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Teaching Through: The University and the Development of Minority Literature

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In the nature of things, a university is more likely than a secondary school to offer courses in fields not much in demand, not high in commercial value. The reason is not far to seek. Secondary schools by and large have a programmatic mission, to cultivate a readiness for the business of life. Their university-bound students may make things a bit less topical, but never enough so to shift the balance. With universities, again by and large, we see a more abstract mission, the pursuit of learning and the cultivation in the individual student of powers that may be applicable to the business of life, but without being ultimately answerable to that business.

In classroom terms, the presumption in the university is that the student will discipline and interest himself or herself, in relation to the material, whereas in secondary school the odds are that the teacher will spend a good deal of imaginative and physical energy trying to catch the student's interest in the first place (though we all know some university professors unfurl rolls of toilet paper to make geological time more graphic, or climb atop desks and peer out into the distance to bring home Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer").

The very idiom we apply to the university years, "higher education," suggests a relationship of aspiration and, at best, condescension between secondary school and those years. And so the university is left with two hallmarks in the popular mind: general uselessness, and general hauteur. No wonder there was such an outbreak of resentful and reformative spirit in the country a decade and a half ago.

It is easy, and to some appealing, to think that the tremors that unsettled academic routines in the late sixties, and which seemed destined to reorder long-standing forms and principles, are over. Both the raw energy and

the declared purposes of all that stress and strain prove hard to find nowadays. If anything students appear even more diligent and dutiful than the *status quo ante*. Most of the programs instituted to honor and embody the spirit of the period have vanished too. It might be the liberal thing to deplore the waste of all that time, all that energy; but it is probably more typical to feel relief and say, with Eliot's agitated young woman, "Thank God that's over."

But is it?

The recent disturbance in Harvard University over the status of the Afro-American Studies Program may make us cautious on this question. Here was a prestigious university that had gone out of its way (a) to set up the Program, and (b) to institute procedures and secure appointments that would satisfy its constituency. And yet dissatisfaction broke out. What will happen when the national dimming of prospects for black students in higher education comes home, not only to the people who gave so much in the sixties, but also to those who because of them have come to expect so much?

There are those who argue that the "dimming" was inevitable, for the light was at best moony. Black students, they claim, are by venerable tradition ill-motivated and ill-prepared. And yet the recent improvement in national college-board examination scores seems to have been principally a reflection of improved scores for black students. One is reminded of the antithesis between conservatism, which assumes that things can only get worse, and teaching, which assumes that things can only get better. Such an image of teaching influenced Yale, supposedly an arch-conservative institution, to join with the New Haven School System and form the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. Interest in this program has increased at large, and many areas seek to establish comparable operations. In this light, we are asked to describe what we have been doing, and (I think) to offset a fear that what we have done may not be a replicable commodity, but only a freak of circumstances.

In what follows, I do not speak for Yale University, or even for my Yale colleagues. It has been of personal value to participate in the Institute, and to have to muse upon my participation. What shaped my efforts? How could I, who would doubtless prove a failure in high school teaching, do anything to benefit people who were getting along very well there. Thank you? What made my efforts "take" with my partners-in-priming-the-pedagogical-pump?

The teachers who shared my course with me will, I trust, concur that it was not set up as a series of tasks, with tight parts and squared corners lashed down against the winds of personality and circumstances. Rather, it was a sort of sailing together into new waters, having a special freight

and a general direction, but dealing gyroscopically with the gusts (and disgusts) of the way. We knew our Indies was a better high school program, and managed to improve on Columbus in at least the respect that we continually questioned ourselves and our direction. Let me attempt to set forth some compass points or principles that influenced my engagement and helped to account for the tacks we took.

The relative stillness of the academic scene today may be construed as evidence of a diligence without relish or cheer, and of a duty that is leaden and depressed. Students who used to clamor for relevance are not clamoring for anything, but simply questioning everything. They question the range and the number of courses they must take, the extent and the particulars of the materials in a given course, the paper assignments, the function and benefit of examinations, the propriety of grades and records. . . . Not immediate “relevance” is at issue, but primary reason for going through the process of education at all. The sharp growth of interest in law and medicine and journalism and economics can be accounted for by the fact that these areas supply a plain, practical reason for academic life: with the education, or even just the degree, in these areas, one probably can find a place in a constricting economical situation, and if it looks like a way of involving oneself with justice or humanity or truth, so much the better.

Still, the challenge of the new silence remains, and nowhere more palpably than in the fields of language and literature. We do not boast any universal art form based on words, any popular literary culture such as the Greeks had and developed into the astonishing authority, without authorship, of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. It may be that television is the closest we have come to such an art form since the Middle Ages, but for all that McLuhan has said television is community-wide without becoming communal—we do not share in the performance on the screen, and we see it in cells of isolation.

Literary culture has lost its popular base, but has survived this disability to achieve a kind of limited nobility and splendor; we may see John Milton as the deliberate prophet of this situation, summed up in his motto: “. . . fit audience find, though few.” The modern instance is James Joyce, who demanded a lifetime of study of anyone who would understand his work. Instead of knowing, axiomatically, as any Greek or any citizen of medieval London would, that the verbal art form is about and for all of us, we suffer in the paradoxical setup where its consummate mode, the book, is accessible, and neglected, as never before. Thus if our times make teaching problematical, to teach language and literature turns into an exercise in double jeopardy, and of course to teach *minority* language and literature must multiply the difficulty by no negligible factor.

Even people of unusual equanimity in the literary field—to train my focus there—have latterly felt a crisis of vocation, a crisis of culture. The old canard, “those who can, do. . . ,” rings hauntingly in one’s ears, and it is defiance more than conviction that retorts:

Those who can, teach;
Those who can’t, hoard.

We look for reassurance and reinforcement outside, and find it missing. What would happen though, if we looked to the nature of teaching, and to the character of our material?

Whether we teach in high school or in college, almost surely each of us has met people who appear just plain unconscious of what work we do as teachers of literature. We say we teach essays or poems or short stories or plays, and they look interested, but vague, and it turns out that they think of us as linguistic masons, pursuing unknown rites, or as grammatical pruning shears, devoted to making our students’ sentences tidy and their use of words precise. Concerning the latter notion, we can concede that tidy sentences and pithy words matter a great deal to us. But they are hardly the reason why we teach poems by Emily Dickinson or Alice Walker or Nicolás Guillén, and short stories by Jorge Luis Borges or Jean Toomer or James Joyce. Tidy sentences and pithy words are not what we teach.

What, then, do we teach? If our work is not merely masonic or esoteric, how do we account for it when people do not immediately separate sentences and idioms from poems and plays? If we consider chemistry or even history, it seems by contrast so straightforward a matter to say what teaching involves. Why is it so different with literature? How is it so different? On the face of things chemistry and even history have a hard objective content. Litmus paper turns red in acid solutions, hydrochloric acid explodes if water is poured on it; these statements can always be verified by experiments (though they are hardly experiments—it is a matter of brute mimicry of what once, for one or two individuals, was a true adventure and vital experiment). By the same token, the bloodless revolution of 1688 in England or the revolution of America against England in 1776 and the surrender of Cornwallis to Washington in 1781 can be verified by checking records and documents (and finding that what is a record for us was once immediate, urgent life). But how do we verify a poem or a play? We may say, we verify it by itself, which is of course not verification but tautology. Literature seems to have little to warrant it, or to rely on, outside of itself.

This contrasting of literature with chemistry and history is a plausible one, but we may well ask from the point of view of teaching whether it is just. It hardly seems fair to reduce chemistry and history to brute matter

of fact and information. I have already indicated that a chemical experiment and a historical event originate in personality and pass through a stage of irresolution. Both result in a settled condition, as formula or fact. But neither divorces itself from its origin. It would seem rather that when we teach chemistry and history we are recreating, in a highly condensed and economical form, the process whereby formula or fact came about; we are recreating, in our students, the human condition that gave rise to formula and fact, as well as transmitting these in final form. In other words, our students find out their human *capacity to produce* chemistry and history, and not only the external data of what these disciplines have produced. A few may carry on to become pioneers, and teach us. At any rate, the basic level of competence in history and chemistry is elevated, to the general good. For both history and chemistry will afford students an abstract sense of how data congregate into evidence, of how random factors affect large systems, of the necessity for precision and thoroughness as well as formula and fact. They learn various possible and transposable terms of engaging in the enterprises of being human, even as they acquire means of gainful employment with DuPont or the National Archives.

On the surface literature does not yield a product; a Boy Scout surpasses Thoreau for making his way safely through Maine Woods. And yet it would appear that man scarcely gained mastery of practical tools before he began to use them for the abstract purpose of inscribing his impression of whatever was important or focal in his life. Cave drawings are our earliest narrative work, our earliest stories of aspiration and need and value. Literal writing begins not with fact as fact, but fact as momentous doings (or designs), as natural magic, and quickly turns into myth, or the projected image of man's place in the universe. If literature has no product it is because it is itself the product of man's most intimate encounter with himself. It is not what man thinks about himself, or philosophy; not what he remembers about himself, or history; not how he describes and seeks to define himself, which would be sociology or psychology; not how he justifies himself, which results in political theory; not what he engages himself to do, for that is law. Rather literature is the way man envisions and embodies himself, act and spirit, incident and system, in the only mode of self-recognition available to us that keeps the subject essentially alive while impressing upon him standards of time and judgment.

In sum, the product of literature is the status of man's self-recognition, in an ever-enlarging mosaic whose pieces also merit scrutiny in themselves. Far from suffering by comparison with chemistry or even history, which will tend toward a single authority of viewpoint, it is a tribute to literature and to man that so many representative visions co-exist. Co-

pernicus supersedes Ptolemy, but Milton does not supersede Chaucer. Rather he adds a dimension of multiplicity to man's self-recognition, to the substance of his articulate humanity. That multiplicity, but also the integrity of the single vision constitutes a large part of what we teach.

The rest of what we teach is each of our students is himself, that is to say, his power of recognizing his implicit and potential being or condition in what he reads. For literature involves the self-recognition not only of the writer, but of the reader as well. As Coleridge long ago observed, literature makes collaborators of us—we might also have written the pages, so immediate and clear is their freight. At least, this is so sometimes. But as the product of individual enterprise and inspiration, literature is also properly subject to charges of wantonness or weirdness. In effect change in literature works by negotiation between the comforts of the familiar and the fascination of the new. As these negotiations develop, literature shows us not only what we are, but what we are becoming and may become.

In relation to black literature, then, two questions might leap to their tongues. Does negotiating it into its rightful place mean we all are becoming or may become black? And again, if it's really the same old life in another guise, why go to the trouble? Reading for self-recognition seems a narrow, spidery, navel-gazing business. But the case sounds worse than need be, as we can see if we turn our attention to something too often taken for granted, the context of teaching, or what it seems apt to call "teaching through."

Let me approach a positive explanation of "teaching through" by sharing with you the chief grievance one of my colleagues has with our profession. He complains that three years, or seven, or even a dozen years after he has taught them, erstwhile students of his write to ask for recommendations, or advice, or just plain recognition of their still being alive. This colleague of mine says that people don't do this sort of thing with doctors or architects or lawyers or members of any other secular profession. And he thinks the reason they do it with us is that we teachers "*do not charge.*" Of course there's something to what he says. But I wonder if he is finally complaining about a financial burden, or making light of a moral burden. Does a student seek our advice because we don't charge for it, or because we are presumed to care enough to give it? Is there something in what we do as teachers that goes beyond the transmission of skills and information, and enters into our students' conception of themselves as human beings, so that they see their developing talents not just as salable commodities but as modes of human expression and development?

In other words, are we teaching our students one thing explicitly in our classes, and something else implicitly through their lives?

This is not to revive any notion of the teacher as a paragon. We are well rid of that notion, I suspect, because it boiled down to a crust of external behaviors without human contact or nourishment. I am talking about a teacher as someone responsible for a certain material and certain group of students, even if he grumbles about office hours or bus duty or committee meetings. This teacher appears to the students as someone who knows something, and even now we are not too jaded to admire knowledge. But more important, the teacher appears as someone who cares about knowledge as a useful thing in the world, and as a good thing in itself. In the long run, I think our capacity for caring, our sense of values is the matrix in which our students' learning takes growth.

Teaching takes a double object, subject matter and students. The former stays with us, if we are lucky and work hard. The latter may occasionally come back to us. They come back after three years or twelve years because, if we have been lucky, the act of learning—the subject matter—and the state of being—the human person—interanimate each other in the conduct of our classes. And we give advice without charge because we care and never stop to think that caring may be priceless. For while we teach our students care with material, we also represent what it means to care about caring.

We must never forget the histrionic dimension of teaching, for willy-nilly we enact ways that our students recognize and no doubt occasionally try out. There is nothing wrong with this histrionic dimension, it really defines our work as human. Like any other animal born, we cannot help being members of our species, but we are the only species that chooses what kind of member of that species each of us will be. And the kind of human beings we become depends on what we care about, what we make sacrifices for. At the same time, we cannot teach anyone how to care; we only, in some way, exemplify it.

I do think we serve as unwitting models—mind you, not paragons—for our students. I myself have been a model for a student; this is said not with boasting but with some pain. A few years ago I happened to ask one of my students what he intended to do upon graduation. Somewhat to my surprise, for he had not overwhelmed me with attention, he said that my class had had a real impact on him; so much so in fact that he wanted to be more or less like me, and become a teacher. That “more or less” should have warned me, but I listened eagerly as he went on to list a couple of alternatives: he would be, more or less like me, a teacher, or go into the ministry, or work for the CIA keeping troublesome foreign leaders from being too troublesome. In brief, he meant to become, more or less like me, a teacher, a preacher, or a strong-arm man.

Since that day I've really been working hard to project a less versatile

image, but it seemed valuable to recognize the three possible stages of relationship we *could* have with students: teaching, or sharing and being involved in a process of learning and development of values that we construct but which our students authenticate and make live; and then preaching, or imparting fixed structures in fixed ways; and then the strong-arm, or assuming that the only thing possible is conformity, or it's the boom. The preacher and the strong-arm man, however they differ, are self-conscious models; the teacher is, as I have said, a largely unwitting model.

And yet it is clear that as teachers we cannot afford to be too unwitting. Some of our critics believe, though, that we have become worse than unwitting models; they say we have become unreal ones. In certain respects we have put our critics in a good position to lower the boom on us. For there is a second meaning of the phrase "teaching through" that we have tacitly neglected. We have to have grades, 7th, 8th, 9th; and we have levels: primary, secondary, collegiate. But do we have to have virtual passports to go from one to another, and indeed a situation where diplomatic relations seem in danger of being broken off?

Is not education one country, as each student is one person traveling in it? And should not the teacher in the 8th grade be consciously confirming the work of the seventh, and consciously preparing the work of the ninth, even as he does his own? Shouldn't the teacher in secondary school be teaching the student how to learn and how to be taught and to grow in college, even as he does his own work? Isn't it all implicitly his work, as it is all potentially the student's?

I aver that it is all one work, but focused, rather than parcelled out, in a particular way at a given time. The old one-room schoolhouse had a distinct advantage, in that it kept a human and social contact between the youngest and the oldest student, and between them both and the teacher. A whole world was there, and all its parts knew they were parts, not compartments. There was, inevitably, an example of teaching through grades and levels. We need not go back to that structure, in fact, but we could do worse than go back to it in spirit.

Certainly there has sprung up among us a tendency to see the students, up to the end of secondary schooling, as predominantly emotional or spontaneous in style, whereas in college and beyond we presume they will be disciplined and analytical. . . . The inconsistency of such a schema declares itself openly: we follow one mode and emphasis in secondary education to get ready for quite another in college.

There would be no problem if we could count on an abrupt and orderly change in the student's mental or metaphysical economy upon entrance into college. Actually the collegiate upheaval of the sixties may be read as a demand for recognition of emotional values in education, and not just

clinical procedure, while in high school the student finds less excitement and more aimlessness in the philosophy of “emotion” than that system needs. Perhaps we have too mechanically construed the apostle’s axiom concerning “being a child” and then “putting away the things of a child.” Perhaps we would be better off to acknowledge and to cultivate Wordsworth’s paradox, that “the child is father of the man,” thus giving true value and vigor to the natural interpenetration of emotion and analysis. As one teacher I know often says, love is the mother of criticism.

Let me quickly point out how much of the material we teach lends itself to teaching through (though the principle will stand up virtually everywhere). *Gulliver’s Travels* comes readily to mind, or *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Alice in Wonderland*, or *Don Quixote*, or *The Lord of the Flies*, or *The Odyssey*, or any number of short lyrics by Wordsworth. A child can revel in such works, and ten years later marvel at how different they have become (as he too has become different while yet he is the same), and another five years later groan at how much he is just beginning to see or learn to see. Let us take Wordsworth’s “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways,” for example. Here is the poem.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove—
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love;

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye;
Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived alone, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be,
But she is in her grave, and oh!
The difference to me.

I hope it’s not ludicrously wrong to think that most 12-year-olds, perhaps with a very few words glossed will grasp and respond to the loneliness and humbleness of the girl in the poem, what she has meant to the man speaking in the poem, and how keen is his grief at her loss. “Untrodden” looks like a word that would take glossing: it indicates a place where people do not go. Now I would not, with a 12-year-old, go into the implied paradox of the phrase “untrodden ways,” where the term “ways” suggests a path that people do frequent. But certainly an eighteen-year-old would not be excessively puzzled by the idea that Wordsworth is dealing with a way of life as well as a way for walking, and would understand too that

with the word “untrodden” Wordsworth is opposing what is pedestrian, and beaten into unfruitful dirt by overuse.

A 12-year-old would appreciate the alert perception of the violet by a mossy stone, but would, I think, need a few years before coping with the idea that “uniqueness,” as contrasted with the common multitude, is being suggested by the violet and the solitary star, and he might need a few more years beyond that to take on the idea that violet and star serve as examples of the romantic capacity for absorbing the unfamiliar and singular into an enlarged frame of reference.

I could go on, but so could you, and that would be the better way. Probably what I’m saying only brings into focus in a practical way matters already in our mind. Essentially I am suggesting that teaching is a continual process of anticipation and recapitulation. Even if that rings true, you may want to suggest in turn that my reading of the age groups is wrong. In a sense I hope so. Perhaps the 12-year-old is ready for far more than I’ve suggested for the student of eighteen. Perhaps the 18-year-old is not ready for much more than I’ve suggested for twelve. But it is probable that such an 18-year-old will grow much more rapidly than the apparently identical 12-year-old. The main point is, we cannot know how wrong I am if we are not prepared for teaching through, or for meeting our students potentially and actually at many levels, because the sporadic rhythm of their growth so seldom corresponds to a stable line of grades and levels.

How much more problematical, though, must this business of teaching through appear when the student comes from a minority context and bears unknown expectations and preferences and reflexes, or when the material comes from a minority source and crystallizes with distinctive marks and densities and shapes. If we argue that teaching is a process of recapitulation and anticipation, don’t we rely on a foundation of familiarity for the building of new effects? And isn’t that foundation of familiarity cloudy at best when the student comes from a minority context and the material from a minority source?

This is a highly sensitive question, though answers to it have by contrast tended to be roughly dogmatic. Let me suggest that no teaching would be possible—that we could not learn to use a word or toss a ball—without an intrinsic capacity for speech and dexterity. Teaching begins and continues in the mystery of our everyday natures. Theorists may preach against the possibility of increasing absolute capacity, but a working teacher in reality is concerned with eliciting and refining functional capacity. In both our subject matter and our students we teach versions of what it means to be human, and it would be strange if the teacher could not say what a dramatist has said: *nihil humani a me alienum puto*. The alien student and the alien material are so accidentally, and must fall within our human capacity for creating as well as conserving familiarity.

It may be amusing to recall by the way that many of Wordsworth's poems, which we now treat as canonical, seemed odd and objectionable on first appearance. This is of course no guarantee for any present-day poem, but it does indicate that the tradition of literature, like language itself, keeps admitting new elements without impairing itself. Indeed, like language, it may need to admit new elements to keep its special life.

On this basis, without claiming that the material in question will indefinitely answer the range and variety of human interests and needs and so prove immortal, it would be possible to illustrate how, say, a relatively recent piece by a black poet might readily enter into our classrooms. I will try still to keep the question of teaching through in mind, including now the new sense perhaps of teaching through ostensible cultural barriers. The poem I would proffer is Arna Bontemps's "Nocturne of the Wharves":

All night they whine upon their ropes and boom
 against the dock with helpless prows:
 these little ships that are too worn for sailing
 front the wharf but do not rest at all.
 Tugging at the dim gray wharf they think
 no doubt of China and of bright Bombay,
 and they remember islands of the East,
 Formosa and the mountains of Japan.
 They think of cities ruined by the sea
 and they are restless, sleeping at the wharf.

Tugging at the dim gray wharf they think
 no less of Africa. An east wind blows
 and salt spray sweeps the unattended decks.
 Shouts of dead men break upon the night.
 The captain calls his crew and they respond—
 the little ships are dreaming—land is near.
 But mist comes up to dim the copper coast,
 mist dissembles images of the trees.
 The captain and his men alike are lost
 and their shouts go down in the rising sound of waves.

Ah little ships, I know your weariness!
 I know the sea-green shadows of your dream.
 For I have loved the cities of the sea;
 and desolations of the old days I
 have loved: I was a wanderer like you
 and I have broken down before the wind.

Here again one would presume that the average student of twelve will hear this poem with a fair degree of initial intelligence and pleasure. Two points might stand out: the physical and auditory qualities of the opening lines, and the personal sympathy and pain of the closing section. The alternation of whining and booming might be taken as marks of the ships' sorrow at being held by the ropes, and aggression against the dock that holds them through the ropes. Thus the objects—ship, rope, dock—and the sounds—whine, boom—grip our attention on a literal, descriptive level, but the relationship among them seems so active and meaningful, so *meant*, that another level of emotion, or personification promptly enters the picture. It is the kind of feeling we get looking at a beach or seascape by Monet or Hopper, and the feeling, though complex and abstract, has the simple authority of the literal event. We all get it, for it is there.

To be convinced of the drama of the ships at the outset is to share the momentum that carries the poem out of the literal scene into an imaginative, perhaps a fantastic reconstruction of the ships' voyages or careers. An adult may in fact balk at the shift sooner than an adolescent, who well remembers the naturalness of fantasy. But inside the poem the shift is justified; we ascribe intention to the ships in the first lines, and to acknowledge memory and thought in them is only the next logical step. The poem then naturally moves to make explicit a continuity, and identity, between ships and human beings, in the person of the narrator.

All the pathos of the poem becomes candid and terribly intimate in the closing section. The lines bring out the primary secret of metaphor, that we can only see the relation of things to ourselves by undergoing what we attribute to them, and by becoming them in a way. If the ships are as man, man is as the ships, equally yearning, equally adventurous, equally helpless at last. No child of twelve is too young to intuit, or even perhaps to recognize by analogy this feature of our condition. The love of the cities of the sea, while evoking complex otherworlds that subsist in and belong to the water, is also immediately available in terms of the romance of travel to Cathay or Bombay or Abyssinia.

It would be necessary, no doubt, to gloss a phrase like "the sea-green shadows of your dream," but again the entire context suggests 1) that the sea itself, green as it literally is, serves as a projection or shadow of the ships' straining toward faraway places, and 2) that this straining, or dream, remains a shadowy thing but at the same time young (green) or naive (green). It's not an easy line, even for a trained adult, but it has a suggestive power that should carry the young student along, seeking and expecting fuller understanding.

The more experienced student will gain a better purchase on this line by calling to mind the last phrases of Andrew Marvell's "The Garden":

“annihilating all that’s made/ To a green thought, In a green shade.” The “sea-green shadow” and the “green shade” certainly seem akin, especially where both poems are dealing with a world of thought and dream. But the student of eighteen, say, will readily identify in the “Nocturne of the Wharves” the distinctive theme of old age—the ships and the narrator are really most alike in having passed through a great deal, in being “worn,” in having “broken down before the wind.” The “Nocturne” might almost be treated as a poem of old age, and its title, meaning a night-piece, reinforces the idea of coming to an end (of the day, of life). If we hear in the idea of the “wanderer” a slight echo of Ulysses, more particularly in Tennyson’s poem, then the theme of old age becomes paramount.

But neither the poem nor the more developed student stands exhausted here. From the opening line, with its combination of whining and booming, two voices, two attitudes meet in a sort of paradox that is subtly echoed further on in the “Nocturne.” The material solidity and immovability of the dock alter into “the dim gray wharf,” which anticipates the “mist” of the dream. Opposed worlds, like opposed voices, become part of one scheme of response. This effect occurs also in the basic attitude of the speaker. The ships function by metonymy to express the outlook of the “wanderer,” and they are eager to be gone again, to know the heady joy of coursing “before the wind,” and the romance of strange, distant places. This spirit of adventure, though, has a questionable underside, a “shadow.” The phrase “helpless prows” in the first section of “Nocturne,” indicates that the ships cannot go, but what we find out later suggests that the helplessness may be not local but general and characteristic of the ships. They have to go, when sent, are helpless not to go, just as they have to stay when tied. Their “weariness,” then, is at once the weariness of their many journeys, which have “worn” them out, and the weariness of frustration in an indomitable spirit.

If we consider where the ships have gone, in light of this observation, the true nature of such an indomitable spirit emerges startlingly. China and India (Bombay) and Japan were sources of coolie labor for the West in the nineteenth century, and before that Africa—(they think/no less of Africa) was the source of slave labor. Probably “the copper coast” refers on one level to Nigeria, a major producer of copper and a prime region for slave traffic. The mist that covers the copper coast is not enough to conceal the subject the poem confronts obliquely, metonymically, through the ships. Perhaps the poem is forgiving the ships, since they were helpless, but it is first and foremost using their helplessness and indomitability to shadow forth the condition of the slaves. Finally, this is the condition of man, enslaved as he is to time (the very foreshortening of the final section of “Nocturne” works as an emblem of how soon we are cut off).

The theme of old age and the undertheme of slavery reinforce each other, and are themselves reinforced by the ambivalence of the poem, whining and booming, helpless and indomitable.

And still the poem is not exhausted. Rereading, restudying it, the trained adult finds that he duplicates the stages of his life (or anticipates the stages of his students' lives) in miniature, beginning with a fairly simple sense and proceeding, at least we have to hope proceeding, to greater sophistication, depth, and resonance of understanding.

It may be that without the issue of slavery in his background Arna Bontemps would not have made quite this poem of the image of the moored ships. But he is hardly confined to the question of slavery, and by the same token no reader without his background (Bontemps himself was no more a slave than Abraham Lincoln) is prevented from understanding the poem and its yearning for freedom—*from* confinement, *from* old age, *to* encompass all the world in our lives. It could only do injury to the poem to try to tie it down to a racial, rather than a human meaning. The racial question is, somewhat obliquely, present, but cannot be made the litmus paper for characterizing the “Nocturne of the Wharves.” It would do injury as well to a minority student to deny his interest in going beyond the racial question, or his human resources for that. Above all it would be an injury to teaching to shut off the range of possibilities through which attention to minority material and minority students might carry us. That is to force silence upon the potential poet, upon the very man who might most tellingly speak to us of another dimension of ourselves that resides in him.

Something akin to this has indeed happened to Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who could no more be perfectly muted than the ships perfectly moored. In public he disguised his voice and spoke behind the back of his hand as it were, in dialect, but once or twice, briefly and poignantly, spoke of the individualized understanding of the cost of institutional silence:

The Poet

He sang of life, serenely sweet,
With, now and then, a deeper note,
From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
He voiced the world's absorbing beat.
He sang of love when earth was young,
And Love, itself, was in his lays.
But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.

This too we may bring to our classrooms, teaching through virtual silence the complexity and compelling nature of the human voice. The not-quite-

muted voice of Dunbar's poet might be the not-truly-heard voice of one of our students; and we would teach that student the "Nocturne," say, in earnest of the fact that teaching is a guarantee that neither inexperience nor prejudice will prevent the individual voice from developing and being heard.

It is well here to observe the irony of a system of literary commerce that makes itself wide open to foreign tongues, via translation, while the system of domestic education seems deaf to a slightly modified accent in its own tongue, or distracted when it has to deal with the accent and tongue of people—native American (Indian), Chicano, Borinquen—who make up a substantial presence on these shores.

Perhaps it would be well, by way of conclusion, to grapple briefly with two short poems in this category, and to suggest some themes and issues, that would serve to bring out the feasibility and compatibility of using non-traditional material in literature courses. Some would contend there is an automatic advantage in doing so, as a livening and leavening of the familiar mass will occur, but that must be left for individual experience to prove.

Like "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" Michael Harper's "Reuben, Reuben" deals with a near and grievous death (of his two-day-old son), but despite seeming so simple and reachable on the page, it concedes little to its audience, and certainly avoids the undercurrent of argument about the relative values of solitude and fashion or publicity that we can recognize in Wordsworth's poem.

Reuben, Reuben

I reached from pain
to music great enough
to bring me back,
swollenhead, madness,
love fruit, a pickle of hate
so sour my mouth twicked
up and would not sing;
there's nothing in the beat
to hold it in
melody and turn human skin;
a brown berry gone
to rot two days on the branch;
we've lost a son,
the music, jazz, comes in.

And yet it is not Wordsworth but Harper, the poet who seems so much further gone into privacy, who retains contact with something outside of

himself and his loss, something strong and consoling, in the form of "music." He does not at first identify this music and we probably accept the general notion that music may have such powers (it goes back to ancient Greek and Oriental thought), thus perhaps disarming any shock and resistance when "jazz" is declared later on.

What stands out at first in "Reuben, Reuben" is a sort of nervous unconventionality in grammar and punctuation and vocabulary. But in some ways this comes home to us, given the context of tearing grief, more readily than Wordsworth's more "correct" manner; and Wordsworth himself, or the formality of his speech, almost comes apart in the middle stanza of "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," where the rapid shift of attention from violet to star and the somewhat awkward use of apposition (or ellipsis?) obliquely release the turmoil Wordsworth is trying to control. In Harper's poem the physiology of "hate" comes home to us forcibly through the images of the "pickle," and its psychology is matchlessly rendered in the phrase: "my mouth twicked / up and would not sing." Blaming the mouth and not the self constitutes a stroke of genius, and yet the fierce, even baleful determination of the self is revealed in the auxiliary verb, "would." To gloss the verb "twick up" is to give offense to anyone who could read it; we know what it means, and feel its force more intimately than its easier alternative, "purse up." This is a point of no small moment; "twick up" comes out of black idioms, more baldly than anything else in the poem, but speaks to us without mediation or difficulty. How much else are we denying ourselves by canonizing our cautious habits and pronouncing anathema on what might seem new?

It is, finally, not the content of the poem that would make "Reuben, Reuben" seem difficult; Wallace Stevens compellingly observes that "pain is human." Harper's loss and confusion and rage and need of consolation are available, overwhelmingly so, to any candid reader. And the sense of difficulty does not, as already observed, come from the language of the poem; who would be at a loss encountering the images of the pickle or the "brown berry," or for that matter words like "swollenhead" and "lovefruit"? The intrinsically taxing feature of the poem resides in the multiplicity of states it conveys, and in the rapidity and complexity of their movement. The single line, "lovefruit, a pickle of hate" neatly illustrates this point. Fruit and pickle can be said to belong in the same genus of images, but they are opposed in temper and value, and represent an astonishing association-dissociation in the mental activity of the poem. The lovefruit is the child, the pickle of hate the feeling, inseparable from but unrelated to the child, that is brought on by his death. The poem is continually rocketing between conflicting tendencies and effects, between uncontainable grief and irresistible consolation, between music and refus-

ing to sing, between spasmodic formlessness and a delicate use of a stabilizing off-rhyme and assonance (pain, hate; sing, in, skin; gone, son).

There are refinements in the poem that may be passed over here: the way “nothing in the beat” refers to music, the ordering principle of rhythm, and to the heart, the sustaining rhythm of life; or again the way versification compounds meaning in a line like “to hold it in,” for before we see the word “melody” we have the idea of something going out of bounds, off the edge, an idea reinforced by the sense that the bereft father may be going not only out of his head, but out of his “human skin”; or, finally, the clear implication that music “comes in” to fill a void, and enables the poet to come in with it out of “madness.”

Nor will anyone who has listened to the jazz of, say, John Coltrane (a titan of the form and celebrated by Michael Harper in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*) fail to realize that the restorative power of this music is more than incidental. Jazz, as Amiri Baraka has brilliantly shown, models the experience of going through bad things and coming back singing. Many individuals who are white recognize this; the critic Robert Christgau has avowed that “music” is a form of “survival training” for him. And he goes on:

Only now it's black people who seem to have some notion of how to survive the bleak-looking years to come, how to feel both happy and responsible . . . and, above all, how to endure (quoted by Jack Slater, *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 23 Feb. 75, p. 18).

In point of fact it is not “only now” that black people find and invest such values in music, though wide recognition of the fact has come recently. Michael Harper himself has commented that for a long time, throughout and even after the end of the period of slavery, music was “the only explicit expressive device open to” black people. Still it is necessary to insist that “jazz” and “twick up” stamp “Reuben, Reuben” as part of black experience and black expression. The main point to be made about the poem stems from this fact, that it remains particular, and still reaches from that particularity, from “pain” even, to achieve a universal music.

In turning to Nicolás Guillén’s “Madrigal” as a representative work of this foremost Cuban poet, we reach another version of teaching through, in the form of language barriers. Of course it is true that every translation is a reminder of the Tower of Babel, but the trouble there was that everybody was talking at once, and wanting the other person to go to the trouble of listening; in other words, the trouble was less linguistic than psychological. Thus while it remains fashionable to say something is always lost in translation, it seems necessary to observe also how much can be gained from translation. The following version of “Madrigal” seeks to

convey, in however limited a manner, some of the qualities of rhythm and chime that so enrich the original.

Madrigal

Tu vientre sabe más que tu cabeza
y tanto como tus muslos

Ésa
es la fuerte gracia negra
de tu cuerpo desnudo

Signo de selva el tuyo,
con tus collares rojos,
tus brazaletes de oro curvo,
y ese caimán oscuro
nadando en el Zambese de tus ojos

Madrigal

Your belly's more knowing than your
noggin and just as much so
as your thighs.

Therein
is the potent black grace
of your body all naked.

Your own is the forest's design
With your necklaces of red
Your bangles of curving gold
and that shadowy crocodile
a-swim in the Zambesi of your eyes.

One can hardly fail to be struck with the sensuous immediacy and weight of the lines; the inversion of the hierarchy of knowledge in the opening verse boldly declares this as a norm. But we should observe that knowledge is not set aside; rather, the conventional notion of where knowledge is seated, faces a strong challenge: "your belly's more knowing . . ." Knowledge inheres in the entire being, but more so in the foundation (thighs) and center (belly) than at the top (head). The knowledge implied is the knowledge of life, not of fact, apprehension rather than thought.

Once this sense of the fullness of knowledge in being is grasped, the poem's celebration of the naked (*desnudo*) body falls harmoniously into place. Dress would be a concealment and blockage of the source of

knowledge, a loss of power (*fuerte*) and a denial of grace (*gracia*). Clearly grace here refers not only to a manner of motion, but a quality of emotion and spirit as well. In fact, as we reflect on the poem, it is somewhat of a surprise to note how little we *see* of the body supposedly under description. We know about it more than we watch it, in the poem, with an attitude that is reverent instead of prurient.

By the final section of “Madrigal” the larger values of knowledge in bodily form become quite explicit. The forests (*silva*) and the Zambesi convert individual human presence into a signal and a form (*signo*) of nature at large. Such an identification of the natural and the human is not uncommon in modern Caribbean and African poetry, being especially cogent and moving in the work of Leopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. The shadowy crocodile carries the analogy to startling lengths, perhaps, but the risk is worth running. The poem is rounded out by the image, as the eyes refer back to the head, and restore some of its dignity (while yet leaving the question of knowledge open with the epithet, “shadowy”). The crocodile, after the colorful and rich jewelry, carries us inward again, with an implied motion that is slow and sinuous—like the “*curvo*” of the gold—and also potentially fascinating, dangerous. To the English ear, crocodile has a less favorable ring than *caimán* to the Spanish, and we should acquaint ourselves with the fact that, besides the literal reptile, *caimán* metaphorically refers to an astute person who is also hard to figure out. The personality of the woman comes to the fore, and not just her body, and is associated with the rich fecundity, and the problematical depths of the river. What is undressed proves to be anything but lacking in mystery, or in dignity. “Madrigal” is a celebration of the black woman, in naked romance and abstract sensuality.

There is material galore for anyone who would inquire further than these propaedeutic notes into the possibilities for pleasure and for teaching in regard to minority poetry. One can fruitfully pursue in this area such topics as poetry and politics, or the feminine principle, or the modalities of personal worth, or solitude and society, or the assertion and anxiety of the self, or the exploration of nature, or desire and the confines of experience, or the nature of metaphor or the virtues of music or the values of poetry or what have you; it is not necessary to treat at any length the subject of how minority people feel, since minority people feel as people will when treated in just such a way by others. The literary creations of minority groups, as I have tried to show, both express and transcend the particulars of social experience, and it cannot but be of benefit to minority students as well as to the larger student constituency to enlarge the particulars of *their* experience by teaching this material and, through it, the animation and the interanimation of various modes and concerns.