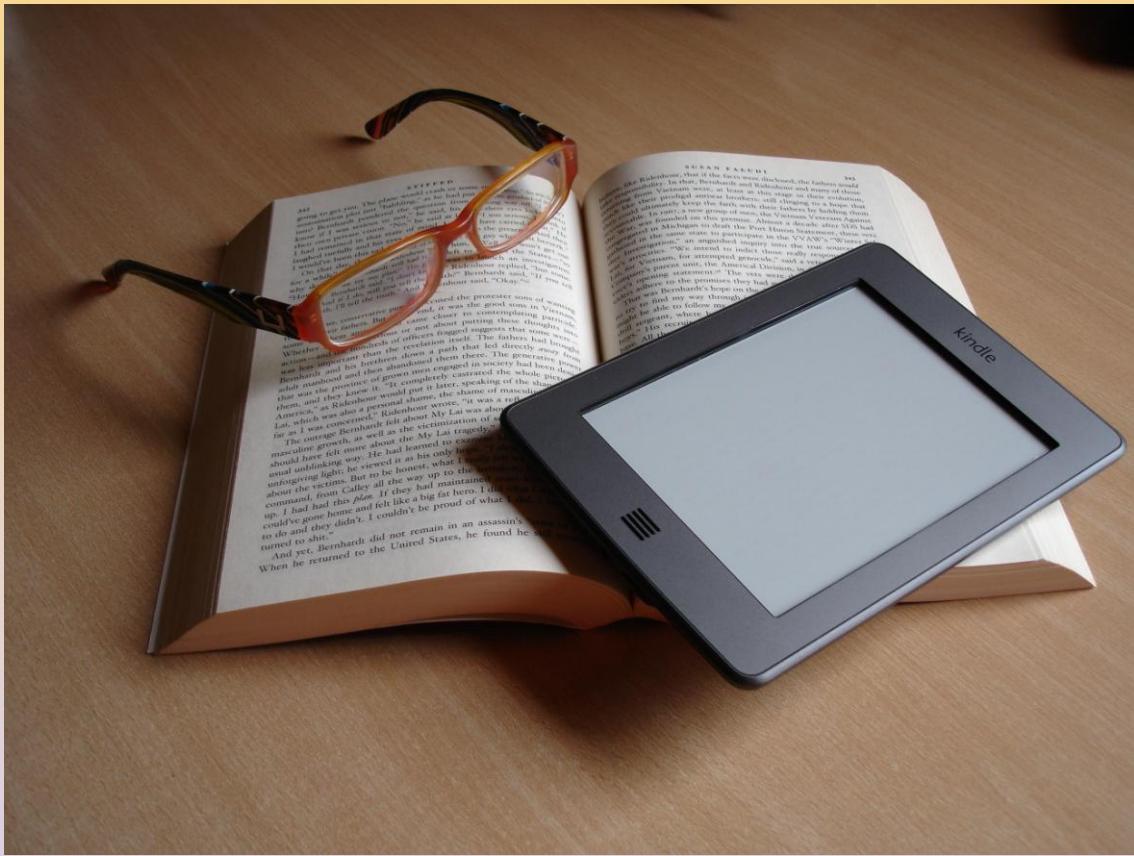


THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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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 2011 ((I started the blog in September 2010) and August 2012. The volume, like the previous and 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.

15-IX-2011 IT'S HOT, SO HOT...: THAT CLASSROOM AGAIN!!

If you care to read my entry for 16 February, you will see I'm trapped in a kind of sinister loop. Then I complained bitterly about the appalling conditions of classroom 302 in our Facultat, a room which is beginning to remind me of Stephen King's 1408 and other mythical Gothic rooms. After being called names, such as 'selfish,' my students and I were moved last semester to a much better classroom. 302 has been revamped in the meantime but not really that much: still no platform, same whiteboard, no air conditioning... at least the eraser was not placed this time on a plate. By the way, I have a projector but no computer equipment (I'm supposed to bring my own, self-financed laptop). We have two tiny windows, a blind is broken and temperatures inside the classroom were yesterday at 15:00 in the afternoon above 30º (that's 86º Fahrenheit). I've asked my very sweaty 50 odd students to bring in a thermometer next day to check if they're actually closer to 35º.

An optimistic colleague who always looks on the bright side of life, tells me I should be happy that I'm getting sauna for free as I teach. Well, I know I'm supposed to earn a living with the sweat of my brow, but this is too literal! I thought of bringing an electric fan to class (instead of the computer...) but I finally brought just a hand fan, feeling it would be disloyal to keep fresh as my students fainted. Sooner or later one of them will indeed faint and then we'll see what happens. You might say that all this is because temperatures are still unusually high for this end of summer but, then, if they're too high for basic human breathing in class maybe the beginning of the course should have been delayed. Or a new air conditioning unit found urgently. Try giving an introduction to Victorian Literature in this heat... I can at least walk up and down the classroom, searching for whiffs of fresh air but my poor students are stuck in seating rows, unable to shift their chairs for more breathing space. They sigh, fan themselves with the paper they should be using to make notes, look wistfully at the out-of-order air-conditioning unit and unglue their t-shirts from their chests every two minutes, look at their watches and hoping this original form of torture is soon over.

Hopefully, temperatures will soon start going down, as, traditionally, Mediterranean Catalonia is drenched by hard rains at the beginning of Autumn. I haven't asked this time for a transfer to another classroom, for reasons that are too long to explain. Yet, I've drawn the line at bringing my own computer or begging for one of the only 5 laptops the Facultat possesses for the staff in 11 Departments. The consequence? I'm back to basics: I'll teach Victorian Literature this time with no film clips, no PowerPoint, no internet... just as I was taught – by reading and talking about what we read. It might even be an innovation...

I just forgot to say I work on a European 'Campus d'Excel·lència Internacional' (Outstanding International Campus)...

18-IX-2011 A FEW THOUGHTS ON SF, AFTER A PHD DISSERTATION

One of my doctoral students, Rafael Miranda, has just passed his viva (or 'defensa') after submitting a brilliant doctoral dissertation on cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk. I am personally VERY proud to have helped him make such an interesting contribution to the field of Science-Fiction Studies. Particularly because that field is so tiny in Spanish English Studies that you can count the specialists with the fingers of one hand. There's Pere Gallardo in URV, Ángel Mateos in UCLM, Rocío Carrasco in UHU,

myself at UAB... and that's only the proverbial 'four cats'!! Of course, outside English, I must mention Fernando Ángel Moreno from UCM, and the names gathered together in the monographic issue published in *Quaderns de Filologia* (vol XIV, 2009). But that's about it. I'm not quite sure, but Fernando Ángel might be the only one SF specialist full time. Excuse my ignorance, just in case I'm overlooking someone (Miquel Barceló from UPC, um, yes, but he's doing something else, not Literary, Film or Cultural Studies).

I love SF. Not all of it, not at any time. Yet, I find myself going back for more, novels preferably, rather than films, which, in my mind, absolutely miss the sheer richness of literary SF. There's very well written SF (William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and many others) and SF which cares more for thrills, gadgets and data than for literary prose. I realise that, in any case, what draws me to the genre again and again is a) the density of ideas per page; b) the scope by no means limited to just one individual but ambitious enough to encompass whole worlds; c) the pleasure of being taken to my limits both as regards visualisation and my understanding of the impact of science and technology in our world. Those of us who read SF can't simply understand how the rest copes with the world, ignoring as they do how we're placed in our mystifying universe and within our fast-evolving technocrazy world. One of Iain M. Banks' characters, thinking of these deep ontological matters in one of his novels –I forget which one– says that he "gets swim." So do I, and I love the feeling. Give me a mid-life crisis novel about a middle-class individual and I choke.

I see, however, this is not a feeling easy to transmit. We tend to teach SF covertly, within subjects with unthreatening titles (Short Fiction, Contemporary Novels, War Narrative, Cultural Studies...) because students don't quite manifest an interest in being taught SF overtly. Or maybe they would if we were bolder. In 2010 Pere Gallardo invited me to teach SF within an MA degree in Tarragona and one of the students told me precisely that: "it's your collective fault for hiding." Perhaps the key question is that when you teach Literature, in the general sense of the word, or specific genres, whether they are Victorian Poetry or Post-colonial Indian Fiction, you're backed up by cultural or literary respectability and also by the idea that you're doing something socially relevant (I mean here in relation to Post-colonialism). If students encounter difficulties when dealing with the texts, that's part of the package –they must put up with them. In SF it's quite the opposite: lacking this cultural respectability, as SF is still considered a silly genre for teen males lacking basic social skills, we can hardly put students through the difficulties of reading any major writer –and believe me, SF is difficult. Neale Stephenson and Thomas Pynchon are not really that far from each other. I wouldn't like, either, to end up force-feeding students which is why, in the end, we keep SF for our lonely pleasures, publishing research now and then and trying to keep up with a field that often feels as vast as the universe.

20-IX-2011 BITTERSWEET: THE FIRST BLOGGING YEAR...

Yes, a year ago yesterday I posted my first entry (or did I enter my first post?, the semantics are unclear to me). 93 posts or entries later, I'm still here, which comes as a surprise to me, with enough energy, I believe, to go on for another year at least.

Or, rather, it's not quite a matter of energy but of badly needing an outlet to vent the happiness (35%) and the growing frustrations (65%) that teaching (English) Literature brings me every day after 20 years in the profession (another anniversary

this week). Yesterday, I came across an ex-student, now teaching 10 to 12-year-old students, and when I started telling her about the miseries of the university under the current economic crisis she asked me “but you still like it?” Sure, that’s the point: I like teaching so much I must write this blog to go on. If I didn’t like it, if it were just a job and not a career, I would not bother. The blog keeps me (half)sane. Otherwise, I’ve open the window and scream.

When I contacted other bloggers in a similar vein (see the links to your right...), we all went through the same questions: Is there a point in writing a blog in the age of Twitter? Isn’t a blog just a public diary (for narcissistic writers)? Is there any one out there? What’s the desirable frequency? Is a blog a hobby or more work? I don’t use Twitter and I worry about the way the institutions we work for are forcing us in that direction and also to use Facebook, as I don’t want to participate in the commercial frenzy they have unleashed. Anyway, I don’t think Twitter can carry much serious thinking at that limited number of characters per message; blogs, I believe, are great to train yourself to think in greater depth (um, I’m not sure I’ve managed any deep thinking here, but at least I’ve tried). A blog, yes, is a bit narcissistic but one also feels vulnerable and exposed, so one thing compensates for the other. And this one is a hobby, but, then, I’ve never known how to separate my profession from my main hobby, which is reading. Often, I have to stop from writing too much for instant publication is a constant temptation.

I know there are some people out there beyond the handful of friends who’ve left comments (thanks!). José Ángel García Landa tells me that after 4 years keeping his blog *Vanity Fea* alive he hasn’t really managed to generate the expected debate. My aims are more modest (though, yes, it’s great to be ambitious). Who, after all, would like to debate how we teach English Literature, except a handful of professionals too pressed for time to send in comments? I’m just happy if anything in my first 52,000 words has inspired anyone to read a good book, see a nice film, check a great web, understand a little better what teachers go through, and love (English) Literature a little more.

Thanks!!

27-IX-2011 PEOPLE WHO PASS THROUGH OUR CLASSROOMS: A SUCCESSFUL EX-STUDENT (ABOUT ELS AMICS DE LES ARTS)

As a teacher I must say that one of the greatest satisfactions in seeing ex-students succeed professionally. Of course, ex-students who succeed in one’s own academic professional field elicit a little (or much...) envy, but that is truly fine: a healthy reminder of one’s limitations and even mediocrity, to which honest teachers must always be reconciled. A different type of satisfaction, more relaxed, is afforded by ex-students who do well elsewhere. Recently, I found myself writing a fan email message to one of them, Joan Enric Barceló. If you live in Catalonia you may have heard of him as one of the members of perhaps the most charming pop band ever: Els Amics de les Arts (<http://elsamicsdelesarts.cat/>).

Years ago, many of them, a young Joan Enric recorded a CD with his band of the moment, Toadstools, titled *Syncopated People*. I still keep the copy which I got as the reward for revising the lyrics, written in outstanding student’s English. He then graduated after many comings and goings, became briefly an actor and next thing I

knew, he had made it to the modest Catalan top ten with the Amics. They are part of the exciting new wave of Catalan pop and rock, with Manel at the forefront. These bands are characterised by a wholesome approach to what they do, and by their avoiding the rarefied atmosphere of other Catalan bands of the past that seemed political projects rather than gatherings of musicians. What gives Els Amics de les Arts their own singular personality is the sheer wit of the lyrics.

Lyrics are peculiar type of writing. They're not poetry, they needn't make sense and they're often pure cliché of the trite 'I love you, I need you, I want you' kind. This is why when I found myself LISTENING as I smiled to the very witty lyrics of Els Amics I simply loved it: finally someone was working hard on the *writing* that goes into songwriting. Mostly narrative, the songs by Els Amics capture everyday anecdotes in a language that is elegant and that does not shy away from making cultural allusions (or, rather, making fun of them). Check the very popular "Jean Luc" at the Amics' website, it is perfect to illustrate my point, and it is simply delicious.

Joan Enric did answer my fan message, which made me teen-style happy. He explained in it about the band member's difficulties to become professional musicians in such a small market as the one in Catalan –isn't it funny how one tends to think that popular people always have it easy? He also explained that he found much satisfaction in being qualified by his university degree to discuss the band's lyrics in depth. Hey, I thought, this is what *we*, academics do, not pop stars! I realised then that was the novelty that had actually attracted me to Els Amics: they are capable not just of writing well but also of understanding the very mechanisms of good writing from a proficient academic point of view. A nice application to pop culture of the (English) Literature classes, as Joan Enric himself concluded.

I couldn't be happier!

27-IX-2011 PRETEND TEACHING: THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM FROM THE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

My ill-smelling classroom, now bearably hot as early Autumn temperatures have started slowly falling, has, as I have previously mentioned, no platform. As I wait for that to be built, from my unhigh-heeled perspective I see a very compact sea of 50-odd faces crowning young, restless bodies sitting too close for comfort. Like all teachers, as I lecture I seek facial confirmation that the (dense) information I'm transmitting is understood. Imagine a whole classroom of blank faces! I do find that confirmation in students I know from previous years (this is a second year course) scattered all over the sitting rows, faces mostly friendly as they chose to be in *my class*, and not in my colleagues' class. Yet there's a segment filled up with still unknown students that I find myself avoiding. This semester's blank faces...

As a student I was one of the staring, critical faces. I'm sure I must have been positively obnoxious some times. When I couldn't stomach a teacher I would not attend lectures. We are checking attendance this semester and possibly as a result of this, and because the subject is compulsory, the students who don't enjoy Victorian Literature are opting for a kind of weird disappearing act in the flesh. This is common to many compulsory subjects, far less common in electives but not totally unheard of: the student's body is there, s/he even looks at the teacher most of the time but the spirit is elsewhere, whether this is Linguistics (which seems to be Literature's Other

rather than a twin part of the same degree) or Saturday night, past or future. How do I notice? Well, the friendly faces are fully open-eyed and their owners nod at me now and then, noting they've taken in a particular point or even encouraging me to go on. They offer comments, answer my questions. If they get lost, their expression shows it before they ask for clarifications. The 'missing' just keep their eyes open, look away when my eyes stray over them, never nod, never speak (to me) and in some cases don't even bother to make notes. Blank faces, blank arms...

Then there's the matter of books. This is the third week into the course, still no *Oliver Twist* to be seen in too many cases. I ask students to choose passages for comment as homework, only one volunteers. I do my best, offer my own choices, select others for home reading (but what for since they don't have the books?) The result is that I end up not looking at the blank faces and not looking at the desk tops, so as not to see who's got actually the book (and I think of Stanley Fish's classic *Is There a Text in this Class?*). As some students do their disappearing act, I do my pretending act: pretending I'm teaching a class FULL of committed *Oliver Twist* readers who follow every nuance of the demanding reading, focused on the narrator, that my colleague and I have chosen to offer. I tell them that Dickens rehearsed aloud what he wrote and that his texts work best, precisely, if performed but I don't know what impression my readings make on students who can't follow them without the text. Too oral for them?

How are classes going, we ask each other? Oh, very well... if it weren't for the blank faces and the still missing books. 'Pretend literature teaching,' the best methodology to feel happy and fulfilled in the classroom.

29-IX-2011 IF I WERE CHARLOTTE DICKENS... (HOW I'D REWRITE *OLIVER TWIST*)

I don't particularly favour the fashionable type of novel that attempts to update a classic by adding to it (the sequel to *Pride and Prejudice* by Emma Tennant, *Pemberley*), by paying homage (Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*), or by radically rewriting it (Ben Winters's *Android Karenina*). If you want to tell a story, find your own topic.

However, yesterday, in the middle of lecturing on *Oliver Twist*, it suddenly occurred to me, and so I told my students, that it would be great to rewrite Dickens's novel as the story of Rose Maylie's failed attempt to rescue Nancy from prostitution and from her sick addiction to Sikes. Dickens's imaginary sister Charlotte – I'm thinking here of Virginia Woolf's imaginary Judith Shakespeare – would be up to this task, I'm sure, possibly following Elizabeth Gaskell rather than her own namesake Charlotte Brontë. Our 21st century Sarah Waters would, no doubt, in view of her spicy pseudo-Victorian fiction, like the sexy *Tipping the Velvet*, rewrite Rose and Nancy as two passionate, romantic Victorian lesbians. Now, that's something I'm sure even Dickens would like to read...

As I explained to my students, mostly young women who are receiving my feminist tirades with more eagerness than I've met in recent years, Dickens was very deficient at writing female characters. His imagination, in the grip of his misogyny and of his obsession with his dead teen sister-in-law Mary and other women he loved (not his wife Catherine), seemed only capable of creating bland heroines like Rose Maylie. Yet, he did better with the bad girls. With Nancy, this poor thing unable to escape

victimisation since the devious Fagin traps her in childhood, Dickens manages to create quite a heroine or, rather, a hero, as I mean not only that she is a main female protagonist but also that the heroic acts in the novel fall completely on her shoulders. Rose does nothing but believe in Oliver's innocence against all evidence simply because he looks positively angelic; she tries to sacrifice herself and Harry Maylie's happiness because of her obscure birth, but, essentially, she is just a good girl. Nancy, and this shows Dickens's boldness, is first just one of Fagin's gang, even becoming Oliver's very public, cheeky kidnapper. Yet, seeing how his ill-treatment recalls so harshly her own by Fagin –which led her to prostitute herself possibly just aged 12- she relents and becomes the boy's only champion in the underworld. As every Dickens fan knows, her moral choice to help Oliver by revealing Fagin's plotting to the boy's protector, Rose, costs Nancy her own life, in that famous murder scene that Dickens used to perform with such manic glee.

My favourite moment in this novel, and the inspiration for the rewriting I'll never produce, is that scene in which Rose, supported by Mr. Brownlow, subtly but firmly offers to help Nancy by retiring her from criminal life. Rose wants Nancy, above all, to abandon Sikes but, like many abused women still today, whether they are prostitutes or not, she is too emotionally dependent to abandon her abuser... and so she tells Rose, in full consciousness of her predicament. Dickens was criticised for this, as he seemed to force the situation and withdraw from poor Nancy the reward she deserved. Yet, to my mind he made a realistic narrative choice, characterising, besides, Nancy as a reluctant (anti)-hero rather than as a full blown heroine like Rose, who does get her Harry. Of course, it is interesting to note that, whereas Rose is generous and open to doomed Nancy, her own adoptive mother, Mrs. Maylie, almost brings total unhappiness to Rose's life by denying her her son's love, as Rose is nothing but a nameless orphan until the mystery of her origin is solved together with Oliver's. That she chooses to welcome and help Nancy must have sounded truly radical in 1837. Still today.

Rose and Nancy, the imaginary novel by the imaginary Charlotte Dickens, might perhaps rank high in a gallery of best unwritten Victorian fiction, together with other ghostly novels like *The Angry Child Inside Me*, a rewriting of *Wuthering Heights* in Heathcliff's own words written by the imaginary Charles Brontë, or *Wildness Calls* by Oscar Stoker, in which Jonathan leaves Mina Jonathan for Dracula to become a fulfilled Transylvanian count.

Add your own... !

30-IX-2011 HOW IT FEELS TO BE PRIVILEGED AT THE END OF THE MONTH

I have plenty of work to do today but I feel too depressed to start without letting steam out here first. This depression stems from hearing news the whole week through about the pay cuts that our fellow civil servants, the doctors employed by the Institut Català de la Salut, are being forced to accept. I know we're next in line, again, after the 5% cut of last year. Actually, I'm told we've been about to get only 50% of our pay check this month, which would possibly mean ruin for many of us with dependants, a mortgage or both.

I didn't particularly want to be a civil servant employed by the state. I wanted to teach English Literature at a Spanish university and that's what it takes. I was lucky in that I was employed full-time since I was first hired 20 years ago, whereas younger teachers are hired, if at all, as grossly underpaid part-time associates. I've been, anyway, a 'mileurista' for 5 years before I got my doctoral degree and for five more years after that until the age of 36. 11 years in total to get tenure. When I got it, after two gruelling state examinations, my salary doubled overnight and since then, 9 years ago, whatever pay rises I've got have come from extras such as increments for each three-year teaching period or six-year research periods. I lost, by the way, the money for one whole six-year research period with the pay cut last year and, even with the extras, I've been steadily losing 3 to 5% of my purchasing power every year because I can't remember when our basic salary was raised for the last time. Of course I'm describing a situation common to everyone in my profession. I get nicely by and reach the end of the month without major glitches because I (still) don't have a mortgage, nor dependents. I have no idea about how, say, divorced teachers with 2 children and a mortgage manage.

Now that for the first time I find my monthly income threatened I have mixed feelings. I know that unemployed people will not sympathise with me but, then, I'm seeing civil servants made redundant –what a euphemism- in Greece and even France. And, remember, it took me 11 years of immense sacrifices to get here for the sake of a vocation consisting of wanting to educate young people; and my case is sooo... very common. Material rewards are the only way we have of measuring our value for our society, to which we give plenty. I'm sure Spain could do without me and even without all Literature teachers but if we take that road we'll go back quickly to the dark times of the illiterate dictatorship or even worse. Maybe that's the bottom line. What angers me most is that each civil servant is paying out of his or her pocket for mistakes made by others above us, the politicians whose salary is never touched. I still have a nice enough margin to reach the end of the month by buying cheaper clothes, restricting restaurant outings, etc. Yet I'd like to explain that 90% of the books I use for teaching and research come out of my pocket, and that attending international and even national conferences will be soon out of question, with or without Department or research project help. I've never counted this, but we teachers possibly reinvest around 10% of our salary on our professions. In contrast, a colleague in Finland tells me he gets income tax reductions even for painting his home office. They, of course, have the best educational system in the world.

Today 30 September is the first time I'm not sure the money for the next month will be in my bank account. It might not be there soon enough. Yet I MUST be in class, do my research, go on organising that conference. We've collectively believed that we're much richer than we actually are and now that we're slowly sinking into our actual poverty, I can only say 'I told you so, the bubble had to burst.' Doctors, teachers are already paying for the 'privilege' of giving society what any society needs: good health and good education. Pay less, we'll still be there, do our best. But for how long? And who, in view of all this, will want to accept the sacrifices it takes to follow in our footsteps?

6-X-2011 POWER POINTLESS: TEACHING LITERATURE... BY READING

After one month lecturing in my computer-less classroom, I've got used to it and even find myself enjoying very much the absence of a screen. I've gone back in time, no doubt, to offer that kind of old-fashioned type of Literature teaching based on massive doses of (my) reading aloud. Dickens helps very much in that his *Oliver Twist* has many different performance registers –yesterday, I read his famous, sadistic set piece, Nancy's murder by Sikes, and it was a real pleasure. I'm also bringing in secondary sources, not just a quotation visible onscreen, but complete articles and books, for my students to see and perhaps check out of the library. Students have also been asked to read aloud, as in primary school: one Victorian poem every day and a passage from a Victorian essay. This works reasonably well and is going to go on the increase as we move onto Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and I hope it becomes sheer fun by the time we reach *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Computers can be put to variety of uses in the Literature classroom: PowerPoint presentations, film clips from DVDs, audio files, and audiovisual documents of all types from YouTube. I am not saying I'll never use them again at all; it's just that this semester, and quite by accident, the absence of a PC in class is making me reconsider how and why we use them. Just yesterday I read an article about the growing resistance to PowerPoint, as, apparently, rather than take in information more easily people tend to miss it distracted by the colour and sound effects and, indeed, by the semi-darkness needed in rooms with too much light. And this referred to orders in high-risk military missions... One of my colleagues claims students watch PowerPoint as they watch TV, which is not quite what we want. I feel that PowerPoint consumes too much preparation time and is not used by students for, well, study, which is why I use it very sparingly and mainly to bring images to the classroom. Feature and documentary film clips, which I have used abundantly, can always be watched at home via YouTube, unless one wants in particular to analyse in depth certain scenes, say, in a course on adaptations. In any case, I just hate the whiteboard I am forced to use and its perpetually fading markers...

Also yesterday I saw the first ebook reader in my classroom. Some students, about 6 in a 60 students class, carry their small notebooks with the etext of *Oliver Twist* and an internet connection I hope they use well. But the ebook reader was a novelty. I'm sure that in much richer American and British universities most Literature student carry either a computer or an ebook reader, or both, but at my blue-collar university, paper is still the rule. Call me slow, but only yesterday did I realise that if everyone used a digital version of the set texts, finding the particular passage we need to comment on would be much easier. I've counted 6 different editions of *Oliver Twist* in class... and no, projecting the etext for all to see is NOT a good idea. Students should be able always to underline and make their own notes on their own copies.

If I think twice about, it might even be more positive to increase students' proficient use of digital technologies that the teacher does not use them in the classroom; rather s/he should recommend the use of particular resources at home or the library, and quite possibly students would use them more actively. There's a great difference, I think, between being shown a PowerPoint presentation and being asked to check the very sources from which the teacher builds his or her presentation. And we would spend less time getting that PowerPoint presentation prettified...

11-X-2011 AMONG MEN...: A CONFERENCE ON RESEARCH AND ACTIVISM ABOUT MASCULINITIES

I've been looking forward to writing this blog entry for some time, as my expectations for CIME 2011, the Ibero-American Conference on Masculinities and Equity, were high. They have been fulfilled in that, to my great pleasure and relief, I've learned that there are many men fighting patriarchy with all their might (see www.homesigualitaris.cat for Catalonia and www.ahige.org, the Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad de Género). My expectations have been if not exactly disappointed at least moderated by the tone of the conference presentations. Silly me, I expected from a gathering of mainly men (well, perhaps more than one third were women) something more radically men-centred. Instead, I've found myself in my habitual feminist territory, albeit enlarged, that's true, by personal experience that I can't access as my gender is different.

I know I may even sound testy but perhaps I expected a deeper interrogation of the tenets surrounding masculinity in Masculinities Studies. Let's see if I can first understand myself what I mean. This discipline is derived from feminism and, as such, it is clearly anti-patriarchal, which, logically, means that the ideas discussed in the conference were all familiar to me. The utopian ideal was the same: let's work for a masculinity founded on equity and not on hierarchical, power-based domination. Fair enough. The problem is that while I could see before my eyes many men deeply involved in this fight, the 'others' were missing and without them, I'm not sure the message, the project, is effective. The most serious quarrel arising was between gay men, as one speaker complained that all pro-gay associations were today shamefully assimilationist, which didn't sit well with the gay activists sitting in the audience. No one, at least in the sessions I attended, disputed what others said.

I realise this concordance between feminism and men's activism is very positive and possibly unthinkable a few years ago. My hair stood on end when Miguel Lorente, current government delegate against (so-called) gender violence and author of the excellent *Mi marido me pega lo normal*, revealed that judges and police officers working with him (he's a forensic doctor) in cases of domestic abuse used to call him, jokingly, 'traitor.' I think this must be what I missed in the conference: the judge who sentenced this week that calling a woman 'zorra' is not an insult, not even when the word is inserted into a death threat; the plain male chauvinists and even the recalcitrant abusers. The 'enemy,' in short, who's out there and growing in numbers despite all the resources poured on educating people. Of course, I realise that the 'enemy' could never have attended CIME 2011, yet without him there's a certain circularity in the argumentation.

At any rate, I am very happy to see anti-patriarchal dissidence grow and look forward to many more CIMEs until they're not necessary at all. That will be the day when patriarchy dies and gender becomes in terms of citizenship as secondary as the colour of our hair or the size of our feet.

16-X-2011 COUPLE-RELATED VIOLENCE: THE MATTER OF SEMANTICS

I've been mulling this matter over since attending CIME 2011 last week. In that conference the expressions 'domestic violence,' 'sexist violence,' 'gendered or gender-related violence' and 'male chauvinist violence' were bandied about without much agreement on what this all-pervading type of violence should be called. I would certainly not call it a 'phenomenon,' as the media are so fond of doing, for this is not a new, temporary matter –a fashion– but a deeply-seated part of ancestral patriarchy. Two main problems in relation to the wobbly semantics of the term were often mentioned. On the one hand, 'gendered violence' is more widespread than 'domestic violence' and included crimes such as the mass rape of Muslim women by the Serbs during the Balkan wars; besides, the too neutral adjective 'gendered' conveniently conceals that most attacks are misogynistic while not all women share or have shared a domestic situation with their attackers. On the other hand, the focus on sexist heterosexual violence obscures the fact that abuse also happens in situations in which the couple or ex-couple in question is gay or lesbian. Too many problems for any of these terms to be effective.

It occurs to me that we're simply speaking of 'couple-related violence.' I assumed someone would have already used this but quick Googling only throws up this passage of the California Civil Harassment and Domestic Violent Actions Research Guide from the San Diego County Public Law Library: "Generally, Domestic Violence refers to family and couple-related violence or abuse. Civil Harassment pertains to all other, non-domestic types of violence and abuse situations." I'm no lawyer and I don't want to get lost in the jungle of legal nuances but it occurs to me that the couple, of any variety, is the socio-cultural institution generating the violence we call so inaccurately domestic, gendered, sexist or male-chauvinist. Let's then call it couple-related violence and make it clear that forming a couple, whether temporary or permanent, and ending it, are high-risk situations for anyone unlucky enough to attach her- or himself to an abusive partner. Obviously, it's quite clear to me that heterosexual women incur a MUCH higher risk than anyone else but this denomination would also cover violence within non-heterosexual couples and the very small percentage of domestic abuse heterosexual men claim to suffer.

Having said this, let me explain what happened yesterday in the Catalonia Fantasy and Horror Film Festival at the lovely town of Sitges. During the projection of Lucky McKee's film *The Woman* –which won an award for best screenplay... – the audience composed by mostly men cheered and clapped at the sight of a particularly demeaning, violent scene in which the victim was the woman of the title. Alex Gorina and Jaume Figueras, the seasoned film critics reporting this on Catalan TV, were certainly scandalised. This misogynistic attitude was justified, though, by a veteran spectator who explained that Sitges audiences are very loud in their appreciation of screen violence of any kind; they weren't being particularly sexist. I myself didn't see the film but I just can't imagine what it must have been like for the women in the cinema to see their couples cheering and clapping. They must have been certainly disappointed, perhaps scared that gendered violence would eventually lead to couple-related violence.

16-X-2011 JEREMY PAXMAN'S *THE VICTORIANS: THE VICTORY OF THE PHILISTINES?*

A dear friend gave me as a present Jeremy Paxman's book *The Victorians: Britain through the Paintings of the Age* (2009), a very refreshing volume which is by no means a history of Victorian painting but a look at the Victorian age through its pictorial obsessions. The volume, it turns out, is a tie-in of Paxman's own BBC 4-episode documentary series (also 2009). This, having much enjoyed the book, I had to see and I'm just done. I can only say I have been thinking of my students all the time, envious that they can now use DVD (or YouTube) to learn about Victorian times in an exciting way that was not available to me or my peers back in the prehistoric 1980s.

Paxman is a journalist backed by a good team of documentary researchers but by no means an academic specialist in painting. Perhaps that's an advantage in this case. His choice of paintings and artists is decidedly heterogeneous and eclectic, depending possibly too much on the Victorian issues he wants to illustrate and not the other way round. Dissatisfied viewers/readers can, of course, check more advanced introductions to the not too highly regarded Victorian painters. Yet, thinking as a non-British teacher of Victorian Literature for foreign students, and also as an individual simply interested in Victorianism, I found Paxman entertaining, didactic and quite ambitious in his wish to present an overall *picture* of Victorian Britain. I found also his method, and in general that of the BBC's best documentary work, quite congenial with Cultural Studies, which is possibly why I found book and DVD rewarding.

Reading through a couple of reviews I realise that there is indeed a touch of the Arnoldian philistine in Paxman's approach and in my own appreciation of it. Yes, John Ruskin, the leading Victorian art critic is disregarded, all questions of aesthetic criticism are dismissed with a simple shrug and, in the end, the message, which seems endorsed by the National Trust, is to go and see for yourself where the paintings are hanging in Britain. It's a populist approach with no excuses, yet I wish we had something remotely similar in Spain (or Catalonia), where despite El Prado none seems to have thought of producing documentary work in the same vein. And what for, at any rate? To bury it in a corner of La2?

Paxman insists several times throughout the series that Victorian painting was the cinema of the time and, indeed, his last comments are to the effect that, somehow, cinema did away with the need to document contemporary life through pictorial realism (or wild illusion). Photography is present in the series, particularly as regards portraits yet I find it peculiar that he thinks of cinema as painting's great rival. I should think that his series highlights in the end something else: the impossibility of 'reading' 20th century life through its pictures and, thus, photography's final victory over the documentary value of painting (at least until the advent of video).

I do feel a bit of a philistine, yet being quite happy with the amount of new learning I have got from book and DVD I can only recommend them. Do judge for yourself.

20-X-2011 POST *OLIVER TWIST*: NOT THE BEST CHOICE BUT A GOOD CHOICE NONETHELESS

Having taught several times Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* I had serious doubts that *Oliver Twist* would be a satisfying text to teach, being, as it clearly is,

inferior to this other novel. Why change the syllabus, then? The usual: my colleagues' worries that *Great Expectations* is too hard to grasp for second-year students (yes, a patronising judgement, perhaps). Also, *Oliver* is reasonably short, though I am sure my students would dispute this claim. We agreed to give it a try and, fine, it's worked reasonably well. Considering, of course, that possibly one third of our two classes did not have the book... and just listened to us babbling about it non-stop.

I must say that much of the satisfaction I've found in teaching this novel comes from my colleague David Owen's decision to apply for an MQD ('better teaching') grant, which he received; so did we as part of his group. The idea is that in order to improve our Literature teaching we are to focus on the narrator (whenever we teach fiction, of course), which will supposedly give our courses more coherence. This has certainly helped in *Oliver Twist*'s case, particularly in contrast with our current novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as Dickens's novel is a third person narrative in his typical flamboyant style whereas *Tenant* has two main first person narrators, in the style the Brontë sisters seemed to prefer. Karín Lesnik-Oberstein's excellent article "Oliver Twist: The Narrator's Tale" has provided not only a good model students can follow when writing their own papers but also valuable insight into the problem of why/how the protagonist of this book hardly deserves the name of 'subject,' being as he is mostly absent from the text.

Nonetheless, I miss Pip and Estella and, indeed, Miss Havisham in her tattered wedding dress. Every time Oliver opens his little mouth to speak in that impossibly sentimental language no living child has ever used I think of little Pip's tale of how he was scared stiff by the presence of that ogre in his native marshland... Oddly enough sunny Mrs. Maylie and her adoptive daughter Rose seem to mirror Miss Havisham and her own adoptive child Estella, a much murkier pair. They would heartily despise the Maylie women for being sentimental fools, which makes me wonder what happened to Dickens between 1837, when Oliver was imagined and 1860, when Pip was.

So, dear students, if you read this, just read *Great Expectations* next summer. Perhaps, in the end, the best praise I can offer to *Oliver Twist* is saying that, if you loved it, happily for you there's plenty of much better Dickens to enjoy.

20-X-2011 GILBERT & HEATHCLIFF: BROTHERS (AND BRONTË SISTERS)

Many critics have already suggested that the unfortunate Branwell Brontë provided the main inspiration for his sister Anne's self-destructive Arthur Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. He seems to be also Emily's bleak muse for the degraded Hindley Earnshaw, Cathy's brother. In both cases, Arthur's and Hindley's, they are contrasted with a stronger man, and although the similarities between Gilbert Markham and Heathcliff, respectively, may not be obvious I think they should not be overlooked.

Yesterday we were reading in class the hair-raising passage in which jealous Gilbert attacks the man he wrongly believes to be his rival in love, Frederick Lawrence. The passage is brutal, surely more so because Gilbert himself narrates how he hits Lawrence in the head with the heavy metal pommel of his whip, abandoning the seriously wounded man on the road once he's satisfied that Lawrence is not dying. I reminded my students that just a few days ago we read about Sikes' murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* following a similar method: Sikes uses the butt of his pistol to batter

Nancy to death. Yet while Sikes is an outright villain for whom Dickens plans the cruellest death, Gilbert remains the hero of the piece. A Victorian critic complained that he would have been the ruffian in any other novel, yet Anne, like her protagonist Helen, insisted that he *is* the hero. One wonders how Helen's life improves in getting rid of an alcoholic, abusive husband to marry this (potentially) violent man. She, by the way, never learns of the attack as the gentleman Lawrence chooses, in a strange fit of masculine loyalty, not to sully Gilbert's reputation.

It seems that Anne was thinking of *Wuthering Heights* when she imagined Wildfell Hall: both, as you can seem share the initials WH. I can't know whether she was thinking of Heathcliff when her own Gilbert Markham was created yet the more I re-read *The Tenant*, the more I believe she did. Both are gentlemen farmers, to begin with, and passionate lovers hell-bent on getting the woman they love (both ladies, yes, happen to be married). Gilbert is, if you wish, a more civilised Heathcliff, raised unlike Emily's orphan villain-hero, in a 'normal' family complete with stern hard-working father, adoring mother, sweet sister and playful younger brother. Yet Gilbert also knows how to be ungentlemanly, as shown not only by his attacking Lawrence but also by his ugly treatment of poor Eliza, with whom he flirts shamelessly regardless of the consequences for her feelings when he drops her. If Heathcliff and Gilbert met they would possibly like each other, though I must note that as a reader and as the suitor of a richer woman, Gilbert also shares some features with Emily's dark horse, Hareton.

Anne writes in her preface to her novel's second edition, to defend herself of all the negative criticism received, that she wanted to tell "the truth." Certainly, her account of Helen's terrible marriage rings true but I'm not sure what she meant by offering Gilbert as an alternative: that there are no better men!? If we are to believe him, Helen and he have already spent twenty years together in blissful marital harmony when his tale begins; yet, as we don't have her diary for this second marriage we can only wonder if this is true.

If I were she, I'd stick to my paintings and live the happy life of a rich widow but, then, happily for me, I'm not a Victorian woman.

22-X-2011 A FUNNY EXPERIENCE: READING NEAL STEPHENSON'S *REAMDE*

I have spent whatever free time I've managed to hoard in the last ten days glued to the 1042 pages of Neal Stephenson's last novel *Reamde*. The volume is not only very thick but also trade-paperback size, which means it is *huge* indeed. I've gone through Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, *The Diamond Age*, *Cryptonomicon* (twice), *The Baroque Cycle* and *Anathem*, which what I can only define as glee, particularly for *The Baroque Cycle* and although *Reamde* is catastrophically bad in comparison to Stephenson's best work, something of that glee has stayed in place throughout my reading it.

As a teacher of Literature I try to relax and enjoy the ride when I read for pleasure but with *Reamde* this has been difficult. Every TV-less evening I have spent plodding through yet another 100-page segment of this book I've been telling myself in flat contradiction that a) it is one of the silliest novels I've read in a while, b) Stephenson is too clever for that and it must all be a trick. Now that I'm done, I'm disappointed that the novel boils down to nothing at all, yet at the same time I don't feel I've wasted my time, as I have enjoyed the long reading. It's a very funny

experience for the characters are flat, the plot the kind of James Bond-style global chase that airport literature is full of, and the style as transparently camera-ready as possible... yet, I found myself unable to stay away from Zula and Richard, and all the assorted secondary characters of their world, from the Chinese hacker down to the Russian mercenary passing through the Welsh jihadist.

As a reviewer said, this is not a Stephenson I'll re-read. It is, though, perhaps the perfect Stephenson for our troubled times, since after putting up daily with the crisis-related depression that watching the news inevitably leads to, I just felt relieved to plunge into Zula and Richard's life-threatening, exciting adventures. I believe this is called escapism and is what gives popular fiction its bad name. I wasn't looking for that when I bought *Reamde*, for all the other novels by Stephenson are hard reading indeed. Yet it is my wild guess that perhaps Stephenson thought these are not times for deep thinking and chose to tell instead a simple yarn. Or this is just a bad novel, written by a bored writer who couldn't care less. Occam's razor...

Strangely enough, although *Blue Mars* is waiting enticingly on my shelf I'm sorry *Reamde* is over. Is that what Stephenson wanted? Or is it simply that, for all our sophistication as readers, now and then even Literature teachers just want to know what happens next? Might be that...

25-X-2011 RETURNING TO WILDE ONCE MORE: *LA IMPORTÀNCIA DE SER FRANK*

We have included again Oscar Wilde's delicious comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* in our Victorian Literature syllabus and, luckily for our students, this has coincided with the successful production offered at Teatre Gaudí by the stage company Lazzigags Productions. Ivan Campillo, responsible for the new Catalan translation, is, besides, the director and also the mendacious John Worthing, who finds to his chagrin at the end of the play that he has been telling the truth all along.

Surfing the net, I learn that Ricardo Baeza seems to be the Spanish translator who came up in 1919 with the sorry title *La importancia de llamarse Ernesto*. Gosh. The Argentinean translator Agustín Remón went instead for the bland, unimaginative *La importancia de ser hombre serio*. Later Spanish versions tried to play with the pun included in Wilde's title, and resulted in much better variations, such as Alfonso Reyes's *La importancia de ser Severo*. This, however, has not caught on. As the Wikipedia author wisely notes, if in Catalan the usual title is *La importància de ser Frank*, since the Catalan adjective 'franc' means 'honest' as in English, one wonders why we don't have *La importancia de ser Honesto* (which rhymes with Ernesto!) Or *Perfecto*, which would have amused Wilde indeed.

The gimmick of Campillo's production is having a male actor, Ferran Castells, play both Lady Bracknell and the butler Merriman. The students who have seen the play were quite mystified by this. It is not, however, something unheard of, much less unusual. A review of a recent Chicago production (2010) notes that "Lady Bracknell, that caustic *queen* of Oscar Wilde's comedies of obfuscation, tends to be played by men in drag. I doubt the doyenne would approve of this pervasive trend on Broadway and beyond —not that anybody ever asked the old buzzard" (my italics). Of course, Peter Pan used to be played by a young woman in drag, a habit inherited from old pantomime due to the titillation provided by the public display of female legs encased

in tights. I am not sure, though, what kind of titillation is provided by a male-in-drag or drag queen Lady Bracknell. Is it because she's outspoken and authoritarian that she's thought to be masculine? Is it because she's seen as a 'queen' in the gay sense of the word? How trite – I just can't see a Victorian man saying her lines at all. It all seems to be a gross misreading. Whatever the case is, Edith Evans was so good in the 1952 film version that I've managed to forget I've actually seen Judy Dench play the role in the 2002 version with Colin Firth and Rupert Everett. Odd, very odd.

I enjoyed Campillo's version, in the end, because it proves that the text still works as a comedy, more than one hundred years later and in a quite different context. Campillo's is quite a conventional production with an irregular tempo that should be faster yet I found it solid enough, particularly considering that, as for my students, this is a first introduction to Wilde for many members of the audience. I found the funniest moments still amusing even though I knew what was coming and that is high praise for the cast. We'll see how the musical version of *Els crims de Lord Arthur Saville* works at TNC in a few months.

At Teatre Gaudí, my hair stood on end when I heard John explain that his 'brother' Frank had died of a severe cold alone in Paris, for Oscar Wilde died there also alone (though of cerebral meningitis) only six years after the play was first performed. Perhaps the bitter seeds of his disgrace were already there, in his protagonists' imperious need to lie and lead a double life. Sadly, very Victorian...

27-X-2011 WHY DO WE DO WHAT WE DO?: CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

I'm co-organising a three-day conference for which we have received proposals to present 31 round tables, 4 workshops and 146 papers. Yes, very successful. I happen to be coordinating the programme and, well, it's very complicated because with 90 minutes sessions we need 8 simultaneous classrooms, which also makes it highly unlikely that panel attendance can be higher than a handful of listeners.

For reasons that I won't go into, I've had to produce a more compact programme, supposing that the sessions would take 60 instead of 90 minutes. This means that participants in round tables should speak for between 5-10 minutes before proper debate begins and papers should be given in 15 minutes instead of 20, as it is traditional in the humanities. The problem is that conference delegates still don't know about this... We're three weeks away...

Seeing what a big difference 5 minutes make, I started wondering why 20 minute papers are the rule and whether anybody knows how academic conferences have come about. I've been asking my colleagues and none seems to know. Google led me to volumes by Anton Shone and Tony Rogers, though their focus are business and not academic meetings. I'm still in the dark...

I've attended conferences in which delegates were given only 10 minutes to present and that seemed very little for the expenses and the hassle involved in attending a conference. 20 minutes (around 2,500 words) can indeed seem 40 depending on the presenter's delivery skills. And, then, of course, there are all those tiresome presenters who never bother to rehearse their papers in advance and spend their presentation regretting that they have to skip this and that, or simply taking everyone else's time. 15 minutes, which must be around 2000 words, do not sound so bad.

Listening to papers can be, believe me, terribly dull though we very politely tend not to comment on this. Some people just seem unable to communicate (one wonders what they do in class!!), others tend to overuse PowerPoint trying desperately to make things more lively, and few manage to keep their audience's attention for the full 20 minutes. Listening to three papers in a row takes one hour, by the end of which the first paper may have been forgotten. It is when attending conferences that I realise what students go through every day. And, of course, I have seen my own papers send members of the audience into Morpheus' sweet arms... None is an exception.

Some conference organisers are beginning to ask for shorter papers (the 15-minute kind) or, preferably, short presentations. Although I can talk non-stop in class for 75 minutes with just a few notes the idea of not having a written text to lean on in a conference unnerves me. Once, years ago, I decided that the paper I'd written was not good enough and improvised a whole new version in a conference, and I'm still shaking. Never again!!

My own solution to the mortal boredom of listening to papers is simple: use conference time to talk to people. Write the paper, upload it, and come to discuss it with whomever has bothered to read it. Turn the conference into a day-long coffee break, which is when, anyway, real contact is established.

Let's just start thinking why we do what we do, instead of following a 'tradition' whose origins none seems to know about and that, in practice, is so problematic to maintain.

5-XI-2011 WHO'S TO BLAME, THEN?: ABOUT TELLING 'THE TRUTH' IN FICTION

Yesterday I taught an MA seminar at UB about Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* as a film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*, which it is indeed even though Austen's novel is not credited at all. Inevitably, as I happen to dislike Austen very much, we eventually came to the point in which I criticised *Emma* (and *Clueless*) for being a quite conventional patriarchal story leading to the classic heteronormative marriage, or so-called happy ending.

The heroine may be rich and, thus, free *not* to marry, yet the hard lesson she learns thanks to her wrongheaded bout of matchmaking leads her to find Mr. Right (aka Mr. Knightley) and not to assume a happy singlehood. Someone said that *Emma* (1815) was a protest about how little freedom even rich women had in the early 19th century. That may have been the case as Henry James still made the same point many decades later with *Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1). Yet, well, I am very sorry but, as a 21st century working woman, I simply cannot sympathise with these ladies' plea. The joke in *Emma*'s case is that she is blind to Knightley's charms, whereas the sick joke in *Isabel Archer*'s case is that she chooses the appalling Gilbert Osmond as a husband. What doesn't amuse me at all is that both *Emma* and *Isabel* MUST marry for, according to their authors, a single man may be in want of a wife but remain single, whereas a single woman is always in dire need of finding a husband even when she's rich. Or else. However, this is as false now as it was in the 19th century: do read the passage in the autobiography of Harriet Martineau (1802-76) in which she candidly explains how the

timely death of her fiancée freed her from the need to marry and thus gave her infinite happiness. And consider.

So here I was, complaining with two of the female students that Austen is to blame for a dangerous romantic model in which the woman finds an ideal mate despite her behaving quite stupidly and making many mistakes that hurt others along the way. The fantasy is quite transparent and persists today in characters like Bridget Jones. I won't discuss *Sex and the City* as I've never seen a single episode. The single girl is today a career woman rather than an idle upper class parasite but the principle is the same: they bumble their way and eventually stumble into Prince Charming. I would probably dislike Austen a bit less if she'd had the gall, in her famous ironic way, to make Knightley and, of course, Darcy, less perfect. To this a student replied that Austen is not to blame at all and that we, contemporary female readers, are the ones to blame for our addiction to these fantastic male characters. She also said that, after all, what Austen wrote was just fiction.

Yes, sure, but this is fiction that many women use it to script their biographies by, being hopelessly disappointed by the real men they come across and who can never measure up to the likes of Knightley. If you ask me, Jane Austen is guilty of tricking her readers into believing that ideal men do materialise sooner or later. She, who never married, must have had a good laugh at our expense. Mulling over this, I recalled how Anne Brontë declares in her preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that if her novel is not what anyone would call 'pleasing' this is because she aimed at telling "the truth." Of course, the truth is not that ALL husbands are like the horrid Arthur Huntingdon but that the good men like Gilbert Markham are less than perfect. Even very imperfect. And so are women, even though Austen had already pointed that out. Brontë's truth is still today far less palatable than Austen's lie, which is probably why she's regarded as a second-tier canonical writer, whereas Austen is now the untouchable queen (thanks to silly romantic misreaders like Emma Thompson perhaps?).

Another student told me, and I thank her for it, that Darcy and Knightley are like today's teen idols: they fulfil impossible female romantic cravings that real boys and men simply cannot understand. I'm sure that sleepy-eyed Kristen Stewart must now and then throw that into Robert Pattinson's pretty face to keep him in check. I wonder what it's like to have a (teen) male pin-up as your boyfriend... and whether Austen was cynically manufacturing Knightley and Darcy as such.

20-XI-2011 TRASHY, TRASHED CAMPUS: THE UGLIEST SIGHT

Last Friday 11 as I got off the train at UAB a strong smell of garbage hit my nose. As I walked towards the Department using a back lane, I could soon see that the whole area from the station to the Faculties was covered in litter: crushed cans, plastic bags, rests of snacks... Another teacher was filming it all with his smartphone, I guess the images must be already available at some website or other. Hours later, on the way back home, walking to the station through our main square, I was simply dismayed to see the incredible amount of trash piling up all over the place. Clearly, the effort to dirty the campus had been systematic, a form of protest. Who'd done it? Our own UAB students, of course, who celebrated last Thursday what they call an 'alternative' holiday, that is to say, a wild party without the required authorisation.

The same UAB students called a 48-hour general strike a week later (16 and 17), together with some teachers and admin personnel, on the grounds that Catalan universities are at risk of total collapse if the budget cuts that the Catalan government is preparing are implemented. This is indeed the case: top research is in dire straits and many jobs on the line, not to mention the basics of daily teaching, such as having reasonably sized groups in order to offer personalised attention. In our university the figure is already out: we must 'save' 6.8 million euros from our already very tight 2012 budget. I don't want to think how, I'll see soon enough.

What baffles me is that basically the same students organising the massive wild party or 'botellón' are also in many cases the ones supporting the strike. Last year the party cost the UAB 300,000 euros including cleaning up and the many elements that had to be repaired or replaced. I assume the cost is going to be similar this year. What is the sense, then, in complaining that public money is being wasted if students themselves waste it in this way? There's also something else: the dirt spread all over campus clearly indicates that many are getting an education paid with public money they obviously don't deserve. They think they're paying for it but registration fees only cover 10% of the real cost. The barbarians are not at the gate, they are *within* the gates and getting worse. The so-called 'right' to have fun can never be an excuse to behave as so many did.

I've been asked when telling other colleagues about this mess why these wild parties aren't stopped by the authorities. Well: how do you close a huge campus? And how do you empty it of the thousands drinking there once they're in? Maybe the army would do the trick, as I doubt the police could do that... But even Franco might have hesitated to call them. Actually our Rector is very reluctant to calling in the 'mossos' (the local Catalan police), as their necessary presence three years ago to stop the occupation of our Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres led to very nasty incidents. I sympathise with her plea, but the more lenient we are with these barbarians (I mean the students and non-students at the wild party, not the 'mossos') the more power they earn over the civilised members of our community which, of course, includes very many civilised students. Hopefully, the invisible majority that we need now to speak up.

20-XI-2011 AMATEUR PROFESSIONALISM: AFTER A CONFERENCE

I used my right not to be on strike to protect a conference I have been co-organising for the last 18 months from the disaster that the university strike programmed for 16 and 17 brought in. I agree that the situation in the Catalan universities is terrible but I don't believe that strikes are an effective weapon of protest and, anyway, we just could not cancel a conference just a few weeks before its beginning. Besides, only a handful of the participants came from the Catalan universities where the protest was being staged and they were practically on the way. We simply stayed away from our UAB campus, feeling a little clandestine much to my chagrin.

Finding an alternative place was nerve-racking. We did manage by a series of small miracles and the conference was, in the end, quite normal, which is exactly what we aimed at. Someone praised me for my professionalism as programme coordinator and that left me thinking hard about what we do and why. In this case, my main co-organiser and myself had decided to undertake the huge task of organising the event

out of a sense of duty, as we had attended many other conferences in the same series and simply wished to reciprocate. I have felt since the beginning totally amateurish, since organising a conference with around 280 people is not something I have been trained for in my academic life. I don't know to this day whether there's a kit to organise conferences available somewhere on the internet but I have had to build my own by trial and error. I am pleased it has worked well for most delegates but I have been horrified most of the time by the many things that could go wrong and by the many poor choices I personally may have been responsible for.

So why do we do it? In short, because we're poor. With more money I would have very gladly left the organising in the hands of conference professionals. And I don't mean in this particular case or for this particular series. I mean that generally university teachers and Departments are expected, as a matter of fact, to be able to organise conferences. Many academics invest plenty of time on them with all the generosity we can afford considering our other many duties. This is done because the conference circuit must obviously exist for networking and for the circulation of ideas. Yet, whenever my day has started with tens of email messages to purveyors or guests, I have wondered what silly notion made me think I could handle all this.

My belated thanks, then, to all the organisers of all the conferences I have attended in the past and my heartfelt admiration for all those who'll volunteer to organise the ones I'll attend in the future.

20-XI-2001 TEACHER'S PET: THE COST OF HELPING OUT

Two days before the beginning of the conference I have co-organised I got very concerned that we were short on student volunteers and, so, I asked my second-year class for help. There are 60 students in class, all of whom knew very well how important the conference was for me, as I had repeatedly explained. In the end one helped me pack the bags (another one volunteered but got ill) and only one became a proper conference volunteer for the three days the conference lasted. My thanks to her.

Just for you to see how important this conference was for the Department we included a three-day break in our teaching programmes so that everyone could attend it. Students were welcome indeed and needed, as I say. If students in my class had told me they were on strike on 16 and 17, I would have understood their lack of collaboration. Yet, none mentioned this so I can only assume they didn't volunteer out of disinterest (the other possibility is that they were preparing the paper proposals they need to hand in tomorrow...). Whatever the case is, I was sorely disappointed.

I asked our student volunteers why this situation had come about and they patiently explained to me that students who help teachers or contact in any way with us more than it is strictly necessary become ostracised. Teacher's pet they're dubbed. This, of course, is as old as the hills but sycophants (if that's the right translation for 'pelotas') need not be confused with team players. Stupidly, I thought that my students would take my call as an opportunity to get a glimpse of academic life that might be inspirational for their future (careers). I know that handing out bottles of water, making photocopies and directing delegates to the right classroom is not exactly glamorous but helping me would have been more clever than staying away. Why? Well, for one thing, everyone needs sooner or later a helping hand, maybe a job

reference. And two, I don't feel now inclined to mark with generosity the pile of proposals coming today from students who chose not to help.

Is this blackmail? Um, no, I think not. It goes by the old name of backscratching, or doing mutual favours. There is something else for which there is no exact translation: 'quedar bien.' WordReference tells me this translates as 'making an impression' but that's not quite what it means in Spanish. 'Quedar bien' is about wanting to please for your own sake: not necessarily because you like the person you please but because you want that person to think well of you, of your politeness, willingness and readiness to work hard in this case. How this is mixed up with the obnoxious figure of the teacher's pet is beyond me.

Luckily, I was wrong and we had enough student volunteers. No teacher's pet in sight, though...

5-XI-2011 MR CLOONEY AND MR GRANT: ALONE (AND LOVING IT)

This might be an example of intertextuality in the making. Or in hindsight. Also an example of how academics cannot really relax. For, I don't know what nuclear physicists do for relaxation, but I tend to watch films, and, well, they make me think, an activity that often leads to writing papers. Or blog entries. So, here we go.

Late one night I was watching a rerun of *About a Boy* (2002), adapted from the novel by Nick Hornby, which is the kind of film you might call a Hugh Grant film, rather than a film directed by Paul Weitz and Chris Weitz (as it is). It's quite charming. Grant plays himself, as usual, in a plot about a single man who happens to enjoy his idle loneliness but loves dating women. Dating leads into complications, this being a comedy, when the Grant character (Will) pretends to be a father in order to join a single mums' support group. He intends to exploit these women's vulnerability for his own sexual ends, but his ploy is soon exposed by the 11-year-old son of one of these women. Misunderstandings follow from Will's many lies and he ends up, of course, paired up with a lovely single mum and surrounded by a kind of pseudo-family.

The running joke in this story is that Will needn't work, as his dad wrote once a corny Christmas song whose rights bring in yearly enough money for Will to do nothing. In this he is diametrically opposed to workaholic Ryan Bingham, played by George Clooney in *Up in the Air* (2009), directed by Jason Reitman from the novel by Walter Kirn. What's the connection? Well, that's what I noticed when I saw *About a Boy* the second time. Both Will and Ryan are happily minding their business, enjoying their chosen singleness when destiny in the form of a novelist decides that this cannot be tolerated for the sake of social stability (it seems). Grant/Will is, fortunately for him, written into a romantic comedy whereas poor Clooney/Ryan is plunged into a sort of tragedy of humiliation, his lifestyle shattered by a sad affair.

Having taught many times *High Fidelity*, Hornby's (lad lit) masterpiece, I had already wondered about the pressure he puts on his male characters to 'settle down' and be lonely no more. *About a Boy* does this too, as it is easy to see. Seeing again the film adaptation after seeing *Up in the Air*, it strikes me that there is, if not exactly an inter-Atlantic conspiracy (Hornby is British, Kirn American), at least an emerging pattern to extend the fear of loneliness typical of women's romance literature to the literature about men. Remember? Bridget Jones is scared stiff that she'll end up her days a lonely, dotty old woman eaten by her own Alsatian (um, this always makes me

think of J.G. Ballard's *High Rise*, which begins with a man eating his own Alsatian). The same fear is being poured onto the men.

Here's the funny thing: Will and Ryan, the unhappy single men who don't even know they're unhappy when their stories begin, are played by the two most recalcitrant single men in Hollywood. Grant (born 1960) and Clooney (born 1961) seem to enjoy to the hilt their chosen singlehood, bent on collecting a string of ever younger and prettier girlfriends. It's a tribute to their acting skills that these two playboys play so well these forlorn single men, yet I'm quite annoyed at the hypocrisy of the whole act.

I wonder why our contemporary stories will focus on the choices people do make and not on the choices they *should* make.

25-XI-2011 EDITING CONVENTIONS: WHO CARES? (WE DO!)

I'm taking a break from my main task today: going through the 49 paper proposals that my second-year students have sent me (I've managed 37 so far... yupiii!!! And it's only 16:00). This is the first time they write an abstract, which makes their difficulties to firmly state what they aim at doing quite understandable. Perhaps it's my fault for describing abstracts as an announcement of intentions rather than what they are: a summary of something which still does not exist (I thought they would be mystified by this). So, I'm getting abstracts in which students write sentences such as 'In this paper I will analyse the role of the narrator in *Oliver Twist*' instead of 'In this paper I argue that the narrator in *Oliver Twist* matters more than the central character' because... (add arguments here).

What I don't quite understand are the difficulties with the bibliography. The choices made are quite good, generally, and the quotations submitted for my supervision quite apt, considering the subject matter of each paper. What 90% students disregard are the basic conventions of how to edit a bibliography: alphabetically by authors' surname, obeying the rules about when to use italics (basically, volume titles) and quotation marks (the rest), and providing all the required information (such as in which journal an article has been published...). We do provide guidelines and, what's more, in preparation for this year's paper (the students' first with secondary sources) we ask them to produce a bibliography in the first year. This bibliography is thoroughly inspected down to the last comma, students asked to resubmit if conventions are not followed. It doesn't work, though. Many students complain that we teachers are a bunch of fusspots (um, nothing as savoury as 'tiquismiquis' in English) and seem really puzzled as to why this matters at all.

Having edited some journal issues and a collective volume, I know first hand that too many academics have exactly that very same attitude. This is why editors need to threaten authors with returning their work if not properly edited. A shame, really. Everyone knows that editing a paper or a book is a real pain in the neck, particularly when you have written it using MLA and for whatever strange reason your editor prefers Chicago. Yet, it must be done. Not only because there's a crucial difference between referring to Oliver Twist (character) and *Oliver Twist* (book) but also because these conventions are universal and help us to keep knowledge neat and tidy. Just imagine the chaos if anyone used bibliography and referenced quotations as they pleased...

So, it does matter, my dear students. As much as giving your teacher a good impression of your ability to follow guidelines. I can't say too often that when a teacher is going through piles and piles of exercises a neatly edited one is truly welcome as a rest for the eyes and the mind. It is, besides, sure to attract more interest and, hence, a greater willingness to help the student in question.

27-XI-2011 DOING GENDER STUDIES: FOR MY MALE STUDENTS

At the last count, the male students following actively my Victorian Literature subject are 9 in a class of 50 active students (by this I mean that about 10 more are registered but never show up). This is about 20%, slightly higher than in other courses I have taught, in which the proportion was usually around 15% or less. Last year, for instance, my English Theatre class had only 4 male students out of 35 in total.

I have often wondered when lecturing how this male minority was taking in the heavy-handed feminist/Gender Studies orientation we have given to the two novels we've taught, particularly Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I do wonder too how this novel can be taught indeed without addressing gender issues not only because it narrates a harrowing story of domestic abuse but also because Brontë chose to embed her heroine's diary within the letters that her second husband, Gilbert, addresses to his best friend and brother-in-law, Halford. I believe that Brontë didn't want to alienate the men of her England by throwing into their faces Helen's gendered suffering. Gilbert was, hence, created to frame her tale and suggest that not all men are as selfish as Arthur, Helen's pampered husband. However, this decision has also elicited plenty of criticism regarding how women's voice is ultimately edited and silenced in this novel by men's, as shown in Gilbert's manipulation of Helen's texts (diary and letters).

I made a point in class, though seemingly not often enough, that because I am a feminist who writes about masculinities I am very much interested in men's developing their own gender-related consciousness. In short, I hinted (or so I thought) that paper proposals considering what kind of masculinity is constructed through Gilbert's letters would be welcome. We often discussed how he seemed not to be quite a gentleman and I've already written here about his proximity to Emily Brontë's problematic hero-villain Heathcliff. Other male characters in the text –Arthur, Walter, Hattersley, even little Arthur– are also worth exploring. Well, to my surprise none of the 7 (I think) paper proposals dealing with this novel coming from young men discuss masculinity at all. Instead, they focus on feminism, (Victorian) women's rights and Helen's particular plea as a married woman artist.

This makes me a bit wary, as I can't help suspecting that these male students are addressing feminist issues simply to please me and, well, earn my sympathy. This is not quite right. Although I realise they may be really committed to feminism I wonder why none of these young men has offered comments in class on gender issues; also why my hints regarding masculinities have not been followed. Most of them have, accordingly, got back from me their own paper proposal with an open, firm invitation to reconsider their chosen topic and write about masculinity. If you're reading me, believe, I am truly interested in what men have to say about this aspect of Brontë's novel.

This is by no means an atypical circumstance. Everyone doing Gender Studies notes men's resistance to doing Masculinities Studies. American sociologist Michael Kimmel, one of the founding fathers, teaches an introduction as a *compulsory* subject in an engineering degree because otherwise he'd might not get enough students!! Gender Studies courses are regularly attended all over the world mostly by women (heterosexual, lesbian), secondarily by gay men. Why? The usual answer is that, whereas women usually enjoy discussing gender issues to better understand their own socio-cultural constrictions (and freedoms), men tend to stay away out of insecurity regarding their own sense of masculinity and, crucially, regarding whether they'll be turn into targets of anti-patriarchal critique. This is why I stress that masculinity is NOT the same as patriarchy and that, though I'm very much against patriarchy as a hierarchical, power-based system of abuse I want to know as much as possible about masculinities.

So here's my invitation once more: address gender issues if you wish, but do so out of a personal conviction that it's worth doing and feel free to discuss masculinity. You can make an innovative, important contribution and I'd totally welcome it. If having read this, you still want to discuss feminism, that is fine too, but make sure you do it sincerely, please, and not out of a gentlemanly or interested standpoint. Thanks.

1-XII-2011 DEPRESSION LOOMS LARGE: MORE AND MORE PAYCUTS...

I'm beginning to sound like a broken record but I guess this is yet another sign of my incipient depression.

A few days after the Spanish elections the Catalan government insidiously announced yet another paycut for civil servants, something between 1 and 3% to be deducted off the extra month's salary paid in June and December. Oh, well, we all said: it could have been worse. Now it IS worse, much worse. The announcement yesterday was that the salary 'complements' would be drastically reduced. Last time I checked complements made up about half my salary, so I am right now in a panic. I can't imagine what it is like for university teachers with young children and a mortgage.

All this came on the same day when someone explained to me that the rumour circulating among our school's students is that we teachers are paid between 4,000 and 7,000 euros a month, with some UAB employees making as much as 120,000 a year if in top admin positions. In other circumstances this would be a very funny joke... Right now it sounds plain ridiculous. A young tenured teacher (meaning a new 'titular', between ages 35-40) makes around 2000 euros a months (net income I mean). Complements for seniority, research and the implementation of new teaching methodologies may bring that up to 2,500/2,600... after about 10 years. The basic salary, on which our pensions are calculated, is not quite 1,200 euros. For the next step up the ladder, full professor, what varies, once more, are the complements. A professor (a category achieved between ages 45-55 usually) makes 600 more euros a month, so around 3,100. Some may make more, again, because of seniority, research and teaching innovations. But very few, if any, make 4,000 a month. Maybe one or two about to retire (we retire at 70, remember?) I have no idea what the Rector makes monthly for running the UAB on top of her full professor salary but I can say that as head of Department (2005-2008) I got a paltry 300 extra euros a month. And those were the good times. Managing a team of about 40 people brought in daily problems

and plenty of stress all through three years, which that money could by no means compensate.

Yesterday, on the news they explained that for young people to be able to afford housing in any of Spain's major cities average salaries should be around 2,350 euros. Ergo: soon, not even hyperqualified university teachers will be able to buy a decent flat, much less a house. We might become squatters at our own workplaces if things go on like this.

2-XII-2011 NEW BOOK (AND MANIFESTO): *DESAFIOS A LA HETEROSEXUALIDAD OBLIGATORIA*

I have a new book out. It's very small, only 84 pages, but it's taken plenty of reading and plenty of thinking, so I thought I'd use this blog to publicise it a little bit.

The volume is called *Desafíos a la Heterosexualidad Obligatoria* and it's part of the enticing collection that Meri Torras is editing, *Los Textos del Cuerpo*. Mine is number 7 (Barcelona: Ediuoc, 2011, ISBN 978 84 938802 7 9, see its wonderful cover by Lucy Gutiérrez at <http://cositextualitat.uab.cat/?p=1298>). And, yes, it's a protest against the conceptualisation of heterosexuality as the patriarchal enemy and a call for us, heterosexuals, to reconsider our own identity as we must do under the impact of Queer Studies. And Feminism. And Masculinities Studies.

I close the book with a manifesto, so here it is, in the original language I used, Spanish.

MANIFIESTO

Hago una llamada para que desparezca:

*La heteronormatividad homófoba que privilegia la heterosexualidad. NO a la homofobia.

*La dominación masculinista (patriarcal, sea hetero o gay) sobre las mujeres (heteros y lesbianas). NO a la misoginia.

*El esencialismo en el género. NO a una sola manera de ser hombre (hetero o gay, etc.) o mujer (lesbiana o hetero, etc.).

*El modelo central de la heterosexualidad actual: el amor romántico. NO a la falsa idealización y la mala convivencia.

*El falso feminismo. NO a ayudar, NO a volver a casa como derecho.

Abogo por una heterosexualidad plural que rechace el patriarcado, el masculinismo, la misoginia, la homofobia, la normatividad sexual y reproductiva. Pido una ética heterosexual que promueva la libertad de elección personal y que realmente la respete; que comparta la plena ciudadanía con todos y todas; que luche contra la violencia y el abuso; que promueva la afectividad y no sólo la sexualidad; que eduque en el placer; que enseñe a convivir y no sólo a enamorarse y que acabe con el falso feminismo habitual entre los heteros, tanto hombres como mujeres. En suma, pido una heterosexualidad que rechace privilegios y que se limite a ser una opción de libre elección y no una norma, sea dentro o fuera de la propia heterosexualidad. Reinventémonos ya.

The rest of the book, as you can imagine, is an examination of the basic tenets surrounding today heterosexuality both from queer and heterosexual positions in Gender Studies. I find, and here I should start a contest, that anti-patriarchal heterosexuals like myself do not have a label to distinguish us from the recalcitrant, patriarchal straights. I propose using, as Calvin Thomas does, 'heteroqueer' but queers mistrust the label. So far, we have none better and perhaps it's high time we find one. Others have proposed 'dissident heterosexuality' or 'ethical heterosexuality' but these are not catchy enough... Any ideas?

9-XII-2011 BACK FROM MARS: KIM STANLEY ROBINSON'S MARTIAN TRILOGY (ABOUT READING A VERY LONG TEXT... FOR PLEASURE?)

It's taken me a few months to go through the 2,000 pages that compose Robinson's trilogy about the (hopefully) soon to come colonisation of Mars: *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1992) and *Blue Mars* (1996). At some point, particularly when the end of the Mars 500 experiment was announced (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mars_500), I thought that Mars would be colonised before I finished the last book. I was clearly a bit overoptimistic about the colonisation of the red planet and, happily, I'm done reading.

'Happily' not because I got tired but because reading the trilogy has brought in much pleasure. Intellectual, as Robinson is not afraid of tackling head on complex political and ideological issues, and indeed aesthetic, as he decided to slow down in the third book and take his time to detail the dramatic changes in the terraformed Martian landscape and in the personal experiences of the long-lived earliest Terran colonisers. I have also enjoyed enormously the sustained anti-patriarchal tone, manifest not only in the characterisation of the bold female protagonists but also in that one of the main achievements of the new native Martian society is the abandonment of old-fashioned patriarchy for complete equality. The men and women of the trilogy do engage in frequent occasional liaisons and long-lasting romance, yet, above all, both *work very hard* for the betterment of the land they occupy and for the creation of a radically new society. It's truly refreshing to read about women scientists and politicians, even mystics, taking a leading role together with the men as a matter of fact (how, after this, I'm going to teach a chick lit novel in a few days is something that right now mystifies me).

Having paid my long-standing debt with Robinson, the usual questions crop up. Should I write a paper about the gender issues in his work? (but... I was reading this for pleasure!! And, anyway, the MLA database already carries plenty about him...) Shouldn't I do something, anything with the many hours I have spent on Mars, forgetting about everything else? (but... it was my leisure time!! And, anyway, there's so much else to read, some also by him). Should I, to recap, re-read the whole trilogy, now that I know the basics of the plotlines, and see if I can milk something publishable out of it? (but... 2000 pages again, pencil in hand??). Is reading for so long wasted time if it doesn't lead to some writing beyond this blog entry? Insert here the usual deep sigh.

The lesson to be learned? No rest for the wicked (English Literature teachers), for if we enjoy reading a text, this leads to this strange wish to write about it which, as far as I know, none has analysed as *the* source of all literary research and criticism. Is it

a form of appropriating the original text? Is it a guilty way of maximising the utility of our scant leisure time? I understand now why some of my colleagues keep for their free-time reading a genre they're not interested in academically. Yet if we don't read what we're interested in academically in our so-called leisure time, *when* are we supposed to read it? After all, if I have crammed Robinson's 2,000 pages in the evenings and weekends of the last three months this is because even though I am a professional reader as a teacher of English Literature there is no way I could have taken, for instance, a couple of my working weeks to read the three books. Not even if I had decided beforehand that I wanted to write a paper about the trilogy and that reading it was indeed work.

So, here is the paradox (or do I mean vicious circle?): I have used my leisure time to read what I could or should have read in my working hours if I didn't have to waste them doing a hundred other things which the bureaucrats above regard as *real* work. For, in their twisted logic, reading Literature *isn't* work since, as everyone knows, reading books is something one does for leisure. Unless, that is, one produces something publishable.

Whatever happened to reading just for the sake of filling in gaps and learning? Why, oh why, do I feel guilty that I have used so much time for the trilogy...?

16-XII-2011 OSCAR AND BORIS: A FARFETCHED COMPARISON

I was trying to get my students interested in Oscar Wilde's peculiar position as a late Victorian celebrity *avant la lettre*, and before I really knew what I was saying I blurted out that his celebrity status then was not so different from that of Nicaraguan import Boris Izaguirre today. That surely got their attention (poor things, it was 15:30...) and a good laugh. Once more I chastised myself for adlibbing instead of sticking to my notes... oh, well, it's that pressure to keep them entertained all the time!!

On second thoughts, however, my *boutade* may have some grounds, at least it is making me consider in more depth the difficulties of presenting historical characters as real, living people as not just that – wooden, stiff characters in history, understood as Hayden White taught us: just an agreed upon fiction. The lurid details of Oscar Wilde's unfortunate life stick out so prominently that it is harder in his case to reduce him down to just being a writer. One of my students really got a serious case of bad vibes when I mentioned that Wilde died as the fictional Ernest that Jack invents does in his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*: destitute, alone and in Paris... Yet, whether you read about him in the Wikipedia or in any proper academic source (say Richard Ellman's biography), or even if you see the film *Wilde* with comedian Stephen Fry in the title role, there is always a mist surrounding Wilde's real person, as happens with all the dead authors we'll never see on TV, only in photos. This is silly, I know, but my guess is that what is shocking about comparing Wilde and Izaguirre is not so much that they're very different men but that they live in very different times, the latter one when writers can have if they wish a prominent media presence. Just imagine what it would be like to have Wilde (or Shakespeare!) as a talk show guest and you can, perhaps, see what I mean.

Having said that, Wilde and Izaguirre share much if you think about it: a flamboyant dress style, a flippant repartee, a wish to shine as a celebrity no matter

what it takes, their condition as homosexual men, their making a living primarily as journalists. I don't know if Wilde would ever have accepted pulling down his pants as often as Izaguirre did on TV (remember Pepe Navarro's late night shows?) but I can certainly picture him presenting *Channel nº 4* with Ana Siñeriz. After all, Wilde was the editor of popular magazine *The Woman's World*, which he rescued from financial ruin with great doses of glamour. No, I'm not forgetting in this comparison the fact that whereas Wilde was a brilliant scholar, Izaguirre did not attend university. I haven't read any of Izaguirre's novels (yet) and I can't say how the two men compare as authors but they do have in common their good nose for the media that pays best: Izaguirre wrote soap operas for TV, Wilde took up playwriting for money (with great acumen, he preferred a box office percentage over a flat fee).

Happily for Western society things have changed in a most significant front, and while poor Oscar was sentenced to two years hard labour for his homosexual liaisons, which led ultimately to his sad end, Boris is happily married to the love of his life: a man, Rubén. I'm aware of how controversial Izaguirre is as a gay man, with his often annoying mannerisms and his sharp tongue, but when I think of him and Wilde I'm very glad that Izaguirre can enjoy full citizenship rights in our time and very sorry that Wilde had to suffer so cruelly and, above all, so unnecessarily.

22-XII-2011 READING 'TRASH': ON THE HEROINE'S LOSS OF DIGNITY

As part of my MA course on 'Postmodernities: New Sexualities/New Textualities,' which deals with Gender Studies as it is easy to surmise, I decided to include a 'chick lit' novel. I needed something reasonably short and, ideally, about a woman who already has a candidate to be her Mr Right but who comes across the real thing unexpectedly. Also short enough given the numbers of texts in the course. With the invaluable help of my dear Elena Serrano, who is writing her dissertation on this genre, I finally chose Sophie Kinsella's *Can you keep a secret?* Kinsella is a well-known brand name in the field of chick lit thanks to her *Shopaholic* series. If I have to believe the comments on Amazon, any of these novels are vastly superior to the one I chose. I may be then passing unfair judgement on *Can you keep a secret?* but the fact is that, in the end, this novel has been most useful for my students to consider the problem of what kind of readership is willing to put up with its appalling writing.

The plot is trite enough. Middle-class, 25-year-old Emma (yes, as in Austen) is a junior marketing executive (very junior, as in barely an assistant) who, despite having a college degree, seems quite fond of showing how ignorant and incompetent she is at work. During a bumpy flight to London back from Scotland, where she ruins a business meeting, she panics and blurts out her most intimate secrets to a complete stranger, an older American guy. This (patient) guy, of course, turns out to be the millionaire owner of the company Emma works for and is in possession of a wondrous memory which allows him to recall every single stupid secret Emma unveiled on the plane. A series of embarrassing misencounters happen and by the end of the book, guess what?, she's got the promotion she was hankering after and the millionaire guy in her bed (no rock on her finger, though). In principle, there is no reason why you couldn't create fine literature out of this, since Jane Austen, the great-grandma of chick lit, managed to spun a subtle, irony-laden prose out of comparable bilge (excuse my... bile). We ended up, though, figuring out that she was lucky in that her readership

welcomed (perhaps even demanded) that kind of prose for their literary entertainment, whereas in our supposedly more cultured time, thousands and thousands if not millions of readers seem satisfied with Kinsella's unbearable... trash. Trash, because as my students complained, you do not see any kind of thinking behind it, though we don't know whether this is the product of hurried writing under marketing pressures or of plain inability to put the literary brain at work. Considering Kinsella's education I doubt she lacks the brainpower, and if she is just slumming down to please an allegedly less cultivated readership, well, isn't that cynical?

There is something else that concerns me. If I compare Austen's Darcy and Kinsella's Jack Harper they are not really that different: both can be described as patient gentlemen, quite ready to tutor the younger heroine on the pragmatics of social life and also quite willing to love them despite the many irritating mistakes they make. The heroine has changed, though, in a crucial matter: she is much less dignified. Discussing Amy Heckerling's updating of *Emma*, the teen pic *Clueless*, Melissa Mazmanian claims that since the 19th century lady has no equivalent today Heckerling could only rewrite Emma as a much more relevant figure for the late 20th century: the (rich) dumb blonde. Paris Hilton, yes, is the kind of woman Austen would have to write about today if she were alive. I'll grant that Hilton, and Kinsella's Emma and Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones may be more clever than they appear to be but 'lady' is not the kind of word that comes to my mind when I think of them. Last week, teaching a seminar on the comic and the film *300*, I ended with film critic Roger Ebert's complaint that whereas heroes seemed dignified in the old 1960s sword-and-sandal films (we know them as 'peplums'), the hypermuscled lot in *300* act as 'lager louts.' Now it is my turn to complain about this new batch of bumbling, idiotic heroines.

My students pointed out that, for all her mistakes, you still like Emma by the end of Austen's novel, as she remains indeed dignified, even much more so after humbly learning a lesson. About Kinsella's Emma the only thing I can say is that I hope there are not many real women like her. And novels like Kinsella's.

3-I-2012 THE ART OF ENTERTAINING: EGOS TEATRE'S *ELS CRIMS DE LORD ARTHUR SAVILLE*

This semester we're awarding our Victorian Literature students extra points for attending a performance of either Oscar Wilde's masterpiece *La importància de ser Frank* (see related posting in October), or Egos Teatre's production of *Els crims de Lord Arthur Saville*, a musical based on Wilde's short story. Ironically, Wilde's classy and classic comedy was offered at the quite modest Teatre Gaudí whereas the musical is on at none other than the Sala Gran of the Teatre National de Catalunya. Yes, even more ironically, whereas the musical is subsidised with public money, Wilde's classic was on at a commercial theatre.

I enjoyed myself enormously watching Egos' 'à la Sondheim' musical version of Wilde's cruel tale. As far as I am concerned, if a little bit of my taxes has gone to subsidising their joint effort this is fine, for I got back much pleasure for the evening. I actually think Egos have a very nice product in their hands that can be easily exported elsewhere in Spanish translation. As happens, whenever I see something really enjoyable in Catalan in one of our local theatres, whether commercial or subsidised, I can't help thinking that either we're VERY lucky to get such excellent performance

standards or, the alternative, there must be HUNDREDS of great companies all over the world that pass unnoticed except locally because the language they use is not English (French, German... Spanish??).

Having said that, Egos' musical ends with a song that comments on how the company's only aim was offering a nice show and entertaining the audience. This chimed in very nicely with our last session with my Victorian class, as we discussed whether Wilde's theatre was meant to be artistic or 'only' for entertainment. Very obviously, Wilde wrote for money and for a commercial theatre patronised by the upper classes. He was no committed Ibsenite and I very much doubt that, despite *Salomé*, he would have followed the road of the Shavian theatre club and the cherished project for a national theatre. Shaw explained in his *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* that whereas a typical, conventional play consisted of beginning, development and denouement, an Ibsenian play ended with the discussion of a serious issue. If considered from that angle nothing Wilde wrote was particularly significant; I find it particularly hard to explain why *The Importance of Being Earnest* has survived so well until our days. It must be its irreverence and its avowed intention to be a 'trivial' comedy for 'serious' people.

Shaw himself claims that a good play is that from which audiences take something home once the performance is over, meaning something apprehended intellectually, something learned – an idea, in short, or some kind of mental fulfilment. I didn't get any new ideas from *Els crims de Lord Arthur Saville* but I did get much pleasure and this was due to something quite easy to notice: each member of the company had done their best to fill in the play to the brim with comic touches. There was much hard work behind every song, every gesture and this is why they got their well deserved 'bravos.' It might not be the kind of art Ibsen et al had in mind for the theatre, but there's much to be said for the often neglected art of entertaining the audience.

13-I-2012 READING 'AVERAGE' BOOKS (I): RAFAEL YGLESIAS'S *A HAPPY MARRIAGE*

In this and the following entry I'd like to write about two very different books I've been reading for academic purposes, in one case connected with teaching and in the other with the search for a topic linked to a conference. You'll see why.

I chose Rafael Yglesias's novel *A Happy Marriage* (2009) for my MA course on gender issues as I wanted to include a story about marriage itself, something not so easy to find. I was actually spurred by that poignant moment in Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* in which the narrator, Rob, acknowledges that he cannot fully commit to his relationship with his girlfriend Laura because he's too cowardly to eventually face her death. He imagines Laura dying of cancer and, well, sadly this is exactly what happened to Rafael Yglesias's wife of 30 years. Seeking to overcome his grief and bereavement, Yglesias narrates in his autobiographical novel the first three and the last three weeks of their 'happy' marriage, using a title which he describes as "neither ironical nor sincere." The novel is cleverly structured so that the beginning and the end of their story occupy alternating chapters. The author himself indicates in an interesting TV interview (see <http://www.pctv76.org/show.php?epid=169>) that despite the sincerity with which he portrayed himself even at his worst, this novel should not be approach

in a “gossipy” spirit, as he aimed at telling “the truth” of human experience, and not just of his own. Interestingly, he set out to tell a story of a long romantic relationship but realised that this could only be told if a member of the couple had died. Yes, in fiction we need closure and this is what the female protagonist’s harrowing decay and death provide.

The novel is, as you may imagine, both moving and exasperating. Amazon.com readers value it highly and I can’t say I regret having included it in the course. In the end, however, apart from contributing plenty to our discussion about the lack of stories dealing with long-standing relationships –the ones assumed to be happy– Yglesias’s novel turned out to be particularly useful as an example of not quite successful quality literary fiction. We’d gone through Annie E. Proulx’s brilliant “Brokeback Mountain,” Sarah Waters’s sparkling *Tipping the Velvet*, Nick Hornby’s candidly confessional *High Fidelity* and Sophie Kinsella’s truly bad *Can you Keep a Secret?* with considerable critical self-assuredness. A *Happy Marriage* presented us, though, with the very interesting critical challenge of having to point out what exactly was wrong with it. In the end, we more or less agreed that the author sounded too smug, too self-centred to give the dying heroine enough presence and that, at too many points, his prose was too pretentious, yet we also felt oddly callous to be criticising someone’s style in a book that is so personal. On the other hand, one of my students did worry indeed that she was being taken in and that all Yglesias wanted was to cash in onto his wife’s awful death... an ugly suspicion...

As Yglesias includes so much about his own literary career in this novel, A *Happy Marriage* can also be read as a document regarding the life of the average American writer today. I mean the writer that perhaps should be called ‘mediocre’ but who is good enough to have been around for decades thanks to the loyalty of his or her readers. Perhaps we focus too often on the major living figures and the classics and forget that there’s a whole army of writers just getting by, struggling to write their best even though that might not be good enough to interest scholars in generating bibliography about them. And they must be the majority. I don’t think Yglesias, judging from this novel, will make it to the history books about contemporary US Literature yet, having found his book relevant though hardly pleasing given its subject matter, I can only wonder at how many other writers have been lost for us in, as the cliché goes, the mists of time.

13-I-2012 READING ‘AVERAGE’ BOOKS (II): DAVID BRIN’S *GLORY SEASON*

I came across David Brin’s *Glory Season* (1993) while looking for a suitable topic for an oncoming conference on Utopian Studies in Tarragona (see <http://www.urv.cat/deaa/utopia/international/home.html>). This, a low-tech SF novel about a utopian “feminist nirvana” written by a man, sounded promising enough, backed as it was by its Hugo and Locus nominations (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glory_Season). I hadn’t read anything else by Brin and checking the inevitable Amazon.com I learned that *Glory Season* is by no means his best effort, with top marks going to his multi-award books *Startide Rising* (1983) and *The Uplift War* (1987), both saga starters. Anyway, I decided to put the 3,5 star-rating at the back of my mind, brace myself for the disappointing ending most readers complained about and plod on, pencil in hand, for its almost 800 pages. What’s

happened finally? Well, I have started re-reading the book at once because now that I am familiarised with the odd workings of Brin's feminist separatist utopia (or dystopia?), it's time to enjoy the ride.

This is one problem that science fiction and fantasy inevitably face: each novel, unless it is part of a series, describes a completely new world but, to make it more enticing, writers naturally provide information about it little by little. This means that the complete picture only emerges by the end and much is missed as the beginning, as I have checked myself just by re-reading the first 50 pages of *Glory Season*. Let's say that the first reading has been tantalising enough to make me go back again, something I assumed only good short stories and poems could do. The ending, by the way, was, in this reader's modest opinion, a beauty and I was really moved to see young Maia reach in this bildungsroman the point when she decides to be her own woman, stepping outside the restrictions that her matriarchal, clone-based society imposes.

This is a novel too dense to summarise in just a blog entry without doing an injustice to Brin's "thought experiment" but I'll argue to begin with that it's enjoyable because it's a nicely balanced cautionary tale about how the excesses of patriarchy can lead to the excesses of matriarchy, with individuals –male and female– suffering much for that. I am myself, despite my feminist beliefs, quite uncomfortable with the separatist, radical feminist utopias of the 1970s onwards (not forgetting Charlotte Perkins Gilman's pioneering *Herland*) and this may be why I enjoyed Brin's tale. I'm not blind to some of his worst misogynistic plot turns nor to the glaring absence of a basic human rapport between men and women, except for a handful of Maia-related exceptions, but I'm all in all satisfied with the energy Brin put into his task.

I haven't decided yet whether I'll focus on this novel for my conference paper as my plan-B topic seems more suitable (see my entry for cheeky sci-fi film *Battle Los Angeles*). Also because I have nagging doubts regarding the status of *Glory Season* among the SF community. Let's say that David Brin enjoys a much higher reputation as an SF writer than Rafael Yglesias as a literary author, as attested by the top genre awards he's got. Yet, *Glory Season* is not in the same league as the most obvious SF and Fantasy masterpieces and, lacking as many of these do, relevant bibliography about them I'm not sure I should devote my academic efforts to this novel just because I found it very interesting. I know it is not first rank because it often just rambles on, the protagonist gets too many whacks to her head that leave her unconscious and, although still in print, it has not made quite a stir since it was published, almost 20 years ago (nothing in MLA, of course). It's the kind of novel, perhaps, to be commented on together with others in a discussion of utopian anti-patriarchal fiction by men (gosh!) but not quite justifiably a reason to write a paper focusing mainly on it.

Here's where I think that Medievalists have an advantage over us, specialists in the contemporary: time has sifted through the literary production of the past so thinly that nothing can be left out, whereas for us what kind of sieve we need to use is the first and foremost problem. I might, therefore, leave it at that: Rafael Yglesias's novel is relevant and enjoyable enough if you're interested in literary fiction about long-lasting romantic relationships; David Brin's insightful critique of pastoral, feminist utopia is, likewise, relevant and enjoyable if this sub-genre is your cup of tea. This does not answer my question about what to do academically with 'average' books but if I ever write a paper about any of them I'll let you know.

15-I-2012 MARKING PAPERS: COMMUNICATING VASES

I have just finished marking a batch of 48 papers (1,200 words on average each), a task which has taken much of my time this week, the weekend included. I wish actually I could say I'm done, for the downside of all that time and effort is that the poorest 23 of these papers will bounce back for reassessment according to the rules my university follows. So much for continuous assessment... Deep, deep sigh...

As I marked the essays the image that came to my mind all the time was that of communicating vases. These are, as you know, vases holding the same amount of liquid connected in a way that when one is depleted the other is filled. In ideal stasis both vases hold the same amount of liquid. The image might not apply to this case but the impression I've had through the many hours of marking is that my vase would fill and even overflow in direct relation to the student in question making very little effort to write his/her paper. A well-written paper of the kind I have marked may take 5minutes to read (balanced vases), a bad one roughly 20 minutes (unbalanced vases). Why? When I mean mark, I really mean edit. With a well-written paper I can focus on simply reading; in the bad ones the 'noise' that poor writing and presentation make is so 'loud' that I can't simply read. Ergo: the less a student works at polishing his/her paper, the more I have to work at reading/editing it. This is why marking is to tedious, time-consuming and, what is worse, brain-weakening...

All teachers hate marking and, believe it or not, it is one of the most exhausting teaching-related activities. This is because, as I was saying, we don't limit ourselves to reading and tend, rather, to correct down to the last comma whatever is wrong in each exercise (well, I do). The brain-power needed to think of alternatives to errors and awkward phrasing is enormous, so big that after marking a few bad papers I can't simply go on, which is why, of course, marking takes so long. I wish I could simply read the papers but we're told students need feedback and this encompasses anything from adding missing an -s to third person singular present-tense verbs to explaining why the paper's overall argumentation is not solid enough. I mark now all papers on my computer as I find writing comments on hard (printed) copies very untidy and also because I think I work faster. I realise, through, that I tend to make many, many comments and I guess that my students possibly hate to see so many blurbs added to their essays... It's in good faith, believe me.

The theory of our new-style Bologna degrees is that the communicating vases can be balanced by offering in advance detailed guidelines as to what is required of the student's exercises. How come, then, that two thirds of my marking effort have gone to asking students to check and re-edit their papers according to the guidelines? Big mystery...

20-I-2012 I'D RATHER LEARN THAN PLAY: WORKING TOWARDS A UNIVERSITY DEGREE IN KOREA (AND NEWS ABOUT LINCOLN)

Last Sunday I watched on TV3 a French documentary on Korean secondary-school kids, "South Korea, Slave to Education." The film explains that Korean students are doing marvellously according to the PISA yearly report and also that they hold a top world record in that 8 out of 10 attend university. The thesis, however, as you can

see from the title, is transparent: the price you pay for a good education is being enslaved to it.

Watching the poor teens in the film I can only say that I'm sorry that South Koreans are putting their kids through such impossible schedules. Basically, responsible South Korean parents seem to have convinced themselves and their children that in order to succeed in life by first getting a quality university degree, they must attend regular classes from 8 to 5 and then take a second helping until midnight or past. This is provided by private institutions and teachers in a way totally unregulated by the state. The whole point of the documentary was to show how dangerous for the physical and mental health of the kids this competitiveness is becoming. When a teen girl was told that in France kids don't attend private classes after school unless they choose to for very particular reasons, she was flabbergasted. In self-defence she exclaimed 'I'd rather learn than play.'

I know nothing except what the documentary taught me about South Korea but I should think that there's a Catch22 at the bottom of all this. No country needs so many college graduates and even supposing only half of the 80% who attend university get a degree that is already too much. Logically, universities must want to select the best possible students and this unleashes the ferocious craving for 'learning' at secondary-school levels, prompted by quite pushy parents (doing their best, I'll assume). The problem is that with rising standards, universities will become even more demanding, and kids will be further victimised. Someone stop this horrific snowball...

I was the kind of little girl who'd rather learn than play, but that was because learning was a pleasant game for me. Children have a right to enjoy their free time, and I used mine to read. I am speaking of a school system in which children were busy from 9 to 6, and then when we got home we were expected to do homework until at least 8 (supper-time at home has always been 9). Not much free time, then, except for weekends and holidays, though my impression is that the balance was fine. I see kids today deprived of some of their scant free time after school by keen parents who drag them to English, computer or sports classes, and that seems already too much. If you ask me, a good school system should need no extras (which makes me wonder what is so wrong with the South Korean system). Homework is quite another matter, as already a senior lecturer, I don't seem to have ever stopped doing it, weekends included...

Perhaps the bottom line problem is that if we compare the basics needed 50 years ago with the basics needed today they have dramatically increased and there's no way a kid may know enough to satisfy all his/her secondary school teachers much less his/her demanding university ones. Now, that might explain some of the difficulties South Korean students are facing but what baffles me is how here, on the other side of the world, we get university students capable of claiming that Abraham Lincoln was the *king* of the United States or, alternatively, a runaway slave that became the first black President (as seen in actual History exams). There must be a middle ground, I guess, and I just wish some of that South Korean ambition to do extremely well would come our way for the benefit of those who don't have it.

24-I-2012 IN YOUR OWN WORDS (OR NOT...): USING GOOGLE AS A WRITING AID

One of my second-year students emails me a paper with a suspiciously wide-ranging vocabulary. I smell the usual rat, google the suspect sentences like mad but find no convincing evidence of plagiarism. My gut feeling, however, tells me that something has gone awry and, rightly or wrongly, I award the paper the lowest possible mark, hoping she'll offer a justification. A good one. She comes at once to my office and explains that the over-rich vocabulary comes partly from Google Translator and partly from plain, straightforward googling. There are, of course, no rules against using that or online dictionaries at home. I ask the student to submit a second version, as the paper needed anyway some revision, and will base the final mark on it, no grudges kept.

I explain the case to someone outside the university and he tells me that he's not sure this is the right solution, considering we value our students' language skills. Let me explain his reasoning: when writing an exam no dictionaries or thesaurus are allowed and this means that students are assessed on the basis of their actual (written) command of English. In the case of papers, as this girl shows, since Google and all the other linguistic tools that the internet offers are available, the results are 'distorted.' Students produce, in short, texts at a higher level than they can actually command. I want to suppose that this is not negative and that Google has allowed this girl not just to produce a better paper than expected but also to learn new vocabulary –we'll see whether she ever uses the phrase 'dour criticism' again, though.

This happens in a week in which I'm also employed translating into English an essay I wrote originally in Spanish. Translating your own words is mind-boggling not only because you discover that your command of two languages is always bound to be asymmetrical (some things I know in Spanish I don't know in English and vice-versa) but also because translating requires thorough rephrasing. At least 20% of the essay is now new. I also understand why literary writers say they never go back to their texts once they're finished if they can help it, for I feel quite embarrassed by some of the passages (did I really mean that? Couldn't I have put it in better words?) Anyway, I use Google all the time, as I did when I wrote the Spanish version, to check that some expressions and idioms do indeed exist. I don't use Google Translator, as I think it produces texts that require too much revision but I don't know what I'd do without WordReference. I don't use, then, just the store of words lodged in my brain but the vast pool outside it. Happily for me and for whoever might read me.

This brings me back to the girl student. Also, to a piece of news published this week in Barcelona: "Schools propose exams with internet access" (<http://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20120123/54245244690/escuelas-proponen-examenes-acceso-internet.html>) The argument backing this proposal is that in real life nobody relies just on their memory and it makes perfect sense to integrate the 'enhancement' tools we do use also in assessment (as the Danes have done...). Some assessment can still be based on mnemotechnics but new forms of cyber-assisted examinations can (or should) be introduced. It seems we're already doing that by having traditional exams in the classroom and asking for papers! Not forgetting that the possibility of allowing students to bring notes and dictionaries into the exam classroom has always existed, though it's anathema for many teachers.

For me the key issue is time: a student writing a paper uses other sources and aids at his or her discretion; in exams time pressure might even affect students negatively if they're allowed to check internet sources. Just think of the time that we spend googling our way into cyberspace to make our own words sound richer... and imagine yourself doing it within tight time limits for an exam. Um, not for me, thanks.

29-I-2012 ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE: FRANZ WERFEL'S *THE FORTY DAYS OF MUSA DAGH*

These days the Armenian genocide is back on the news thanks to the law passed by the French Senate criminalising its denial (see, for instance, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16677986>). This law, proposed by Sarkozy's party and sanctioned by him as President, is quite similar to the corresponding German law that makes it a criminal offence to deny the Jewish Holocaust. Sarkozy is himself of Jewish descent, which might have something to do with the passing of this law; the Turkish government, however, attributes it to the electoral interests vested on the 500,000 million French citizens of Armenian descent living now in France. The Turks have threatened to sever their many business and political ties with France, and have angrily argued that France should acknowledge the genocide committed in Algeria before accusing innocent nations of false crimes.

As happens, I'm supervising a PhD dissertation in Comparative Literature on the literary representations of the Armenian genocide in novels written in three different languages: Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933, German); Antonia Arslan's *Skylark Farm* (2004, Italian) and Gonzalo Hernández Guaarch's *El árbol armenio* (2002, no English translation). As a result of doing research connected with the First World War, I realised the Holocaust had much to do with it, particularly as regards the implementation of technology to eliminate great masses of human bodies and the rise of Nazism (marked partly by Hitler's experiences in the trenches). I spent quite a while reading and reading about the Jewish Holocaust –I still do– in particular in relation to its representation in popular American texts (like the film *Schindler's List* or the TV series *Holocaust*). When, out of the blue, this Armenian doctoral student, Anna Manukyan, emailed the Department asking for help I volunteered. I'm learning so much more than she...

My position on the Armenian genocide is very simple: it happened, it must be acknowledged. Just like the Jewish Holocaust it was carried out under cover of a major world war but it was *not* part of the war. Those responsible for it in Turkey are NOT all the Turks and I believe that the drama of its denial will only end when the Turkey Government realises that they should draw a very clear line separating modern Turkey from the excesses committed by the Young Turks' party almost a 100 years ago. The Germans did that and although the whole nation asked for forgiveness, it's clear to everyone (I hope) that the Nazis were to blame, not every single German down until our days. Likewise, Spain has much to atone for in relation to the multiple genocides committed in South America and I think it's about time we ask publicly for pardon. The genocide committed by Franco's regime on the Civil War's Red losers is, of course, so impossible to acknowledge that Judge Garzón is now being tried for attempting to investigate it. I do understand Turkey's chagrin, fear and mistrust at being asked to

declare their guilt over such horror but it must be acknowledged. Same regarding the French and Algeria, and a long, sad etc. all over the world.

Read *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, please. Werfel was an Austro-Bohemian Jew –a colleague of another illustrious Franz, Kafka– who found in the Armenian genocide the perfect example to warn all European Jews of what might soon happen. 1933, when the book was published, was the year of Hitler's rise to power; 1935 saw the passing of the Nuremberg Laws. Fancy Werfel touring Germany, as he did, to unmask the already forgotten reality of the Armenian tragedy, which he knew first hand from a journey to the Middle East in which he met a handful of survivors. He had to flee Europe, of course, chased by the Nazis, and find refuge in the USA. His novel was at the time an immense best-seller –criticised as anti-Turkish propaganda, of course. It's an immense work, not only because of its length (800 to 900 pages, depending on the edition), but also because of the intensity of the events it narrates. I was really astonished by its classic literary quality and disappointed that a novel like this one is not hailed as a major work. Excuse my ignorance, but I had never heard of it. Ironically, Amazon.co.uk has no copies available of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* but it still offers Werfel's other best-seller, written after an emotional visit to Lourdes, *The Song of Bernadette* (1941). The excellent Spanish translation (Losada, 2003), which I read, is, fortunately, available.

I forgot to say that the Armenian genocide was so savage that the German military officers working then in Turkey (Germany and the Ottoman Empire were allies during World War I), were appalled. The motivation, by the way, was partly ethnic and partly religious, as the Armenians are Christians. I never thought I would write this but the Jewish Holocaust was more humane (my God!), with the Nazis struggling to find the fastest, most effective method to eliminate the victims (hence Zyklon-B). In contrast, the Armenians were rounded up by paramilitary forces of dubious composition, forced to leave their homes taking roads leading nowhere, and left to die after being abused and starved. Most Armenian women were, besides, raped.

I always wonder where the genocide deniers of any kind think the missing millions have gone to. 2015, just around the corner, marks the hundredth anniversary of the vanishing of 1,5 million *human beings*. Let's hope that by then this loss is no longer denied for the sake of the Armenian nation and for all our sakes.

2-II-2012 THIS BUSINESS OF COORDINATING A DEGREE...

In my Department, since more and more staff are woefully underpaid provisional part-time associate teachers, there are fewer and fewer of us, tenured teachers, who can do inevitable admin work. This is why I could not reject my appointment as Coordinator of our English Studies BA-style degree. For two years, possibly three, which would be the usual term. It's not one of those tasks you undertake for money but yesterday was quite funny in that regard, for in the morning I attended a UAB meeting in which we were told that Coordinators are crucial for the survival of the degrees and in the afternoon I got my first monthly payment: it turns out my university values this 'crucial' job at roughly 200 net euros a month (271 before taxes, 25%...).

We were told, of course, in that meeting how sorry the heavily bankrupt UAB is that we cannot be paid more, and having been Head of Department (2005-8) I know

that the top position in that kind of unit is valued roughly at around 350 (after taxes). A basic fee for a plenary speaker at a conference is about 300 (a.t.) running up to 1,000; seminars are usually paid about 150 an hour (a.t.). I know, I know: I also get a teaching reduction (25% of my annual workload) and this extra money is on top of my monthly salary. As happens, though, with the recent pay cuts and the tax rate increase (more to come soon), my new salary, with the 200 euros addition, is just back to 2008 levels. Ergo: I'm now Coordinating for free...

I have promised myself to spend this money on extras, whether they are books or handbags, we'll see. This may sound a bit naughty in the middle of the current crisis but somehow I need to get rid of that money fast or I'll start thinking that I've got myself a considerable workload on top of my classes and research for money, which will make me feel exploited or, even worse, cheap. How heavy the added workload is going to be I don't know yet, as the first months in admin positions learning the ropes are always the hardest ones. What I need to brace myself for are the many days lost to research because I must attend a very urgent meeting that is hardly ever truly urgent.

Am I complaining, cheeky me, being as I am a privileged worker unthreatened by unemployment (more or less)? Um, if you think about it, the key question here is that being a Coordinator was already badly paid in the good old days of the fat cows, pre-2007. If you ask me, I'd rather be paid less or even nothing but be given more time by doing less teaching –that's the only way to save my research. Of course, in that case the UAB would have to hire a more expensive teaching replacement for me and that sums it up: it's 200 euros and that's final. And be grateful for small mercies (I am, I am...at least, I don't work for Spanair...)

Here's a final thought: the funny thing is that admin positions are not advertised as ways of earning extra income. It's not done. I don't know, there might be teachers up to their neck with mortgage payments who need the extra money sorely... It's also inelegant to ask how much you're going to be paid for extra jobs like this. As if we were above materialism... Odd, very odd.

3-II-2012 'SINCE' AND 'BY,' AND OTHER FORMS OF LINGUISTIC SNOBBERY...

I see someone carrying a bag with a Spanish brand name on it –Massimo Dutti? – followed by the word 'since' and a year number. I cringe, almost outwardly. A web in Spanish announces the new collection 'Be my Valentine by Bershka' and I double cringe (I heard someone described on Tele5 as a very intelligent person: 'one of the few people in Spain who can pronounce Bershka'...). Although Zara designs always fit me very poorly, I have nothing against Inditex (who, for the absent-minded, also owns Dutti and Bershka); I am, however, stubbornly prejudiced against linguistic snobbery. I find the snooty (miss)use of 'since' and 'by' particularly obnoxious.

What's new about this? Nothing, really. I just wonder whether it's just me or, whether all non-native English philologists are plagued by the same prejudice. I see people on the street with silly T-shirts carrying a stupid message in English and I have to stop myself from challenging them: would you wear a T-shirt like that in a language you speak? Do you actually know what *that* means? Perhaps I should feign extreme surprise or disgust and leave them feeling there's something wrong with the darn T-shirt... (A –male– student in my Department wears a T-shirt announcing 'I'm still a

good investment' against the background of a graphic showing financial heavy loses, but that's ok: it's witty and he knows *exactly* why he's wearing that...).

Back to 'since' and 'by'. I don't understand what is wrong with the word 'desde' (or Catalan 'des de'). Does it sound old-fashioned (Vda. de Pérez e Hijos, desde 1886)? Is it a paralyzing fear that people in, say, Finland, will be mystified by what 'desde' followed by a year number might mean? As I gather, everyone has learned the meaning of 'since' by seeing this word between a brand name and a date in labels in English. How come I don't know how to write 'since' in 12 different languages in this global world of ours? (Nokia ***** 1865? Yes, 1865!)

'By' is a slightly different kettle of fish. It is, of course, short for 'designed by' and I realise that Spanish 'por' fits only awkwardly the sense of the phrase. 'Vueling by Custo,' in reference to the designs produced to decorate some of this not-so-low-cost airline's planes by Catalan designer Custo(dio) Dalmau, is a particularly mindboggling form of linguistic snobbery with an attempt at wit (how does Vueling sound to a native English-speaker?). 'Un vestido de Armani,' however, still sounds to me better than 'Un vestido by Armani' though I know that soon we'll all speak like Tamara Falcó –on a bad day. 'Rihanna by Armani Underwear' as seen in a web in Spanish overwhelms me, as this means 'En esta campaña la cantante Rihanna nos vende ropa interior diseñada por Armani' (or was Rihanna herself designed by Armani in his underwear???). Are ads for perfume to be blamed for this unfortunate trendy use of 'by'? When did 'de Paco Rabanne' become 'by Paco Rabanne' in Spain? I seem to have noticed only recently...

End of today's entry for *The Joys of English Literature* 'por' Sara Martín, 'desde' 2010 (as you can see, I've been marking essays all day long, needed to relax...)

11-II-2012 RISING UP TO THE CHALLENGE: IS MAKING THINGS HARDER THE BEST WAY TOWARDS IMPROVEMENT?

I am now part of a team of UAB and UB Literature teachers grouped together in an 'MQD' project ('Millora de la Qualitat Docent' = Teaching Quality Improvement). Our aim is improving our methodology by focusing on the narrator when teaching Literature. This is the reason why we decided to ask students to write their critical papers for Victorian Literature (second year) either on the narrator in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* or Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, novels that I have already mentioned here.

The process of writing the paper has been quite hard, as we expected, for our students. Many had difficulties understanding what we meant by asking them to focus on the narrator, used as they are to focusing on textual and contextual aspects, from the characterisation of a particular figure to socio-historical issues. Luckily for us, even though we didn't plan this beforehand, the two novels contrast nicely as regards the narrator, since Dickens's is famous for its overbearing third person narrator, whereas Brontë's –technically an epistolary novel– is a first person narrator that mixes a diary written by a woman with letters written by a man. This helped us, as we could always appeal to this contrast when explaining how each novel is, at heart, the result of a collection of choices made by the author about how to narrate it. I think we also got very lucky in that the academic articles selected to boost class discussion (Karín Lesnik-Obertsein's on Dickens and Carol Senf's on Brontë) were quite productive in content and as models for our students.

Students were asked to submit a proposal mid-term, with a title, an abstract and quotations from three sources. This they did, with many difficulties, as I say, particularly as regards formulating a thesis. To my surprise –and that of my colleague in this subject– there is not a direct correlation between the quality of the abstracts and that of the final paper. Mainly, in quite a few cases, bad proposals led to very good papers, which is mystifying enough... In the end, students submitted 48 papers, of which I asked for re-writings in 23 cases due to editing problems (the content was acceptable but presentation matters had been approached with quite a cavalier attitude). I have failed finally only 6 papers... though I believe I'm quite a demanding teacher (maybe I'm not?).

So, my conclusion is that when a teacher poses a challenge students feel compelled to rise up to it. Ergo: I need to make things not necessarily more difficult but indeed more demanding (first year students, be warned!). I must say I have worked very hard to help students progress but they have made an effort, in some cases an impressive one. This must be acknowledged. I even emailed all of them to congratulate them, ask them to please remember the lesson learned with the paper and wish them good luck in the third year.

What I simply can't understand is why NOBODY has answered that message... Maybe that's my next challenge...

11-II-2012 SELF-PUBLICATION IS HERE TO STAY: ABOUT JOHN LOCKE'S SUCCESS

My colleague David Owen has often heard me predict that, inevitably, at least part of our academic work will be eventually self-published on our websites. This is why he emailed me a very juicy article by Dave Lee about "The authors who are going it alone online - and winning" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16469000>). The article highlights a few key issues: the *Chicago Tribune*'s groundbreaking decision to review self-published books (e-books, actually), the re-fashioning of the self-published author as "an entrepreneur," the rise of services designed to help you publish on the internet, and, oh yes, the success of novelist John Locke, who's sold more than one million copies of his self-published works on Amazon.

Self-publishing has been around for a long time, as authors have always been free to spend their own money on having their work printed, distributed... and ignored. 'Vanity' publishing –as Lee points out– has traditionally been regarded as a major ego trip, which is why reviewers would not touch books without the stamp of a publishing house. The novelty is the current popularity of e-book readers, which makes the expensive business of printing, storing and distributing a paper volume redundant. Also, the availability of payment systems online that make selling your own stuff as easy as using e-Bay. Just think: authors usually get 8 to 10% on the book price –how tempting it must be to get 90%. Leaning towards the conservative, Lee warns readers that, in the end, not everyone can write a marketable book, which is why editors will always be needed (not necessarily publishers – a difference we don't understand well in Spain). Distributors too: it turns out that Mr. Locke has a "distribution deal with Simon & Schuster." Oh, well.

This is indeed the key point: distribution, which means visibility. Whether literary or academic, self-published *book* authors are like bloggers (we are self-

published authors also) in the sense that you are read only if you're noticed on the internet, not necessarily depending on the quality of your writing (sorry, does this sound smug?). Academic writers, as far as I know, make very little money out of writing, which is why I tend to think of self-publishing as a way of curbing down the impact of peer reviewing, and not as a way to limit the profits of academic publishing houses in favour of authors. That might also be desirable but my point is that, at least in the Humanities and particularly in literary and cultural criticism, academic creativity is often limited by prejudiced peer-reviewing, which can be easily avoided with self-publication. How to make self-published articles visible is quite another matter, unless MLA starts accepting them (it doesn't, does it?), in the same spirit that has made the *Chicago Tribune* open its pages to self-published books.

One day I'll do the experiment: I'll write an article for publication in a peer-reviewed publication and a second version for self-publication on my web (I don't have one yet). Then we'll see which version has a higher impact. Yes, yes, it might well be that nobody will read either version, as I doubt anyone at all reads what I publish anyway. But you know what I mean, right?

15-II-2012 MAKING SENSE OF THE 20TH CENTURY (OR NOT...): THE MATTER OF LABELS

I have started a new edition of our first year subject '20th century Literature' and, as usual, I'm mystified by how untidy the labels used to describe it are.

Not that Metaphysical or Romantic are particularly tidy, either, which sets me thinking about how and why such a mess has been made of organizing (English) Literature. Of course, with the exception of some avant-gardes few Literary schools or movements bother to choose their own label –which shows how careless writers are... when thinking of marketing themselves and of posterity. We get by as best as we can, using labels pinned on authors by mocking contemporaries, or in hindsight by critics aspiring to wit. Writers seem too immersed in their surroundings to really care... It's funny to read, for example, how quintessential Modernist Virginia Woolf decides to call fellow Modernists "Mr. Forster, Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot" 'the Georgians' in her famous essay "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" (1924). None uses Georgian at all today to refer to them... Didn't they know they were Modernists??

Monarchs have, when it comes to the periodisation of English Literature, an uneven impact. There is an Elizabethan Age but somehow nobody has thought of calling ours 'the second Elizabethan Age,' even though the reign of Elizabeth II (Elizabeth I for the Scots) is now in its 60th year (poor Prince Charles...). Victoria was queen for 64 years (1837-1901) and in her case, there's no doubt that she provided a very convenient umbrella term for the period. In contrast, checking this morning how the label 'Georgian' is used, I came across more information on the Literature of the Caucasian Republic of Georgia than on that produced in the first decade of High Modernism... And all I found refers to the series of Georgian poetry anthologies that we now tend to connect with WWI poets.

At any rate, what is clear is that since 1945 English Literature has become very hard to classify, much more so if we think of the present. There are catchy labels like 'The Angry Young Men' or 'In-yer-face Theatre', but they are in dispute and, anyway, are not quite useful to describe what was going on outside the English (British?) stage.

The case of the label 'Post-modernism' begins to smack, as I see it, of naughty intellectual and critical laziness. How can a period be said to begin in 1945, 1968, 1979 and even 1990? Is it over yet?? Who knows for sure?

Suppose, for the sake of argumentation, that there is something called Post-WWII Literature and that Post-modernism runs from, say, the emblematic 1968 to the not less emblematic 1989. Let's say, then, that the years 1989-2001 form a distinct period, for which we have no name (except 'Globalisation') although it might seem that these two historical dates separate very neatly a slice of History in which particular kinds of Literature emerge. On the spur of the moment I told my students yesterday about Berthold Schoene's proposal that current Literature (the novel, actually) should be called Cosmopolitan, as writers feel quite free to deal with stories anywhere they please and not in their immediate surroundings. Um, appealing... yet the way I see it from 1989 onwards what seems to be happening is actually a heady mixture of the local ethnic, the post-colonial and the cosmopolitan. And, yes, 10 years have gone by since 2001, which my young students couldn't even recall.

Perhaps it's time to celebrate a contest and see who comes up with an interesting label. So many writers claim today that they're not part of any collective school or movement that perhaps the best label, after all, might be 'Individualism' (or 'Self-conscious Literature'?).

Yes, I know what you're thinking: why on Earth use labels if they're so confusing? Well, as I said, to try to make sense of something as vast as the hectic 20th century.

19-II-2012 HOW TO (NOT) USE A GUN: HEDDA GABLER AT TEATRE LLIURE

Henrik Ibsen's 'heroine' Hedda Gabler has taken residence up at Teatre Lliure for a while and is today leaving town. Good riddance! Students of Victorian Literature will recall Shaw's claim in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* that whereas late 19th century British plays generated nothing much except entertainment, Ibsen's generated discussion. Well, here it is: I'm generating discussion about why we put up with them. Entertained, I surely wasn't.

The poster announcing David Selvas's production (based on Marc Rosich's version –how I hate that word in relation to the theatre) was promising enough, with actress Laia Marull (as Hedda) happily waving a gun. Yet, in the end the Chekhovian gun mentioned in Act I goes off predictably in the last act, killing the female protagonist. I'm sick and tired of so-called 19th century heroines who kill themselves rather than put up with the strictures of patriarchal society, and the fact that this one has been rewritten against a contemporary setting makes things much, much worse. Particularly so when I think of Laia Marull's courageous Pilar in Iciar Bollaín's hair-rising denunciation of marital abuse, the film *Te doy mis ojos* (2003). Marull decided that Hedda is mad as a hatter, and she plays her like that with total glee; she's right, for I believe that this is the only way to make sense of a useless woman like Hedda today.

Selvas's production is, simply, anachronistic. A production set in 1891 when the original play was first performed, which needn't be a *conservative* production, could have worked very well as a poignant document about the past and, implicitly, about women's progress in the last 100 years. By freezing Hedda in time rather than updating her Selvas and Rosich also highlight this progress but only unwittingly. Today, Hedda

and Thea would be fighting themselves for an academic position, rather than help husband or (male) lover, as they do, to get the one they ambition. I'm sure certain parasitical upper-class women still expect their husbands to provide for all their caprices but they're not representative of today's women as Hedda Gabler was of her time. And I'm not paying to see a play about them.

So, why did I pay to see this one? Frankly, because having seen last October that well-made production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Teatre Gaudí I was curious to see how different this would be from an Ibsen at Teatre Lliure. I got an attack of Shavian blues, so to speak, and wanted to get serious after getting trivial. My opinion after the event is that Wilde wins by a few heads: his 'trivial comedy for serious people' is fresh as dew whereas this Hedda Gabler smells or, rather, stinks.

As happens, I support legally-sanctioned suicide (or euthanasia) for medical reasons and generally believe that suicide is an act of courage in most circumstances. What annoys me is how often authors chose suicide for their 'heroines' in the 19th century: from Maggie Tulliver to Emma Bovary, passing through Edna Pontellier, Lily Bart and, yes, Hedda Gabler. And how today, in the 21st century, those deaths are still celebrated, somehow. I was happy to see that idiot Gabler top herself, but I deeply regret that her suicide is the central act of a so-called literary masterpiece. I am going to suppose that, having allowed Nora to slam the door on her husband in *A Doll's House* (1879), Ibsen killed off Hedda more than a decade later as a way to denounce the uselessness of women like her. Yet, the popularity of play and role is annoyingly suspicious, reeking of that glamour attached to the female literary suicide but not quite for the same reasons to her male counterpart. Whereas she kills herself because she's trapped, he kills herself because he's free to do it. Not the same thing...

In my own updated version, Hedda finds in shooting her father's guns the talent she lacks at everything else, becomes an Olympic champion and stops pestering those around her... Otherwise, keep her in Ibsen's original 1891 setting. Or put her out of her misery for good.

27-II-2012 THE CHRONOLOGY OF MODERNITY: A SURFEIT

[Last entry: 19 February – um, yes, it's the beginning of the semester, a mad time until the subjects get themselves running and students find their places... Difficult to put aside 60 minutes for a blog entry... yet sanity calls!!]

Last week I produced a chronology of the first four decades of the 20th century for my own benefit and that of my first-year students (if they find a use for so much raw data). I have mixed a list of works (literary and commercial fiction), history and society facts and, here's the novelty for me, a juicy list of inventions. For the curious, my very visibly acknowledged sources were the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/timeline/worldwars_timeline_noflash.shtml), Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_century_in_literature), and, for the inventions, About.com (<http://inventors.about.com/od/timelines/a/ModernInvention.htm>) and the amazingly chauvinistic but great fun *Brits at their Best*, (www.britsattheirbest.com/ingenious/ii_20th_century_1900-1930.htm). Call me stupid, but although I did know that literary and artistic Modernism was to a great extent a reaction against the radical changes brought about by technology applied to

mass consumerism (and to mass destruction in WWI), I hadn't realised how dense the list of innovations was for the first decades of the 20th century. Really mind-blowing.

To begin with, we seem to have quite a fuzzy idea of everyday reality at the turn of the century (I mean 19th to 20th) perhaps because the ladies took their time to update their bulky fashions to the demands of fast moving around (they waited until the 1920s to take up bras and raise hemlines even above the knee). Among the inventions already available by 1900 we count much of what makes everyday life still today: photography, cinema, the car, bikes, public and domestic electric lights, the telephone, the underground railway, machine guns, dishwashers, Coca-cola, the radar, the gramophone (now i-pod...), the escalator (first seen in 2011 in Uzbekistan)... And it's not just that.

Take, for instance, the year 1915. The list of great eminent books published in Britain is quite rich: *The Good Soldier* by Ford Maddox Ford (a great favourite of mine); *The Rainbow* by D.H. Lawrence; *Of Human Bondage* by Somerset Maugham; *Victory* by Joseph Conrad; *The Voyage Out* by Virginia Woolf; even the popular thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps* by John Buchan. But if you think this is meaningful for 20th century civilisation, what about what happened in that April 1915 of the WWI (the Gallipoli peninsula disaster for the Allies), or in September, with the first British use of poison gas at Loos (France)? Yet, maybe, in the end, the real sign of modernity was the invention that same year by US citizens Eugene Sullivan and William Taylor of the ever useful Pyrex glass. Or if you look at the British side, the Nobel Prize for Physics won by William Bragg and his son William Lawrence Bragg for essential work on crystal structure.

Here's the thought for today: I guess chemistry students can very well learn the history of crystallography without reference to the list of 1915 eminent books (or even to WWI), yet I'm less and less sure that we can study 20th century English Literature without looking at what was going on in science and technology at the time. History and society are commonly accepted as part of the context relevant to (literary) texts, but we're still a long way from connecting technology and literature, arguably even in science fiction. Or maybe that's a thought brought on by our internet cum mobile phone era, in which it seems simply impossible to write without thinking of how we do it (me? using a computer) and how our texts are shaped by technology (um, yes, I'm writing a blog).

I realise that knowing about Pyrex will not help me read *The Rainbow* better but I also see that 'Modernism' was an ironic label, for we are the real modernists in love with ever-changing modernity.

1-III-2012 A STRIKING STRIKE (AND SERRA HUNTING...)

Yesterday the public Catalan universities went on strike against the too many budget cuts that we're suffering. I didn't join the strike as a) my not teaching students for one day does not bother anyone, b) I'm sick and tired of giving back more and more money every month to the Government(s) between the pay cuts and the rising taxes. The students, logically, do not see things my way and yesterday there was a huge demonstration with motorways and main streets taken in Barcelona. The attempt to annoy as much as possible the gigantic mobile phone fair that has occupied Plaça Espanya only worked partly. I realise that the most violent protesters were not

really university students but, though I absolutely hate any type of violence, this kind of street guerrilla will soon grow, given the violence of the Government measures.

As regards hiring teachers, I have a strong sense of *déjà vu*, of the time when I was Head of Department (2005-8). Generalitat's Secretary for Universities appeared yesterday on TV3 claiming he didn't understand the meaning of the strike, as the Catalan Government, rather than make teachers redundant (associates do not count for him as teachers, it seems), has offered a new programme to hire quality talent. Yes, the second phase of the famous Serra Húnter, a programme designed to bring in OUTSIDE talent with contracts rather than tenure as civil servants (what I 'enjoy').

Today's blog entry is an exercise in media literacy, see how you do. I'm using the Generalitat's own press note (http://premsa.gencat.cat/pres_fsvp/AppJava/notapremsaww/detall.do?id=139443&id_ioma=0). This claims that in the next 10 years, Catalan universities will incorporate 1,000 new teachers. A few lines later, this is corrected to 8 years, until 2020. The Serra Húnter programme was implanted in 2003 with the Llei d'Universitats de Catalunya (LUC). The idea, the brainchild of current Finance Counsellor Andreu Mas Colell, was to create "un cos docent universitari propi, més flexible i de major excel·lència, per superar la cotilla imposta pel model funcionalist espanyol." Part of LUC was also the creation of the 'Lector' (4-5 years contract) and 'Agregat' (indefinite) figures for the same purpose: to have a firmer hold on Catalan universities and avoid the (political) dependence on the Spanish tenure system. Ask 'Lectors' and 'Agregats' what's happening to them: the former are being told their contracts might not be renewed even when they have an 'Agregat' accreditation, and the 'Agregats' are often being invited to get an accreditation as 'Profesor Titular' from ANECA (the Spanish agency) and pass a state examination to become Spanish civil servants. End of part one.

Serra Húnter aims at incorporating international talent and there's no way I can be against it... as an additional or reinforcement programme, and not as the one and only way to hire new teachers (or rather, to give tenure to those who have already been working for Catalan universities for more than 10 years). Have a look at the same piece of news, this time from the UAB website (<http://www.uab.es/servlet/Satellite/noticies/detall-d-una-noticia-1090226434100.html?noticiaid=1330414961772>). Here we learn that in the next 10 years 2,000 (tenured) university teachers will retire, HALF of whom will be replaced with permanent contracts, of which 50% will be Serra Húnter appointees (by the way, that's 500 teachers, not 1,000 as Generalitat claims). So, first: we won't be getting 1,000 MORE tenured teachers in total, but 1,000 FEWER. 500 of the lost 1,000 tenured teaching positions will be covered with temporary contracts (= associates, who are NOT teachers, remember?, and can be fired at will). If you do the maths, in the next 10 years the Catalan universities will lose 500 tenured teachers; 500 more will be replaced with associates; 500 will be Serra Húnter positions with terminable contracts and only 500 MIGHT be tenured, most likely by the Spanish Government.

UAB also informs that additional figures will be created for teaching and research support, that is to say, that pre-doctoral and post-doctoral scholarship holders will be given some extra money for doing these jobs. Always, of course, less money than even the worst-paid associate would get (and how many scholars does the Catalan Government think we have?). To cap this, UAB informs that with all these measures implemented we'll 'keep' the current 1/10 teacher-student ratio that

ensures the 'quality levels of personalised attention required by the development of the EEES plans'.

No comment...

4-III-2012 READING OUT OF ENVY: MARÍA DUEÑAS'S *EL TIEMPO ENTRE COSTURAS*

They say that envy is the national Spanish sin (avarice would be the Catalan one). This week I've used my evenings to read, out of envy, María Dueñas's best-selling novel *El tiempo entre costuras* (2009). Why the envy? Well, Dueñas is one of us: a teacher at the English Department of the Universidad de Murcia. [I haven't been able to understand, though, from the Department's website what she teaches and does research on. Most news reports refer to her as a teacher of 'Filología Inglesa.' Peculiar.] Yes, most teachers of (English) Literature are frustrated writers who end up acknowledging that it's always much better to teach good books than to write trashy ones, particularly for readers. There are many exceptions, of course. David Lodge used to be an outstanding academic and now he's a very successful novelist. One of my neighbours on the floor above –Spanish Department– is the illustrious Carme Riera, professor, poet and novelist. She's the kind who writes excellent academic work and gets invited to attend conferences celebrated on her honour as a writer. One of its kind, really.

I myself do not write fiction and hardly ever have, feeling always inclined to writing essays, even as a little girl. What kills me about Dueñas's case, at any rate, are two overlapping matters: how she found the time to write 640 pages (this also applies to writing essays), and why isn't her quite average novel much better. *El tiempo entre costuras* is an immense popular phenomenon that has made Dueñas only second to Ken Follett in the Spanish middlebrow territory with this, her first novel. She's already sold more than one million copies, enough to consider, as a friend from the University of Murcia told me, retiring from teaching at 47 (that's slightly older than myself, and possibly the source of my deep envy!!). The TV series by Antena 3 with –of course!– Adriana Ugarte (*La Señora*) as the spy-cum-seamstress heroine will be soon released and, I'm sure, will dramatically increase the sales of the book. Its appeal, to be frank, is quite easy to understand: this is a novel about a likeable, pretty heroine who moves from Madrid to Tetuán and back to Madrid, between the Republic, the Civil War and its aftermath. Sira Quiroga undergoes quite a personal and professional transformation, which includes not just her work as a *couturier* but also as an improvised spy for the Brits during WWII.

This is the kind of book that, because it's easy to read, seems easy to manufacture. Well, if it were there would be 1,000 María Dueñas, and that's not the case –in which I find some comfort. Or not. A colleague who teaches creative writing informs me that a novel like this one –cliché-ridden, with the seams showing particularly where historical information and characters are introduced and with an unlikely first person narrator– can be managed in two months (research apart). Maybe she's stretching the point but my own point is that I don't know any university teacher who has two solid months for writing a year, not even counting August. Unless you cut yourself off email and escape from all teaching duties in July, which used to be the case, not anymore. A friend and novelist, Carme Torras, explained to me that she puts

aside one day a week for her writing, plus the holidays. I have no idea what method Dueñas follows and no journalist has asked her.

The other matter is the quality. A friend who specialises in detective fiction, Isabel Santaulària, tells me that given the window of opportunity (the two famous months) we might put thread to the needle and write a publishable novel. Publishable, perhaps, to be proud of I doubt it. Happy, lucky Dueñas seems very proud indeed of her work and suitably baffled by its success, and I understand that very well –how could I not? Yet, I would not have put my name on the cover of that novel or a similar one for I would not want others to think of me what I think of Dueñas: that her novel will not do.

This is envy for you.

10-III-2012 THE PULP MAGAZINES PROJECT: WHAT A FEAST!!

One of the wonders of teaching is that one never stops learning. Here's proof.

I've been teaching my first year students an introduction to the short story, based on Mansfield ("Bliss"), Joyce ("The Sisters") and Woolf ("Kew Gardens"). I insisted that the Modernist short story is only one branch of the modern short story and that to really understand the first decades of the 20th century one should never forget about pulp fiction in all its variety. I didn't know, though, how to prove that as succinctly as possible.

Reading (for a completely unrelated matter, a paper) Justine Larbalestier's excellent essay *The Battle of the Sexes in Science-fiction*, I came across an image of Hugo Gernsback's first editorial for *Amazing Stories*, the pulp magazine that invented modern science-fiction (post Wells's scientific romance). Doubting whether to scan the image for class use, as Gernsback explains beautifully the function of the story-based pulp, or check the internet, I chanced upon a real treasure trove: *The Pulp Magazines Project* (www.pulpmags.org). My digital generation students absolutely loved the idea... and its gorgeous look. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would have the chance to thumb my digital way into so much mythical, thrilling stuff...

This is a huge depository, started in 2011, an "archive of all-fiction pulpwood magazines from 1896-1946", but also a digital archives hub of many other projects connected with the short story in the first half of the 20th century. Ironically, this website proves the point I was trying to teach my students much more effectively than any book on the short story I have read, namely, that the Modernist short story coexisted with a true avalanche of popular short fiction. In both cases –literary Modernist, popular– the short story reveals itself as a genre essential to understand 20th century Literature in English. Indeed, although I came across this web in search of *Amazing Stories*, you'll find there as much as you wish to know about the magazines in which Modernist short fiction originally appeared in the USA and the UK.

Larbalestier speaks of her luck at having access to the very rich Science Fiction Collection of the University of Sydney for her essay. One thing that caught my attention was that she speaks of crumbling pulps which must be handled with all the care in the world. The scanned versions of *The Pulp Magazines Project* might thus be eventually the only proof that these magazines ever existed, which makes me think inevitably of how in literary research we are fortune's fools, as we depend on the

vagaries of the materials' survival. Funnily, it turns out that this applies to Medieval manuscripts as much as to early 20th century pulpwood short fiction.

So... for next year, if I teach 20th century English Literature again, as I guess I will, it's back to drawing board for me, to reconsider how to put much better in context my Modernist trio, now that I know that this website exists. How absolutely tempting to teach an elective subject based on the astonishing richness (and variety) of its resources!!

15-III-2012 TEACHING EARLY IN THE MORNING: AN OPEN LETTER TO THE DEAN

[I pretty much doubt that our busy Dean, Teresa Cabré –just re-elected– reads my blog, yet here's my open letter for her (just in case, you never know).]

Dear Dean,

As I'm sure you know very well from personal experience, the 'Facultat' decided in time immemorial (before my time as a student) to start classes at 8:30. Considering the UAB Campus is in the middle of nowhere, unless you're one of the few teachers who find it convenient to live in expensive Sant Cugat this means getting up around 6:30 to be at UAB around 8:00. Yes, it's possible to adjust the personal schedule a bit and reach UAB later but, as a teacher, I need a good 20 pre-lecture minutes for a last review of the class materials, drinking coffee, applying lipstick, etc.

That's fine by me, at least in the Winter-Spring semester, when the sun rises as I travel by train to UAB. I'm fresh enough in the morning and I enjoy having a long day ahead. This is not, however, the case with many of my students (not all).

Even though we started the semester with a much needed introduction to class etiquette, including instructions about how to stifle yawns, students do yawn all the time in my face –no hands covering nicely their mouth, no deep intake of breath to, well, stifle a yawn. I had a male student close his eyes and practically fall asleep on me today, even though I have quite a strong voice and speak as loud as I can. I realise that can have a paradoxical lulling effect. Also, it's much easier for me to keep awake as I do most of the talking and, poor things, they must listen to my ranting and raving –I mean teaching.

Using PowerPoint or anything that requires projecting computer documents onto our big screen requires enormous dexterity as to what exact degree of light will prevent students from falling asleep. I think I have almost managed that... The electricians never realised that by placing the fluorescent lights in rows across the benches front to back instead of parallel to them, teachers need to darken THE WHOLE classroom... By the way, one of the blinds that compensates for this oversight is not working; I lodged a complain 5 weeks ago.

Then, there's the problem of punctuality. I'm in class at 8:30, maybe 8:33 some days. I give my students 10 extra minutes, which means that classes begin by 8:40. Despite my constant warnings and complaints, many students are late. A girl came last Tuesday at 9:15. One of my colleagues had a student turn up at 9:45. The stream of students coming in between 8:40 and 9:00 is simply unacceptable. Yes, we're quite surprised and wonder what will happen when the late-comers have a regular job.

I'll leave for some other day matters such as why some students never take notes, why others think I'm so blind I don't see them texting their friends with their cell phones... All in all, today we had a great session, including a bravura performance by three students of the first 11 pages of *Look back in Anger*, which was really excellent. I don't want to spoil the mood.

So, dear Dean, why 8:30? Either we build a town on campus and give many more people the chance to move in, or we reconsider our schedule. Particularly considering that most students' attention time-span tends towards 60 minutes, not 75, much less 90 (the last time I heard someone speak for 90 minutes I ended up exhausted –and he was wonderful). It's either that, or have UAB bring us all nice coffee in the morning, as my lectures begin. Milk and sugar –one lump– for me, thanks. On the other hand, if we must adapt, then you need to train teacher on how to keep students awake. I don't seem to be doing that well.

Yours,
Sara Martín (Senior Lecturer)

18-III-2012 WE'RE ALIVE, WE'RE ALIVE!: THE FIRST ENGLISH STUDIES SF CONFERENCE IN SPAIN

My good friend Pere Gallardo from Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona has just organised the first English Studies SF conference in Spain. 18 of us, SF academic fans, met last Friday 16 (see the list at <http://www.sciencefictionppab.blogspot.com.es/>) and promised to stay in touch to meet again in one year's time at my home university, UAB.

The format used was having 15-minute presentations in one single room so that everyone could listen to everyone else, with Q&A sessions replaced by breaks after every four presentations, and lunch together. The day was closed with time for comments and general feedback. The guest speaker was, by the way, the novelist Montse de Paz, Pere's ex-student and the most recent winner of the fantasy and SF Minotauro award with her novel *Ciudad sin estrellas* (see http://www.scyla.com/libros/1026/ciencia_ficcion/ninguna/ciudad_sin_estrellas_premio_minotauro_2011).

I found the presentations much in line with what is going on in the field of SF. Most dealt with identity issues, such as race and gender; others with current issues such as family, religion, utopia/dystopia, the post-human body, etc. currently at the front line of research in SF. I myself presented a paper on Manuel Huerga's fascinating documentary about US-Spanish astronaut Michael López-Alegría, *Son & Moon*, focused on the construction of post-patriarchal masculinity in it, if, indeed, it is post-patriarchal at all. I don't know if that's cutting edge, but I do hope it is. My favourite presentation was the one by Bill Philips, who spoke about what he calls the 'SF Renaissance' in Britain –and also about the surprising presence of Hell as a virtual world in one of my favourite SF novels, Iain M. Banks's *Surface Detail* (see my blog entry for 14 August 2011). He gave us all a long list of thrilling novels to read, which is what any SF fan hopes to get out of meeting others of his or her ilk.

The downside of all this excitement is a composite BEM (bug-eyed monster, for non SF fans). To begin with, 18 scholars interested in SF for a population of 47 millions in Spain is not that much. I realise we deal in particular with English Studies but, just

think: the SEDERI conference –Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies– overlapping our own conference (actually lasting for 3 days...) has been around for 23 years now. In this edition there were 46 papers and 3 plenary speakers. Ummmm... Some of the 18 were actually supporting friends, colleagues who work on adjacent popular fiction areas, such as detective fiction. Others were doctoral students just beginning, and although this is brilliant and a hope for the future, it also means that in that room at Rovira i Virgili there were very few of us with a 10-year-experience in the field, much less 23. Pere Gallardo is the absolute dean: his PhD dissertation on the robot in short fiction of the Golden Age dates from 1995 (my own, from 1996, about monsters mixes SF and gothic).

Two more factors must be mentioned. One is that the current crisis and its appalling impact on the consolidation of tenured positions in English Department is seriously affecting the development of SF within English Studies. The scholarly committees in charge of accreditation for tenure do not welcome research in this field and those with temporary contracts who try to pursue it are warned that this might not in their best interests by bigoted peers who think themselves kind. Even without them, it's hard to concentrate on a field when one must have another job to supplement the one as associate. The other factor has to do with the senior doctors supervising PhD dissertations. From what I gathered, some are advising their students to pursue much downtrodden paths which might be (relatively) new in Spain but that elsewhere are not at all what might be called cutting edge. There's a feeling that in SF garlic soup is being constantly discovered, as not enough critical mass has been assembled to give the field a firm foundation from which progress may come. Too soon, perhaps.

Thank you Pere for making the effort to organise this first promising event!! It'll be my turn next time and I'll do my very best to correspond.

21-III-2012 OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD: YET ANOTHER STUDENT PROTEST...

Yesterday you and me found ourselves unable to access our classrooms and teach, which is what we love doing and are (under)paid for. The corridors were blocked by the usual assembly students announcing that the Facultat had been occupied and that it was in everyone's interest not to do any teaching or learning... to guarantee the survival of the public university. Deep sigh. This caught me totally by surprise, I assume you knew nothing, either.

As you are quite a rhetorician, I found you –after getting away from quite an ugly situation in the corridor leading to my inaccessible classroom– trying to convince a girl student to let you pass. I joined you and this is when the girl told us that, 'The problem is that you teachers do not support the public university'. Ouch. I protested that *my* salary has been cut for the benefit of the public university. When, exasperated, I asked her how her preventing us from teaching protected the public university at all, she answered that without the current occupation of the Facultat there would be no teaching at all next year. Deep sigh, deep sigh, deep sigh...

There's much, much, much to protest against in the current situation as I'm sure you're well aware of since you've been following what you call my 'journal of the crisis'. What tires me, and you as I saw, is the lack of imagination of these particular protesters who think that occupying the Facultat and annoying teachers and students

who disagree has any effect whatsoever on the 'Rectora' and the Generalitat. What kills me in particular is how old-fashioned this method of protest is, so nostalgic of the good old hippy days of 1968.

So, here are some alternatives, dear occupying students:

- *write a blog, or open a website, to keep your fellow students informed day-by-day of how their rights are being destroyed – a serious one, not a pamphlet
- *organise a gigantic flashmob in downtown Barcelona, as they did a few days ago in Plaça Catalunya for the defence of independence
- *perform a play about the public university in the middle of Plaça Catalunya, in the style of the Medieval morality plays, or as 1990s in-*yer*-face theatre (we both can help with that)
- *film a witty, clever lipdub music video with your own protest lyrics to upload on YouTube
- *flood the Generalitat's Counsellor (maybe the Secretary for Universities and Research) with a zillion email protest messages
- *write an essay about the ills of the public university and go en masse to register it as intellectual property
- *organise marathon lectures – I propose one to break the record established by Pepe Rubianes in the longest interview ever: 24 hours. My colleague Laura Gimeno can indeed lecture about civil disobedience, as she was asked to do, I volunteer to lecture on neo-liberalism as a sophisticated form of upper-class villainy.
- *take each of you a book and organise a sit-down that covers all of UAB – this is to show the authorities *how much you love learning*

I could go on. Take your pick.

In the meantime, you and I, 'like a patient etherised upon a table', await for news of our fate, with, as usual, our resources as educators dilapidated by those who think they are protecting their right to learn.

22-III-2012 UNHINGED (MORE ON THE PROTEST)

More of the same yesterday to begin our day: the Facultat uglified by barricades in each corridor (wo)manned by humourless, verbally aggressive students defending the 'consensus' reached by the assembly to stop all lecturing. We do whatever we can to defend our right to teach/learn: go on-line, go elsewhere... Our own English Studies students have signed a manifesto against the budget cuts and the 'okupació', which has earned them for ever a reputation as traitors (we're very proud of them). Their votes will not be considered in the next assembly. By the way, the UAB student, teacher and admin personnel assembly that met yesterday claims we ALL back the protest. This is simply not true.

Here's the oddest, scariest thing that happened yesterday. One of our female teachers –a sweet, fragile-looking one– tried to teach but, typically, access to her classroom was impossible. She and five or six students took refuge in her office; a picket member followed her –he called in a few more. These barbarians entered her office and when she protested, THEY UNHINGED HER DOOR, took it off. She called Campus Security, who were able to identify at least one of the perpetrators (an habitual offender) but claimed they had no authority to mandhandle them. They left

the office in the company of the security men, we don't know why everything considered, after putting the door back on its hinges. We duly reported the incident –a serious breach of the implicit norm that Department corridors are off limits to strikers. These, remember, were *students* in a public university we all pay for.

As I reported this aggression to the Dean I was thinking about its meaning and intention. Well, sorry, the intention needs no thinking about: you take off a door, the person inside can't close it in your face, intimidation is absolute. The meaning lies partly in this, but there must be something else. It could well be that this is an action defined by the aggressors' knowledge that it can't be easily typified, hence punished. Is unhinging doors a crime or an offence?? Of course, it works perfectly as a terrorising strategy, since a) the victim feels unprotected, b) we all do, thinking that next day...

The antidote to all this is humour. This is no laughing matter, of course, but for you to see how little the protest has to do with protecting our collective right to learn, consider what goes on in this very witty sketch by the always perceptive José Mota (thanks, Ruben, for the link): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q6NwqGI4ZQ>. Here the humour comes from the contrast between what we know about youth's lifestyle in inner city areas (they don't read) and how the ones in the video have chosen reading as a most pernicious anti-social activity.

I just wish that the unhinged protesters that unhinged that door would unhinge us all in that way...

29-III-2012 AND THE GENERAL STRIKE, AND WAYS OF PROTESTING THROUGH LITERATURE...

I have a list of themes waiting to be addressed, as the series of protests culminating in today's general strike demand more attention than what might seem today just trivial Literature matters. How I long to get back to normality, if this can ever happen in this abnormal, subnormal, paranormal culture of ours. Let me just repeat what I've been saying: the situation is simply appalling but a strike will not change it, as 21st century Governments have learned not to be impressed by 19th century protest methods. Also, on principle, I will not take part in any form of compulsory protest which is imposed on me with threats, insults and coercion (you should have read the email sent by UGT to all UAB workers). I'd much rather unions used their time and our public resources in thinking of alternatives to the crisis and in organising truly effective forms of protest, one of which should always be educating people in their real rights. And duties –like the duty to work hard for the present and future of our country.

Having made my point, let me record here my contribution to our university strike, which is teaching to my first year students how John Osborne's *Look back in Anger* (UK, 1956) connects with our current worries. It's easy, a standard reading of the play: Jimmy Porter is working-class, remember?, and he gets a university education funded by the post-WWII Labour party in one of the new white-tile universities. Although we all agree he is one of the most obnoxious characters ever, Hamlet included, anyone with his same credentials (working-class family, public university education... a majority at UAB) can sympathise with his plea: his education brings just an upsetting sense of declassing but no better job prospects. He clings onto the hemline of the middle classes by the skin of his teeth, yet his wife Alison's makes sure the intruder stays there, as bitter as gall.

Granted that Jimmy's is an extreme case in that he chooses to run a sweet stall rather than do something else with his education (like writing a play...), we need to examine why he's 'looking back in anger' and not 'looking forward in hope', as would correspond to a 25-year-old. Well, I guess that many Spanish 25-year-olds packing today their suitcases to migrate to more civilised countries are indeed looking back in anger onto the apparently golden age that was the longish decade 1995-2007. I was there and didn't notice it much, having actually spent my post-doc years between 1996-2002 waiting for the supposedly affluent state to materialise tenure for me. So, you see?, it was never good. However, as happens to Jimmy when he rants and raves against the Edwardian brigade embodied by his military father-in-law, I'm sure many young people today rant and rave against the useless 40, 50 and 60-years-olds in command of this sad country and pushing them hard out of it. Yes, the 'los-de-siempre' brigade that the 1980s Socialists replaced briefly for a while dashing all our hopes when they decide to try to become middle-class each and one of them, instead of helping the whole country progress. I was there, as one of the Jimmy-Porter-style students allowed entrance to the university by state grants. Sorry about using myself as an example (of anything).

I hope one of my students, as they are the right age, writes the play (film, novel, comic...) we need so badly today to capture our sorry times. Please, don't use the words 'back' or 'anger', as you can see from Jimmy's case they only lead to emotional paralysis and social inaction. Express your disappointment with your elders in creative ways –use comedy, perhaps farce and be witty, intelligent and, above all, forward-looking. Work hard and show those bastards how much you deserve being made the centre of our efforts, for our future depends on you –literally. Don't stay, like Jimmy, pent up in your garret, playing bears and squirrels with an equally desperate partner. But, although the world is big and too many places waiting for you to give them for free your mind, body and soul, demand as loudly as possible your right to stay on, here, with us. And just educate yourself as thoroughly and profoundly as you can, and all the rest around you. It seems to be the only solution... and the best form of protest.

9-IV-2012 GIVING UP (ON A MASTERPIECE): FORD MADOX FORD'S *PARADE'S END*

I don't feel much compunction when abandoning a book that fails to interest me. So many fish in the sea... why bother to stick to one chosen freely and that can be equally freely abandoned? (quite another matter are the books I *must* read, for teaching or research... and the many I read as a student but never enjoyed). Yet, one thing is giving up on a run-of-the-mill book whereas abandoning a masterpiece seems to be quite a different matter.

This Easter holiday I gave myself as literary homework reading Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End*, all 836 pages. Why? Well, I just love his novel *The Good Soldier* (1915) –unfairly regarded as one of those second tier books that needn't be taught– and I happen to be a sucker for anything on WWI (it's a very rich field for anyone interested in masculinity.). And *Parade's End* is a masterpiece, or so many readers and critics claim. Soooo.... about 70 pages into the first novel, *Some Do not...*, I realised that I had already tried reading the tetralogy years ago but had forgotten I'd given up mid-book. The problem? I couldn't *see* the hero protagonist, Christopher

Tietjens, and I mean in a very physical sense –he seemed to be both the manliest man ever and a fish-eyed, soft-bellied, bland slob. Above all, this being a Modernist novel, characters talk and act in the weirdest possible way (um... yes, they're upper class!), something further complicated by Ford's decision to narrate in odd time loops, with events being recalled in quite an oblique fashion rather than narrated in your regular dramatised scenes, Austen-style. Yet, I decided to plod on. Cultural capital and all that...

Since 20th century novelists don't bother to describe their characters as the Victorians did, I've got the really awful habit of casting actors in my personal reading. This time I got lucky because by a strike of serendipity, it turns out that a TV mini-series, scripted by none other than Tom Stoppard, is being currently filmed, with Benedict Cumberbatch (of recent *Sherlock Holmes* fame) as Tietjens. This bit of information helped me go more smoothly through 240 of the 288 pages of *Some Do not...* until the moment came to make the decision to plod on for yet 548 pages (a bad sign, isn't it?, counting pages). I checked the Wikipedia for tips about the content of the three following books, as Tietjens, though shell-shocked, is not seen at the front in the first book, and that was what I was looking for. I checked Amazon.co.uk for readers' opinions, and found a dismayed reader who had gone through the whole tetralogy but who, disliking the snobbish characters, felt "relief" when reaching the end. I discovered Good Reads (www.goodreads.com), excuse my monumental ignorance, where many, many readers praised to high heaven Ford's 'masterpiece' while a handful despaired. After two hours of trying hard to find renewed motivation I decided to give up.

Seeing how *Parade's End* is included in diverse list of the best fiction in English ever, and realising it must have been truly hard to write, I'm considering whether what we mean by 'masterpiece' needs to be revised to include books that *are* masterpieces but that are also unreadable without a great deal of perseverance. I'm not talking here about *Ulysses*, which I can claim to have read, or *Gravity's Rainbow*, my most spectacular failure to date, but this other kind of novel which while being representative of a certain artistic, literary trend –whether Modernism or something else– no longer works and runs even the risk of becoming a relic. I'm sure I'll watch the TV adaptation of *Parade's End*, in the hopes of returning to the tetralogy one day, but it'll be rather for Stoppard and Cumberbatch (what a surname!) than for Madox Ford. Yet, it's funny how instead of feeling that Madox Ford fails as a writer in his foursome I feel that *I have failed as a reader*. This is what trying to get a literary culture does to you.

Luckily, my other Easter novel, Benito Pérez Galdós's *Miau* (1888) has turned out to be as brilliant as promised by that Spanish Literature teacher who recommended it to us, students, more than thirty years ago. I'll leave the problem of keeping reading lists for some other entry...

9-IV-2012 'TEACHER, HOW MUCH SHOULD I LEARN?': ON SETTING LIMITS TO ONE'S OWN EDUCATION

This is one of the entries left in my inkpot because of the student strike last March. I realise now that it makes a good companion to my previous entry, so here it is.

Any Literature teacher knows that it's never enough ("until your heart stops beating" – extra points if you catch which lyrics I'm quoting...), hence my trying to read *Parade's End* no matter what: to fill in a gap. When checking on its fame as a masterpiece, I chanced upon "1000 novels everyone must read: the definitive list" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jan/23/bestbooks-fiction>), a definitively not definite list that *The Guardian* had the guts to publish in 2009, when time apparently stopped. Curiouser and curioser, I did check what I'd read already, and it turns out I'm 647 books short. How embarrassing! (I decided not to keep that list close by, fearing another *Miau* case –see the previous entry).

Picture now one of my *most motivated* first-year-students asking me a few weeks ago how much of the background reading to drama included in our handbook *Introduction to English Literature* she needed to learn: 'Do I just read that or learn it?' I pretended not to understand the difference between 'reading' and 'learning', but I feel I was not stressful enough when I told her that 'the more you know, the better' as I added 'for the exam'. Silly me. The book in question includes 12 pages about 20th century British drama, by the way, it was never a question of her reading volumes to accompany our fitful teaching of *Look back in anger* (fitful because of the strike). I suspect that the other book we have included as compulsory background reading, *The Edinburgh Introduction to English Literature* is simply not read, as we don't test students on it.

I would have stripped myself naked in class rather than ask one of my own university teachers how much I needed to read from a particular book –stripping being the less embarrassing option. The right question was (and should still be) 'what else can I read?', always. In my time, gosh what an oldie I've become, it was understood that students ought to read *as much as possible*, leaving no minute of their lives empty. Lectures were just the tiny tip of the iceberg. Of course, many approached this in a pragmatic way and regulated quite well, often at the bar, how much time the library deserved. They were the ones happy to get just a pass and move on. The others, us bookworms, knew that no library is small enough to gnaw your way into – consider how *The Guardian* speaks of reading 1000 novels just like that, when truly devoted readers read about 100 books a year, average readers (in Spain) less than 20... The baffling exchange with this student shows me something I've been suspecting all along: our youth are pragmatic and *candid* (I thought they were cheeky). Candid, as you can see, because they don't realise what a *faux-pas* is asking a Literature teacher about how little will do, instead of how much more. The same applies to the handful of English Studies students who tells us to our faces that they don't like reading, without seemingly realising this is *not* the way to earn the sympathy of a Literature teacher.

What worries me much more is why the message that at university one ought to read non-stop, particularly in the Humanities, has been blurred or lost. I don't know what my colleagues do, but I make a point of telling my students how recently I've learned this or that, or how much I still must read, for them to see that learning is a lifelong process. Ignorance is bliss for too many in our classrooms, while for me ignorance is a blessing spurring me to move on. So... my dear student, if you read this, learn what those 12 pages have to say and use our reasonably rich library to learn much, much more, till you realise how little even the most learned know.

18-IV-2012 HEADACHE: PLANNING NEXT YEAR

I have a spectacular headache and the problem is that I can't take yet another painkiller. I know, I should not be writing. How did the headache come about? Planning the schedule for the next academic year, I mean for all the teachers in the English Studies BA. This is one of the duties of the degree Coordinator –remember the 200 euros a month? I'm writing this entry, by the way, not just with a pounding headache but with the greatest admiration and sympathy for my predecessors (and coordinating colleagues).

Check this: I'm planning a schedule involving 43 teachers, each with their personal demands. Some want to concentrate all their teaching in one semester, others MUST teach particular subjects. Some live far from UAB and drag their feet when it comes to teaching at 8:30 (or end at 19:00), others ask for teaching reductions that the Dean frowns on in this time of crises. Some complain even though they have a tenured position *and* the reductions, others take up anything because they have shitty contracts and dream of getting tenure one day for putting up with the low pay. The coordinator needs to juggle a ready-made schedule with the needs of real people, as she imagines how angry students will be at certain clashes between subjects. Meantime the Vice-Dean herself complains that UAB teachers should be available no matter what from 8:30 to 18:00, if required every day of the week. Deep sigh...

I do know that other Coordinators have worked harder and others juggle much bigger numbers (or both). Planning a yearly schedule must be done, there's no way around it. And it must be done by the teachers themselves for we certainly don't want to be pushed around by bureaucrats. What I'm wondering is why my brain is doing all the work and not a computer, it seems somehow old-fashioned. What's Apple doing about this??? Mind you, planning can be even fun, for the schedule is like a big jigsaw and it's a real pleasure to see the pieces falling into place. It just takes, judging from my headache, more brainpower than it is reasonable to apply, at least in such a short period.

So, if it's so stressful, why didn't I start planning beforehand? But I did... I started in February, then got stalled because, guess what?, it's election time for a new Rector and the outgoing one has been procrastinating. Yes, usually by now we'd be in possession of a final staff list for next year. No such luck this time. Why? Well, they need to 'reorganise costs', which means teachers must be laid off. Which ones? Well, that's what we're still waiting for. My headache, you see?, it's not because planning a schedule is something that only Deep Blue's current descendant can possibly manage with no mistakes but also because, as I know from my predecessors, is has to be done over a number of months and many times over.

If you ask me, I think this is a waste of public money and resources, but, then, who am I to complain in comparison to the Department and UAB colleagues who might not be here next year?

21-IV-2012 CHOOSING A BOOK (FOR A LITERATURE TEACHER): HERE COMES SANT JORDI...

Next Monday is every Literature teacher's favourite holiday (it is, isn't it?): Sant Jordi's –book day here in Catalonia. Holiday not in the sense that we Catalans don't

work on that day, but in the sense that civil society takes the streets to celebrate reading –or so claim the authorities on popular Catalan festivities. For the uninitiated, all bookshops set up stalls outdoors and offer a 10% discount on their wares; in the major bookshops people queue to have their books signed by their favourite authors (I might pay a fetishistic visit to Chuck Palahniuk...).

This was all invented by the booksellers' guild back in the 1920s, I think, though I have no idea how this got entangled with lovers' day, which is also 23rd April here (um, yes, hero, princess, dragon...really?). Here's the (changing) sexist tradition for you: men get books from their women, women get roses from their men (not necessarily boyfriends, though woe betide the boyfriend who does not spend an outrageous amount of money on a rose he could get much cheaper on any other day). This is changing in the sense that women are getting these days both roses *and* books, though I don't know how many men get roses from their women, with or without books.

Anyway, I love the sight of so many men walking the streets roses in hand, though I tend to avoid the crowds buying books on that day. I do my Sant Jordi book shopping beforehand as, well, I hate buying book on Sant Jordi's day. Not just because it's crowded but mainly because it *is* crowded... No, I haven't lost it. Picking a book in a crowd is quite uncomfortable under any circumstance (no peace, no quiet) but what I rather mean is that these crowds are only found on that day. Where are they the other 364 days, I wonder? Buying books online? Sant Jordi always reminds me of that awful celebration in which women rule a village for one day because they don't the rest of the year. Same thing.

Well, here's the problem: how do you choose books for your non-academic loved ones? It's easy if you're happy to get any of the novelties, for Sant Jordi is the biggest book-selling campaign in Spain (yes, not just in Catalonia). Sales amounting to 25% of the yearly total... on a single day. Quite another matter is whether you want to pick up a particular book, which needs planning in advance, plenty of net surfing and trusting that delivery will be, as promised, on time (you tell me!!). Mostly, crowds and even Literature teachers end up buying whatever is at hand. This year –and this is really what I wanted to write about– I have given up the attempt to buy my mother a copy of the Spanish translation of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a novel I'm teaching, as a) the cheaper paperback copy is very hard to find, b) the trade paperback copy is equally hard to find and pricey (above 25 euros for a classic out of copyright??). Call me Catalan, I mean tight-fisted, but my hard-earned money has been finally invested in this time of crisis on books more at hand (a Follett, a Steinbeck). My mum doesn't read my blog, don't worry (and she gets books from me and my family more often than just once a year...).

I forgot to say that though I do get a spectacular rose every Sant Jordi, I never get books, as my family is in a panic that I've read everything published under the sun –a good excuse, my cheeky ones! It seems I let this out last year –poor me, nobody buys me books– and my mum got so sorry for me that she decided to brave it out and buy me a novel. A non-English one, just in case. She got me Margaret Mazzantini's *La palabra más hermosa*, which I did enjoy very much. Thank you, mum.

And, so, my mum got very happy that she had managed the hardest feat: giving a Literature teacher a book as a present and getting it right! Poor thing, I hope this Sant Jordi is less stressful for her... perhaps I should give her some hint?

23-IV-2012 ON THE DAY I READ *COROLIANUS*... FEES WENT UP BY 66%

Last Sunday I went to see Alex Rigola's production of *Coriolanus* at Lliure. It was the first time I saw a Shakespeare without first reading the play but even so I could guess that something was very wrong as the performance only lasted for 75 minutes. The guy who appeared to be Coriolanus's main rival, Aufidius, was never seen on stage. Um, fishy! That sent me rushing to the library and I managed to squeeze the play within my crazy schedule this week (fancy reading Shakespeare on a noisy train full of schoolchildren, I must have seemed a complete nerd to the rest of the passage).

As I finished reading this marvellous play –thank you, Rigola, for the inspiration... – I thought that on that particular day the most important thing that had happened to me as a Literature teacher was getting acquainted with *Coriolanus*. Not my morning lecture, the meeting with colleagues, the paperwork for the 2012-13 schedule. No. Reading that play, my 21st Shakespeare, had given my day the richness that I thought, when I was 18, all my days teaching Literature would have. Then I switched on TV to watch the news, and the day changed completely. It was quite spoiled.

I had already heard that university tuition fees would go up next year but the increase announced on that day is outrageous. Our Humanities students pay now for a BA academic year 910 euros, 15% of the real cost of their public education; this may be increased up to 66%, meaning that they might end up paying 1500/1660 euros, a 25% of the cost (depending on whether how many subjects they're repeating they might pay the full amount per credit, 100 euros). If I think of England, where universities were allowed two years ago to charge up to 9,000 pounds, this is nothing (and, after all, 150 euros a month is still cheap for a university education). Yet, I wonder at the insensitivity of the politicians making a decision like this one at a point of deep, depressing crisis. Clearly, the idea is to expel as many working-class students as possible from our classrooms and, then, with the excuse of our having fewer students, terminate us, teachers, little by little. Here, in Catalonia, Generalitat has promised to turn 25% of the increased fees into scholarships but this is not enough.

I saw a minister of the current Spanish Government claim on TV that, despite being the product of a school with 40 children per class and of that 1980s Spanish university in which you needed to rise up early to find a chair in crowded 300-student classes, he was fine indeed. Well, he may be a Minister but he's NOT fine indeed if he thinks that going back 30 years in time is desirable and that he's an example of anything. That other Minister claimed this week that with classes up to 25, children are insufficiently socialised, this is why they need 15 extra classmates... As a primary school teacher quipped, with 40 kids squeezed into classrooms meant for 25 we'll see what kind of socialisation we get.

In the end, that day will not make it to my personal history as a Literature teacher because I read *Coriolanus*, but because a further step has been taken in the demolition job that is fast destroying what has been achieved in the university by my generation and our elders in the last 30 years. I'm bracing myself for the many protests that I'm sure UAB students will soon stage and though I hate strikes I hate even more what's been done to us collectively –I don't mean the university, I mean Spain.

Someone please write a play about this soon, quick. How badly we need a Shakespeare! And how well *Coriolanus* still applies to our time (do read it, please...)

27-IV-2012 BY DECREE: THE NEW TEACHING WORKLOAD

Last Saturday, 21 April, the Spanish Government issued a new decree (see BOE <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2012/04/21/pdfs/BOE-A-2012-5337.pdf>), cheerfully called “de medidas urgentes de racionalización del gasto público en el ámbito educativo.” According to this decree, although university teachers are still supposed to teach 24 ECTS credits a year (= 4 semestral subjects), this workload may be increased or decreased, depending on the commitment to research of the said teachers.

This is measured in research assessment periods (the famous ‘tramos’): a senior lecturer (‘titular’) needs 3 to be honoured with an 8-ECTS credit reduction; a full professor (‘catedrático’) needs 4. If, no matter what rank you belong to, you have fewer ‘tramos’, then you can be asked to teach up to 32 ECTS credits. The UAB is debating these days how to apply the decree, as the schedule for next year is almost finished. Also, the figures fit badly our subjects, which are 6, 9 or 12 ECTS credits.

Here’s my personal view: I’m VERY worried, as this decree does not distinguish between teachers who simply do not do any kind of research and never have, and young/er teachers who have not had the time to accumulate 3 ‘tramos’ but who do struggle to do research *and* teach 24 ECTS credits (plus admin work). It’s easy to see that, if asked to teach more, our research –for I myself don’t have the magical 3 ‘tramos’— will suffer for it. In contrast, senior teachers with plenty of research to their names are privileged for that, but not really encouraged to gain a fourth or fifth ‘tramo,’ depending on the case.

I must say that I fully agree that teachers who don’t do research should have a greater workload. 30 or 32 ECTS credits seems right. To begin with, I’ve never understood why the university tolerates that some teachers –including professors who got tenure before ‘tramos’ were established back in 1982 (I think)— do no research whatsoever. Since, however, they are tolerated, then it is obvious that as these teachers have more time in their hands than us, researchers, they should either teach more or run all the admin in the Department. I know this might irk some colleagues but I’d really like to know on what they spend the time that we researchers use for, well, research. I know that my life would be relatively stress-free if I only taught my classes.

Using research assessment periods as the measuring rod is both clever and perverse. As they are notoriously hard to get, many (young/er) teachers will consider whether they’re worth the effort in comparison to teaching an extra subject; they might even decide to give up research altogether. This will indeed help the Government save money, as they’ll have to pay for fewer ‘tramos’ and there will be also fewer candidates, in the case of senior lecturers, to apply for tenure as full professors. Not to mention the savings in staff, as fewer teachers will suffice. In any case, with increased fees (also itemised in the decree), we’ll have fewer students – ironically, we might not need to teach 32 ECTS credits at all!

Finally, if the Department in question has enough resources (and students), there will be no need to force researchers to teach 32 ECTS credits, but if that’s not the case, the fight will be hard. If, suppose, I get my third ‘tramo’ and demand to teach 16

ECTS credits –it would be stupid of me not to do so– someone else will have to teach the 8-credit difference. That is to say: one of my colleagues will be ‘punished’ for my (supposed) efficiency even though s/he might be a better researcher than myself but just younger or less fortunate when applying for ‘tramos’. Tough luck...

I forgot to say that, with the new UAB regulations, credits are combined with the number of students in class, so that my 6 credits for the first-year subject Literatura del s. XX (92 students registered) amount actually to 10, whereas my 6 credits for the MA subject Postmodern Textualities and Sexualities (5 students) count as just 4'5 credits. Teachers working in the first and second year might end up, thus, teaching the equivalent of 50 ECTS; those in the fourth year and the MA less than 10.

How this rationalizes anything is beyond me. Deep sigh... multiplied by 32.

1-V-2012 ‘IN THE VERY FIRST ROW OF THE SECOND-RATERS’: READING W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM’S *OF HUMAN BONDAGE*

I have spent much of my time this long weekend glued to the 600 pages of W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (1915). I picked up the yellowing, crumbling copy at UAB’s library to read for pleasure, after having read a while ago *The Razor’s Edge* (1944) –and yes, having seen the two film versions, one with Tyrone Power, the other, surprisingly, a pet project of Bill Murray. I vaguely recalled this was supposed to be a scandalous novel, but that was not was had kept it at the back of my mind for future reading, nor the three film versions, which I have never seen. Rather, it was Brad Pitt as a police officer in *Se7en* asking his partner Morgan Freeman whether Maugham’s novel, a clue connected to the sophisticated serial killer they are after, is S&M. Note this: Freeman plays in the film the cultured detective William Somerset – script-writer Andrew Kevin Walker’s homage to Maugham, his favourite writer. And yes, this novel is indeed S&M, but not of the leather-clad kind Pitt meant.

Maugham was a great star in his time, in that line of solid British writers that has also given us Graham Greene, John Le Carré, maybe Anthony Burgess, and that, while also somehow connected with E.M. Forster, has nothing to do with Modernism. Maugham, enormously successful as novelist, playwright and short story writer, is actually one of the greatest victims of Modernism, as his unadorned prose and oddly melodramatic novels are at the antipodes of what Woolf *et al* regarded as interesting literature (include also Bennet and Galsworthy). Theodore Dreiser loved *Of Human Bondage* and I should think he makes a good transatlantic companion for Maugham. There’s been recently a renewed interest in Maugham’s work because of a handful of new film adaptations: *Up at the Villa* (2000), *Meeting Julia* (2004) and *The Painted Veil* (2006) –Naomi Watts and Edward Norton are superb there– but, arguably, they have fixed Maugham in the role of vaguely *passé*, decadent writer, *a la* Noel Coward or Terence Rattigan, rather than vindicate him.

It seems Maugham described himself as belonging to ‘the very first row of the second-raters’. A colleague, who happens to specialise in Shakespeare, spoke wonders to me about *Of Human Bondage* and I read it, accordingly, not at all as second rate, but as one of the great forgotten novels that should be included in my dream course about, well, great forgotten novels. Now I’m not so sure. One thing I noticed is this: I never looked at the page number as I read Maugham’s masterpiece and when I did it was to note, with surprise, that I had read 100-150 pages non-stop. This is something

that rarely happens, and a good sign that the author does indeed know how to tell a tale. Yet, as for the tale itself, possibly what's happened to me as a reader is exactly the same that happens to its protagonist, Philip, regarding his paramour Mildred: he has no idea why he loves her, being, as he is, fully aware of her many faults and of her lack of beauty –of her vulgarity, in short. Even so, Philip loves her; even so, I've loved this book. But it is, let's be clear about this, first row of the second-raters.

As I read the story of Philip's life –close to the author's own life in many aspects, completely fictional in others– I kept wondering why I wanted to go on reading. I doubt any reader can truly like Philip and I don't wonder that some have found the story of his obsession for the heartless Mildred that of a fool. Maugham, however, deals through Philip not just with the misery of unfulfilled sexual yearning but also with the even bigger misery of misreading one's mediocrity. He gives Philip a chance to confront his own and choose finally a reasonably happy life but the book is strewn with the dead bodies of those who fail to come to terms with their own limitations. I was (morbidly) impressed by that; also by the women's frank approach to sex in the novel, far more direct than in Lawrence because of the, excuse the pun, bare prose.

Curiosity satisfied, then, for the time being. I know I'm not done with Maugham, either because I'm at heart a philistine or because we need the second-raters (front or back row) as much as we need the first-raters... to make our reading complete.

9-V-2012 ON COPYRIGHT, VIRTUAL CAMPUS, CEDRO AND HARVARD

CEDRO is the Spanish organisation that protects the copyright of writers on books (and music scores, I mean sheet music); it is analogous to SGAE, which protects performing artists. Recently, CEDRO has sued UAB for 1 million euros, accusing my university of not restricting at all book piracy in our virtual classrooms (see <http://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/20120411/54283660307/cedro-uab-fotocopias.html>). They apparently want to charge all 75 Spanish universities a flat rate of 5 euros per year and student that, together with the tax charged for each photocopy, would be distributed to their authors members. The bottom line is that they do know that everyone, teachers and students, infringes copyright, hence the decision to collect tax on that 'bad habit' rather than try to stop it by other means. This is a little bit like the tax on smoking.

In the same week, as my colleague José Ángel García Landa informed us, Harvard University has decided to curb down the expenses on bundle subscriptions to academic journals offered by major publishers. The prices in some cases have increased by 145% when, as Harvard notes, publishers are already making an alarming 35% profit on journals. The additional problem is that the university itself, a very potent generator of research, is getting too little back in return for the funds poured on the very work that produces articles for journal publication. The whole memo is worth reading (see <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k77982&tabgroupid=icb.tabgroup143448>), particularly the recommendations to Harvard researchers, who are encouraged to "Consider submitting articles to open-access journals, or to ones that have reasonable, sustainable subscription costs; *move prestige to open access.*" (my italics) I'm

personally elated to see that common sense views I have defended again and again in public and private also make sense at Harvard. Call me smug, that's how I feel today.

Now, here's the joke: I'm also a CEDRO member, as a writer of single-authored books and as collaborator in collective volumes published in Spain. CEDRO, by the way, does not include my articles in academic journals in the list of my copyrighted work. As a teacher, I wonder whether this means that uploading articles onto virtual classrooms is not really a crime (or is it another kind of crime?). Ironically, I do get a little bit of money annually from them out of the photocopy tax, but their protection does not extend to my more serious problem: a cheeky publisher that has failed to pay me royalties for years (I have got NOTHING for my book on *The X-Files*). The lawyer I have contacted is asking for 2,500 euros, plus 800 for other legal fees, to sue this person, who owes me less than that. Logically, I'm stuck, worried that he'll declare himself bankrupt and, thus, cost me much more money than I'm owed. I'm mystified that piracy is in Spain a bigger issue than the rampant fraud committed by certain editors on naive authors (we seem to be too many, from what I gather).

So, how do I feel as an author myself regarding piracy? Well, the problem has three sides. With books allegedly protected by a contract, my concern are publishers rather than piratical readers. With chapters in collective books, I believe that those paid by research groups using public funds or by conferences using members' fees, should be free access. At any rate, they should always be very cheap, as authors are never paid royalties for book chapters. With journal articles, I'm a Harvard girl: we should 'move prestige to open access', with all the consequences (including indexation lists, etc.). It's very simple: if my work does not entitle me to receiving royalties I don't see why it should benefit others in the scandalous way Harvard highlights.

(And, yes, this entry has been very hard to write because I realise that I'm in flagrant contradiction with myself, as I want to protect my copyright on books and give away for free my shorter pieces –I can only say in my defence that books are VERY hard to write and that, anyway, royalties amount to so little they seem to be just a symbolic reward).

13-VI-2012 A SOCIOLOGY OF TEACHERS: ENGLISH STUDIES IN SPAIN

To my surprise Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979, English translation 1984), based on field work in late 1960s and early 1970s France, still makes perfect sense today. I don't know whether this is because Spain is till catching up with the France he portrays, or because, essentially, Europe's patterns of consumption have not changed that much since the pre-internet time when it was published. I'll leave aside for the moment his insightful idea that so-called student failure is actually due to working-class students' resistance to a devalued education that guarantees them no future. I'll focus, instead, on a peculiar gap in the book. Although the tastes of primary and secondary teachers as consumers of goods and culture are often commented on, university teachers seem not to be there at all, unless, that it, Bourdieu assumes that in that France they were all upper-middle or upper-class. It's puzzling.

This leads me to one of my pet projects: a sociological study of all those who teach English Studies in Spain. Coming from a working-class background –my father, now retired (or rather, made redundant at 57), was a printer; my mother is a housewife– I am myself very much class-conscious. I can only recall with a shudder the

many difficulties during my student years to combine working and studying; my later academic career has always been marked by that and by a constant preoccupation with the sociology of culture, which is why I practice Cultural Studies. What I mean is that this kind of autobiographical musings are usually bypassed in the Spanish university. I myself only started wondering in earnest when, during my period as Head of Department, I was interviewed by two different research teams investigating whether women do admin tasks in a different way. I had to think hard and came to the conclusion, as I explained to both teams, that class could not be left aside. In my experience upper- and middle-class women in English Studies have a very different style of management from mine or that of my university female colleagues from my same social background.

My pet project would consist of asking everyone who teaches English Studies in Spain from which class they come from, to which class they think they belong now and how class conditions their choice of speciality or field, and of teaching methodology. It is a key factor, believe me. When 'Filología Inglesa' started back in the 1950s and until the 1980s when my own generation came on board, the whole field was upper-middle or middle-class, both teachers and students. With no English taught at all in public schools and no money to afford private tuition, it's easy to see why the working-classes had little access. My generation (born 1960s) must have been the first one to be taught some English (irregularly, often by ill-qualified teachers) in public primary and secondary schools and also the first one to make up for many gaps by going to England to work as au-pairs or waiters (Erasmus only started in 1986). None has examined what (popular) cultural baggage we brought onto English Studies, nor how (badly?) we fitted in an environment run entirely in a second language that remains a mystery to most Spaniards. Other factors, such as who got what grants and scholarships also bear examining, together with the history of the introduction of Cultural Studies as a discipline and of new subjects such as popular texts and/or film (Film Studies still has no degree in Spain, would you believe that!?).

I guess this survey will never be carried out to begin with because I'm not sure where it could be published and, second, because it's somewhat a taboo. In English Studies the impression is that we're all part of a nice, big family quite inexplicably ignored by the other 'Filologías'. It would be regarded as in very bad taste to ask people for their class credentials, I assume, which is in itself a typical upper-middle-class position. In the meantime, I'm asking myself the relevant questions and I'm starting to think that perhaps I should ask my own students. I already know that teaching English Literature in the downright blue-collar UAB has nothing to do with teaching the same subject in Navarre's private university but I don't what the exact differences are. As for my students, whereas I have assumed, seeing that 68% of the first-year ones work, that they are working-class indeed, I might be in for some surprises. Who knows? This is why I'd like to ask.

Or have we come to a time when people will be tempted to conceal a middle- or upper-middle background? (By the way, do we have actual upper-class people in English Studies in Spain? And in the whole Spanish university?).

21-V-2012 SPENDING MONEY ON DRAMA (WORKING OUT THE COST OF A SUBJECT)

I'll be teaching again next year the elective 'English Theatre' and I'm reconsidering the texts I used 2 years ago. In that edition I asked my students to read two anthologies, Grahame Whybrow's *Modern Drama: Plays of the '80s and '90s* and Alekz Seirz's *Twenty-First Century British Plays* (both Methuen). 10 plays in total, 36 euros.

We worked on dramatised readings of scenes from all of them and seeing how they played out in class, I have decided to replace 50% of the plays with other texts. Now here's the problem: the only way I have of checking whether the texts I have selected are worth teaching is by reading them, that is to say, by spending my own money (as I did, yes, 2 years ago). In the end I have spent 60 euros on 5 new books (3 single-volume plays, 2 collections by the same author). Single-volume plays are, at around 12 euros, not that cheap considering they're on average 100 pages long. Yet, there's no way around it. I have worked out that my students need to spend around 85 for the 10 plays. That's roughly the price of a cinema ticket per play.

We teachers may purchase books through the library but they remain the library's property and though we can borrow them for the whole academic year, we can't make notes on them. The result? The books we buy for the library don't include the ones we use in class, which we pay for out of our own pocket. A subject can, thus, easily cost each of us, teachers, 100 euros, if only a couple of secondary sources are added. This is why it's VERY annoying when we see that students don't buy the books (in time), or use low-quality editions, etc.

Now that I'm planning this subject I'm thus caught between a rock and a hard place: the need to spend my money to offer quality based on an informed choice and the students' resistance to spending money on books. As usual, I'm possibly going to be unfair to many students but many seem to forget that books are part of the expenses of any university degree. The NECESSARY expenses. I saw the other day in my class a girl who had downloaded and printed an e-text copy of the (copyrighted) novel we're reading, *The Remains of the Day*. That is something I will never understand... Back to drama (or to my drama!): If I opt for the cheaper solution (= teaching the same plays as 2 years ago) I do know that 50% of the subject will not be as good as it could; if I cut down the number of plays to, say 5 or 7, it'll be a pity as that's all the contemporary English drama (some!) students will read; if I keep the 10 plays, the subject will be rich enough but I'm sure it will all result in rampant piracy of the texts among my not-so-rich students.

I wonder if Medicine university teachers, a degree notorious for the cost of the textbooks, ever consider these matters. (I also wonder how they pay for the said textbooks...). Whatever my final choice is, in consideration of the students' finances, the bare truth is that I have already spent those 60 euros...

21-V-2012 THE PAYCUTS SEEN FROM THE OTHER SIDE: A FAMILY LUNCH

I made the mistake of declaring to my family over lunch that I was very depressed as President Mas has decided to deduct yet another 5% off my wages, this time off the complement paid by the Generalitat (I'm a civil servant on the payroll of

the Spanish Government). This unleashed not the sympathy one is entitled to expect from one's own family but a torrent of criticism against us, civil servants, preceded by the sentence 'it might not be your case, because you work hard, but...'. I was flabbergasted. I still am, 24 hours later.

Happily, the members of my family are all employed. Some have been knocked hard, however, by the collapse of the market for which they work (real estate) and, logically, complained bitterly than when *they* had to take harsh paycuts none noticed or bothered. From their point of view, as a civil servant I'm afforded a high rate of protection against unemployment and, so, the least I can do is grin and bear it when the wages go down. The portrait I was offered is of a civil service class of pampered, lazy no-gooders sponging off the unprotected average citizen.

I tried to explain as best as I could that, whereas there's been indeed much abuse of public money, if you apply general paycuts to all civil servants you demoralise the ones who do have a will to serve the public as best as we can. My view is that surgical interventions are needed and not wholesale amputations. To no avail. On the contrary, I had to agree with the view that in Spain we don't need so many universities, nor so many Departments of the same speciality; there's no point, indeed, in forming engineers if they're going to be employed abroad. And I do know that employment opportunities for philosophers or philologists do not abound.

Used to the mutual commiseration which we, university teachers, exude when comforting each other as our world collapses little by little, it was shocking to see how close the ones who regard us as a luxury are. Yes, maybe this is what we are, but it's dreadful to see how all kinds of civil servants get lumped together in this highly politicised misreading of what the public university is about. I feel tempted, now and then, to justify the criticism and misbehave like those who give us the bad name. Maybe I'd be better off, seeing how trying to convince even my dear ones that university teachers work hard is not working... Sad, very sad.

26-V-2012 FINDING AN AUDIENCE: SMALL JOURNALS AND MELVYN BRAGG

I was leaving for home after a long, tiring day, depressed as I am these days at the thought of how hard the university is being hit by the current crisis, when a smiling colleague stopped me in the middle of the corridor. She's an associate that teaches English Language and with whom I've only had contact because of admin matters. I thought she was going to ask me something about her workload next year as I'm the current Coordinator but I wondered why she was smiling.

To my surprise, she told me that she'd come across an essay on Melvyn Bragg's *The Soldier's Return* (2000) and *A Son of War* (2001) that I had written a few years ago and published in Jaén's 'obscure' journal *Odisea* but available on the internet. In the article (see: www.ual.es/odisea/Odisea09_MartinAlegre.pdf) I discuss these two autobiographical novels, which are part of a quartet completed by *Crossing the Lines* (2003) and *Remember Me...* (2008), using Masculinities Studies in order to examine a highly neglected theme: the silence that WWII British veterans kept and were forced to keep about their experiences. We know much about the shell-shocked WWI veterans and indeed about the post-traumatic stress syndrome suffered by Vietnam veterans. Yet, since WWII was a 'just' war fought against a monstrous villain, its veterans were forced to play the role of heroes, and, thus, to voice no complaints for theirs could only

have been the right (military) experience: all duty, honour and glory. Bragg dismantles the myth by narrating the many difficulties his own father had to readjust to civilian life once back from the war, also dismantling the myth that the reencounters with estranged wives and children were easy. They were not, as he himself learned.

As happens, my colleague's father went through a similar situation and when she came across my essay she was surfing the net for research on fiction that narrated the soldier's return. In the lively 15 minutes we spent chatting in the middle of the corridor, she told me how sorry she was that she hadn't listened with more interest when –atypically, I believe– her father insisted on telling his war tales to his daughters. 'We were then teenagers' she told me, 'and teenagers are bored by these things.' This is why she has decided to compensate for that lack of attention, which she sorely regrets, by checking the corresponding fiction and perhaps embarking on a doctoral dissertation (that's why I always say that research in the Humanities *is* personal). Funnily enough, I had just taught my students that very same morning, following Leonard Davis's clever *Resisting Novels* (1987), that ironically we pay attention to novels with a patience and interest we never find for actual human beings. I used as an example how I search myself all the time in Spanish Civil War novels for the experiences I could not get out of my grandfathers (being on opposite sides but in the same family they decided to silence them completely). I'm not sure I would have listened if they had decided to tell the tale.

So, Christina: thank you, you made my day by making me see that research no matter how 'obscure' can find an audience (as I always say, thanks to the internet), and that what mattered to me very much when I wrote that essay matters to others. I do hope you write that dissertation and I look forward to reading it.

2-VI-2012 A VIVA IN BRITAIN: COMPARING EXPERIENCES

I was quite surprised when a UAB doctoral student in the 'Arts Escèniques' programme run by the Catalan Department asked me to be the second internal examiner of a board that should meet at Warwick University. Surprised because a) I didn't know her, b) I do not specialise in Theatre Studies (though I teach Theatre now and then), c) I didn't know you could –as she has done– get simultaneously a British and a Spanish doctoral degree with the same dissertation.

Cleverly, she got Warwick and UAB to sign an agreement and I became technically UAB's envoy to check that the proceedings met our regulations. I said yes considering I would never have again the chance to experience in person how a British viva works (why I never stopped to consider the hassle of reaching Coventry from Barcelona and viceversa is another matter). I realise now that I was a desperate choice as examiner, as more alert UAB doctors claimed not to know enough English. I, in contrast, took the bait hook, line and sinker. Silly me!

It's been a peculiar experience. We –the 3 examiners and the chair or advisor– met two hours before the viva to agree on the list of questions we'd ask (7 for a 90 minute conversation, a long list I'm told). Forget, then, about the notes I'd prepared for my intervention, Spanish-style. This meeting took 1 hour, followed by a modest lunch with these 3 persons, plus the 2 co-supervisors (one Spanish, one British). Then came the viva itself.

The PhD candidate offers no presentation and I almost jump out of my chair when I heard the external examiner (who leads the viva) wonder where the candidate could sit so that she felt most at ease. There were finally 6 of us in a tiny room, a very high number as usually vivas, which are not public, involve just the candidate, the internal and the external. The supervisors attended because I explained that in Spain not attending the defensa of your own student is an offence. No audience, no families, though –which I did miss. The tone has been throughout kind and friendly and the *conversation*, for that's what it is, rich and productive. The candidate was nervous but she soon relaxed (and so did I).

Spanish 'defensas' make me quite edgy as even when my intervention is short this lasts for at least 15 long minutes in which I feel exposed, as if I also were under examination. At UAB we have 3-member boards and the session lasts around 3 hours (plus paperwork) but one of my poor doctoral students had to endure a few years ago a 5-hour session with a 5-member board! In Britain, as I saw, the viva did take almost 5 hours, paperwork included, but time was allocated differently and the tension was much lower. I'm told this was a placid viva –it ended by the way with a pass with minor revisions, which means the new doctor will be awarded her degree once we're satisfied that the typos, grammar mistakes and bibliography incorrections are gone. In worse cases, candidates may be asked to rewrite substantially and resubmit 6 months later, though I'm told this is not at all a dishonour.

Yet... I have missed our own ritual. In Britain candidates are not expected to invite the board to lunch, as we do here. This may seem a bit feudal but since a doctoral degree is the highest degree a human being can get anywhere in the world, I see the point of senior doctors celebrating the occasion with the new doctor. Also, since board members are not paid, this is a courtesy that the candidate extends to them for their efforts.

In my case, I did make the effort not only of reading a dense dissertation outside my field but also of taking quite a long journey to do both universities a favour. Yet, here I am: it's 4 p.m., the viva is over, I can't get back to Barcelona this evening and, except for a brief thanks from the candidate and her supervisors, no other courtesies have been extended to me. Nobody bothered to check if I arrived safely yesterday, nobody has bothered to ask me how I'm to spend the long evening nor how I'm going home tomorrow. From my university I expect no thanks, either –just a swift return of the 300 euros in expenses that I have advanced. Yes, silly me as I said.

In contrast, I have the fondest memories of the last tribunal I attended, a year ago in Zaragoza, which ended with the most fabulous lunch I've ever had in my life... and, what matters most, with a fulfilling sense of having shared very good academic company and of having accomplished an important academic task. Different cultures, different views, of course...

6-VI-2012 A LITERATURE QUIZ (HERE WE GO AGAIN)

I'm tempted to cut'n'paste my entry for 28 May 2011, written after marking a disastrous Literature quiz based on studying our handbook *Introduction to English Literature*. Yet, re-reading it, I notice that things are even worse this time around as, instead of 50 titles, the quiz covered only 20 –presumably those any self-respecting student of English should be able to identify by author and period. A colleague tells me

that I should not write this entry as students might feel offended that I reproduce their mistakes here. Sorry, but in that case I must be cruel: these are not mistakes, they are something else that must be addressed urgently. Judge for yourself:

David Copperfield, by Charles Darwin (see also *Sense and Sensibility*)
Heart of Darkness, by John Connor (the hero of the Terminator series?)
Lord of the Rings, by, Lord Byron/ JK Tolkien (JRR Rowling?)
Middlemarch, by (literal): Brontë, the first one not Charlotte
Robinson Crusoe, by Oscar Twain from the Jacobean period
Sense and Sensibility, by Charles Darwin/ by Pope Alexander / by John Austen
The Time Machine, by Julio Verne (again??)
To the Lighthouse, by George Tenis
Wuthering Heights, by (literal) The Roberts: Charlotte, Anne, etc./ by Chatterine Brotën/ by Charlotte Wröntë / by The Brontës (in collaboration??)

For some strange reason, Thomas Hardy was named in possibly 70% of the exams as the author of *A Passage to India*. Some glorious misspellings include: Sheckespeare (no first name...) and Launance Stready... And what's worse, much too often authors were named correctly but placed in VERY wrong periods. I could have dinner today, if I wanted to, with Mary Shelley and Charles Dickens.

Most students passed the quiz thanks to the second part, a multiple choice exam in which, I'm sure, luck had a share, big or small (as it is always the case with these exercises). In one extreme case a student passed with a 5 by scoring only 2/40 for the quiz and 48/60 from the multiple choice. Perhaps we need to correct that.

What worries me TERRIBLY is that the students' imaginative quiz answers –and the many blank ones– reveal a WORRYING inability to study in a systematic way. The quiz is not what interests us but the *process* of preparing for it: we expected our students to draw their own charts, with periods and main authors. I know from the comments one of them made that they have problems discriminating between major and minor writers yet this one of the skills (or competences) they should be learning. As I wrote a year ago, the other worrying, not to say, SCARY factor is how the quiz results show that those approaching us lack the basic cultural capital a student of English should possess (and indeed acquire in the first year). Many of the quiz answers seemed to be shouting at us: 'I don't care, and you won't make me care!!'

Food for thought...

13-VI-2011 THE TEACHING GUIDE (OR SYLLABUS BOLOGNA-STYLE): OBJECTIONS AND BENEFITS

I do know that the correct word to name the document that describes a subject is "syllabus" but I'm using "teaching guide" here on purpose to discuss the new kind of syllabus we've been using since the beginning of our degree, three academic years ago. As degree Coordinator I'm facing now the daunting prospect of checking ALL the Teaching Guides of my colleagues in English Studies to make sure that they are indeed available and properly filled in. I'm not sure how many I'll receive punctually but I'm

satisfied that things work reasonably on this account in my Department, where, yes, we have this tendency to out-Pope the Pope, as we day in Spanish.

How do I know? Well, I attended a Coordinators' meeting this week and I was truly appalled to hear that many Humanities teachers are not just dragging their feet but resisting with all their might the very idea of having to write a Teaching Guide. Not just because spelling out the competences for each subject is mind-boggling and time-consuming but rather because they do not want to commit themselves to a reading list and a programme –um, I'm not sure whether they mean right now or ever. A Coordinator passed on her Department's complaint that now we're too busy marking essays so as to think of what students need to read from 12 September onwards. Considering that students will register on 16 July, I wonder when these teachers will find it convenient to publish their syllabus.

Yes, we're terribly pressed for time but this is how we do our job. I don't want to put myself as an example of anything but those of you following this blog will recall a recent posting about the plays I'm reading at full speed for my next year subject. Yes, I was tempted to leave the play list open but a) it's a bad example for the students, who think we improvise all the time; b) all the work I'm doing now is time I'll gain when teaching the subject, as I know from experience. As for the Teaching Guide, I do profoundly agree with my colleague from Zaragoza, Paco Collado, who complains that it stresses abilities at the cost of downplaying knowledge. In a Teaching Guide you CAN'T say that on completion of the subject the student will have a sound knowledge of, say, British Drama; you MUST claim that s/he will be ABLE TO SHOW his/her understanding of the main lines of British Drama, as teaching has become now training TO DO SOMETHING, not to KNOW SOMETHING. However, I have always supported the idea of the Teaching Guide as a very convenient teaching tool to which you can refer at any time, and indeed as a contract with the students. I was taught to see it that way in 1998, when I started working for UOC, a virtual university for which the Teaching Guide is almost sacred. It's taken UAB a long time to catch up...

A Teaching Guide is not, however, and should never be a straightjacket. This semester, for instance, with all the disruptions caused by the strikes, we've had to improvise much syllabus-wise. The Guide is, precisely, a Guide to guide both teachers and students and also a healthy reminder that we teachers need to get used to specifying how we teach and how we assess students in a public document. I won't go now into that other problem, which is some teachers' absolute reluctance to sharing a Teaching Guide with their colleagues. Or I will, as that's simple for me: I'm happy to say that I work for a Department in which teachers understand that a subject taught by different teachers must offer to all the groups involved the same contents and assessment methods –your 'libertad de cátedra' or academic freedom should apply to *how* you teach not to *what* you teach when you share a subject (quite another matter is an elective). I can, though, imagine very well the tensions that these anti-Teaching Guide teachers are suffering and I'm sorry for them.

Having said all this, I must now answer the question everyone is asking me: do students read the Teaching Guide for each subject? I wonder!! I do know that we're writing the TGs for a future degree assessment by the corresponding authorities, bent on using the scissors on us, yet I do hope the TGs are also useful as what they should be: good teaching tools for all.

14-VI-2012 IN MEMORIAM FÉLIX ERNESTO CHÁVEZ: AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

Today we have learned that our dear colleague Félix Ernesto Chávez, a member of our research group 'Body and Textuality,' was brutally murdered last Monday in the course of a burglary in México DC. Félix had arrived just two weeks ago to teach a course at UNAM and was staying with relatives. A man who had been doing repairs to their house assaulted it, together with two accomplices. Félix resisted their vicious attack and died defending his uncle, aunt and cousin, who were also murdered.

Born in Cuba in 1977, Félix was both an outstanding researcher and a brilliant poet (as Félix Hangelini). He earned his doctoral degree in 'Comparative Literature and Theory of Literature' here at UAB in 2010, under Meri Torras co-supervision, and was currently a post-doc researcher at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. He had been the President of the Asociación de Jóvenes Investigadores de la Literatura Hispánica, ALEPH (2009-2011), and had taught in places as varied as the Universidad de La Habana, the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, and the University of Miami. He was one of the still too few men who write about women, particularly women poets in Spanish; at the time of his death he was working on the Romantic women poets of both Spain and Cuba, as he felt they had been unfairly neglected. As a writer, he had published the essay on Walt Whitman and the poetry collections *La construcción de las olas* (2003), *La Devastación (La imaginación de la Bestia)* (2006), and *Restauración de la luz* (2007).

When first reading the message notifying Félix's death, I just thought it could not be true. Horrifying violence of this kind happens to others, not to our friends. As the hours pass, the monstrosity of his untimely death slowly sinks in and it feels like sheer nightmare. I won't enter here into a discussion of the uncontrolled violence that México DC suffers from, for we might as well read Félix's murder as one of those appalling jokes destiny seems fond of cracking (yes, I am thinking all the time of our dear Mia Victori, who also died far from home). Whatever the case, I wouldn't like Félix to be remembered for his grisly end but for his gentleness, sweet good temper and intelligence.

It's simply impossible to understand why things like this must happen. Some human beings are indeed vermin beyond redemption and I rebel at the idea that others like our gentle Félix must pay for their greed, stupidity and violence. I'll leave you with the final lines of Félix's last entry in his blog, *El bosque escrito*, and I'll ask you to always bear in mind how utterly absurd, ironic, cold-hearted destiny can be: "Estoy en la Ciudad de México y tengo gastritis mientras veo caer grandes chaparrones del cielo, y se mojan las sillas de madera de la terraza, la mesa llena de queso traído de Zacatecas, los enormes cristales impolutos. El cielo más cercano que nunca, antojadizo, volátil. Nada, sin embargo, me resulta familiar. Y me pregunto qué habría sido de mi vida hace más de diez años si hubiera empezado por aquí."

Rest in peace, Félix Ernesto Chávez.

18-VI-2012 ON PLAGIARISING, AGAIN, WITH SOME RECENT ANECDOTES (AND A PAIR OF LOUBOUTINS)

Possibly, each anecdote deserves a separate entry but since they seem to be interconnected somehow, here they are together.

I show a student where the plagiarised sentence she's used comes from (a website) and she claims not to be aware of having copied –her defence is that the complete sentence stayed in her mind like that and hence appeared in her essay. I point out to one of my mature students that a whole paragraph in his essay comes from an unacknowledged source and he claims he didn't know that this particular source could not be used (Yahoo. Answers) –he doesn't quite defend himself but still demands to pass the subject. He tells me he sympathises with my worries about plagiarising as he's a secondary school teacher. Third, a student explains to a colleague that he doesn't understand why she considers that his exercise is plagiarised, as the suspect text comes from a book (quoted in a website, I think) and not from a website. The same colleague has her students sign a document stating that the whole content of their essays is in their own words, and still finds plagiarised text. Finally, a student demands his right to be re-assessed and when I catch him plagiarising he answers that since I hadn't noticed the plagiarism the first time around I should not fail him.

Recently I came across a website with a banner warning students not to plagiarise its contents and explaining, once more, what plagiarising consists of. The concept is very simple and we're truly puzzled as to why students have so many difficulties to grasp it: you plagiarise when you pass off as your own text copied from another source, which remains unacknowledged. This source can be from the internet or printed, that is irrelevant; what matters is that work you submit as 100% yours actually includes paragraphs, complete sentences or fragments of long sentences that you have not written. One thing is a quotation, which is a borrowing properly identified between quotation marks and accompanied by a bibliographical reference to the source text, and quite another plagiarism, which is an intellectual offence, as you steal from others words and ideas that you present as your own.

The difficulties to see plagiarising as a serious offence have much to do, of course, with the weakening of the sense of authority that the internet is responsible for. The main source of information we use today, Wikipedia, is anonymous and, as such, often copied by other websites. This might give the wrong idea that anything on the net can be freely used, no matter whether it has an author or not. The author is not quite as dead as Barthes supposed but the idea of authorship (and the rights it entails) is being questioned. 'Copyleft' discourse even supposes that this is at it should be, as ideas and knowledge should circulate freely regardless of copyright regulated by law. The problem with this approach is that it can't apply to texts on which merit is assessed, such as students' exercises. We assess on an individual basis, checking the originality and the effort put into each assignment. If a student borrows text produced by someone else's efforts, then s/he is cheating in his personal assessment. Students who plagiarise just don't make the effort of making themselves responsible for their own work.

I'm not sure what example to quote, as we're surrounded by blatant examples of 'legal' plagiarism. Just this week a judge has declared that Zara has a right to use red

soles in its high-heeled shoes, even though this is a gimmick plagiarised from French designer Christian Louboutin. Some fashion ignoramus might indeed think that Zara have great original ideas, without realising that the credit is due to Louboutin. And that is the whole point of plagiarism: that you arrogate to yourself merits that others deserve (Zara could have used green or asked Louboutin for permission, instead). Here, of course, the judge is establishing a dangerous precedent by allowing Zara to plagiarise for quite unclear reasons (it seems Louboutin didn't copyright the specific Pantone red). The universities, in contrast, have very different ideas about plagiarism because we teachers, as producers of ideas, are all Louboutins (or aspiring Louboutins). We know how hard it is to think and this is why we don't welcome Zaras in our midst. They do exist, but we 'don't buy them'... (I hope you get the analogy and don't go telling everyone that teachers are snobs who don't shop in Zara and that we earn enough money to buy red-soled Louboutins!!).

I hope this explains to you, students, why you should not plagiarise and to you, teachers, why it's so hard to prove that plagiarising is a crime.

25-VI-2012 TERRY AND CHARLIE: THE (VICTORIAN) CONNECTION SURFACES

I must thank my PhD supervisor in Scotland, Prof. David Punter, for inviting me to overcome my prejudice against the colourful covers of Terry Pratchett's novels and kicking me head first into the Discworld. 17 years and 39 novels later I can only say 'thank you, thank you, thank you...' for so much literary pleasure. As happens, I have just started supervising a PhD dissertation on Pratchett (by Rosa María Moreno), thus breaking the rule that treasured authors must be kept just for pleasure.

Rosa María's focus are five of the best novels and, in particular, how humour is constructed in them. Pratchett is a superb writer of comic fantasy and one of the best-kept secrets of English Literature, in view of the little academic attention he has received (talk about prejudice...). All his novels reach systematically the top of the best-selling list in the UK but I know very few academic readers of his work, if any, and just a handful of fans (Rosa María among them). There's a book-length monograph about him called *Accused of Literature* and that seems to be the problem: that calling Pratchett a literary author sounds pretty much like an accusation. I've had the pleasure of teaching the 25th Discworld novel, *The Truth* (still my favourite) and his collaboration with Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens*, though I must acknowledge that Pratchett's dense web of allusions (he's a very sharp satirist) make reading his novels a hard task for many students. This is one of the paradoxes of popular fiction in the university classroom –Joyce ends up seeming more accessible... (right, Rosa María?)

The reason why I'm writing this posting is sheer serendipity. I have just gone through Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, with the usual immense pleasure I find in reading his work. One of my colleagues, Néstor, saw the copy on my table and he launched into enthusiastic praise of Dickens. We both agreed that a) a non-native learners of English can only fully appreciate Dickens after reaching 40 (sorry, students!) and b) there's none like him to portray eccentricity and absurdity (Becket is just a would-be-Dickens...).

Then I read Pratchett's latest paperback, *Snuff*, and something clicked: hang on, this *is* Dickens, passed through Tolkien and Monty Python. I have never doubted that Pratchett's chaotic Ankh-Morpork *is* Victorian London and I have always found

something endearingly Victorian in the Discworld's reluctant yet wide-eyed embrace of new technology. Yet, as Pratchett is otherwise very up-to-date in his social criticism, I had missed the Dickens in him (silly me, all that talk of justice and injustice!). To my immense surprise (and, yes, pleasure) Pratchett himself has pointed out the obvious: his next hardback, due September, is called... *Dodger!*, and yes, it has Charlie Dickens in it, together with all those other Victorian eccentrics. I'm teaching *Oliver Twist* again starting next September and I do know it's going to be a long summer, waiting for the master to see what he's done with the master in *Dodger*. I'm sure indeed that Dickens would have enjoyed reading any of Pratchett's books.

Two more things. The Discworld series has been narrating over the years the progressive inclusion of 'ethnic' minorities other than human in Ankh-Morpork's society. The police force, its most symptomatic example of integration, already boasts among its ranks a werewolf, a troll, dwarves and, indeed, Igors and vampires in its 'CSI' team. *Snuff* is all about Commander Vimes's heroic fight to have goblins acknowledged as full citizens. And, yes, also by sheer serendipity I have just read George MacDonald's Victorian classic for children, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872). I do know that goblins are much older creatures, possibly our guilty memory of the Neanderthal we exterminated. Yet, reading MacDonald's callous presentation of the goblins as pure monsters, I realised even with more clarity how Pratchett is following Dickens's wake in undoing Victorian (and indeed post- or neo-Victorian) prejudice. Perhaps the telling difference is that sentimentalism is (almost) gone. Um, well, instead of Little Nell you get a goblin girl move Ankh-Morpork's high society to tears... with a harp.

To finish: Pratchett has Alzheimer's disease in its early stages, which is why, I'm sure, his last eight novels or so, are much darker (or maybe the world is to blame for that). Also, why each new book is so precious to us, fans. Let's then, look forward to *Dodger*.

1-VII-2012 SCATTERED THOUGHTS ABOUT READING (AND E-READING)

I finally got an e-book reader three weeks ago (um, yes, a Kindle Touch). It's taken me a long time to choose one basically because I find the screens which e-book readers are equipped with too small in all cases. I guess the idea is that their overall size reproduces that of a smallish paperback you can easily carry in your handbag but this makes the actual screen tiny. An I-Pad is not an option for me, as its bright screen makes reading far more tiring and, well, it's also too big to carry comfortably in my several bags as they remain unfashionably small.

I think Virginia Woolf was the one who said that when we start a book the first thing we do is check how many pages it has (I do worse things, such as reading the ending, don't ask me why, too long to explain). I supposed she meant we assess the effort which reading that particular volume will entail. So far, this is what I miss most in my e-book reading practice. I'm getting used very slowly to the idea that instead of pages the Kindle screen announces the percentage of the text I have read so far. Also, the uniformity of the text is quite mindboggling as, logically, the specifics of each edition are lost (yes, yes, I know I can customize the text but that's not my point). I'm just a novice e-book reader and there's, as you can see, little I can say, perhaps I'll add that Project Gutenberg has become my latest addiction. No, I haven't bought anything yet –actually, no e-book reader around me seems to be buying any e-books.

The odd thing is that I use my Kindle horizontally from day one, which means that I read roughly the equivalent of half a conventional page with every touch. I'm sure this has to do with the size-matters problem I mentioned and clearly indicates that possibly 8 inches and not 6 would be the ideal screen size (an I-Pad has a 9.7 inch screen). I'm just saying a very obvious thing if I mention that what I enjoy about the e-book reader and dislike in computers is not just the comfort of the e-ink for my tired eyes but that I can avoid scrolling. In one of the episodes of the BBC documentary series *The Virtual Revolution* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00n4j0r/episodes/guide>) I heard an American lecturer (at Harvard?) argue that first-year students resist having to read books because they're used to reading just short texts on the net and they don't see the need for a book-long argumentation of any idea. In the same episode a British researcher demonstrated that we hardly ever read the complete contents of the webpages we check: we just skim through them. This is, precisely, the problem: scrolling results in superficial, partial reading –somehow we need pages to focus. The youngest raised on a diet of scrolling resist page-based reading (except, of course, the bookworms); we, the pre-internet diplodocus have brought pages back with a vengeance thanks to the e-book reader. So, it's not so much, for me, a matter of paper vs. screen but a matter of scrolling vs. thumbing pages (whether physical or virtual). Thumbing wins, em, hands down.

What I don't get about the e-book reader is the cult of the cover. I have no idea why people spend roughly 30% of the value of this high-tech gadget on an old-fashioned leather cover seemingly aimed at pretending the e-book reader *is* a paper book. My Kindle is for that reason still a domestic instrument, as I will not go for the absurd leather cover and will not squander silly money on an over-priced neoprene or cloth cover, which is all it takes. I have even considered making my own cover (yes, there are websites for that!). A friend carries her Kindle in a cute tiny folder with elastic binders and that seems to be plain sensible –though, believe it or not, a cute tiny folder is not that easy to find!

I never, ever thought this would be the main problem when owning an e-book reader... Suggestions welcome!!

8-VII-2012 A CONFERENCE: KILLING YOUR OWN PAPER

I'm back from a conference, as usual with mixed feelings. Taking a break from admin work and students to focus on sharing ideas with academic peers is always refreshing, much more so when each day ends with dinner in good company and in a beautiful town, as was the case. Yet, inevitably I wonder why we keep on using the same format when it's obvious that it needs serious improvement, even when the conference itself is well organised as this one was.

I always think of students when listening to my peers delivering papers (and when preparing my own contributions). A standard paper lasts for 20 minutes, sessions usually include three papers (= 60 minutes) and the rest of the 90 minutes of each session is ideally taken up by debate. More often than it is desirable these 90 minutes seem endless, this is why I think of students putting up with lectures of similar duration each day –and not just for three days maybe twice a year. The complaints we have been voicing over coffee are repeated from conference to conference: delegates

don't rehearse their papers in advance, take too much time, mumble the text to themselves, use PowerPoint badly...

Just let me add a few examples. A delegate used 30 minutes instead of 20 despite the desperate warnings of the polite chair and when he finally stopped his comment was that he still had 4 more pages to go... Another one insisted on speaking with the window open and the loud noise of the cars on the motorway outside overlapping her (unintelligible) words for fear that the air conditioning was not on (it was!). Another delegate simply could not manage to make her PowerPoint occupy the full screen and we had to interrupt and teach her how to do it –when the slides became visible we were dismayed to see they contained large chunks in thick print of the paper she was delivering.

I have nothing against reading from papers and using PowerPoint. I tend to be quite nervous before an audience of my peers and prefer using well-rehearsed props to doing a presentation based on notes (or slides). I did that once, was terribly anxious and vowed never to do it again. Students might not believe it but there's an enormous difference between a lecture/seminar and a conference paper, which has to do with how relaxed you feel before the audience.

What always baffles me is how much some speakers contribute to killing their own papers by failing to adapt them to the requirements of the situation, which simply begs for face-to-face communication strategies. I never ceased to be amazed by the fact that if I can't connect with a speaker's style of delivery from the first sentence I may very well not understand a single word in 20 minutes. My brain just switches off. Sorry to sound so smug but I can't help wondering what kind of teacher some of my colleagues are when I see them boycotting their own papers in conferences.

The safest thing to do, in my modest opinion, is to start from the idea that the audience will be bored to death with your paper and then think of ways to make it more attractive. Make your sentences short, speak loud and clear, look at the audience, use images and not words for the PowerPoint, throw in a bit of humour, make your body language show you do care for their attention... –all those things our students demand and expect from us. After all, aren't we supposed to be professional communicators?

Having said that, I did enjoy very much the debate time in each session, which makes me wonder whether we could do away with papers and simply talk to each other, perhaps have a gigantic three-day coffee break. I keep on telling myself that's the conference I want to organise... One day I'll do it, promise.

12-VII-2012 JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR, 2012, (WITH ZOMBIES)

I read Daniel Defoe's ultra-realistic fake diary *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) with great pleasure a few weeks ago. I was intending to devote the whole post today to Defoe's novel but reality insists on intruding, this form in the shape of a new pay cut (civil servants will not receive the Christmas pay –anymore?) and I've lost my concentration. Thinking about it, though, I realise I am writing a journal of the 'plague year', only in this 2012 the epidemic is not caused by a virus affecting bodies but by the virus that affected minds in the so-called 'fat-cow years': greed.

Defoe's classic narrates the Great Plague that swept the streets of crowded London in 1665, when he was a mere five-year-old boy (he seems to have borrowed

the pungent first-hand impressions from his the diary of his uncle, Henry Foe). It's a relentless account of the relentless spread parish by parish of the bubonic plague (yes, caused by bacteria not a virus), with its appallingly fast-mounting death toll and its gruesome symptoms. I haven't read Samuel Pepys's version of events in his famous diary but I'm sure I will soon, out of curiosity knowing he was a direct witness. The question is that Defoe's point in the *Journal* is to praise the authorities of the City of London for their reliance and general good management of the crisis (although he is also adamant when it comes to criticising them for the stern measure of containing households with a sick inhabitant, thus condemning the rest).

I'm sure you're beginning to see the analogy. In this, our 'year of the plague' 2012, the authorities are sadly mismanaging the epidemic and generally behaving like the unenlightened doctors of 1665, who thought that nice smells and lots of smoke could drive the 'pestilence' away. They couldn't even understand what was going on beneath their noses, much less dream of penicillin. Same here right now. If you think that the recipe to stop unemployment is stopping public expenditure you should get yourself quickly familiarised with the concept 'New Deal'. Maybe it's the impact of Defoe's melancholy text, with its families being quickly wiped out amidst razor sharp pain and hair-raising screams but I do feel terribly downhearted these days. I comfort myself by thinking that at least we don't have to send carts every night to pick up the dead lying abandoned in the streets but, surely, there are other kinds of death.

Then there's the matter of the zombies. I have spent a good many hours watching the TV series *The Walking Dead* and hating every minute of it (also the British equivalent, *Dead Set*) –call me masochistic. The idea behind these new plague fictions is just the opposite of Defoe's defence of civilisation: it's all about survivalism (in the American case) and plain despair (in the British). This is the most direct metaphorical use of the plague to signify the collapse of our 21st century white, Western civilisation. I don't like it because in narrative terms it's dead boring –pun intended– and also because I suspect that the constant ripping apart of undead bodies spells out a hardly concealed wish to let go of our thin veneer of civilisation. Yet, funny enough, when reading Defoe I chuckled now and then, missing the zombies very much.

Here in Spain they crowd the streets. I myself feel right now like a zombie, I'm walking dead as the civilisation I believed in slowly crumbles –'Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold'. In the conference I attended last week we got really dystopian yet there was a speaker who claimed again and again that *nothing* will happen, apocalypse will not come, it's just a crisis. Actually, he made the point of stressing that for the average Chinese and Indian person hope is just rising. The problem is that I happen to be one of those devoting their working lives to the service of a certain idea of public education right here and right now. This is being swept from under my feet and what lies beneath is not the bare ground but a frightening hole. Full of zombies who do know I'm one of them.

Having still 24 more years to endure, I wonder whether at the end of my career I'll see this 'plague year' with the same relief Defoe transmits towards the end. Right now, I don't see how far we still have to go. I wish it were only *one* year (yet scattered remnants of the plague lasted until 1750 it seems). Sorry about the suicidal mood –I was going to write that 'hopefully' the world will end, as announced, next December but I realise that's unfair to the Chinese and the Indian. Poor things, we're *their* zombies.

17-VII-2012 A FORGOTTEN BEST-SELLER: MARIE CORELLI'S *THE SORROWS OF SATAN* (1895)

Whether you're interested in Victorian Literature, Gothic fiction or the material aspects of Literature (i.e. the market), Marie Corelli's name is sure to surface in your reading. I'm interested in these three issues and so, sooner or later, I was bound to read her best-selling novel *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895).

Corelli (née Minnie Mackay) is a footnote in the history books of English Literature for, although an amazingly successful writer in her own lifetime (or at least between the 1880s and the 1910s), her melodramatic, pre-New Age fiction went out of fashion as one of those quaint things the turn of the century produced. Reading her is, then, an exercise in literary archaeology but also a good starting point to consider whether when we teach a period or wish to learn about it we do well to be satisfied with what has survived from it firmly. After all, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) used to be a relic not unlike Corelli's contemporary *Sorrows* (well, I exaggerate, as *Dracula* has never been out of print).

I've devoured *The Sorrows of Satan*. That's easy to explain: the main character, Prince Lucio (= Satan) is described from his first appearance as a most handsome man and the author devotes many, many lines to mentioning his beauty (that this is done by the other main male character, George Tempest, adds a singular queer frisson to the text –yes, Marie was gay). What annoyed me as usual in this case is that the description of so much beauty is too vague and being a child of the cinema era I need a face to focus on –yet I feel none of the current British actors (for I had to cast a British actor) is handsome enough. Um. This Lucio is a composite of Milton's Satan, Byron's Romantic heroes, dear Heathcliff and even Oscar Wilde. Like Sherlock Holmes, he is also an in-yer-face misogynist (nice, coming from a woman author...). Funnily, quite unlike Milton's tough devil, he is seeking redemption. I always suspected Satan was God's undercover agent rather than his opponent and Corelli confirms this: Satan's sorrow comes from his disgust at the human race –all those he tempts fall, causing him thus to be still barred from heaven. He seeks, thus, believers that resist him since the prayers he asks from them for his own lost soul accrue towards his redemption.

The one believer who does resist him is the author's delegate in the text, a popular writer called Mavis Clare (yes, same initials as Marie Corelli). Being a non-believer myself this is what I have enjoyed most from the text: the author's candid views on what constitutes a successful novelist, for they explain much about the state of the late Victorian literary market. Tempest happens to be a writer of literary ambitions who finds himself plucked out of his dismal garret by millions pouring on him out of the blue (actually out of hell). Having had his 'masterpiece' rejected when poor he decides to finance its publication and marketing campaign (led by Lucio) when rich. The failure to truly interest the reading public galls him and, so, he pans Mavis's last novel out of envy. She understands that the anonymous review is his and, quite sweetly, teaches him a crucial lesson about how to become a best-selling author: you need to be above all honest, never pretentious. That the author has the cheek to put herself in the text as an example of how a successful woman novelist should work and live is very irritating and quite spoils the pleasure in Lucio's exploits. Yet I could not help thinking how 'useful' this novel is to explain the split into different levels which

the British novel went through at the end of the 19th century. A character even mentions that this is because “now” everyone has a compulsory education (thanks to a law passed in 1870).

Do I recommend you to read this wonderful piece of trash? Yes, if you care to learn about late Victorian fiction beyond what the men were writing –Stevenson, Wilde, Conan Doyle, Stoker... – always bearing in mind that Marie Corelli is much closer to Ouida than to George Eliot. Then we can talk... and maybe find me help the perfect face for ultra-handsome Lucio.

26-VII-2012 1844 AND 1902, OR BETWEEN ENGELS AND LONDON: WHAT GOOD IS CAPITALISM?

Preparing for my Victorian Literature subject next semester –in particular for *Oliver Twist*– I read back-to-back Friedrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (published 1845 in German, 1887 in English) and Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1902). Each is a fascinating account of the stay of the author (complete with proletarian disguise in London’s case) among ‘the other half’ as Jacob Riis would put it, or the other ‘nation’ in Benjamin Disraeli’s lexicon. I’ll grant that I have not read these books just to better understand what Dickens fictionalised in *Oliver Twist* (1838) and then again far more bleakly in *Hard Times* (1854), but to find some kind of spurious comfort in the idea that rich Victorian Britain failed worse than current poor Spain in protecting her weakest.

Reading Engels’ thorough account of the misery brought about by the first tides of the Industrial Revolution I have a feeling not dissimilar from what I felt when reading Roger Casement’s *Congo Diary* (1902) and comparing it to *Heart of Darkness* (1897): I’m quite annoyed that not even the best Victorian fiction was up to the task of representing the horrific reality of the poorest, whether in central England or Africa. It irks me that in *Oliver Twist* Dickens can so rely on a shameless sentimental plot to save the angelic Oliver from a worse-than-death fate. Likewise, it irks me that Conrad’s prose poem focuses on Kurtz rather than on his victims. Then I pause to think that Dickens, not Engels, has left us the most vivid portrait of the tyrannical abuse that the workhouse system heaped on the poor. Again likewise, Conrad, not Casement gave us the most crushing portrait of colonialist greed. Yet, and this is a big yet, for a moment I’m tempted to simply drop Dickens and teach Engels –not to worry, I’ll just use Engels’ criticism of the workhouse as a bitter side dish.

Jack London was roughly the same age as Engels (around 25) when he reported on the horrors of the East End, where tomorrow the 2012 Olympic Games will finally allow the Tory mayor, Boris Johnson, to chuck out the proles and make room for gentrification. Engels and London, both foreigners curious about the richest empire of their time, found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer squalor they met. Engels was writing at a time when children could still be employed up to 10 hours a day (there was no state-sponsored primary education until 1871); he wonders how far the degradation of human life will go in an England subjected to periodical economic crisis. London visited his namesake city almost 60 years later, at the time of Edward VII’s coronation, to report on the effect of that terrible squalor on subsequent generations. He stresses that this is a prosperous time for Britain; still, the systematic abuse that Engels described prevails with little improvement.

Surely I'm not the first reader to be upset by London's last chapter, in which he wonders whether "Civilization [has] bettered the lot of man". He compares the Inuit folk of Alaska, a "very primitive people" who are "healthy, and strong, and happy" except at times of occasional famine with the citizens of London's East End. His conclusion is that whereas the Inuit suffer only in "bad times" East Enders "suffer from a chronic condition of starvation." He notes that "each babe (...) is born in debt to the sum of \$110. This is because of an artifice called the National Debt," which rings a bell here in Spain. London is sharp: "Since Civilization has failed to give the average Englishman food and shelter equal to that enjoyed by the Inuit, the question arises: Has Civilization increased the producing power of the average man? If it has not increased man's producing power, then Civilization cannot stand."

Indeed, it doesn't –just replace 'Civilization' for 'Capitalism' and you'll see how 110 years later, although the extreme squalor is gone from the streets of Western Europe (at least, I assume so), the same truth stands: not even the richest countries in the world, whether the United States or China, can prevent their poorest citizens from suffering much –indeed, they don't care. Here in Spain we were satisfied, believing we had managed to strike a happy medium but, sadly, this has proved as delusional as the idea that Victorian Britain got 'Civilization' right.

27-VII-2012 HOW MANY LAYERS TO THIS CAKE?: CONSIDERING SF WRITERS

I am spending a good deal of my holidays reading SF, this time not so much at random and for pleasure but, rather, trying to update my (always tottering...) knowledge of the field in a more systematic fashion. Like any other contemporary genre, SF is fast evolving and it's very hard to grasp which new names and titles are worth reading –it's actually impossible to keep up to date. Whenever two SF fans meet, we swap reading lists and, yes, I also receive the corresponding bulletins from the SF Site (<http://www.sfsite.com/>). Still, there is no way around: I have spent long hours reading SF, studying, checking endless database and Wikipedia entries and finally making overlong lists of what I should read asap (thinking also of how to combine my personal interest with the research project on US masculinities I work for, and wondering whether SF is as advanced gender-wise as I hope it is). It's been GREAT fun, dear students, believe it or not. And there's SO MUCH MORE to come!

A genre is never completely mapped out and with SF one of the obvious problems is that many writers tend to combine this genre with others, mainly fantasy and horror but also, to my surprise, detective fiction (and children's fiction). From a Gothic Studies point of view, this should be no surprise, as all these contemporary genres descend from, well, gothic romance. The main awards do distinguish particular novels by genre (clearly, the British Fantasy Award is not the same as the Arthur C. Clarke Award), yet even in that case curious overlappings happen. You might think that because SF is a (so-called) popular genre, sales are the principle on which canonicity (the list of the best) is organised, but this is *very* wrong. The awards are what matters: the Nebula, the Hugo, the British Science Fiction Award, the Locus Science Fiction Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial, the Philip K. Dick and the Arthur C. Clarke. There are others, of which I am considering for research purposes the James Tiptree jr. Award "to the work of science fiction or fantasy published in one year which best explores or expands gender roles" (www.tiptree.org).

If you check the website World Without End, you will see that the awards, precisely, have been used to establish a list (a canon) of the best SF/Fantasy/Horror writers in English born in the 20th century (yes, all combined) (see: <https://www.worldswithoutend.com/authors.asp>). It has 62 names: 61 are white, 9 are women, 20 are British and 3 Canadian (the rest American), 5 are dead... They are all also part of the website's database, which contains exactly 1,115 names (62 is 5'56%). Just take the letter A, as I did, and see how its 49 names defy classification by, let's say 'relevance' to the genre rather than 'quality'. Yet, check GoodReads or Amazon and you'll see that a good guesstimate is that perhaps 80% of those names, major or minor, have found a reader willing to leave an opinion. It's mindboggling. Particularly so if you consider that SF/F/H writers tend to be VERY prolific. Just take patron saint Philip K. Dick and consider: he published 44 novels and 120 stories, a not so uncommon average, and multiply that by, let's say, 62. Who can claim a command of this field? You need a super-reader, like John Clute, to barely understand what's going on.

Some thoughts: 1) I know nothing, as usual. 2) The whole scholarly construction of any contemporary literary genre is based on a very superficial collective knowledge of the field (5'56% sounds about right). 3) We cannot understand popular fiction well enough because of the sheer prolificness of the authors. 4) I simply cannot make sense of the market. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (founded 1965), which awards the Nebula, "has over 1,500 members" (<http://www.sfwa.org/>). The SFWA distinguishes between active members ("Established authors with three qualifying short story sales, one qualifying novel sale, or one professionally produced full-length dramatic script") and associate members ("Authors with at least one qualifying short story sale"). There's no expectation, then, that all members are PROFESSIONAL writers. Yet, even so, how can the US market stretch so far?

How many layers are there to this cake? (Please, see the comment sent by Patti to my post of 10-III-2012, on the pulp magazines...)



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