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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the prevailing tendency in the teaching of literature today is to rely too heavily on secondary material. An approach to training English majors to explicate and evaluate literature on their own is described. Students should understand that literature is not often autobiographical, that the writer's original intent is not fundamental to the understanding of a work, and that writers are most often intelligent. Exercises that focus discussion on explication and evaluation should be offered to give students the challenge of spontaneous thinking and solving a given problem as a group. James Tate's poem "Dark Street" is used to illustrate the value to the approach described. (TS)

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What Our English Majors Lack Most: or, The Old New Criticism Reapplied

Today jobs are what our English majors lack most. But disregarding that sad state of affairs, I should like to define what I believe to be an equally sad situation. Despite the general intelligence and knowledge of our English majors, they often lack that independence of thought and that spirit of innovation so vital in the great teacher. Emerson, in calling for the independence of American thought, declared in The American Scholar, "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds." Not many English majors today, and perhaps not too many of us, have taken that oath. Goodness knows, we are capable of it, and so are the majors we teach. My opinion is that we should cultivate such an independence in ourselves and foster the training of it in our majors.

I cite a situation to define a pattern. In high school when I was assigned Huckleberry Finn, our teacher presented the mighty Mississippi as a mystical symbol, a "brown god." To me the idea was startling (we were convinced that our teacher, like Don Quixote, had read one novel too many); yet I must admit that I was intrigued. Much later, in graduate school, I discovered an article by Professor H.S. Canby calling the river in Finn a "brown god" (the idea goes back at least to T.S. Eliot), and I was a little disillusioned with the originality of my high school teacher. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with presenting someone else's ideas, if the proper

credit is given, but I believe the prevailing tendency in the teaching of literature today is to rely too heavily on secondary material. Naturally there are certain benefits, as Professor Canby had valuable insight into Twain. But there is the problem that weaknesses develop in the teacher who avoids grappling with the work itself. That approach to teaching cannot develop confidence in the teacher's own capability as interpreter, and good teachers need that confidence.

Imagine a hypothical situation. The high school or college survey teacher discovers that he must teach three poems by Keats. In all likelihood, where will he go first? To a brief biography, then to a short evaluation, then on to a critical essay or perhaps his undergraduate notes (two pages on Keats). Finally, and perhaps half an hour before class, he advances to the works themselves, skimming them for the first time in five years. Whatever the cause of this unprofessional pattern, and whatever the excuses for it, the teacher who follows it comes to class with few (if any) ideas of his own about the Keats poems. Plainly he functions in a world apart from that of his students: they are expected to see the poems through their own eyes. In contrast, the teacher has not just been with the master, so to speak, but with interpreters of the master; thus, his experience is at least once removed. As a result the teacher and the class talk of the poems on different wavelengths. Moreover, the teacher who now faces the class, lacking the close touch with the poems themselves, is likely to be embarrassed with a question such as, "What does line 9 mean?" If he actually teaches biography and history rather than literary art, he might reply with some confidence, "How should I know what such an obscure line means? The ninth line in many poems is obscure. Not to change the subject,

but did you know that Keats attended medical school, and in fact we all know how vague medical people can be." Admittedly, knowledge of the backgrounds, the biography, the trends of the centuries and of the major cultural movements is often relevant and has its place. Notwithstanding, I believe the literature teacher, and then in turn, the English major, ought to be trained to face the literature on his own two feet and work it out in his own mind, without having to run to the library for commentary on every challenging work. Only such training builds confidence in a young teacher that he can cope with the problem of line 9, and I affirm that he has a professional obligation to that line. If a footnote helps, fine; but if not, soon or late he must face a line 9 on his own. After all, the purpose of a course in literature is to cope with the difficulties, to illuminate through lecture and discussion the difficulties and implications of the art.

In training majors to explicate and to evaluate on their own (and I attempt to provide some training in every majors course I teach), I have found that many lack a basic concept of what literature is and what it is not. Therefore, I often begin with several key principles such as these: a) Literature is not very often autobiographical; thus, the speaker of a poem or the narrator of a novel seldom is the writer himself. This concept should draw the student away from that somewhat true but mostly false doctrine of "If you know the author's life, you know the author's art." b) The writer's original intent, which can seldom be determined anyway, is not fundamental to our understanding of the works. So is it with the freshman essay: "But Mr. Woodward, you misinterpret what I meant to

say!" An undergraduate teacher of mine once asked Robert Frost what "The Road Not Taken" originally meant to him. Frost responded with, "Well, what does it mean to you?" She gave her interpretation, to which he replied, "Never thought of that; but from now on, that's what it'll mean to me." Our students should remember that. They should be aware that once the work has left the writer's mind in the symbolism of language, it must be perceived by others in terms of what those language symbols convey. c) The writer (and there are few exceptions) should be given credit for some intelligence. Evidence of masterful artistry and astonishing ingenuity, at least in our major writers, comes from the university presses every year. An especially convincing defense, to cite an example, is A. Kent Hieatt's book on the incredible intricacies of time symbolism in Spenser's "Epithalamion" (Short Time's Endless Monument, Columbia University Press, 1960). What we sometimes forget, and our students often fail fully to comprehend, is that there exists such a thing as brilliance. Most of us not possessing that gift, we find it difficult to comprehend its possession by others. Joseph Summers said of Milton that he had a finer grasp of language than any of his critics. If students can be persuaded of such a fact, persuaded that great literature is usually a product of a brilliant and acutely sensitive mind working with great deliberation, I believe they will rise more vigorously to the invitation to probe its depths. Otherwise, they tend to respond to complexity with skepticism.

Having laid a foundation of concepts such as these, I proceed to train my majors to read closely, to re-read, to examine and to innovate as they attempt on their own to understand a work. I try

to use exercises that focus the discussion on explication and on evaluation, giving students the challange to think on the spot and as a group to solve a given problem. I often center term paper assignments on close evaluation of the text rather than reporting on the published criticism. I do insist, however, that after the student has reached his own conclusions, he must survey the criticism and summarize it to place his own work in perspective. Altogether, these simple techniques have produced gratifying results. I am proud of the student who feels confidence in his own experience with "the real thing," who can stand on his own two feet, and who has something in his mind that has originated there, not elsewhere.

Allow me to anticipate an objection: certainly the student sometimes will misinterpret when he is pushed to explain on his own. Yet if he is taught to substantiate his ideas with evidence and is trainded to use whatever reference materials are appropriate --that old-fashioned source of many virtues, the dictionary, plus the Oxford English Dictionary,a handbook on mythology, the Bible--his accuracy and his confidence will increa e in direct proportion.

To illustrate what our majors need to be able to do, I draw attention to the following contemporary poem originally published in 1967.

DARK STREET

James Tate (b. 1943)

So this is the dark street

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(from Shake the Kaleidoscope: A New Anthology of Modern Poetry, ed. Milton Klonsky, New York: Pocket Books, 1973, p. 279)

If the class is presented, say, with the problem of establishing where the "dark street" is and thus what "lives" are ahead for the speaker and the angel, they come to understand without much difficulty that a) the problem is no simple one, and b) it cannot be solved very handily without working out several other difficulties first. I use a work like this as evidence that more often than not the student must start at the bottom and work up. In "Dark Street" the vocabulary must be clarified--burgeoning of wings, frontal lobes, languorous leaves, shards on the shoulders: then, evidence must be located that establishes the characteristics of the street--the lifeless leaves, and so forth. Tone, imagery, connotation, even structure and sound pattern can be a significant part of the close appreciation of the art of "Dark Street." I believe that the investment of effort in a good piece of literature like this will be amply repaid.

It is for us, then, to invite future teachers of literary art--our English majors--to be their own interpreters, to look closely at what they read, and to train them to see, to hear, to smell and taste, to feel what is there and what is not, in short, to be users of their own two feet, their own hands, and their own minds.