

## Relativism, Radical Pedagogy, and the Ideology of Paralysis

theories of education advanced by T. S. Eliot—alarmed challenger of popular culture and ardent advocate of culture and of the higher class that guarded and preserved it—are often pointed to as the antithesis of radical pedagogy. Like Matthew Arnold, of course, he believed culture was the cornerstone of a healthy society:

We have to try to keep in mind, that in a healthy society this maintenance of a particular level of culture is to the benefit, not merely of the class which maintains it, but of the society as a whole. Awareness of this fact will prevent us from supposing that the culture of a "higher" class is something superfluous to society as a whole, or to the majority, and from supposing that it is something which ought to be shared equally by all other classes. It should also remind the "higher" class . . . that the survival of the culture in which it is particularly interested is dependent upon the health of the culture of the people. (*Notes* 35)

He believed that of all institutions education was the most important for maintaining "the continuity of our culture" and for "preserv[ing] us from the error of contemporaneity" (*To Criticize* 119). Although the primary function of education was to transmit the tradition of culture, the individual played a role as well: "Tradition by itself is not enough; it must be perpetually criticized and brought up to date under the supervision of what I call orthodoxy . . . [which] is necessary for the exercise of all our conscious intelligence" (*After* 62). While the individual maintains an active role in interpretation, tradition serves as a check on individuality (which "when each man is [free] to elaborate his own [morals] . . . becomes a thing of alarming importance" [*After* 54]), and thus a check on subjectivism and relativism. A sort of critical thinking, then, a perpetual questioning of the past and present, does play a crucial role in Eliot's thinking. This brand of critical thinking is embodied in his "perfect critic," who eschews his or her own personality and emotions in order to "see the object as it really is," "with the greater possibility of arriving at something outside of ourselves, which may properly be called truth" (*Selected* 57, 76). The study of tradition, then, develops the critic's sensibilities and helps him or her separate the accidents of his or her own personality—and the personalities of individual artists—from what is permanent, truth.

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without moral values, transcendent anchors that humans could believe were eternally truthful. Without transcendent normative values informing what was right and wrong, individuals—especially those from the masses, like the wretched “young man carbuncular”—would do whatever felt good. Politically, the world would not just change with alarming rapidity, it would sink further into chaos. The noble mission of critical thinking (Eliot’s “orthodoxy”), imbibed only by the “intellectual strata,” was to keep tradition well oiled and in proper working order, to preserve it and inculcate it into the citizenry as the great standard. Although Eliot’s literary criticism is swinging gradually toward anachronism in the halls of American English departments, and although Eliot’s outrageous (to some of us) conception of education—to serve as the breeding ground for finicky idolators of the status quo—has become a feeble straw man for attacks by radical theorists, his theories of education (through its influence on the New Criticism) secured and have maintained a firm grip on American pedagogy.

But more interesting and important than the conservative dread of relativism, as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux have argued, is the curiously similar dread displayed by liberal humanists and even some Marxists (evinced, for instance, by their infatuation with science). Both sides of the spectrum at times exhibit a certain hubris in positing that their categories and paradigms of knowledge are morally, politically, universally, and transhistorically correct. Both assume that the nonobjectivist critical stance implies an inevitable undermining of all positions, because commitment to every cause and every belief implies a commitment to nothing, or it implies at least the logical impossibility of taking any action toward any political or other cause. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has argued that extending the relativist argument to this conclusion—an example of what she has termed the “Egalitarian Fallacy”—is wrong-headed, unwarranted, and naive. To clarify my own position, I am in general committed to the conceptions and goals of radical pedagogy, but I feel several factions, in their dread of relativism, do themselves a disservice by conceptualizing ultimate goals and rigid political positions; and at times they seem surprisingly naive in thinking that sound method or correct content by themselves will lead to the creation of desirable political values and to successful radical teaching. I maintain that sophisticated conceptions of relativism are not only in consonance with radical pedagogy, but are, as thinkers since Gramsci and Lukács have argued, vital to any system of critical thinking. Finally, I point out some caveats for teaching relativistic conceptions to students and offer suggestions for fostering healthy relativist critical thought in the English-studies classroom.

In order for pedagogy to be radical, it must help students transcend culturally imposed consciousness, allowing them to exit their circular, self-enclosed, and self-perpetuating “uncritical immersion in the status quo” (Shor and Freire 14); it must somehow get them outside their own repressive consciousnesses, allowing them to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. That is, critical thinking—the ability to transcend limited or oppressive consciousness, becoming critically aware of the status quo, one’s society, and one’s own consciousness as histor-

ically contingent—is fundamental. The radical pedagogue’s most insidious nemesis is, as Henry Giroux calls it, “the culture of positivism,” which smothers the development of critical thinking by portraying the world in objectivist terms, ready-made, already there to be discovered and passed on:

Adulating “facts” and empirically based discourse, positivist rationality provides no basis for acknowledging its own historically contingent character. As such, it represents not only an assault on critical thinking, it also grounds itself in the politics of “what is” . . . Buried beneath this “end of ideology” thesis is a form of positivist pedagogy that tacitly supports deeply conservative views about human nature, society, knowledge, and social action. (51)

And the result, argue Aronowitz and Giroux, is that “students of all social classes exhibit a tendency towards literalness . . . [and are] unable to penetrate beyond the surfaces of things. . . . In short, reality is dissolved into objecthood” (49).

The remedy to false notions of an objectified world is relativism, or at least a move toward relativism, and it is not surprising that several Marxist thinkers have pointed out this necessity. One of the first to be recognized was George Lukács, who, in describing the enfeebling power of reification, set the stage for later Marxist critiques of bourgeois reified consciousness:

Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. . . . [H]is lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*. The contemplative stance, adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man’s consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly enclosed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man’s immediate attitude toward the world. (89)

Though Lukács is here describing the work process, he intended the description to serve as the paradigm for reality, knowledge, and the process of learning. Rather than participating in knowledge, engaging it, relating it to their lives and themselves, Lukács argued, workers and students passively contemplate it as the established truth, something to be mastered but not altered because it is permanent. In this sense, knowledge is mechanized; it is conceived of as a vast and inscrutable machine that requires little human labor. The task of the intellectual laborer is to maintain the machine, and occasionally to modernize it a little, adapting it to accept new kinds of raw materials. Students are not encouraged to become the master of knowledge or to use knowledge for liberatory purposes, but to see it as an already in-place standard to which they must submit themselves. The escape, and the beginning of Marxist history, occurs when the proletariat becomes aware that it is “the identical subject-object of history”; that is, societal transformation begins when the proletariat becomes self-conscious: aware that they are a commodity in a capitalist market, aware of the totality of societal relations, and aware that this system of social relations is what

able to discern such a notion of reality, Lukács believed, because their unique role in capitalist production denies them the illusion of objectivity, and they are forced into recognizing the "true reality" of capitalism. (Lukács never explains, however, how he, an intellectual, came by this vision.) And once this realization occurs, revolutionary praxis is inevitable: "[T]he rise and evolution of [the proletariat's] knowledge and its actual rise and evolution in the course of history are just the two different sides of the same real process" (21). Ultimately, as the Comintern of the Third Communist International argued, Lukács' position is idealistic and realistic. Nevertheless, his work is extremely valuable for its revival of the important concept of ideology in Marxian and other social critical thought.

Antonio Gramsci was more specific about the relation between detecting the falseness of objectivity and bringing about social change. The idea of objectivism for Gramsci was a remnant of religious ideology ("a hangover of the concept of God"), which capitalism exploited in order to maintain hegemony (445). Gramsci's criticism of objectivism as a form of "mysticism," and his emphasis that the world, society, and one's own consciousness should be seen as relative ("humanly subjective . . . historically subjective . . . [not] universal[ly] subjective") is unequivocal:

The idea of "objective" in metaphysical materialism would appear to mean an objectivity apart from man; but when one affirms that a reality would exist even if man did not, one is either speaking metaphorically or one is falling into a form of mysticism. We know reality only in relation to man, and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also a becoming and so is objectivity, etc. (446)

Because hegemony depends on the masses' willing consent to the moral and intellectual leadership established by state and corporative leadership, and because the established (though necessarily protean) web of institutions, social relations, and ideas must be created and re-created throughout the society, it is necessary to convince the masses that the societal organization is objectively correct, in concordance with nature or at least with necessity. In order to establish a counter-hegemony, society's objectivity must be undermined, and this "war of position" or "passive revolution," Gramsci says, is achieved gradually, as "organic intellectuals" (intellectuals either in sympathy with or from the masses) attain positions of moral leadership in civil society, helping transform the unorganized masses into an "intellectual and moral bloc," participating in the political sphere only *after* this is accomplished, thus becoming an "historical bloc" (137, 366).

In all, Gramsci's conceptions of the process of demystifying the masses and of the transition to social change are much more elaborate, sophisticated, and patient than those of Lukács. And furthermore, his ideas seem to be much more applicable to the modern Western world, where ideology has taken over as the principal means of coercion. There is little wonder, then, why pedagogical theorists have gravitated around Gramsci and other Western Marxists for their conceptions for social change. There is little wonder, also, that theorists such as Aronowitz and Giroux have shied away from traditional Marxist categories

argue in their excellent examination of the relationship between Marxism and radical pedagogy) as universalist and reductionist, and inapplicable to modern society. They argue that Marxism as a theory of class and history should be abandoned in favor of Marxism as a critical "way of seeing": "the theoretical terrains of culture and ideology [must] be given primary importance as a constitutive force in the shaping of consciousness and historical agency" (117).

The problems with Marxian models for radical pedagogy are typical of any system that proposes universal values, or to put it in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's terms, values that are not recognized as "radically contingent." The principal problem with Marxian models for education is that they tend to be "content-oriented," regarding knowledge as fixed, something that can be deposited into the students. The assumption is that when students understand that they are oppressed by the structure of capitalism, the light bulb will turn on, and they will become critical thinkers; that is, the development of critical-thinking skills is unnecessary because the truth has been revealed to them. On the other hand, "strategy-oriented" theories are subject to the typical pitfalls of humanist theories of education, which assume that by merely changing the structure of the education process (by doing away, for instance, with oppressive educational structures, such as teacher-as-authority and student-as-object) the material and economic structure will somehow change as well, because students grow up to be more spontaneous and open persons. (This argument seems similar to the one that says by bending the indicator on the thermometer, the ambient temperature will rise.) Aronowitz and Giroux find all correspondence theories of education inadequate. Simplistic Marxian correspondence theories (those which argue that education, which is superstructural, is always a reflection of the material structure) "reduces culture to a mere reflex of the material base" (Giroux 69). Also inadequate is Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural-reproductive model," which treats "both the concept of [cultural] capital as well as the notion of class . . . as static categories," leaving us with a "theory of reproduction that displays little faith in subordinate classes and groups and little hope in their ability or willingness to reconstruct the conditions under which they live, work, and learn" (Aronowitz and Giroux 87). In other words, they see as inadequate any pedagogy that presents knowledge as fixed or neatly categorized, or that fails to offer students and teachers avenues for constructing alternate liberatory structures of knowledge.

As I have noted, liberatory education, through the practice of critical thinking, must allow the individual to transcend the reified ideology instilled by the culture of positivism. But more than transcending is required; students must also visualize a version of emancipation. And although theorists disagree on methods, most agree that the real goal of radical pedagogy is the practice of emancipation:

[T]he ultimate value of the notion of resistance [education] must be measured not only by the degree to which it promotes critical thinking and reflective action but, more importantly, by the degree to which it contains the possibility of galvanizing collective political struggle among parents, teachers, and students around the issues

It is important to note that by "emancipation," Aronowitz and Giroux do not have in mind a teleological goal (such as the goals some radical theorists, including Gramsci, seem unable to avoid), but rather the process toward emancipation. Yet as any relativist thinker must note, emancipation conveys different visions to different persons and groups, and the means to that emancipation and what exactly it consists of must therefore be explored during the process of education.

In response to the question, "how do we form such a vision," Paulo Freire's well-known works propose "dialogic" education, where the teacher undergoes a "conversion to the people . . . through comradeship with the oppressed" (47), cultivating a knowledge of the students' world view; the students benefit from the teacher's more detached viewpoint: "Here no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world" (67). This symbiotic relationship allows both parties to "re-examine themselves constantly" (47). The objective of Freire's "problem-posing education" rejects the idea of education as a transfer of information and adopts

instead a concept of men as conscious beings, and [of] consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. . . . It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being *conscious of*, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself . . . consciousness as consciousness of consciousness. (66-67)

Students develop not only a kind of "thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as static entity" (81), but also a consciousness-creating power and, as Freire has put it recently, "a kind of *permanent effort* to grow, to create" (Shor and Freire 50). In any case, teacher and student join in the common objective—they share a "cointentionality" in their struggle to create meaning—of dissolving oppression, learning from each other.

The question arises, however, how does a teacher develop and maintain an emancipatory vision when, unlike Freire in 1960's Brazil, he or she is not surrounded by students who feel a desperate need for liberation, but by students who in fact feel quite comfortable with their world or by affluent college students who have great interest in keeping things exactly as they are? As Ira Shor put it, "Many students want to make it in a culture they perceive generally as democratic. Teachers wonder . . . [i]s it reasonable to apply such pedagogy here, with its vocabulary of domination and oppression?" (Shor and Freire 122). As Freire's theories emphasize, you cannot force someone into liberation. And as Stanley Fish has argued recently, all contexts of consciousness are equally restraining, the relativist's as constraining as the positivist's. Therefore, it does not follow that by simply convincing someone that all structures of knowledge are relative, an emancipatory vision that calls for the destruction of those structures will readily take its place within that person: "The authority of contingent schemes of association is not shaken simply by an awareness of their contingency" (Fish 20); because by that logic the concomitant recognition that the envisioned structures are also relative would necessitate their destruction as well. In other words, we would be entrapped by the egalitarianism that positivists insist is the result of *all forms of relativism*.

If the theorists I have discussed truly believe all structures of knowledge and evaluation are relative, they must realize their vision for emancipation is also relative, or in Smith's terms, radically contingent on their personal economies, which "are constituted by [their] needs, interests, and resources," and which, something like Fish's "interpretive communities," dictate the way one perceives ("Contingencies" 12). This is not to say, with the Egalitarian Fallacy, that all authority is undermined. Smith makes the crucial point that

Someone's distaste for or inability to grasp notions such as "absolute value" and "objective truth" does not in itself deprive her of such other human characteristics, relevant to moral action, as memory, imagination, early training and example, conditioned loyalties, instinctive sympathies and antipathies, and so forth. Nor does it deprive her of all interest in the subtler, more diffuse, and longer-range consequences of her actions and the actions of others, or oblige her, more than anyone else, to be motivated only by immediate self-interest. (*Contingencies* 161)

The relativist teacher, as much as anyone else, is committed to his or her own beliefs, values, and loyalties about what is right and wrong in the world, and therefore feels as obliged to bring about change, whether such change is brought about through individual action or socially, by influencing the beliefs and values of other persons.

For radical theorists and teachers, there is always the danger of begging the question of the "goodness" of their emancipatory visions, assuming that their emancipatory values will naturally follow from pure critical thinking (as if such a thing exists). Yet it stands to reason from the relativist position that the emergent values (if indeed any do emerge) could be anything. Giroux recognizes the fallacy of this reasoning, citing the example of "how Consolidated Edison in New York adopted (?) Freire's notion of literacy and conscientization to teach 'skills' to the uneducated [so] they might become 'employable and promotable!!'" (140). The upshot of Giroux's observation is that teachers need to recognize that methodology alone will not ensure radical visions of the world.

An appropriate course content is necessary as well. It seems to me that teachers need to keep well in mind that equality and democracy are not transcendent goods that inevitably emerge when one learns to seek the truth through critical thinking. Rather, if those are the desired values, the teacher must recognize that he or she must influence (perhaps manipulate is the more accurate word) students' values through charisma or power; otherwise, one must depend on the assumption that those values are latent in students, and the teacher's job is merely to help the student bring them to the surface. It must be recognized, then, that emancipation is not a transcendental vision, but is a value, which, like all values, is contingent, and that if the teacher wishes to instill such a vision in students, he or she must accept the role as manipulator.

But as both Fish and Smith argue, recognition of this should not necessarily affect the values we teach or the methods with which we teach them. Smith writes, "just thinking" about one's actions in "nonobjectivist ways" would not "therefore [lead the relativist to] act significantly differently from anyone else, including some morally reasoning moral theorist" (*Contingencies* 165); and Fish

I find the logic [that lacking transcendent values we can commit to nothing] incoherent because I can make no sense of the notion of convictions that do not flow from belief. If I am convinced of something it will be because within the assumptions that ground my consciousness I cannot see how it could be otherwise. . . . [N]one of us is possessed by convictions in which we do not fully believe or in relation to which we have a reservation rooted in some higher vision. (21)

The only effect of such logic would be, it seems, to make us more open-minded and respectful of our students' values. We still believe in our values—at least it does not logically follow that we should not—whether we believe them to be transcendentally anchored or anchored merely by our personal convictions. Therefore, it is of course reasonable—if it is what we believe—to try to inculcate into our students the conviction that the dominant order is repressive, that they should feel angered by the injustices done to others, that an emancipatory vision should be formulated, and its praxis should be exercised. The recognition that all the values we teach are radically contingent will only, as far as I can see, call for our making our agenda clear to them, much the way Robert Scholes in *Textual Power* asks English teachers to do when they teach the arbitrary structures and hidden curricula of English studies. We might make it clear to our students that emancipation is something we feel strongly about, and that it is our desire to make them feel strongly about it as well. We perhaps should make it clear that we are teaching one type of critical thinking among potentially numerous types, one that allows us to recognize the oppression of the dominant order.

Because we make clear that these are personal beliefs—but held with strong conviction nevertheless—and because we realize we are not teaching the truth, which the student will inevitably arrive at if he or she is only bright enough and follows instructions, the degree to which we are able to influence students depends a great deal upon charisma and power. Since the real value of emancipatory education can only be measured by the degree to which students are converted, that is, the degree to which they become committed to emancipatory causes and activities, it is crucial that we set proper examples and engage in behaviors they would wish to pursue themselves. As Shor puts it, "The teacher needs to model an active, skeptical learner in the classroom who invites students to be curious and critical . . . and creative" (8). In short, we need to keep in mind the importance of personality. If we want our students to become politically active, we should be politically active, participating in rallies, for instance, or keeping abreast of and attending lectures. If we wish our students to remain open-minded, we need to demonstrate our openness to the ideas of the students and others.

How can radical college teachers make a difference in society? Gramsci's "war of position" seems to be the paradigm with the most far-reaching possibilities. Gramsci saw hope in the steady infiltration of "organic intellectuals" into the ideology-creating arenas of civil society. They would teach the "popular element," enticing more of them into the "intellectual strata," until enough cultural and political momentum was gathered to create an "intellectual and moral bloc," which could then participate in the sphere of political action and change

to become so—by their students, and their influence can lead to life-long changes in students' lives. We can begin a grass-roots movement to make pedagogy more emancipatory throughout American education, not just in the college classroom. Workshops for high-school teachers can be organized, and lectures at teachers' conventions offered. Finally, college teachers teach the educators of tomorrow, and through the progressive radicalization of teachers, education in America—and more important its students—might be steadily altered. It takes time and patience. As Shor explains in *Culture Wars*, the battle most often means "settling for less." In his "talking book" with Shor, Freire—who has lived through revolutions, counter-revolutions, prisons, and torture—cautions us again and again that we should not expect to change the world overnight, encouraging us to take heart at the "little transformations." As Smith points out, patience is another virtue (at least I think it a virtue, but I realize many political activists would not) cultivated by relativists, because they do not see political change as an "either/or" situation (e.g., "either private property is abolished or things are terrible") and can therefore accept limited successes; they know the entire world will never be won over to their side and do not expect it, and even if such successes are achieved, by that time our values may have altered somewhat, and we must be ready to do battle once again.

The point that theorists of radical pedagogy make repeatedly is that a relativist outlook on the world is necessary for critical thinking; the point that many social critics (e.g., Christopher Lasch) make is that relativism is rampant, and therein lies the source of some crisis of consciousness. One needs only to turn on the *700 Club* or other TV Christian broadcasts to discover that objectivism sells in America, that there is a market of hungry and empty relativists eager to buy some truth. It seems to me, however, that for many people the problem is not so much adopting a relativist point of view, but adopting a healthy kind of relativism.

The awareness of relativism for college students, as the education researcher William G. Perry points out, can be liberating, but with this liberation also comes a potentially paralyzing degree of anxiety for many young students. Perry's chart of nine intellectual- and ethical-development "positions" can, for the sake of brevity, be collapsed into three: 1) "Duality"—the Garden of Eden, seeing knowledge as divided between good and bad, right and wrong, and the mindset that the objective of education is memorizing through hard work the right answers; 2) "Multiplicity"—seeing truth as pluralistic, indeterminate, that absolute truth, even in science, say, is unknowable, and authority is somewhat arbitrary; and 3) Commitment in Relativism—"an affirmation made in a world perceived as relativistic . . . an act in an examined, not in an unexamined life" (136). The problem is not that students experience anxiety and we need to coddle them; anxiety is part and parcel of the learning process. The problem is that many students temporize or retreat when they reach position 2, unable to move into Commitment. Developmentally they are simply not ready to go beyond the ideas of cynicism, awful freedom, solipsistic subjectivity, and truth-as-determined-by-power that can accompany relativism. The problem with relativism, then, is that it can be paralyzing to some subjects, especially the fielding "It

doesn't seem possible to, to, to determine any absolute, so . . . so I'm sort of stuck with relativism that leaves me a little bit dissatisfied" (179).

As I see it, the reason students tend to come to the conclusion that relativism is paralyzing is that we often inadvertently teach them to be moral paraplegics. We preach moral and political paralysis, teaching the misery of relativism without informing them that it is not the end of the world.

Despite the inroads made by deconstruction, most students today are still taught literature in the humanist tradition, where literature is seen as consoling, a relief from a brutal world. As Herbert Marcuse has argued, humanism places literature in an ideal realm, severing its ties with the material world. This conception of literature not only inhibits the development of critical thinking, it also affirms the ideal realm as a place for spiritual escape and transforms the material world into a place of relatively little importance. When culture is in this way segregated from material and mental actuality, it becomes what Marcuse calls "affirmative culture," which is seen as residing in

an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilization. Its decisive characteristic is the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed; a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence. (95)

Opiate-like, this exaltation of "cultural activities and objects . . . above the everyday sphere" acts as an insidiously repressive release for dissatisfactions; it is repressive because it prevents our becoming critical of the material situation, and thereby prevents us from taking the trouble to realize and carry out what is in our best interest; it is insidious because we are unaware of it. Such a view is admittedly seductive—it is easier than changing the world or our consciousness and it partakes of the myth of transcending the sublunary world of change—but it does not raise our critical awareness of the here and now.

Especially guilty of promoting affirmative culture are literary critics in the humanist tradition, a category which, in this context, includes Northrop Frye, whose work is an attempt to get beyond the aestheticism of the New Criticism. In his description of the tradition of literature, Frye proposes a formulation that is curiously similar to Lukács' portrayal of capitalist society and knowledge within it, as a vast and inscrutable machine that requires little human labor, and only occasional maintenance from the intellectual laborer. Frye proposes something like a criticism machine, which takes raw materials in the form of literary works and punches out interpretations—a conception that ironically undercuts his belief in the ennobling power of literature to produce better human beings.

Frye has written, following the arguments of Arnold and Eliot, that the entire body of literary work from the first tales told by primitive humans to the most recent poem makes up a self-contained "literary universe," a system that "absorb[s] everything from natural to human life into its own imaginative body" (71). Even the producer of the literary text, he writes, is absorbed into this machine:

The general principle involved is that there is really no such thing as self-expression in literature. . . . We relate to the poems and plays and novels we read and see, not to the men who wrote them, nor even directly to ourselves; we relate them to each

other. Literature is a world that we try to build up and enter at the same time. (72-73)

This passage reveals, when considered in the context of Lukács' model of reified consciousness, how Frye's system resembles a machine that merely needs the tending of caring laborers. Frye's "literary universe," made by humans for humans about humans, reifies literary labor: it transforms human work into something independent of humans, and this is what governs, or should govern, Frye proposes, literary work. Also interesting is Frye's idea that literature can promote social change by helping us "produce a vision of the society we want to live in" and strengthen our imaginations "to fight to protect us from falling into the illusions that society threatens us with" (140-41). (I would term such a formulation the "fallacy of the Savage," after Huxley's character whose taste of Shakespeare somehow enables him to see through the foolish ideologies of the futuristic, scientifically efficient society of *Brave New World*.) What makes us human is our ability to persevere in imagining the dream of the world we desire, but the desire transcends the material world: "literature does not reflect life . . . it swallows it. And the imagination won't stop until it's swallowed everything" (80). But the nexus between the imaginative and the material is never explained; it simply magically happens somehow by making us nobler beings and by eliciting our desire for a better world. It seems that what Frye offers, then, though he denies it, is the transference from reification of the material to reification of an imaginative system. And his system, which he adopts in his efforts to preserve and justify culture, does little in the way of getting us to examine or change our society. In other words, Frye's great-imaginative-body-of-literature anchor attempts to provide an escape from dreaded relativism, thereby reifying literary knowledge and sanctioning the ideology that we need an escape from relativism in order to survive. Frye does not seem to be talking about critical thinking, but rather about adhering to the vision produced in the literary machine.

It is important, then, that we move away from professing literature as a haven in a heartless world. Furthermore, it seems important that we do so early, before students develop the idea of intellectual vocationalism and the dread of relativism. Fostered by the New Criticism, the idea that becoming an English professor is something like entering the Roman Catholic priesthood strongly persists, lingering in the hallways of American English departments of colleges and high schools like a bad hangover. This religion-like role for literature sanctions the sacerdotal authority of English professors, who, abiding by the accepted literary canon, practice their profession while unchosen literature admirers participate as laypersons. But most insidious and dangerous, this conception of English studies suggests that literature is all the novice needs to study after entering the holy order. It depicts the best priest-interpreter as the person with the least historical or personal consciousness, with the least bias—the "transparent eyeball," to use Emerson's term, or "the perfect critic," to use Eliot's. The idea of literature as a substitute for religion is, of course, nothing new (Frank Lentricchia calls it the greatest banality of modernism), but the attitude is prevalent enough to attract ivory tower seekers, frustrate the socially concerned, and propagate the myth that we can't do anything about it. This has

pernicious consequences not only for the cause of social change—allowing students and faculty to take a moral holiday—but also to the students themselves, alienating their work from the rest of their lives. In short, one way that the study of English inhibits ethical development is through its methodology, by offering students affirmative culture, the promise of literature as something that transcends historical, social, and political contingencies, something with intrinsic good value.

But just as English studies may be especially guilty of bringing about the ideology of relativism-equals-despair, it also possesses potentially great power for overcoming this ideology. In order to avoid such objectivist ideologies, it is important to adopt appropriate methods—specifically, teaching literature within historical or other socially relevant contexts. Jeffrey Robinson, for instance, in *Radical Literary Education*, describes teaching Wordsworth's "Ode" in a manner that develops an "historical imagination in the presence of literature" (3). Another potential method for obviating such ideologies encourages students to relate literature to their lives and their societies, portraying literary works not as talismans that enable us to transcend our world, but as equipment for living in it. Ira Shor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, for instance, describes a method that develops critical thinking through the curriculum of an expository-writing classroom. It examines the foremost theoretical problems for radical pedagogy in American education, and posits hundreds of concrete ideas for overcoming them. Politicizing everyday life is a three-step problem-solving process in Shor's scheme: "Life-Diagnosis-Reconstruction." All this is part of Shor's idea of "problematizing life": "re-perceiving" the world, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary, desocialization, recognizing and expelling dominant-ideology thought processes, and, finally, developing the practice of actively engaging the world and of changing it.

Aside from methodology, our traditional interpretations of literary works—that is, the *content* we give literature—can promote the ideology of relativist despair. For instance, there is enormous emphasis in undergraduate literature courses on the loss-of-innocence-and-the-despair-of-experience theme, which seems to describe what we are doing to our students, watching them "fall" before our eyes while giving them the mythic vocabulary to describe the feeling. The problem with this paradigm is that, if taught in certain ways—emphasizing the tragedy of experience, discussing the paradigm as if it were the way the world and our psychology really and inevitably operate—it can lead to the idea that the only way to be truly comfortable in this relative world is to remain deluded, which, in turn, leads to the kind of elitism of Eliot, which goes something like, "I know everything's relative, but I have literature to lean back on; fortunately the miserable populace has its various idols, and is not aware of how dreadful epistemology really is, because if it did society would surely crumble." We must also exercise caution in the way we teach modern texts. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has probably contributed to the proliferation of the relativist-despair ideology as much as any text. Why teach this text (as, for instance, I was taught it) as indicative of the way things must be when "there's no longer any meaning in the world"? Why not, instead, take a cue from the humor

of the play, and pose the questions to students, "is this any way to live, and aren't there alternatives?" Why not compare the play to, say, Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2*—written when objective values were still the order of the day—and encourage a discussion about whether anything has really changed, and whether the two tramps are any less deluded than the misinformed but committed characters of Shakespeare's world?

The point is, the content of our courses as well as our methods can lead, if we are not careful, to a romanticism for objectivist epistemologies. Rather than empowering our students, we may enfeeble them, instilling within them the ideology of paralysis, and oppressive, institutionalized distortion of thought that is the product of the Egalitarian Fallacy and that acts to keep social change at bay by immobilizing the intellectual strata of our society.

As Smith's study makes clear, it is not especially difficult to live comfortably in this world without transcendent meaning or to pursue radical political change, but it does, I would argue, require some "scrappiness" on our part. By scrappiness Smith suggests "not only that the elements that interact to constitute our motives and behavior are incomplete and heterogeneous, like scraps of things, but also ('scrap' being a slang term for fight) that they are mutually conflicting or at least always potentially at odds" (*Contingencies* 148). I would add another meaning: Getting along in the world requires scrappiness—"scrappy" also serving as a slang term for "plucky," that is, "having great courage or spirited resourcefulness in trying circumstances" and "full of fighting spirit" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Since we acknowledge that there are no transcendent anchors to consult, no transcendent goals to justify the way things are or the actions we take, and no transcendent goods to teach our students, we must cultivate the courage to assume full responsibility for our actions, influence, and beliefs, which we try to pass on to our students.

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