"AND WHO ARE YOU?:

TEACHING ENGLISH IN AN AGE OF DECLINING AUTHORITY

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When I look back on it now, it seems to me that as a teacher, my identity, my feeling of self-worth, depended upon the ways my authority was recognized by those I taught. But with English as my subject I kept finding myself in a paradoxical situation with respect to authority: in my classroom my principal claim to authority frequently consisted in my having to give it up. Such a paradox had nothing to do with discipline in the classroom; rather it arose whenever I took seriously the problem of how literary texts are created and interpreted.

It was not difficult to see that literature, because it ended up telling someone's story about particular aspects of life, was never going to reduce neatly to a multiple-choice question. But once this was clear, I had to agonize over where to place my allegiances. Should I view the stories we were considering in the classroom, both the students' and the ones in the books, from the perspective of received wisdom, or should I open them up as occasions for new possibilities, for disagreements and contradictions? Should I relinquish my authority over the text and share openly with my students the inconsistencies of interpretation? Of course, I would like to say that I always remained flexible when it came to disparate response, yet I continued to be tempted by a desire for "right" answers to my interrogation of the poem. In part, by sharing too much with students the process of interpretation, my hold over the knowledge base of English became threatened. In other words, some question of "ownership" marked my undeniable anxiety: what was the school paying me for if not for my knowledge of English, which included my knowledge of how to "read" stories?

This issue of authority especially provoked me during my first year of teaching; only twenty-one, I was obviously quite ambivalent about having just crossed the barrier between teacher and taught. On any given day I might find my loyalties on the opposite side of the front desk, for, as a story I tell about that first year indicates, I had trouble being recognized for who I was because even I was not sure myself.

Joe Mangiello seemed to hulk over me as he slouched against the lockers. We were the only two souls in the main corridor, the bell having sounded for sixth period more than ten minutes ago. "Come on, d' I 'ave ta do dat paper over again?" he complained. "Joe, it's really up to you. But the rest of the class have already handed in theirs."

Just then around the corner in back of Joe appeared one of the school's vice principals, Mr. Jaworski, who yelled, "Hey, Mangiello, what're ya doin' out in the hall? Didn't ya hear the bell? Hurry up and get your butt to the next class." As
Joe turned to protest his innocence, I stepped out away from the lockers and came to his defense. "I know he's late, sir, but he was talking with me about an assignment."

"And who the hell are you?"

"Why. . . , I'm Joe's English teacher," I stumbled to explain. "You know I teach English here. I'm the one whose classes they put in the girls' auxiliary gym."

Endless startled pause. "Oh. . . , I'm sorry!" finally came the flustered but gruff apology. Then he did an about-face taking Joe with him. "Ya can talk to him some other time; now let's get to class. . . ."

Whenever I tell this story, I take great pleasure in playing with Mr. Jaworski's "I'm sorry!" reply. Even though it's clear he was merely acknowledging his violation of a social rule that administrators should know their subordinate teachers, I imagine myself standing alone in that school corridor pondering some great ambiguity: I would never know whether Mr. Jaworski felt sorry for me because I was teaching in that room covered with mirrors, or because I had Joe in my class, or maybe even because I was trying to be an English teacher.

Once I recognized that the real subject of English is our stories, I began to understand my fascination with identity and authority. Having to interpret literary texts forced me and my students to explore who we were. Our disagreements reflected alternate stances toward experience, while suggesting a range of human relationships we were still sort ing out. So while stories function on many levels, we were using them to embody and enact the choices that constituted who we are. I began telling the story about Joe and the Vice Principal, for instance, in part to shore up my fragile identity that seemed in danger of becoming engulfed by the sea of that vastly oversized senior high school with its more than 3000 students. In the telling I could pretend to be an unsung rebel facing an impersonal environment, one created by administrators who didn't even know the teachers, let alone their names. In reliving that moment I too questioned authority and for an instant stood on Joe's side, on the side of a local "hood" who thought it cool to be jollying up this new teacher assigned to his class of characters, those juniors who'd rather fix my car or manicure my fingernails, not read and write about the short stories in my syllabus.

But to take this position, that stories were central to English, was also to take on much more of a burden for the lives of my students. The more my students were allowed the integrity of their own responses, the less secure I became about assessing their achievements; still, I saw that they were struggling with issues that were significant to them. And the universal problem that subsumed all the others was their relation to authority: how were they going to receive the traditions of social conduct being forced on them, and on what basis were they going to establish their own autonomy or authority in the world?

The personal and social spaces students explored, when I allowed them to in my classroom, were filled with contradictions and ambiguities. In seeking friendship and fairness, for example, students were discovering that jealousy
might destroy the best of intentions, that honesty wasn't always rewarded. Having opened up all this conflict for the purposes of literary inquiry, I saw I had a special responsibility to support my students in their quest for maturity. Such a quest involved nothing less than learning to understand and live with the flaws of surrounding authority, which literature was constantly revealing. As they were soon to be adults, I felt my students had a right to be armed against the pretensions and hypocrisies of adult life by uncovering the same tendencies within themselves.

Discovering the inconsistencies of authority, however, should not, I felt, be tantamount to rejecting it. By frequenting the stories of literature and writing their own, I hoped my students might be encouraged to adopt an ironic sensibility toward the ambiguities and uncertainties of existence. For this reason the vision embodied in "Young Goodman Brown" served me as a guide whenever I considered the kind of sensibility I valued in the realm of English education.

In relating the story of Young Goodman Brown, Hawthorne is enacting one possible response to the loss of innocence. At the beginning of the story, Goodman Brown sets off on a mysterious journey into the darkness of the forest. Significantly, his wife, Faith, desires him not to go as she laments, "A lone woman is troubled by such dreams and such thoughts that she's afraid of herself sometimes." In her plea and the contrast of their given names resides all the thematic tension of the subsequent tale. Goodman, while focusing on the carrying out of good acts, finally suggests an emphasis on the literal mindedness of surface appearances. Faith, on the other hand, points to a concern for deeper realities, those that remain steadfast despite the passing variations of contradictory interpretations. One without the other paralyzes human sensibility. Goodman alone loses the ability to engage in good acts of whatever sort because the intentions behind them are forever in doubt. Faith alone fears her condition, for without deeds there can be no proper testing of her faith.

So here I saw one of the major tasks of maturity: How are we going to deal with a world of human motives and deeds that inevitably will not live up to our childish expectations of perfection? Goodman, appearing to be acting on the strongest of resolutions as we first meet him, rejects the notion that our opposing desires need constant mediation. He strongly rebukes Faith for already entertaining doubts about his journey (that classic journey in search of meaning and value that is repeated so often in the nineteenth century American literature written by men). She can but reply, "Then God bless you! and may you find all well when you come back." But as we know, Goodman is not blessed; his rights of passage in the night do not leave him with a mature response to experience when he returns to the real social world at sunrise.

What we discover is that Goodman knew all along of the discrepancies between his deeds and his motives. But what is at issue in Hawthorne's tale is how Goodman will confront the knowledge that such discrepancies exist for all persons, because they have the capacity to represent experience for themselves. Goodman knows he is off to sign a pact with the devil, but this is not something to be openly shared with others: "Methought as she spoke there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done tonight. But no, no; 'twould kill her to think it. Well, she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven."
Soon Goodman is joined by the follow traveler who is to reveal all. But as the sins committed by the pillars of the community are paraded before him, Goodman continues his literal response to appearances: "If it be as thou sayest, I marvel they never spoke of these matters; or, verily, I marvel not, seeing that the least rumor of the sort would have driven them from New England. We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness." The wonderful twist of irony here, where he too is going off to join in such wickedness, remains lost on Goodman. For he refuses to admit to the biggest secret of all, that he alone has no monopoly on his inner secret.

As the journey continues, Goodman, of course, becomes more and more alarmed. He must even face the fact that the minister, Deacon Gookin, and Goody Cloyse, who taught him his catechism, are all part of the devil's band, but he resolves to stand firm against their clutches for he believes he can always fall back on his Faith. Alas, even this deserts him at the end as his wife that night is also to join the fellowship of this underworld. In this gathering, "it was strange to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints." Finally, the dark figure presiding over this nefarious ceremony sums up the realities of the secret,

"Welcome, my children, to the communion of your race. Ye have found thus young your nature and your destiny... There are all whom ye have reverenced from youth. Ye deemed them holier than yourselves, and shrank from your own sin, contrasting it with their lives of righteousness and prayerful aspirations heavenward. Yet here are they all in my worshipping assembly. This night it shall be granted you to know their secret deeds; how hoary-bearded elders of the church have whispered wanton words to the young maids of their households, ... [and so on] ... Depending upon one another's hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue were not all a dream. Now are ye undeceived. Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness."

Young Goodman Brown never recovers whatever equilibrium he might have had before that fateful occasion. As Hawthorne relates, "A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream." Never again could he be part of normal human communion with all its contradictions and imperfections, and after a long life thus, "they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom."

Hawthorne's story remains richer, in terms of its imaginative evocation and exploration of the Puritan consciousness and character, than any didactic summary I could offer here, still what he has imagined in the represented experience of Goodman Brown serves to define for me what a life can be like that fails to triumph over the loss of innocence. For I take this to be a fable about the consequences of never rebounding from the discovery of the fallibility of authority. Goodman was all gloom because he took an idealist position toward others even while he recognized his own discrepancies within. Belief for him was isolating because it was finally an all-or-nothing proposition. And while such a morality tale is no doubt, like education itself, wasted on the young, it can be a touchstone for the major crisis of growing up: how to live with contradictory oppositions, how to remain committed, and even cheerful, in the face of ambiguity and "exposed" authority. The task remains
sufficiently complex, of course, for us not to wonder too much at the frequent
descents from maturity that characterize any age.

If toleration of uncertainty represents a major goal of education, then
much depends on what relationship is established between teacher and taught.
The obvious trap awaiting educators is dependency. In reading and writing,
the teachers, as authorities, will naturally have all the answers: they'll
know what the stories mean or they'll give out the assignments and grade on
the basis of the ideal text that's in their heads. In carrying out such an
agenda, however well-intended, teachers immediately demonstrate their own in-
tolerance of uncertainty, and therefore, of course, hold little hope of fostering
this positive sensibility in their students.

In his study of the intellectual and ethical development of a group of
Harvard students as they progressed through their four years of college, William
Perry has outlined a pattern of epistemological progress from dogmatic dualism,
where answers are absolutely right or wrong and a belief in outside authority
neatly settles any disputes, to committed relativism, where personal responsibility
and consistency on issues are based on principles which the individual understands
are socially constructed. The significance of Perry's analysis is not so much
the extent it does or does not pin down any given student on some fixed develop-
mental time line; rather, it serves to chart out the various stances toward
human knowledge that are possible and what strategies we use to defend any
particular position we might hold. Goodman Brown for one could never come to
terms with the collapse of his simple dualistic stance. Determined to reside
cleanly at one pole or the other, he was unable to grow into the maturity of
mediation, which represents the capacity to evolve judgment in the light of
the considered and considerable appeal of whatever opposition.

When they were engaged with stories, I came to realize that my students
were taking responsibility for the disparate emotions available to them. In
doing so they were exploring the possible representations of the events of their
lives. This dynamic, however, is generally misunderstood because the nature of
stories for most people remains unexamined, part of the hidden environment that
constantly shapes their lives. A story, and the so-called "facts" it is presenting,
is just there; the teller seems oblivious to any deeper purposes than simple
communication. Yet a closer inspection reveals a host of reasons behind any
story, reasons dealing with values and the teller's attempt to come to terms
with what occasioned the story in the first place. For what is called experience
is finally one individual's interpretation of events that have been lived through,
whether through the eyes and brain of that individual, or another's.

This role of interpretation in the making and receiving of stories, it seems
to me, provides a unique opportunity for English; because people's representations
or interpretations are not unalterable, not infallible, they can always be working
toward the realization of potentially new selves, selves partially dependent upon
the shifting current of social contexts. To be locked into any one interpretation,
no matter how fitting for the moment, is to surrender the genius of our mental
capacities: our ability to celebrate newfangledness, even as we bend to the
power of conventional strictures. So in this sense English can allow students
to entertain the riches of contradiction without destroying their equilibrium.
As such it is a paradigm for learning itself, which depends on disbelief and its
continual suspension.
The cycle of telling and listening to tales is central to the maturing of any individual, but to understand this development is to appreciate the necessary contradictory nature of stories and how this fact both defines and contributes to a mature sensibility, however imperfectly realized. Stories are contradictory because in making sense of the events of life, an individual invokes choice, deciding on this point of view rather than that. And even if this choice or evaluation appears free of options, or if the person is not conscious of what has been dismissed, the point of view of the story can only take its significance from what is left out, from what is not there. Value, in other words, is a contradictory construct; unless it opposes something, it has no existence at all.

This paradox of contrast is basic to all human knowing. We would have no concern for the truth were it not for our ability to tell lies. As John Milton instructs us about what is unquestionably the central mythic story of Western culture, "It was called the tree of knowledge of good and evil from the event; for since Adam tasted it, we not only know evil, but we know good only by means of evil. For it is by evil that virtue is chiefly exercised, and shines with greater brightness" (328). Thus true and false versions of events always compete, nor is a finally "accepted" version necessarily more than a function of interpretive criteria agreed upon by any given audience.

Stories require contrast in order that the choices they embody be properly recognized. In fact this quality seems primary to mental operations in general, whereby categories, such as Milton's "good and evil," come into being on the basis of separateness or opposition—they do not reside in states of splendid isolation. Recognizing and standing by these value choices is finally an act of social construction. The very survival of each person's individuality requires active participation in the narrative arena, for it is here that identity and membership are determined. No wonder so much time is spent "correcting" the other person's account of an event shared in common; to do so is to assert not just a superior memory but the primacy of one's interpretive map of the world.

Whenever a story is told, the quandaries of emotional development are forced upon its spectators. In telling the story, an individual artistically expresses and recapitulates, whether in support or disagreement, the values which have given a particular community its character. But it is precisely a community's values which constitute authority, and the problem peculiar to Western culture is how to gain independence from this authority while still granting its primary shaping power over us. Nor is it any coincidence that Milton himself wrote the ultimate story about the necessary defiance of authority and its aftermath.

This problem of how authority moves from one generation to the next emerges at all levels of education as students resist the frequently unwarranted intrusions and dominations of adults. As adults, we are wary of letting go of our own triumphs, believing that unless the young carry the "wisdom of the ages" forward with complete fidelity, our purposes will have been denied and invalidated. We want our stories and their subsequent interpretations to be the only ones. On reflection, of course, we know that culture and values are not passed on so rigidly or systematically; still our adult desire for closure and control, for complete confidence, strongly overrules reason.

In contrast to those approaches which would dictate the proper meanings to be assigned to our stories are those which seek to insulate and thus protect the
young from the corrupting influence of all stories, filled as they are with so many potential lies. Donald Winnicott tells of "a father who refused to allow his daughter to meet any fairy story, or any idea such as that of a witch or fairy, or of a prince, because he wanted his child to have only a personal personality; the poor child was being asked to start again with the building up of ideas and the artistic achievements of the centuries." As Winnicott concludes, "This scheme did not work" (Mat: 101). The response of the father, though extreme, should not be seen as being unusual, for there are many, whether through their advocacy of censorship or their exclusive concentration on what are supposedly the "basic" language skills, who similarly are frightened of the prospects of student’s really meeting (to call particular attention to Winnicott’s choice of terms) the literature or the stories that comprise our common culture. It is precisely this "location of cultural experience" (the title of another of Winnicott’s papers that unfortunately has yet to have the influence on our profession that it deserves) that concerns us in English, for stories are the food that nourishes our emotional and moral development.

This notion of "cultural experience" suggests the importance of the reciprocity that exists between a story and its audience. Winnicott’s reflections on this matter are instructive. "... [I]n any cultural field it is not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition. Conversely, no-one in the line of cultural contributors repeats except as a deliberate quotation, and the unforgivable sin in the cultural field is plagiarism. The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union" (370). And though he was speaking of what artists produce, this truth holds equally for performance. Our performatory interpretations based on whatever source, from musical scores to lyric poems, only work to the extent that their novelty is transmittable. On the one hand to completely copy the performance of another, say another’s reading of a poem, is to declare yourself out of personal existence. On the other hand, to offer a reading which is completely inaccessible to others (for instance to conclude that Faulkner’s Emily is an Eskimo) is to declare yourself out of social existence. In either case, a balancing act is required. We may find living with such ambiguity difficult; still, we must celebrate its existence if we are to succeed as English teachers. Our respect derives from our sharing our original power. Otherwise, along with our students, we lose any claim to authority.

The key to emotional development lies in the relationship one takes with one’s surrounding stories. As I have been suggesting, it is narrative that governs a person’s responses to the new or repeated events of life. These stories embody hypotheses through which the individual anticipates recurrence or novelty. Further, these stories establish the particular role relation an individual takes toward the event. Every story serves to illustrate this process. Let’s say Brenda tells her best friend of her longings for the new boy in class. The next day the information is all over school. Brenda interprets this betrayal of trust as being characteristic of all friendships, and so the story she continues to tell begins to deny the value of being close with any of her peers. Because of the negative anticipation set into motion here by this story, Brenda risks closing herself off from others. "You’ve got to be careful out there against all those vultures who are out to get you," she keeps insisting. The point is that regardless of the content of the story, if it is allowed to be the only one used to make up one’s experience, the person telling it over and over will be locked into the kind of simple dualism that Perry described.
The smorgasbord of tales in cumulative English classes can encourage the individual toward more complex forms of development. It goes without saying that schooling alone will not guarantee the kind of movement toward maturity or committed relativism that I am advocating. Still what wonderful opportunities lie in the English teacher's hands to sow the necessary seeds of doubt in any particular story telling or interpretation, so as to force on the students subsequent alternatives with their possibilities for wider tolerance. And beyond all this tolerance and reflection, the world of action is not neglected. In English, when we allow students "ownership" of their own texts, when we reinforce the validity of their own intentions, we help establish for them a zone of rebellion, one which can serve as the basis for committed action. Neither Hamlet, nor Horatio, need they be, but rather in conversation with both.

By keeping many stories in competition at once we try to reach some mean of explanation about what is finally inexplicable. But to return finally to "Who are you?" Whether he realized it or not, Mr. Jaworski was indeed sorry for all three reasons, for like most of us he was sorry for the fact of discrepancy in the world, for the fact that things were never going to work out quite like he imagined them. Ironically, such a reaction merely points to what must always be a decline in authority, if the world is to go on living, to go on being born anew.

The only thing the adult world can ever temper is the pace, the rate of transition, and how we as English teachers meet students with stories contains our particular contribution to this process of maturing. English can provide a testing ground, a kind of "walkabout," for the emerging moral imagination. It can allow students to deal with the fact that the world is going to be buzzing with constructs not their own, buzzing with conclusions that deny those they've reached separately. From their readings to their compositions, by sharing and then relinquishing our ownership of the public text, we recognize the necessity for a social forum in which students' rebellious attitudes toward authority can be critically voiced and fostered. To see that it is precisely our authority that we are giving up is to free us finally to offer the advice which in another context might have had my vice principal saying, "I'm glad for you!"

Works Cited


