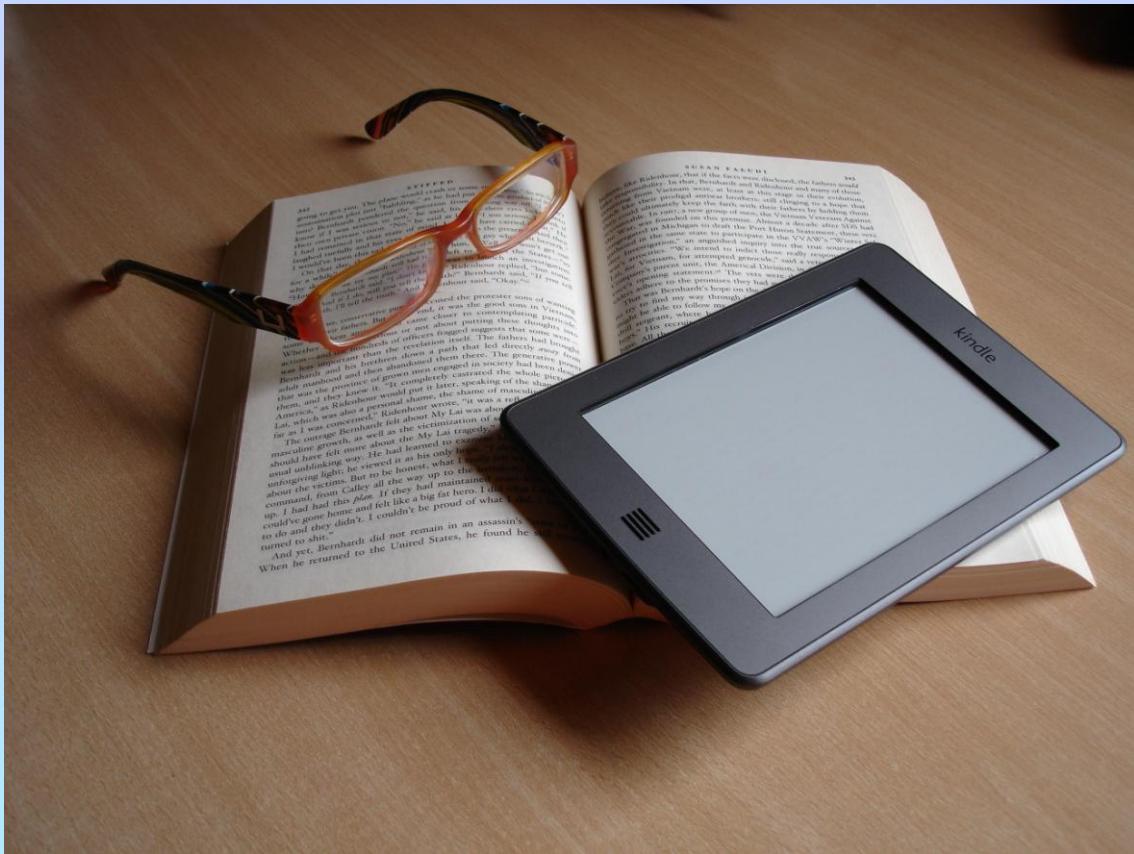


THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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A WARNING TO READERS:

These are the posts (or entries) that I published in my academic professional blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/) between September 2010, when I started it, and August 2011. The volume, like the following ones, covers, then a complete academic year.

I have not edited the texts. They may show some dissimilarities with the final published posts as I always revise them before uploading them. The differences are, however, negligible.

19-IX-2010 WELCOME!

Welcome to The Joys of Teaching Literature!! A blog for raving and ranting about what goes on in the Literature (and Cultural Studies) classroom and share it with whoever is reading out there.

19-IX-2010 STARTING A NEW BLOG

19 September 2010, beginning of the academic year, which is like New Year for us, teachers. A good moment to start a new blog. I believe blogs should focus on a single theme, so here's mine: the joys of teaching literature. Those who know me will quickly realise this is both an ironic and a straightforward title, as I love teaching literature (and cultural studies) but suffer for that, teaching as we do under less than ideal conditions. It is my aim to add once a week a short comment on what goes on in class, as I try to instil my students with a love for what I know is a hopelessly old-fashioned cultural practice: reading! If none reads me, this will help me at least to think about what I do and why I do it. Best, Sara.

19-IX-2010 THE FAMOUS BRONTË SISTERS (OR NOT SO FAMOUS)

This week I have started teaching 'Victorian Literature,' a second-year subject within the new 'Estudis Anglesos' degree. Fun started when I mentioned 'the three famous Brontë sisters.' You should have seen my students' blank faces!! Those who did know what I was talking about explained to me that the sisters were... Emily, Charlotte and the other one (Anne, yes).

I try never to be appalled by what my students don't know, which is hard. Yet, thinking with my colleague Esther Pujolràs about students' lack of acquaintance with the canonical Brontës, we both remembered that by the time we entered 'Filologia Anglesa' we were already familiar with plenty of English Literature.

As happens, we both had read Bruguera's translation of *Wuthering Heights* (more or less aged 15), seen the 1978 TV adaptation and developed an interest in other authors in English, following a similar pattern: translation, adaptation, original version.

This may have been exceptional, as not everyone grows to be an English 'filólogo,' but my impression is that it wasn't and that in a cultural environment with little to offer, one makes the best of available possibilities.

My students simply live in another world, with so much on offer that they are overwhelmed. To them the 'famous' Brontë sisters matter very little, they may be even feel like relics of a strange world we (re)construct in class and that may never catch on. I hope it does... but... And, yes, I'll be using a colourful PowerPoint next week to try to interest them in reading *Wuthering Heights*, thinking how none bothered when I was a student to make reading more palatable for me: it was my problem whether I enjoyed it or not, never the teacher's. But, yes, that was another world.

More next week...

23-IX-2010 ABOUT THE NEW MA DISSERTATIONS

This post was lost during the updating of the UAB's blog software, somebody may have read a longer version. Here I go again...

This week I'm done assessing MA dissertations for three different MA degrees and now's the time to consider what the new European convergence plans for higher education, which we know as plain 'Bologna,' have brought about. Not much that is good.

In my time as a student, ehem, mid 1980s to mid 1990s, it took 11 years for someone to complete a PhD in Spain: 5 for the 'Licenciatura,' 2 for doctoral courses, 1 for the equivalent of the MA dissertation (100 pages), 3 for the PhD dissertation (around 500). That was too much, no doubt. The 2002 reform reduced the 'Licenciatura' to 4 years and the doctoral courses to 1, so that the total amount of years to get a PhD went down to 9. Now it's down to 8 years: 4 for the 'Grado,' 1 for the MA including the dissertation (35-50 pages) and 3 for the PhD dissertation (350). This, of course, includes learning English in our case to a level high enough for international conferences and publication.

It's easy to see that time has been dramatically compressed at the MA level, which means in practice that in our UAB MA, Advanced English Studies: Literature and Culture, students have a maximum of 15 months to complete assignments for 8 different teachers and to write the dissertation. Yes, they may submit the dissertation in September rather than June, and yes, it's short, but this hardly helps.

We start the process of tutoring the dissertations as soon as possible with a research seminar given by all members of staff between November-December leading to a proposal submitted after Christmas. There is a constant follow-up with intermediate submissions of work in progress. Yet, this cannot make up for a new problem that we didn't have with the doctoral courses.

In the old system, students who enrolled in these courses aimed at completing a doctoral dissertation. Many gave up after writing the shorter dissertation, which was, anyway, twice as long as the current MA affair and researched over at least 1 year. Only students graduating with average Bs and As attempted the feat of getting a PhD. Now our public is different: they may just want the MA and never considered writing a PhD dissertation at all. The MA dissertation is hard enough for them but, then, ours is a research MA.

Why not filter the students and be more demanding, you may be wondering? Well, let's be frank: we need as many students as possible to guarantee the survival of our MAs all over Catalonia, just in case Generalitat considers that they're too expensive in terms of teaching resources. The result? Frustrated students and, at best, with a few honourable exceptions, half-baked pieces or nothing at all.

Delaying the submission of the MA dissertation to a second year means that students pay a staggering 900 euros for re-registration (600 plus a 40% surcharge). I'm beginning to believe universities are banking on this unlikelihood to complete the MA dissertation in time to get some extra money. Our suggestion that students may submit their work either in September or in February, counting as part of the same academic year, has been discounted with the excuse that our computers cannot do it.

Bureaucratic matters apart, the fact is that you in the same way you can't hurry love, as the song claims, you can't hurry learning (much less thinking, that undervalued activity). The production of good Literature dissertations takes time, as it takes plenty

of reading and that is time-consuming. We have, of course, the additional problem that some 'clever' politician decided to implement first the introduction of the MAs and then that of the new BAs (the four-year 'grados'). Also, that many of the most committed students are taking the new MA in teacher training for secondary schools which has been made compulsory for those who wish to teach in Generalitat schools. Thank you very much!!

If anyone knows of a fool-proof method to write excellent dissertations within a 15 month MA (in a foreign language, remember), do let me know...

23-IX-2010 BOOKS, LOVE AND LIFE

Yes, I made a mistake with the last slide of my PowerPoint presentation introducing *Wuthering Heights*. I inserted an image of the edition of Emily Brontë's masterpiece publicised as 'Bella and Edwards's favourite book.' What? You don't know who Bella and Edward are? Been hiding with Bin Laden in the last few years?? Perhaps even *he* knows who they are...

Well, so there I was, ranting and raving about how unfair and parasitical this appropriation of Brontë's work is, particularly because I happen to believe that Brontë portrays romantic love as an unhealthy form of madness (not so for the younger Cathy and Hareton, ok, fine).

I find, as I told my class, Stephanie Meyer's immensely popular saga extremely dangerous as, once more, it preaches an extreme form of romantic love based on the girl's total emotional dependence on a guy (who happens to be vampire, gosh!).

For me, Edward's 'heroic' fight to control his predator instincts (quite unlike what Heathcliff does, he lashes out...) contributes to spreading the idea that we must accept men's violence, as this is part of their nature, and *praise* them as *heroes* for controlling it. Just consider this: Bella initially doubts between Edward the vampire and Jacob the werewolf!! Whatever happened to nice guys??? Doesn't she have a problem choosing boyfriends?

Anyway, as I was leaving after my session, one of the girl students approached me – a bright one, who had made the point that she didn't admire *Wuthering Heights* as a romantic story (good!!). She needed to tell me, though, that she didn't quite understand my deep mistrust of Meyer's saga as she enjoyed a beautiful, intense relationship with her boyfriend and, in her view, this is what the saga was about: a defence of fulfilling, profound, romantic love.

So here we are, in the middle of the corridor discussing really intimate matters, myself telling her that romantic love should be all about complicity not dependence and that, no matter how much you love your partner, one cannot do a Heathcliff and spoil your own life and everyone else's when the loved one is gone. I didn't even tell her whether I have a relationship or not.

But, then: what do I know? I was moved by the girl's sincerity, and if she's reading this, I'll insist that it was a *beautiful* moment. Yet, I always get very nervous at confessional times like this because suddenly the mission of teaching 19th century fiction transforms into something else, maybe a mission to protect young people from the unstoppable influence of some kinds of appalling heteronormative fiction.

Yes, I love that in a way and I wouldn't know how to teach novels without relating them to real life (in the aseptic way of my own Spanish Literature teachers,

who used to discuss just textual precedents and philological features). I wonder, though, where is the boundary. I'll blame (I mean *praise*) feminism for tearing down the barriers between the political and the personal, the literary and life, yet, if any student is reading this, let me say this: literature teachers are as lost as anyone else, we just happen to have read much more...

27-IX-2010 SEEING BOOKS

Yes, more about *Wuthering Heights*.

I've been reading with my students today, among others, the scene when Nelly Dean tries to persuade an upset, teenage Heathcliff that he has nothing to envy his rival in love, blond, blue-eyed Edgar Linton. "Come to the glass," she says, "and I'll let you see what you should wish": a good-natured temper that would give his handsome face an attractive expression. An unusually nice Nelly tries, besides, to build the boy's self-confidence by telling him that "You're fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen...?"

As she administers this ad-hoc therapy Nelly is actually engaged in washing up Heathcliff's very dirty face and combing his unkempt hair so that his paramour Cathy, just transformed into a refined, pert young lady, will no longer make fun of him. One of the students, a girl trained as an actress at the Institut del Teatre, later told me (typically in the corridor) that she found this scene quite enticing as, precisely, a scene in the dramatic sense of the word. She marvelled at the good dramaturgy of this novel. I do, too.

I also marvel at how we miss this aspect of reading novels, caught up as we are in considering character, narrative technique, plot construction and a myriad other factors. It is plain that novels –even *Ulysses*– are a collection of scenes yet we very rarely consider the dramatic talent of novelists, perhaps except when we pay attention to adaptations as they force us to consider what can be transferred onto the screen (the scenes) and what cannot (the rest).

Maybe because I am indeed interested in adaptations I find it increasingly difficult to read without mulling over the visuals of what I am reading. I have already written an essay on what Heathcliff looks like based on a comparative analysis of diverse film versions of Brontë's novel but I am not talking now about this kind of visualisation. I mean: what exactly happens in our brains as we read? How do we imagine? In our media-saturated world, reading seems more and more unsatisfactory: scenes, even when they are as good in dramaturgy as the mirror scene I have described, are strangely hazy, diffuse, vague... particularly those set in a foreign past we know so little about.

I wonder what we'd see if we could take the mental images that Brontë's excellent mirror scene (wow, doesn't this sound Lacanian?) generated in each of my students, in each of the million readers of the book. Have they grown dimmer as the years go by? Do we imagine Brontë's world in 2010 in a radically different way from 1847? Surely, but still the question remains: how do we do it?

2-X-2010 LET ME COUNT THE HOURS

I wish this were a romantic post about counting the hours until seeing a loved one. It is not romantic at all, as here I want to comment on how our working time is being quantified to ridiculous extremes.

In Spain tenured university teachers are civil servants. The contract we sign with the Spanish state (or the regional governments) claims that we work 37.5 hours a week, 44 weeks a year (do we really get 8-week holidays? I hadn't noticed). This amounts to 1,650 hours per year. The UAB considers that these hours should be distributed as follows: 560 (teaching), 560 (research), 200 (administration, excluding appointments for particular posts like head of Department) and 330 (training and free choice activities).

Here's the obvious: you can't really count the hours we work, much less distribute them in neat packages. Some universities are even trying harder than this –a colleague in Lleida tells me they keep a strange accountancy which details how many hours it takes to write an article. As if we were robots instead of thinking persons. Maybe that's what they want, 'they' being the robotic bureaucrats that want to regulate our time as if we were factory workers (with all my respects to factory workers, including those in my own family).

Class hours, of course, can be counted but try to count the hours it takes to prepare one: from nothing, if you're recycling last year's materials, to anything if you're reading a novel just for one or two sessions (plus criticism, of course). Then, everyone has the experience of reading a book or seeing a film in their leisure time and end up using that as the basis for an article, which becomes the basis for a seminar, etc, etc. How do we quantify this mixture of leisure and working time?

A good Literature teacher must read as much as possible, and this includes time on the train, the evening until early hours, weekends –plenty that falls outside the 37.5 hour contract. Writing is even harder to quantify as perspiration doesn't always lead to inspiration and one piece may come to you as if dictated by the muses and another take ages, whether this is due to writer's block or because, as I have said before, **THINKING TAKES TIME**.

Actually, I believe that there is no way teaching Literature, producing good research, being an improvised administrator, etc, etc, fits into a 37.5-hour schedule. Maybe if we counted all the hours we do put in, governments would realise how **CHEAP** we are, but, then, this is not what they want, do they? Also, if we shouldn't have to waste our time making our own photocopies or being our own travel agents when we attend conferences, and if our groups were of 25 instead of 100 students, our time would stretch further.

And I'll stop here, and I'm sure someone is already thinking that the 20 minutes it takes to write a blog post are wasted time or, even worse, time I cheekily take off my 'well-paid' 37.5 hours. By the way, today is Saturday.

5-X- 2010 MOODLE ME UP (OR IS IT MUDDLE ME UP?)

A post today on the uses of virtual environments to help teach Literature. From the title you can see that this week I have been learning to use Moodle, maybe much later than you, my reader (if you exist), as it seems dear UAB has not been exactly in a hurry to open its Moodle classrooms. We've had our own platform, Virtual Campus,

for a number of years now and even though it is less flexible than Moodle it seems both are going to coexist for a while. I myself feel right now too laaazzzzyyy to open my Moodle classrooms.

Moodle, all considered, seems fine to me, maybe a bit overwhelming at first with all those mysterious menus. It is also time-consuming, which makes it particularly apt for courses of fixed content in which material and exercises are repeated from one year to the next.

This is precisely the reason why I'm not so happy about its applications to teaching Literature, as all self-respecting Lit teachers change the set texts as often as we reasonably can (even teaching *Wuthering Heights* for the twelfth time in a row is boring). What is, then, the point of developing, say, a quiz you're only going to use once? (Um, maybe sell it? In the process of looking for materials for my Moodle class, I found out there's an internet teachers' market for PowerPoint presentations –and then we complain that students are lazy...)

Before you think I'm a technophobic Taliban (would I be writing a blog?) let me explain that I have been teaching an 'Introduction to English Literature' (compulsory for Humanities and Catalan) at the online Universitat Oberta de Catalunya since 1998. That's already quite a long time but I haven't really seen much change as regards how we teach Literature.

Essentially, students at the UOC read (and they do it well, being mature students mostly educated in the far more serious pre-1994 pre-LOGSE system), consider the questions in the exercises and write; I read their exercises, mark them and provide feedback. They DO learn. Do the Forum and the Debate compensate for what happens in a conventional classroom? No, I don't think so, it's quite impossible. Yet, my online students do in many cases, not to say most cases, better than their UAB equivalents. Why? I have already said: they have been trained/educated in another system and are far more autonomous readers and learners.

At the UAB we are being asked to use Moodle, which is a platform for online learning (or e-learning), as a complement to our 'traditional' classroom-based teaching. I am not sure this is fair, probably because I also teach online. I find Campus Virtual and Moodle VERY useful, don't get me wrong, to keep the class up-dated, send messages, place materials in their hands. However, when last year I used the Forums, as I do at UOC, the result was mixed: positive peer interaction, yes, but both the students and myself felt we were doing too much. Don't we have classroom time for debate? Why should we use Forums? (And what else can we do for Literature in e-learning, I wonder?)

In a way, virtual interaction works well for shy students and has become more and more necessary because classroom time seems to have shrunk. I don't mean that we teach fewer hours (with Bologna and the new BA degree we actually teach more, which mystifies me). What I mean is that as students' autonomy as readers and learners has not been encouraged by ESO (our secondary education seems to have destroyed all vestiges of that), classroom hours are needed for pretty basic stuff, such as making sure students follow the plot of the novels they read. More and more is pushed onto the virtual classroom and, therefore, home, but not as Bologna intends.

The idea is that the new generation, being used to the internet, will approach the traditional teaching of Literature with more eagerness if new technologies are used. My impression is that this is not the case, at least in a conventional, presential

environment. Reading online has nothing to do with reading books and I, personally, prefer students to read books. The virtual classroom takes time off that and, anyway, no one can STUDY using a computer. We still need paper and pencil (yes, some eBook readers already allow users to underline and makes notes, that's also valid).

I'll get ready, then, to Moodle myself up hoping I won't muddle my teaching even more. In the meantime, teachers who have never even bothered to prepare a photocopy pack will continue as usual... offline.

9-X-2010 QUOTING LAURA MULVEY... AGAIN

This post is not so much about teaching as about writing academic essays.

I'm working on a paper on the concept of sexiness as regards men under the female heterosexual gaze and for the umpteenth time I'll have to quote Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." (In *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*. Eds. John Coughie and Annette Kuhn. London: Routledge. 22-34; 1992)

I have no idea how quotations are counted for impact indexing – I imagine underpaid students boringly keeping track of who quotes whom, in an Orwell-style open-plan huge office – but, surely, Mulvey's already quite old essay (for our hectic academic standards) must have broken all records.

What irks me is that I don't agree at all with her psychoanalytical conceptualization of the person holding the active gaze as male. Many, many other feminists have expressed the same annoyance with Mulvey's categorization of the passive as feminine and the active as masculine, which has in practice prevented heterosexual women from clearly explaining how they desire the [onscreen] men they find sexy (I'm trying to explain this, at least to myself). Yet, inevitably, we have to quote her in order to manifest our disagreement and offer alternatives that never really seem to discredit her work.

This leads me to the conclusion that, quite possibly, the most often quoted author needn't be the one who best illuminates an issue. I see Mulvey's merit in breaking new ground for the understanding of the mechanism of desire in film consumption and I see how she contributed to clarifying the exploitation of women as sexual objects by plenty of voyeuristic masculinist cinema, thus inviting women directors to re-imagine film (although, to tell the truth, I find only Kathryn Bigelow up to the challenge and she's been called 'male-in-drag,' just imagine...).

Anyway, I assume we quote her again and again because of this ground-breaking effort but I get tired of endorsing her work in one way or another and it worries me that, 35 years later, there's no new ground-breaking work to 'replace' hers. We seem to be too busy saying NO to her to come up with a radically new idea. I have the impression that only work that forgot about Mulvey could really offer a truly new approach but I know that simply ignoring her won't do, as it would be, yes, bad research.

Mulvey would matter less to me, of course, if impact indexes were not a reflection of mere quantification. Her impact index must be, of course, enormous but I wonder why/how impact can be positively quantified even when it is negative. I wish I knew how to write an essay so wrong that it would prompt everyone to quote me in disagreement and I'm beginning to realise that maybe that's a merit.

In my stupidity, I thought that impact had to do with making a striking point that generates productive consensus and a significant paradigm shift (yes, Judit Butler's *Gender Trouble* did that back in 1990). Mulvey did shift the paradigm but I still puzzle that she did so by generating disagreement and, although that's also VERY productive, I prefer quoting those I admire.

13-X-2010 QUEERYING MY TEACHING

I was teaching *Wuthering Heights*, trying to convince my students that when Heathcliff characterises his wife Isabella as a very dumb creature who has stupidly mistaken him for a gentleman hero of romance, Emily Brontë is actually pulling the rug under our feet –‘we’ being the women readers who, like Isabella, are mesmerised by the villain Heathcliff.

I was in the middle of ranting about the ills of clichéd romantic fiction and how it generates too many dependent, abused Isabellas in real life when I realised that my focus on the heterosexual readers of Brontë's masterpiece was excluding a male gay student in my class. He's openly gay, in case this clarification is necessary (um, just I am openly heterosexual...). Not that he complained at all; I did, silently and to myself, feeling suddenly self-conscious about how the heteronormative 19th century discourse was colonising my own teaching.

As a researcher I specialise in Gender Studies (yes, not Women's Studies) and that's how I teach. Many may disagree with this approach but I feel that as a feminist teacher of English Literature I fulfil a double mission: teaching about the texts as outstanding narrative, and teaching about their heteronormative context in order to make ours more visible, less powerful. This, of course, supposedly might also help any gay student, male or female (why are the lesbian girls so invisible??).

Actually, I am reading *Wuthering Heights* with a focus on how the unexpected homoerotic bonding between Heathcliff and Hareton should not blind us to Brontë's defence, through the latter's vindication, of a softer version of patriarchy by no means subversive. Yet, I hadn't wondered until last week whether this is enough. I do have the training to offer passable queer readings of all the Victorian texts I'm dealing with –think what comes next: *Great Expectations*, *Dr. Jekyll*, *Heart of Darkness*- but I am not sure heterosexual me can be totally fair to the identities and interests of the homosexual(s) in class. I am not (hetero)queer enough no matter how hard I try not to be, at least, heteronormative straight. I do hope that my assessment is fair enough to alternative queer readings of the texts and I hope they materialise.

As happens, I'll be teaching in a few days a seminar within Dr. Rodrigo Andrés's exciting 'Queer Readings' extension course at UB. My seminar deals with Sarah Water's lesbian novel, *Tipping the Velvet*. I had submitted a 20 minute paper to the conference that Prof. Andrés has organised for 4-5 November, «Noves subjectivitats/sexualitats literàries», but I was invited instead to expand that into a 3-hour-session. My panic transformed my paper on Waters' mainstream success into an examination of how I, as a heterosexual feminist, can read a lesbian text that doesn't address me. Can, not may, as I believe I have a right to read Waters, as much as my gay student surely can read (critically) that heterosexual novel, *Wuthering Heights*, and queer it. I should ask him to enlighten me about how he's doing it, though I don't know

whether this should be privately over coffee or publicly in class. To be honest, I don't even know how to address the issue...

15-X-2010 HOW MANY BOOKS (DOES IT TAKE TO KNOW THE BASICS OF VICTORIAN FICTION)?

A student in my Victorian Literature class complains (the third time in five weeks) that we're reading too much and too fast for this subject. I do worry, as I know that he is bright and capable –also that, like too many of our students, he works, given the serious scarcity of grants in our system. His complaint, by the way, is motivated by my blurting out in our final, seventh session on *Wuthering Heights* that it's shameful that students haven't finished reading it yet. Typical reaction, right? Mine and his.

How much is too much, though? I don't think that a graduate in English (as a foreign language) can claim s/he has a basic knowledge of Victorian fiction if that's based on fewer than four texts. As for speed, working out how many pages of wordy 19thC English an average Spanish second-year student of, well, English can read in one hour leads nowhere: the problem, I feel, is, rather, how many hours students devote to reading. Or do I mean endure reading non-stop? (Excuse me if I offend the truly devoted readers)

Essentially, there are two ways of teaching Literature. You may teach a History of Literature based on plenty of data and brief passages from literary sources, and leave to students the choice of how much Literature they actually read. The risk? Students may read no book at all –maybe not even a poem. Instead, we select a few representative texts and comment intensively on them (with groups of up to 100 students..., 40/50 on average, a small miracle!). We do offer introductions but, basically, we trust students to read History of Literature on their own. The risk? Students may read no secondary sources at all and end up with a confusing, patchy image of the History of English Literature.

What's driving us, teachers who favour close reading, up the wall, is that students hardly ever read the set books BEFORE we start commenting on them (some NEVER do, as one of the best students I've ever had candidly disclosed). Also, once started, they take very long to finish. English Literature teachers in Spain complain about this all the time: how are you supposed to analyse a text without students' being previously familiar with it? I've even had students asking me not to spoil their reading by commenting on the book's ending!!

This makes classroom close reading terribly constrained, as it imposes an awkward chronological order on what we comment on, for we patiently wait for students to read on (plod on?). At least, I do, or have to. It also keeps analysis at a very elementary level, at least until the last sessions (or so I thought!!). I've found myself recommending to my students that they read plot summaries before they read each chapter, which, yes, I know, sounds desperate... And I don't even want to think today about whether my students are reading the secondary sources in English (4 articles, compulsory; 1 book, recommended). Some other day...

I wonder whether my colleagues in the Spanish or the Catalan Departments face the same problem, working, as they do, in our own language(s). I also wonder if this is happening in Britain... Somebody tell me!!

The main reason for our difficulties is, I'm sorry to say, that the English students learn in secondary education is painfully inadequate. It's amazing how a novel that seems quite accessible becomes, the moment I read a passage aloud in class, an almost impenetrable maze. Yet, we're too pressed for time to wait for our students to have a good enough command of English to read fast, much less to appreciate the nuances. Surely, there's a minimum they should read before graduation.

A colleague suggests that I reduce my list of four down to two books, but if we go down that road we might end up reading just ONE book and maybe need a whole year. Yes... that's how Victorian readers read but this is a luxury we, as teachers, can't afford nor allow students.

19-X-2010 FASTER, FASTER... (DO DIGITAL RESOURCES MAKE LITERARY RESEARCH EASIER?)

This issue of whether the internet and the related digital resources make literary research faster comes up in conversation with our new MA students and with a doctoral student, now finishing her dissertation. Actually, I seem to have pretty much forgotten what it was like to do research before the internet although I wrote my own PhD dissertation at a transitional period (1994-6), when the net was finding its feet in Spain (see, about its fascinating history, the web of the Asociación de Usuarios de Internet, http://www.aui.es/index.php?body=histo_seccion&id_rubrique=255). Today PhD dissertations are published almost automatically on university websites, whereas mine belongs to the time when they were published by the UAB as microfiches, which sounds now as something vaguely out of old-fashioned Cold War spy fiction. That the UAB is now re-issuing those 20th century dissertations as .pdf documents available on the net, says it all about the obsolescence of microfiches.

A colleague in the Spanish Department, dazzled by his discovery of the main resources we use in English (the MLA database, among others), enthused about how anyone could get hold of the basic bibliography in any field –and even pretend s/he is a specialist. In a way, he's right. The availability of databases and catalogues devoted to secondary sources in English is certainly impressive and, yes, it's possible to produce a reasonably complete bibliography fast (passing for a specialist? Not really...). This, however, is not enough and has other consequences.

The time required to write an MA or PhD dissertation, an article or a book, is possibly shortened by on-line resources. Perhaps a year spent plodding through paper catalogues in library-based literary research can now be reduced to a few weeks, even less. Many sources can be downloaded from home, of course, and any book can be located all over the world. Naturally, once the sources are found, reading them takes the same time it used to take in pre-computer or pre-internet times, so does thinking and articulating thought. Until the time, that is, when, as happens in cyber-punk fiction, neural implants become generally available. I mean it...

Many students beginning literary research feel overwhelmed by the many resources available and it's certainly harder and harder to determine what should be the proportion between sources quoted and our own writing. If you read older secondary sources on English Literature you'll be surprised by how much pre-1980s quality work (published, for instance, in *PMLA*) has a very short bibliography or even none at all. I am by no means saying this is desirable but when I come across articles

that quote 50 sources in 20 pages, I wonder where the limit should lie. We run the risk of transforming our literary research into an exercise in intensive cut and paste, and even though collage has its merits, surely we need to consider them carefully.

In fact, evaluating the merits of any bibliography in literary research is also becoming quite complicated, as there must be very few specialists who can keep track of all that is published in their field, no matter how small that is (say, lesbian detective fiction!). Also, there's no way to distinguish between bibliographies that reflect extended reading on the author's side or a great proficiency in the use of the digital resources to avoid, precisely, investing too much time on a dissertation or an article. Add to this that as instant availability matters much in our fast-paced times, secondary sources on paper that are hard or expensive to track might eventually disappear, never to be quoted again.

So, on reflection, do the internet and other digital resources make literary research easier? No, I personally think they make it different: daunting for beginners; richer in secondary sources perhaps even to a dangerous extent; increasingly indifferent to the old idea of authority and more often conditioned by immediate availability. These tools may give you more time for reading as less is needed for (re)searching, but they also increase the amount of what the researcher may deem fundamental reading. They require, in the end, not so much skills to use them as skills to know when to stop using them... and start writing!

24-X-2010 ON FALLEN IDOLS (AND MR. CHARLES DICKENS)

I've started teaching *Great Expectations* and, as our times will have it, I have used a PowerPoint presentation to accompany a brief introduction to the life and works of Mr. Charles Dickens. In the course of searching for pictures that might make this write out of the remote Victorian past more real for them, I came across Claire Tomalin's acclaimed biography of his supposed live-in mistress for 13 years: *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (2004). 'Supposed' as no documents attest to their actually living together, for this silenced romance was regarded as a scandalous affair in Dickens's lifetime (1812-1870).

I don't favour at all biographical approaches to writers' lives and much less gossip about their romantic privacy, although this is still quite widespread (just read the magazine *Qué Leer* for a contemporary version). I make a point of never reading biographies, feeling that they can hardly bring a satisfactory explanation to the riddle of why/how some people grow up to become writers. Also, because I feel that many other biographies could be equally enlightening and even more exciting, and I don't mean those of football players –think here housewives or truck drivers. I am sure Dickens himself would agree that either any life or none at all deserves a biographer (who writes the biographies of biographers, I wonder?).

Just as Pip imagines that his father's looks reflect those of the letters on his grave, I wanted to imagine that Dickens's personality reflects the 'letters' in his novels. I pictured him not just as a genius but also as the kind of warm, committed person I definitely would like to meet and make friends with. Now my idol is fallen, quite possibly for ever.

What's changed? My internet search led me to a webpage on his wife, Catherine Hogarth, which disclosed how nasty Dickens had been to her after they

separated and, yes, before. I read gossip I want to forget about his being quite unsympathetic towards Kate during a long breakdown, caused by their baby daughter Dora's death. It seems he even published a notice in the newspapers when they formally separated in 1858, essentially blaming her for her incapacity to run their large household (there were at least two sisters-in-law helping the wife, maybe the husband had a point?). Someone claimed that Dickens even blamed Kate for their sprawling family of ten children.

I don't have enough elements to judge Dickens and I don't want to have them – instead of borrowing Peter Ackroyd's famed biography from the library, I borrowed Dickens's own *American Notes*. My students will learn about the difficulties of divorce in Victorian times but not about Dickens' ungentlemanly behaviour, unless they read this post (is this censorship?). Yet, I am disappointed, not just as a daft groupie, which I am, but mainly as a feminist teacher who, once more, *must* separate the man from the artist.

Others may find this irrelevant or even androphobic (I hope it's not), but when I admire a writer, I admire a mind that I suppose untainted with major sins: misogyny, racism, snobbery, homophobia, anti-semitism... If the mind is tainted, so is my pleasure in the text.

As a woman I am of course particularly sensitive to misogyny. Yet, finding out about Dickens's private life is teaching me, to my surprise, that I am more willing to accept misogyny in the man's text than in the man. A radical feminist would tell me I should expose both in class, text and man, as they are inseparable. Being no radical (or not always) and because I still love the text even though I love the man much less, I'll teach *Great Expectations* with the enthusiasm it deserves, pointing my finger at its weaknesses, and including mine for Dickens.

27-X-2010 THAT SUBVERSIVE CANON... OR DOING MARGINAL RESEARCH ON 19TH CENTURY US FICTION

Recently, I spoke with a doctoral student working for her PhD dissertation on Herman Melville's more neglected texts. To my surprise, she complained that the field of American Studies in Spain is saturated with research on 20th century and contemporary texts with a strong racial and ethnic component. This is why, in her view, 19th century American Literature is being unfairly ignored to the point that writing on someone in principle as canonical as Melville appears to a bold choice. Or even, I assume, using that favourite word of the anti-canonical, a subversive choice.

A colleague in the tiny circle of Popular Texts in Spain used to joke that he was looking forward to the day when a student would ask him to supervise a doctoral dissertation on James Joyce and he would be in a position to reply 'estás tonto/a, ¿o qué?' His boutade grew out of his tiredness at being constantly told that our research on non-canonical texts is trivial, even banal, but it also shows how tempting it is to dismiss what others do, once you pass from the minority to the majority. It also shows how the unorthodox displaces the orthodox creating a new marginality which, in its turn, becomes subversive –just think of how that budding Joycean would feel. Not that this has really happened with the canon yet... but, who knows? Maybe the first signs are here...

Of course, the choice of a 19th century white man (say, Melville) or an contemporary Afro-American woman (say, Toni Morrison) as the focus of research has nothing to do with the final quality of a PhD dissertation: the study on Melville might break new ground even beyond 19th century US Literature, that on Morrison could be just a boring repetition of academic clichés. Yet, it is true that we tend to attach the labels 'progressive' or 'conservative' to particular topics and it seems, at least at first sight, that working on Melville might be more conservative –might be, as what really matters is seeing Melville with fresh eyes, using the latest methodological and theoretical tools. One simply cannot write an old-fashioned dissertation, whether on Melville or on Morrison, out of touch with issues that dominate the current academic debates, for that would be just an apology of ignorance. And we're all fighting ignorance, right?

For me, in the end, literary and cultural research boils down to filling in the gaps in the currently available bibliography. If there is already plenty on Melville, why write more?, particularly considering how many other US or UK 19th century writers are still neglected. But if you feel there's a gap, go ahead and fill it up –who am I to stop you? Just don't stop my efforts to fill in other gaps... All in all, it is a perplexing irony of academic life that, although there is room for everyone, those working on the canon and those of us dealing with non-canonical popular texts feel equally marginalised. Do we do this to each other? Or is there a post-canonical (or neo-canonical?) orthodoxy disguised as subversion doing this?

Could it just be that no one is discriminating anyone any more and that we're simply not reading each other? I'll have to think harder...

31-X-2010 READING DICKENS... ALOUD

As anyone who enjoys reading Dickens knows, he had a very active interest in theatre to the point of staging amateur theatricals in his own home and taking part in them as an actor (that is how he met Ellen Ternan). His passion for drama is more than obvious in the dialogue of his novels, which is not at all like ordinary conversation; no wonder he electrified the crowds of Britain and the United States with his public readings.

Clearly, his novels are designed to be read aloud by a playful reader willing to perform the text, not simply read it. And it seems this is the way his novels were often consumed, whether in urban British Victorian households with the *pater familias* reading to wife, children and servants, or in the prairie camps of the ante-bellum America moving fast westwards, with the hardy pioneers taking turns to read to their companions. Many in the 19th century, it seems, never read Dickens but *heard* him, or, rather, *listened* to his written words.

Today, audio books are a growing business in the English-speaking world (not so much in Spain, who knows why), which suggests that the oral dimension of the novel has not been completely lost. We may have lost the ability to listen, however, since audio books are most often used as the background soundtrack to exercising, driving or cleaning the house, among other boring occupations. Making the most of the combination of working and listening (not just hearing), the Cuban tobacco factories still employ 'lectores' whose job consists of reading aloud a variety of texts

for the benefit of the workers. In this way, even those who happen to be illiterate can claim they're very well read.

It's hard to imagine, in any case, someone listening attentively while doing nothing else, much more so a single individual, for this attitude can only assumed within a group: the audience in a book presentation, a book club, or a classroom. As a student joked last week as we read in class passages from *Great Expectations*, the problem is that if he read Dickens aloud on the train he'd be taken straight to the loony bin! And he's right –the classroom is possibly the only space left where reading aloud feels natural. And where listening with full attention happens. More or less...

Dickens calls for quite a bold performer and students of English don't like reading aloud in class, as they don't want their mispronunciations mocked by their peers. The consequence? We teachers bear the burden of reading aloud, as well as we can... and end up perhaps amusing more than teaching our students. My guess is that all teachers of Victorian fiction have an embarrassing memory of voicing little Pip as he's scared by the ogre –the escaped convict– at the beginning of *Great Expectations*. I got lucky this time since half the attention was diverted towards the girl student who read so beautifully the convict's part (she has a training in acting). I am sure that her peers were a little awed by her performance. That was just what I needed to convince them that Dickens invites readers all the time to use, if not their actual voices, at least their mental theatres and, well, play.

3-XI-2010 STATISTIC IMPOSSIBILITIES (WHY OUR COMMON GROUND IS GONE)

“What happened to essential books?,” Rick Gekoski wonders, recalling with candid nostalgia an ideal 1974 when everyone had read the 21 books in his list, at least everyone he knew at Oxford (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2010/oct/22/essential-books>, thanks to Laura Gimeno for the link). What's happened is statistics, for now there's so much of everything and so many more of us that it is almost statistically impossible that your friends and colleagues read the same books you're reading. I don't see why students, apparently much annoyed by Gekoski's patronising comments (see Twitter), should be different in this.

Gekoski's approach seems both right and wrong, for since 1974 much has changed that makes forming canons more difficult; at the same time, though, readers still form canons of all kinds. In my view, the problem Gekoski misses is specialisation, not just field specialisation within Literary Studies but also genre specialisation among readers. No doubt, his canon *is* already specialised, as what he calls essential books were essential for an elite minority on elite campuses, hardly for the common reader.

Here's an example of these difficulties. I happen to love SF but even though that is a relatively small field within academia, it is impossible for me (and too expensive!) to keep up with all the academic novelties in English, Spanish and Catalan. As for SF fiction itself, I punctually receive the newsletter of the SFSite (<http://www.sfsite.com/>), and feel, thus, regularly overwhelmed by how much I must miss for lack of time. I just choose a few books every year, aided by reviews and awards, and hope for the best. I find it very unlikely that another SF fan reads exactly what I read, which makes sharing my pleasures difficult, regardless of the internet. Yet

all SF fans agree that there *is* a core canon that everyone should read, and we do read it (see for instance http://home.austarnet.com.au/petersykes/topscifi/lists_books_rank1.html). The same phenomenon applies to all genres, I'm sure, from detective fiction to literary novels about middle-age crises, passing through hard core philosophy or mathematics.

Gekoski himself realises that the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* sagas *are* essential books but he is uncomfortable with the idea that popular fantasy has taken the place of *his* essential books. Actually, popular fictions of this kind provide the only common ground for large numbers of readers, which doesn't mean that other essential books do not emerge (I'm thinking here of the passion unleashed for Zygmunt Bauman's books in academic circles). Perhaps the question, as usual, should be rephrased: what is an essential book today? And for whom? And are essential books more essential than essential films (movies?), comics, TV series, videogames and music? Isn't what we call Culture, in the end, a generational phenomenon marked by the media most highly valued in each time? Let's ask our students...

6-XI-2010 FAILED GREAT EXPECTATIONS ABOUT *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

A bright girl student pours down onto a long, singular email message the many reasons why she's disappointed with Dickens: she "cannot see the literature" in *Great Expectations*, she dislikes Dickens's too obvious moralising, and, generally, she finds him unable to impress her with a deep vision of what being human is about. He 'doesn't stir her soul' (as Emily Brontë did). We meet for coffee, together with another student –a young man– who does enjoy reading Dickens. (Um, precious meetings like this are indeed one of the joys of teaching Literature). Here is what happens: we badger her but sound less and less convincing as the conversation goes on.

For other students in class, the feeling is just the opposite: they love Dickens and can't stomach *Wuthering Heights*'s claustrophobic, mad Romanticism. I am so used to defending the merits of popular fiction against the attacks of canonical-minded academics, that I find myself less well equipped to defend the merits of a *particular* literary novel. Specially, with students who understand very well what Literature, as applied to the novel, is supposed to be (the artistic manipulation of all the elements for the purposes of enriching content beyond mere narrative, I think). Does this boil down to a matter of personal taste? Could it be that some texts generate great expectations they fail to meet and there is nothing we can do about this?

All the battles about the literary canon seem to forget what great debunkers of reputations students are. They may accept our reading lists but this doesn't mean we convince them, whether we try to perpetuate the canon or attack it. Sometimes this has to do with their bringing a virgin mind to what we read or see –I'm thinking of the class who found *Apocalypse Now!* soooo slow and boring (maybe it is!), or the class who found Laurence Olivier's Richard III simply hilarious (my, it is!). Other times, this has to do with students' having firm criteria we simply can't manipulate: this girl's discomfort with *Great Expectations* is, I'm sure, one among many cases. The difference in her case is that she's worried enough to try to articulate the reasons for her disappointment rather than just reject the text. Good for her!

After that coffee I had to use all my heavy artillery to explain why I think that Dickens is a great literary writer. Remember that as recently as 1948 F.R. Leavis still hesitated about what place Dickens occupied in the great tradition of the English novel, as Leavis also disliked Victorian moralising and didn't believe that Dickens had marked a turning point in the evolution of the novel. My personal opinion is that Dickens did amazing things with the English language and had a wonderful eye to penetrate not only into the weird and the grotesque but also into the general ugliness lurking beneath civilized mid-Victorian Britain. Yes, a very Gothic eye.

Just read the wonderful passage in which Pip, just arrived in London, takes a walk in Smithfields leading to Newgate and see how in just TWO paragraphs Dickens says it all about how justice treated people like animals. Is this obvious preaching? Maybe. I just happen to think we need more of this in our own individualistic, atomised post-modern time (obviously: we teachers are preachers). Of course, forcing my opinions onto students and shutting them up (or do I mean shouting them down?) would amount to committing the worst crime in teaching: behaving like a fascist. I don't Dickens would have like that.

10-XI-2010 MORE STATISTIC IMPOSSIBILITIES (OR WHO AM I WRITING FOR?)

Let me return to the idea of how statistic impossibility undermines our common ground from another angle.

This came up time ago in conversation with a colleague at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, Ángel Mateos (another SF fan!!). We were wondering one day about how many readers any of our publications actually get and how many academic essays go completely unread. Ángel came up with the startling idea that it is statistically impossible to read everything published in the field of English Literature.

He didn't mean on an individual basis but as a collective. Suppose you could count all the teachers, all the students and all the publications and then you'd see that our collective time is not enough to read all that we academics absolutely insist on publishing. It's a depressing thought. Limbo, after all, exists –and it is not only a cheeky Catholic ruse to frighten parents into baptising their babies!!

Impact indexes, one of the new obsessions dominating our bureaucratic academic life, count the times we're quoted for good or bad (yes, my post on Laura Mulvey). They register that someone or no one has quoted us, yet cannot quantify how many readers we get for each time we are quoted nor whether no references means no readers at all. I mean, of course, readers of actual published material, apart from editors and peer reviewers.

Professional writers tend to claim that they write with no particular reader in mind and that they're always surprised by their actual, material presence. We, academics, should be wise to address our writings, likewise, to this blank non-entity. I was going to write that we could also feign cool surprise at the material reality of our readers but I personally needn't feign anything –I attended a conference last week in which someone quoted me and I almost fainted!! Me??? Is she quoting me?? I introduced myself to the young academic who oddly enough thought I was worth quoting and *she* was the one surprised at my unexpected materialisation. (My, I realise this sounds Gothic).

I know that someone like Terry Eagleton would not understand my feelings... but there you are, academic life has so many levels and there are so many of us labour so close to limbo all the time. Now, in a clear case of sour grapes, I'll claim that I wouldn't like being as big as Eagleton –my nose grows long as I write... yours too...– as I'm sure that for him we, his numerous readers, are more a pest than a pleasure. I'd rather communicate with my readers on a personal basis and exchange ideas, as that's why I write academic work. Also, because I assume that my readers are my peers, the people I myself read. But where are you??

15-XI-2010 SEXUAL FANTASIES AND VICTORIAN FICTION

I ask the students to read a passage in *Great Expectations* which ends with the sentence "I must obey." One of them pretends to mishear me and asks in surprise "masturbate?" The whole class laughs at the fake Freudian slip and we start then a conversation on Pip's (and Heathcliff's) strange sexual lives. If they have one...

Unless Brontë wants us to read between the lines, we must accept that Heathcliff has no sex (at least in company) for almost twenty years, ages 21 to 39: from the moment his wife Isabella leaves him to the moment he dies. We may speculate about what goes on in his rambles in the moors with Cathy and during the three years of his mysterious absence but have no proof whatsoever that he's ever had sex before his disastrous wedding night (that might explain Isabella's wish to run away the following morning). Cathy, at least, bears a daughter, which suggests that Edgar and she are sexually active –at least once, yes, seemingly inspired by Heathcliff's return. In *Great Expectations* Pip falls madly in love with Estella aged 7 and gives her up aged 23 when she marries, remaining a bachelor until the age of 34 when he meets her again, already a widow. Once more, Dickens keeps silent about the hero's sexual life despite Pip's ranting about his passion for the girl. We might infer from her marriage to the brutal Drummle that Estella does have sex, who knows of what kind -sadomasochistic would be a safe bet.

Students and teachers used to the explicitness of current narratives with an erotic component and to the openness with which matters like masturbation and orgasm can be discussed today don't know what to make of odd fish like Heathcliff and Pip. The only option left is to think that they "must obey" their natural impulses and "masturbate" thinking of the women they fancy, yet it's even hard to apply this term to Victorian fiction. Our current post-Freudian, post-Foucaultian discourse on sexuality is complicated enough to complicate matters even further with a discussion of celibacy in Victorian fiction.

If staying mentally and physically healthy requires regular sex (alone or not) as we believe, then Heathcliff and Pip must be mad, as their obsession for a particular woman shows. Yet, because they're not presented as the pathological abnormalities we believe them to be today but as deluded, sad romantic heroes, we can hardly assess them as men. The women are, somehow, normalised by marriage but not Heathcliff and Pip. Perhaps a Victorian reader could automatically guess what kind of sex life they lead or accept they have none but us, 21st century readers, just puzzle and wonder.

17-XI-2010 PAYING TO READ MYSELF

Many people assume that because a handful of writers make a spectacular living off their best-selling books, any writer makes money. So far, if I count what I have invested in my writing and what I have gained, I am awfully, appallingly in the red. I have the experience of earning nothing whatsoever from a book that cost me plenty of money to write (yep, I never got royalties for the book *Expediente X: En honor a la verdad*, 2006, as the publisher, dear Alberto Santos, claims to be ruined...). Yet, here's a new experience for me: paying for a copy of a volume to which I have contributed an essay.

The book is called *A Comparison of Popular TV in English and Spanish Speaking Societies: Soaps, Sci-Fi, Sitcoms, Adult Cartoons, and Cult Series* and has been edited by my colleagues at UIB Marta Fernández Morales and José Igor Prieto-Arranz. I only have words of praise for them and for the hard work they've put into editing this very interesting volume, which is, precisely, the reason why I want to read it complete and keep it. Yet, the Edwin Mellen Press, which has published it, is not in the habit of giving copies to contributors. We, authors, are offered a discount, a strange practice imitated by other publishers (such as Cambridge Scholars Publishing).

For the benefit of the poor souls reading me who ignore it all about academic publishing, let me explain that we get no money from sales as chapter contributors do not really sign a contract but a waver of their copyright. I doubt that editors, who do sign a contract, get money, anyway. We, authors, sign contracts for books but, for instance, my colleague Isabel Santaulària has got so far for her great book *El monstruo humano: Una introducción a la ficción de los asesinos en serie* (2009) around 250 euros. Yes, it pays more to teach a seminar any afternoon (but then, you need to publish books for anyone to call you).

It could be worse: I should have to pay to have my work published, as many academics do all over the world for articles in academic books or for books, collective or otherwise. What truly puzzles me is that Amazon.com is selling at 5.95\$ an essay on Stephen King that I published in the journal *Atlantis* years ago and which can be downloaded from the internet for free (and for which, as usual, I wasn't paid). I have simply no idea who is the middleman distributing this to Amazon.com and I very much doubt the editor of *Atlantis* knows about this odd situation.

I understand that writing is part of my job and that, somehow, as Spanish society subsidises my time to write I am not really entitled to making even more money out of it. Or am I? I'm confused. I also assume that many academic presses make very little money out of publishing their books but I still don't get it: what kind of business is this? Can really the 9 copies for the contributors make such a big difference to the publishers?

I'm taking a deep breath here... and counting my savings to buy the book.

21-XI-2010 ISN'T JEKYLL, NOT HYDE, THE SCARY ONE? JUST WONDERING (ABOUT THE SCOTS)

I've read once more *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as I'll start teaching it again tomorrow –actually, the second time this semester as my UOC students have already gone through it– and I marvel at how powerful Stevenson's writing is. I also puzzle about how to explain to the students that this is a deeply

Scottish text in its depiction of evil. I do not mean villainy but, rather, the very tangible presence of something truly frightening, yet comprehensible, in the human mind. I find English fiction much tamer in this. Not even the Americans, for all their serial killers, can really compete with the Scots. I have the impression that Hyde would scare even Hannibal Lecter (or maybe eat him!). Perhaps only the Irish, with LeFanu's Carmilla and Stoker's Count Dracula, can truly match the Scots.

Anyone interested in Scottish Literature knows that the figure of the double is quite strong in it, beginning with James Hogg's masterpiece *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), nearly 60 years older than Stevenson's dark tale. Other literatures have attractive Gothic tales built around that figure but there is something singular in the way the Scots deal with the doppelgänger. Many critics have dealt with the issue, seeing in the nation's oppressive Calvinist background the main source for this basic acknowledgement that human beings are tainted and, thus, condemned to put up with their evil versions. It seems, somehow, hard for Scottish Literature to believe in unambiguous good though not so hard to believe in pure evil. Read Ian Rankin's splendid series of 17 novels on Detective Inspector John Rebus and you'll see how the hero falls gradually under the spell of his dark half, the self-assured, sardonic gangster Big Ger Cafferty. So will you.

On close consideration, what scares me in Stevenson's story is not really Hyde but Jekyll. His own account of the disastrous experiment that brings about his personality split and, eventually, his death is quite chilly, as Jekyll frankly acknowledges his addiction to Hyde's extreme freedom. Like many readers, I first approached the text thinking this was the story of a good man who wanted to help mankind get rid of its evil side, and, after all these years, I'm still reeling from the shock of realising this is not true at all. Jekyll never thinks of good, only of how to free himself from all moral restraints to enjoy his darkest pleasures without the burden of a conscience (or the loss of his social position). Hyde is pure evil, but Jekyll is much worse as he makes the decision to release Hyde. Just think: although he is in Hyde's shape, it is actually Dr. Jekyll who kills poor Dr. Lanyon, formerly his best friend, by showing him how the appalling transformation works. It is important to see that Lanyon dies of the shock produced by seeing Jekyll emerge from Hyde's body –not the other way round– as I very much suspect the 'good' doctor wanted all along.

As the story progresses, Jekyll loses control over Hyde because Hyde grows stronger –not a word is said about how Jekyll's good side grows weaker. It's tempting to think of an alternative version in which Jekyll distils the essence of good mixed in his personality to become not an evil sinner but a holy saint. It sounds like the kind of fiction only American Christian fundamentalists or Opus Dei members might enjoy –unless it was made as a comedy. It might be fun! The point is that none, as far as I know, has written this. All we have is the dark progeny of Stevenson's tale.

I just wonder why Stevenson, a Scot, was the first to muster the courage necessary to say that evil is not the Other but us and why we still blindly insist in finding Hyde scarier than Jekyll.

25-XI-2010 PREPARING JUST ONE LITERATURE CLASS

To begin with, I'm aware than I'm probably misusing the word 'class' as in the Anglo-American world teachers give lectures and teach seminars, whereas we, here in

Spain, do a mixture of both, and, so, we teach 'classes.' Somebody correct me if I'm doubly wrong, please. Anyway, here's my ranting and raving for today.

If I remember correctly, my university uses a 1:1 ratio to work out how much time we use to prepare classes. Thus, if I teach for one hour, I should use one hour for preparation. No way, it never works: I always need at least twice as much and at particular points it seems as if preparing just one session might take the whole day if not the whole week. I won't mention the word PowerPoint (my, I just did...).

Logically, things run faster if the class in question is repeated from a previous academic year but, even so, I still need to re-read the primary source –the literary text, the film, the TV episode– I'll be dealing with. I think most of us do. It's easy to explain: not even the briefest short story can be fully recalled with confidence enough to teach it. (Or just call me incompetent.) One thing is commenting on it in passing (at a conference during question time, in conversation) and quite another keeping all of it in mind for classroom analysis. And, then, literary texts have this enticing but exasperating quality: they seem to change all the time and no two readings are the same. Making exhaustive notes is useless –maybe except for plot summaries– as our ideas about what we read change all the time. Beautiful, sure, but hardly practical.

So, preparing a class might take as long as reading/seeing the text requires plus taking fresh notes, plus finding bibliography. And, then, what happens is this: class discussion suddenly takes an unexpected turn, too interesting to drop, and I run short of time to say what I've been working on for too long. Or students, ehem, haven't read the set text and I just manage to say 25% of what I had prepared, which means I have wasted my time. Or all goes well in class but I needed, anyway, to use many hours for preparation because I'm teaching new material I'm not yet wholly familiar with – as they say, often you teach to learn. Just think how long it takes to read a 250 page book for just one or two sessions.

And here's the killer: no matter how detailed my notes can be before or after class, they will be probably useless the following year, as we tend to change the set books, for the sake of variety as there's soooo much to choose from. I'm not sure whether this is plain romantic or plain dumb.

So, 1:1, sure, yes, whatever.

29-X-2010 EATING PEOPLE IS WRONG: MORE ON DR. JEKYLL, DR. LECTER AND PROF. HENRIETTA JEKYLL

Last week I wrote that even Dr. Lecter would find Mr. Hyde scary and since then I've been mulling over why cannibalism never comes up in connection with Stevenson's masterpiece. Actually, we had a lively discussion in class about the worst crime we imagine Hyde committing, and because the contemporary readings of the text focus so much on (Victorian, repressed) sexuality, we just came up with child rape and murder. Someone mentioned the Amstetten monster, as you might expect, as our most potent recent Jekyll-related nightmare but not the ultimate taboo of eating people.

Check any database and you'll soon find that plenty has been written about Lecter as the 1990s quintessential Dr. Jekyll, with suggestions that he's both the good doctor and his evil self in one, sealing thus Stevenson's self-divide. Other candidates to the post of best fictional Dr. Jekyll of the last twenty years might be, of course, Patrick

Bateman from Bret Easton Ellis' magnificently horrid *American Psycho* (1991) and, yes, the split protagonist of Chuck Palahniuk's truly great *Fight Club* (1996, film –also great by David Fincher 1999). Yet, I haven't been unable to trace an essay arguing that Hyde's favourite debauchery consists of eating people. Why not consider this? Ummm... yummy!

Now, seriously, most critics gloat over the hidden sexuality of Stevenson's text, fantasizing mainly that Hyde is either a sadistic, misogynistic heterosexual or a homosexual –do they mean just plain or also sadistic? See for instance Elaine Showalter's confusing essay "Dr. Jekyll's closet" in her book *Sexual Anarchy* (1991 – my thanks to Josh Bazell for pointing it out to me). Showalter makes three claims: 1) Hyde's crimes are sexual, 2) late Victorian male readers leading a double life would have quickly guessed that Jekyll's dark pleasures are homosexual, 3) it's hard to imagine a version with a female protagonist. Well, yes, if you must focus on sex.

Showalter wonders, as I do, what a contemporary Ms. Edie Hyde might do secretly that is too shameful for Prof. Henrietta Jekyll, chair, I would add, in Gender Studies at any US or UK university. Have sado-masochistic (lesbian) sex with a student? Really evil... As for her twin claims that Stevenson may have, perhaps, possibly, perchance, who knows, come in and out of the closet which is why Jekyll and his cronies are clearly gay, I find it intolerant and homophobic. I know she intends to condemn the author's and the original readers' hypocrisy but believing that Jekyll needs Hyde because he is gay simply hurts my queer (=anti-homophobic) sensitivity. Last time I saw Lecter (in print) he had trapped Clarice Starling into an appalling HETEROSEXUAL affair...

The problem with Hyde is that we don't seem to have much imagination when it comes to evil –um, luckily? Thomas Harris opened up through his Dr. Lecter new possibilities regarding ultimate evil at a modest individual scale (Lecter is no Hitler, not even a Bush). And why not imagine that in her college office Prof. Henrietta Jekyll daydreams about having some students for dinner? Unless, of course, you think that ladies can never be that evil... or good cooks like Lecter. That would be sexist, wouldn't it?

5-XII-2010 THE BOOK OF LIFE (IN MEMORIAM MIA VICTORI)

A very dear Department colleague, Mia Victori, passed away early this week, on November 29, the victim of an unexpected, massive stroke. She was only 44, and died while enjoying with her children and her sister a long-wished for sabbatical in California. We are all devastated, groping in the dark for clues that allow us to understand, if only a little, what has happened. It seems as if she might still return any time from the States and all this might turn out to be just a very sick joke.

My last image of Mia, which is a beautiful one, comes from a chance encounter by the photocopier in mid September. She announced to me then, absolutely radiant as if she had just fallen in love and full of what I can only call pure happiness, that, finally, she was going away, returning to California. Yes, returning. Here's the appalling irony that makes this sad death even sadder: about 15 years ago, Mia had spent two years there on La Caixa's well-known scholarship, and this was her chance to give herself and her three children another taste of American life. Somehow, the feeling

sticks that she *had* to go California because this is where her destiny was leading her for this final act.

And so, in the book that was her life, the heroine dies and there is no happy ending. A husband, three young children, the rest of Mia's family and friends, all her colleagues are left staring at the final page, angry with that bastard of an author –if there is one, I *know* there can't be– who has used a cheap *deus ex machina* to cut short the captivating work. Mia did plenty of value in her 44 years of short life, both personally and professionally but, precisely because she was doing well and doing good, it is hard to accept that she didn't deserve 44 more. After all, let's say it, other people who're up to no good get to enjoy even more years. I simply don't understand how anyone can believe there is a God. It (yes, *it*) certainly has no idea about (poetic) justice.

The obvious lesson to learn from the short book of Mia's life is that every moment should count as if it were the last one. I personally regret not only her untimely death but missing the opportunity to be more than a Department colleague. As we are civil servants, or aspire to, in Spanish academic life it seems as if people will be around for ever and too often relationships stay shallow. Mia was my own age and she had become a member of the Department also in the early 1990s. There were periods when we'd meet quite often, and enjoy our lunches together –she was always cheerful and warm– and there were others when we hardly saw each other, as everyone is so busy. Now it's too late. End of the story. End of the book. I'll miss you.

12-XII-2010 IDEOLOGY AND AESTHETICS (*HEART OF DARKNESS* ONCE MORE, CONRAD'S AND OTHERS)

I've just gone through Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* once more, this time to teach it almost simultaneously in my post-grad subject on "The Vietnam War" for our MA, and in my under-grad subject on Victorian Literature. In the first case, I've also focused, of course, on Coppola's *Apocalypse Now!*, which seems to me a worse film every time I watch it because of its pretentiousness, although I'll accept that there's no better adaptation of Conrad's masterpiece. Odd, very odd for a writer so interested in making us *see*.

Anyway, here I am this Sunday afternoon bracing myself for a few difficult sessions on Conrad's novella, not only because the text *is* (brilliantly) difficult but also because there is no way one can escape the dilemma aesthetics vs. ideology when teaching it. I already had a very complicated taste of this while teaching *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* when a couple of students showed their discomfort with my queer reading, only to beam at my strict aesthetic reading, which I gave in less than comfort. One can always speculate whether Jekyll was imagined as secretly gay or not but NOTHING can hide the fact that Marlow's misadventure happens *to a white man in colonial Africa*. It is, thus, my duty –how Victorian this sounds! – to integrate Chinua Achebe's bitter criticism of Conrad's racism and the subsequent reactions, for not doing this to focus just on the sheer beauty of the prose would be simply *morally* wrong.

Harold Bloom says in *The Western Canon* (1995: 28) that "If we read the Western canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service

of any ideology is not, in my judgement, to read at all." If that is so, then I'm *proudly* illiterate, as I believe in teaching students to detect everyone's ideology, including mine and Bloom's, a true monster of selfishness if there is one. Can there be anything more narcissistic than claiming that "All that the Western canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality"? We live as we dream... alone, yes, as Conrad said, but we are also social, historical and cultural creatures, that is, the children of a particular ideology, as Conrad knew very well, whether he liked it or not.

Mario Vargas Llosa, the last Nobel prize winner, has recreated in *El sueño del celta* (2010) –which I haven't read yet but will read asap– the astonishing story of the man who inspired Conrad, pro-human rights activist Roger Casement, a hero turned villain as British public opinion about him changed. Vargas Llosa, certainly no leftie, is a clear example of the successful mixture of aesthetics and ideology, for which, precisely, he has impressed the Swedes (and, yes, annoyed many others). Read his novel ignoring why Casement fought, what Congo was about and why Conrad had to write his masterpiece and let's discuss only literary aesthetics... at your own moral risk.

14-XII-2010 ENGLAND, ENGLAND... AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR CULTURAL STUDIES AND LITERATURE OF RAISING UNIVERSITY TUITION FEES

A very dear ex-student, Cristina Delgado, emails me a photo in which she appears sitting on the ground in the middle of the street with her boyfriend, surrounded by an impressive human wall made up of police agents. Both are doctoral students in England, just two among the many thousands forced to take the streets by the British Government's decision to rise tuition fees from a maximum of £3,290 to £9,000.

I won't pretend to be very well informed about the situation, which, as usual the BBC explains very well (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11483638>) My first impression, though, is that of a nation slowly committing suicide, as education is the key to the future, whether individual or collective (for a comparison of England with Scotland, where university fees are still –mostly– free see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11515828>).

Discussing this ugly situation with a colleague at Manchester University, just a couple of weeks ago, we wondered about the impact that the much higher fees will have on the teaching of Literature and, more particularly, of Cultural Studies. He worried about having to teach more hours and to more students, as they would demand more classroom presence from teachers –value for money, though we all know that warming seats in the classroom for longer has little to do with quality teaching.

Above all, however, he worried that the only students able to afford a university education would be, like in old times, (upper)-middle-class and upper-class. Coming from a more conservative background, they might avoid degrees with any kind of ideological left-wing whiff, which is certainly the case of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies was started and is maintained mostly by us, the children of working class families enabled by some small miracle to attend university (in Britain by post-war Labour policies, in Spain by the post-*transición* Socialist government). Now it seems as if the cycle might be closing, unless a new wave of anti-bourgeoisie young people

emerge, as happened in the mythical 1968. Maybe they're marching in the streets of England, I don't know.

As for English (that is, Literature) my guess is that fewer students of any background will choose it in Britain, given the limited related job opportunities. In Spain, let's recall this, we, Literature teachers, teach under the protection of the label 'Filología' now renamed 'Estudios.' There are no degrees, new or old, just on a particular Literature in a given language. And here, at the UAB, our Licenciatura in 'Literatura Comparada y Teoría de la Literatura' was lost somewhere in the misty path towards the new degrees.

It's hard not to feel depressed these days, whether you are young or not so young, student or teacher, in the sciences or in the humanities. Truly, this is the winter of our discontent.

18-XII-2010 THE QUIET AMERICAN: GREENE, MANKIEWICZ, NOYCE AND PHUONG

I'm teaching a course on the witness in Vietnam War books and films. This includes Coppola's overblown *Apocalypse Now!* with *Heart of Darkness*, *The Quiet American* with its two film versions, Ron Kovic's truly sad memoir *Born on the 4th July* with Oliver Stone's memorable adaptation, and Le Ly Hayslip's moving two-volume autobiography, filmed also by Stone as the underrated *Heaven and Earth*. This week I've been teaching Greene's novel and the films by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1958) and Philip Noyce (2002) and, well, in a class with a female teacher and only female students inevitably the spotlight has fallen on the main female character, Vietnamese Phuong.

The Quiet American (1956) is celebrated as a good novel and an even better historical insight into the escalation of American intervention in Vietnam. Greene is highly critical of how the Americans betrayed the French to establish a corrupt south-based Third Force that disrupted tragically the anti-colonial war of liberation which the nationalist Vietminh of Ho Chi Minh were waging. Ironically, this anti-American novel became the Bible for many American war correspondents in the 1960s and 70s (see Nolan's article, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/30/movies/graham-greene-s-unquiet-novel-film-print-quiet-american-still-fascinates.html>). They seemingly identified with the jaded, middle-aged British journalist Fowler than with the naive but highly dangerous young Alden Pyle, the quintessence of American blinkered interventionism.

Now, if you strip the novel down to its core, Greene actually narrates a melodramatic sexual confrontation between Fowler and Pyle for the girl Phuong, Fowler's mistress for two years. There is a clear metaphor here: Phuong is a sexualised representation of all of Vietnam, whereas the men represent two kinds of selfish colonialism: one more or less benign in its non-interventionism but also decadent (1956, when the novel was published, was the crucial year in which the Suez Canal was lost to Egyptian nationalism), the other quite evil in its paranoiac Cold-War approach to Vietnam's anti-imperialistic struggle. To make the story closer to events, perhaps Fowler should have been French but since he is not, his patriarchal contest with Pyle for Phuong's body is revealed to be just that: pure patriarchal rivalry, transcending the particular local conflict where it erupts.

Phuong is so obviously the stereotypical Oriental woman –beautiful, uncomplaining, always sexually available but undemanding– that I cringe all through the novel. She hardly reacts while Fowler and Pyle discuss to her face, though wholly ignoring her, whom she should choose. Her uglier sister Miss Hei uses, in the meantime, all her cheeky wiles to palm her off to Pyle and a cherished American future. Another stereotype indeed. The Vietnamese men hardly exist in this alleged war story, which helps present Phuong as a helpless maiden in distress, condemned to street-walking prostitution unless a white man rescues her. The men, of course, do not see that they just want to be her one and only client and fancy themselves, particularly Pyle, as her saviours.

The films do strange things to this Phuong. In the 1958 version she's played by a pretty, but also pretty bad, Italian actress (Giorgia Moll), with the wrong body language, face and diction. My students, to my surprise, liked her better than the ethnically correct Do Thi Hay Yen of Noyce's film version, maybe because Moll plays the role with Mediterranean passion and Yen is too close to the original passive Phuong for comfort (though also more of a subtle schemer). I puzzle about Moll's miscasting, maybe a side effect of the film's interiors being shot in Cinecittà. My provisional conclusion is that audiences were not yet ready for interracial kissing, though the film proudly announced that its exteriors had been filmed on location in Vietnam. Or maybe an Italian woman was as exotic as a Vietnamese one in the 1950s, for that matter.

The 2002 version has a different, serious problem: put beautiful 20-year-old Yen in bed with 61-year-old Michael Caine (as Fowler) and, no matter how mild the scenes are, instead of love you see a picture of blatant sexual trafficking in Asia, past and present. When Miss Hei declares that Phuong is Saigon's most beautiful woman, I couldn't help thinking she could do much better than Fowler –a disgusting thought; this is what patriarchal stories do to women spectators. No matter: such a beauty would have done better indeed in real life, which shows that the Phuong of *Quiet American* is plainly just Greene's sexual fantasy (he was 52 when the novel was published, roughly Fowler's age).

In the end, I'm sorry to say, *The Quiet American* boils down to the old patriarchal fantasy and is not such a great Vietnam War novel as too many think. Maybe, here's an ugly thought, American journalists carried it in their bags expecting not to much to understand Vietnam as to catch their own Phuong.

22-XII-2010 POLITICAL CRITERIA AND MASTERS DEGREES

I'm more and more baffled by what is happening in Spain and here at home, in Catalonia, regarding the European convergence in higher education. We have ended up with four-year BAs and one-year MAs, instead of the more desirable 3+2 scheme, and now, before most of the new BAs (Grados) have even produced their first graduates, we're being asked to modify and, in the worst cases ordered to shut down, MAs which have been running for under 4 years. This is madness, particularly if we think that, simultaneously, the tuition fees have sharply gone up making it even more difficult for any of the Bologna-style MAs to survive (and much less attract foreign students). And also, that we face very tough competition from the new MA required to teach in secondary schools. And also... (the list goes on).

Anyway, I have already written about this and before I start sounding like a broken record, let me consider what is new. The novelty these days is that we're been asked to reform the surviving MA degrees to fashion them as a second cycle degree, a continuation from a BA, rather than a specialised degree. In a way, this would mean going back to the old Licenciatura system which I myself followed and which consisted of a 5 year degree with two cycles (3+2), followed by 1 or 2 years of doctoral courses. In the new proposed scheme, the numbers would be 4 BA + 1 MA +1 PhD courses (yes = 6, as of old), as we'll probably have to reintroduce teaching at doctoral level to make sure MA graduates can face the challenge of writing a PhD dissertation. Running in circles, I call this. And losing, in the meantime, much of the original intellectual energy of the old-fashioned Spanish degrees. I don't believe I'm writing this but that's what I feel right now.

What irks most is that all these decisions are being taken by politicians sitting somewhere at remote Generalitat offices here in Barcelona or even further away in Madrid. The tiny Literature section to which I belong in the English Department at UAB had managed more or less well before Bologna happened, in that we used to teach our Licenciatura subjects and a one-year doctoral programme, which attracted between 6 and 10 people each year, most of them finishing their equivalent MA dissertations satisfactorily. Suddenly, the same figures no longer seem good enough for the MA, which is ridiculous as, logically, the market for post-grad degrees in English Literature has not increased. Why should it?

I do believe our MA is good enough, considering our circumstances (we're a second language Department, an understaffed section and divided into many fields as each of us has to cover at least one for all of English Literature and Cultural Studies). If the product cannot find its niche it's clearly NOT our fault but the fault of those who pushed us onto a market that we needn't enter. We used to be happier, now we're a frustrated bunch, tired of the whole Bologna nightmare.

There are plans to fuse with the other Department MA, as we should have done from the beginning to guarantee survival. Yet, this is, as the main opponent against the merger claims, absurd from an academic point of view as MAs should be designed to offer specialisation not a furthering of the general education offered by the BA. I can only say to this that this absurdity doesn't spring from any of us in the Department but from the politicians who believe that training less than 10 post-grad students is too expensive but that do not see that admitting up to 140 (official UAB figures) students in an undergrad class might be even more expensive in the long run for the nation as this reduces dramatically our time for research.

These are indeed bad times for teaching, Literature or anything else.

2-I-2011 MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S *EL SUEÑO DEL CELTA*: CONSIDERING WHAT THE NOBEL PRIZE MEANS

First posting of the new year: happy 2011!

I don't wish to turn this blog into a space for reviewing but, as happens, I've been reading Vargas Llosa's *El sueño del celta* (2010) and I do feel the need to vent my deep disappointment.

You may recall from a recent post that I recommended this book –I hesitate to call it novel– as it deals with the fascinating Roger Casement, an Irishman who became

a fervent patriot only after witnessing the outrages of colonialism in Congo and Peru. Being Peruvian and, allegedly, an excellent literary writer, Vargas Llosa seemed highly qualified to recall Casement's story for the benefit of the Spanish-speaking world, where this heroic Irishman is not known. The fact that Llosa is also a conservative, right-wing failed politician and a well-known opponent of nationalism should have warned me that he was a less than ideal choice. Yet, the problem with *El sueño del celta* is not just its wavering gender and political ideology but, mainly, its flat, insipid writing.

Of course, reading Vargas Llosa's account of Casement's sad life so soon after reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* highlights even more Llosa's limitations as a writer—at least in this particular book, which is my first by him. The atrocities, yes, are more accurately described and the visual impact of what horrified both Conrad and Casement is higher; Conrad's novella is irritatingly vague and too timid in comparison to what actually traumatised him and indeed a clear case of the limitations of literary representation (yes, he did know and this is what *Heart* is mainly about). Yet, the beauty of its nightmarish prose is unsurpassable and I suspect that knowing he could by no means match it, Llosa went for the simplest possible Spanish. So bad, believe me, that at points he seems to be translating from English and characters are said to be 'perdiendo su sanidad' instead of their 'cordura.' Repetitions of events abound as if Llosa felt too lazy to edit them out while characters come and go with little depth of characterisation, as Llosa seems more interested in pouring down all the details he's learned in his (superficial) research than in building a proper novel. At points, yes, this feels like non-fiction but of the worst kind, nothing to do with Adam Hochschild's excellent *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) that Llosa knew so well, as he wrote a prologue for the Spanish edition and was the inspiration for *El sueño*.

I am also wondering whether rather than celebrate Casement as a hero, Llosa is sending out a warning to all those poor misguided souls, queer or not, who fight for the independence of their nations. As you'll recall, Casement was a former British consul that became involved with the Irish uprising of 1916 and, having conceived the mad plan of asking Germany for help in the middle of WWI, was executed as a traitor. It seems to me that the segments on Congo and Peru do reflect the abuses of colonialism whereas the segment on Ireland completely fails to do so, insisting instead on the poor planning of Irish independence and the ensuing bloodbath. As for Casement's notorious *Black Diaries*, which portray in singular detail his many sexual encounters with young men and whose authorship is dubious, Llosa has decided that they *are* Casement's but partly a fantasy, as if accepting a gay man as hero was subjected to limiting his promiscuity to tolerable numbers. You might argue that Llosa is here making an effort few conservative writers would make but I doubt this will please many LGTB activists.

All in all, I haven't learned anything new about Casement that I hadn't already learned in the afternoon I spent surfing websites about him. Llosa's research contributes many trivial details regarding location and the characters' appearance (and health, an obsession) but misses, for instance, the fact that Casement's report was a British Government Blue Book, calling it the *Blue Book*, as if this were its title. I'm mystified, though, about the unavailability of this crucial Blue Book on the net, where only an extract can be found. I'd be thankful for tips on the e-text (I know of the print

edition by Seamas O'Siochain and Michael O'Sullivan). My impression is that the *Black Diaries* are much easier to find.

To conclude, whereas in the case of *Heart of Darkness* I argued the need to bear in mind the ideology of the text and never judge it on its literary merits alone, in the case of *El sueño del celta*, which raises similar ideological issues, my point is that it fails miserably as a literary text, which is what it should be coming from the most recent Nobel Prize winner... if that means anything at all.

5-I-2011 THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP AND 'THIRD-WORLD' AUTOBIOGRAPHY (LE LY HAYSLIP'S MEMOIRS)

I'm preparing my notes to teach Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993), and I realise that defining authorship in them is quite complicated.

Hayslip, born in Vietnam in 1949, moved to the USA in 1970, when she married Ed Munro, a civilian contractor –her ticket out of the devastating war. She spoke little English and, indeed, not enough to write a book on her own even years later, by the time she decided to narrate her life. Her teenage son Jimmy, educated in America and computer-literate, helped by taking down what she dictated, presumably partly the stories she had been painfully writing alone for years. Once she sold her first book, this was completed with the help of Jay Wurts, a Californian writer who advertises himself on his own website as co-author, developmental writer and editor. Wurts is, thus, credited as co-author on the cover of Hayslip's first book ("with Jay Wurts") though not on the second, where an adult James Hayslip is named even though the copyright notice only cites 'Charles Jay Wurts' as co-author. Complicated...

Of course, this is nothing new, as many autobiographies and memoirs are co-authored by writers like Wurts or by plain ghost writers (yes, I'm thinking of Polanski's adaptation of Robert Harris's thriller...). The other Vietnam memoir I've taught, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, is not his alone, either, as he mentions in his acknowledgements that his friend and editor, Joyce Johnson, spent "countless hours... helping construct this book." I'm well aware that editors play a prominent role quite unwelcome in Spain, where both authors and readers prefer what could be called 'purity in authorship.' I wonder, though, why Johnson is not credited as co-author whereas Wurts is; it must be a matter of the actual writing done but, again, no idea how this is measured.

This 'purity' hadn't bothered me much regarding Hayslip and Kovic until I came across Allen Carey-Webb's article "Auto/Biography of the Oppressed: The Power of Testimonial" [*The English Journal*, 80: 4, Apr., 1991, 44-47]. In this essay Carey-Webb offers a list of Third World "testimonials" that might interest American students (college, I assume), ranging from Rigoberta Menchú's to Hayslip's. He, surprisingly, denies that testimonials are autobiographies (=texts worth literary studies attention) as "they are recorded and written down by a second person... Testimonials are a sort of Third World 'auto/biography' that brings to the center the experience of the unlettered, marginalized, and oppressed. They are ideal texts in which students and teachers alike attempt to hear the voice of the voiceless, investigate cultural and social differences, and raise questions about what it means to be 'culturally literate.'"

Third World sounds to me here appallingly patronising precisely because Kovic is First World and he still needed, like many other of the “unlettered, marginalized, and oppressed” (or the simply untalented for writing) help from an editor. By placing Menchú’s or Hayslip’s co-authored written texts in a separate category on the grounds of their oral origins I think that Carey-Webb undermines their importance in increasing that ‘cultural literacy’ that we, teachers and students, so direly need –and as autobiographies, and what this implies for the genre. Actually, Hayslip, for all her pro-American bias, teaches an important lesson in how to acquire a mixed cultural literacy (under pressure from war). Her books, by the way, are very well written, in particular the first one. And, surely, many memoirs and autobiographies by First World persons are based on oral interviews, which is not quite Hayslip’s case.

Another essay, Killmeier and Kwok, “A People’s History of Empire, or the Imperial Recuperation of Vietnam? Countermyths and Myths in *Heaven and Earth*” [*Journal of Communication Inquiry*, July 2005, 29: 256-272] shows how Oliver Stone’s film version of Hayslip’s books, the underrated *Heaven and Earth*, does something peculiar with language, having Le Ly use correct English in scenes where only the Vietnamese appear –though they miss that they’re played by an assortment of Asian actors– and pidgin English with Americans. This choice shows that Stone’s American audience was/is not ready for the required linguistic realism (have the Vietnamese speak their language with English subtitles). Yet, it also complicates the memoirs: they’re not translated, like Menchú’s, into English but thought directly in Hayslip’s migrant American English, polished by Wurts. Is this pidgin?

So, in my own pidgin, Third-World English, as, like Hayslip, I’m not a native English-speaker, let me say that I’m very glad her ‘testimonial’ has reached me through the First World bridge of American English, whether co-authored or not, oral or written, literary or not. It is the perfect companion for Kovic’s ‘First World’ ‘literary’ ‘autobiography.’

11-I-2011 MARKING PAPERS... (IF YOU'RE A TEACHER, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!)

I’m taking a break from marking the 39 papers (minimum 1,000 words - maximum 2,500 words) I need to mark by Thursday, unless I want to spoil my weekend once more (my Friday is busy with other academic activities). I’m about to fulfil my 15 paper quota for today, which is not too bad, and I need to let steam off. If any teacher is reading me, I know s/he’ll sympathise but this is not for you. This is for the students, mine or anyone else’s.

Despite the constant, universal plagiarising, I still believe in papers and in the importance of teaching Literature students to write them well. I convince myself that students work hard and, so, deserve my whole attention when I mark their work. This is why I spend an unreasonable amount of time, taken off writing my own papers, making notes and comments. I find that doing this on a Word file instead of a paper copy is less time-consuming but I’m not sure how it works for students (or other teachers). Anyway, my students, if you’re reading me: I understand that my duties include investing my time on marking your papers but how am I supposed to feel regarding those papers clearly showing that the student author doesn’t care and won’t

bother? Marking those is, for me, a complete waste of my teaching time and, so, of the resources that should benefit those who do care and bother.

Well-written, well-researched papers are, of course, a pleasure to read. Marking becomes then less relevant than establishing a dialogue with the student author. Other papers may be not so perfect but work well, nonetheless, because the student has given his or her best: you can hear the brain wheels purr and spin, and sense the wish to do well, to impress. In these two cases, the papers striving for perfection and the papers born of making an effort beyond one's limits, teaching is no burden at all. Quite the contrary.

The real killjoy are the papers that demand my attention even though their authors have paid no attention whatsoever to 'minor' problems such as: spelling (Dr. Kekyll?), layout, referencing, use of quotations, writing intelligible sentences, etc... you name it! The whole paper screams at me: I don't care and I won't bother. Not even to check the painstakingly written guidelines and samples available on Virtual Campus and, what is even more puzzling, the secondary sources that could have been so easily used... Why, oh why?? You lose by getting a lower mark, I only gain frustration, no one benefits. What a sad waste.

16-I-2011 PUZZLING OVER THE USE OF GUIDES AND GUIDELINES

Now that everyone is marking papers and exams, some colleagues and myself discuss over lunch the function of guides and guidelines (yes, you, students, occupy our thoughts a great deal of our time). I'm using these two words to distinguish the documents that offer information on a whole subject, and that we call Teaching Guides, from the documents written specifically to help students with particular tasks (like our Writing Guidelines for Literature Papers). We're divided on the issue of whether guides and guidelines should be offered at all.

Those of us who think that they should, argue that it was about time there existed a unified document (the Teaching Guide) for the whole Facultat de Lletres here at UAB that was taken seriously as a contract between teacher and student (a very good Bologna-related innovation). As for the guidelines, we write them in the belief that they give clear instructions that help students and ourselves save time. In both cases, the intention is also giving students an impression of cohesion and coherence in our teaching practice, and improving indeed these two aspects. The detractors, like those at our lunch table, however, think that students are given too much help and point out that their exercises are proof that many, anyway, don't even read the documents we pass on. Some of us, they say, coddle students too much and prevent them thus from developing their own autonomous skills (from 'wising up,' which, I think, is the closest verb to Spanish 'espabilan').

An important issue like this shows the difficulties in communication between students and teachers. When writing guides and guidelines, we think of helping, believe me, of simplifying students' lives. But I feel, like many of us, awfully frustrated when the course begins and no student has bought the set books even though the Teaching Guide has been available for months. Or when I mark papers that haven't been edited in the way the Writing Guidelines indicate. Where do we go wrong? If books are not bought sufficiently in advance, the Literature class degenerates into chaos. If guidelines are not followed, marking becomes exasperating and, you,

students, should know that an exasperated teachers simply tends to award lower marks. We're human, after all.

A student once told me that books are bought at the last minute because we, teachers, change our minds all the time. Well, check this with us. And, truly, the function of the Teaching Guide is to prevent that from happening – teachers publish their reading list and this is it: as binding as a legal contract. As for the Writing Guidelines, there are two points that we simply can't understand: why they aren't read and why they're not applied. No small points... Maybe we sound as a bunch of quirky, capricious individuals – one wants footnotes, the other MLA parenthesis... Or we fail to impress students with the importance of obeying rules that we need to obey ourselves if we ever want to publish academic work.

The same applies to deadlines, which some students seem to think are another teachers' whim and not a way to organise their workload and ours. By the way: the deadline marks the last possible time for handing in an exercise, not the moment when this **SHOULD** be done... My colleague in Victorian Literature was asked to extend her deadline from 14:30pm to midnight on the grounds that my students could email their papers until that moment. I agree we should have had the same deadline but a matter of hours should **NOT** make a difference, particularly for a paper that has been in development for at least three months.

I'll be grateful for feedback on this one.

20-I-2011 MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN, WHO COULD HAVE BEEN RAYMOND WILLIAMS

An unexpected blessing of commuting by train to the UAB is that I get one hour a day for reading what I please. As I always carry a heavy bag and I still don't have an e-book reader, I'm becoming an expert at choosing the slimmest, juiciest possible books (mostly from my local library, the wonderful Jaume Fuster on Plaça Lesseps). This week I was truly fortunate to pick up Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *Crónica sentimental de España*, a volume published in 1971 but based on a series of articles originally issued in the weekly magazine *Triunfo*. I wish it were 400 pages long, instead of just 200...

Reading Montalbán's recollection of popular culture in Spain between the 1940s and 1960s and his clever insights into the split between that and what was fashionable in elite circles I wonder why his book didn't initiate a corresponding Cultural Studies tradition in Spain already in the 70s. Of course, I'm not so naive that I can't myself answer: journalism is not the same as academic writing, the university under Franco was extremely backward, the theorisation of Cultural Studies *per se* was just beginning in the UK. You name it. There was no way a Raymond Williams could emerge here, though I'm sure he would have greatly appreciated Montalbán's efforts to make sense of the popular in Spain.

The other feeling this marvellously written book produces is one of dismay at, precisely, the nature of culture in general and of the popular in particular in Franco's Spain. As Montalbán was writing in 1969, already from the perspective of the generation born during the Civil War, the reader can see how his thinking is poised on the brink of the Transición, and, thus, sounds far less mouldy than anything an earlier generation could have produced. It's also great to read what was going on at the time first hand, rather than from the (academic) perspective of, say, my own generation

(born in the 1960s). Yet, it's hard to admit that our roots are so narrow-minded, provincial, and unsophisticated. No wonder that so many of us interested in popular culture became 'Filólogos Ingleses' rather than Hispanists (anyway, *they* don't study Spanish popular culture).

In a way we took a shortcut to access the foreign, English-speaking cultures that fascinated that older Spain through cinema since the 1940s (dubbed, yes) and through the popular novel, TV, pop and rock and fashions later on, particularly since Spain entered UN in the 1950s and the Americans started using us as a military outpost. We could safely ignore the Lolas Flores, and the Pacos Martínez Soria and contribute to the 1980s project of finally updating Spain. The problem is that we have no other past and, although I don't identify at all with the culture(s) Montalbán describes, the funny thing is that I'm beginning to feel nostalgic.

Not of Franco's time, for God's sake!, but of the past we didn't have because of his evil ways. What a pity.

24-I-2011 ON BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SCHIZOPHRENIA (HOW COME I'D NEVER HEARD OF GILLES LIPOVETSKY?)

Yes, I'm still marking students' exercises, no teaching to do, which means I'm reading for pleasure texts I needn't prepare for class. This time it's been the turn of Gilles Lipovetsky's simply excellent *La felicidad paradójica* (2006), which I picked up because a colleague in my research group ('Body and Textuality,' beautifully coordinated by Meri Torras) happened to mention him in passing as a fundamental name, in the same way I'd name Michel Foucault.

I am awfully ignorant of too many things but it worried me particularly that I'd never heard of Lipovetsky (a French philosopher like Foucault, by the way –um, maybe you knew?), as this sounded like a really glaring omission. I think I understand the problem better now (I still acknowledge my bottomless ignorance!): the academic world is tightly divided into different language communities, one (to which I belong as an English Studies specialist) uses for theorising bibliography almost exclusively and originally in English, the other (i.e. Spanish academia, to which I belong only secondarily) depends on theory mainly translated from English and, yes, to the same extent from French. Um, theory originally written in Spanish occupies, this is my feeling, a secondary place in our own territory. Our fault?

Here it is: I know Foucault because he's been translated into English and profusely quoted; I didn't know about Lipovetsky because only two of his books have been translated, I assume that with little impact as I've never come across a quotation from them in English (have I??). In contrast, Anagrama has published practically all of Lipovetsky's works in Spanish; some, like the one I've read, are even included in their popular 'Compactos' collection. See the paradox at work. Check the English-speaking Wikipedia page on Lipovetsky... and it sends you to the Spanish version for more info!! Amazing. Check www.worldcat.org and you'll see that, again atypically, of the 98 items cited under his name only 6 are in English (26 in Spanish... and only 23 in French!).

This, of course, needn't mean much but, to me, it is essential proof of how badly knowledge circulates across language barriers even in the 21st century. It's not only that there's a noticeable time lag because of translation needs but also that whole areas fail to permeate other areas. Dialogue doesn't really happen. Thus, entering the

multidisciplinary research group I belong has plunged me into an enriching but also bewildering bibliographical schizophrenia. I find myself using bibliography in English to write my papers in Spanish because there is no equivalent in Spanish, either translated or original, yet I wonder how many Lipovetskys I don't know about (and I should, from a Spanish point of view). Quite a mess. Maybe I should start again all over and take a degree in 'Teoría de la Literatura' – I wish I could, as it's vanished from the UAB.

You might think that access to English makes you properly cosmopolitan but I often believe it's the opposite: it makes you provincial, as what happens in, say, France or Germany, doesn't exist without translation into English and what happens in Spanish simply doesn't exist. I won't even mention Catalan – there we go again: I just did.

I can hear you groan... 'What! you didn't know about Lipovetksy? Shame on you...' Yes, indeed.

28-I-2011 IT'S SO BEAUTIFUL WHEN IT WORKS...

There's a little bit of irony in the title of my blog but also a little bit of despair, as you can see from many of my postings, about the sad fact that teaching is not always as joyful as it should be. Yet, this is exactly what it is when it works well, joyful indeed, so this time I'm celebrating.

I've just marked 26 longish papers (2,500 words, standard conference measure) on villainy and heroism for my segment of the Cultural Studies module within the MA in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory. It's been tough, because as usual I had very little time (just two days, more papers and exams coming in next Monday...) but it's also been a pleasure, which is rare. In the best cases, I've even learned, which is the highest praise a teacher can give a student. Well done!!

The problem is that I can't apply any of the strategies that have worked well for this class to other classes, as the success of these strategies does not depend on my teaching but on the students' willingness to learn. It is true that we, teachers, work at a higher standard when our teaching is received with interest but, if this is the key, then it's not my merit at all but the students'. They've listened patiently and they've applied very well what I lectured on to their own papers, choosing to focus on a variety of very interesting texts. Again, all of it is their merit. I'm the same teacher, with my well-known limitations, in all my subjects but, then, some work beautifully (at least for me!) and some don't. The difference, that's the inevitable conclusion, are the students.

This particular class has no common denominator, which is peculiar, except that they're all in the same MA. They come from very different BAs and from a variety of countries; only 5 have the UAB 'Licenciatura' taught by practically the same teachers that teach in the MA. I'd say they're exceptional if it weren't because it's the fourth time I see this exceptionality. Perhaps the MA is exceptional in that it attracts plenty of intellectual energy focused on reading, though no teacher can say whether this will turn out to be the last flare of the dying pre-Bologna system or a constant stream that will survive the mounting ravages on education.

I feel, it's odd to say, well used by this class. They've made the most of me, as a resource funded with public money and, of course, by their own money, and I think that this is what all students need: an awareness that we, teachers, are resources they should exploit for their own intellectual growth. Students who cheat, who don't work,

who don't care are simply wasting the resources others could use better but also, and this is where they show that they don't deserve a university education, they are not making enough of the possibilities offered to them.

Anyway, today I'm satisfied. Thanks, students!

2-II-2011 GROWING PARANOIA AND FRUSTRATION (MORE ON MARKING ESSAYS)

Marking papers is exhausting because it has become a sad game of suspicion and also because I can't help being appalled at how shallow secondary education has become –yes, I said secondary. First part: my second year students plagiarise from sources I can easily find and, then, they claim they're actually quoting 'indirectly.' Others plagiarise from sources I can't find and it's a case of their word against mine. Second part: students who have produced very weak papers in which apparently no guidelines have been followed claim they have indeed followed them and are frustrated that what they thought were good papers are actually failures. I'm tired, very tired, which is not the mood a teacher needs to prepare for the oncoming semester.

So, dear students: when suddenly perfect sentences appear in the middle of your papers, written in a vocabulary and with a syntax that only a native speaker with a PhD would use, I grow paranoid. There should be a name for those sentences that somehow jump out of the text to stare at me and challenge me to find where they come from. I HATE wasting my time checking the internet for 'evidence.' All teachers do. It's absolutely necessary to learn the difference between quoting (using "quotation marks" and a reference for the author, book, page...) and simply copying; it's also necessary to understand that paraphrasis means repeating 'in your own words' what the author means, not copying without quotation marks. How come you don't know this? And how do we distinguish the cheeky, cheating students from the confused ones?

In the tutorials with second-year students who had failed their papers I feel increasingly sorry for them, as, one by one, they reveal the limitations of their secondary education: this is the first time they write a paper (just 1000 words long), use bibliography, are asked to quote. Many present papers with a nice bibliography they claim to have read but simply don't see that if it is not quoted I can't know how they have used it. Quotations are often dropped into the text, rather than used to support an argument they're developing. They have checked the guidelines, they tell me, read the sample essay. What can I tell them, I wonder? Read articles, there's no more guidance I can offer. Of course, we have lost 6 credits, a whole semester, in the first year with the transition to the new degree, 6 valuable credits which might have helped us teach our students writing techniques. Instead, they're taking who knows what.

Then, there's this other matter: the hairy ball in the stomach. This is what I feel I have when I must see a student who hasn't played by the rules but who doesn't understand why I'm so annoyed at this. It's tense, it's ugly and I simply don't like it. And, typically, it always happens when it's too late, and the wretched paper in question has been marked, not during the semester, when I may spend my office

hours doing something else for lack of visits... Wasted resources, as I said in a previous post.

2-II-2011 31.2%, THE LOWEST OF THE LOW

Second posting in a day, yes, I have the urge today.

Here's Spain for you: there were two news items yesterday worth contrasting. On the one hand, a report by the European Commission revealed that in Spain 31.2% of the 18-24 age segment abandon their secondary education studies. The European average is just 14%, high enough for the Commission to launch a plan to curb it down urgently (see http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news2768_en.htm). An article in *El Público* blames the Spanish horror on the easy money that young people could make in Spain until the real state bubble burst out (see <http://www.publico.es/espana/359168/el-auge-del-ladrillo-disparo-el-fracaso-escolar-en-espana>). This is funny because the picture my students offered of jobs for the young was quite bleak also at the time of supposed bonanza, courtesy of Aznar's labour reform. Anyway, youth unemployment is today 51%, the highest in the European Union. Wonder why...

Connect this to the other news item: retirement age has been increased to 67 (university teacher retire at 70, by the way). The main trade unions were yesterday celebrating, as they claimed that the agreement with the Government regulated retirement at an earlier age, provided the worker had been paying his/her retirement fee or contribution to the Social Security for 37,5 years. Now: my dad started working aged 14, so he could have retired aged 51,5 (he pre-retired, like too many workers made redundant at the state's expense, at 61). The joke is that with that 51% unemployment and all the lousy contracts few young people start contributing to their pensions in earnest before they're 30. Check this: $30 + 37,5 = 67,5$. Nice, huh?

Here's what missing: unless young people go back to school to finish their secondary education (and let's hope the standards go up), we, the oldies, won't get a pension. Much less if the unemployment figures stay so high and if the few lucky ones who get a job are as ill-treated by employers as they are now. Check this: I have a very nice student employed as a waiter by a very famous luxury hotel here in BCN –he's sub-employed through a temp agency and recently his 10 euros an hour went down to 8. He has been unable to attend classes regularly because even though he explained he needed a regular schedule when he signed up, he's been given a different one every week. And he is, remember, trying to complete his university education to give all of us a better future, with pensions.

In *Trainspotting* Renton famously says that Scots are "the lowest of the low." Now, they're not: we are. So, back to teaching, see if I can secure my own pension...

7-II-2011 THEATRE FOR KIDDIES, NO KIDDING!!

When preparing a new subject what is usually a free-time activity for fun suddenly becomes work. I'm now reading non-stop for a subject on Contemporary British Drama (1980s-2000s), which I haven't taught in a long time and truly look forward to teaching this second semester, and, so, now attending any play means work, yes, even a play for kids.

The one I attended recently, a danced version of *Pinotxo* by Cía. Roseland at Teatre Poliorama in Barcelona, left me open-mouthed with its daring, clever multi-media approach (have a look at <https://il.youtube.com/watch?v=xLx5yzKM3bA&feature=related>). Many adults shouted 'Bravo' at the end and this has been an habitual reaction in the about 10 plays for kids I've seen in the last year and a half. I haven't found really anything so fully satisfactory in the theatre for adults (I'll make two exceptions: *El Ball* and *Agost*, both at TNC).

I was, like many people I'm sure, prejudiced, thinking that kiddies' theatre could by no means compare to adult theatre. I was SO wrong I don't know where to begin to apologise to all those companies that work SO hard not just at entertaining children but at making them sophisticated theatre spectators: Roseland, Ego Petits, Comediants, la Joventut de la Faràndula, La Trepà, Més Tumàquet... Hey, the only thing I can say is, check if there's any kid in your family or circle of friends willing to give theatre a try and go. (They're not always up to it, no matter how enticing you may sound... by the way, it's just a bit more expensive than cinema and can even be cheaper. It's worth it!).

The kids take in their stride every experimental play they see -and, believe me, they are experimental to a degree you would never guess- as the most normal thing. Indeed, not all adults can be so open-minded, though I know that you can't turn a child into a theatre spectator if s/he doesn't have the inclination. The only thing that worries me is that it's usually us, the adults, clapping wildly at the end while few kiddies show the same exact degree of enthusiasm. Of course, being so young they can't know that what they're being offered is truly special and it's hard to explain this to them unless they're subjected to a temporary diet of very bad theatre (um, where?).

Paradoxically, with all this exciting theatre the kids might grow up to be jaded, soon-bored spectators and abandon the theatre eventually, if you know what I mean. I also worry about how the gap is filled between the ages of, say, 10, when kids probably simply reject kiddies theatre as too childish and, 18 (16?), when they're ready for adult theatre. Or maybe earlier? No idea, really... That's how little I, as a Literature teacher, know about the wildly underrated theatre for children and about kids as theatre spectators. Time to learn more.

12-II-2011 A SENTIMENTAL MOMENT (A STUDENT SAYS THANKS)

One of my UOC students has the kindness of emailing me a message of thanks for my patience and efficiency –I hope this doesn't sound too smug– and I feel a knot in my throat. The message comes at the right time, for I have spent a good two hours over lunch commiserating with a colleague about how we're not working for the university we dreamt of when we made the choice of becoming teachers. And I don't mean we'd rather be elsewhere (um, what are things like at Harvard?), I mean that we're disappointed with the whole institution in Spain.

I should think that human beings need encouragement to progress and fulfil their aims in life and we, university teachers, are no exception. However, in my experience the pat on the back hardly ever comes, which is why this student's generous message almost upset me, unexpected as it was. There have been others, as I guess all teachers get now and then, but always from just a handful of students,

hardly ever from colleagues or the institution, the one actually employing us or the whole Spanish university. Do we do it so badly?

The colleagues I have discussed this with –the constant lack of encouragement– often point out that we are being punished by the institution, the Government (national and local) and Spanish society at large for what is perceived to be a privileged situation. Our irregular work schedules, the incomprehension regarding what we actually do apart from what happens in the classroom, the apparent long holidays, the rumoured high salaries... all these factors play against us. Not against sportspeople, that's funny...

In addition, we must put up regularly with a stream of abuse from those who complain about the endogamic nature of the Spanish university, forgetting that jobs are few, badly paid and that the Spanish university thrives, if it does, on our collectively giving for free energies that have indeed improved it much since the 1980s. We have also been abroad to learn and train, by the way. If things go on like this, the best in the younger generation will take a good note of this and leave, to be replaced by others who won't be any better, despite the widespread assumption that foreign is always best.

Thanks, my UOC student, for your thanks. It's the breath of fresh air I just needed to face my new classes next week, the breath of fresh air that will carry me till July, that's how little it takes.

14-II-2011 GREAT EXPECTATIONS (NO, IT'S NOT ABOUT DICKENS)

My second semester subjects begin tomorrow and I'm nervous in anticipation. Yes, I've been a university teacher for almost twenty years but I still have trouble sleeping the night before a new semester begins. The first lecture is always important to set the tone for the whole subject and my nervousness springs from this need to hit it right from the beginning. To this, which is common to all my semesters at UAB, I must add two novelties, one a problem, the other a challenge.

First, the problem. I'm used to teaching smallish groups of 50 students at the most, which is already too big for a second language Literature class which has to learn a language as they learn the content of a particular subject. My 20th century English Literature was last year already too big at 68 students, which is funny considering this time I'll have 87. Since my usual teaching practice is not based on lecturing but on interacting with students, my main worry this time is my possible lack of methodological tools to give such a substantial class the quality teaching they surely expect. I don't think I can, at least, not at the same level I usually work. Why the sudden increase? Well, easy: the Facultat has offered new degrees without hiring new staff; the degrees, combining two languages, have doubled the demand for English and, as you can see, increased my workload to absurd limits. Will the students learn as much as promised by the new degrees? No, of course not. I'll do what I can and explain this to them.

Second, the challenge. I'll be teaching a subject on Contemporary British Theatre and I have decided to make dramatised reading the main activity in the classroom. This means that students will be asked to prepare particular scenes from a selection of plays for classroom performance (within reasonable limits... we're reading Sarah Kane's *Blasted* among others...) and discussion. With 33 students last time I

counted, this seems feasible enough though it turns out only 5 of them are men. The 28 women should be ready, therefore, for plenty of 'cross-dressing' I hadn't anticipated –not to this extent. This might be fun, as it'll give us a excuse to produce some truly radical versions of the scenes selected. I can't wait to see Freud in *Hysteria*, played as a woman...

My great expectations are now at its highest and after months of planning I'm ready to see the faces of my new and old students. I do hope all goes well and that the mood is not spoiled.

16-II-2011 DID I SAY GREAT EXPECTATIONS?

Remember my last post? Now, this is what happens on my first day of the second semester this year 2010-11, third of the global financial crisis.

I find that I must teach my first year 20th Century Literature class in a gigantic classroom which holds about 40 more seats than required (88 students registered, actual attendance might be around 70, it might be lower as the course progresses). It's so dark that I ask one of the students to raise the blinds and I end up demonstrating how to do it because she claims they're not working –three blinds later, it's still dark... in sunny Spain at 8:45. I'm on a high platform (two steps up) and, typically, students leave the first row empty, choosing to sit at the back as far away from me as possible. One of them, sitting on row ten, I think, squints at me all the time, I'm not sure whether this is because she can't see me perched up there (should I wear high heels?) or hear me (I've never used a microphone and hate the idea of using one). I have a computer, projector, internet, the whole caboodle but... not a monitor on the table. I have used this classroom before and I know that this means a crick in my neck by the time the lecture is over. I decide to use the blackboard for the first time in years and save the screen for when I really, really, need it. All considered, the lecture goes well but I'm quite hoarse today. Deep breath. More blackboard tomorrow and we'll see how the students react when I tell them that the last 6 rows are off limits...

Disaster strikes with my second class. I've been working on a new Contemporary British Drama subject for about one year. I swear that I started planning this subject last Spring and I have plenty of witnesses for that. I had asked, as usual, for a fully equipped classroom thinking of using all kinds of media resources but as soon as I entered 302 I knew I'd been had. I can only describe this classroom as the most appalling place in the whole Facultat de Lletres, possibly including all the broom closets. 302 has no equipment whatsoever, which means that my careful preparation of internet resources to be shared with my students went down the drain. Two hours of my life wasted. It's dark, it's smelly (!), it has no platform where I can stand to be seen (I'm very small even in high heels), and my 30 odd students sit at pseudo-lab tables (this used to be the computer room) so large that I can hardly see them. There's worse to come. There's a whiteboard where someone scribbled something maybe three hours or maybe three months ago, I don't know –what I know is that I can't erase the writing. No computer, no board, black or white. Students burst out laughing when I show them that the board rubber and marker are... on a plate, yes, what you use for holding food. I email at once the corresponding vice-dean and brace myself for a whole disastrous semester.

Thank you very much indeed for guaranteeing the quality of my teaching. And sorry students, it's not my fault.

19-II-2011 A STRANGE BOAST

An angry student comes to my office to tell me how badly I do my job because, in her view, her paper has been unfairly awarded an appallingly low grade. Yes, a 2 is low indeed. I agree.

As the temperature in the room rises I try explain to her, not as calm as I would like to be, that the 2 corresponds to the fact that even though the exercise is designed to teach students to integrate proper academic secondary sources into their papers, in hers there's not a single quotation (some from the primary sources, yes). She then points out that the paper does include a bibliography but when I answer back that her sources are all inadequate (*SparkNotes* and similar non-academic websites exclusively) and that she clearly has not used the library, as we expected, she argues defiantly that she's a working student and has no time to use the library. When I point out that the library opens on Saturday and has extended opening hours during the exam period, she boasts to my face that in the four years she's been a university student she's never been there and has managed to pass all her subjects satisfactorily. I feebly point out that I don't understand how she can show off about this but, clearly, she still thinks it an oddity that a university teacher expects university students to use the library.

If you're curious to know, I volunteered to have the student's exercise assessed by another Literature teacher, who concurs with my own assessment. Yet, this is not my point today. My point is that I'm appalled that a student defending his or her work from a teacher's criticism can actually boast about not using the library, when this is the whole point of the exercise she had submitted. How this can help generate a good mood for reviewing the paper is beyond me. Also, and most importantly, this student's attitude tells volumes about what many students understand by a university education: just passing subjects, not at all learning. My other point is that there are shortcuts for those who can't find their way into the library: a judicious use of the academic online resources that we do show how to use in class yields plenty of useful bibliography. There are many good journal articles out there for free and even complete books, but, to my surprise most students seem unable to find them despite the alleged internet proficiency of the younger generations.

So, here's my message: it's not so difficult to trick a Literature teacher into believing that a paper has been wholly researched at the library. What would irk any of my colleagues, I want to believe, is this strange, ugly boast that a university library has no place in a university education.

19-II-2011 FROM A TO X, HOPKINS, SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

I read on the train –how/where else?– John Berger's brief novel *From A to X: A Story in Letters* (2008) and I'm moved as I hadn't been in a long time by what I can only describe as its exquisite prose. Some readers, as I see in Amazon, are annoyed by Berger's vagueness about where and when exactly the story takes place but I am, unlike them, totally enticed by this. I don't really enjoy love stories but I fall for this

one maybe because I find it convincingly sad, coloured as it is by the palpable threat of the ugly politics that ruin so many lives anywhere in the world.

Being, as I am, a Literature teacher, I immediately feel sorry that there's no room in our very few subjects to teach Berger's novel. Why am I sorry? Well, because I feel that as a teacher I can provide an audience, limited in numbers as this may be, for books I love and that I think deserve more attention. It happens every time I read an interesting book, and I'm sure we all have the same feeling. In a few rare occasions, I've managed to get hold of a particular subject just to teach an author I admire – Alasdair Gray, Terry Pratchett, Tom Stoppard, Barbara Ehrenreich – but it's not easy at all. This, by the way, seems to be the main function of electives for teachers: provide breathing room.

I'm writing this entry, besides, the day after we discuss in a teachers' meeting how we can possibly fit into just 7 compulsory semestral subjects the whole History of English *and* American Literature, a list of canonical texts of all genres and tutorials to teach academic writing. In a way, it's great that we argue ourselves hoarse defending the merits of *Oliver Twist* over *Great Expectations* because this means we do care passionately about what is best for students' education. What is frustrating is how fast the number of possible set texts is diminishing as students cannot simply cope with as much reading as in the past (see my many complaints about the shortcomings of their secondary education). Where we could in the past teach 5 books, now the figure is down to 3. More or less.

We get actually entangled at a funny (as in peculiar) point, for I've been asked to introduce other genres than fiction in our Victorian Literature subject. Wilde is back on the syllabus but when I try to explain that we only have four sessions to teach short fiction, poetry *and* the essay pandemonium erupts. A friendly one. A colleague thinks we MUST teach Victorian intellectual issues, by which he means not just mention Darwin or Ruskin but have students read something by them. Fine, indeed, but this 'something' will be just passages, maybe up to 20 pages. No more. Another colleague claims students MUST read Tennyson, Browning... and Gerald Manley Hopkins. Fine, I invite all my colleagues to see what happens in the classroom the day we teach Hopkins (have a look at "The Windhover" at <http://www.bartleby.com/122/12.html>). My guess is... pandemonium. An unfriendly one.

So, here I am, caught between Scylla and Charybdis, between what I MUST teach (but know won't work) and what I CANNOT teach (and might work but I'm very unlikely to teach). Why, in the end, Hopkins and not Berger? And what will students miss if/when we drop *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*?

Maybe we should supply a list of what in each teacher's opinion is worth reading, apart from what we manage to teach in those meagre 7 subjects, once students get their degree. It's an idea.

23-II-2011 NOTHING ON YOUTUBE!! (PREPARING A BRITISH THEATRE CLASS)

I assume that what I'm going to complain about here is something that British Theatre specialists know very well. Yet, since I am not really a specialist and only teach theatre now and then, I must say that I'm surprised by the lack of good material on YouTube.

The last time I taught a drama subject (2006-7), my focus was Shakespeare on the screen, for which many DVD editions of the adaptations were available (Brannagh's *Hamlet* took ages to be released, though, who knows why). Before that, I'd taught a course on British and Irish 20th century drama in 2002-3, when there was no internet connection in our classrooms. When the internet materialised, precisely in 2006-7, I discovered the pleasures of YouTube: interviews with writers, film scenes that needn't be painfully extracted from DVDs, complete TV productions, music videos, and that memorable gag (for a Cultural Studies class on humour) in which Chris Rock advises AfricanAmericans how not to "get your ass kicked by the police" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uj0mtxXEGE8>).

Last week I spent a few hours browsing YouTube in the hopes that my students might see samples of good stage productions of the main British plays between the 1940s and today, from Terence Rattigan to Simon Stephens, so to speak. This was the result: I could add to my class notes YouTube links to a number of remarkable film and TV adaptations –Richard Burton can be seen in the complete TV version of *Look back in Anger* (1959)– and I discovered the genre of the theatre trailer; this is quite mystifying as, unlike film trailers, theatre trailers don't really show scenes but just images suggested by the play (this was at least the case of Stephens' *Pornography*.) There was practically nothing on such 1990s classics such as Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* and Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. 'Practically' means that I did come across scenes from amateur productions of many of the plays I checked, but these were poorly filmed and had usually bad sound, not to mention bad acting. I also discarded non-English-speaking productions, somewhat more generously offered.

I'm told that stage productions are not filmed in order to protect actors' right to their image (what about actors in films?). I know, of course, that some theatres do film their own productions, but I also know that TNC here in Barcelona didn't lend me their video of *Translations*, staged by The Abbey Theatre in 2001-2. I told them that having my class of 50 students see the video in their small facilities was not really an option but they never relented.

So, I'll do without YouTube, except for writers' interviews. Still, I don't understand why the filmed recordings of theatre productions are not massively available on the internet. And I mean professional theatre, filmed professionally. Many would sign a pact with the Devil to see how Shakespeare was staged in his time, and I just don't see why what is close at hand is not kept for posterity.

Maybe I have wrongly assumed YouTube has all the answers and there's a wonderful resource just round the corner I know nothing about... Can anyone help? (Thanks)

25-II-2011 THE COST OF DOING RESEARCH: A FEW FIGURES

Happily for me, I've been commissioned a short book on heterosexuality for the collection 'Los textos del cuerpo' (EDIUOC) that the research group I belong to ('Body and Textuality', coordinated by Dr. Meri Torras) has been publishing since 2009. I'm now at the stage of putting together a bibliography... and making decisions about how much the book is going to cost me. I've already written about paying to read myself

(17-11-10) but I neglected to mention the investment of money needed to publish, so here it is.

There is more bibliography on heterosexuality than I expected (basically in English), though hardly any in the Spanish university libraries, not even of the very few relevant Spanish texts –Oscar Guasch’s *La crisis de la heterosexualidad*, published in BCN, can only be found in distant La Laguna, Oviedo and Castilla-La Mancha. I could use the interlibrary loan system but, even though the project would pay for the cost, I would not be allowed to take home the books in question. Yes, I told my recalcitrant student she should spend more time at the library, but I didn’t mean to read complete volumes. How many people can really do that? If I order through the project the minimum list of books I should read (I’ve reduced it down to 6), they might take months to arrive and I’m in a hurry (deadlines, deadlines...). Here at UAB, by the way, teachers/researchers can buy books for the library but not for individual use (yes, we do pay for the books we teach, inspection copies apart). If you like underlining and annotating the texts that you study, as I do, the only option is purchasing whatever you think you really, really need.

I’ve finally decided to invest on my little book part of the extra 300 euros I made at UB lecturing for 3 hours on, precisely, heterosexuality: 140 were gone this morning, spent on the 6 short-listed books, which still leaves me with half my earnings. Well, not quite, as I’d already bought 3 more books to prepare my UB seminar (which, incidentally, I was VERY happy to teach and would have taught for nothing, this is how committed –or impractical– we are). Whatever I make out of writing the little book will go, of course, into more research or other seminars. No Manolos for me, definitively... I’ve drawn the line, however, at buying a slim volume of just 176 pages, published by a famous British publisher only in hardback and sold at 125 euros (well, 106.88 at BookDepository). This is 0.71 euros a page, much more than I’ll make or than anyone makes, Ken Follett included. I can do without the volume, as there is anyway so much to quote from that I’d run out of space for my own writing. Or I can be *very* dishonest, and check the coveted volume ...ummm... at Google Books, an option towards which the greedy publishers are mercilessly pushing everyone (em, I won’t mention them in case I ever want to publish with them).

Who, except very rich libraries, can afford books like his, I wonder? I’ve never ordered for our own library a book above 60/70 euros, and even that is an absurd waste of public money. In the future, when I finally buy an eBook reader, I’ll commit countless acts of piracy with no qualms whatsoever. I can’t even begin to imagine what it is like for university teachers in developing or undeveloped countries (that’s a euphemism for you). And to think that our research is judged by standards that only privileged Harvard professors can meet...

One last thought: I understand that other professions also require a high degree of self-investment: I don’t *have* to wear make up, designer clothing or high heels (oomph, the Manolos). Yet, it is my suspicion that scientists do not pay for their lab rats out of their pockets, whereas we, Literature teachers, bookworms that use no rats, must pay for our research. Curioser and curioser, as Alice said.

2-II-2010 MORE ON MONEY: RESEARCHING THEATRE

I invite to my Contemporary British Theatre class Prof. Mireia Aragay and Prof. Enric Monforte of the University of Barcelona, two of the best Spanish specialists in the field and co-authors of the excellent collection of interviews with directors, playwrights, critics and academics, *British Theatre of the 1990s* (Palgrave, 2007) I interview them with interventions from my students (a format I'd certainly recommend) and they draw a very vivid panorama of what's happening on the London stage right now. I'm amazed at how important money becomes in our discussion.

First, the matter of their book (the other co-authors are Pilar Zozaya and Hidegard Klein, by the way). It's a great volume and I wish all my students could read it. This is unlikely, though, as it costs 72.62 euros (well, 55.99 at the usual lower cost place). The students will have to share the copy I've bought for the library –one of the few overpriced purchases I mentioned in my previous post. Mireia and Enric explain to me that publishing houses are reluctant to issue paperback editions of academic books unless they can be widely used as textbooks. They're aware of how the high price limits the impact of their book but there's nothing they can do. This, as you can see, connects with my comments on the previous entry on that expensive sociology book I didn't buy.

Money also comes up next on two other accounts: one of my students asks insistently about the price of theatre tickets in London, as Mireia and Enric explain that there theatres are full every evening. We'd already had a conversation in class about how theatre is only relatively expensive: prices run from 8 to 70 euros (for a musical), which means that at the lower end, theatre prices rise slightly above cinema's, whereas on average a ticket costs the price of inexpensive dinner (20-30 euros). I remind my students that rock concerts and, indeed, football matches are far more expensive but, somehow, the idea that theatre is expensive sticks.

Then, there's the problem of research costs –here we go again. Mireia brings an impressive bunch of programmes from the plays she's seen recently in London. It's quite clear to everyone that a committed theatre specialist cannot be simply satisfied with the texts and that what is worth researching is, as Mireia underlines, the 'cultural experience' that the staging of a play constitutes. Ideally, this means travelling to Britain as often as possible. She and Enric quickly explain that they're now making the most of their research project money but that, otherwise, their research travelling is necessarily limited. Mireia also points out that you might be in London for an expensive week and miss for just one day a very relevant play...

All this might explain why, as they told me, the research project they run, 'Contemporary British Theatre – Barcelona,' (http://161.116.168.92/cbt_joomla/index.php) seems to be the only one of its kind in Spain. Shakespeare, of course, is, from this point of view, easier to research, as one may focus on the texts, the films and ignore, depending on the budget, how he fares on the British stage. Some irony...

2-III-2010 THE HEN! THE HEN!: AN HOMAGE TO THE LITTLE STORYTELLER ON THE TRAIN

I'd run out of reading matter a few stops from my station, which is annoying, when a hassled thirty-something mum got on, dragging a feisty six-year-old and

holding a crying, twisting, screaming two-year-old. They sat opposite me. For some puzzling reason, the baby was shouting at the top of her lungs for 'The hen! The hen!', as her mum desperately tried to find something. "I can't find the book!", she finally declared in defeat just when the elder girl stepped in to help: "Shall I tell you a tale?," she volunteered to her baby sister. Yes, the baby nodded. "And what do you want in it? Would a princess do?," she asked, predictably. "A hen," the baby replied. "Ok," the sister agreed, "but a princess, too."

She embarked then on the most mesmerising story you might imagine, with a princess, a hen, a thrilling metaphysical plot about the sky falling over, compounded later with a witch who had a strawberry shaped house and grew strawberries in a field. The baby and her mum listened open-mouthed... and so did I. A woman sitting next to me turned her head and we smiled at each other amazed at what we were hearing. Two stations later the story still continued and I found myself considering the possibility of skipping my stop. I decided to get off but I *had* to tell the little girl that I loved her story very much and was very sorry to miss the end. She looked pleased!

All writers fabulate as the little girl did when they're children and I was wondering, as I listened to her, whether she was making up her story (and would grow up to be a professional storyteller) or borrowing elements from tales she'd read. Checking the internet I've located books in Catalan about "La Gallina Fina" (Fina, the hen) and one about "La Bruixa Maduixa" (yes, the strawberry witch) but even supposing the little storyteller had borrowed from them, what was mesmerising was how she could hold our attention. I wanted very much to tell the poor, distressed mum that her daughter's talent was precious but I felt too shy, opting instead for offering her girl my praise.

I just wanted to share this lovely moment, which made me feel like another little girl and also reminded me of how powerful storytelling can be.

(A friend has wrongly believes this is fiction but, believe me, it is not!! All I write here in this blog is 100% non-fiction)

3-II-2011 THE PLAGIARISING MINISTER

Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, the German Defence minister in Angela Merkel's Government, has finally resigned. The reason? The newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has made it public that Zu Guttenberg had plagiarised part of his doctoral dissertation: a staggering 20% of its 475 pages. Zu Guttenberg, a very popular politician, has taken his time to resign as Merkel has supported him throughout this crisis, downplaying the importance of the offence committed.

I'm personally appalled by Merkel's support, as a man who cheats to this extent can hardly be a reliable, honest politician (is that an oxymoron?). Yet, the obvious reason why I'm writing this entry today is to teach my students about the very serious consequences that plagiarising (= copying text from unidentified sources, pretending it's yours) may have: it may ruin your career many years after the events. Just consider: The now ex-Minister stole someone else's ideas, his or her intellectual property, and for a doctoral dissertation, which is, precisely, the kind of exercise in which you prove your value as a thinker of original thoughts.

Martin Luther King was guilty of exactly the same offence and, somehow, there's a tendency to exonerate him because he compensated for this with many good

deeds. Merkel seems to think that this is what Zu Guttenberg will do too –not become a second Luther King but continue his brilliant political career. My view is that the sins committed by saints are sins nonetheless, and the sins committed by less than saints are also sins. We don't expel students from the university for plagiarising (at least not at UAB) and I don't think Zu Guttenberg should be ruined for life. Yet, plagiarising is a little bit like infidelity: you may forgive an unfaithful partner but can you ever trust him or her again? Fully?

Zu Guttenberg justified himself, quite predictably, claiming that he was under great pressure, had reached the end of his tether and had acted out of despair (if I had a million dollars for every time I've been given the same excuse...). What worries me is that this is part of that widespread view of education in which cheating matters more than learning. He tricked a serious German university into awarding him a title he didn't deserve, like many others that have gone undetected, yes. Typically, plagiarisers think that being clever is the same as being intelligent. This is where they all fail.

4-II-2011 CLASS ETIQUETTE: RESPECT FOR THE TEACHER AT WORK

One of my first year students eats during my class and I scold her publicly. I tell her this is rude, she should have had breakfast before 8:40. The class goes well but I must stop now and then to ask for silence. I have two clever-looking students who oscillate non-stop between chattering like old women (they'll catch the allusion) and looking at me in enraptured attention. No middle term. Others use their computers and I trust they're not checking Facebook.

The girl who ate her breakfast in class approaches my table to hand in an exercise and I take the chance to insist that her behaviour was rude. To my surprise she tells me that her seating-row mates were not bothered and I almost scream that I am, and that I am due respect as I'm working. She, very politely using 'usted' all the time, says she won't do it again if that bothers me so much... She misses my point, thinking this is my personal caprice.

In the evening I watch a debate on TV3 about why young people are so rude and it turns out their parents don't have the energy to teach them etiquette = how to behave in public places. I feel tense and upset all the time I'm teaching this class. They're lovely people, don't get me wrong, but I can't be policing them all the time and since they seem to lack the rules of classroom etiquette, here's what we expect at UAB:

Teacher at work:

- eat and drink before or after class, not during it
- listen in silence, unless you want to contribute to class discussion
- don't use the cell phone to text friends
- use the computer only to make notes
- BRING THE TEXT we're discussing and a piece of paper to make notes
- attendance is expected but not compulsory - if you're terminally bored, go to the bar

All this amounts to: I'm not your mother, you're not children and my class is not nursery. The classroom is not your living room, either, and I don't offer an spectacle to

be commented on, like a film or a TV show. A classroom is a space for sharing ideas and thinking requires a correct body language and a respectful behaviour as I AM WORKING HARD FOR YOUR BENEFIT. Do I sound authoritarian? Well, I must be, otherwise I won't be able to educate you. And, yes, all this is very important.

I know teachers all over Spanish universities share my feeling that first year, as a colleague told me, is becoming Bachillerato's third year, with our classrooms colonised by some of secondary school bad manners. But I also know that students very often simply don't know what is expected from them and this is why I'd rather be specific. I hope this helps.

4-III-2011 TOP GIRL PERFORMERS IN CLASS

This week the experiment of having students perform scenes from a selection of contemporary British plays in class has started... with top results!!

The first texts were Act I and Act III of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and I can only say that the women students playing the roles turned out to be top performers much beyond my expectations. They cleverly combined reading (as I'd requested) with using whatever props the classroom could offer –from chairs to our big screen– adding some themselves: minimalist items of clothing and even a bottle of Bailey's which, somehow, stole a particular scene... Churchill's text indeed came alive in a way that mere reading cannot generate and thus the whole point of the exercise was accomplished. The ensuing class discussion was, also, lively and productive. These top performers set no doubt a very high standard, a challenge to be met by the rest of the class. Well done and THANKS!!!

There are perhaps two moments I want to highlight, one from each act. On Tuesday, Act I, I was sitting among the 'audience,' making notes to comment on, once performance was over, and I was so enthralled by the lady reading Lady Nijo that I simply switched off: I was no longer in the classroom but in a real theatre listening to a real actor. Wow, Luca, thanks for that moment. And a thousand thanks to Gloria for her amazing energy in organising six women who hadn't met before for that first experiment. It was brave... On Thursday, Act III, Gloria herself and Maria provided us with another unforgettable moment when, as sisters Marlene and Joyce, they argued about Angie's future. This girl is Marlene's daughter but was raised by Joyce and what was at stake was how Marlene's professional success depended to a great extent on Joyce's sacrificial willingness to raise the baby Marlene had at 17. Our two performers shouted and screamed at each other with passion, anger and love –Maria blushed so furiously we were all scared and Gloria trembled with Marlene's effort to control herself. We all giggled now and then, awed by their performance.

Unforgettable!!

8-III-2011 LIKE A CROWDED PARTY: READING INTRODUCTIONS (TO BRITISH THEATRE)

Introductions to particular literary periods, genres or schools make me as nervous as a party where I don't know anyone: I do want to meet *everyone* but I know that I'll end up mixing up faces and stories and making serious gaffes (um, I have the same problem with academic conferences, apologies to all concerned...). I'm currently

going through two well-known introductions to contemporary British drama –Ian David Rabey's *English Drama since 1940s* and Christopher Innes' *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*– to reinforce my always improvable knowledge of the field, and I find myself struggling to take in so much old and new information. There's nothing wrong *per se* with these two volumes, which fulfil very well the promise they make to inform the reader. The problem is that this particular reader is increasingly unable to absorb it all.

Yes, I've made notes and lists of the playwrights discussed and the plays recommended but I get increasingly annoyed that academic volumes have a prejudice against photos which might help me distinguish, say, between Howard Brenton and Howard Barker. I'm also beginning to miss a more user-friendly layout with bullet points, highlighted issues, framed main points, etc. Yes, all those stratagems used to help less advanced readers understand and recall with ease. My colleague David Walton got it absolutely right in his academic bestseller *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning through Practice*, which even includes cartoons and is my favourite specialised introduction of any kind ever. This is not at all dumbing down nor has it anything to do with those popular 'dummy' books (there is a *Shakespeare for Dummies* but it's not what I am asking for). It's about helping students and academics find their way into a field we know something or nothing about with true didactic intention.

Perhaps, I thought, my discomfort is caused by the internet but browsing through the Wikipedia pages for British theatre confirms my suspicion that there is not yet any website that fulfils well the role of book-form introductions. My complaint is with the genre of the literary introduction. The success of literary introductions, I'm arguing, is limited by each reader's ability to absorb biographical information, career summaries and critical assessments in such tight packages. Also, let's say it, by the genre's conventions. Here's one: plot summaries are never straightforward for that is apparently against the 'rules'; the reader must painstakingly infer them from the criticism offered, which often feels to me like watching a film through a slatted blind. The language used is also particularly imprecise with a peculiar tendency towards the literary, as if because you're giving information about literature your prose should also be literary. In the end, even though introductions are supposed to offer shortcuts, I increasingly feel that a simple list might do the same trick (I mean in particular as concerns authors).

Maybe the lesson to be learned is that there are no shortcuts. The best possible impression I can get of an author must come from reading, in this case, his or her plays. The difficulty, obviously, lies in finding the time to read 100 plays instead of one single introduction but, then, that is really the only way. And trying to find satisfaction in vaguely recognising a name next time I come across it at another crowded party.

13-III-2011 AESTHETIC EMOTION ON THE STAGE (THANK YOU, KYLIE MINOGUE!!)

Two years ago I had the great pleasure of writing with my friend Gerardo Rodríguez of Granada a paper on Kylie Minogue, which we presented at the 2009 AEDEAN at Cádiz. Yesterday, we both had the pleasure of seeing Kylie perform here in Barcelona to a full Palau Sant Jordi (her boyfriend, top model Andrés Velencoso, included!!!). Not everyday can one can dance with a colleague, much less to the

subject of a paper. Thank you, by the way, Mr. Andrés, we know we owe this unforgettable pleasure to your charming Ms. Minogue...

Being specialists in Gender Studies, the point we made in our joint paper is that Australian Ms. Minogue is being discriminated as a performing artist in comparison to Madonna and other female American stars, because she's assumed to be too feminine to be in control of her career. This is false, we claimed: that femininity might be incompatible with feminism is already a worrying assumption and that Ms. Minogue is just a doll is simply wrong. She's a devoted professional, capable of overcoming the disaster caused by her breast cancer with smiles and an easy charm that barely conceals an iron will to please. I was witness of this yesterday.

Watching her on stage, I realised what aesthetic emotion means and how deeply moving it can be –even to tears. Her show, part of her *Les Follies* 2011 tour, is based on the theme of her last CD –*Aphrodite*– and includes, as usual for her, a series of numbers in which she sings live (very well!!) accompanied by a group of muscled, handsome female and male dancers (yes, gays love her for the men –but so do I). The spectacle offered is unique in its classy elegance and is visually astonishing, perhaps only comparable to West End or Las Vegas-style musicals. This made me consider, of course, whether what I was seeing was theatre rather than a pop concert, which makes the experience particularly enriching (bitchy others think she's using the show to mask waning musical abilities... this is so unfair!).

What was unexpected for me (and for Gerardo and our companions) was that we could be moved to tears by the *beauty* of what was offered on stage. A beauty which, and this is crucial, Ms. Minogue and company *choose to provide* at a high expense, regardless of how this diminishes their benefits. The last segment of the show, in which water plays a major role, is simply splendid. I was watching her sing surrounded by four couples of flying dancers, all glamour at the service of *my* pleasure, and I had to thank her mentally for caring to hire the right people, people who bring a truly avant-garde feel to what is, if you will, just a pop music gig.

Then I remembered that next week I'll be working with my students on Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, and I wondered why we make so much of that ugliness (poetic, some call it) and so little of this beauty. Since Ms. Kane has entered with full honours the history of British Theatre, I'll do my best to help Ms. Minogue enter the bigger history of *performance* on the stages all over the world, to which pop music contributes much more than it is usually assumed.

Thank you, Kylie!!! It was a real pleasure.

14-III-2011 MISSING THE PUNCH LINE: TERRY JOHNSTON'S *HYSTERIA* AND BEN TRAVERS'S FARCE *ROOKERY NOOK*

Last week we witnessed in class the struggle, brilliantly solved, of four students –Sara, David, Carla and, secondarily, María– with Terry Johnson's demanding intellectual farce *Hysteria* (1993). They made the most of a plot which narrates Freud's morphine-induced circular dream (or nightmare); in it, his subconscious or, rather, his conscience embodied by a naked woman, nags him mercilessly about his complicity with the male child abusers in his bourgeois circle, casting serious doubts about what Freud actually did to 'cure' his patients. The eccentric Dalí, who visited Freud in 1938,

also features prominently, perhaps in an attempt to defuse with farcical humour the seriousness of the accusations (first shed by Jeffrey Masson in 1984).

I failed to locate an academic source that could help us with *Hysteria* until too late, once the scenes were performed –I’m not sure whether this was due to my thickness or to the new MLA platform, which, ironically given its name (CSA Illumina...), seems somehow more opaque than usual. I relied instead on Spanish, UK and US reviewers, who also seemed quite baffled about what kind of achievement this play is. A US reviewer called it, basically, a glorious mess and this is what my students felt it was. The academic article by Luc Gilleman I finally read sheds precious light on the play, explaining practically *everything* about it, including its being inspired by Ben Travers’ once very popular Aldwych farces. Luckily for me, a reviewer mentioned them and even more luckily, Christopher Innes makes generous room in his *Modern British Drama* for Travers, so my students got some inkling about the main intertext in Johnson’s hysterical play: Travers’ *Rookery Nook* (1926) This is even mentioned by Freud, twice if I’m not mistaken. Gilleman points out that “Freud’s inability to see the relationship to what is happening to him and the play he has just seen is not just hilarious; it is also sinister –indicative of the blind spots in his vision” (2008: 115). Em... and in ours.

The point I want to make here is that the level at which Travers operated very successfully as a playwright, shall we call it the ‘popular mainstream’?, usually falls below our literary radar and is particularly difficult to grasp by foreign audiences. I did mention Benny Hill as Travers’s most likely inheritor, and it turns out that Johnson wrote right after *Hysteria* a play, *Dead Funny*, which begins with Hill’s death and has certainly plenty to do with his dubious brand of humour. My class of Spanish students, with a high component of foreign Erasmus students, some of them English, recognised at once Hill’s name but Travers meant nothing either to them or to me. TV, of course, has an international impact that theatre can never have. I assume that a British teacher of Spanish Theatre might also feel mystified by a contemporary literary play using elements from the *revistas* of *El Molino* or *La Latina*, or the plays by Carlos Arniches.

We did manage to enjoy *Hysteria* nonetheless but, clearly, we missed Johnson’s joke on Travers. Freud wrote a famous book, *Jokes and the Relation to the Unconscious*, which his conscience in the play –Jessica– criticises, arguing he has no sense of humour. To prove her wrong, Freud replies that he laughed “three or four times” at the last play he had seen, *Rookery Nook*. We don’t laugh: we can’t. And, as everyone knows, the surest way to kill a joke is to explain it... Naturally, Johnson should not worry about his audience’s limitations, much less ours as foreign readers, but this a reminder of how hard it is to cross cultural barriers when it comes to humour. We tend to miss the punch line.

16-III-2011 BLAST ME IF YOU WANT (BUT I DON’T UNDERSTAND SARAH KANE...)

Yesterday four students offered us Scene 1 and Scene 2 of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, with a courage and enthusiasm far beyond my expectations. Josep and Helena, Julia and Isabella played Ian and Cate, with Julia doubling as the Soldier. To begin with, in Scene 1 we had a young couple (happy, I assume!) playing the alienated

couple in the play, which added a strange tension –the class started giggling but grew silent as the scene progressed, and jaded Ian’s aggressiveness towards naive Cate was made visible. In Scene 2, the necessary cross-gendering (there are so few men in class...) made it quite clear that Ian’s power over Cate and the Soldier’s over him can be disconnected from their gender. In the end, we agreed, despite common sense feminist beliefs, what matters more is who becomes a victim and who holds power, regardless of gender.

If you’re familiar with *Blasted*, you know that it has plenty of sex and violence (the worst physical violence erupts in Scene 3, in which the Soldier rapes Ian and swallows his eyes... later Ian eats a baby who dies on stage). Logically, the taboos operating in the classroom are much more restrictive than the taboos at work on the professional stage. The students decided to leave Kane’s directions regarding touching and hurting to a narrator, a wise decision which didn’t really detract from the impression of cruelty Kane wanted to generate. We wondered at how actors manage to play scenes like Kane’s and what kind of psychological make up they need not to be affected by this...

Ensuing class discussion was short but very lively with three main reactions: downright dislike of the play (“We don’t have to like every play, do we?”), a staunch defence of its moral message (“Everyone is a victim, and anyone can be”) and, third, denial that the play means much (“This has no message, it’s just written for shocks”). The student who disliked the play claimed that it was actually quite easy to write something like *Blasted* but far more difficult to write something with substance (as an example, she quoted Daniel MacIvor’s *In on it*). I myself think that *Blasted* belongs to the particular 1990s moment that Aleks Sierz portrays so beautifully in his very personal essay *In-yer-face Theatre* (2001, see <http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/main.html>). I am not claiming it is dated, proof of this was that it worked well in the classroom. My impression is, rather, than in-yer-face theatre is a bit childish, the adult equivalent of the child shocking the adults by using swearwords. That was part of the mood of the 1990s: Tarantino is a main referent and so is *Trainspotting*.

18 years after the scandal raised by *Blasted* the shock value of in-yer-face theatre has somehow faded, maybe the pendulum is swinging. We all agreed that if *Blasted* were stage in Barcelona we’d see it –though more out of intellectual curiosity than for pleasure, intellectual or otherwise. Here is a Catch 22 situation, for if I claim that I don’t enjoy plays like *Blasted*, I’ll sound conservative and if I claim that I enjoy it I may sound too fond of violence... Blast me if you know how to solve this dilemma!!

21-III-2011 EVA AND ELIZA: MIRROR IMAGES

Josep María Pou has staged J.B. Priestley’s classic *An Inspector Calls* at Teatre Goya here in BCN for the first time in Spain, with the exception of a 1973 version for TVE’s *Estudio 1* (um, the good old times when drama had a place on Spanish TV... The new version didn’t apparently get the expected share last year...). I find Pou’s production very good as regards acting but disappointingly conservative as regards stage design. The memory of Mario Gas’s version of Priestley’s *Time and the Conways*, which I saw in 1992, doesn’t quite abandon me throughout Pou’s production. As happens, Stephen Daldry rescued *Inspector*, coincidentally also in 1992, in a

production for the National Theatre of London, rightly famous for its stage design. This production just returned, this time to the West End, in 2009 (trailer at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7jGR61PM6k>).

Anyway, this is not my point today –though maybe it should if I think of the great session on radical stage design that Taisma Caparrós offered my class last Thursday. Rather, as happens, I'm teaching Shaw's *Pygmalion* and it strikes me that the suicide girl in Priestley's play, known among other names as Eva Smith, could very well be a reverse mirror image of Eliza Doolittle, a very unhappy one.

A left-wing political play masking as traditional detective fiction, *An Inspector Calls* was first staged in the extinct USSR in 1945, then in London in 1946. It is set, however, in 1912, months before the sinking of the Titanic, mentioned by the pompous patriarch, Mr. Birling, as an example of British achievement that can't fail. *Pygmalion* was written, precisely, in the Spring of 1912, but first staged in London only in 1914, after a Viennese production of 1913 and just a few months before the start of calamitous WWI. Eva, aged 24 in 1912 and Eliza, aged 18-20, according to Shaw's directions, are thus contemporaries –working girls surviving as they can.

Whereas London offers Eliza –a street seller of violets who will not sell herself for money in the streets– the romance of her transformation into an ersatz lady, thanks to her bumping into bachelor phonetician Higgins and his pal Pickering, Eva is not so lucky in her northern Midlands town, Brumley, where the Birlings rule. I won't spoil the play for you but, basically, Priestley narrates through the inquiry of the Inspector into the death of this girl (if she is one and not five...) the sad fate of abused working girls who simply demand better wages. There's no Higgins to rescue Eva from the gutter and she sinks as low as possible. The Inspector can only apportion blame.

I marvel at how the two plays denounce the workings of patriarchal capitalism by focusing on a young woman, whether present (Eliza) or absent (Eva), and also at how well both plays explain the complicity of upper-class women with patriarchy. It seems that Pou was tempted to update the play to our times but found it would damage its credibility. I really don't think so –particular points might need adjustment but the Evas of this world are still trapped 100 years later by unemployment, sexual exploitation, the jealousy of uglier women and a narrow-minded morality. Eliza's story appears to be, by contrast, a mere fairy tale, though of a rather cruel kind. It is also, I believe, not so difficult to update (Willy Russell did it perfectly in his play *Educating Rita*).

If written by a woman both *Pygmalion* and *An Inspector Calls* would have been deemed feminist plays about the victimisation of women. Written, as they are, by men their politics appear to be socialist above all. I wonder what Eva and Eliza would tell each other if they could meet in that other world, where fictional characters live... and die.

23-III-2011 THE FACELESS BUREAUCRAT ON THE OTHER SIDE (DOING PAPERWORK)

I'm enrolled to write paperwork for a new MA and I'm dismayed by how much we're asked to do in so little time. This is so habitual in academia all over the world, I know I shouldn't be surprised.

Also habitual is the supposition that paperwork must always be a priority, which means, specifically, that the research I'm currently engaged in will have to wait, once more. My teaching will necessarily go on but I'll have less time to prepare lectures –students, be warned. Unless, that is, I take time off my weekend, which are the days, precisely, that I'm using to read bibliography for my research. Then there's Easter, yes, but I have a life outside the university and people who share it and, um, they seem to want my company...

When I was young and dreamed of being a university teacher, thinking this was a glamorous life because my family was working-class, I only knew about classes and books. No one told me about paperwork, though I believe they may not have told me because twenty years ago there wasn't so much. Or someone else did it, not the senior teachers and researchers, I don't know. It's hard to imagine Harold Bloom filling in forms...

Every colleague has the same problem: applications for grants and new degrees, the up-keep of cv itself –that time-consuming monster–, research and teaching assessments... You name it!! All in user-unfriendly computer applications which, I very much suspect, already act as a filter for the less committed. Students know nothing about this and probably believe we teachers enjoy unstressed lives in paradise, just thinking of new, devious ways to make their lives harder. I wish!

Since paperwork is fast becoming another of the genres I practice, together with the academic essay, I do wonder who reads it. I have foggy Dickensian visions of armies of clerks wearing sleeve garters and green celluloid visors, reading the 'literature' we produce for them and I wonder why they ask for so much. Do they love it? Really? Do they read it? Really? What kind of person cannot see the beauty of the principle by which less is more?

Call me paranoid, but, is this part of a vast conspiracy to not let us employ our precious time in *thinking*, which is what we're paid to do? Just a thought...

26-III-2011 NOW I GET IT!! (WHY THE MAs ARE REALLY BEING DISMANTLED)

I have heard many voices explaining that the cost of the MAs we established barely 5 years ago is too high for the Catalan university to maintain. I could not quite understand this as our now dying MA 'Advanced English Studies: Literature and Culture' (slashed for having less than 10 students) cost more or less the same in terms of teaching resources as our old Doctoral courses. A friend in the Philosophy Department, where they seem to have more alert minds but whose MA has been also slashed, nonetheless, has explained to me why this is happening. Here it is, for your benefit. Apologies to those who already know for my usual thickness.

MAs are taught by doctors, of course, which means that the more senior staff may use up to 25% of their teaching time for them. This absorption of resources by the second cycle leaves the first cycle, the new BAs, with fewer resources provided by senior teachers. The result? Associates are hired to teach anything and everything, particularly considering, in my own Department, the sudden increase in numbers in the first year, due to the establishment of combined degrees with other 'philologies'. Our staff this year comprises one third senior teachers (tenured or under contracts

lasting at least 4 years), two thirds associates, most of them on a yearly, provisional basis linked to the deployment of the Bologna-style BAs, some already doctors.

Now, take our now declining MA (we're in the fourth, final year). It is very cheap if you consider that it only requires 8 teachers teaching 5 ECTS credits each (24 teaching hours), plus dissertation supervision value at an extra 5 hours (maximum 0.5 dissertations each teacher, so far). If you look at it this way, and consider that the number of students we've been teaching was the same as in the old Doctoral programme (around 7-8 new ones every year), the cost has not really increased. Now, if you put the 8 subjects we teach together, this amounts to 2 full time teachers (here we teach 4 semestral subjects each per year), or 2.5 associates (they teach 3 semestral subjects a year). Dismantle the MA and you have magically made room for 8 other semestral groups in the BA taught by senior teachers (54 hours each, by the way). At least two of the 5 associates we employ now in the Literature section (with only 6 seniors...) can be 'released.'

What irks is that the Generalitat is not openly acknowledging this. Instead, we're told that the MAs have intrinsic problems due to low registration figures (regardless, by the way, of the nature of each of them) because we don't know how to offer attractive, market-oriented degrees. Of course, an MA degree is a requirement to enter a Doctoral programme and with fewer MAs in Catalonia, we'll necessarily have fewer Doctoral students which, I suspect, is very much another unacknowledged ultimate aim. Fewer doctors also mean fewer accreditations and fewer employable university teachers, which will help reduce the size of the staff at PUBLIC universities in Catalonia. The rich, as a friend reminded me, do not care about this, as they send their kids to private or foreign universities, anyway.

Think, think... I personally feel as a dinosaur on the verge on extinction – *Angloliteraturus redundantis*.

27-III-2011 ESPABILIZATION SKILLS, OR HOW TO MOTIVATE PASSIVE STUDENTS

I spent 4 hours last Friday in a seminar on formative continuous assessment applied to university teaching. The seminar, run by Joan Simón, a Pharmacy senior lecturer at UB (<http://joansimon.nom.es/cms3/>), was very good, and served partly as a therapy session, which we, first year teachers down in the trenches, need badly. As usual, though, I missed being trained by someone with experience in teaching Literature. I also missed taking the seminar together with our students.

'Formative continuous assessment', as you may know, corresponds to a fashionable teaching methodology in which the student is assumed to be a motivated autonomous learner. S/he uses guidelines and samples showing how to produce the evidence on which s/he is to be assessed to, precisely produce it; also, s/he benefits from teacher's constant, constructive feedback. I am familiar with the more formal aspects of the methodology since 1998, when I started working as an associate teacher at UOC, but I'd been using it, without knowing I was a convert, since 1992 at UAB. My Department has never favoured lecturing ('clases magistrales') and much less final exams as the only way to assess students. Our passage to the new Bologna system is, for this, smoother than in our Departments.

What is happening now, as everyone can see, is that Bologna has finally institutionalised continuous assessment as the most desirable methodology to encourage student autonomy... just at a time when the younger generation shows a remarkable passivity for which, possibly, lecturing and final exams would be perfectly adequate teaching and assessment methods. My impression is that my generation (born in the 1960s) is now implementing the kind of university teaching we wish we had received but not at all what the new generations (born in the early 1990s) need or want. They'll have to wait 20 years to try their own methods on a younger generation who, of course, will require others... maybe ours.

An autonomous student is by definition a motivated student, and this is what my young first and second year students are not, mostly (this is quite different at UOC, where I teach mature students). Any Literature teacher knows that this translates into students' not reading the set texts, which makes teaching them an often impossible task. How should we motivate them? Well, apparently enticing them with the use of new technologies –apart from developing materials that clarify how we assess them and what they should be learning (we already do that, though not as well as we should, it seems –too much to read...). I'm tempted to ask first year students to take the poems we're going to read and accompany them with a PowerPoint presentation, with images suggested by reading them (as I've seen on YouTube). Then it hits me: this is ridiculous, as it will distract them from *reading* the poems, which is exactly what the *Literature* subject requires, and might even be more time-consuming than reading dictionary in hand. (I know I'll end up giving this a try, anyway... more about in May).

A witty colleague, Felicity, tells me that our students need 'espabilation skills' ('wising-up skills?') and I fully agree. What I don't know is whether, we, university teachers, are best qualified to teach these, as we are possibly one of the most highly self-motivated collective on Earth (I was going to write 'bunch of i...', given our rewards). We're *naturally inclined to studying*... think about that! Faced with a student who is naturally inclined NOT to study, I don't quite sympathise, much less feel, um, motivated, to help.

The funny thing is that the university system tells me I am the one in need of the 'espabilation skills' required to turn passive students into active learner. Maybe if unmotivated students took useful seminars like Joan Simón's addressing *them* that would save us, teachers, precious time for... well, how about research?

27-III-2011 ESPABILATION SKILLS, OR HOW TO MOTIVATE PASSIVE STUDENTS (part 2)

This is a regular teaching day for me this semester: 8:30-10:00, I face my sleepy-eyed, unmotivated first year students: 50% attendance, of those in class 50% don't take notes (apparently they don't even bring paper to class) and 50% don't even bother to conceal their boredom (the ones not taking notes are not necessarily the bored ones). I've had, at the last count, three serious incidents with students deciding that class is up before I finish, having breakfast in class or –this one is new– kissing as I lecture. Second class: 13:00-14:30, Contemporary British Drama. Yes, attendance is also only 50% (but at least it's the same students) and few take notes, but this is because they're actively following what happens in class, particularly the amazing performances by their classmates. All seem highly motivated (though I grant that a few

seemed less enthusiastic, I wouldn't say bored) and class discussion must often be cut short for lack of time. I'm the same teacher in both classes.

If I consider what Joan Simón said in his seminar I'm doing things right only at 13:00: a) I'm bringing a collection of guests for my students' benefit (5, which costs the Dept. some extra money – thanks!); b) I'm asking students to produce something on which they can invest their creative energies (a short play, which I'm not quite sure how to assess); c) they feel in charge of their learning, as shown in their performance of the selected scenes. Yes, the subject works beautifully and I'm enjoying it, particularly because I can relax for part of each session. More or less. I'm still shaking remembering how intense was the performance of parts of Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* this week.

Precisely, what I wondered when I saw the scenes was what could possibly motivate students to work so much and so well, much above my wildest dreams. The marks? Certainly not. My 'espabilation skills'? Ha, ha... I was really scared when I prepared the subject that students would not go along with the experiment and that the sessions would fall flat. I am no longer worried but whenever students thank me for the subject (sorry to sound appallingly smug) I insist it is not my merit at all: it is *theirs*. I am just VERY LUCKY.

I asked the students playing Ravenhill so brilliantly why they'd gone to such pains –literally– and they told me that it was something different: it was fun. Such fun, that I actually received two guests, friends of students in my class to see them... This worries me, for it shows that students' motivation is not primarily learning but enjoyment. Of course, plays are perfect for mixing pleasure and learning, as students are discovering but there is plenty of Literature less amenable to that reading methodology. Some texts must simply be endured –yes, endured– for the sake of learning about the History of Literature and I'm beginning to feel guilty that my British Drama class may be doing things harder for other Literature teachers. Even for myself in other classes.

Generally speaking, life is not fun and learning, even for the highly self-motivated, can often be mortally boring, a pain in the ass. We've become university teachers by spending many gruelling hours tied to literary texts we hated, breathing in deeply, and using whatever carrot and stick we had at hand. We are all Victorians for, as George Eliot wrote, we believe that "Conscientious people are apt to see their duty in that which is the most painful course." In contrast, our students belong to a generation fixated on their right to have fun.

This was, to my surprise, formally acknowledged as a fundamental human right by the 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child but, somehow, the right to have fun has spread beyond childhood to clash badly with adult duty, as adulthood is delayed and teenagehood prolonged (into the university classroom in what is called 'bachillerización').

Most of our students, particularly in the third and fourth years, are dutiful people, I know, but a significant minority still must learn that an adult is, simply, someone who must do his/her duty and have fun only once that is done. These are a worrying percentage of the ones we battle with on the front lines of the first and second years. And we must motivate them...

30-III-2011 WHO'S ELIZA'S MYSTERY STYLIST? (COLONEL PICKERING'S QUEER ROLE)

I show to my first year students the glamourous Ascot sequence of *My Fair Lady* and the moment I write 'Cecil Beaton' on the blackboard, I wonder once more why Shaw neglected to explain in further detail Col. Pickering's role in Eliza's transformation. We do know he is the one paying for the whole experiment, as he bets with Higgins, precisely, the expenses. Yet, Shaw is so engrossed by Eliza's relationship with her impatient phonetics teacher (speech therapist, rather), that he forgets to explain her equally spectacular bodily transformation.

Whoever is responsible for that works fast, as by Act III Eliza, a pretty girl literally covered in uglifying gutter grime until Act II, already looks like a lady (her dreadful small talk, though, betrays her origins). Perhaps Shaw was thus making the point that anyone can pick up the right classy clothes, but the more I read *Pygmalion*, the more I think that that awful film, *Pretty Woman*, got this aspect of female metamorphosis right on, with Julia Robert's famous shopping spree on Rodeo Drive. Now, whereas Cecil Beaton got all the credit he deserved for lovely Audrey Hepburn's marvellous look in *My Fair Lady*, in the play Eliza-Cinderella's fairy godmother goes uncredited, though she *must* have one. Remember what she wears when she first knocks on Higgins' door... My students suggested Mrs. Pearce, but there's nothing to explain why Higgins' sober housekeeper should have such fine taste. Higgins himself dresses badly and knows nothing at all about women's clothes. His mother, the elegant Mrs. Higgins, meets Eliza once her outward transformation is accomplished. This leaves us with only one candidate to be Eliza's secret stylist: Colonel Pickering (um, one wonders what went on in the British military abroad...).

I'm not the first reader to notice that Pickering and Higgins form one of those happy, socially accepted, pre-gay bachelor couples (think of Holmes and Watson). See how romantic this sounds: Pickering has travelled all the way from India to London, just to meet Higgins, his hero phonetician. Once he sets the bet on Eliza in motion and the girl is admitted into Higgins' house –not without Mrs. Pearce's misgivings, soon confirmed by blackmail from Eliza's father– Pickering quickly moves in. Mrs Higgins sees in this a perfect arrangement, worrying instead, like Mrs Pearce, about Eliza's (sexual) function in her son's household. Pickering himself seems also anxious to prevent Higgins from touching his pupil... I'm aware that by suggesting that Pickering is Eliza's fairy godfather I'm using a politically very incorrect word to out him. It is far from my intention to sound homophobic, which I'm not at all. I do intend, rather, to bring Pickering into the ranks of the queer stylists who, like Beaton, give our sad heterosexual world the glamour it so badly needs (Is this homophobic? Cliched?).

Shaw would surely give me a good show of his famous Irish irascibility if he could read this, but if his homophobia prevented him from making Pickering openly gay this is his fault not mine. Perhaps, only a homophobic, misogynistic man would insist on making the abusive Higgins the main focus of Eliza's transformation and not the gentle-man who enhances her good looks and, above all, her self-esteem. By treating Eliza with the respect any person deserves, Pickering accomplishes far more than Higgins, who clearly could take a few lessons from his good friend. It is in order to protect Higgins' masculinist allure, however, that Shaw pushes Pickering to the background, leaving him closeted. And Eliza all dressed up but not quite her own woman.

1-IV-2011 THE DAY I THREW A PAIR OF SLIPPERS AT A STUDENT IN CLASS (AND HE SEEMED TO ENJOY IT!)

Three of my first year students were supposed to offer a dramatised reading of *Pygmalion*'s Act IV. In it, after her successful impersonation of a lady at a posh party, Eliza quarrels bitterly with her teacher Higgins because she thinks he's not considered in depth what's to become of her after this odd experiment. I didn't want the students to simply read, I aimed this time at a more properly theatrical performance, and, so I was carrying simple props, like a couple of plastic envelopes shaped as the slippers she throws at him at the start of the quarrel.

Now, the girl supposed to play Eliza never turned up, and, whether dismayed or inspired, I volunteer to play the role. My, that was fun!! I got to throw the 'slippers' at my student and he had the pleasure of calling me names. I recommend this to any teacher, really!!! What amazing therapy!

Also, I think the point of the exercise was accomplished, even for my own benefit: we learned to see in the text what is usually missed in our fast, silent, private reading. And it turns out I myself had missed a key passage with Pickering's comments on personal style, the very subject of my previous entry. This is what the student playing Pickering read, and I finally *heard*, when Higgins complains that the party was mortally boring and "The whole thing has been simple purgatory":

PICKERING. You've never been broken in properly to the social routine. [Strolling over to the piano] I rather enjoy dipping into it occasionally myself: it makes me feel young again. Anyhow, it was a great success: an immense success. I was quite frightened once or twice because Eliza was doing it so well. *You see, lots of the real people can't do it at all: they're such fools that they think style comes by nature to people in their position; and so they never learn. There's always something professional about doing a thing superlatively well.* (my emphasis).

There you are!! Pickering, the party animal thirsting for glamour. He's boasting that Eliza shone out almost professionally and I see here the pride of her other Pygmalion. Sorry, Shaw, I'd missed this but I'll still insist that Pickering should be allowed to leave the closet...

6-IV-2011 FOUR IS COMPANY (WHAT SHAW IMAGINED FOR ELIZA)

As everyone who's read or seen *Pygmalion* knows, Shaw failed to give his play a coherent ending, which is why audiences have always fantasised that, somehow, Eliza and Higgins find happiness together, in love. This is, of course, nonsense, as they make an impossible couple, something both realise but that Eliza, like the audience, resists. Our deep indoctrination in romantic fiction makes the happy ending inevitable, a point which Shaw stubbornly disputes in his absurd epilogue (absurd because it can't possibly convince either reader or spectator).

The romantic option triumphs because not even today have we managed to imagine an alternative. Reading the play with my first year students, we came to the passage towards the end of Act V when Higgins, after calling Eliza "damned impudent slut" (!), congratulates her for having finally understood that releasing her pent up anger is far better "than snivelling; better than fetching slippers". Happy to see that,

since the girl is no longer afraid of him, she can finally stand on her own two feet, Higgins imagines a life in which “You and I and Pickering will be three old bachelors together instead of only two men and a silly girl.” Yes, a sexless threesome in which, besides, Eliza should be degendered –or, rather, treated as an honorary (celibate) man. Not quite what a woman would dream of, though I do see Higgins’ point. At least, he shows some imagination, we don’t.

I take it that Shaw was joking, or maybe so out of touch with his own society that he truly imagined that his singular threesome –the gentleman, the bully and the lady– could succeed. At any rate, Higgins’ proposal opens untold of possibilities beyond coupledom and the family. It’s close to current flat sharing, only it’s not conditioned by money. Nor by age, and this is what’s *truly* odd. Fancy a young woman living with two middle-aged men and enjoying it (or for that matter, a young man living with two middle-aged women). Couldn’t they have fun and live in perfect companionship if they chose to? (of course, there’s a Mrs. Pearce to pick up the dirty clothes...)

Funnily enough, the play’s epilogue leads to this final solution, the threesome, complemented with the addition of a fourth member, who seems to be there just to satisfy Eliza’s sexual cravings: pretty Freddy. Shaw gave Higgins a classic Oedipal backstory. Mrs Higgins, that formidable *mamma*, would, ironically, make a great mother-in-law but Higgins simply won’t have it. He chooses celibacy over young women (or men...), pretending he cannot understand either Pickering’s admiration or Eliza’s feelings. Pickering, surely, must be happy in Higgins’ particular household, as he’s a pliable man who loves the company of those he loves. Eliza, lucky girl, gets a gentle ‘father’, a gentle husband, and a most special friend. And Higgins gets to enjoy her company without the bother of being her husband.

I’m sure poor Cathy Earnshaw would have killed to get her brother Hindley, her husband Edgar and her ‘special friend’ Heathcliff together under the roof of Wuthering Heights, living in perfect domestic bliss. Instead, you see?, she must let herself die.

Eliza, yes, you lucky girl...

9-IV-2011 TESTING, TESTING, ONE, TWO, THREE: MAKING SURE LITERATURE STUDENTS READ LITERATURE

A student in our Department has bragged (in a classroom, before a teacher and classmates) that he has passed an English Literature subject (mine) with a high mark without having read any of the set texts. How? Quite possibly, he has attended classes regularly, seen film adaptations and downloaded guides to the set texts. Yes, it can be done. The result of his boast is that we, the English Literature teachers, have started a discussion about whether we should introduce compulsory, eliminatory reading tests: you don’t pass them, you’re not awarded a mark for the corresponding exercise.

There was a hilarious moment in our last meeting when a colleague with a degree in English from Edinburgh University explained that as a student there he had to pass a pre-semester eliminatory reading test. Yes, he was expected to read ALL the set texts BEFORE the subject started; students who failed the reading test were, simply, not allowed to register for this subject. I assume not even Edinburgh can hold today these high expectations about students’ willingness to read. I explained to him, though he knows this perfectly well, that it’s even difficult to test students before

teaching each text, as they don't buy the books with time enough to read them, if they buy them at all. We publish the complete syllabus for all subjects in July but not even second semester students buy all the texts in advance. I was told by one of them that they buy books about two weeks before we use them in class, as it's too expensive to buy them all at once. Logically, they read the books, if we're lucky, as we teach them. The only option is testing them after teaching is over, not quite a guarantee that classes will work better.

So: point one, students don't read – will the tests encourage them to read? Maybe. My own resistance to testing has also much to do with the fact that we'll have to use class time and mark even more exercises (not to mention preparing the tests themselves). I find it very depressing and disappointing that we need to check that university students do what they're supposed to do, but they're leaving us no other option. Now, again, how can a student pass an English Literature subject without reading the books? The answer is simple: what we test is their acquisition of the intellectual skills required to write literary criticism. In an exam, we don't ask what happens in chapter 18 of *Wuthering Heights* but how the structure chosen by Emily Brontë conditions our understanding of the love story between Cathy and Heathcliff. We teach *reading*, but we test *writing based on reading*. A clever person can perfectly understand this and, well, cheat (see above).

What depresses me even more than having to introduce reading tests is that an intelligent student may boast about not having read a set of wonderful books: *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Heart of Darkness*. It is sad to see how some people prefer flaunting their ignorance rather than learn. A sign of our times, no doubt. Some day, hopefully, the tide will turn and we'll get students asking for more (and if you're already here, do ask us, please, we love to teach those willing to learn). Meanwhile, I'll sharpen my red pencils and get ready to mark those irritating reading tests... another waste of time.

13-IV-2011 PLATE-SPINNING (MY CIRCUS ACT, OR THE UNIVERSITY AS A CIRCUS)

I was head of department for a brief stint (2005-8), a hectic time that left me with the perfect metaphor for what we, academics, do: plate-spinning. Recall the stereotypical Chinese circus artist, keeping a dozen plates furiously spinning: that's us. Preparing and marking exercises, writing paperwork, preparing and teaching and classes, answering email (lots of...), seeing visitors at office hours, making appointments, organising and attending conferences, reading dissertations... and that's just a typical day. Today for instance has already had a little of all this, much of it through email – and it's only 14:00. Writing this blog entry feels actually like a break.

I realise now that doctoral students writing their PhD dissertations are immensely privileged as they can claim priority for their research, which we, tenured teachers, cannot do. This week, for instance, I need to decide whether to spend Friday marking exams or working at the library on a conference paper. Whatever is not done on Friday will have to be done on Saturday, so my guess is that the exams will take part of my weekend (either that or work during my Easter... holidays?). Then, just yesterday, I got a 400 page dissertation by one of my doctoral students; I am already

reading another one sitting on my table... The problem with the plates is not just that they must be kept spinning but that unexpected ones keep falling from the sky...

What about my writing, I wonder? I do write, of course, but almost always to a deadline (conference, collective volume...). What is fast disappearing from my life as a researcher is the free-choice article, the one you embark on just because you need to say something in particular that some journal might pick up. I don't know how I managed to write one last autumn... The one I want to write this semester is not even at the stage of basic bibliographical research. As for books, I have no idea how I have managed to publish a few, for the one I've been working on for the last three years has been actually on stand-by for one and a half. Maybe I need an academic wife, that's some thought for a feminist...

I blame Oxbridge novels and films, though I couldn't name one in particular, for the very wrong view of academic life as a peaceful, sedate oasis of intellectual cultivation. I don't seem to find the peace and as for the cultivation... Perhaps I'm just getting old and losing the capacity to sacrifice more of my so-called free time to my job, or maybe I just can't cope with so many plates.

End of the break...

25-IV-2011 EUROPEAN DOCTORATE: SOME DOUBTS

This entry is prompted by a suggestion from one of my senior colleagues, recommending that we invite EU (= non-Spanish) researchers to the examining boards of our doctoral students. At UAB we do have something called 'Doctorado con mención europea' (European Doctorate), which entails quite a complicated system of validation for dissertations: a three-month stay abroad for the candidate (self-financed!) tutored by a local researcher; two reports once the dissertation is completed by two other non-Spanish researchers and a fourth EU specialist, invited to the board. The four non-Spanish EU specialists get nothing for their pains (well, one gets invited to Barcelona...), which makes finding them a matter of appealing to friendship or flattery. Although the internet suggests this scheme is active all over Europe, still today, after asking repeatedly the corresponding administrators, I can't say whether this is a UAB, Spanish or European validation system. No one seems to know...

Here's a sample of my experience with European doctorates. I tried to set up an exchange with a British university I won't name. I send one of my doctoral students to study with a specialist, who is, indeed, very willing to help (because she knows me, not because she'd heard about the European Doctorate) and I get one of theirs to tutor. Sending my student is no problem at all, but the student I was supposed to tutor at UAB was told by this British university that a) they're not aware that the European Doctorate exists and b) the stay at UAB would not be considered part of the study time for his dissertation. When he asked whether I could be an external examiner on his board (with the full support of his supervisor), the answer was that foreign specialists are only invited for linguistic reasons (i.e. if the dissertation deals with a foreign language). So much for reciprocity.

This might be unusual, or pure bad luck, but I witnessed recently yet another example of European miscommunication that left me reeling. A colleague invited to the examining board of a doctoral student who had fulfilled the expensive, demanding

requirements for a European Doctorate two non-Spanish EU specialists (French, I think). I have no idea why but one of them decided it was the right time and place to teach a lesson in European assessment strategies and, after quite an ugly debate, awarded the candidate a lower mark than she deserved. Why? Because, in her own words, this is what the dissertation really deserved using a European grading scale. This clearly hinted that we, Spaniards, overvalue our PhD dissertations -which might be the case?- but also that we are NOT European. By the way: there's no such thing as a European grading scale for PhD dissertations, although in view of this incident we might urgently need one, as national grading traditions clearly differ from each other.

My two examples might just be examples of very bad luck but I worry that by calling foreign specialists to our examining boards here in Spain we're sending out the wrong message: that we need them to validate what we do, for we are not good enough. I have seen websites by other British universities with the same rules we use for European Doctorates but I wonder who is invited to their boards (German and French specialists?). Are we going to build yet another hierarchical system by which the aim of reciprocity results in having a jet set of top European specialists (German, British, French...) validating what their less efficient neighbours do? Am I simply too pessimistic, as usual?

25-IV-2011 THE OTHER BOOKS: THE PROBLEM OF NON-FICTION

I seem to be developing an allergy to novels, for causes I find hard to diagnose. I have frequently heard that when compulsive readers reach a certain age (em, mid-forties) we get tired of novels and seek in other genres the literary and intellectual satisfaction we crave for. This may be happening to me, as for the first time in my reading life, I'm avoiding novels (except the ones I teach, of course...). What am I reading instead? Drama, poetry and everything else, that is to say, non-fiction.

I find the label 'non-fiction' lazy and silly; it sounds even worse in Spanish or Catalan, trust me. Yet, as often happens with lazy, silly labels (think: Romanticism) it has stuck and it is beginning to create a serious problem: how to define the genre (non-genre?) it names. Strictly speaking, the problem has been around for quite some time and what I really mean is that now that I'm itching to teach a course (sooner or later) I find myself concerned with it. That's egotism for you.

Surfing the net, I've come across two interesting lists of non-fiction, both American as, somehow, the label seems to be more popular across the Ocean (*Amazon.com* includes the category in its best-sellers lists, *Amazon.co.uk* doesn't). Check the list of 100 best non-fiction books at the Modern Library website (<http://www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-nonfiction/>) and the counter-list at CounterPunch (<http://www.counterpunch.org/top100nf.html>), which also includes a twin list of non-fiction in non-English... Ualah!!, as kiddies say today. The horizon expands and suddenly I have almost 300 more interesting books to read. A miracle!

During surfing I also come across Lee Gutkind's label 'creative non-fiction' (see the eponymous journal he founded at <http://www.creativenonfiction.org/>), which he uses to distinguish, with less than meridian clarity, non-fiction of a literary cast from the more utilitarian kind. 'Non-fiction' used to be called the 'essay' and even 'belles-lettres' but Gutkind seems to be guilty of persuading the National Endowment for the Arts to embrace 'creative non-fiction' as the *comme-il-faut* label in 1983. He mentions

as examples of the best 20th century non-fiction classics like George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, and Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, "books that communicate information (reportage) in a scenic, dramatic fashion." Of course, the genre becomes fully established with Truman Capote's intense *In Cold Blood*. That might be it, for my own more recent favourites respond to that description: Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*, Deborah Cadbury's *The Dinosaur Hunters*, Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* and even Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down* (in Spanish, Ignacio Elguero's *Los niños de los Chiripitiflauticos*).

However, this category of the 'lively reportage' is to narrow to encompass all of (creative) non-fiction. The lists I've mentioned include plenty of other kinds of valuable non-fiction: from *The Education of Henry Adams* to *Aspects of the Novel*, passing through James Watson's *The Double Helix* and even Elizabeth David's *French Provincial Cooking* (in non-English, some highlights are: Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*, Barthers' *Mythologies*, Rigoberta Menchu's *Autobiography* and Hassan Fathy's *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*).

I'm beginning to think that 'non-fiction' simply means an interesting book in prose which is not a novel (and not poetry and not drama)... This would be the equivalent of calling men 'non-women,' which might have a point but is hardly a useful, self-defining label. I do know there are narrower categories (the Wikipedia entry for 'non-fiction' gathers together 30 genres under this label), but I also know that when I visit the library I do not use them. I just want a non-novel, which, funnily enough includes drama (also fiction!!) and poetry (not quite, unless we're talking *Beowulf*...).

More thinking to do... My, this never ends.

29-IV-2011 THE HANDSOME ACADEMIC AND THE WOMAN WRITER

My good friend José Francisco Fernández Sánchez, from the University of Almería, emails me to announce good news: the volume gathering together the complete short stories by Margaret Drabble, *A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman*, is just out (see <http://www.amazon.com/Day-Life-Smiling-Woman-Complete/dp/0547550405>). He's the proud, happy editor. Congratulations!! José Francisco includes in his message a link to a radio interview with Drabble, in which the volume's publication is discussed (<http://www.npr.org/2011/04/24/135611071/stories-of-changing-english-life-in-smiling-woman>). A delighted Drabble explains that "He wrote to me and he said, 'I've assembled all your stories' (...) and he edited the text, and he'd just done it out of pure love. (...). It was a bit like a fairy story, to find a handsome young man who really loved your work and wanted to see it in print." I must smile, for he is handsome –and this is a fact, not an opinion. And yes, I can imagine how she must have felt, getting this marvellous token of admiration for her talent...

Here's the funny thing: I dare not send the link with Drabble's praise of José Francisco to our national AEDEAN email list for I'm not sure whether Drabble's sweet comment will be welcomed by our academic peers. Will they sneer? Will José Francisco's efforts be mocked by some envious academic, spurned by his or her idol? Ugly of me to suspect my own peers yes, I know, but I've seen worse... Still, I feel that

he deserves much praise for what Drabble reads, correctly, as an act of ‘pure love.’ So, here’s my entry, to remind ourselves that what we do for academic reasons is often not so far from a fan’s passionate dedication. And it is often shared by other fans, as you can see from the rapturous reviews the volume has got from a handful of admiring readers at Amazon.com.

Of course, what I’m itching to say is that, inevitably, as a woman, I notice the gender issues raised by Drabble’s grateful praise of José Francisco’s homage. Fancy a male writer saying this of a female academic in our times... Yet, this is also the time when, finally, a male academic can kneel at the feet of a female writer and show truly felt admiration. This happens in the same week when, here in Spain, Ana María Matute is awarded the third Cervantes prize received by a woman writer in 35 years. No wonder Nuria Amat complained that women writers working in Spanish are still *ninguneadas* (see <http://www.uimp.es/blogs/prensa/2009/06/23/nuria-amat-critica-que-las-escritoras-hispanas-son-ocultadas-por-el-mercado-editor-la-academia-la-critica-y-los-lectores/>).

So: handsome the man, yes, but even more handsome the gesture, the book. I just wish many other, male and female, academics learn from the example and do more for the love of the women who write.

8-V-2011 DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS: THE STRANGEST GENRE

Doctoral dissertations are the strangest genre because they’re both the record of a process of learning and its final product. PhD candidates are so overwhelmed by the effort made throughout years that they don’t seem to notice this particularity until, precisely, the time of the ‘viva’ (or ‘defence,’ as we call it in Spain echoing old Inquisitional tribunals...). Once the questions from the examining board pour down on the poor candidate, s/he realises that it would be perfect if only s/he could start again all over, now that the main mistakes are highlighted. But, then, part of the game is that you can’t start all over, and correct those mistakes you see in hindsight with all clarity.

This leads to a peculiar situation: if an examining board has enough ill-will against the candidate (or his/her supervisor...) any PhD dissertation can be failed, which seldom happens, if ever, in Spain –quite the opposite. I’m aware that in Britain PhD candidates can be sent back home to reform their dissertations and are allowed to re-submit them a few months later. This is unthinkable here, as it would be an appalling embarrassment for the supervisor. A peculiar idea of honour, then, turns defences into very strange exercises, as a dissertation can be awarded the highest mark regardless of the intensity and even aggressiveness of the criticisms it may receive. No wonder foreign members of examining boards are puzzled by our grading scale (remember the French diva?).

As a member of a few tribunals so far, I do worry about our very typical ‘cum laude’ hyperinflation. I’ve fought hard to keep up standards on examining boards that intended to reward candidates in excess of their merits, as I think that the all-too common automatic ‘cum laude’ diminishes the merits of real ‘cum laudes.’ This, ironically, might make me unwelcome to other examining boards, for I may gain the wrong reputation... We need to understand that if universities allow for a wider range of marks, these should be used, included ‘Aprobado’ (C) and ‘Notable’ (B). I do realise that the supervisor is a key element in the ‘cum laude’ hyperinflation, as his/her

colleagues would not want to question their professionalism by awarding one of his/her dissertations a low mark. Yet, it's funny how we never think this way of plain exams, which the best university teachers can fail with no qualms about his/her own reputation (again, quite the opposite). In the same way, although a doctorate is our own honours program, we need to understand that the impact of falling standards will soon be felt and we'll have indeed dissertations that only merit a simple 'pass,' regardless of the efforts of the supervisor.

Knowing that this blog is, somehow, autobiographical, I'm sure readers will suspect that I'm referring here to a particular dissertation. Well, yes, last Friday I was part of a PhD examining board and, yes, criticism was quite thorough, despite which the candidate got a 'cum laude' (A+). I awarded this mark with all my heart for I did see that the candidate, a hard-working person whose academic capacities I know well, understood our criticisms and would make most of them in order to publish a better version of his dissertation. Also because his failings were connected to his ambition to do innovative research in his field, which is, after all, the point of a dissertation. Well done!!

I just hope my own doctoral students do so well and that if they receive a 'cum laude' it is justified on the same grounds. I'm ready to help but I'm also ready for the time one of mine might deserve just a 'pass' despite my efforts. Sooner or later, it'll happen to any of us.

16-V-2011 PIERRE BAYARD'S *HOW TO TALK ABOUT BOOKS YOUR'VE NEVER READ*: IS IT REALLY TONGUE-IN-CHEEK

(A brief note to say this week-long absence from this blog feels much longer. May and not April is the cruellest month, if we judge by the overwhelming –or underwhelming– feeling that Spring is here, classes soon to end but pressure on our shoulders is higher than ever. Every conversation with a colleague ends in depression and commiseration. Deep breath).

Perhaps, you're already familiar with Pierre Bayard's deliciously wicked best-seller *How to Talk about Books We've Never Read* (2007). If you aren't, go and buy it or check it out of your local library. This is a book in which, as its title indicates, the author –a well-known French professor of Literature– makes the most of the fact that teaching and criticism function without students and teachers really reading the books they discuss. He presents his argumentation in favour of non-reading in a witty way, which, however, I'm not sure how to read. I understand that Bayard is writing tongue-in-cheek but I'm too worried by what goes on in class to relax and enjoy the fun.

Bayard lives in another galaxy, as far as I'm concerned, in which people have conversations about books (apparently in parties...), the chattering classes are important enough in the social landscape and, get this, students WANT to discuss books even though they haven't read them. His main point is that SHAME prevents academics and other intellectuals, or simply educated people, from acknowledging they haven't read a book (in students' case, it's pure cheekiness). This might be like that in sophisticated France but in plain Spain literary conversation is rare even among Literature colleagues (we discuss paperwork), TV programmes on reading are buried in a corner (as they deserve, since they are embarrassingly... bookish), and Literature

students simply don't open their mouths in class most of the time. Except to yawn. In my face.

Bayard's idea of shame doesn't seem to play a significant role. Every Literature teacher I know will simply declare without embarrassment they don't know a particular book they haven't read. *Ulysses* is widely unread, though I understand that not having read *Hamlet* is a bit too extreme for an English Literature teacher. Students used to claim they had read everything in the syllabus not to lose face but what disarms us is how readily they accept today that they don't read and don't even like it. OUR students, here, in English Studies, not the students in, say, Medicine or Law (probably they read more, I don't know).

Recently a colleague scared the bejesus out of us, Literature teachers, by saying that perhaps students' autonomy includes their autonomous decision not to read. No, it doesn't – Literature students simply DO NOT have the right not to read. They have the DUTY to read. If they don't want to accept it, they can go elsewhere with they're right not to read. I admit, as Bayard points out, that many teachers lecture or write about books they may not have read (hopefully, he means the books one mentions in passing, not the set texts!!) but we know ABOUT LITERATURE, that is to say, as he says, about how books connect with each other. And if we know, this is because we've read plenty, including histories of Literature.

The problem Bayard can't discuss, of course, is that even when students read, many don't read, that is to say, don't understand. Lying on my table are 63 exams based on a question which had to be answered in reference to a passage. Strictly speaking, only 2 have READ the passage well (= have developed critical thinking about it). The rest offer a mish-mash of plot summary, badly digested class notes and observations about personal life, often twisting the passage out of its meaning to fit a few lines in their essay. Sorry to be so hard but this is it.

Maybe we need another book called *How to Speak about the Books We Haven't Read and Offer Interesting Ideas about Them...* But, then, since people don't read...

23-V-2011 THE HANDBOOK OF THE PHD DISSERTATION SUPERVISOR: IS THERE ONE?

This cruel month of May is turning out to be quite peculiar in my academic life as regards doctoral dissertations. Today is 23, and in the three weeks of May I've gone through: an examining board for a dissertation supervised by someone else, the defence (or viva) of the second PhD dissertation I've supervised, the thorough editing of the my third supervised dissertation. Yes, that's plenty.

Just check this: it's taken me 20 hours to read/correct/comment on this third doctoral dissertation (380 pages), now on its final stage. Yet, my university supposes that the total amount of hours spent on a doctoral student is only 30 (computed when the dissertation is submitted, nothing along the 3 or 4 years we've been working together). This means that supposedly I've helped my student only 10 hours along the rough path he's chosen. Well... (MA dissertations count as 5 hours – the one I'm supervising now, 55 pages long, has gone through 5 complete rewritings so far).

So here's my question: where's the limit? How much energy should one invest on someone else's dissertation? Of course, we supervise PhD students for the glory of our CVs, since we get no economic reward whatsoever for them and those paltry 30

hours do nothing except engross the amount of hours I already give my university for free. If one is lucky and the student writes and thinks well, the whole process is logically easier and reading the final version amounts to making a note, say, once every 10 pages. Now, if the student has problems thinking and writing well the process of reading his/her intermediate and final texts may be agony (say 10 notes for every page...). But, where do we draw the line? As I've been explaining in diverse entries, in Spain it is assumed that both the student and the supervisor have done their best; furthermore, the supervisor is supposed to prevent dissertations deserving less than an A from being submitted (to a board of tired, overworked colleagues). Ergo: faced with a problematic dissertation, which might never get an A, the supervisor is placed in practice in a very tight corner. Every typo, every wobbly section subtitle, every neglected secondary source will count against him/ her. The only solution seems editing the candidate's dissertation to one's thorough satisfaction, as if we were his or her examiner or even the candidate him/herself.

Yet, I wonder whether editing is part of the supervisor's job description. I'll remind my readers that I work in a second-language department mainly with PhD students for whom English is not their native language. It's practically impossible to discuss ideas without discussing the kind of English in which they're couched. I don't know how this will work with the two native speakers of English I'm supervising, but whether you ask for a sample of writing in advance or not, there's no guarantee that the PhD dissertation will be immaculate. In this, possibly our worst enemy is that we must always rush. PhD students are all exhausted at the end of three or four years and want to get rid of their baby as soon as possible, often before it reaches full term. We, as the midwives, face the difficult task of risking a still birth... or finish the pregnancy ourselves!!

A friend told me recently that his own PhD supervisor warned him that he'd only accept supervising his dissertation on condition that he was never bothered with it. Yes, you heard me. When my friend called him to ask for help he needed badly, his supervisor (who never ever met him) reminded him of his initial warning. As my friend is brilliant, his supervisor got for free, as we say in Spain, another medal for the collection.

Cheeky, awful, yes, but maybe a system that thinks that supervising a PhD dissertation along 3 or 4 years and helping to make it outstanding takes ONLY 30 hours deserves this, I don't know.

28-V-2011 RAISING MY QUIZZICAL EYEBROW (ABOUT A LITERATURE QUIZ)

Yes, I'm always complaining, I know. I wish I could say that all the first-year students that took the English Literature quiz last Thursday passed it with flying colours. The truth is, mark this, that only 16 out of 59 managed to score at least 50 points.

What was the quiz about? Based on our handbook, *Introduction to English Literature*, it required students to identify the author for each entry in a list of 50 titles and also to assign to him/her to a period or school that had to be chosen from a closed list. It was devised as an excuse for students to read the handbook, produce a basic chronological scheme for all of Modern English Literature and learn to identify as many authors as possible, all of this in preparation for the rest of the Literature subjects in

the degree. Instead, I very much fear that many students assumed that the quiz was a simple, terribly old-fashioned memoristic exercise. Perhaps, some just highlighted authors and titles on the page and never read the rest of the handbook.

I know that the quiz was not too easy but the case is that most students did very poorly despite our making the period list available in advance, and despite warnings from the first day of the course that students should revise for it little by little (at least 16 were listening...). 10 students scored less than 20 points and to me this amounts to openly declaring they hadn't bothered to study at all (or had they studied with the wrongest possible method? What could this be?). Beyond these cases what truly puzzles me is how two poems read and commented on in class a few days before the quiz remained unidentified in most cases. And get this: Shakespeare was identified as the author of *Ulysses* at least twice, whereas *King Lear* remained authorless also at least twice. In one case the student did identify Shakespeare as this play's author but placed good old Will squarely in the early 20th century. Gloriously, a student named Jules Verne as the author of *The War of the Worlds* not even realising this was an English Literature quiz (or did she think Verne was English?). Another managed to fill in the complete exam but scored only 7 points out of 100, practically a statistical impossibility.

These are students who have chosen to take a degree in English Studies, whether combined with another language or not. My guess is that for many the fact that they need to take Literature subjects comes as a nasty surprise. For some very odd reason, many of our students claim to be interested in the language but appear not to be interested in the culture that generates it. The quiz results show that they lack the capacity to soak up information, which is not just the only way to accumulate cultural capital but also to progress in all professions. Fancy a doctor scoring low in a quiz about the location of bones, muscles and organs in the body! Aaaahhhh, how scary!

My own memory is beginning to fail me and I catch myself making mistakes and forgetting names or titles. I blame Google (or, rather my bad habit of relying on it to check forgotten things) and I try to compensate by keeping lists of what I read and see (I mean films and plays). It's funny: first I made lists to learn, now I make them to remember. The point is, however, that I have spent my whole academic life since the age of 18 making lists, and I am sure they will stay with me until the day I die. Sometimes I only manage to retain absolute garbage (who cares if Sylvia Plath put her head in the oven or cut her wrists?) but without the sedimentation left by all those lists I don't think I would be able to teach. Or read, or understand the world I live in. I don't know any other shortcut to feed my brain. No input, no output.

You might think that knowing that Charles Dickens wrote *The Old Curiosity Shop* has no use except perhaps winning in a TV quiz show (not many of them are that sophisticated any more...). Yet knowing which 50 authors wrote certain 50 titles means you do know something substantial about English Literature: this is your basic map to guide you in a journey which is exciting and rewarding.

The question for me in the end is whether you really want to be here, at the starting point and with me as your guide. Refusing to learn where we're going is, for me, like travelling to Egypt ignoring all about the pyramids – it can be done, but what's the point?

28-V-2011 FORCED ENTERTAINMENT (THE THEATRE COMPANY, NOT A UNIVERSITY LECTURE...)

Yesterday I had the good fortune of seeing the British theatre company Forced Entertainment (<http://www.forcedentertainment.com/>) here in Barcelona's CCCB... and for just 7 euros!!! What a luxury, and what a beautiful way to close the great experience that teaching contemporary British theatre has been this semester. In case you've never heard of them, Tim Etchell's company specialises in post-dramatic theatre, which is a trendy, vague way of calling shows which refuse to follow rules regarding plot or characterisation (perhaps 'anti-drama' would be a better label?). The one I saw, *Spectacular*, had two actors on stage: a very nice man wearing a skeleton mask and disguise, which suggest he is death one way or another, and a woman. She 'dies' in absolute agony for most of the show as he softly tells the audience how the performance is not at all progressing as usual. This lasted for about 80 minutes, more or less like a university lecture, and this is why I thought that 'forced entertainment' is an ironic label that applies to performing as fitly as to teaching. Who is forced? I'm not so sure...

To my surprise about 10 members of the audience (150 in total?) left in the middle of the show (in two separate groups, I mean). They were not entertained, forcefully or otherwise. I was glad then that students don't do that (but I also wondered how long will it be before they catch the habit... now they go to the bathroom at least once). I myself managed not to look at my watch, always a good sign that I'm having a good time at the theatre, though I saw others doing it. One of my students, by the way, was there, earning extra points, but she left too fast for me to chat with her about the show. I did chat with my companions, two doctoral students who specialise in contemporary British drama, and we agreed that some forms of entertainment entail hard work –not as you're entertained but in preparation for the kind of entertainment you're being offered. We found the show funny, witty and deep and apparently so did many in the audience who cheered, clapped and even bravoed the actors (poor Claire, dying hard for so long...) As I walked out of CCCB, however, I heard a young man complain to his mates that a friend had conned him by promising that Forced Entertainment were the best company in the world. "Fancy what the worst must be like," he quipped. At least he had stayed the whole show through.

Again: why put up with something not meant for you? I am not saying you should enjoy Forced Entertainment. I believe their name is an open, ironic acknowledgement that audiences sometimes put themselves through very odd experiences in their search for entertainment and/or enlightenment. What I'm saying is that none should force themselves to take up something they don't enjoy, whether this is postdramatic theatre or a degree in English, with plenty of Literature.

So: find whatever you enjoy, do enjoy it and don't spoil other people's pleasure in what they love. There you are: today's message.

1-VI-2011 ONE MORE SLAP IN THE FACE: THE GENERALITAT ANNOUNCES THE DOWNSIZING OF THE TENURED STAFF IN CATALAN UNIVERSITIES

I grab a coffee to start my day, sit in front of the TV to watch the news for a few minutes and this hits me in the face: the Generalitat announces plans to cut from 70%

down to 40% the percentage of tenured staff in Catalan universities (see <http://www.3cat24.cat/noticia/1225786/barcelones/El-govern-vol-reduir-en-un-30-els-professors-universitaris-amb-placa-fixa>).

First, I panic thinking they'll dare fire tenured teachers like me. What is announced is, rather, that on retirement only half the tenured teachers will be replaced; if they are replaced at all it'll be by hired teachers. But, hang on a minute: this is not news at all. It has been happening for the last few years, apparently the fat cow ones. And 70%, where would this figure come from? My own university, UAB, let it spill recently that the figure was 50%, which is what I see in my own Department, increasingly staffed with easy-to-fire associate teachers. The only thing that is news, therefore, is that this covert policy of reducing tenured staff down to a minimum is now overt. News, indeed...

Logically, the fewer tenured teachers are replaced, the bigger the workload for those of us trapped between happy retirees and unhappy young associates who might never be tenured. I guess this is why the UAB passed a rule stating that classes should be above 140 in order to be split into two groups. We haven't seen these enormous classes in our Department but the way we're going we're bracing ourselves for the worst. Fancy applying continuous assessment to 140 students... we'll have to go back for sure to cut and dry lecturing, with final exams. And I'll insist again that while teaching standards might perhaps be maintained with fewer tenured teachers by switching back to passé methodologies, research will suffer the most for it. Of course, that might be part of the plan, for without time for research, fewer people will be qualified for tenured positions and fewer tenured teachers will apply for professorships.

We'll go back to the 1980s, when we were routinely told that only foreign universities could offer quality teaching and research. We all made this gigantic effort to put Catalan universities on the map and start attracting foreign students and now, what? Will this absurd, mismanaged crisis sweep away 20 years of continued efforts?

I should grab my sleeping bag, and join the indignant crowds on Plaça Catalunya...

5-VI-2011 PHILO-LOGOS, OR THE LOVE OF LANGUAGE: READING JAUME CABRÉ'S *EL SENTIT DE LA FICCIÓ* (AND THINKING OF ENTRY LEVEL EXAMS)

This is serendipity. I get from my excellent local library Jaume Cabré's autobiographical essay on why and how he writes, *El sentit de la ficció*. As I read it on the train I find the perfect passage to close my first-year course on 20th C English Literature (pp. 24-25, in case you know the book). My last lecture is scheduled for just one hour later...

In this passage Cabré explains how pleased he was to discover that at university he would be given marks for reading books he would have read anyway for pleasure. This seems written for my students!! What is more important, he explains next how reading led him to writing and how our souls are trapped as we read by style, "sempre l'estil, sempre l'ús de la llengua, sempre la relació íntima de tu amb la llengua amb que t'has fet persona i que, mitjançant la intencionalitat artística, es converteix en llengua literària i deixa de ser vehicle per convertir-se en essència." (p. 25) I rarely quote here this long, but I think this time it is worth it. As I read aloud in class, I realise we often

forget that 'philology,' a word which has been dropped from the names of our degrees because students often didn't know what it stood for, means that: the love of the language. How hard it is to instil it...

I realise that the main difficulty in a first year course in a second language degree is that although students' love of languages may lead them to us, the way they love English is diffuse, based just on a superficial acquaintance. We possibly spend more time improving this acquaintance than teaching them to savour the beauties of Literature for the very basic reason that without a sound knowledge of the language these beauties pass unnoticed. And here's the rub: the courses we teach are designed for students who already know English intimately; instead, students often approach us because they want to learn English, starting from that superficial acquaintance. And this is not enough, much less when they take combined language degrees, mixing two poorly known foreign languages.

Why don't we introduce entry level qualifications? Well, for some strange reason we can't. In contrast, they have them in the Translation Faculty or School, I have no idea why. I mean to say that it would make perfect sense for both to have entry level exams: ballet schools have harsh examinations for prospective students and I don't see why future 'philologists' shouldn't be tested on their command of language, both first and second. Instead, we admit everyone –many of them are those who didn't pass the Translation test... And hope for the best.

I wonder if in Mathematics they have the same problem.

13-VI-2011 TWO STYLES OF DOCUMENTING THE CRISIS: *CAPITALISM: A LOVE STORY AND INSIDE JOB*

In this unusual long weekend in June with no exercises to mark, and after a WHOLE lecture-less week in which I've managed to write non-stop I don't know what trash (and thank God for that little time...!), I've finally managed to find some time to see two fine documentaries on the current crisis: Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) and Charles Ferguson's *Inside Job* (2010). The pack was to be completed with Oliver Stone's *Wall Street 2*, but I'm afraid I fell asleep over that one... not focused enough on the crisis, except for Michael Douglas-Gordon Gekko's spot-on speech about how greed seeped down from Wall Street and onto any of us who thought houses are to speculate and not to live in. Bubbles bursting, you should be thinking.

One thing I sure learned is the answer to the final question in my previous blog entry: what's the situation in Mathematics? It turns out that because the American university system encourages less and less the development of pure science, the best young mathematical brains of the US (not necessarily US nationals) were hired in the early 2000s by Wall Street to dream up new investment products that would make money out of thin air. They did –call them derivatives, CDOs, etc.– with the disastrous results we all know, aided by everyone's self-indulgent greed (the once fearsome villain Gekko said). If only those brains had been left to enjoy the beauties of pure science... or had been applied to other more apt dreams, like, the space race (yes, I read SF) or how to produce a reasonable amount of wealth for all... Now what's vanished into thin air are the many personal dreams of millions around the world, if not their whole lives. *Our* lives.

Anyway, I'm getting carried away. I don't want to discuss what Moore and Ferguson's documentaries have to say (do see them!) but how they say it. My point today is that even though the argumentation they present is pretty much the same, *Inside Job* got an Oscar and Moore's film was greeted by critics (not so much by spectators) as yet one more example of Moore's dubious populism. Disregard this... Seeing them back-to-back is a very rewarding experience because, of course, you get a much rounder picture of the darned crisis than either can provide independently. Ferguson, clearly, aims at the educated segment of the audience, whereas Moore, also clearly, goes beyond that into the mind of the popular, less educated classes. He does succeed in making crystal-clear sense, for everyone to grasp, of the absurd behaviour of those in government who should have controlled money but failed to do so.

I've taught in a course on globalisation Moore's moving *Bowling for Columbine* and his scary *Fahrenheit 9/11* and in each edition we crashed against his populist sentimentalism. This, as we know, is manipulative and, essentially, anti-intellectual. I think, however, it is also, ultimately, *very* necessary. If only the patriarchal clique – Ferguson makes a point of stressing there were no women in it – had put, as Moore does, a human face on the blank images of those whom they mercilessly destroyed the world would be now a better place.

Think twice next time you reject Moore's films or his working-class sentimentalism. They may not be to all tastes but have their uses. I should know, coming, as I do myself, from the working classes now everyone is pretending not to see.

18-VI-2011 AMINA IN DAMASCUS AND SARA IN BARCELONA: DO WE EXIST?

If you've been following the news this week you'll soon catch which Amina I mean: yes, Amina Arraf, the 'author' of the now notorious blog *A Gay Girl in Damascus* (<http://damascusgirl.blogspot.com>). By now the whole world knows that hers was a fake identity, invented by a 40-year-old American *heterosexual man*, Tom MacMaster, an MA student living in Edinburgh (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amina_Abdallah_Arraf_al_Omari). By pretending to be a lesbian girl trapped by the horrors of the Syrian revolution, MacMaster certainly opened a window onto a harsh reality that had to be revealed. This was his justification. Yet I am personally quite scandalised by how his stupid narcissistic hoax may damage the credibility of any other testimonial blog. Just think of Yoani Sánchez in Cuba (*Generación Y*, <http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/>).

Yes, anyone who writes a blog uses a 'fictional' auto-biographical self and, yes, we might wonder why we crave so badly for other people's personal experience. After all, whether Amina exists or not, MacMaster has transmitted to the world a clear, accurate image of the hardships suffered by too many citizens at the bloody hands of Bashar al-Assad. That should be enough. I am aware that blogs should be treated with all the caution of personal diaries and never mistaken for journalism, yet I still feel we need to draw the line somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. If MacMaster had presented his blog as a piece of fiction, at least as far as his protagonist was concerned, I wouldn't be worried at all. What worries me is the intention to cheat on his readers. MacMaster may say he never intended his hoax to go so far, but I wonder what any

'real' lesbian girl in Damascus might think of his sense of humour. If 'she' decided to write a blog, how would her testimonial be received? (Yes, with mistrust)

I assume that anyone with the patience to read my own blog does it supposing that I exist (I do most days...) and that the professional issues I raise here do depend on my 'real' personal experience. If now I revealed I'm actually one of my students, or someone with no links at all with the university, I'm sure the whole blog would collapse. I do know that any blog is validated by its readers, who turn it into something beyond the pure personal diary, above all with their comments. This validation is based on either direct knowledge of the author or the supposition of a *bona fide* intention on her or his side. This is what MacMaster has dynamited. I do wonder how his readers will react and whether his Amina blog will survive at all.

When venting my obnoxious opinions in a debate, I was reminded of the case of Enric Marco (http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enric_Marco_Batlle). Enticed by the generous reception granted to concentration camp survivors in public forums, Marco decided to pass himself off as one of them. He lectured extensively until his deception was exposed. The colleague who reminded me of his case argued that he had done good in the end. Yes, he may have fulfilled the aim of attracting the attention of many who would not have listened otherwise but the way I see it he usurped an authority that didn't belong to him. This irresponsible action casts a shadow on the real survivors whose testimony might even be discounted by negationists as a downright lie. This is what worried me too in the case of Amina's blog.

There is something called 'disclaimer,' Tom MacMaster, and you should have used one calling your blog 'fiction.' Mine is not, at least to the extent that I give if not the truth, at least my own version of anecdotes, etc., I've witnessed. I don't know, though, if in the end this makes me more real than Amina, for, after all, perhaps, just perhaps we're each of us just an "agreed-upon fiction" (yes, Hayden White's definition of history in his persuasive, mind-boggling *Metahistory*).

1-VII-2011 TEACHERS IN JULY: DOING WHAT, EXACTLY?

One of our brightest students visits me (see why below) and asks me, casually, seeing that I'm still stressed out, what exactly do teachers in July. This is tactful in comparison to the habitual 'so, you're already on holiday?' with which I'm greeted by family and non-academic friends every year at this point. I always wonder why there are not more people queuing to be teachers at any educational stage if everyone believes we have these loongggg holidays...

Between June and July, my dear student, we teachers mark tons of exercises, papers, exams, dissertations as we try to catch up with our reading and writing, perhaps attend a conference, perhaps organize it, and, yes, get ready for the next academic year –design the syllabus, choose the set texts and read them... What do students do, exactly?

This leads me back to a recurrent worry: why is our profession so deeply misunderstood? To begin with, everyone believes that our main job is teaching, when it should actually be doing research. I say it should because teaching and management tasks are taking up more and more of our time, as I've been complaining about here again and again. Yet, somehow, teaching hours are the only measurable part of our job and, therefore, the only part that is grasped by the general public, students included.

This means that, except for the person who lives with me, and who sees me work at home practically every day, whether I go to UAB or not, everyone else believes I work half the week and only for a few hours.

Even so, the hours spent in front of the computer seem to count for more than the hours we spend working on our backs –I mean reading on the sofa. For my dad, who spent 8 hours everyday standing, operating a machine, the idea that one can work stretched out on a sofa reading a book is absurd. If I told him that after 8 hours of intellectual work of this kind I’m exhausted, particularly when I write (no, none can write for 8 hours...and not on the sofa), he would not understand at all. This generates a peculiar feeling of guilt –yes, guilt– that a) at this time of the year, I am free to choose my daily schedule (except on exam dates –last one 19 July...), 2) I use most of my time to read, which for other people is a pastime.

I wonder if this is why they hate us so much and why ‘they’ (the bureaucrats that oppress us) want to reduce university teaching down to the regimented horror that most jobs are.

See next...

1-VII-2011 GETTING READY FOR ACADEMIA: THE LONG ROAD

The bright student who visited me wanted to know what it takes to become a university teacher. Time, patience, luck, stamina, determination, pragmatism and the thickest possible skin. The other qualities –a teaching vocation, a passion for learning, good writing skills– are taken for granted to such as extent that I have never heard them mentioned, which speaks volumes about the upside down world in which we live.

This student is 20, still very young, but I found myself planning her life for the next 10-12 years. First you finish the degree (2 more years), then take an MA (1 year), then write a doctoral dissertation (3 years) and that’s just the barest beginning. Um, yes, as you do this try to combine working with teaching as an associate (which universities hate, I know...), publishing and attending conferences out of your own pocket. In our current accreditation system if you strike it very, very lucky, you get a first post-doctoral accreditation, which might just perhaps lead to teaching position for 4-5 years. By that time you’re already 30 –if you’re a woman the biological clock starts ticking, which means that you stop being competitive just at the time when the second, final accreditation for tenure comes up. If you get that by the age of 30 and are tenured by, say 32, that’s EXTREMELY lucky (the average age for tenured positions is now 40). I told you: my student is 20, 12 years later she might be tenured. Or not.

There was a time, 20 years ago, when one could become a tenured teacher still in their mid to late 20s, with just a PhD dissertation and one (minor) published article under their belt. Now this is impossible. I agree that the academic career was, if not exactly easy to access, easier than it should have been. Now it’s verging on mental torture and, faced with this very long road no wonder many young promises are giving up before they start. My crystal ball tells me we’ll soon have a shortage of doctors with a lectureship accreditation but, then, as this will coincide, or is already coinciding, with this monstrous crisis which is destroying tenured positions as teachers retire, I just don’t know whether to tell my student to feel optimistic or pessimistic...

I just hope the younger generations are not as naive as we, the ones born in the 1960s, were. Pragmatism rules... The best you can do is take the accreditation regulations, study them, and plan your career with foresight. What this has to do with the creativity of learning beats me.

2-VII-2011 READING ROGER CASEMENT AT LAST! (AND QUESTIONING LITERATURE)

I first mentioned Roger Casement here in relation to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (see entry for 12-XII) and, later, in my review of Mario Vargas Llosa's *El sueño del Celta* (2-I), a novel based on his tragic life. In the meantime, I have spent 60 euros of public money to purchase for the UAB library a copy of *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement's Congo Report and 1903 Diary*

O'Sullivan, University College Dublin Press, 2003). Amazingly, nobody has uploaded the report onto the net, I can't explain why as copyright laws no longer apply, although, tellingly, the available edition of this official British report is Irish (remember? Casement, himself Irish, was executed for helping the Irish rebel). Anyway, I have finally read the report and I worry now that *Heart of Darkness* is for ever spoiled for me.

The report is a straightforward narrative of Casement's own journey into the heart of darkness that King Leopold's personal Congo was in 1903. Basically, Casement repeated the journey he'd already taken in 1887 (Conrad was in Congo in 1890) in order to better appreciate the contrast between Congo as it was before the arrival of the white man and Congo under the impact of his depredations. The results of this comparison are devastating, basically due to the imposition by private companies of harsh food and rubber quotas (for the budding bicycle and car tyre industries) on villages punished with unbelievable violence, with the Government's full consent, if these were not met. Ivory, which is central to Conrad's story as we know, is hardly ever mentioned whereas, unlike what happens in Conrad's text, the natives are indeed mentioned by name and so are the places they inhabit. We know through Casement of the atrocities they report to him and I remain personally haunted by the chief who breaks down and cries, as he tells Casement life is no longer worth living for him and his people.

I am well aware that Casement *reports* what he's told and we don't hear the actual voices of the terrorised native population for they are completely disempowered, having to resource to this committed, disgusted white man to vent their grievances. Yet, reading the report, one is also fully aware that the stance Casement took was a matter of human rights, as he, like many contemporary NGOs attacked, mainly, the *illegality* of what was being perpetrated in Congo as a way to free the native population from terror. At one point he recalls how in his first visit the Congolese would flock to meet any white person who happened to pass their village when in 1903 they often fled in terror at his own approach.

Suddenly, after reading the report, Conrad's tale appears to be not only very silly (more in the line of *King Solomon's Mines* than of anything else) but also irresponsible. No wonder Chinua Achebe was angry. Now I understand. I have always thought that, given the all-pervading racism of his time, Conrad's Congo needed be the primitive, exotic place it is while his own racism appeared to be quite moderate.

Reading now Casement I stand corrected, as his report shows that many white persons were then already capable of a degree of human sympathy that we are still struggling to achieve (think Iraq and Afghanistan). And it shows, above all, how easy it is to build empathy for the suffering of those who cannot speak for themselves if this is what the writer intends. We get nothing at all like this from Conrad and I can only say that Literature, or at least Conrad, fails in this miserably. Next time I teach *Heart of Darkness*, I'll make sure students also read Casement. If I ever teach it again...

6-VII-2011 A FEMINIST DILEMMA: THAT MAN AT THE CONFERENCE...

I attended a few weeks ago a very interesting interdisciplinary conference on gender, development and textuality at a university near Barcelona. As usual whenever gender is discussed, there were very few men, which is why *that* particular man soon caught my attention.

Tall, wearing salwar kameez and cap, his face decorated with a longish beard and no moustache there was no way we could miss him. Particularly because he never smiled, which is a feat when you're surrounded by dozens of chattering, laughing women (and a few truly nice men). As it turned out, he was the brother of a female Pakistani guest speaker with a cosmopolitan academic background –I won't name her. I first supposed the siblings were joyfully reuniting after a while without seeing each other but soon it became clear to me that he was her 'official' chaperon, guardian or worse. To my dismay, although only the sister spoke at the round table to which she had been invited, she credited her brother as the co-author of her paper ("independent analyst," his affiliation claimed). He didn't even take part in the ensuing discussion.

When I told one of my colleagues how annoyed I was by the presence of this patriarchal eyesore at the conference, she answered that she herself had managed NOT to see him. I tried, but failed. Another colleague reminded me, more charitably than I myself felt, that without this man's surveillance our woman guest couldn't have delivered her paper. Of course, without her accrediting him as co-author, he could have been prevented at least from entering the premises, but I was told I was beginning to sound really authoritarian. Well, deep breath. It was not MY feminist conference and I don't know what I would have done in the place of the organizers but it HURT to see how weak our position is as women, so that we have to tolerate out of politeness (or female solidarity?) the imposition of this man's unwelcome presence among us.

I do wish someone would embarrass me right now by telling me that I had grossly misread it all and he was just enjoying the company of his adored sister. Anyway, next time I find myself in a situation like this, I'll rent a bulky, spectacular escort –bodyguard or toy boy, I haven't decided yet– and will parade him all over the conference, stuck to my heels. Maybe he and the unsmiling man will make friends, go sightseeing together, leave us women alone...

10-VII-2011 WHEN IT'S BAD, IT'S WORSE: ARTHUR MILLER *ALL MY SONS*

I believe that when theatre disappoints it does do with the same intensity as when it pleases: very much. This is not quite the same in the case of cinema, I'm not

sure why; somehow, bad films are soon forgotten, whereas bad plays, always harder to follow than films, remain stuck in our memories. I'm afraid this is what will happen to me in the case of Argentinean director Claudio Tolcachir's version of Arthur Miller's *All my sons* (1947), translated as *Todos eran mis hijos* and staged here in Barcelona's Teatre Poliorama within this year's Grec Festival.

I had been warned that the production was a complete disaster, which is why I took last night's performance with a pinch of salt and even enjoyed now and then the ham acting of minor celebrities Manuela Velasco (of *REC* zombie fame) and Fran Perea (from TV series *Los Serranos*). The seniors, Gloria Muñoz and Carlos Hipólito, were not much better. And the others, oh my... Velasco ended calling her 'brother' Georgie, Jordi, which provided us, Catalans, with a truly hilarious moment, while Muñoz destroyed one of the fake plants on stage by stepping on it accidentally. I could hardly hear Hipólito well (from row four...); young Perea insisted on sweating profusely and running all over the stage instead of acting. I could go on...

I'm not sure whether this appallingly bad acting was all the directors' fault or whether Miller's text (condensed at some points, I'm afraid...) is so outdated as to be impossible to recycle. I found it predictable, contrived (yes, there was a letter concealed for years...), very middlebrow, if you know what I mean. Now, here's what I really wanted to say: my friends and myself, quite bemused by what we had seen, found ourselves surrounded by a sea of enthusiastic members of the audience, clapping wildly and shouting bravo. That was funny. My friends attributed the unexpected reaction (we assumed everyone was as uncomfortable, bored, astounded as we were by what went on on stage) to the celebrity cult inspired by Hipólito (the voice of the grown up Carlos in *Cuéntame*), Perea and Velasco and they might have a point. The audience yesterday was not the usual one at our habitual haunts, Lliure or TNC, but the 'others' of commercial theatre. (I, besides, found the play very alien in terms of its following stage conventions that can only be seen in Madrid's theatres.)

Anyway, the point is that I was one of the dozens spectators clapping like mad and shouting bravo at the top of my lungs after last Sunday's performance of *Octopus*, the beautiful contemporary dance show by Philpe Decouflé's company. A friend told me he'd enjoyed it but found it just pretty, immediately forgivable. Um. To him I am, therefore, what the 'others' were yesterday to me at Poliorama, which is making me think hard about theatre and taste. Each one of us is a stage snob, just like that, and there's little we can do except avoid shows not intended for us. Actually, when I saw the poster for the play I saw yesterday, circulating all over Barcelona on the side panels of buses, it took me a while to connect it with the play I had tickets for. "This is a play," I told myself then, contemplating the cast's photo, "I'm not going to see."

Too late, big mistake. I was lured by Miller's name, I should have checked the other names. Or see, perhaps, the 1948 film version with Edward G. Robinson and Burt Lancaster...

13-VII-2011 (ACADEMIC) DIVA IN TOWN: ABOUT NOT PAYING HOMAGE

SHE is in town, the one who made all that possibly with the publication of that book back 20 years ago, invited once more to illuminate us (at great expense, with public money). I saw her years ago, one among a crowd of adoring admirers and I liked

her very much because she deflated her hyperbolic introduction by claiming she had no idea who that ‘other’ woman, the one the presenter had described, was. Last time, when she was here talking about matters totally unrelated to that book, I didn’t attend, finding the announced lecture little enticing, too dependent on her fame. This time, I haven’t really paid attention to the seminar she’s teaching and, from anecdotes I’ve been told, I feel even less inclined to pay homage.

This is what we do, right?, pay homage –“rendir pleitesía” as we say in Spanish. I’m not so snobbish, or such a bad case of green envy, as to think that visiting scholars do not provide us with valuable occasions to fertilize our local wasteland. Yet, the higher the reputation, the less willingness I see to seriously engage with local scholars and students, which is what the visit should be about. I don’t know how or why but we, relative ignoramus, have created a circuit of academic divas (and divos, does the word exist in English?) that, somehow, takes us for granted here in the academic Third World. I wonder if they ever truly realise where they are in their travels around the world. Of course, notice that these travels tend to begin in the USA, occasionally in France, Britain or Germany, and that hardly ever lead to reciprocal invitations. Actually, how could they? We don’t have luminaries here –they all moved long ago to the States or dream of leaving the wasteland behind. Of course, this is our fault, for admiration totally precludes real intellectual work. I see too much of that. Groupie admiration leads nowhere intellectually, though it might supply you with the odd orgasm (of the mind, I mean...). I’m all for debate, which only happens when people occupy similar positions, when the diva/o understands that now and then it’s quite healthy to stop acting as one, slum down and connect.

We should write papers, perhaps a PhD dissertation, about academic stardom in the same way we write about other kinds of stars, and place this diva alongside Madonna or Marylin Monroe. Maybe this way we’d discover how these mighty brains produce: on rich campuses, under the initial mentorship of well-connected names, networking with others like them, not having to carry out dirty admin work or teach undergrads. Do I sound bitter, maybe totally jaundiced? Well, of course I do. In academia we are all aspiring divas and divos –don’t we all crave for admiration? Yet, above all, I am tired of not seeing Spanish names in international bibliographies and of the fact that so few nations produce ‘inevitable’ guest speakers. Why don’t they have divas this big in Roumania? In Tanzania? In Colombia? How come the list of big names is so small in this big world?

Or, rather, how come some names are so big in this small world of ours that none cares for outside? Say Bauman, say Spivak in the streets and see what happens. Say Lady Gaga in class... Oh, no, she’s from that country. Say Shakira, then, and see who’s the real diva, whether you like her or not, and why some fields of knowledge should have none or just very modest ones. As for myself, instead of attending her seminar I’ll attend that other seminar and see what my younger colleagues have to say.

17-VII-2011 ISHIGURO & GARLAND: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS (ABOUT A VIDEO)

I’m writing a chapter for a collective book, edited by José Francisco Fernández Sánchez, on how contemporary British writers have progressed since the publication of

Blincoe & Thorne's anthology (and manifesto) *All Hail the New Puritans* (2000). I chose (I begged...) to write about Alex Garland, as I'm very much interested in how he's straddling the world of literature and cinema.

In my search for bibliography I came across an interview by David Poland with Garland himself and Kazuo Ishiguro, filmed at the time of the release of *Never Let me Go* (Mark Romanek, Sept 2010), the adaptation scripted by Garland of Ishiguro's SF novel. I'm fascinated by that 36-minute conversation (enjoy it at <http://www.viddler.com/explore/mcnvideos/videos/219/>). What's so interesting about it? Everything –if you love books and cinema. The contrast between these British writers of two very different generations, who are, nonetheless friends and creative accomplices. Even the body language is significant. What they say about the profession of writing from very different perspectives on literary achievement and reputation. How well the interviewer manages to raise all the key issues regarding the difference between writing for the page and writing for the screen. The fascinating insights into the writing of *Never Let me Go* and the ensuing film adaptation...

Apparently, the pair met when Ishiguro contacted Garland after learning that he had modelled a piece of dialogue in *The Beach* after a similar exchange in Ishiguro's own *The Artist of the Floating World*. You might say that Garland also borrowed from Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* the gimmick of having an unreliable narrator who is exposed to the reader in his meanness as he himself remains unaware. Garland clearly admires Ishiguro for his novels and Ishiguro, for all his immense literary quality, has the elegance of admiring Garland for being a much better screen writer than he is. Possibly this is the key issue of the interview. Ishiguro explains that when you're regarded as a good novelist, your screenplays are welcome regardless of your actual qualifications to write them, an opinion he uses to justify why he's not so satisfied with his own screenplays. Garland, who seems to be now a full time screen writer (his last novel, the brief *The Coma* was published in 2004) is asked, in contrast, how he's coping with the acute loss of reputation that being a screen writer entails in comparison to being a novelist. He claims not to care at all, poor thing, as long as he can carry out the film projects he's interested in. Ishiguro comes to his rescue, stressing it's all a matter of convention –screen writers are just not granted the respect that their closest colleagues, playwrights, receive. But that might change.

I hope so! I also hope that Garland's decision to adapt *Never Let Me Go* as his own very personal project (it took him five years...) starts a new fashion for literary adaptations in which the screenwriter's name does matter –'Garland reads Ishiguro' could be the slogan I'm after. Add your own... This, of course, has been around for a long time, possibly from the beginnings of cinema (William Faulkner was co-author of the screen adaptation of Hemingway's *To Have and to Have not*, remember?). Yet, somehow the adapter's work is always obscured and all merit stupidly awarded to directors. And the other way round: Garland insists that Ishiguro is also the author of the film adaptation of *Never Let me Go*, even though he had no hand in the screenplay nor was in touch with the director: the themes, characters and settings, Garland stresses, are all Ishiguro's. By all accounts, then, if Garland wins, let's say, an Oscar for his adaptation, Ishiguro should win one as well. I'll keep my fingers crossed for Garland, knowing Ishiguro will be very happy for his friend.

18-VII-2011 BRONTË'S *THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL* ON TV: WHY I WON'T SHOW IT IN CLASS

Among the myriad things we, teachers, do in July one is (re-)reading the set texts for the coming academic year and, in some cases, seeing the corresponding film adaptation (on DVD, self-financed) to check whether it might be of use to complement the book (also self-financed). I personally enjoy very much doing research on film adaptations and have frequently used film clips in class, teaching occasionally elective subjects on the adaptation of short fiction or drama.

Last year (2010-11), however, I didn't use films at all in class for two reasons: a) students' ability to understand the texts is fast diminishing and we have, therefore, less time for 'extras'; b) after reading an exam on *High Fidelity* in which Rob Fleming was called throughout Rob Gordon (as in the film) I must finally accept that too many students see adaptations instead of reading the books. Next semester we'll be teaching *Oliver Twist* and I'm already bracing myself for getting songs from Carol Reed's musical film instead of passages from Dickens quoted in student papers. Oh, well!

Actually, with Victorian novels the problem is the TV adaptation rather than the film version. The 1999 TV mini-series based on *Oliver Twist*, for instance, seems at 386 minutes complete enough to tempt students into not reading the text. And not only students. I've read somewhere that the TV version of *Middlemarch* (375 minutes, 900 pages) boosted enormously the sales of the book but not necessarily the size of its readership. For the other novel we're teaching, Anne Brontë's overlooked *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the choice is between 400 pages or 159 minutes... This is why I doubt I'll even mention the TV version in class, much less show clips from it.

It'll be easy, in any case, to catch students who haven't read the book (yes, we have introduced reading tests –isn't it appalling that we need them?). Even though the main actors are perfect (see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115387/> -God bless the Brits for producing such great acting!) and so is the very English country house setting, Brontë's secondary characters are mostly pared down to mere non-entities. More important, some key aspects have been rewritten in some cases to make up for apparent plot gaps (Helen's odd ignorance of Gilbert's brutal assault on Lawrence) or to dismiss uncomfortable gender issues –uncomfortable today, not for Brontë's Victorian imagination: in the novel Gilbert hesitates to approach Helen again knowing she's become a very rich woman; this is not even mentioned in the TV version. Also, the crucial religious subtext is sharply downplayed, possibly to make Helen less sanctimonious, which she is no doubt.

Poor Tara Fitzgerald, a real beauty and an inspired casting for Helen, was given a most unflattering Victorian hairstyle in the mini-series, corresponding to the decade the novel covers (1827-1837). I realise I could never have come up with that awful look as a reader. That ugly hairdo has certainly colonised my own visualisation of the novel... what an eyesore! In the end I might show just that –images to help students visualise the text, not necessarily from the mini-series but perhaps original Victorian fashion plates.

Deep breath. I just feel sad. Too much in our teaching Literature is becoming conditioned by students' readiness to cheat on us rather than by our eagerness to teach them... Their loss as much as ours.

14-VIII-2011 A MATTER OF OPINION: ABOUT AMAZON READERS' BOOK RANKINGS

(It feels very nice to return to this blog after a much necessary three-week summer break, which, like all Literature teachers, I have spent chain-reading... Shouldn't this count as work time???)

Among my summer reading I have included Iain M. Banks's last Culture novel *Surface Detail* (2010). He happens to be my favourite sf writer and I buy his sf novels (12 so far) as a matter of habit, not even checking first whether they're worth reading. I know they are (same with Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, or Terry Eagleton's essays). However, at one point, 70 pages into Banks's book, which stretches to 640, I thought I would fail this time to read the whole volume (mark this: I'm speaking of MY failure, not his). Too much information to digest, too many threads to follow. I decided to trust Banks, let him push me as usual to the farthest margins of my capacity to visualise bizarre creatures, spaces and gadgets and go on. My reward? One so big I have decided to re-read the novel as soon as possible to savour the, well, surface details, now I've got the story (I'm in the middle of the *Narnia Chronicles*, long overdue). Do I recommend Banks's book to you? No, not at all. Unless you love sf, particularly post-cyberpunk space opera, you won't enjoy it. If you're curious about Banks, you just can't plunge, anyway, into the middle of this immense Culture saga. Take his sf first novel, *Consider Phlebas*, and enjoy!! I have promised myself not to spoil the fun by re-reading them all pencil in hand to write a paper, as I have done with Ian Rankin's Rebus saga (essay forthcoming in *Clues*, this autumn), but I do feel so tempted...

As it is my habit every time I read a book, I checked what other readers have to say in (at?) Amazon, where else? Americans like *Surface Detail* better than the Brits (4 stars on average rather than 3,5, out of 5). I can't tell whether the 67 opinions at Amazon.com and the 124 at Amazon.co.uk account for 1% or 10% of the total English-speaking readership, possibly more 0.01%, but what never fails to fascinate me is the statistical distribution of opinions. Most books I read or check out of curiosity rank between 3 and 4,5 stars and, inevitably, between 50% and 75% of the readers are enthusiastic or quite happy. Also inevitably, around 10% just hate the book. I tend to read the negative reviews on the grounds that pissed-off readers who bother to waste even more of their time usually have an interesting point to make. It never fails... (I just need to put up with the usual complains that a) the book is overhyped, b) the author is losing touch with his/her own talent and was miles better in previous books). The 191 sf *connoisseurs* who have bothered to leave an opinion tell you thus simultaneously that *Surface Detail* is perfect, not so perfect, passable, just passable, and a complete failure. How can one recommend any book any more?

My personal experience, anyway, is that Amazon readers' opinions work well to curb down my own enthusiasm and be more critical when I love a book (yes, yes, *Surface Detail* might not be that coherent). When I hate it, I just feel smugly confirmed in my own prejudices. And, no, I don't want to become an Amazon reviewers and get emails from other readers telling me how wrong my opinion is... Someone should study all this to see how literary canons, of whatever genre, are being formed in internet era, by the way.

17-VIII-2001 THAT SINKING FEELING: READING DAVID GILMORE'S *MISOGYNY: THE MALE MALADY*

David Gilmore is an American anthropologist who specialises in Spanish masculinism in recalcitrant local areas, which, I'm sure, is enough for several academic careers. Having puzzled over his volume *Manhood in the Making* (1991), which deals with the rites of passage devised by men around the world to access 'proper' masculinity, I embarked this summer on his book on *Misogyny: The Male Malady* (2009). You may read Jenny Diski's thorough review at *LRV* online (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n17/jenny-diski/oh-andrea-dworkin>) and I'll save thus myself the trouble of expressing in too much detail how annoyed I am with Gilmore. Let me quote a tongue-in-cheek bit from her review, and you'll get the idea of how his main argument runs: "Of course, it's not women's fault that it's all their fault (...) but men suffer from having been given birth to by women from whom they have to separate in order to become men; they suffer from having to desire people of the same gender as their mother (my, this is very awkward, Jocasta), and they suffer because they cannot perform the miracle of reproducing the species directly from their own bodies. Men suffer. No, they do. It's awful."

Gilmore piles up an impressive catalogue of misogynistic attitudes and institutions all over the world but remains unimpressively blind to what links them all: it's patriarchy, stupid! Once more: yes, patriarchy, the masculinist, hierarchical, power-based social arrangement, which IS NOT THE SAME AS MASCULINITY (men *needn't be* patriarchal at all). My sinking feeling has much to do with this selective blindness but also with his blanket dismissal of feminism and his deciding to ignore the worst consequences of misogyny for women ('hard to spell, easy to practice' reads the t-shirt slogan). This is like discussing racism without listening to its victims, just as a white problem. Quite unscholarly to begin with and implicitly, if not overtly, racist. Cheeky, cheeky... My little voice remonstrated with me as I finished the book: 'what did you expect, silly?' Yes, you're right. What did I expect? To be honest: I expected to learn about the patriarchal enemy's camp but I simply got too much of that. Really not that much, if I think that Gilmore is a nice, highly educated, politically correct man and not at all the kind of bastard who calls 116 (the Spanish number for victims of male violence) to insult and demean –maybe he'd like to study these... But still...

What irks me most (and it's amazing how often I use this phrase in this blog) is how easily Gilmore dismisses feminism, even calling a feminist author who is in favour of a more androgynous approach to gender 'stupid' (I have avenged her now a few lines above). This is still too frequent in the texts by male chauvinist authors who seem to believe that feminists don't have degrees but just a hazy, unspecified self-training in trashy, men-hating ideas not worth the name. I believe that feminism, which is a civil-rights ideology, has this bad reputation because it's got a misleading name: it should actually be called 'anti-patriarchalism' and be open to all genders. However, how can this change as long as patriarchy is, like Poe's famous letter, hidden in view of all? Apart from this, please some man explain to me how you can bear your own portrayal as animals dominated by uncontrollable (sexual) urges, which is how Gilmore characterises you in his analysis of your psychogenetic (?) make-up. Here, in the feminist frontlines, we are fighting for the acknowledgment of women as much more

than just bodies (to be controlled...). Men, fight your own fight!! I can't you're just bodies out of control. How can you?

21-VIII-2011 'A SLIGHTLY SUPERIOR SPAIN': SO, THIS IS HOW THEY SEE US?

In his excellent cultural history of sf, simply called *Science Fiction* (2005) Roger Luckhurst comments at one point on C.P. Snow's *The New Men* (1954). This is a novel in which a dying nuclear physicist envisions a sad, decadent future for post-WWII Britain. Two things can happen, according to this Englishman: "the best is that we can fade out and become a slightly superior Spain, the worst is that we can get wiped out like a mob of Zulus" (156; 120 in Luckhurst). Puzzlingly, Luckhurst needs to further elaborate by noting that for this character "the English will become the equivalent of the barely modern peasantry of the Spanish, or the plucky zulus" (121), the second option being clearly far more heroic. I'm left wondering who thinks that Spain is a 'barely modern' peasant country: Snow or Luckhurst?

This hurts. Being called backward is never gratifying and the immediate temptation is to lash out. I'll end up doing it, but let me try at least to do it moderately.

Yes, Spain was once an immense Empire, 'where the sun never set,' whereas we're just now a corner of South-western Europe and one of the letters in the infamous financial acronym PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain). Foreigners interested in our culture are usually fascinated by the sense of decadence that pervades our history but I feel that we are not, on the whole; except a very few recalcitrant Franco supporters I doubt many think of the faded glories of Empire. Good riddance to all *that*, actually. Mostly, we see ourselves as post-Franco survivors who've made a *huge* effort to leave that 'barely modern peasantry' behind to become (second-rate) Europeans. We were indeed a (hungry, post-Civil War) bunch of peasants, barely modern at all, in the 1950s when Snow wrote his novel but not now in the 21st century. Our sad record in the current economic crisis shows the struggle is far from over as we have carried over to post-modernity from that decadent past a tendency to overstretch our resources and think too highly of our possibilities. But, then, this seems to be the fate of all post-imperial nations. Even of the USA, now well on their way to becoming one.

These last days the TV images of angry bands of Afro-Caribbean British teens smashing up public and private property, and people, in their own urban neighbourhoods surely has shown the world that Britain is not managing all that well its post-imperial condition. To be honest, I'm not sure why rioting is not breaking up all over Spain, given the fantastic rates of unemployment among the young. Yet, it seems to me that Snow's scientist neglected to imagine a future in which Britain would be 'slightly' if not 'much' *inferior* to others. I'm thinking of Germany, not Spain. To be totally bitchy about all this, part of the attraction of British culture for the Spanish is how it mirrors in our own lifetime what must have happened in Spain centuries ago. It's like a huge living lab to test out how decadence grips a culture struggling to ignore the fading out of its prime.

Now imagine a US novel in which an American nuclear physicist would contemplate the post-imperial fate of his or her nation: "the best is that we can fade out and become a slightly superior Britain, the worst is that we can get wiped out like a mob of Native Americans." Get it?

21-VIII-2011 A CHEEKY FILM: *BATTLE LOS ANGELES* (2011)

Get *Independence Day*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Cloverfield* and a number of alien-slashing computer games and out of this heady cocktail comes *Battle Los Angeles*, one of the cheekiest pieces of US military propaganda you can ever imagine. The storyline, strikingly similar to that of *Skyline*, couldn't be simpler: Los Angeles is invaded by an army of very aggressive aliens, apparently intent on robbing Earth of its water (yes, as in the 1980s *V*). Send in a platoon led by a rooky lieutenant to rescue a tiny group of civilians before Santa Monica is wiped out as the only way to stop the invaders, and see who survives. The Spanish title *Invasión a la Tierra* alludes to the fact that 20 other major cities are also infested by the aliens (Madrid and Barcelona are not mentioned...). Yet, don't be mistaken about this: the film is truly provincial, straightforward marine recruiting propaganda and not at all about global threats.

Many things are striking in *Battle Los Angeles* that are also quickly becoming commonplace: the fast-paced editing style borrowed from action computer games; the high-quality special effects showing invasion in daylight at its most scariest; the facelessness of the relentless, repellent extraterrestrial enemy; the detailed, though often inaccurate, depiction of all kinds of weaponry and its tough, unquestioned, combat-proficient woman soldier. This Hollywood film, partly financed by the USMC (the marines) and the US military, leaves no margin for doubt: even though Iraq is never mentioned, we learn through the figure of the remorseful Staff Sergeant Nantz, accused of negligence by his men, that the loss of young lives in war is inevitable. The obvious military superiority of the alien invaders pre-empts any counterargument. I personally found the film *very* scary, as I tend to empathise easily with the terrified civilians and imagine the fear endured by my own family during the Spanish Civil War. Yet I was even more deeply scared by the cheekiness of the film's premise. Given the situation, who could declare him or herself a pacifist?

I'm simply amazed that, with the Iraq occupation still under way, Hollywood has the gall to spurt films in which America is invaded. The 1950s and 1980s invasion films, which were transparent allegories of Cold War fears, made, more or less, sense, in that two superpowers with similar military might faced each other. *Independence Day* (1996) is already something else: a defiant product of a smug America that celebrates the overcoming of the red scare for good. Bin Laden must have seen it and laugh. But what is this post 9/11 new wave of invasion films? Terrorists are not invaders, that's the whole point of their tactics. And it's hard to imagine the Chinese armies invading American territory. The threat might come, rather, from madcap nuclear button pushers in North Korea or Iran. Military sf started back in late Victorian times as a warning about the unpreparedness of the British in the face of a possible German invasion, which seemed then to many a fantastic possibility. A little later, Wells had the elegance to point out that his Martians were actually inspired by the atrocities of the British in Tasmania. Yet it's absolutely clear that *Battle Los Angeles* is not remotely thinking of comparing the ugly aliens with the US Marines in Iraq. It simply intends to scare kids into joining the marines just in case... non-human aliens invade???

If the US military have invested money on this film, this means they know it'll work. What this says about US society is beyond me. I don't understand, even though

Battle for Los Angeles couldn't be more transparent. Perhaps military intelligence is not an oxymoron after all.

29-VIII-2011 WILL A SIMPLIFIED ROSE SMELL THE SAME?: ECO'S NEW EDITION OF *THE NAME OF THE ROSE*

Appalled? Amazed? Astonished? Dismayed? How does this piece of news make you feel?: Bompiani, Umberto Eco's publishers, have just announced the publication on October 5 of a simplified version of his best-selling historical thriller *The Name of the Rose* (1980)... simplified by the author himself to make it more accessible to new readers. The article in *El Mundo*'s supplement *El Cultural* includes a variety of opinions by Spanish authors and publishers which gathers all possible reactions (http://www.elcultural.es/noticias/LETRAS/1961/Rebajas_en_la_novela_historica). My own is that this is a very serious mistake but, then, not so different from what we do in the Literature classes.

I myself read *El nombre de la rosa* in my pre-university (or COU) year and was, like everyone else, riveted by it. I was BY NO MEANS the only one in my course to read it, and I attended a public secondary education school... I remember discussing it with my brilliant Spanish Literature teacher, Sara Freijido and with some of my peers. I'm sure we missed more than 50% of Eco's sophisticated intellectual scaffolding and just connected with his singular detective story but I'm also sure that we were stimulated by the challenge he posed rather than put off. What Eco is now formally acknowledging is that the pleasure in that challenge has been lost for the newer generations. To be honest, second and third readings of *Rose* may result in the scaffolding being quite irritating in its density, not always justified, but this should have solved in the first edition. Logically, authors have the right to do as they wish with their work and second editions may very well include substantial cuts. What is disarming in this case is that whatever Eco has done to his masterpiece has been done to pander to tastes downgraded by the book market and decaying educational standards rather than to improving *The Name of the Rose* for the sake of Literature.

If you're a younger reader beginning to hate me for my smugness and that of my generation, I must point out that it is not my intention to look down on you. You're not to blame, after all, for the serious flaws in your education, as you haven't designed it. You should, however, reject this second, simplified *Rose*, as an insult to your intelligence –which is the same as that in any other generation– and *demand* the original book (and that we teach you to read it, if you have difficulties). If you're in English Literature I'm sure you've gone through a number of those awful abridged versions of the classics and know now, when you're reading the real thing, what a paltry thing they are. Just don't let greedy publishers and authors convince you that you're *not good enough* for anything else.

29-VIII-2011 AN ANTHOLOGY OF MALE WRITERS: HOW WOULD THIS SOUND?

In the process of preparing two very small selections of Victorian poems and essays for our second year students, I've gone through a number of the main anthologies in the field. To tell you the truth, I'm quite amused by what I've found. And

also disappointed. I'll name a few volumes. For poetry: *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* edited by Margaret Reynolds and Angela Leighton; *Victorian Women Poets: An Annotated Anthology* edited by Virginia Blain; and even *Victorian Working-Class Women Poets: An Anthology* by Florence S. Boos. For prose: *Prose by Victorian Women: An Anthology* by Andrea Broomfield and Sally Mitchell. For both: *Women's Writing of the Victorian Period, 1837-1901: An Anthology*, by Harriet Devine. Sigh... So, clearly, the feminist project of bringing back women writers from unjust oblivion is not over, not by far. I see that more and more women writers are incorporated into general anthologies, which are getting bigger as no male names, no matter how minor, are dropped. But how can we be still stuck at this essentialist, gender-based type of anthologizing?

The debate is already too old. As women have been so blatantly discriminated against, we have the duty as feminists of making their 'special case' particularly visible. Fair enough. What worries me is that we're not making the other 'special case' particularly visible because we're not highlighting that the others are *male* writers. Just imagine the havoc an anthology called *Victorian Men Poets* would rise, for its patriarchal sexism... when actually it would help to clarify matters. To be precise, anthologies should identify even more clearly who they're dealing with: *The Victorian Anthology of Verse by White, Middle-class, Male writers...* If the adjective 'working-class' appears in one of the anthologies of Victorian women poets, shouldn't its counterpart also appear? (Other unnamed categories include 'heterosexual' and 'right/left wing'.)

If you're against being so specific, thinking that we'd end up with anthologies of, say, poems by Australian, right-wing, working-class, lesbian, disabled, white, transsexuals (might happen...) perhaps you have a point. My own is that by creating specific categories for some but not for all we're not making headway into that utopian future in which full equality will reign and PEOPLE will be judged by the QUALITY of their writing and not by their identity. Having said that I'm looking forward to the further defusing of identity categories by more fun anthologies, such as: *Victorian Prose by Blond Writers*, *Victorian Verse by Poets Who Enjoyed Drinking Laudanum Too Much*, or *Victorian Writing by Brits Who'd Never Been Abroad but Really Wanted To*. In the meantime, I'll make do with what we have, hoping someone begins to change things by putting the word 'male' (or 'men') in titles.

29-VIII-2011 WHATEVER HAPPENED TO FEMINIST CINEMA? (ON BIGELOW AND BIER)

I'm reading Teresa De Lauretis already ancient collection *Technologies of Gender* (1987!) and I stumble onto her post-Mulvey cry for a truly feminist cinema. By this she means, as it is well-known, not just a cinema by, about and for women, dealing with issues concerning women, but a cinema using specifically female narrative and aesthetic codes in opposition to the predominant male ones of (commercial) cinema. She enthuses about Yvonne Rainer, so I check IMDB and I find two spectator comments for her *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985): a man proclaims this is a "Very funny movie, if you like feminist deconstruction" and rates it 10/10; a woman (?) who saw this in her feminist class and claims to be an experimental film buff claims that

feminist cinema died because “their mantra included removing pleasure from movies.” He was writing in 2010, she in 2005.

Barcelona hosts every year an international festival devoted to women’s films (<http://www.mostrafilmsdones.cat/>), soon to reach its 20th edition. I’ve never attended it, as I don’t feel comfortable with this kind of positive discrimination (see my previous post). I know I’m very wrong to be so prejudiced and I should be open to what women directors have to offer, flooded as we are by the painful trash spawned by male-oriented Hollywood films. Yet, again, in the style of what I wrote in my previous post: I look forward to either a film festival openly about (heterosexual) men, or more inclusive film festivals in which all identities are balanced. Keep on dreaming...

De Lauretis set me thinking about the ONLY TWO women directors who have won an Oscar: Kathryn Bigelow (in 2010 for *The Hurt Locker*) and Susanne Bier (in 2011 for *In a Better World*). Bigelow, currently making a film about Bin Laden that has been re-written to fit his assassination, was brutally criticized by some feminists (even though she won against ex-husband James Cameron, nominated for mega-hit *Avatar*!). The criticism had much to do with Bigelow’s being specialized in action films about male characters; also with the alleged criticism that she makes films not just like a man but *as* a man. After Bigelow’s win, some expected more nominations for women directors and there were complaints that, instead, there were none this year. Oddly enough, this complaint completely missed Susanne Bier’s success; her film, get this, won the Oscar for best foreign-language film. Had you noticed?

Surf the net and you’ll find that Bier, an ex-Lars Von Trier’s protégé and a former Dogme 95 member, has stirred no comments with her triumph, except in Denmark, where she is praised, logically, as a quality *Danish* director. I’m puzzled by this, very much. Could it be that Bier’s films (I love *After the Wedding*, *Brothers* and *Things We Lost in the Fire*) are too ‘feminine’ to threaten anyone? To me, both Bigelow and Bier make films *as* women, addressing everyone and contributing a female gaze on both men and women – now that I think about it, they’re particularly good at dealing with men. Why has one elicited so much controversy but not the other? It’s not just that Bigelow was attacked but that Bier’s triumph has not really been celebrated as a triumph for *women* directors all over the world... no idea why not.

Could it be that, almost 25 years after De Lauretis’s book, we’re still confused about the obligation for feminist cinema of being experimental or avant-garde? See a list of 50 best female film directors at IMDB (<http://www.imdb.com/list/7YULN6kSrTo/>) and judge for yourself.

31-VIII-2011 A TEST CASE: LITERARY FICTION, MAINSTREAM FICTION (AND THE JEWISH GIRL WHO ESCAPED FROM VEL D'HIV)

You might be familiar with the French film *Sarah’s Key* (Gilles Paquet-Brenner, 2010), originally titled *Elle s’appelait Sarah*, like the best-selling novel (2007) by Tatiana de Rosnay on which it is based. I saw the film, loving, as usual, Kristin Scott-Thomas’s fine performance. She plays Julia, a journalist who doggedly follows the clues leading her to discover the identity of the little Jewish girl who used to live in the Paris apartment she’s to move into, owned by her husband’s family. I was not so keen on the suitability of the horrifying, sensational central anecdote that the English title refers to, but I was appalled enough to read the novel by the representation of the

rounding up of thousands of Jews –many children– at the Vélodrome d'Hiver in July 1942 by the French police, of which I'd never heard (and I *am* interested in the Holocaust). The novel contained, as I expected, more information about brave Sarah and the ghastly conditions which Jews endured at Vel' d'Hiv, but also even more melodrama, as the book really narrates the strange beginning of a second-chance romance between Julia and a man closest to Sarah (um... that's half a spoiler).

To my surprise, I came across at my local library with a novel by Spanish writer Juana Salabert, *Velódromo de Invierno* (2001), about exactly the same topic. Little Jewish girl escapes the horrors of French collaborationism by sheer pluck and luck to be plagued by survivor's guilt for ever; there's also a little brother and a son, and parallel narrative strands contrasting past and present. I'm not claiming that De Rosnay plagiarised from Salabert and, at any rate, I haven't come across comments on the internet about this. Salabert's volume is now and then mentioned when De Rosnay's or discussions of the Vel d'Hiv horrors crop up. That's all.

Since one is Spanish and the other French, I'll never teach these two books together but I wish I could do it because their contrasts illustrate to perfection the difference between highbrow or literary fiction (Salabert's) and middlebrow or mainstream fiction (De Rosnay's). I don't think one could/should write formula lowbrow fiction about such a sensitive subject, but there might be some. I fondly remember a seminar on the Holocaust organised by my colleague Gonzalo Pontón at UAB in January 2005. We endlessly discussed what strategies of representation were more apt: high culture to keep the seriousness of the subject intact or popular culture to teach a moral lesson to the largest possible audience (yes, *Shoah* versus Spielberg's *Schindler's List*). I myself spoke about the TV series *Holocaust*, so you can see which thesis I defended. Today, with De Rosnay's and Salabert's books here before me I haven't changed my mind.

Before you tell me I should read a history book if I'm so interested in Vel' d'Hiv, let me say that fiction's function is to represent the human emotions that essays cannot and need not reflect. Salabert's high literary prose is certainly beautiful and far above anything De Rosnay can manage. Yet, half the time I kept thinking that 'people don't speak or think like that,' the other half I struggled to follow who was saying what and to whom, as Salabert eschews the conventional presentation of dramatised scenes that De Rosnay uses, preferring, as it is fashionable in Spanish Literature, long passages with very few full stops and dialogue compressed into blocks of texts interspersed with stream of consciousness. Salabert's Ilse could hardly come up to life in comparison with plucky Sarah and, although I admire the book very much for Salabert's self-assured artistry, I wished she'd simply been more direct, for, to my mind, this is what her subject demands. On the other hand, although the film does a much better job of this, in De Rosnay's novel Julia's love life weighs too heavily on Sarah's story for my liking. It provides, actually, a totally unnecessary narrative framework, which is why many will consider this is not a serious Holocaust novel but (pure) melodrama. Fair enough. Yet, despite cringing now and then –which is what middlebrow fiction will do to you at its worst– I enjoyed De Rosnay's novel far better than by Salabert's. One I could not drop, the other I forced myself to end.

Personal opinion, of course. 19th century novelists managed to be entertaining and literary at the same time. The Modernists then made these two values irreconcilable and now, in Post Post-Modernism (please, someone find a name soon),

we're stuck, with just very few writers managing to provide all kinds of pleasure. Name one, if you can...



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