Hermeneutics and Deconstruction at Work: Teaching English Poetry to Non-native University Students

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Introduction

My main focus in this paper is the teaching of English poetry to nonnative university students of English language and literature departments in third world countries where English is a foreign language. At the time of their enrollment these students usually lack the necessary competence in English. And unfortunately this incompetence remains their companion until the time of their graduation. Faced with this level of students, on the one hand, and the curriculum with its language and literature courses, on the other hand, teachers should exercise all their efforts to render their literature courses practically beneficial to their students in order to enhance their language competence and literary appreciation skills.

Approaches to Teaching Poetry

Many reputable educators, such as Widdowson (1975), Leech (1991), Stern (1983), among others, argue that poetry is an invaluable source for the teaching of language and culture. But the question that poses itself is how to teach poetry to students in such a manner that would improve both their literary and language competence.

Among the common approaches practiced in teaching English poetry is the factual-historical one, that is to say teaching poetry by confining it to clusters of historical eras, such as medieval poetry, Elizabethan poetry, metaphysical poetry, and so on; with the sad result that students are crammed with more information on the historical background than studying the real thing, the poem itself, as it were, and the consciousness(es) and the significations it embodies and generates. In contrast, some teachers cut the suffering short by driving one interpretation of the poem, either of their own or extracted from some book as such, and then expect students to accept these interpretations as gospel.

Fact-Acquisition Approach

Since English poetry is not studied in this part of the world for English poetry's sake, fact-acquisition in teaching poetry a well as in teaching any other genre is not preferable when it becomes the sole purpose of the course. It is evident that such an

approach in teaching poetry will not help the students in their future careers, as they will, at best, become mere containers of data.

This is not to say that the teacher and the student should completely ignore the basic background studies concerning a given era or school of thought to which a certain poet belongs, for literary interpretion and appreciation require an awareness of historical facts. But what is more essential is developing the skill in handling the literary text itself, i.e. seeing, imagining, and feeling it. The rest—facts about era or school of thought—can be extracted from within the text by bits and pieces: i.e. in a Romantic poem the teacher can point to solitude, dejection, heroism, whenever they are encountered in the text, rather than talking about them beforehand, and in a vacuum.

Some teachers have always been aware that fact acquisition in teaching literature does not help the learner become original and creative: "The erection of a historical or geographical frame of reference for literature has seriously limited the way teachers and pupils have looked at literary texts, focusing attention on things external to experience of the text itself" (Dixon 1969: 79). Though easy and tempting to nonnative students and their teachers, the danger of factual teaching is that it acts as a trap to the learner. It entraps the students outside the text and shifts their attention to things external to the poem. From my class observations, I realized that students end up memorizing what meager notes they have about a given poet or era.

Thus, students render Wordsworth, for example, into a poet of nature, solitude, and dejection, a visionary prophet, etc., without really seeing how all this is worked out in any given poem. What matters to such students (and teachers) is the who, when and where of the poet (who he, his family, and his friends were, when and where he was born and educated, when and where he traveled, who influenced his work, when and where he died, etc.) and what established critics say about his work, with the result that students come out from the course at best described in a way similar to that of Byron's *Don Juan*:

> The arts, at least all such as could be said
> To be the most remote from common use,
> In all these he was much and deeply read;
> But not a page of anything that is loose,
> Or hints continuation of the species,
> Was ever suffered, lest he should grow vicious.
>
> (*Don Juan*. Canto 1, 40, 315-320)

Approaches in the Scale: Simplified Hermeneutics & Deconstruction at Work

For poetry classes to be more effective, teachers should encourage personal responses so the text becomes personalized rather than reductively factualized. By "personalized" I do not mean that the students should empathize with the text as such, or forget themselves in their attempt to relive the experience communicated in the poem. Rather, the students should be taught how to apply their personal experiences and background knowledge (schemata) in interpreting a text. Consequently the text might/should yield various meanings, interpretations and responses. This way of training students to bring forward their own personal visions to a poetry class (or other literature courses) will greatly aid them in becoming better learners since, through the continual process of reading and responding, they will develop self-confidence in their own responses and interpretations.

Equipped with their basic knowledge and commons sense, the students should be brought face to face with selected poems that best represent a certain movement or poet, or are suitable for a pedagogical aim. Students should then be asked to tackle the poem applying various methods and techniques: such as drawing the poem, miming it, debating it in pairs, looking for colors, images, thinking of it in terms of their own native poetry, etc. However easy it might appear to the teacher, a poem might be like a wall of rock to the students. The task of both student and teacher is to cut through this wall of rock as much as they can. Indeed, poems might be regarded as walls of rock to those students whose teachers follow a factual-historical approach, but they usually do not feel the rockiness of the rock as they do not have to cut through it. They are just passive learners watching their instructor toiling his way through while they are dozing or jotting down notes. Whereas a hermeneutical or deconstructional approach requires that the students do the mining, while the teacher does the monitoring, inspiring, and encouraging.

The teacher's contributions should be in the form of suggestions, explications, and introductions when needed, intervening when necessary to explain a related mythical tale, biblical story or reference, a historical, or cultural event that might bring the class to a better awareness of the text. Students' responses, reactions, feelings, imaginations, sense of right and wrong, moral values and judgments, even their gender and political attitude should be encouraged to emerge to the surface while reading and interpreting.

This is not an easy thing to do, nor would I claim that students would always be able to produce plausible interpretations of the given poem. But then, the question is, who is to decide what is plausible? Traditionalists would take what has been written about a certain poem by certain recognized pen(s) as *the* plausible

interpretation(s). Others, who believe that, as Derrida (1981) puts it, a text has no beginning, no end, no stable identity, etc., would reject the very idea of claiming ownership of a text.

This would naturally lead to change in the attitudes of learners to poetry. Poetry should become something to be experienced and enjoyed, and factual, cultural and historical elements are to be elicited from within rather than without the text. For example, the following first two lines from Coleridge's "Christable"

'Tis the middle of the night by the castle clock,

And owls have awakened the crowing cock;

enable the students to see the emergence of the supernatural (and/or horror, evil, darkness, fear, death, etc) in the poem through the word "owls", and therefore establish a mood; make students see time and place and therefore establish a sense of belonging or alienation; make students hear the sounds of things and creatures and therefore shift their attention to rhyme and rhythm; and so on. Not to forget that all through the process of teaching, the teacher's role should always be suggestive and, to a great extent, neutral in imparting information as to the possible meaning(s) of a poem.

Conclusion

A series of experiments with various approaches have shown me that the historical-factual approach does not really better students' comprehension and appreciation of text, nor does it enhance their language competence. Rather it devotes an authoritarian, patriarchal pattern of teaching and produces parrots skilled in the art of memorizing data to pour down on paper at a moment of assessment, to be forgotten after the exam is over. On the other hand, the hermeneutical and deconstructional approach encourages the learners to depend upon their own responses and interpretations and above all, motivates them to use their own English in contending with the text, whether during the discussion sessions or in the exam. And this is the very thing teachers should foster in their students; as this will help them become creative in both understanding and using the language. I remember a response from a student in one of my classes to William Blake's "To Spring" establishing a lesbian relationship between Spring and Britain. Whether the response is truthful to the intentions of the poet or not is something beside the point. What matters is that the student attributed a feminine gender to spring and coupled it to the feminine Britain: *"O, thou, with dewy locks,...pour thy soft kisses on her bosom."*

References

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