, to name just a few.

It became common among activist teachers in the 70s and 80s to argue that since absolute neutrality was impossible, students deserved an overt statement of the teacher’s political stance. But although in politics outside the classroom I strove to define my position and articulate it forcefully, in the study of literature I wanted my students to be able to immerse themselves in the widest possible range of experiences and ideas. One thing I most value about literature is precisely that it challenges our certainties, makes us think more complexly about ideas and issues. When I first read Nietzsche he horrified and repelled me, but when I revisited him years later I realized that although I would always resist much of what he had to say, he opened up new ways of understanding life as an adventure in the creation of values as a human enterprise. He also undermined any attraction that finding an ultimate universal truth might have had for me.

I also was convinced that overtly activist teaching can deteriorate very quickly into preaching to the choir on the one hand and alienating students who differ on the other. I respected my students enough to think that they could arrive at their own positions in much the same way I had, not by becoming my disciple, but by exploring a wide range of ideas and experiences and applying their

minds and personal experiences to them. I am proud of the fact that students were often unable to figure out where I stood on issues I spoke about even as I articulated with some passion arguments that could be made from various perspectives. I think that sort of traditionally humanist/liberal approach provides a stronger basis for students to deal with political issues once they leave the academy, building up and keeping their intellectual muscles and tendons flexible.

I discovered as time passed that many of those whose thought had been shaped in the sixties took a rather different path. For them, the classroom was an extension of—or even replacement for—their activism. Arguing that neutrality is impossible and that students deserved to know honestly the positions they held, they became open advocates of defined political positions and shaped their curricula to channel young minds in the political paths they advocated.

Huge bodies of politically oriented criticism and theory grew up to eventually dominate literary studies in the eighties and later. The only “serious” ways to regard literature were political: once you had figured out who was being oppressed, who caricatured, who silenced in a text, you knew all that was really significant. I contributed my own bit when I reacted to the Reagan revival of the Cold War by launching into a ten-year study of the vast corpus of nuclear war fiction. It led to some very interesting opportunities for me, and I think the work was worth while; but in some ways I regret having polluted my head with so many wretched post-nuclear holocaust fantasies.

The canon wars of the 70s and 80s were essentially an attempt to rank authors by their degree of alignment with the political concerns of the teachers. I was glad to help widen the curriculum to include previously unheard voices by women and writers of color; but the widespread insistence on discussing only issues of power and oppression rendered much of the result simplistic and mind-numbing. Those aspects of literature reflecting less than “progressive” values were called

“problematic” and teachers who still emphasized esthetic and formal concerns were often disdained.

I have always thought this was a mistake, for several reasons.

First of all, this sort of overtly politicized teaching expressed a basic distrust in the ability of students to sort through the complex maze of human ideas and arrive at their own conclusions. Few of us deserve disciples, and the kind of teaching I admire most resembles more that of Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in which he dismisses his listeners and tells them to resist him if they can, and find their own paths.

Second, a convert to a view argued one-sidedly is acutely vulnerable to disillusionment and apostasy: better to seriously engage the most powerful and intelligent arguments of your opponents. I learned a lot studying Plato: mostly how to resist him. If I had been *taught* to resist Plato I might well have been more eager to see value in his ideas.

Third, when we sort out writers according to how well they match our political agendas, we deprive ourselves of some of the richest experiences literature has to offer. There is greatness in the forthright angry eloquence of a Claude McKay or a Malcolm X, but there is also greatness in the fiercely complex ideas of a Derek Walcott or a Samuel R. Delany.

Two of the authors I was instrumental in bringing to this campus illustrate this point. The late Octavia Butler wrote powerfully—even fiercely—about matters of race and oppression; but often in ways that made readers on all sides acutely uncomfortable. She identified not only tensions generated by inequalities, but by profound flaws in the individual characters of all races and classes. Wole Soyinka disappointed the “post-colonial” crowd and orthodox Marxists by

refusing to make the evils of colonialism his subject, instead preferring to focus on the nightmare into which Nigeria and other African nations descended during his lifetime. The fact that he preferred not to spend his time analyzing how all of this disarray was partly the legacy of the British in West Africa did not signify that he held them guiltless: after all, he wrote a book advocating reparations for slavery. But his body of work might well bear a label common to many Anglophone writers from non-Western nations: “This story is not about you.”

To many writers from some nations, “postcolonial” studies is another way of Europeans introducing themselves into the center of the picture. It is remarkable how very distant most fiction from India, Nigeria, Jamaica, and other countries is from the agendas of postcolonial scholars, even those from the same countries. All too often, the scholarly agenda is reduced to the level of carping and complaining about insufficiently political authors in tediously repetitive critiques.

I also spent five years intensively studying Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, which occupies a territory deeply troubling to committed literary activists. He fiercely attacks the tendency of the white majority to demonize all foreigners and view them as interchangeable, but he also fiercely attacks Iranian fundamentalism and Sikh terrorism. And he mocks Trotskyites and other activists. The temptation of some is to dismiss him as a reactionary; but there is much more to Rushdie’s novel than he’s often given credit for, and he literally—if unintentionally—put his life on the line when he wrote it.

Fourth, formal esthetic qualities are, of course, the very qualities that attract most readers to literature; and denigrating them alienates a great many students. The 90’s revival of the old Stalinist term “formalism” to denigrate esthetic considerations repelled me. For most students

literature which is not alluring or engrossing in some sense is not worth talking about. Social and political concerns can be far more effectively discussed directly using sociology, political science, psychology and other disciplines rather than literary criticism.

Finally, if political activity has any justification, it is the hope of creating a better life. The puritanical tendency of some teacher-activists to scorn the sheer pleasure that literature can bring evinces a certain insensitivity to the richness of life's possibilities. Literature which puzzles, exhilarates, frightens, excites, and amuses is worth exploring and celebrating. If we choose only literature which forwards our pet agendas we are little better than the worst sort of Victorian critic who disdained any writing judged not properly edifying. "Problematic" is the new "improper."

One of the greatest gifts the reading of literature can convey is surprise: the opening of our minds and hearts to ideas and feelings we had never previously experienced. If we approach each text always already knowing what we shall find, we are not only bad readers, but impoverished human beings. All too much modern literary scholarship teaches us nothing new, but circles around the same familiar set of ideas. Often the more complex the language and theory involved, the more simplistic the conclusions being made.

Fortunately younger faculty and students alike are interested in a much wider range of approaches to literature than the last generation; and I see more adventurous, independent thought among my colleagues and students these days than I have for a long, long time.

I want to conclude by making a few remarks about the work that I'm best known for outside the university, my Web site *Common Errors in English* and the various publications derived from it.

A standard objection to this sort of thing is that correctness in English usage is a social

construction, and that the proper role of the professionals should be confined to tracking changing usage and celebrating diversity. Yet English professors are not the gatekeepers of usage, and their permission to stray from traditional usage goes unheard by the general public. Instead, people want to know how they can make themselves clear, impress their readers, communicate effectively.

It is precisely because language usage is an artificial social construction that one needs a lot of information to navigate the dangerous waters of modern English to avoid embarrassment and disdain. We can tell bosses that they should ignore the tendency of their job applicants to write “for all intensive purposes” and “one in the same.” They are not listening. The pronunciation by eastern newscasters of our neighbor state’s name as “Oregawn” alienates listeners. The tendency to call a slash a “backslash” confuses computer users. Mistakes are essentially social, but that does not make them unreal: we need to know the social reality which our words encounter when others read or hear them. Some English teachers are happy to critique the obfuscatory jargon and clichés of bureaucrats but not to address the verbal gaffes of the downtrodden: but who needs more help? Who is more endangered by linguistic patterns that arouse contempt?

My attitude is not to smugly announce what is right and wrong, but to provide information: speaking of “tragedy” will not impress your English professor, “oriental” offends a lot of Asians, but using “decimate” to mean “utterly destroy” probably offends only truly picky people you can safely ignore. This is information: social information.

So how do I reconcile my praise of ambiguity and complexity in literary studies and my praise of clarity and consistency in language usage?

First, literature is often at its best when it's ambiguous and puzzling; ordinary communication is not.

Second, the complexities and surprises of literature are intentional and lead us to admire the writers when we understand them whereas verbal and written stumbles are mostly unintentional and tend to make people look foolish or poorly educated. Knowing standard usage lets you make a conscious choice of whether to say "penultimate" when you mean "last" or "exalt" when you mean "exult."

Third, the drive to prune the canon and throw open the doors of English usage flowed from similar impulses: to reject the irreducible complexity of both literature and social interaction in the service a political ideal.

Finally, my experience of trying to explain language matters to a broad public using simple language and humorous illustrations seems to have found a large audience hungry for such material. Millions of visitors to my site and thousands of e-mails reinforce every day the notion that people find guidance on language matters just plain *useful*.

I'm happy to have worked in department where there is a lively variety of approaches to both language and literature, where students can encounter both challenging complexity and helpful clarification, and where my wildly varied and sometimes unorthodox approaches to scholarship and teaching have been more than tolerated—they've even been rewarded, sometimes by the very people who disapproved of them.

The sort of narrow politicization of English studies I've focused on is looking increasingly dated nationally, and certainly does not characterize the majority of younger scholars I've encountered

here. Though we are constantly pressured to mold ourselves in the service of mission statements and benchmarks, I am content that English at Washington State University will remain gloriously unorganized and varied. Today's students are fortunate to be able to plunge into the rich, messy stew that is English studies at WSU.