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ADFL Bulletin Vol. 15, No. 2 (November 1983), pp. 8–11
ISSN: 0148-7639
CrossRef DOI: 10.1632/adfl.15.2.8
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IF I were to shape an ideal American university I would begin by withdrawing credit from all foreign language instruction below the usual introductory literature courses, at least in the languages that are most commonly taught at the high school level—Spanish, French, German. I would also abandon the idea that there exists a well-defined canon of literary works that should be assimilated by every undergraduate major in the field. Within the prevailing academic context, such proposals sound heretical, if not downright subversive, but before you dismiss them as a menace to the cost-per-credit-hour ratios of foreign language departments, allow me to explain that my prohibitions would also extend to giving credit for elementary mathematics, remedial reading, and freshman composition. These programs all involve skills that students should have learned long before arriving on a university campus and that students need to benefit from a college education.

But what should a college education be in an age when the average American reads less than one book a year and the average television set operates more than six hours each day in the 98% of American households that have televisions? What should a college education be when people measure its value in terms of the dollar differential between a graduate’s lifetime earnings and the profits that might have accrued to that same person if his or her time, labor, and capital savings had been invested in other ways? What should a college education be when a new coach at a large Texas university receives a quarter of a million dollars to recruit and train football players and when some activists are complaining that it would be “racist” for the National Collegiate Athletic Association to require all athletes on scholarship to score at least 700 (out of a possible 1600) points on the combined SAT verbal and mathematical examinations? Obviously such questions admit of no simple answers, but they do indicate the framework within which we must begin to reconsider the teaching of literature, and particularly the teaching of foreign language literature, at our colleges and universities.

My exercise in utopian thinking might seem unrealistic under the present circumstances, but it is not altogether futile, for what we as college teachers and administrators do invariably emerges in an ongoing dialectic between what we hope to achieve and the givens of the situation in which we find ourselves. The utopian vision helps us, I believe, to articulate what we hope to achieve; but without a sober recognition that the so-called educational problem is part of a larger sociocultural problem, even the most down-to-earth proposals for program reform or curriculum revision will provide no more than temporary improvement in a depressingly gloomy overall picture of literature teaching at the university level.

In my opinion, a college education should prepare students to understand and appreciate a multiethnic, culturally diverse world community; it should equip them to devise solutions not only for textbook problems modeled on past situations they might never encounter but also for the unforeseen problems they will necessarily confront in the years ahead; finally, it should enable them to adopt decent, morally responsible patterns of behavior to cope with human and natural environments into which we have all been so unceremoniously thrown. Such an education would obviously require a familiarity with modern problem-solving techniques, as John Kemeny, the president of Dartmouth, realized a number of years ago when he instituted computer literacy as a requirement for graduation from that institution. But it would also entail a greater emphasis on literature, history, and philosophy.

Why literature? And why, in particular, foreign language literature? The answer should by now be readily apparent: literature familiarizes students with real-world perspectives other than those reinforced by The Dukes of Hazzard, Starsky and Hutch, Dallas, or Kojak; it exercises their imaginations and allows them to conceptualize situations they have never experienced; and it permits them to test the validity of their own moral judgments in hypothetical or imaginary settings. In other words, literature, and foreign language literature in particular, can be admirably well suited to the objectives of an ideal college education. But how does one implement a utopian ideal in a highly imperfect university where entering freshmen lack the sophistication and interest to read literature in their own language, let alone in Spanish, French, German, Russian, or Chinese? My suggestion is that we strive to incorporate as much of the idea as we possibly can. Thus, if we have to instruct ill-prepared and generally uninterested students in the most elementary rules of grammar and syntax for the foreseeable future, let us by all means do it, but let us also not forget that such instruction can never be an end in itself; on the contrary, it is a means to other ends, among the most important of which is the acquisition of a capacity to com-

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prehend literary texts. Only when students have this capacity will they truly be ready to benefit from the foreign language department's contribution to their college-level education.

Yet even entering freshman students can and should be exposed to literary texts. The first problem is to determine which texts; the second is to develop a way of generating a self-sustaining interest in these texts. At this point I would like to return to my second proposal for an ideal university—the abandonment of traditional notions about a canon of important works that must be taught to all students. Sooner or later, students should undoubtedly read the most well-known works in the language they happen to be studying, but such works may or may not be the most appropriate ones for a college education in the contemporary world.

The choice of texts will depend on four factors: the vast array of potential texts available in any given language, the previous reading experience of the instructor, the individual abilities of the students, and the collective personality of the class. It is the responsibility of each teacher, using his or her creative intelligence, to develop a series of readings that can meet serious higher educational goals within the constraints of the particular teaching situation. Required syllabi and standardized examinations can never produce even adequate teaching, although records from previous course offerings are invaluable, especially for less experienced instructors who might not know the possibilities open to them.

But the variety of texts available for all levels of foreign language teaching is far greater than most of us might expect. In fact, this variety includes texts that were never considered part of the canon. In particular, it includes texts written by minorities, by women, and by Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans who learned a major European language as the result of foreign domination in their native countries. Their writings constitute the body of what I shall call "third-world literature," and I am making a plea not so much for creating courses in this area (although I would certainly advocate new courses) as for including third-world literature, both as the American literature establishment ignored black writers for so many years, or we can lead in breaking down the cultural stereotypes by means of which people justify such exclusions. Certainly the task is not an easy one; in fact, it is only one aspect of a much larger and more intractable social problem. Yet I would suggest that schools and universities have abdicated their responsibility by allowing themselves to become reflections of dominant attitudes rather than the tutors who start with those attitudes and shape them into something better.

In attempting to redress this situation, we have much to learn from the responses of young children, for in contrast to college freshmen, they seldom express an aversion to literature. Quite the contrary, they seem to be fascinated with narrative, poetic wordplay, and dramatization. For example, in a recent favorite, Return of the Jedi, the robot C3PO (who is programmed to speak six million different languages!) retells the narrative of the earlier Star Wars movies to a group of primitive Ewoks. He is speaking a language that none of the children in the theater audience has ever heard, and yet his gestures and his use of English proper nouns make what he is saying perfectly clear to them. The impact of such an oral tale is immediate, and I suspect that the children's positive response to C3PO's story reflects their own ability to reconstruct the narrative of the Star Wars trilogy on the basis of clues in his performance.

They respond similarly to favorite books or televi-
sion programs. Is it not possible that this fascination with narrative can be reawakened among college freshmen? I believe it can, and I believe that examples drawn from third-world literature might be particularly useful in this process. For African storytellers, a narrative is an entertainment, but it is also a repository of tribal wisdom. This wisdom is part of an attitude toward life they are seeking to inculcate in the children of the community. Often they underscore the moral by citing an appropriate proverb at the end of the story. If we were reading a transcription of a tale or a written tale in French by a talented short-story writer like Birago Diop, we might not seek to integrate it into our collective consciousness in the same way the oral storyteller’s audience would be expected to do, but if such a story can become our vehicle for understanding the attitude toward life embodied in it, we can begin to place that attitude into a dialogic relation with the received attitudes of our own culture. And the willingness to engage in this process is the first step toward a kind of wisdom that I would like to associate with a true college education.

Why is a story by Diop important in this process, perhaps even more important than a story by de Maupassant? Simply because the world view of the third-world writer is further from our normal set of assumptions, his or her work contrasts more sharply with the usual perspective of our students, opening new opportunities for insight and enabling them to appreciate how diverse and equally valid meanings and values might be generated from cultural matrices that differ from the one they have come to regard as normal and natural. This is what I meant earlier when I said that we are involved in teaching attitudes, for if we can bring our students to allow for alternative cultural norms, we will have accomplished a great deal. We will have transported them to the threshold of a discovery that all of them will have to make for themselves. Teaching a few works of third-world and minority writers to a broad cross section of students will not obliterate all traces of the anti-intellectualism, intolerance, and hubris that have become so deeply ingrained in our modern way of life, but it can make an important contribution, the sort of contribution that we ought to be thinking seriously about making.

But how can we reach students who are not preoccupied with reading literature of any kind? Even the well-intentioned American literature professor who wants to teach Douglass’ Narrative must confront a class of freshman students who, on the average, have been required to read less literature in English than a Russian high school student. Without a backlog of reading experience and an acquired taste for literary analysis, such students cannot be expected to love or respect the works we know they could benefit from if only they would take the time. At this point, we have to begin not with our utopian conceptions of what the students ought to be doing but with an empathetic understanding of where they are actually “coming from.”

Here again it is instructive to reflect on the way children delight in narratives. Television soap operas and Star Wars are narratives, and many of our students continue to enjoy them. Why not begin with an analysis of characterization, plot, symbolism, and leitmotifs in a narrative that is known to the students? Dismissing such works as banal or trivial is counterproductive, because it implicitly insults the students who are attached to them. Once students can be stimulated into looking on popular-culture narratives with their own critical intelligence, however, it becomes far easier for them to appreciate the subtlety and complexity of a great novel.

The oversimplification of the struggle between good and evil in Star Wars pales beside the internal conflict that ultimately destroys Samba Diallo in the Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s Aventure ambiguë, just as the stereotyped characters and situations in Dallas become blatantly obvious when compared with the fictional reality created by the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez in Cien años de soledad. Students are quite capable of drawing their own conclusions about such matters, but they need guidance, which the teacher must provide.

On several occasions, I have asked students to write a serious analysis of a story borrowed from some popular magazine like True Romances. The experience has always been extremely rewarding, because students have never failed to detect the awkwardness, the banality of the underlying world vision, and the stereotyped features of the popular story. Once they have acknowledged the inadequacy of literary devices employed to communicate such a narrative, they are far more receptive to the appeal of an accomplished storyteller, because they have themselves articulated the standards of value according to which other works will now appear superior to them. By placing these “other works” in their hands, we are offering them truly college-level, foreign language instruction.

As I mentioned earlier, some of these works ought to be noncanonical. A short novel, Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille by the Cameroonian writer Ferdinand Oyono, illustrates how such a work might operate within the context of an American university classroom. Oyono’s narrative revolves around what was to have been the most glorious day in the life of Meka, a law-abiding Bulu elder whose two sons had fallen for France during the last world war. He himself had donated the land for the site of a new Catholic mission. As a reward for such exemplary civic behavior, Meka is to receive a medal during the fourteenth of July celebrations at the local parade grounds. Dressed in a European suit and tightly fitting shoes, Meka proudly stands in an isolated chalk circle under the beating sun, while the Europeans sit beneath a veranda to await the governor’s arrival and his fellow tribesmen reflect irreverently on
the disproportion between his sacrifices and his reward.

Meka strives to maintain his dignity, but what im­
pinges most strongly on his consciousness are the op­
pressive heat, the urgent need to urinate, and the agony 
of his cramped toes. After the ceremonies, he becomes 
drunk, suffers several slights from the Europeans who 
supposedly respected him, and is finally arrested by a 
gendarme who fails to recognize the “nigger” who 
received a medal earlier that day. The medal itself has 
been lost, and when Meka is released the next morning 
by the commandant, he returns slowly to his village. 
He has shed his coat, his tie, and his tight-fitting shoes; 
he urinates leisurely along the way, and on his arrival, 
he drinks palm wine with his friends, joins in their 
laughter, and admits that he has been an arrogant fool.

What has happened to Meka is a type of conversion, 
not altogether different from that of old Stepan 
Trofimovitch in Dostoevsky’s The Possessed. Like 
Stepan, Meka is humiliated, and like Stepan, his 
humiliation causes him to accept a truth deeply rooted 
in his culture but obscured by his acquiescence in an 
imported standard of value that vouchsafed him a feel­
ing of superiority. The reason why Meka’s and Stepan’s 
insights are so relevant in the American classroom is 
that elements of their preconversion attitudes toward 
the world are also elements in the world views commonly 
held by our students.

In particular, Meka had thoroughly assimilated Euro­
pean assumptions about the moral and social order— 
the rightness of his sons’ deaths in the defense of a coun­
try that had subjugated his homeland and the rightness 
of a Catholic mission that had decreed the wisdom of 
his people to be no more than idolatry and pagan 
superstition. When he sees through the existing moral 
and social order, he is seeing through a part of the same 
moral and social order that predominates in the con­
temporary United States. If students can be brought to 
see, from Meka’s perspective, how that order has often 
been manipulated to keep some people subordinated to 
others, they will be well on their way to establishing 
the sort of inner dialogue necessary for them to comprehend 
the multicultural world in which they are living and to 
develop a morally responsible attitude toward it.

In concluding, I feel obliged to admit that the pres­
et university is far from the ideal I would like to see. 
As teachers of foreign language literatures, we will be 
preoccupied for years to come with the fundamentals 
of French, Spanish, German, Russian, or Chinese, but 
if our teaching can reflect an aspiration toward the ideal, 
while recognizing the existential situation in which the students are confined, we can both progress toward a 
more humane university and enhance our chances of 
reaching the students who are entrusted to our guidance. 
If we are to do so, however, I believe we will need to 
respect a few cardinal principles:

1. We will need to recognize that the teaching of 
foreign language literatures is embedded in larger 
academic and societal contexts. It responds to the needs 
of those contexts, but it also has the responsibility to 
elevate the level of awareness in them by providing a 
genuine college-level education.

2. We will need to realize that the number of literary 
works available for foreign language instruction far ex­
cedes the number in the usual canon. By drawing on 
European language works by writers from the third 
world, we will be fulfilling the true objectives of a 
college-level education and broadening the spectrum of 
works that can be used to connect with the previous ex­
periences of students.

3. We will need to grant a certain autonomy to in­
structors and students alike, for just as instructors can 
only teach effectively when they are free to modulate 
their assignments and techniques according to their own 
range of experience and the nature of the class, students 
will only learn what they truly want to learn. Because 
literature is such a natural form of human pleasure and 
edification, I am convinced that, if a love of it has been 
stifled by television, inattentive parents, and clumsy 
teaching at the primary and secondary schools, this love 
can be restored by dynamic and liberal teaching on the 
university level. But such an approach will only be suc­
cessful if foreign language teaching can once again be 
perceived as an integral part of every student’s ideal col­
lege education.

It is possible to create settings in which students will 
learn what they should know to cope effectively and 
responsibly with their world, and literary texts by third­
world writers can contribute significantly to these set­
tings. They are exciting possibilities that lie within our 
reach and within the reach of our students. The next 
time you look over a course proposal or a syllabus, 
perhaps you might pause for a moment to reflect on 
whether such possibilities have been included or 
excluded.
The World Literature degree program is about critically examining conventional definitions of "world literature" and redrawing the boundaries in view of the conditions prevailing in a globalized and media-driven world. Developing new contemporary conceptualizations of the term "World Literature" permits a multitude of references to the cultural complexity of a globalized world and intense debate regarding the resulting questions and problems. The "World Literature" master's degree program consists of five modules in the mono and major and four modules in the minor. In each of these four or five modules, students need to earn a minimum number of ECTS credits. The module teaches methodological skills that enable students to undertake interdisciplinary-oriented work.