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THE ARTIST OF THE BEAUTIFUL: AN ALLEGORY FOR OUR TIMES

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In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful," Owen Warland devotes the energy of his entire life to the pursuit of and creation of a single beautiful object d'art: a mechanical butterfly so shimmering and delicate that it seems to have a life of its own, albeit an ephemeral one. Those who witness it admire and criticize, wonder at and puzzle over it in an attempt to understand it, only for it to be crushed by the hand of an ignorant child who reduces it to the wheels, gears, and springs that are its individual parts. Yet, the whole was always greater than its parts. "What is it?" asks one character in an attempt to categorize. "How does it work?" inquires another more interested in the cause than the effect. "Doesn't that beat all?" observes a third admiringly. Because none are artists, the characters who comprise the family of Peter Hovendale in Hawthorne's tale fail to see or understand the essence of Owen's gift, preferring to the butterfly itself its allegorical compliment, the box in which it came, as skilled craftsmanship, beautiful, and practical.

In Spring 2003, I taught an American Literature class after a two-year administrative absence from the classroom. When reading my undergraduate students' papers or exams, I was struck by the language they were using to discuss the stories of Poe and Hawthorne. "Take it apart" and "dissect" were substituted for "read," "appreciate" and "understand." "What does it mean?" they queried, "and what should we privilege?" They concurred that Poe "must have been a deeply troubled man who hated women to write the stories he did," but they wanted to know what some of Hawthorne's stories (other than "The Birthmark" which they "understood," after reading Judith Fetterley's essay) revealed about his mental state and relationship to women. Since all had taken our Introduction to Literary Theory course, the only course all English majors are required to take, they were anxious to flex their critical muscles and use words like "discourse," "new knowledges," "privileging," "deconstruct," and "post-structural" or "post-colonialism." The English Department at the University at Albany prides itself on its forward-thinking critical perspectives and "cutting edge" theorists, particularly in our graduate program, and expects its undergraduates to learn the vocabulary and history of English Studies as we see it.

What they couldn't discuss, however, and had no vocabulary for was the beauty of the language and superb craftsmanship of images and sentences each writer had used to create the effect. The aesthetic response had been bred out of them. I found this to be particularly onerous when I attempted to engage my students in conversation about poetry. My senior section of American Literature 1815-1865 admitted sheepishly that they didn't know how to read poems—they didn't know where to begin—and had had no experience with the fundamentals. They had been transformed into a group of English majors who no longer read to be entertained or to have that glimpse into the sublime or supernal loveliness that Poe spoke of. They read literature as they read the recipe for a cake: two parts feminism, one part new historicism, one part cultural studies but without any savoring of the flavor of the piece. In short, they had not developed a palate. They read literature as if its sole province was to act as a barometer of the social, political, and psychological milieu from which the writer emerged.

While literature is certainly the product of those things, to me it is far more. In fact, when I asked my students to examine the internal workings of the poem or short story, probing the texts and asking them to explain the use of assonance, alliteration, synecdoche, onomatopoeia, synesthesia and the like, they were stymied. I found myself teaching them the terminology and means of experiencing literature we used to learn under the “New Critical” method before it was abandoned for new critical perspectives. Interestingly, I was criticized in my course evaluations for giving them work as if “we were taking a graduate course instead of undergraduate English.” The irony was not lost on me. To me, theoretical constructions of meaning and viewing literature through a single critical lens is the stuff of graduate study, particularly when our English courses are open to majors, minors, and interested students who are neither.

As we were reading Poe's “Sonnet: To Science” it struck me that for my purposes in the current atmosphere, I might re-write Poe's lament, though not in sonnet form. I'd call it “To Theory” and keeping the spirit of Poe's lament, alter a few lines to express my own dismay:

To Theory

Theory: stunted stepchild of literature thou art,

Whose sterile language and disconnected sensibility

Pierce the poet's heart,

Obliterates all trace of ART,

Pulls Diana from her chariot, an unwilling pawn of Patriarchal Zeus,

Reveals the naiads as oppressed,

And the woodland haunts as emblematic of the pristine land

Usurped by the evil Colonial Empire.

Oh, Theory! Had I the power and the courage, I would confront you as knights of old faced the dragon.

With only my words, I would deconstruct you, leaving tattered leaves in place of the tomes we now must read and worship by.

Down with Foucault, Derrida, and others whose bastard child you are!

I would return triumphant, having rescued Poetry, so frail and waif-like,

To restore her to her proper place among the thousands of words written, beloved and admired.

I would restore poetics to poetry.

Undaunted, and determined, I decided to take a new tack with my students. I had been delving into Howard Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences so I began to read aloud to my students. I would then ask them what they heard, and, more importantly, what pictures the words and phrases evoked for them, forcing them to participate in the experience of the literary event and appealing to both the visual and auditory senses simultaneously. I used Hawthorne's "The Hollow of the Three Hills," a brief and magnificent short story which is a *tour de force* of literary genius. Hawthorne employs sound, motion, synesthesia, the tactile and the visual to weave his spell.

My students had not read this story before I handed it to them in photocopy form. Like Owen Warland's butterfly, I sent the words of Hawthorne the artist out among my students. They read silently as I read aloud. I stopped at key moments in the three-page story to ask them to react purely on the observable: describe where we were, who the narrator was, who the two women were and what images Hawthorne had used to build this picture. For example:

For it seemed as if other voices—familiar in infancy, and unforgotten through the many wanderings, and in all the vicissitudes of her heart and fortune—were mingling with the accents of the prayer. At first the words were faint and indistinct, not rendered so by distance, but rather resembling the dim pages of a book, which we strive to read by an imperfect and gradually brightening light. In such a manner, as the prayer proceeded, did those voices strengthen upon the ear; till at length the petition ended, and the conversation of an aged man, and of a woman broken and decayed like himself, became distinctly audible to the lady as she knelt. But those strangers appeared not to stand in the hollow depth between the three hills. Their voices were encompassed and re-echoed by the walls of a chamber, the windows of which were rattling in the breeze; the regular vibration of a clock, the crackling of a fire, and the tinkling of the embers as they fell among the ashes, rendered the scene almost as vivid as if painted to the eye.

After reading this segment, I asked for reactions. One senior in the back of the room summed up her experience with one word: WOW.

Why do we no longer care about or encourage the WOW? Why is the beauty of language, sentence structure, and characterization deconstructed, diluted, and dismissed by the elusive and denuded language of theory that, in some cases, appears to be convoluted, specious tail chasing? Why do we look at the work of literature and morph it through our own "critical lens" so that the distortion that emerges bears little or no resemblance to the original piece?

I have very serious concerns about the effects of literary theory when students tell me that Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is intended as a critique of British Colonialism—and nothing more than that! They have no knowledge of the poetry of the play or the elaborate layers of illusion and disguise Shakespeare creates. I have serious concerns when I teach juniors and seniors who have never been trained in close readings of the text, who can't read a poem aloud, or identify the speaker and setting. I have serious concerns when these same students

ignore aspects of the poem, novel, or play that don't fit or cannot be explained by the particular lens they have adopted. This is "theory" at its very worst. It is similar, in fact, to a course I took as a graduate student entitled "Shakespeare and the Family." This is a course in which the play *Hamlet* was reduced to a discussion of feminist critiques of both Ophelia and Gertrude (we read a lot of Luce Irigaray, Julie Kristeva, and Soshona Feldman), with not one glance at the poetry of Hamlet's speeches or an attempt to examine the role of philosophy or theology in Hamlet's world. The Ghost was referred to as "that old chestnut no one cares about anymore." Well, students in our class did and wanted to discuss the implications of the Ghost but were thwarted in their efforts. It may have been an "old chestnut" to our instructor but not to her students.

It may be heresy to speak these words aloud, but a poem, a play, a short story, or even a character is not what I as a reader choose to make it, despite theories to the contrary which explore the negotiated ground between text and reader. Three examples occur to me: Robert Frost's poem "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," Peter, Paul, and Mary's whimsical song "Puff the Magic Dragon," and a paper I wrote for a graduate writing seminar. In the first example, one high school teacher I know taught the poem as if the speaker WAS Santa Claus. Indeed, the setting is winter, it is the darkest evening of the year, there is snow—but there is a horse, not reindeer and no mention whatever of a sled or gifts. In the second instance, my generation's devotion to counterculture and drugs persuaded many of us that "Puff the Magic Dragon" was a song whose title was a euphemism for marijuana, the way "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" was assumed to be a thinly disguised tribute to the effects of LSD. I attended a Peter, Paul, and Mary concert in 1968 at which the group criticized us for co-opting their song and lyrics. As the group played the easily recognizable opening chords of the song, the author emphatically stated: "It's a song I wrote for my son. This is not a song about marijuana. When I DO write a song about marijuana, I'll let you know." My final example took place in a graduate writing workshop, peopled with other potential doctoral students. I had written a reflective paper about my experiences at a high school reunion. In one section of the paper, I talked about sitting at my mother's kitchen table seeking the answer about whether or not to attend the reunion in the patterns of her kitchen wallpaper. One graduate student was ecstatic about the way I had woven into my own anxieties the angst of the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper." I hadn't. I hadn't yet read that story at the time I wrote the piece and I wasn't exploring "angst".

I recently attended an NYCEA Conference at which a graduate student delivered a solidly researched, scholarly paper about *The Taming of the Shrew*. Her point was that it was clearly misogynistic, noting the cruelty of Petrucchio in his taming tactics. Her feminist position was clear, her argument well-crafted, and her paper a "success." However, as I listened to the paper, I was again struck by how Shakespeare's play was being appropriated to her own design and "bent" to fit a mold. Gone was any notion of comedy—or even acknowledgement of farce. Gone was any concept of *Commedia dell'Arte* and the stock characters out of which Shakespeare's evolved. Gone was any consideration of the larger questions of wagering, comparisons, and valuation that the frame story proposes; gone was the notion of illusion and role-playing as well. In their place, was a discussion of the characters Kate and Petruccio as if they were actually male and female, engaged in an actual marriage, instead of adult male actor and a young boy actor dressed in women's clothes portraying characters who are actors portraying characters in a play that Christopher Sly and the Duke's household, as well as we, watch in order to be entertained.

It is time to revisit and to incorporate literary history as well as new historicism into our classrooms. It is time to revisit rhetorical strategies and demonstrated how they are used. It is time to revisit basic philosophy and logic so our students can recognize specious reasoning and logical fallacies. It is time to revisit the glory of language and its effects on the emotions and on behavior rather than to be lost in the labyrinth of the mind that post-modern literary theory has become. Enjoyment of literature, celebrating the beauty of creation, and appreciating the artist's efforts in creating the work of art are the lessons I want my students to take with them into the world,

not whether or not Shakespeare was or wasn't bi-sexual, or Poe was or wasn't an alcoholic or a racist, or Hawthorne was or wasn't afraid of women. If we don't teach them the means to do this, then literature becomes, like the butterfly that Annie's child crushes in his tiny hand, little more than gears and wires and cogs.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Hollow of the Three Hills." *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Selected Tales and Sketches* . New York: Penguin, 1987, pp 1-6.

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