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Confrontational Pedagogy and Traditional Literary Studies

We all know too well the resisting student—even the bright student—who seems to have a mental block when it comes to studying Milton's prosody, or Lacan's psycholinguistic theory. It is an unfair oversimplification to label such a student "ignorant," "stupid," or "insensitive," though the obvious alternative—admitting that we are dull, boring, or insensitive as teachers—is not very pleasant either. But as long as we accept, as given, the privileged inviolability of both the "knowledge" to be imparted (literature or literary theory) and the conventional methods of imparting it (including all of the institutional and personal apparatuses and methods by which authority is vested in and deployed by the teacher), there appears to be no other way to recognize opposition and resistance in the classroom.

Fortunately, we don't have to accept the privileged inviolability of the "knowledge" we are teaching or the conventional methods of teaching it. There are at least two currents of recent pedagogical theory which suggest new models of teaching precisely by challenging the traditional assumptions of canonical knowledge and pedagogic authority. Psychoanalytic critics have rethought the traditional opposition of "knowledge" and "ignorance," by seeing "ignorance" as an active form of resistance to knowledge, and by identifying the individual student's resistance to knowledge as analogous to the repression of the unconscious. In a more directly political vein, Marxists and feminists have called for an oppositional pedagogy which can understand the way the concept of knowledge is implicated in the reproduction of the dominant ideology, and which can empower students to resist the neoconservative and corporate-sector demand for an educational system that shapes students to fit the needs of a capitalist and patriarchal society.

These theories demand, it seems to me, a radically unconventional orientation for the teacher. The teacher of literature should adopt a confrontational stance toward students, and a critical, skeptical stance toward the subject matter; teachers should avoid posing as mentors to their students and champions of their subjects. In this essay, I will outline a strategy of confrontational pedagogy that uses the key concepts of resistance and opposition as they function in both psy-

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choanalytic and politicized critical theories. I will argue that both the student and the teacher always occupy interested (in a broad sense, "political") positions in the classroom, and that this always results in a conflictual relationship between the student and teacher. Sometimes, of course, this conflict takes the form of what can be a monotonous authoritarianism on the part of the teacher and a deafening silence on the part of the student. But when conflict is not ignored or suppressed, it constitutes a discursive site in which knowledge can be produced. My goal is to suggest a way of theorizing the classroom which enables one to acknowledge conflict and to open up the classroom for a productive contestation and interrogation of existing paradigms of knowledge (as opposed to the mere reproduction of knowledge, or the transmission of information as knowledge).

In a seminal essay on psychoanalysis and pedagogy, Shoshana Felman has argued that the single most important contribution of psychoanalysis to education is that psychoanalysis reveals "the radical impossibility of teaching" (21). The "teaching" Felman refers to is the conventional notion of teaching as the transmission of existing knowledge from an authoritative, "knowing" teacher to an "ignorant" student who desires to know. What psychoanalysis calls for, instead, is a radical rethinking of the concepts of knowledge and ignorance. Traditional theories of pedagogy implicitly assume the existence of a substantial, fixed, and absolute body of knowledge which can be mastered by the student. But, when knowledge is conceived as an absolute category, teaching can only be indoctrination; there is no discursive space in which new knowledge can be produced. The notion of absolute knowledge is exploded, as Felman points out, by the Lacanian conception of the unconscious, "the discovery that human discourse can by definition never be entirely in agreement with itself, entirely identical to its knowledge of itself, since, as the vehicle of unconscious knowledge, it is constitutively the material locus of a signifying difference from itself" (28).

This critique of the positivist conception of knowledge, of course, casts new light on the concept of ignorance as well. Ignorance may be seen as the dominant order's term for the suppressed other against which it defines itself. Or, as Constance Penley has observed, ignorance may represent unconscious resistance to the dominant order: "Ignorance is not a passive state but an active excluding from consciousness (that is, repression) whatever it does not want to know" (135). The point at which the student's "ignorance" manifests itself, the point at which the student desires to ignore the knowledge proffered by the teacher, is precisely the point at which any real learning has to take place. It is the point at which minds are changed. The difficulty comes in flushing this resistance out and confronting it in the classroom. Students are conditioned, by traditional patterns of pedagogy, as well as by the conventional structures of society, to defer, as "unknowing" subjects, to the teacher as a "subject who is supposed to know," in Lacan's phrase (230-43). But insofar as this deferral goes unchallenged, students are not really learning anything new. They are only adding to, reinscribing, and reaffirming what they already know; the "truths" of the dominant ideology of our society.
Psychoanalytic critics have generally viewed the student's "passionate ignorance" as a barrier to self-knowledge (see Jay). But in calling attention to the subject's refusal to acknowledge his or her own implication in knowledge—or, one might say, in the particular configuration of discourses which produces an academic discipline—psychoanalysis offers a glimpse of a politicized understanding of the opposition of ignorance and knowledge. In a move reminiscent of Louis Althusser's rethinking of ideology in terms of Lacan's theory of the unconscious, the problem can be restated as that of the subject's refusal to acknowledge his or her implication in ideology (170-83).

As Marxist critics have demonstrated, conventional literary studies has been more complicitous, perhaps, than any other academic discipline, in the (re)production of the dominant ideology. According to this critique, the traditional literature course operates as what Terry Eagleton has called a "moral technology," producing—or, in Althusser's term "interpellating"—individual students as liberal humanist subjects (96; see also Zavarzadeh and Morton). The liberal humanist conception of subjectivity is that of a unitary, constant entity, originating from a rational individual consciousness which is relatively unconstrained by socio-historic forces. Traditional English studies helps to maintain liberal humanist individualism through its emphasis on authorial genius (focusing on "great men," such as Milton, to the neglect, for example, of the socio-political determinants of textual production and reception) and through its cultivation of "original," "individual" response to literature in students. By representing individual genius as the essence of literature and by granting literature a privileged role as the prime repository of human experience, the traditional curriculum represents liberal humanist individualism as the natural and universal mode of human subjectivity. But this particular construction of the human is itself the product of a specific socio-historic framework. Postmodern critical theory has radically problematized the idealist-humanist conception of consciousness as prelinguistic and of the individual subject as an originator of language rather than as an effect of language.

The commonsense readings of texts favored by traditional literary studies are revealed, then, as unselfconsciously biased ideological effects. They take for granted an unproblematized relationship between author and reader as two autonomous, individual, self-present consciousnesses in communication. There is a specific political imperative to resist the privileging of individualism in this practice, for, as Terry Eagleton has demonstrated, it amounts to a form of ideological coercion in the interests of a conservative, elitist politics (Eagleton, 102-4). Yet, notwithstanding the current prominence of critical theory, the study of English literature remains deeply implicated in perpetuating liberal humanist individualism. Precisely on this point the discipline of English most strongly resists criticism and change: it is almost unthinkable to suggest an anti-individualist approach to literature because individual genius is seen as the fundamental ground of literature.

An oppositional pedagogy would reveal the literary canon and the familiar landmarks of the curriculum—the major figure course, the genre course, and the
period survey course—as constructions of critical and pedagogical apparatuses, rather than distinct and substantial bodies of knowledge, which exist independently of our work as scholars and teachers. As Gerald Graff has reminded us, the familiar subjects and methodologies of our curricula are themselves products of historical conflicts which have been systematically forgotten (247–62). Of course, this critique of conventional pedagogy would apply to most alternative courses as well. One can’t do away with critical and pedagogical apparatuses, or, to paraphrase Voltaire, if there were no canon to teach, the teachers of literature would have to invent one. What the teacher can do, however, is to acknowledge his or her implication in the institutional assumptions and conceptual frames which produce our particular constructions of knowledge. This acknowledgment in turn calls for a questioning of those intellectual boundaries and opens up the possibility for alternative knowledges produced in other cultural sites to contest the social values implicit in the institutionally supported curriculum.

In fact, I would suggest, such an oppositional strategy is the only way to achieve an intellectually responsible pedagogy. Any knowledge that is not self-conscious about its enabling assumptions and conceptual frames can only reproduce itself, can only adduce new data and win new converts to support what it already knows. Such teaching is inherently limited to the passive transmission of known information as knowledge and can only stumble upon new ways of understanding by accident, when the system breaks down, when someone misunderstands and others happen to recognize the misunderstanding as a viable alternative. Much is to be gained, therefore, from a pedagogy which systematically focuses on misunderstanding.

To illustrate some of the advantages of a radically oppositional pedagogy, then, I would like to offer some specific strategies for fostering self-conscious misunderstanding, or the production (as opposed to the reproduction) of knowledge in literature classes. My strategies can be grouped under three broad headings: identifying and confronting the subject positions of students and acknowledging resistance between teacher and students; resisting cultural hegemony and developing oppositional reading strategies; resisting individualism.

**Confronting Students**

In order for knowledge to be produced, rather than merely reproduced, the teacher must resist the students’ attempts to defer to the teacher as the authoritative dispenser of absolute knowledge; as, in Lacan’s phrase, “the subject who is supposed to know.” The way to resist this deference and transference is not to deny the teacher’s authority, but rather to acknowledge and demystify the institutional function which this authority is constructed to serve. Above all, the teacher should avoid the pretense of detachment, objectivity, and autonomy. To this end, I see the teacher’s role as divided among three functions: convener, archivist, and adversary. First, as convener, empowered and somewhat constrained by the authority of the institution, the teacher is responsible for setting the topic of the course, writing the syllabus, preparing the list of readings, and so on. As archivist, the teacher should provide extensive bibliographies which
enable students to develop strongly situated positions on the issues which arise in class. By providing access to these materials, one gives the students access to the sociopolitical and institutional discourses of the discipline. The positions that students will occupy in their readings of texts for the course will be identifiable as positions produced in relative degrees of alignment or contestation with various positions already shaping the disciplinary struggle over knowledge and values. As such, these student positions will be available for the critique of all participants in the class, including the teacher. Thus, at this stage, the teacher can best facilitate the production of knowledge by adopting a confrontational stance toward the student, and by avoiding models of assimilation and apprenticeship.

I require students in my classes to produce several one to two-page critical response/position papers on issues concerning the structure, content, and practice of the course. Each week I reproduce a packet of eight or ten of these texts, along with position papers that I write against some of them, for distribution to the entire class. In this manner a considerably larger proportion of the class discourse is textualized than would be the case in a traditional lecture/discussion course. The position papers produced in the class become part of the general text to be studied, decentering the institutionally authorized content of the course and producing alternative centers of meaning (on the margins of the discipline) where readers situated differently in relation to class, race, gender, and other culturally significant discursive categories engage the official texts. Through this practice of publishing the texts of students and teacher, positions are occupied in a way that makes them much more accessible for critique than in the traditional classroom discussion. Increased textualization also produces some welcome practical side effects. For one thing, it encourages students to give more carefully considered thought to their responses to the issues raised in the course. Though many teachers use reading journals to achieve this purpose, I think the response/position paper has considerable advantages over the journal. As an ostensibly private mode of writing, the journal is unavailable as a source of knowledge and as a target of criticism for other participants in the class. Thus, the journal cannot contribute directly to the productive conflict that I seek. Another useful side effect results from the attention focused on students whose papers are circulated to the entire class. This attention, I have observed, is inevitably perceived as a mark of distinction, even when the students’ positions are subjected to the critical attacks of the teacher and other students. Thus, the response/position paper functions as a sort of reward, allowing a relatively large proportion of the work produced in the course to remain outside the institutional sphere of the grading system.

The conventional letter-grading system, as I see it, is an unjustifiably reductive evaluation that pretends to represent the student’s work for an entire semester in a one-letter text. In addition, as David Bleich has argued, the grading system “promotes the attitude that the sharing or negotiation of knowledge among students must finally be subordinated to the student’s performance as an individual” and thereby discourages the open exchange of ideas necessary for knowledge to be produced (4). I am not well acquainted with the experience of
those universities which have abandoned letter grades in favor of alternative sys-
tems, but I would like to suggest my own alternative to letter grades: at the end
of the semester the teacher would give the student a one to two-page evaluation
of the student’s work to which the student could write a response or rebuttal.
Both texts should be made part of the student’s permanent record. Some might
object that such a practice would be impractical; that it would require too much
sifting through evaluations by prospective employers and graduate school admis-
sions committees. Nonetheless, I think it would involve both students and teach-
ers in a productive continuation of the learning process. For the time being, I
conform to my institution’s requirements (and my students’ insistent demands)
by submitting letter grades for each student. However, I also make longer evalu-
ations available to students and invite them to respond. I require students who
are dissatisfied with their grades to submit position papers detailing their argu-
ments. I answer these in writing, and verbal discussions begin only after this
written exchange. This process discourages shot-in-the-dark complaints about
grades, but some students actually go through the end-of-the-semester exchange
with me just for the learning experience it provides.

As students often remind me, the authority to assign grades gives me the
upper hand in our classroom debates. One might expect that the fear of grade re-
tribution would intimidate them. In actual practice, however, the collective
awareness produced by the position papers works to offset the imbalance of au-
thority; students assume authority through discursive alliances with other writ-
ers in the class. In addition, my well-publicized policy for negotiating disagree-
ments over grades quells fears of retribution. I acknowledge that my grading
may be biased and depend on the negotiation process to correct unfair grades.

Adopting a practice of contestation between the student and teacher and be-
tween the reader and the text disrupts the traditional pedagogical model which
aims for the unquestioned transmission of information as knowledge. In the tra-
ditional model, the teacher/text is positioned as the authority on the subject, and
the student passively receives his/her/its wisdom. The common practice of close
reading supports this authoritarian/authoritative model in its privileging of the
text. The close reading, by definition, attempts to occupy the same epises-
temological frame as the text it reads. Ungrounded by a theorized position, it
can only reproduce the institutionally authorized meaning of the text, which is,
like all meaning, ideologically and discursively constituted, though it usually
does not acknowledge itself as such. To counter this reproduction, I advocate a
practice of strong reading (reading that acknowledges the discursive subject
position of the reader in its interrogation of the text) and symptomatic reading
(reading that attends to the symptoms of disorder within the constructed order of
the text). In contrast to close reading, strong/symptomatic reading deliberately
violates the presumed authority of the text. But this is not a random act of
violence—the strong/symptomatic reading asserts the reader’s discursive subject
position against the position of reader proffered by the text in its social and in-
stitutional context. The acknowledged conflict between these different centers of
meaning is the focus and impetus of the strong/symptomatic reading. Thus, un-
like close reading, the strong/symptomatic reading strives for an epistemological
break between the reader and the text. It is in this space of rupture that knowledge can be produced, and not merely reproduced.

Resisting Cultural Hegemony

The effects of cultural hegemony can be resisted by making the course itself an indictment of the conditions behind its institutionalization. The literature course should be subjected, that is, to an ideological critique that reconstructs the ideological conditions in which the course is situated and makes them available as part of the text of the course. Milton, for example, is an interesting subject for ideological critique in view of the politically significant appropriations/contestations/(re)productions of his work and reputation by subsequent readers: Addison and Johnson, Blake and Shelley, Eliot and Leavis, C. S. Lewis and Douglas Bush, and the modern feminists all represent interested and interesting (re)productions or appropriations of Milton in different socio-historic contexts. What each of these reproductions of Milton reveals is a "Milton" who is literally available for appropriation—either laudatory or critical—as a symbolic underpinning for some particular sociopolitical position: Neoclassicism and rationalist politics, Romanticism and revolutionary politics, conservative Modernism and the nostalgia for an organic society, Christian humanism, and so on. Feminism, I argue in my classes, offers the most urgent contemporary critique of Milton. Any contemporary course in Milton that does not acknowledge and address the ways in which Milton's *Paradise Lost* is implicated in the ongoing oppression of women in our society is, as I see it, condemned to reaffirm that oppression. This position conflicts with the expectations of some students—Christian fundamentalists who seek to read Milton as a great Christian poet, students steeped in the assumptions of New Criticism and traditional literary historicism who seek a purely literary or literary-historical study of Milton, and students who simply seek to fulfill a humanities requirement as painlessly as possible and who are eager to continue their preparation for business and professional careers unencumbered by an encounter with a teacher committed to feminist consciousness-raising. These students make it difficult for me to pursue my political/intellectual agenda. My role, as I see it, is to make it is as difficult as possible for them to get what they expect from the course, to confront and contest students in ways that will challenge them to recognize and rethink their assumptions.

In a somewhat paradoxical but not entirely surprising way, the fact that I often take a critical position against the value of studying the designated subject matter of the course places many students in the unfamiliar position of arguing for the value of the course. These students may complain, in position papers, that they have enrolled in a course in Shakespeare, not theory, and that we should neither be questioning the literature nor reading the theory. Sometimes I am able to persuade such students that such an unquestioning reverence for literature and tradition has dangerous moral and political implications, and sometimes they force me to rethink my self-consciously marginal positions. In either
case, this kind of conflict is always more intellectually stimulating than discus-
sions which assume literary appreciation as the common, unquestioned goal.
Furthermore, I find in each class that there are always some usually detached
back-benchers for whom my iconoclastic positions represent an unexpected
breath of fresh air. It is particularly gratifying to see such students become in-
volved in the class discussions.

Resisting Individualism

Traditional literary study has had the effect of "centering" the student and the
teacher as liberal humanist subjects reaffirming the dominant ideologies of our
society. The literature student is commonly expected to produce "unique," "original" readings of literary texts. But if one takes seriously the postmodern
claims of intertextuality and intersubjectivity, this ideal of originality evaporates.
It is revealed as merely a mechanism for keeping the individual-as-autonom­
ous-self in place. An oppositional pedagogy should strive to displace the traditional
model of the individual scholar/critic and to replace it with that of the interrogat­
ing intellectual who could recognize his/her subject position as the product of
discursive conflict.

The critical response/position paper facilitates this kind of intellectual work in
two ways: it depersonalizes the student’s position, makes it public and available
for critique and symptomatic readings from other students and the teacher, and
it provides a relatively grades-free space for class participants to engage in a col­
lective dialogue. I also specifically offer the option of collective work in stu­
dents' formal essays. Students may submit collectively-written essays after hav­
ing first established (in position papers) a political and theoretical foundation for
their collaboration. The discursive subject position, rather than the individual
consciousness, is recognized as the source of meaning.

Collectively-written formal essays are given a single grade, and that grade is
then assigned to each member of the collective. In a recent class, a student who
was not a member of a collective wrote an essay criticizing this practice as po­
tentially unfair to individual writers in the class. For one thing, he argued,
collectively-written essays require less work per student than individually-
written essays. Furthermore, he went on, one collective member might not write
as well as the others, and therefore might gain an unwarranted benefit from
being in the collective. As the collective members in this particular class were
quick to assert, however, it actually requires more work to write as a collective
from a self-consciously theorized collective subject position than it does to write
as an individual. On the second point, I have never found that different levels of
skill or sophistication among collective members prevents them from maintain­
ing a fairly equitable distribution of work. In practice, the participants of collec­
tives may make different contributions to the collective project, but they all con­
tribute. If one believes, as I do, that the goal of producing knowledge should
take precedence over that of fostering individualism, then it follows that the
grades given should address and evaluate the work itself irrespective of whether
it was produced by an individual or a collective. The knowledge produced from
a particular subject position should be the focus of the grade, and not the subject position itself.

Collectives soon drop members who fail to make the serious commitment required in collective work. Theoretical and political differences within collectives, on the other hand, usually result either in splits and realignments into new collectives or stronger positions which have been tempered by the process of internal debate worked through to consensus. In either case, the level of critical thought achieved in collective work is always higher than that achieved by the same students working as isolated individuals.

It may be objected that the kind of confrontational course I have described for the study of a major figure—such as Milton, for example—will not produce the “fit audience” Milton sought for his work. What has happened, some may ask, to the goal of producing students who can appreciate Milton? The very fact that such an audience has to be produced—that it will not just be found—begs the question: Why produce it? What interests are served by its production? What does it mean to produce a fit audience for a three-hundred-year-old poet? As this mission is generally understood, I think, it means producing an audience who will acquiesce in subjection to a conservative historical reverence which supports an oppressive status quo. It is not surprising that students resist this kind of subjection. Producing this sort of faithful appreciation of literature is not a proper goal for a university course.

The strategies of confrontational pedagogy described in this essay were first formulated in discussions with Rosemary Hennessey, Bob Nowlan, Minette Marcroft, Rajeswari Mohan, and Mark Wood of the Student Marxist Collective at Syracuse University in 1986-7. In addition, I have borrowed the terms “archivist” and “adversary” and I have adapted the “adversarial” relationship between student and teacher from the model of my former professor, Masud Zavarzadeh.

Works Cited


