

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/saramartinalagre/) between September 2012 ((I started the blog in September 2010) and August 2013. 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.

6-IX-2012 FREEING RESEARCH FROM THE MARKET: THE BRITISH CASE (AND CHINA MIÉVILLE)

A colleague emailed me back in July yet another article on this new phenomenon I've been discussing here in fits and starts: the demand that research be freed from the market. This time it was the turn of *The Economist* (<http://www.economist.com/node/21559317>) to announce that "Academic journals face a radical shake-up." The main arguments are the ones I do defend: research funded with public resources should be available for free; journal publication is slow and expensive and it hampers research rather than promote it; publishers make excessive profits by exploiting university budgets that should be used to fund more research.

The novelty that *The Economist's* article highlights is the British Government's announcement on July 16th "that, from 2013, the results of taxpayer-financed research would be available, free and online, for anyone to read and redistribute." I haven't seen this piece of news commented on at all in Spain although apparently "On July 17th the European Union followed suit." I have already commented on Harvard University's reluctance to paying overpriced bulk rates for journal subscriptions and it seems, again according to *The Economist*, that some private foundations are also demanding that the research they finance be made freely available. The article also comments as solutions to the problem of how to replace the services provided by publishers (peer reviewing and so on) on the 'gold model' –by which authors pay a fee to have their research made available for free on specialised websites– and the 'green model' by which research is posted to a free "repository" by the journals themselves one year after publication. The craziest, most appealing idea is that of 'arXiv', where scientists send their manuscripts for a "ruthless process of open peer review." Um, you need a thick skin for that!

All this requires a huge effort of reorganisation, both structural in terms of how exactly repositories can replace journals and also in mental terms. Journals, after all, have been a key piece of research since 1665, "when the French *Journal des sçavans* and the *English Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* first began systematically publishing research results" ("Scientific journal", Wikipedia). Still are indeed. Let me stress that the whole point of this new ongoing revolution has to do not just with the fact that most research is publicly funded via research projects but also that we, university researchers, are *per se* funded through our salaries to write and publish. We are in the market for jobs but precisely the whole point of our *tenured* jobs is to give us time (less and less) for thinking, writing and publishing *without* market pressures.

Where am I going with all this? Well, the *enfant terrible* of British SF/fantasy, China Miéville –this is a guy–, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, recently caused quite a stir when he wondered at the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference "What if novelists and poets were to get a salary, the wage of a skilled worker?" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/aug/21/china-mieville-the-future-of-the-novel>) For whereas the internet may free research, it may also destroy for good the market for literary writers. Miéville, of course, realises that the process of selection would be *very* complicated. "God knows we shouldn't trust the state to make that kind of decision", he said, though he realises the state would be involved, somehow. He is

asking, in short, for tenured positions –what I enjoy thanks to the Spanish *state* as a civil servant, precisely in order to write research on the English Literature that authors like Miéville produce (my UK colleagues no longer enjoy that privilege thanks to Maggie Thatcher, by the way).

This is what I call ironic...

10-XI-2012 IS TRASH ALWAYS TRASH?: THE STRANGE CASE OF THE FILM *WARRIOR*

It often happens that suddenly a particular actor starts appearing in a number of well-publicised films without being himself particularly famous (or at least, not here). After seeing English actor Tom Hardy in *Inception*; *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and as the masked Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises*, and knowing he'd played Sikes and Heathcliff in recent TV adaptations, I got curious, checked his IMDB profile... and got to *Warrior*. Oh, my, that poster!! (see for yourself: www.imdb.com/name/nm0362766/). That did it, also the 8.3 rating, which means that this quite unknown film, not even released in Spain, is currently no. 155 in IMDB's 250 top films (of all times). And, according to audiences, among the 5 best for 2011. Strange, very strange.

I watched the film enthralled, and I don't know how to begin to explain myself. I'll begin, perhaps, by calling it 'male melodrama' in its purest state (spoilers ahead). The plot concerns two Irish-American brothers, Brendan (the eldest, played by Australian Joel Edgerton –recently seen battling *The Thing*) and Tommy (our Tom). They were estranged when their sick mother had to run away from their abusive, alcoholic father; Brendan, around 16, stayed on for the girl he eventually married. Tom (14?) fled only to see his mom soon die a miserable death. Both brothers hate their father's guts but owe the man, a former boxer, their professional vocation as fighters.

By the time the film begins, 15 to 20 years later, Tommy is back from a stint in Iraq (he did something heroic there but is actually a disgusted deserter). Brendan – recycled as committed high school teacher and family man– faces foreclosure, ruined after paying for his daughter's heart surgery. Guess what? Both find the solution to their woes in fighting the MMA ('Mixed Martial Arts') Spartan Fighting Championship (this *does* exist –it has fighters fight inside a cage...). Tommy asks Dad (Paddy, played Nick Nolte, who got an Oscar Nomination!!) to train him for pragmatic reasons –no forgiveness at all. Guess who fights whom in the tournament's final? And who wins...

Echoes of many other boxing films runs through *Warrior*, from *Rocky* to *Raging Bull*, passing through the unmissable *Fight Club* and even *Cinderella Man*. In this one, the key note for each fighting brother is clear as daylight: Tommy's rage makes him fast and furious (and so bulky!!); Brendan's despair makes him tenacious and, ultimately, impossible to defeat (also more slender!). His sweet wife, first horrified, cheers him on, as bloodthirsty as the crowd of marines supporting Tommy. Yet, and maybe here's the key to the film's popular success, *Warrior* is a film about reconciliation among brothers –the new men that must replace the damaged generation represented by the father. Both, by the way, make a stand against appalling conditions ultimately created by their own Government, whether they are the Iraq war (Tommy's buddy was killed there by friendly fire), or the failure to provide medical insurance for the children of the middle class (there's also a greedy banker involved in Brendan's fall).

I'm not saying at all this is an 8.3 film and I sympathise with all the appalled IMDB users at a loss to explain this rating (it's not hype this time, or paid voters...). Yet, this piece of trash, so cliché-ridden, so predictable, so hard to watch in its brutality, is also strangely sincere and completely straightforward about what is valued in current American masculinity. Artistically it is aeons away from *Fight Club*, but not being pretentious, this is hardly relevant. It is indeed easy to spoof, as *300* was, but, and this is possibly Tom Hardy's main contribution, Tommy is too scary to laugh at, Brendan too close to the brink of disaster.

I saw *Warrior* while trying hard to find an American novel focused on an alternative, anti-patriarchal, pro-civil rights masculinity (for work related to the research group I belong to). And, well, I'm beginning to have the nagging suspicion that this is it: there's no alternative in current US culture, although Brendan and Tommy *are* indeed the alternative to Paddy. 'Harder to find women who let themselves be punched these days, right?', Tommy sneers when Paddy explains that he's alone. Or maybe I'm depressed and I'm wondering where the 8.3 rated US film (or novel) on the alternative is (but do see Susanne Bier's *In a Better World*, a Danish film).

Any suggestions?

14-IX-2012 WE ARE THE BEST!!!: ON HOW THAT FEELS... (SWEATY)

On Wednesday 12 I learned that according to 'QS World University Rankings 2012-2013', the university I work for, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, is the best in Spain, followed by the Universitat de Barcelona. It is also number 176 in the list of the top 200 in the world (QS considers 2,500 universities in total, 700 for the 'long list'). The top 10 are, what a surprise: MIT, Cambridge, Harvard, University College London, Oxford, Imperial College London, Yale, University of Chicago, Princeton and California Institute of Technology. Yes, all English-speaking centres. Yes, the richest ones. Yes, private.

Apparently, this ranking is based on the academic reputation of each institution (40%), capacity to generate employment (10%), the ratio student/teacher (20%), citation volume (20%), internationalization (5%) and (number?) of foreign students (5%). UAB occupies place 105 by academic reputation, but, hei, it climbs up to 92 if we consider the Humanities, which rank above Social Sciences (95), Natural Sciences (106), Medicine and Life Sciences (144), and Technology and Engineering (203). Clearly, we need to start pulling rank... Barcelona, by the way, is the 11th favourite city of students around the world (no wonder, ask Erasmus students about our 'academic' reputation).

On the same day, 12, the course begins and I start my battle with the real conditions that QS does not reflect: a sweltering 30° in class at 15:00 and no air conditioning. This makes me go mad with anxiety about the possible sweat stains on my dark skirt and... the survival rate of my new students, desperately fanning themselves with their class notes. Poor things, they behave so nicely!! There are 64, more to come when the Erasmus enrol –also, I see some Chinese students not on my class list yet. This means that not all have access to my Moodle virtual classroom, and that many won't have the books I'll start discussing next week (and that were announced last July). I complain (as usual) to the corresponding Vice-Dean about the appalling heat (it was the appalling smell last year) and I'm told we need to put up with the building as it is, they're doing what they can, implicitly in this time of crisis. And

they measure the temperature now and then. Not all the official lists, by the way, are available because the computer system has decided of its own to boycott our Department.

If we're 176, and I'll believe that, the QS rating system is either not working properly or working perfectly and revealing much about universities around the world. I feel proud to contribute, if only modestly, to the UAB's top Spanish ranking and, in particular, that of the Humanities section in the world (92!!??). Today, better than ever before, I can truly say that the effort takes much sweat of my brow (and other bodily parts I'd rather not mention). Our lovely Mediterranean shores can be an enticement for many Erasmus students but they have a clear downside. This, surely, they don't notice at MIT not only because they're further north but also because, my guess, they needn't put up with the building...

If despite all this, and much more I'm narrating in this blog, we're number 176 in the world this is indeed cause for celebration!! Good for us!

19-IX-2012 OLIVER'S BASTARDY: BEYOND THE WORKHOUSE AND INTO THE LAW

Typically, there comes a point when after reading a particular book six or seven times, a new angle opens up and I wonder how come I'd missed that. In the case of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* perhaps this has much to do with having overlooked the details of the rocambolesque explanation of the connection between the poor orphan Oliver and his wicked stepbrother, Edward Leeford a.k.a. 'Monks.'

As Mr Brownlow explains (SPOILERS AHEAD...), Leeford Sr. was married off by his greedy family at the tender age of 21 to what was indeed in Regency times an old maid: a 30-year-old rich heiress. The offspring of the ill-fated marriage was Edward, apparently born wicked because of his parents' unhappiness. Edwin Leeford not only separated from his wife, but also disowned this elder son for his bad behaviour, at least nominally, not quite legally. The said Edwin then seduced pretty teen Agnes, befuddled her with the excuse that a big secret prevented him from marrying her, and made her pregnant with Oliver, never disclosing that he was already married. Then he fled to Rome, corroded by guilt, to elaborate a plan to, presumably, become a bigamist. Instead, he died and his evil first wife took the chance to destroy a second will in which he acknowledged the existence of Agnes and her bastard (not yet born). This revengeful harridan also told Agnes's father what a bad girl his daughter was, which brought about her disgrace and her untimely death in childbirth at Mudfog's workhouse. Monks, learning that the bastard had survived, concocted a strange plan with his buddy Fagin to turn him into a criminal and, if possible, do away with him. Strange, very strange.

The fact that Oliver is illegitimate is hardly concealed in the novel. He gives Noah Claypole a serious beating up for suggesting that Agnes was less than pure and it's all through quite clear that Oliver can't name his father. What I had missed is Mr Brownlow's cornering of Monks until this very poor example of an elder brother accepts sharing what little is left of Edwin's legacy with Oliver (6,000 pounds). I can't check Susan Zlotnick's article "'The Law's a Bachelor': *Oliver Twist*, Bastardy, and the New Poor Law" (*Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34:1, 2006), nor Laura Schattschneider's "Mr Brownlow's Interest in *Oliver Twist*" (*Journal of Victorian*

Culture, 6.1, 2001) because that would cost me 60 euros –too much to prepare my seminar for tomorrow and satisfy my curiosity. The free access article by Dorothy L. Haller, “Bastardy and Baby Farming in Victorian England” (<http://www.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1989-0/haller.htm>), however, informs me that although previous to 1834 fathers of illegitimate children had to support them, fear that single women would commit perjury against ‘innocent’ men, led to the Bastardy Clause in the New Poor Law of that year. By this, “All illegitimate children (...) were to be the sole responsibility of their mothers until they were 16 years old.” If Agnes had survived, being unable to support her child, she would anyway have ended up in the workhouse with him. This blatant injustice was overturned in 1844 (see also for free, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/newpoorlaw.shtml#Bastardy>)

Yet, this is not quite my point. The fact is that through Brownlow (who, remember, adopts Oliver once he’s proven to be a good boy), Dickens defends the right of illegitimate children to be granted equal rights as regards their father’s inheritance. A peculiar website on legal matters (<http://www.british-genealogy.com/forums/showthread.php/72235-Illegitimacy-and-inheritance>) explains that in 19th century England (not Scotland) “a child who was born illegitimate had no inheritance rights” unless a) the parents married after its birth (without committing bigamy, of course), b) or the illegitimate child would be “provided for in a legal settlement” or “bequeathed a legacy in a legally valid will.” The latter was indeed the case with Oliver, though as Edward’s mother destroys his father’s second will, Monks can very well keep the whole inheritance for himself, as I understand. Only Brownlow’s bullying and the threat of being reported as Fagin’s accomplice in Oliver’s abuse does the trick.

This defence of the bastard –together with that of Agnes as a fallen woman, and of Rose as the collateral damage of that fall– is, now that I think about it, as sensational as Anne Brontë’s defence of Helen as a runaway wife in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I might be totally mistaken in thinking this is not a central issue in *Oliver Twist*-related bibliography but I certainly had missed it. My apologies to my previous students... it just scares me to think that what other elephant in the room I’m missing.

24-IX-2012 THE SHORTEST AND THE LONGEST: CELEBRATING TWO YEARS (WITH AN INVITATION TO READ SF)

Two years ago, on September 19, I started publishing my ranting and raving on teaching English Literature (and other academic matters) here. I am very much surprised myself by the frequency and regularity of my postings, which now amount to 100,000 words, a long book.

Writing this blog, my journal of the plague years of the crisis, feels often very, very lonely. Yet, it keeps me sane (or rather, it prevents me from going insane) and, well, from comments published here and others I get in person, my guess is that someone is reading me, if only a few (thanks José Ángel, I appreciate!!). I don’t think I have ever wasted my time writing here, quite the opposite.

Anyway, to celebrate I’m giving away here a Guide I’ve written for anyone who might be interested, like me, in doing research in the field of SF. Yes, I know, it’s an odd gift, but, I don’t know, it just feels right. I hope someone ‘out there’ enjoys it.

Thanks!!!

27-IX-2012 HOW MUCH READING?: THE RECURRING QUESTION

One of our Erasmus students at Edinburgh emails us the reading list for one of her subjects, a crash course on 'Scottish Fiction' (third year, I guess):

Week 1. Introduction; extracts from Tobias Smollett, *Humphrey Clinker* (1771) and James Barker, *The Wonder of All the Gay World* (1749)

Week 2. Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818)

Week 3. James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824)

Week 4. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped* (1886); *Catriona* (1893)

Week 5. Eric Linklater, *Magnus Merriman* (1935)

Week 6. Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961)

Week 7. David Daiches, *Two Worlds* (1956); Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992)

Week 9. Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993)

Week 10. Iain Banks, *Complicity* (1993)

Week 11. Ian Rankin, *Set in Darkness* (2000) and *The Falls* (2001)

12 volumes, passages from 2 more. Um!! Here is my own reading list for 'Scottish Literature and Culture' (2009-10), third/fourth year, with 3 books, 4 short stories, and 1 film, for a 13-week course:

1. Xavier Solano, *El mirall escocés* (this is a 212-page essay comparing Catalonia and Scotland)

2. Short stories by A.L. Kennedy, Jackie Kay, Janice Galloway and Ali Smith, about 50 pages in total

4. Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* (1993), 336 pages

5. Ian Rankin, *Let it Bleed* (1995), 360 pages

6. Danny Boyle, *Trainspotting* (1996). Yes, the film. Irvine Welsh's novel was recommended reading.

Of course, Edinburgh's course is for native speakers of English, ours are all for second-language speakers. Yet, here's the mystery: our students take courses like this one in Britain and when they return, worn out but happy, they throw at us these trying words: 'Oh, my! They *do* make us read there!!'

As a second-year student I did take an annual subject, 'Introducción a la Literatura Española de los siglos XVIII y XIX', for which I had to read more than 20 books, including long, long *La regenta*. The teacher lectured weekly on a different text –brilliantly– and I read non-stop even the *Cartas eruditas y curiosas* (1742-1760) by Padre Feijóo. Amazing, really. There was no time for close reading and no dialogue at all between her and us, a huge class. Revising for the exam with no clue as to what would be asked was some chore. Yet, I remember that course fondly. (As fondly, mind you, as the courses in English in which I was asked to read only 5 books but would read 15 more out of curiosity to complete my personal syllabus.)

Now that I'm using 7 sessions to read *Oliver Twist* with my second-year students, working under the impression that we'll only manage to scratch the surface, I wonder whether they'd hate me horribly if I used an Edinburgh-style syllabus. In the elective 'English Theatre' I have already used, and will use again, 10 plays with no

complaints whatsoever, though, yes, I know, this amounts to roughly 1,200 pages. I'm still perplexed, no matter how hard I push my brain, by why students sent to Edinburgh accept (and love) reading so much.

Unless, that is, that I come to the uncomfortable conclusion that students see us, non-native teachers (or even native teachers) working here in Spain, as, well, not quite the 'real thing' but a kind of second-hand version of our British colleagues. Once in Britain (or in other 'serious' countries like Germany), surrounded by competitive peers and in the hands of teachers who simply do not care whether students are native or not, things must look very different... If it's that, or something else (maybe we're being too prudent?) I'd like to know so that I can finally teach 10 Victorian masterpieces instead of just 4.

1-X-2013 SNOOKI AND OBAMA (DID I JUST WRITE SNOOKI AND OBAMA?)

Instead of the expected weekly dose of *Ridiculousness*, MTV broadcasts a special programme on *Jersey Shore's* Snooki. Yes, I confess: I'm addicted to *Ridiculousness*, as I should be, being a specialist in Gender Studies. Its viral videos offer, after all, the most complete corpus one could wish for on the absurdity of human behaviour –in particular that of the US *male* teens and twenty-somethings of the infamous *Jackass* generation. I have never seen a complete episode of *Jersey Shore*, nor of *Geordie Shore*, and I'm not looking forward to seeing *Gandía Shore*, thank you very much. Snooki, though, has become this big eyesore on my screen(s), whether I want it or not.

The Snooki special showed at one point President Obama confessing, bemused but embarrassed, that until a week before he didn't know who Snooki was. Now, the question is whether Snooki knows who this Obama guy is... If you don't know who she is, then, evidently there's something very wrong with you. Nicole 'Snooki' Polizzi (b. 1987) is a big TV celebrity whose fame, like that of fellow *Jersey Shore* cast members, among them Pauly D, comes from a most unglamorous, not to say ugly, reality show. This has been raising quite a stir since 2009 because it shows with no taste whatsoever the lives of a bunch of Italian-Americans (with plenty of hard partying, booze, casual sex, etc.). Guys and gals are presented with no embarrassment at all by MTV as Guidos and Guidettes (Snooki, by the way, is actually Chilean but was adopted by her still proud Italian-American parents at six-months old). Both the inhabitants of the real *Jersey Shore* and the associations devoted to promoting Italian-American culture are mortified.

I am also mortified because a) Obama thinks he SHOULD know who the Snooki woman is, b) the Snooki woman has the *cheek* to 'write' books though she's never read one (what she says, not my opinion). She's published three so far (ghost-written by someone else, of course): *A Shore Thing*, *Gorilla Beach*, *Confessions of a Guidette*. Yes, they have got very bad reviews from Amazon readers but a few of these readers make the point that Snooki's books are just for fun and there's nothing wrong with reading them. Naturally that is the case if you think that your life is anyway not really of much value, so why not waste a few precious hours reading utter trash –or watching *Jersey Shore*. (Unless, that is, you do it with at least half your critical brain alert to what's going on, as I try to do when I watch *Ridiculousness* –yes, the typical intellectual excuse).

In our appallingly bad times (better, in any case, than WWII or similar), one is tempted to absolutely disconnect from anything intellectually more challenging than *Jersey Shore* and, well, escape. It's an option that millions have embraced. What baffles me is why anyone would want to go as far as to read a *book* by Snooki... Anyway, I'm sure we'll soon have academic papers on the issue of the misrepresentation of Italian-Americans in *Jersey Shore*, on the ethnic identity problems highlighted by Snooki's insistence on suicidal overtanning. There is always someone consuming all kinds of trash with an academic brain on the alert (I do that all the time, as I said).

I'm just begin my Cultural Studies colleagues out there to, please, please, please, ignore Snooki's books for the sake of the scant good writing left in our world. Yes, it's sheer snobbishness but when I started working on Popular Culture back in the early 1990s, I never imagined the Snookis of this world would take centre stage. And be welcome to it!

4-X-2012 CHARLES AND MARIANO JOSÉ: A ZEST FOR (CITY) LIFE

A ridiculous moment in Dickens's 'paper' (as he calls them) on a charity dinner in his *Sketches by Boz* (1836-37) provokes a strong sense of *dèjà vu*. Soon I identify it with a memory of reading Mariano José de Larra's articles back when I was a secondary-school student and again as an undegrad. Suddenly, I feel very thankful towards those who decided that I was mature enough to read Larra at 15, for that is a fond memory. As fond as that of later enjoying at 19 the whole collection of his 200 articles (within that massive survey course I mentioned two posts ago).

When I google Dickens and Larra together, though, I come up with very little. There's a trivial article on Christmas dinners –mentioning Dickens's tale *A Christmas Carol* and Larra's acerbic report on overeating and bad table manners, "El castellano viejo." Google Scholar throws up a couple of references to Lluís-Albert Chillón's *Literatura i periodisme: Literatura periodística i periodisme literari en el temps de la post-ficció* (UAB/UJI/URV, 1999). It looks very interesting. As MLA returns zilch when I check "Dickens and Larra", my guess is that Chillón's might be the only volume where both writers are mentioned, even together in the same line, as (outstanding) practitioners of *literary* journalism.

WordReference tells me, as I suspected, that there's no English translation for 'costumbrismo' though, very clearly, from a Spanish perspective (like Chillón's) it's easy to see that this is what Dickens produced in the *Sketches*. I marvel at how many of the characters and observations that later appear in his *Oliver Twist* are to be found in the *Sketches*: from the pompous parish beadle to the brutal ruffian with a dog, passing through the nightmarish suffering of the condemned at Newgate (and I have just read the first third). It's really fascinating to see how Dickens used similar material for literary journalism and for literary fiction within the short span of a couple of years.

Larra (1809-1837) wrote a mediocre historical novel, *El doncel de don Enrique el Doliente*, which follows from his play *Macías*. He was more in the line of Walter Scott (1771-1832) than of Dickens (1812-1870). The dates show how, although he was Dickens's contemporary, Larra belongs somehow to a previous literary generation, that of the Romantics, at least as a fiction writer (that's 19th century Spain for you...). As a

journalist, he's indeed Dickens's peer, though, as you may notice, he died the very same year Dickens finished the *Sketches*.

I still remember my brilliant secondary-school Spanish Literature teacher telling us coolly, with that glint in her eye, that Larra (the idiot!) shot himself dead minutes after his lover demanded that he returned the letters written during their adulterous (on both sides) love affair. He was only 27. His 5-year-old daughter, by the way, was the first to see the body (so much for having guns around the house, and for Romantic suicide). The Museo Romántico of Madrid still exhibits the very pistol Larra used –a shocking sight!

On a trip to lift up his recurrent depression, Larra visited London in 1835, yet he never met Dickens, as 'Boz' was still a nobody. A pity, they would have liked each other. And I realise that this is what the *déjà vu* elicited: the memory of feeling as a very young reader that I *liked* Larra, in the sense that I liked the brain (or mind?) producing that writing as much as I like today Dickens's brain, and for similar reasons. Here are two young men –Boz, Figaro– both very clever observers of their reality, which they portray under a stark light with a mixture of wryness and compassion. They both transmit an immense zest for life and an immense keenness on their task as recorders of the urban landscape that they daily examined. They do care.

Now that I'm 30 years older I can understand that whereas Dickens could cope with marital unhappiness and the ugly underside of English Victorian reality to die a most famous author at 58, Larra could not. His despair at Spain's backwardness –not just Dolores Armijo's rejection– was too much. That he chose to die by destroying his own brain says it all. How very Dickensian, in an odd sense.

Maybe one day someone will write one of those now fashionable novels or plays in which famous figures of the past meet and we'll have young Boz and Figaro be amazed at each other, as I am at both.

8-X-2012 AN EARLY PORTRAIT OF GENDER-RELATED VIOLENCE: DICKENS'S SKETCH "THE HOSPITAL PATIENT"

I read with my class the interview in *Oliver Twist* between the whore Nancy and the lady Rose –both 17-year-old girls separated by a social abyss. Dickens speaks through each girl's mouth, first to claim (through Nancy) that it's not inborn malice but the bad luck of finding yourself in an appalling environment as a child that leads to prostitution. Then through Rose's lips he impresses on Nancy the idea that any prostitute can be 'saved', as long as she's willing to fight for herself (and show repentance for her sin... yes, so typically Victorian). Despite Rose's perplexed tears, though, Nancy decides to return to her pimp, the brutal Sikes, to be, as she somehow foretells, murdered by him. She just can't leave him. Or won't.

Dickens was accused of being untruthful to human nature in making Nancy so defenceless –or, as we'd call her today, so emotionally dependent on her abuser. He lashed back in the 1841 preface to the novel claiming that Nancy's plight was true enough. He could do no more, lacking the contemporary research on domestic abuse that so well explains why a victim will not abandon her victimiser, not even at the risk of dying. Women like Nancy, used to being abused and exploited from early childhood, end up believing that violence (physical or psychological) is a natural part of human emotional life and even confuse abuse with an expression of love.

One of Dickens's most poignant sketches is, precisely, "The Hospital Patient" (1836) –which might well be the foundation for his assertion that Nancy is 'true' to life. Curious about a street crowd, Dickens reaches a police station where a "powerful, ill-looking young fellow" is being questioned "on the very common charge of having, on the previous night, ill-treated a woman, with whom he lived in some court hard by." She's dying in a nearby hospital and, with the police's permission, Charles the inquisitive young journalist accompanies the magistrates to doublecheck the prisoner's identity (there were witnesses) –and face, as he knows, a horrific scene. Thus they find the girl: "Her face bore deep marks of the ill-usage she had received: her hand was pressed upon her side, as if her chief pain were there; her breathing was short and heavy; and it was plain to see that she was dying fast."

When asked to identify her murderer, the victim bursts into tears and claims she injured herself: "He didn't hurt me; he wouldn't for all the world. Jack, dear Jack, you know you wouldn't!" Dear Jack, taken by surprise, starts sobbing –if you believe that. The dying girl assures him that 'they shall not persuade me to swear your life away. He didn't do it, gentlemen. He never hurt me.' Her last words are of repentance ('I hope God Almighty will forgive me all the wrong I have done, and the life I have led'), followed by a blessing for Jack and love for her poor, disappointed father. Dickens closes the sketch simply with her death, no comments added. It is understood that 'dear Jack' will be, anyway, hanged as his neighbours witnessed the attack and her testimony was just a formality.

One can always suspect that Dickens, so fond of sentimentalism, added tears to the already tearful scene and, perhaps, those words of repentance. Yet beyond all this claptrap there lies a truth which he describes as "very common," at least among low-lives like Jack (Sikes's predecessor) and his victim (Nancy's). J.S. Mill later clarified in his *The Subjection of Women* that middle- and upper-class Victorian ladies were also subjected to all kinds of abuse (Anne Brontë had already made the point in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*). What is surprising is why it has taken us so long to react.

By the way, my class and I agreed that in that interview the less credible character is Rose, the lady. Her hands, joined as if in prayer, and her abundant tears when begging Nancy to reconsider her choice seem fantastic –yesterday and today. So far I haven't found in the *Sketches* any evidence that angelic ladies like Rose existed –except in Dickens's imagination.

11-X-2012 MORE ABUSED WOMEN... IN NOVELS BY MEN

An MA student, Rubén, asks me to supervise his dissertation on Richard Yates's 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* –a novel I promised myself not to touch ever after seeing the film adaptation (because of its very ugly plot). Yet, what can I do? I like his proposal to consider 1950s masculinity and so... I *must* read Yates. Another student, Diana, an undergrad, has asked me to work on the representation of love in contemporary fiction for her BA thesis. Since she's in Dublin as an Erasmus student, I have persuaded her to focus on an Irish author. After some searching, we've fallen in love with Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1997). I read the two novels back to back over the weekend and I come to the conclusion that we don't choose books: they seek us out (to help our reading lists cohere).

Still reeling from the impact of Nancy's death in *Oliver Twist* when read aloud in class (just imagine Dickens reading *that* in public, as he did on his famous farewell tours), I've had to face something not so different in Yates's sickening portrait of American 1955 suburbia and in Doyle's stark portrait of Dublin's working-class life in the 1980s and 1990s. The three texts have male novelists consider the plight of abused women, though, of course, the specific nature of the abuse and the social condition of the woman in question is very different. Also, the narrative technique.

Dickens, who could report with such chilling effect the death of a real young woman in one of his sketches (as I commented on), turns Nancy's murder at the hands of her pimp, Sikes, into something lurid. It seems that the stage adaptations of the novel further sensationalised Nancy's death, making the scene far longer for the audience to hiss the villain to their content. I do puzzle about why Dickens chose this ugly scene as a set piece for his public readings, 30 years after he wrote it. I just fail to see how the philanthropist that worked to rescue prostitutes from the streets could also be the performer who made piles of money out of Nancy's death. It seems cruel to me. Still, I know his on her side.

Yates's novel is that kind of text whose outstanding literary qualities you can easily miss if you focus on the asphyxiating suburban lifestyle it portrays –that this novel made me physically sick is, I believe, an indicator of its effectiveness. Although no academic work has, seemingly, reflected this, Yates anticipated by a couple of years Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) with the heroine April Wheeler. The novel, narrated in the third person, has however this odd problem: it is mostly focalised through the point of view of her husband Frank, quite the average 1950s conformist. He *is* abusive in the sense that a good deal of the novel deals with his attempts to tame depressive April into being a happy wife, including a ferocious battle over their third child, which she wants to abort. Yet, I can't tell whether Yates is on his or her side and I very much suspect that many rightwing, pro-life activists might find much to admire in this sad American tragedy.

Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is the kind of novel that makes you say that stupid thing: 'My God! How could this *male* novelist use a first person *female* narrator so convincingly?' Stupid since the novelist's job description includes necessarily a capacity for empathy with any character. Yet, Doyle's narrative technique is certainly very impressive. Poor Paula Spencer is particularly convincing as an example of how love is most of the time self-delusion, and also in her difficulties to come up with a coherent memoir of her life as a battered wife. Just as Dickens will not justify the behaviour of villains like Sikes, Doyle refuses to justify Charlo's –which to me is quite right. Some people (whether men or women) are rotten apples and we need to protect their victims before we think of treating them as victims.

As happens, one of my favourite novels is Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), as I admire very much Ellis's ability to write a first person narration focused on a horrific killer (of women and men, even animals). I have also read with great pleasure Jonathan Littell's faulty but enticing first-person portrait of a Nazi officer in *The Kindly Ones* (2006). I don't know, however, whether I could put up with a story about couple-related abuse narrated by the abuser (man or woman). I don't even know whether this would have the desired effect of shaming abusers or whether it would rather, as often happens with the news, generate copycat abuse.

Do read Yates and Doyle and consider. Also Dickens, always and ever! (And thanks Rubén and Diana, for the joy of supervising exciting academic work).

16-X-2012 ELAINE SHOWALTER'S JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

Although I try to take regularly some of the teacher-training courses offered by my university, I find them, and the academic literature on higher-education teaching, generally too disconnected from my specific needs as a second-language teacher of Literature. The same applies to the bibliography on using Literature to teach English, which is not at all what I do. This is why reading Elaine Showalter's *Teaching Literature* (2003) has been quite a breath of fresh air. I have been even tempted to make a list of topics and address them here, but I find I have been already doing that for the last two years.

Showalter is herself a very-well known academic and part of the attractiveness of her book is that she's gathered an impressive array of anecdotes, opinions and tips from other big names like her. Although the volume is slim, she covers plenty of ground, with a clear focus on the teaching of *English* Literature, something, as I say, quite unusual. As I read, I ticked mentally all the points she raised –yes, I do this (hei! writing a blog is recommended); no, I don't do that (write out my classes). Some of the advice regarding the use of technology in class sounds hopelessly outdated (she speaks of video-tapes instead of DVD). Still, most ideas are worth considering in depth, from the strangely intimate nature of teaching (which is why we resist our colleagues' presence in the classroom) to how our wardrobe may make an academic point (bright colours for feminists!).

However, for all the familiarity of the issues raised, a couple of things kept nagging me. One is that since there is no straightforward description of what happens in an English Literature class, someone who had never attended one would not understand the book at all. The other matter has to do with Showalter's Anglo-American perspective. She speaks of 50' lectures, of small group discussions lead by teaching assistants (TAs) and, frankly, this is not my world. (It's funny, though, that just these days the Generalitat has announced a plan to employ 2,000 TAs in Catalan public universities, beginning already and although we have no tradition whatsoever in that sense.) Even the job titles are different and although I call myself a 'Senior Lecturer' I'm aware that my British colleagues might disagree and my American ones misunderstand.

I was first hired 21 years ago as an 'Ayudante' or 'full-time teaching assistant', although I assisted nobody and my duties were from day one those of any tenured teacher (which is why the transition to being tenured meant in practice no change except a 'spectacular' doubling of my scant salary). It's funny but I can't remember whether as a student I attended 60' or 90' classes, but, whatever the case might be, I teach 90' classes for undergrads (rather 75' if we take into account the 15' breaks between classes) and 150' to 180' classes for postgrads. The 50' lecture is unknown to me. And so are small group discussions (not in the MA, of course, where groups are to our perpetual anxiety only between 5 and 10 students). I'd like to see Elaine Showalter try to discuss a literary text with 150 students in class (as a friend has in Castilla-La Mancha) or even 20, which is more or less the lowest number for us in electives. Without teaching assistants, of course.

In my Department, Literature teachers don't use classroom time to lecture except occasionally, whenever we need to give an overview of an issue. We believe that whatever a lecture can transmit can be found in the appropriate bibliography, this is why classroom time is based on very intensive close reading. Ideally, our classes should function like Anglo-American small group discussion, with the teacher asking a leading question, and students responding (enthusiastically) and contributing close readings of passages. It hardly happens, though, given the size of the groups, the embarrassment felt by non-native speakers of English asked to read aloud or voice their opinion, etc. We try again and again...

Showalter knows nothing, either, of the challenge posed by teaching Literature in a language which is not your own. I have to face every class not just the potential embarrassment that my ageing body or my poor choice of clothes may bring, but also my unreliable linguistic abilities. I'm sure every foreign English Literature teacher has been plagued, like me, by the fear of mispronouncing or misspelling words, not finding the right expression to express a thought, etc. If, as Showalter says, teaching is a little bit like adlibbing in stand-up comedy, just imagine doing that in a second language. The presence of exchange students that are native speakers of English can also be, or is to me, a constant concern (though I love having them in class).

Finally, I had to smile when I saw that Showalter had called her epilogue 'The Joy of Teaching Literature.' That sums it up.

18-X-2012 'PROUD OF WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW': THE REALM OF STUPIDITY

At the end of a rainy afternoon I watch the 2003 documentary *Stupidity* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0399704/>) on YouTube. It's not very good but at least the producers are brave enough to address the question of why stupidity is so popular in our days (much more so when the documentary was filmed, during Bush jr.'s first mandate).

The key question, which as a teacher bothers me very much, is why, in these times when people are better educated than ever, so many human beings choose to flaunt their stupidity –including the college-educated. As an interviewee explained, today too many people are 'proud of what they don't know' instead of being troubled by what they ignore. Add to this, as Rosa María Calaf commented yesterday on TV, that in the past people would be shown on TV as a kind of reward for their merits whereas now TV has become a parade of people with no merits at all. (Call that backlash, if you will...)

Stupidity, as many observed in the documentary, has many different meanings and I would indeed agree that the academic profession has many members that I would describe as downright stupid, Literature teachers included. I myself am as guilty as many of my hypereducated peers of being unbelievably stupid at many points in my life, personal and professional. Yet, the kind of stupidity that concerns me is that of the person who won't bother to overcome their own stupidity even when they are given the tools to do so (and are intelligent enough to realise they're stupid, of course).

Downward peer pressure, I believe, is a great factor in this sad situation. Making the most of your capabilities, whether mental or physical, means taking the challenge of being different. This may attract admirers but also very often results in isolation. My generation is full of rampant individualists quite ready to step on

anyone's toes to fulfil their aims; isolation is not a huge worry. In contrast, the younger generation, I assume, have grown up in a very different climate, in which the number of cell phone and Facebook contacts are read as clear indicators of one's popularity. In neither case is the atmosphere the most suitable one for the full development of one's mental abilities: in my generation because of our fierce individualism, in the younger one because none wants to be taken for a nerd.

All this makes me wonder how athletic people view us, lazybones. After all, if I wanted to, I could join a gym, exercise every day and become as fit as Madonna (minus the botox...). Yet instead, although I don't exactly flaunt my physical unfitness, I get by as well as I can, just checking that at least I stay healthy. Yet, just think of that excellent film, *Wall-E*, and see how easy it would be for everyone to let go in a society of very fat people. Also, think of how idiotic it would be for anyone uninterested in sport to demand a university education in that field and then show up in class making it obvious they refuse to exercise. Now, that would be stupid...

It's hard not to be offensive when discussing stupidity, yet, as my job consists of fighting the natural human tendency towards stupidity, including my own, I worry. I worry, in short, because this 'pride' in not knowing is too often found in university classrooms (and offices...). It is the worst enemy of those who *do* want to know, and who are becoming little by little more reluctant to showing their ambition to learn and think.

One is not stupid, remember, because one knows little. One is stupid when, given the chance, one refuses to learn. And that applies to all of us.

18-X-2012 GENDER PEDAGOGIES, AND THE LIMITS OF MATERIAL VIOLENCE

Yesterday (17-X) I presented my little book *Desafíos a la Heterosexualidad Obligatoria*, together with Miquel Missé, author of *Transsexualitats: Altres Mirades Possibles* and Gerard Coll-Planas, author of *La Carn i la Metàfora: Una Reflexió sobre el Cos a la Teoria Queer*. At one point of the lively ensuing dialogue, we were asked about the resistance to the incorporation in our teaching of Gender Studies.

Gerard acknowledged that he was often criticised for teaching "mariconades," I explained that I need to fight my *female* students' resistance to feminism by reminding them that discrimination becomes a crucial issue when looking for a job, and deciding to be a mother. But all this was nothing in comparison to Miquel's comment that he hesitated to declare his identity as a transsexual whenever he taught workshops against gender-related violence in secondary schools, because he wanted to "leave the place alive."

Logically, those of us working on Gender Studies are a bunch of naive idealists who think that everyone will eventually see the logic of total tolerance for personal choice. This creates what might even be a dangerous bubble as we carefully avoid contact with recalcitrant patriarchal individuals. They are often in class, as men or women, but political correctness prevents them from answering back; besides this, there are always ways of avoiding our discourse, as we give them the choice of not taking our elective courses or of working on other issues in our compulsory ones. Students unbounded by political correctness, the ones that Miquel faces, are another matter.

Miquel himself was not sure about his decision not to present himself as a transsexual in the workshops, as this contributes to concealing his identity and that of other persons like him. Yet, I sympathise for there is always the possibility that he'd be verbally abused –from sneers to insults. I want to believe that a physical assault would never happen, but the simple fact that I have to consider this possibility is indeed worrisome. The ugly reality of material violence is, precisely, what makes Gender Studies so necessary as a preventive pedagogy.

I myself and the colleagues who teach Gender Studies suffer from another form of violence, which I'll call intellectual. Other teachers, even Department colleagues, use their classes to criticise and undermine what we do, somehow suggesting that because we do Gender Studies we are not qualified to teach Literature in a 'proper' (philological?) way, whatever that means. In other cases, they teach texts we also teach just because Gender Studies is fashionable, or because they want to offer the 'proper' non-ideological reading –as if that's not in itself ideological.

I'm really looking forward to meeting the colleagues already teaching in the new UAB Minor on Gender Studies, see what's going on in their classes. And, yes, as Miquel said, maybe we should attend one of his workshops.

23-X-2012 RUNNING IN CIRCLES?: ONLINE TEACHING AT UOC

Last Saturday I attended a seminar on the use of up-to-date computer technologies at my other university, the online Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. I've been teaching an 'Introduction to English Literature' for undergrads, compulsory for the degrees in 'Humanities' and 'Language and Literature', since 1998; it's currently the 27th semester I do so. And I still enjoy it.

I don't write much about UOC, or rather, very little, because, somehow, things run more smoothly there. The virtual campus platform is fine, so is administration and organisation; the students are usually highly motivated, with an interesting mix of ages (20 to over 65!!) and backgrounds. And of locations: I remember a glorious semester in which I had students in China, Japan, Florida and Ghana (I mean Catalans working there). I have learned plenty from UOC that I keep applying to UAB, as they have always been far more demanding concerning the clarity of the contractual relationship between teacher and student. I still hate it, though, that we, associate teachers, who used to be called consultors, are now called 'teaching collaborator' but still not quite 'teacher'. And payment could be higher...

The issue that soon came up yesterday in the seminar is how the emphasis on learning skills and competences has affected learning content. In plain words: students do the exercises quite well but do not read nor learn in depth the course materials: they do not *study*. This is basic in the Humanities, as essentially, you cannot improve your competences and skills without constantly working on your intellectual capital, your fund of knowledge. This is common to both presential and virtual universities, as we're both stuck with the same dilemma: students tend to limit the time used for study, whereas in my time it was very clear to us as students that the amount we needed to learn was up to us, provided we understood that it should take all of our free time. Consequently, the measures we are developing to make sure students do study pass through assessing or monitoring them on what they learn. And they're self-defeating.

A colleague presented a method to have students develop the quizzes to test themselves on the course materials, arguing that in this way they need to understand well the texts. I liked that idea and will implement it in my two universities, in my own style. Yet, as I'm sure you see, whether the quiz is done on paper in class or virtually through Moodle, the wrong principle is at work: we need to 'force' students to study; besides, as the amount of background reading on which they can be tested is limited and usually focused on one text or kind of material, we don't fulfil our aim at all: that they self-educate by choosing autonomously what to read from the bibliographies we provide (as we, teachers who were college students in the 1980s or earlier, were expected to do –and as the new competence-focused pedagogies require as well).

After another presentation, in which a UOC colleague showed the very hard work he'd done in turning his 'linear' class materials into an enticing hypertext, another very experienced colleague argued that, in the end, we're working to back up a very classical pedagogy with new technologies without computers really changing the pedagogy at all. She worried that maybe UOC was becoming obsolete but I disagree: no matter how and where you teach a subject in the Humanities, the principle is the same –students *need* to study, as we, teachers, must study all the time, whether we use books or the computer. Yes, we have new tools; yes, they're useful; yes, they can even be thrilling. However, they're worth nothing without old-fashioned cramming and it is indeed the worst fault of some constructivist pedagogies to have encouraged students to think that using computers for study would decrease the effort needed to learn.

I am also personally quite tired of this carrot-and-stick approach by which I, as a teacher, am made responsible for forcing students to read-learn-think (=study!), worrying all the time about which shortcuts they'll use to short-change me. Just remember: when I complained last June about the poor results of the first-year Literature quiz a student wrote in this very blog that if I was so concerned I should have worked harder on that quiz in class –when, actually, that quiz tests the students' capacity to study on their own. They should be concerned, not I. And, above all, they should be concerned to *learn*, not to pass the quiz. Personally, I'd rather trust that everyone will learn the contents of the handbook independently than waste my precious research time marking quizzes.

In the end I'd like to make all my students more autonomous and not more dependent on my monitoring them. I'll work on that, in my two classrooms. Promise.

27-X-2012 TWO THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS ON GENDER: *AMMONITE* AND *ETHAN OF ATHOS*

I read back-to-back Nicola Griffith's acclaimed *Ammonite* (1993), just re-issued as an SF Masterwork, and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Ethan of Athos* (1986), as part of my current search for sf novels with interesting ideas about gender. Back in January I was wondering here whether I'd eventually write a paper on another one of them, David Brin's *Glory Season*, and, well, it's done: I emailed the final version 2 days ago. In the end, that 'average' novel, as I called it, has ended up inspiring a very complex chain of thought about my misgivings about certain kinds of separatist sf feminist fiction.

Brin lost the James Tiptree jr award for best sf fiction focused on gender issues to Griffith, and I really needed to check in which ways her work is superior. My

conclusion is that it is not. Also, that humour does benefit this kind of speculative fiction.

Ammonite is so close to Ursula K. LeGuin's classic *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1968) that I even wondered whether Griffith had the book at hand as she wrote, as a reference. In both cases, an anthropologist, risks his or her life to understand what is going on in a distant planet in which something quite odd connected with gender is happening. As any sf fan knows, LeGuin's male explorer, Genli Ai, is completely baffled by the fact that Gethenians are genderless until they enter 'kemmer' and become either male or female, depending on the sex their erotic partner triggers. I used to love LeGuin's book until I realised that she never contemplates same-sex unions. Maybe Griffith had the same problem, I don't know.

The question is that her female anthropologist, Marghe Taishan, is sent to test in her own body a vaccine against the virus that has killed off all men (... and 20% of the women). Logically, she finds a new Herlandia, peopled only by women. It's true that Griffith's planet has a much larger variety of women characters than Charlotte Gilman Perkins's classic *Herland* (from her 1915 novel), and that she's very open about their lesbianism. It's also quite true that her women are all convincing in the tasks they carry out: I didn't miss male characters at all. What I totally disliked was that Griffith doesn't bother to explain why her *sexist* virus has killed *all* the men – I found that narrative resource plain androphobic. I also disliked her 'magical' approach to reproduction. Genetic variety is achieved when the women fall into a mystic, visionary state in which they can manipulate the embryos in their partner's body, without surgery or lab work. Deep sigh... at the technophobic silliness of feminist pastoral sf.

From what I've read, *Ethan of Athos* is possibly one of the worst novels by Lois McMaster Bujold, which is great, for that was my introduction to her work and I loved it. She exports the idea of the misogynistic monastery on mount Athos in Greece to an all-male planet, in which men can choose between celibacy or homosexuality. In this society men accumulate credits to be allowed to become fathers of sons gestated in artificial uteri. This patriarchal lifestyle depends, however, on the availability of ovaries on the interplanetary bio-market and is deeply threatened when someone tampers with Athos's most recent purchase. Ethan, a doctor in charge of one of the reproduction centres, is sent to find out what happened and to buy replacement ovaries. What follows is a highly entertaining, humorous adventure, as Ethan adapts to the fact that a *woman* (eeks!), and a mercenary to boot, has become his main aid in that mad quest for artificial reproduction.

An Amazon reader wonders whether Bujold is homophobic in making her all-male planet misogynistic. I don't think so, although it's true that Ethan doesn't meet any other gay men outside Athos. I think that her target is, rather, gender separatism, as it leads to absurdly one-sided societies. Ethan himself realises that, after all, Athos is going to be conditioned for generations to come by the genes he's chosen for its new baby boys, as it has been already conditioned by those of the first woman who helped to start the experiment. In contrast, in Griffith's tale the erasure of men's genetic imprint and even presence is total. Neither planet, of course, can be a utopia for heterosexual women like myself.

Possibly, what I enjoyed best in Bujold's tale is that she lets Athos be, and even gives Ethan an unexpected new lover. A more radical feminist –and I have no doubt that she is a feminist indeed, considering her mercenary Elli Quinn– would have

dismissed Athos altogether, but my impression is that Bujold's universe is big enough to encompass all kinds of gender choices, even a utopian patriarchal celibate/gay world. Only this explains her heroine's own choices, ironic as they may be. In contrast, Griffith's world is completely humourless, as she takes the premise too seriously to consider its glaring faults, both as a lesbian paradise and as an androphobic hell.

Now you choose...

1-XI-2012 GILBERT AND HEATHCLIFF, AGAIN: PREVENTING ROMANCE

About a year ago I wrote an entry (20-X-2011) connecting Anne Brontë's Gilbert, the hero of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and Heathcliff, the hero-villain of her sister Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. I still think that Anne bore Emily's novel in mind as she wrote her own and that Gilbert is a more civilised version of Heathcliff. What puzzles me, and this is the question I asked my students, is why Gilbert is not a more obviously attractive character, like Heathcliff himself or Charlotte's Rochester.

One of the girls answered that she found him soft, or bland; my personal view is that his manifest passion for Helen and even his brutal attack against her protector Frederick Lawrence belies this view. In the end, we agreed that his moderate attractiveness is the inevitable result of Anne's choice to narrate the story through first-person voices (or, rather, written documents). This makes it impossible for Gilbert to qualify himself as attractive (it would be ridiculous for him to comment on his own appearance in eulogising terms). Helen's diary is interrupted precisely at the point when she meets him, for she tears off the pages she's written on Gilbert before giving him the diary. She does describe her falling in love with a handsome man, but he turns out to be the villain of the piece, her abusive husband Arthur; thus, we female readers are prevented from forming the deep emotional attachment with a male character that Emily forces us to face in Heathcliff's case. Anne made the choice of not allowing Helen to narrate her falling in love with Gilbert and, so, without the expression of her desire for him we, as readers, cannot love him. It's either that or, as another girl said, we women actually prefer the bad guys, an opinion that, nevertheless, clashes badly with the fact that no reader loves Arthur.

As a female reader I must confess that it's embarrassingly easy to manipulate our desire for a male character, as I have found out when reading Iain M. Banks's new Culture novel *The Hydrogen Sonata* (see next post). The female protagonist, Vyr, is accompanied in her adventure by the organic avatar of an AI, the Mind that runs a spaceship. The avatar, Berdle, assumes a male human appearance that Vyr perceives as "handsome", strikingly so. Despite Berdle's annoyed response that he's not male, female or anything remotely gendered, Banks's omniscient narrative focalised through Vyr insists that he is desirable. She's hooked and so are we as female readers (I'm not sure, but I'll assume that gay readers, I mean men, also react to this manipulation of readerly desire). In contrast, nobody tells us in *The Tenant* that Gilbert is sexy.

I believe this is Anne's deliberate choice. Her novel deals with the dangers of falling in love for the wrong reasons and with the wrong person. Through Helen she advises us (female) reader to make choices based not only on irrational desire but on a rational examination of our prospective partner's behaviour. This diminishes no doubt the romantic substance of the story and the hero but stresses Anne's point: that true

love may be kindled by desire but can only survive if fed by solid companionship. I agree. Still, I miss the sexiness... of the good guy.

1-XI-2012 LET'S SUBLIME: A POLITICAL READING FOR *THE HYDROGEN SONATA*

I have devoured this week Iain M. Banks's new Culture novel *The Hydrogen Sonata* (see <http://www.iain-banks.net/>). As I wrote last year in the post on *Surface Detail*, I hesitate to recommend his novels either as a mainstream or as an sf novelist for I know this is an acquired taste. I read complaints in Amazon.co.uk that he's past his prime and that *The Hydrogen Sonata* offers nothing much, in terms of new ideas or space opera. Well, I have been a very happy reader during the hours I have spent reading it, marvelling at what kind of mind can hold together such a vast literary universe, and thanking him for the sense of humour, which I always appreciate. In this one, there's a male character which overdoes it by having dozens of penises implanted all over his body –he needs four hearts to pump up all the required blood!! So much for the post-human body...

Banks has always maintained that as a Scottish sf writer his allegiance is to the genre not to the nation and, so, that his universe should not be read in political terms in connection with Scotland's history and culture. His claim has always been that he created the Culture as a utopian response to so much American dystopian SF. I have always followed his lead in this, until now. I'm sure that my reading of *The Hydrogen Sonata* is contaminated not only by the forthcoming Scottish referendum on independence in 2014 but also by the independentist madness that has gripped the otherwise sensible nation where I live, Catalonia, because of the deep economic recession.

Consider Banks's plot: his universe has reached a point in which entire civilisations may choose to Sublime into a higher state of being. One of these, the humanoid Gzilt, have decided to follow this path as a consequence of their veneration for their main religious icon: the Book of Truth, handed down to them by a long-Sublimed civilization. The Book has so far accurately predicted their whole progression as a species and seemingly suggests Subliming as the final target. Subliming can only be undertaken on the basis of a majority vote and those few who choose to be left behind must face the consequences of the ensuing planetary loneliness (and loss of significance as members of a extinct culture). A few weeks before Instigation (the beginning of the final process) the doubt arises of whether the Book of Truth might be just a pack of lies. Are the Gzilt committing a tragic mistake of epic proportions? The Culture, as usual in Banks's novels, is faced with the tough decision of letting things be, or plunge their friends the Gzilt into chaos at the very last minute.

All this rang a bell as I read, which does not necessarily mean that Banks intended *The Hydrogen Sonata* to be an allegory. I do not know whether he'd be annoyed or amused by my paranoiac reading of his sf novel, I'd like to believe he'd be amused indeed. I realise that I am projecting my own fears, as no matter how in favour I may be of Catalan independence, I am worried sick that matters have gone too far, too rashly and, what bothers me most, with little Catalan sense of 'seny'. Those who Sublime in Banks's novel do not usually return while the very few who do are too overwhelmed to be minimally coherent. This contributes to the impression that the

grass is indeed greener on the other side, but none really knows for sure. The alternative choice, though, the almost complete loneliness that the female protagonist Vyr considers is equally scary.

So much for reading sf to escape from the worries of daily life here on Earth...

6-XI-2012 THE WORK I'VE TAUGHT MOST OFTEN: KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY* (AND STEREOTYPES)

I haven't been able to find a better title for this post possibly because this is it: I want to write about the work I have taught most often throughout my 21 years as a university teacher. It used to be Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* until I took a break from it to teach Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a little tired of seeing my female students fall for Heathcliff despite my presenting him as a downright villain (I know I'm not done with him...). Ironically, I only started teaching Ishiguro's masterpiece at UAB recently, to first year students, after having taught it every semester since 1998 at UOC. Now it's the 27th time, 28th (or possibly 29th) if I consider my UAB teaching.

I cannot keep tabs on how many students have read *The Remains of the Day* because of my classes but they must be over 1,000. A few years ago, I even wrote a letter to Mr. Ishiguro, asking him whether he'd be so kind to acknowledge my devotion to his novel with a message to my UOC students. He never replied, which I thought was very bad PR. I must explain that I don't like any other novel by Ishiguro. I even had a sort of misencounter with him, a few years before the letter, because there is no way I can hear the voice of the narrator in *When We Were Orphans* (a problem, it seems, shared by other readers). I asked him, please, to read for us his fans (meeting him at the British Council in Barcelona), a passage from the book and he declined, arguing that if the novel didn't work for me or any other reader, there was nothing the author could do. I do regret that this is the novel he autographed for me, and not *The Remains*. And, no, this incident is not the reason why he didn't answer my letter.

It seems that back in the mid 1980s Ishiguro was annoyed by being called by a critic an 'Anglo-exotic'. He responded by deconstructing the most English of all English stereotypes: that of the perfect butler. His butler, Stevens, is given the first person narrative voice in *The Remains of the Day* and it's a marvel to see how Ishiguro manages to have us, readers, dislike and sympathise with the man simultaneously. In comparison, the film adaptation by James Ivory is just melodramatic trash, despite Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson, who are great.

My UOC students, usually what you would call 'mature students', enjoy this novel much more than their 18-year-old UAB peers, who find it, guess what?, too boring (meaning too slow). *The Remains* is, rather, a very subtle book which invites you to read between the lines and indeed against the grain. I ask my UOC students two questions: how Ishiguro criticises the role of Britain in 20th century History and how Stevens' personality is conditioned by his Englishness. Yes, this is the kind of novel that seems written to help teachers explain all that to students –and I thank Ishiguro for that. The answer to the first question shows a certain difficulty to understand class issues, for since Marxism went out of fashion it seems as if class has become more tabooed than sex. I have to point out semester after semester that Ishiguro's critique is

focused on the cheeky alliance between the British *upper classes* and the Nazis. The answer to the second question always baffles me...

Most students choose a passage in the novel in which Stevens declares that only the members of the English 'race' make good butlers, dismissing the Celts (Scottish, Welsh, Irish) and the 'Continental' as unable to "restrain their emotions". Ishiguro is clearly exposing this man as a chauvinist specimen, and hinting that he has built for himself a tailor-made sense of Englishness that fits (and suits) his own emotional shortcomings. Well, it's amazing to see how many students buy the stereotype and tell me that Stevens is 'typically English'. Have we lost the battle against stereotypes, then? Is it still five o'clock tea and 'siesta'? I usually reply that we need to see beyond this 'typicality' and see human beings as individuals, as Ishiguro suggests. Yet, it's very hard. I catch myself using stereotypes all the time (women do this, men do that...) and it's difficult to stop, they're such good crutches for lazy thinking.

So, thanks to Mr. Ishiguro I have to rethink this matter every semester, which is very healthy. I guess this is what keeps the book alive for me. In these times in which identity matters so much, we must indeed consider why stereotypes still survive and, possibly, rule.

10-XI-2012 SHORT BURSTS OF THINKING (OR WHY WRITING A BLOG MAKES SENSE)

I had an interesting conversation with a philosopher friend who, in the last few years, has been concentrating his teaching in one semester and spending the other in the USA. He has married an American woman and since re-location is not an option for either, given the stage their careers are at, he has made a pact with his Department, we'll see for how long. He's not the only one in this delicate personal situation that I know of, though this is not really my point. The point is, rather, that, as he tells me, his scientific production has increased enormously in quality and quantity because of this sentimental accident. Why? Obvious: he can concentrate and *think* for long periods of time away from his teaching duties and the usual admin hassle. As he told me, one cannot think properly when only using two days a week or even two days a month to do so.

Recently, a colleague in the Department has managed to produce a 250-page monograph with a British publishing house. I say 'has managed to produce' not because I doubted he could do it (not at all!!) but because, past the doctoral dissertation, it's almost impossible to find the time and concentration to write books, which should be our priority task. When I asked him how he'd done it, the answer was by staying away from UAB (in this case, he chose to teach at the International University at Venice; also he enjoys a teaching reduction regularly for the bulk of his research so far). I myself wrote a couple of books before starting the round of admin appointments once tenured and spent a sabbatical researching for another book that has been waiting to be written for years now. In the meantime, I've managed to write just articles, book chapters and mini-books below 100 pages.

You might say that the articles, etc. do amount to a good-sized book and that, anyway, this blog, now above 110,000 words is quite a thick volume. So, why not write the abandoned book? Well, the answer is that I'm old-fashioned, as a former student

now teaching in Britain told me. There, our peers, who don't squander precious time on admin tasks and teach less (and make twice as much money), often plan books as a series of articles over, say, three or four years. When they're done, they gather them together and, voilà!, here's a monograph. I, being old-fashioned, dislike very much that kind of book which, unless it is very well planned, tends to be too miscellaneous. To be honest, I often feel cheated by titles that promise solid discussion and that boil down to a collection of minor 'this and that' on the topic. So far, nonetheless, I haven't learned to publish this way. You could also say I have grown lazy or increasingly incapable of writing fast. Maybe it's writer's block.

So, I'm stuck not for lack of time but for lack of time to focus for a long time. Sorry, this is awkward. A colleague who kindly reads this blog (and is hyperactive, and has also written a substantial 200 plus page monograph!!) asks me how I find time to write here, when the answer is very simple: each post requires just a burst of thinking, between 30 and 60 minutes. This is not so difficult to find once or twice a week for our weeks, precisely, are fragmented into a myriad small tasks. This is the factor that makes using a whole day for a single matter almost impossible. I do manage to find now and then a Thursday-Friday window of opportunity from which most of my essays in the last 5 years have emerged (I wrote all of my little book *Desafíos a la Heterosexualidad Obligatoria* in 5 days in June, between the end of classes and the beginning of exams). And the academic year, remember, ends for everyone on 15th July (and for me as Coordinator on 31st). And, well, we need a holiday like everyone else (which, I know, we spend reading).

Fay Weldon used to say that the short story was the perfect genre for women, particularly for housewives, as their daily routine never allowed them for the long periods of concentration needed to write longer texts. So, here it is: it's the blog for me. It's either that or leaving home one semester a year, with all that implies in terms of personal cost to my private life, without mentioning the perfect nightmare of having to teach four subjects in one semester.

I'll leave it here, I need to mark some exercises delivered out of deadline...

18-XI-2012 WHAT WE TEACH, WHAT WE DON'T TEACH: SOME THOUGHTS (AND A NEW COLLABORATION)

I start here a little experiment: a series of, in principle, 5 collaborations with Cristina García Leitón, a student taking a combined BA in Spanish and English. Cristina runs her own blog, <http://palabrascomosouvenir.blogspot.com.es/>, and when I saw that she has a little subsection called 'Aventuras y desventuras de una filóloga en proceso' (within her Literature section) I got curious... After a long conversation over coffee, I proposed to her that we share one topic a month this semester, see how they sound from the point of view of a teacher and a student. Here's the first one. See her blog for her answer.

Cristina tells me that she'd like to work for a publishing house, as she loves books both for their content and as objects to market. She knows a very young person, aged just 16, already offered an internship with a publishing house, whereas one of her flatmates, with an MA degree in publishing under her belt, is still unemployed. This leads the conversation to the many things we don't teach in Spanish universities:

creative writing, training to be a literary agent, art and culture reviewing, film studies... This sets me thinking about what we *do* teach.

I told Cristina that I was interested by her use of the phrase 'filóloga en proceso' in her blog, as I doubt most students understand what they're training for in our language and literature degrees. We are called the Department of 'English Philology' but when we started the new undergrad degree the label 'Philology' was dropped in favour of 'Studies'. 'English Studies' seems a more up-to-date label and also more Anglo-American. I still prefer it, for I hardly ever call myself a 'filóloga', thinking that I'm, rather, a 'cultural and literary critic' (in English). Actually, we Literature teachers don't train any students, not even within the MA, in proper philological tasks, such as text editing (maybe I'll propose that we do it), concerned as we are by teaching the basics: how to read in depth, how to write sound academic texts.

In a way, we, university teachers, look forward ideally to self-replicating. Let me explain: I don't know how to train Cristina to access the job market for publishing, and I don't know how to train the other Cristina I have met this week, who wants to be a writer. I believe that the competences I teach, how to read English Literature and how to write about it at an advanced academic level and in near-native English, can be applied to their dream jobs. But I realise I'm most helpful training students who want to follow, like me, an academic path. These are very few and might be none soon if we're left with no MA and doctoral programme.

Am I questioning my own usefulness as a public servant and my very job? Not at all. I do know that I'm the icing on the cake and a strange luxury in this pragmatic world, not much interested in reading Literature, much less in a foreign language. As regards the two Cristinas, I believe that my main contribution to their professional training is guiding them in acquiring the cultural capital they need to become a good editor/publisher or a good writer. If it were up to me, I'd offer indeed a degree focused on Literature: how to read it, write it, edit it, review it, sell it and study it. But it's not up to me as I'm working within a philological tradition that, like all traditions, has much dinosaur DNA in it.

Just think about this: I first visited the UAB Campus almost 30 years ago to ask whether they offered a 'Licenciatura' degree in Film Studies, which is what I wanted to take (with the vague idea of becoming a specialised scholar and also, maybe, a documentary filmmaker). They still don't offer one... nobody in Spain does. And, let's not kid ourselves, in the end 'English Studies' is the old 'English Philology' just with a more appealing label. I failed spectacularly even to introduce a Film Studies elective in it...

So, Cristina, let's see what you are getting from us, Literature teachers.

18-XI-2012 RECONSIDERING JEKYLL AND HYDE ONCE MORE: ON PERSONALITY DISSOCIATION

This is the third post I write here on Stevenson's "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde", which shows that a masterpiece is that kind of text that delivers something new every time the reader approaches it. In preparation for my classes, I read Nancy Gish's essay "Jekyll and Hyde: The Pathology of Dissociation" (*International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 2, 2007) and I'm sorry to say I totally disagree with her claim that "[Pierre] Janet's theory of dissociated consciousness ... provides the most

compelling conceptual framework for understanding Stevenson's representation of duality." Multiple personality disorders started being described in clinical literature, according to Gish, in 1886 the very same year when Stevenson published his text. Interesting as this coincidence clearly is, this is not what Stevenson is addressing in his text (nor is sexual repression, as Gish convincingly argues).

Stevenson, I believe, disliked Dr. Jekyll for his hypocrisy, which mirrors that of the Victorian upper-middle class all-male professional circles to which our doctor belongs. Ironically, he has Jekyll write in his final statement that "Though so profound a double-dealer, I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I laboured, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering." A common misreading, despite these words, is the belief that whenever the good doctor becomes Mr. Hyde he loses the awareness of what his worse half is doing, which is what happens in cases of multiple personalities or dissociation. Other versions, literary and filmic descendants, might be to blame for that: Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* is actually the perfect example of psychological dissociation that Gish describes. Jekyll, on the contrary, looks at himself in the mirror as Hyde and remarks: "This, too, was myself."

To recap my argument, his case is peculiar in that whereas for common mortals the result of intoxication by drugs (alcohol included) is a change in behaviour accompanied by different degrees of disinhibition, Jekyll suffers besides a spectacular bodily transformation. Since he looks different and nobody can identify him as Jekyll his behaviour is wild, but he is all the time Jekyll, no matter whether he calls himself Hyde when in his other body. No dissociation at all, then. The problem is, of course, that once he's murdered Sir Danvers Carew (as Hyde) he also starts losing control over his metamorphic body. Thus, when Jekyll fails definitively to shed his Hyde body, he locks himself up. When his best friend Utterson brings his door down, Jekyll has no option but to kill himself still looking like Hyde, terrified as he is of being hanged. Wrongly, Utterson concludes that Jekyll is missing, until he learns the truth (and we with him) through the final two letters by Dr. Lanyon (who's witnessed a transformation) and by Jekyll himself.

In his statement, Jekyll writes that the progress of his line of research in the future will lead to the point when "man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous, and independent denizens." Somehow, this is pure common sense: we are no doubt a collection of different identities, depending on the situation (professional, familiar, sexual, leisure... you name it!). We don't change bodies, but we do change the way our bodies look –surely, we don't wear the same outfit to class and to a rock concert– and also the way we behave. And, sorry but, unlike what Stevenson imagined, the worst aspect of our Jekyll and Hydes (I'm thinking of child abusers) is how inconspicuous they are. Jack the Ripper got that right only two years after Stevenson published his masterpiece.

Jekyll suggests that the drug is neutral and that instead of Hyde he could have metamorphosed into someone saintly, supposing his better nature to have been stronger. I asked my students why we don't have a story like that (or do we??). Most answered it would be boring but one answered that it's because in that case the text would hint that drugs are good... Clever!! To see how profoundly we distrust Jekylls who fight evil rather than commit it, consider Bruce Wayne, the man who, at night,

becomes Batman (no drugs, just a mask and cool gadgets). We are currently asking ourselves (see Christopher Nolan's trilogy) whether Bruce Wayne is as psychotic as Jekyll. So much for good intentions.

And a last point to this long post, suggested by my students' exercises: the problem with arguing that Stevenson is criticising hypocritical Victorian society for forcing men to repress their instincts is that this depends on what kind of instinct we're talking about. Supposing Jekyll is secretly a rapist of either women or children I certainly would like his instincts repressed to the hilt. Call me a hypocrite if you wish.

26-XI-2012 CONSIDERING RESEARCH AND NATIONALITY (AND THE PROMPTINGS OF AN ILLUSTRIOUS VISITOR)

The research group I belong to, led by Àngels Carabí of UB and devoted to the study of masculinities in American fiction, received last Friday an illustrious visitor: Prof. Victor Seidler, an emeritus teacher of social theory at Goldsmiths in London (although he trained originally as a philosopher). I owe Prof. Seidler an important insight into my own position as a researcher and I was very happy to have the unexpected chance to thank him, as I did.

As it turns out, we had met back in 2000 in Seville at a conference on masculinity. He listened to my paper on John Grisham's *The Chamber*, a quite interesting novel about a young lawyer who decides to represent his own grandfather, a Klansman sentenced to death for a terrorist attack. Prof. Seidler approached me later and turned small talk into quite an interrogation about my motivations to analyse this novel. He soon got out of me that my two grandfathers fought on opposite sides of the Spanish Civil War but kept totally silent on what they actually did. He made me see this way that I was using Grisham's novel vicariously to understand the gaps in the history of my family's men. Touché. Very much so.

I know now that Prof. Seidler is a staunch defender of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Yet, the point I'm making here is not just that he succeeded in his inspired (psycho)analysis of the family silences nagging me onto doing research on masculinities. I'm more interested on how in his long Friday seminar he insisted that all researchers working on English Studies in Spain should consider how our histories, personal and collective, intersect with what we do as scholars.

Noticing that throughout the session he frequently mentioned our Catholic roots, I eventually explained to him that we're not used to being treated as Spanish researchers. We somehow work under the pretence that our roots play no role in what we do and although we work on foreign cultures we hardly ever bring to our research a consideration of the point of view from which we write. Logically, from his own point of view our 'difference' is what makes our research particularly relevant, for we can contribute fresh insights into dominant Anglo-American cultural criticism.

The point I needed to make, though, is that A-list journals and academic presses do not favour this type of 'difference,' preferring instead a kind of universalism that leaves it (and us) out. Since Cultural Studies exists, you're very welcome to making your own identity an integral part of research. Nevertheless, though in principle there's no obstacle to presenting yourself as you wish, my impression is that there are limits. At least, I have never heard of, say, a Basque or a Bulgarian analysis of James Joyce, though that might be extremely relevant.

Possibly, thus, many of us have chosen to work on English Studies because, unconsciously or not, we have made the choice of avoiding the tangles of our own culture(s). The downside is that those tangles stay on untangled and, besides, we're asked to pass off as what we're not: natives to Anglo-American culture (or honorary members). Yes, you're right, Prof. Seidler, we should write about that. Yet, I doubt there's a 'market' and so, we struggle on, with our backs to our own culture(s), stranded, very appropriately given the topic of our research, in no man's land.

Thank you, once more, for the insights and the encouragement to move ahead.

2-XII-2012 'BOLOGNA WELL APPLIED': WHAT WAS NOT TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT YEARS BACK

One of our students is spending her Erasmus year abroad in Dublin. She visits me during her reading week break and when I ask her what's it like there, she tells me it's "Bologna well applied." I smile at her candid verdict, cringing inwardly, and ask her what she means.

Well, this year she's being educated in the usual British-style higher education method, which the Irish seem to have imported: lectures for 100 to 300 students, group seminars with up to 20 undergrads and tutorials for around 8. I ask her to consider how to apply this, for instance, to our first-year '20th Century English Literature' class: 1 lecturer could cover the 210 students registered (plus 30 repeaters), but we'd need to split students, not counting repeaters, into 10 seminar groups, and 26 tutorial groups. Instead, we make do with 3 teachers (lecturers + TA, all combined), running classes of around 70 students, with perhaps up to 20% abandonment rate. No surprise, as we cannot give all undergrads the personalised attention they require.

The Bologna Declaration was signed, back in 1999, to back up the creation of a European Higher Education Area, based on the twin ideas of a common credit transfer system and a double-cycle system of education (ideally, a 3-year BA followed by a 2-year MA). 29 countries signed up, with 47 now on board. Absurdly, the MA degrees were first introduced in 2006, followed by the BA degrees in 2008. Things have been so badly organized that in this short time we have already have to reorganise the MAs. We used to have two: one for language, one for Literature; now we have a single one with two itineraries, constantly on the brink on being cancelled by the local Government for lack of students. This is no wonder in a system which first introduced the MA, as our first class of BA graduates, to whom the MA should have been addressed originally, is finishing this year.

Then, there's the 'little' matter of local cultural traditions. In Spain we used to have a 5-year 'Licenciatura' system, split into a first cycle (3 years, based on compulsory subjects) and a second cycle (2 years, based on elective subjects). We dismantled this around 1999 to introduce shorter 4-year 'Licenciaturas' in 2002, I think, that, anyway, most students took 5 years to complete. Then came the 4-year 'Grados' which were the result of the pressures exerted by small provincial universities, afraid of losing all MA students to bigger universities after a 3-year BA. The result? It's a mighty mess when it comes to Erasmus exchanges, and does not contribute at all to building a homogeneous European space. Now, I'm told, we'll soon introduce, finally!, a 3-year BA followed by a 2-year MA: in short, the old 'Licenciatura' but with separate degrees and prices for each part. Well, not quite the old

‘Licenciatura’ as in the meantime secondary education has been, um, ‘destroyed’ would be the right word.

In contrast, though I’m not very well informed, my guess is that Britain (and Ireland) have done nothing to adapt themselves to Bologna, as, well, Bologna was based, quite patronisingly, on what they did. Bologna well applied, indeed, but not in the sense my student meant. It’s very frustrating to be told again and again by students spending their Erasmus year in Britain (and Ireland) that there they work very hard there, and read plenty. I do not doubt the capacity of my British (and Irish) colleagues but although I do support the good intentions of the Bologna declaration, either the accompanying practice of continuous assessment does not fit our university system or our university system does not fit the practice. For sheer lack of teaching resources.

I would not go back to the system of lectures in gigantic classes with no contact whatsoever with teachers, followed by impersonal final exams that we used to suffer in the ‘Licenciatura’ but, clearly, we are surviving on the teachers’ good will to make up for structural changes that never happened. It’s like, if you allow me, the change to winter time at the end of October, which shortens daylight for one hour in the evening. I guess this is fine for Northern countries which shut up shop at 5, but with long days running until 8 for many people, I don’t see what we’re saving at all here in the South.

This, I believe, has been overlooked just as local needs and problems were overlooked by this badly applied Bologna.

9-XII-2012 THE VAGARIES OF JOURNAL RATINGS (AND HOW YOUR OWN WORK MAY CHANGE QUALITY WITHOUT YOU LIFTING A FINGER)

A colleague tells me that she’s very disappointed as a prestige journal where she published an article has now been demoted from the A list to the B list (in the ANECA lists, I think). She is really annoyed that when the time comes to pass her research assessment exercise this will affect her negatively. Her jewel in the crown is lost and this doesn’t make any sense to her (or myself), since her article remains unaltered. I tell about this to another friend, and he tells me that in his case it’s the opposite: a journal where he published recently an article has gone from B to A, which, of course, means also a gain for him although, logically, his article has not changed at all.

As a Literature teacher I’m well aware that the reputation of books changes throughout time, with very popular, even well respected authors meaning nothing to a later generation (I have just read, for instance, a blog review in which the author comments that since everyone has forgotten who Robert A. Heinlein was, he needs to point out he dominated SF between the 1960s and the 1980s – that’s how volatile fame is). Magazines of any kind are subject to the same vagaries. After all, everyone has forgotten where Edgar Allan Poe published his tales whereas the tales themselves stay in print. Something tells me, though, that academic journals should not suffer from the same kind of capricious fate since a change in their fortunes means, as you can see, a change in ours. This happens, as I have explained many times, because our articles are rated according to where we publish and not to what they do contribute to knowledge regardless of where they are published.

There's really nothing much to add to this absurd state of matters and today's post should perhaps end here. I'll add, though, a few more comments.

The very efficient staff at the Humanities Library of my university have developed a very complete resource for those working on their accreditations: the website "Suport a l'acreditació i l'avaluació de la recerca" (<http://www.bib.uab.cat/human/acreditacions/planes/publiques/index.php>). If you have a rainy afternoon soon coming you might spend it comparing how the diverse Spanish agencies regard particular journals, citation databases and general resources (like Google Scholar). You'll see this way the many incongruities we fight daily...

The other hot matter is the revision of ERIH's criteria for the 2011 lists. Instead of the former A-B-C ratings, journals are now divided into two main categories, NATional (NAT), which refers to recognised "European publications... mostly linguistically circumscribed ... occasionally cited outside the publishing country, though their main target group is the domestic academic community" and INTernational (INT), defined as "both European and non-European publications with an internationally recognised scholarly significance ... regularly cited worldwide." INT journals subdivide on the basis of "influence and scope" into INT1, influential "in the various research domains in different countries, regularly cited all over the world," and INT2 "with significant visibility and influence in the various research domains in different countries." I'm not sure I see much difference, as everyone knows that INT1 is A, INT2 is B and NAT is C even in their own countries. There is by the way, still no list for Cultural Studies. I'm happy to say there is one for Gender Studies, though much biased in favour of Feminist Studies.

An A-list journal accepts about 10% of the submissions it receives and, often, an article tailored to meet its requirements is very hard to recycle for another publication, as each has its specific rules and aims. Just imagine making it into the elite –ha, ha... – only to be told perhaps a couple of years later that your work is just run of the mill. How tempting, once more, to give in to temptation and self-publish...

16-XII-2012 LEARNING FROM TEACHING ABOUT TEACHING, WITH STUDENTS' HELP

It's the third time I refer here to the MQD ('Improving Teaching Quality') project for Literature I'm a member of since 2010. Our strategy in the last two years has passed through focusing on the narrator when teaching fiction, a strategy which, I believe, has worked quite well for us, teachers and students. This focus allows us to lay the stress on the constructedness of the text; ideally, students can thus overcome their tendency to read for the plot and start appreciating the writing skills required to make the narrative choices that result in great works of Literature. One day, hopefully, they might even produce their own.

Last Friday, December 14, we had a one-day conference to present a variety of teaching experiences connected with the MQD project. We opened it to students and to our great surprise and pleasure, about 70, perhaps 80, of them turned up to listen to us. It was a bit weird for me to address to students (many my own) a paper I had written for my colleagues precisely about how students had welcome my proposal to work on the narrator in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and in the essay by Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the English Working Classes in 1844*. I apologised in advance and changed

as I read 'they' for 'you'. I was in the end very happy that students were my main audience as it's unusual for teachers to have the chance to rationalise what we do in class and offer explanations about our methods and pedagogy. My colleagues later told me it was the same for them.

Two ideas come next: what I have learnt from writing the paper and what I have learnt from the conference.

What I learned from writing the paper, based on the exercises I devised and that 10 students did for me, is that I/we must find a way to balance guided work with autonomous work. So far, I/we have been offering guides to help students do their work and have relied mainly on intensive class discussion and practice. I have shunned exercises, finding them too close to secondary school methods and to Spark Notes-style guides. I had to devise the Dickens-Engels exercises or else find myself with nothing to say in the conference, as my students will only finish their papers in January, yet I did so with mixed feelings. To my surprise, the ones who did these exercises, students I would certainly call autonomous, found them very useful and agreed I should develop similar sets for the other books in the course, something I'll do. I must, then, work, on new strategies for guided work that still emphasise students' autonomy, by no means an easy thing to do.

Throughout the conference students listened attentively (I think) but didn't ask questions, possibly out of shyness, given the big numbers. This leads me to think, a constant concern this semester, that we need to establish some kind of annual meeting with them in which they do ask us questions and offer comments on how we teach. We need to do this, funding or no funding, because we share the same worry: namely, that they're not autonomous enough and that the guidance (and guides) we offer are not sufficient to make up for serious deficiencies in their secondary education. As I teacher I feel I'm reaching a limit in that I don't think my pedagogy can improve without more collaboration with my students – I don't mean just feedback, I mean working together in the original sense of the word collaborate.

So, to sum up, last Friday may turn out to be a turning point in my teaching career and even perhaps in the history of the Department I work for. Let's see if I find the way to establish this annual meeting, hoping it's as fruitful as I dream it can be.

20-XII-2012 DIZZY: DOING LITERARY RESEARCH IN THE WEB 2.0 WORLD

I have spent an unusually quiet day today (pre-storm: 57 exams and 30 exercises are hitting me tomorrow) to prepare a paper for a conference. I have the abstract, I've read the book pencil in hand, I thought I could start with the bibliography. I'm talking about a short paper, 2,500 words, for a 20-minute delivery, which might perhaps expand into 4,000/4,500 for publication. So far, the bibliography I need to check already extends to 35 items and might go on growing if I don't stop myself. Now.

How's that happened? Well, easy. The conference (SAAS, next March 2013) is called 'TRANS-: The Poetics and Politics of Crossing in the US' and calls for papers addressing one of these: the transnational, the transliterary, the transgender and the transhuman, each one a topic that could be discussed in a separate conference (or ten). My own paper, on John Scalzi's SF novel *Old Man's War* (2005), deals with how the transnational is taken for granted in military SF to justify the need for the

transhuman particularly in relation to the (patriarchal/right-wing) soldier's body. This means that my bibliography has to combine all the following 'keywords': transnationalism, transhumanism (general and in SF), post-humanism (general and in SF), John Scalzi and *Old Man's War*. Ufff... Oh, I forgot 'body', 'gender', and 'masculinity'.

A fast search in MLA, Wikipedia, Google and the UAB library's catalogue quickly results in that monstrous bibliography list. I soon realise I won't have room to consider the two other novels I have been re-reading for the paper, Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*, as the discussion of the differences between the post-human and the post-post-human soldiers in the text will take up the whole paper... Not to mention the fact that I need to decide whether to consider analysing the three other novels (and associated shorter texts) that Scalzi wrote later and that, according to him, should be taken into account. I finally decide that I can't accommodate so many primary sources in the paper and that I'll stick to *Old Man's War*. This is a serious problem, as SF and fantasy often come in series. At one point I'm even seriously annoyed with Scalzi for resisting the common sense idea that books, although parts of series, are read as separate items. This ends with my putting in my Book Depository wish list the other books –though I know very well I don't have the time to read them and finish the paper, due for 10th February.

There are still no academic articles for *Old Man's War* and so, I check the internet for reviews, mostly in blogs. In one, by Nick Whyte, I find a very detailed critique of the book, elicited by the bloody death of a character in Scalzi's novel, the only one who demands that humanity negotiates with the alien enemies. Whyte accuses Scalzi bitterly of supporting right-wing militaristic solutions, a charge which, to his surprise, is answered by Scalzi himself. There follows an interesting conversation with the novelist pointing out that "As I know the author's politics better than you, I'm in the position of saying that your assumptions regarding what they might be are *wildly* inaccurate." So much for the death of the author. Scalzi then explains, not without contradictions, that he wrote the book on purpose with a few ideological blanks so as to invite a variety of responses which have indeed materialised (see his blog...).

And I have stopped here because today in our web 2.0 the bulk of the debate around any book is just overwhelming. Any book, believe me. You have to consider the 'legitimate' media reviewers, the bloggers, the author in interviews, the author's blog, the author's Twitter, the author's Facebook and the hundreds if not thousands of messages generated by all this –even before you start touching the academic work. Deep sigh. No wonder in the end papers and, generally any piece of academic writing, feels like patchwork. I wonder what writing literary biographies is going to be like in the future.

I can always, of course, ignore two thirds of all the resources, both 2.0 and traditional, but although nobody, surely, would notice, I would. Catch 22, if you ask me...

31-XII-2012 BACK TO HARRY POTTER (AND WHY THE FILMS ARE SO DISAPPOINTING)

The Christmas break seems a particularly good time to enjoy those very long texts one has never time for. In this occasion we have chosen to see the complete *Harry Potter* film series, the whole eight movies in a row and in just five days. My partner had previously stopped at number four (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*), finding details hard to remember from one film to the other, and I at number five (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*), disappointed with the hurried pace and the low emotional intensity (particularly in relation to Sirius Black's fate). I forget to mention my partner has not read the seven volumes. I have. Twice...

Seeing the films is for me work rather than just leisure, as I have always wanted to teach an elective subject about Rowling's series (published between 1997 and 2007). Yet, this is already 2013 (tomorrow) and I wonder whether by the time I manage to programme that elective, say in two years time, there will be any student left who remembers Harry Potter. I hope so. I know that fantasy readers' interest is now focused on George R. R. Martin's exciting series *A Song of Ice and Fire* but, to be honest, I haven't started reading it yet out of a concern that ageing Martin might die before the promised final volume materialises (I have seen season 1 of the TV adaptation, though, and enjoyed it very much).

The academic interest in Rowling's series, by the way, has not yet peaked out. MLA mentions 442 sources, with 57 entries for 2003 in comparison with just 7 for 2012 (obviously, not yet completed; there are 32 publications for 2011). Um, this quite surprises me, as I assumed that interest would be ebbing by now; then, of course, academic publishing moves slowly and the original child readers are now becoming young academics. I myself, not in that category at all, have not yet written my *Harry Potter* essay, started a few years ago and still waiting to be finished, a little bit daunted by the massive bibliography.

Back to the films, I must say that the experience of seeing them one after another is much better than seeing them on their own (except that plot holes are more conspicuous). I think that this adaptation is quite a prodigy in terms of production design: I keep on telling myself 'yes, that's exactly so.' Also in terms of casting, to the point that I'm beginning to wonder whether Rowling had particular British actors in mind when writing a character (yes, I know that Ian McKellen should have been Dumbledore instead of Richard Harris but he had already been chosen to play Gandalf; also, it's obvious that Michael Gambon is not Harris, whom he replaced as Dumbledore when Harris died). It's quite funny, of course, to see the younger members of the cast grow from one film to the next one but this adds to the charm of the series.

The pity is that it's just a superficial charm. Non-readers, as I see from my partners' reactions, remain quite untouched by it, as it operates on the basis of reader's recognition of the books' content. When I consider certain scenes from his point of view, even I wonder what all that fuss was about... This is, in the end, a reminder that literature (yes, I said literature) cannot be replaced by any other media. What makes Rowling's series memorable is the gusto she tells her story with. The story is dark to a point few parents of young readers realise but also absolutely gripping in Rowling's ability to mirror how a growing child like Harry feels. A child in great danger, persecuted by a truly hideous villain.

Yes, I know how this ends: with me returning to the print volumes a third time around. It might even become a regular habit. I very much doubt that Rowling's first adult novel, *An Unexpected Vacancy* (2012) can generate so much pleasure.

6-I-2013 A PERPLEXING HEROINE: MAYA IN KATHRYN BIGELOW'S *ZERO DARK THIRTY*

I'm a big Kathryn Bigelow fan, which means that my personal impression about the very high quality of her newest film, *Zero Dark Thirty*, is totally unreliable. I don't wish to review it formally here but I'll say that it's 160 minutes are thrilling, even though every one knows how they end. Bigelow's film is also a superb exercise in style, despite the ugliness of the events she narrates, including the by now quite controversial opening 15 minutes, with their grim torture scenes.

Bigelow, remember, is the only woman (together with Danish Susanne Bier, for *In a Better World*) to have won an Oscar for best director –that was only last year, for *The Hurt Locker*. She hates being judged as a *woman* director and this is why radical feminists don't like her, to which you need to add that she makes action films about men in a style many would not hesitate to call 'masculine'. Bigelow has quite a few tough female characters in her films, my favourite being Angela Bassett's Mace in *Strange Days*. Maya, heroine of *Zero Dark Thirty*, is not even her first female protagonist but I'm sure she's the kind of character that will generate much controversy, academic or otherwise.

Maya is based on the same CIA female agent that, seemingly, also inspired Claire Danes's Carrie Mathison in TV series *Homeland*. This agent is codenamed 'Jen' in *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama bin Laden*, by Navy Seal team leader Mark Bissonnette. She is described as a persistent, efficient CIA targeteer (or analyst), who spent 5 years hunting for archvillain Bin Laden and who, despite being "100%" sure of his location, had a hard time convincing the boys' club to act. This, no doubt, makes Maya a hero (though, personally, I'd rather Bin Laden had been captured and judged). In real life, to stress my point, women have been carrying out for years important tasks rarely seen on the screen.

Yet, here's the problem: when seen on the screen, these tasks are, to say the least, distressing. Mark Boal, Bigelow's screen writer, has written Maya as a kind of female companion to his own Sgt William James in *The Hurt Locker*: an obsessive, intense loner with no social graces. Maya has even less of a private life than James, as at least he is a father, while she makes it clear that even sex is irrelevant to her. She simply has no background, no family, no friends though, exceptionally for Hollywood films, she's closest to a female colleague, based on another real-life CIA agent. I did enjoy much, nonetheless, Maya's *fierce* determination to find Bin Laden, and I was happy to see that by the end she doesn't gloat but cry.

What was far more complicated to accept was her participation in torture. A while ago I wrote about a very interesting female character in the TV series *Battlestar Galactica*, Admiral Helena Cain (see: <http://kusan.uc3m.es/CIAN/index.php/CK>) who also uses men to inflict torture (in this case on other women). I could say that both are degendered in that Helena and Maya occupy positions in a hierarchical patriarchal organisation that decides for them (much more so in Maya's case). There's a chilling scene in Bigelow's film in which Maya and her colleagues coolly ignore President

Obama's claim (on TV) that the USA don't torture. Frankly, my impression is that Bigelow presents torture as something ugly, barbaric and idiotic, as it mostly results in lies (which we know from the times of the Spanish Inquisition). Seeing a *woman* organise the 'enhance interrogation' of *male* prisoners adds to this impression –and highlights the typical contradiction in feminism. Women may have made much progress within the CIA but Maya's dehumanisation underlines how high the cost is.

I have no idea how this celebration of the woman who tracked down Bin Laden and send the boys to 'kill him for me' will be received by the radical, fundamentalist Muslims that support terrorism. From their point of view, this, surely, adds insult to injury. Leaving aside what did happen, what the real 'Jen' is like, and my very serious misgivings about Bin Laden's *execution*, my point is that Bigelow and Boal have made a perplexing contribution to the imaginary of female heroism. Maya is far more human than any of those cartoonish action-film heroines that now abound but she cannot be one of those role models we need, unless we want women to be dehumanised.

The horror is that the situation 'Jen'/Maya is involved in calls for this kind of dehumanisation. I want to believe that this is the message that Bigelow and Boal wished to send, not just about women but about any person on either side of 21st century terrorism.

10-1-2013 MARKING PAPERS AGAIN: NUMBERS

Before writing this post I have checked my other two posts, written in the same week of January, in 2011 and 2012. Yes, this is the time when I must mark the papers (1,200 words on average each, including abstract and bibliography) for Victorian Literature (second year, compulsory). This year there are 53, I've gone through 44 in 3 days, 9 more left for tomorrow. And, then, in two weeks time, possibly 15 will bounce back in, I hope, much improved second versions.

What is worrying me this time is how long marking is taking me (I'm no doubt getting old). I initially thought I could do 18 every day in three days, but I have ended up doing only 10 the first day, 19 yesterday, 14 today, with 9 left for tomorrow (with emails as short breaks, lots of coffee, too much chocolate). My working day, which started at 8:30, is not quite over yet (it's only 15:15); still, the headache that has forced me to give up at one final point these last two days is already here. (It leaves 30 minutes after I quit)

I was reading yesterday that working with your brain is really tiring to an extent that is hard to imagine for people working with their body. It really is. I think we misunderstand very badly the effort it takes. Particularly, marking – it's so exhausting that I'm taking a break to *write*, as writing feels like rest. What, then, I'm wondering, is so tiring? And, obviously, can I make this task lighter?

As I wrote last year, the problem is that I can't simply read, I must correct everything down to the last comma (I proof-read, yes). I'm beginning to hesitate about whether this is professionalism or a pathology, a mild a compulsive-obsessive disorder (or OCD). Perhaps it's the same thing, as academic work seems at times pathological in its compulsory attention to detail. Every time I correct a comma or change a word for a better synonym, I wonder what effect this has on my students –why is she so picky, I'm sure they wonder. My comfort is that ex-students often thank me for being so punctilious, which doesn't help, by the way, to alleviate the burden, just in case I miss something relevant. Anything.

This year, I must say, the papers are quite good –some a real pleasure to read. This is very rewarding, and an enticement to go on, believe me. In quite a few cases, I wish I had time to continue the conversation on Charles Dickens or Anne Brontë over coffee but there's no time, everything is rushed so... The worse thing, of course, is writing the comments on the less accomplished papers. I realise that I must be precise about what exactly is wrong with a paper to help the student improve but, my God, it's really difficult to find the right tone and strike the perfect balance between advice and dismissal. I do my best...

In the end, I realise, it's not so much a matter of what marking entails but of the amount of energy it takes with so many students. To be honest, I don't know that 53 are a high number but when I think I'll have 80 in my first year course next semester I do panic. Numbers in my elective, 30, seem about right but, then, in our state of crisis, this feels like luxury. I'll enjoy it while it lasts...

17-I-2013 MARY BRUNTON, ANNE BRONTË (AND GREEN-SKINNED JANE)

My colleague Andrew Monnickendam gave a plenary lecture at the last AEDEAN conference on Scottish writer Mary Brunton (1778-1818), one of the authors he deals with in his new book *The Novels of Walter Scott and his Literary Relations (Mary Brunton, Susan Ferrier and Christian Johnstone)*. His presentation of Brunton's *Self-Control* (1811) did call my attention, as the heroine Laura paints when in dire poverty to support her father, and her would-be-seducer bears the name of Hargrave. This seemed quite close to Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as the heroine Helen Graham, a runaway wife, paints to keep herself and her little son, and is the object of the sexual passion of a man called Hargreave. I did ask Andrew whether there was evidence that Brontë had read Brunton, and it seems she might have. We do know that Austen read *Self-Control* and called it an "excellently-meant, elegantly-written work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it."

I have just finished reading Brunton's novel and I'm now convinced that Anne Brontë had read. It might even be the case that she decided to experiment with the romantic triangle and fancy the heroine already married to the libertine, meeting only too late the right gentleman. I'll call this 'echotextuality' rather than 'intertextuality' as I really have no way to prove my thesis and, anyway, it does not really matter except for my pleasure in finding literary echoes. I agree and disagree with Austen's sneer, as I have found Brunton more brisk than elegant and her plot, although at points the stuff of silly melodrama, also too close for comfort to the patterns of real misogynistic abuse (Anne's *Tenant* is, of course, an early masterpiece in this, with her portrait of domestic horrors).

Brunton's Scottish directness can be seen in the opening chapters, in which she has young Laura fence off a very direct attempt at seduction by Hargrave. The poor thing spends the following four years defending herself from the same man, no easy task as he is aided by Laura's own aunt, Lady Pelham, who tortures her mercilessly to see her married to this dashing, handsome heir (what a difference with Helen's own aunt!). Funnily enough, I was reading one evening in front of the TV and during a pause I chanced upon a Mexican soap opera with practically the same characters, situation and dialogue!

In 19th century novels the line separating seduction from downright rape is quite thin, and Laura is subjected to a second desperate attempt from which only a miracle saves her. My complaint, I think, is that she is saved only because she's the heroine while another poor girl is less lucky – I don't know if this is what Austen found improbable. One of my male students asked me quite perplexed whether the minute analysis of his feelings that Anne's hero Gilbert Markham engages in is realistic. I answered yes as I believe this is a post-Romantic novel about individuals who do care, above all, about feeling. Brunton's novel, however, also touches the improbable when it comes to the many turns and twists given to the feelings that Laura has for Hargrave (for she wants him but is morally repelled by his unruly sexuality), Hargrave for her (a classic case of craving for what he can't have) and the third member of the triangle, the manly but gentle De Courcy. Brunton's insistence on reporting rather than using dialogue and the histrionic quality of that dialogue when it materialises have filled me with impatience and hilarity in turns – but I confess I haven't been able to let go of the book until seeing Laura make the safer choice and the villains get their come-uppance.

I'm writing about Brunton and Brontë at the end of a very busy day that I have spent mainly organising an article on John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* SF saga. This is, believe me, quite a good love story about John and Jane, a couple who first meet when he, aged 75, is recycled into a 25-year-old post-human supersoldier. She, a soldier of an even less human, superior breed, has been born fully adult from his dead wife's DNA. Both are green-skinned as their chlorophyll-rich skin uses sunshine as an alternative source of energy. Inevitably they fall in love and, once they are given new human-looking bodies they start an alternative pacifist life, somewhat complicated by the discovery that Jane still remains super-human.

It's really crazy to see how women in fiction have changed and, well, I'm sorry to say that despite my sympathies for the suffering Laura and Helen, my heart is with green-skinned Jane. As a working woman with her own independent income I am developing an increasing resistance to 19th century lady heroines rewarded with money and sweet men (and who abandon painting as quickly as they can). Jane, in contrast, is awesome and I mean it in the sense that her tremendous efficiency at work generates awe – both as a ruthless killer and later as a ruthless hero.

It's funny to think that Jane comes from the same time and place as Laura as, after, what is Jane if not another version of Frankenstein's she-monster? In the end, then, I choose Mary Shelley. Sorry Mary, sorry Anne (and sorry Jane... Austen).

22-I-2013 BETWEEN THE NOVEL AND THE ESSAY: THE FALL OF BARCELONA, 1714

I was showing my city, Barcelona, to a friend from Madrid almost 20 years ago and when I explained that the Ciutadella (the Citadel) had been built to humiliate the city inhabitants after the Castilian invasion of 1714, he looked at me in surprise. "What do you mean 'Castilian invasion'?", he asked. Gosh, did I get that wrong at school? Don't they teach the same history in Madrid? Surely, I thought, that was 300 years ago and there's no need to conceal the way things were, not even in Madrid. I must laugh today at how naive we, Catalans, are. And I in particular.

I realised of course that I had been given a very sketchy view of what did happen back in 1714 so eventually I read Josep Maria Torras i Ribé's *La guerra de*

Successió i els setges de Barcelona (1697-1714) (1999), an academic essay that fell into my hands absolutely by chance (destiny!!). I found the book excellent despite its density (or because of it), and I did wonder why, for all our militant nationalism we had no Catalan *War and Peace* to tell the same sad events to the world. No such luck, whatever this says about us (or about the fact that only the Russians have managed to produce grand Literature of that kind).

On the very same day when the Minister of Education, José Ignacio Wert, proclaimed the need to ‘españolizar’ the Catalan children (10 October 2012), Catalan writer Albert Sánchez Piñol published his first novel written in Spanish, *Victus*, precisely the story of that terrible siege of 1714. Or so I thought. Lured by the memory of Torras i Ribé’s essay I read *Victus* five-hundred odd pages in a few feverish evenings, an easy task as the book is a picaresque novel seemingly only interested in making adventure out of misadventure.

Until today I didn’t know that one of the two current MP at the Spanish Parliament for Esquerra Republicana, Alfred Bosch, had published in 2008 a trilogy based on the same events, known simply as *1714*. For whatever reason, Sánchez Piñol and Bosch decided on a similar narrative tone and subgenre instead of going for Tolstoi’s throat. I’ve read blog posts and newspaper reviews calling *Victus* a great novel. Myself, I lost interest when I read the protagonist Martí Zuviria exclaim ‘guau’ (really), which I doubt was part of a young person’s vocabulary around 1700. I loved *La pell freda*, which is why I got increasingly annoyed to see my hopes dashed by this pseudo-Eduardo Mendoza product (and I love Mendoza!).

Obviously, there’s no rule stating that you can only write great historical novels about your own nation –there’s much dispute to begin with about whether Walter Scott accomplished that. What worries me is that this is a novel in Spanish, the first one about these events, and, as such, it does have an immense didactic value to teach readers like my friend (now my partner) what did happen here in Barcelona. The light tone does not conceal the horrors of the siege but the melancholy and indignation that Sánchez Piñol elicits are skin-deep in comparison to what Torras i Ribé’s essay did to me. Reading a historical novel in the city where the events happened is a very emotional exercise, as it’s easy to imagine yourself in the place of those other citizens. This is why I can’t accept Sánchez Piñol’s decision to turn this tragedy into picaresque adventure.

This semester some of my students have been working on a comparison between Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and Friedrich Engels’s *The Condition of the English Working Classes in 1844*. Their conclusion has been, inevitably, that although Engels produces a much more detailed portrait of the horrors faced by the English poor only those interested in History will read his essay. For the majority of readers (and even non-readers) poverty will be for ever best represented by little Oliver. Well, I thank Piñol for teaching me about General Villarroel –the Castilian hero who tried to defend Barcelona– but I’d rather not have Martí stand for all those who saw Barcelona fall.

Nothing I can do about it, of course, but write my own novel. Being talentless for that, this blog post will have to do. Do read Torras i Ribé. (And guys at TV3: what are you waiting for, for God’s sake? Or are you afraid of antagonising those who will swear there was never a Castilian invasion?)

30-1-2013 THEATRE IN CLASS: THE FIRST DESSERTION (AND THE LAST ONE I HOPE!)

[This one is for my English Theatre students]

I feel quite frustrated today because one of my students in the elective subject 'English Theatre' has walked out on me –even before classes begin. Actually, two have done so, one for job-related reasons and the one that worries me because (her claim) she's very shy.

As the Syllabus explains, students get 30% of their final mark for class participation and this is a very high percentage because you're expected to take part in dramatised readings of the plays selected. The shy student misunderstood this Syllabus, thinking she had a choice not to act and has left me rather than, um, embarrass herself. I'm therefore writing this, thinking that perhaps other students are in a similar panic about the subject, which makes no sense at all to me... This is all about *enjoying ourselves together* as we learn.

To begin with, most of our students choose eventually to become teachers, a profession for which being stage-shy is quite counterproductive. I am myself *very shy* in many social and personal situations but when I 'perform' in front of a class I just assume a different, bolder personality and that does the trick (I think –at least for me). I'm sure it's like this for many, many teachers around the world.

Also, I believe that part of the training we give you in the degree consists of reinforcing your oral skills, including the ability to do public presentations. Playing a part in a scene is perhaps simpler, for you're asked to assume a fake personality –what you say aren't even your words!! So you can always relax and let the author bear the burden of what you're saying and doing.

What I'm asking students to do is *not* in any case to perform as if they were actors, in costume and with no text as a prop. I ask students to prepare, simply, readings. It's absolutely their choice to decide whether to use costumes or to transform the classroom into an actual theatre. My experience of the other two editions of this very same subject is that students choose to have fun and offer a total show but it's not compulsory to do so.

In the previous edition, two years ago, what I most enjoyed was that I never knew what the classroom would look like for each performance nor what students would be wearing. I'll give you three memorable examples. In a scene from Brian Friel's *Translations* (in the first edition of the subject) the student playing the English officer in charge of occupying a small Irish village chose to wear a black leather coat and a Nazi decoration –my God, did we understand the horror of occupation! People were awed... In *Hysteria*, a farce by Terry Johnson, the female protagonist is all the time naked on scene –logically, one cannot have naked students in class, and the girl who played the part decided to wear a sign around her neck announcing 'I'm naked!' Everyone loved that. Most memorable was the sight of the young man playing the alleged madman in Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange* dressed entirely in orange and reading from the text against a background image of a blue orange (which I had found on the internet two minutes before class started!).

Some of the texts we'll read together are hard and demanding in their presentation of violence and sex on stage –but, then, you can simply read them and comment on them. I had a very concerned German Erasmus student who came to me

absolutely adamant, annoyed and worried, that she would NOT do what Sarah Kane had written in *Blasted*. Of course not!! Then she amazed us all by playing a victimised woman in one scene and a brutal soldier in the next one with the only interval of stepping onto the corridor for a quick costume change. Actually, the play that has me worried sick is Simon McBurney and Complicité's very beautiful *A Disappearing Number*, as I see no way we can reproduce in class, not even remotely, its mad visual richness. (I'm thinking of leaving that to shy students...)

Since I thought last time that it was unfair to subject students to the 'ordeal' of having them act in class, I myself acted a part. I chose the monologue of the terrorist in Simon Stephens's *Pornography*, which I accompanied with a PowerPoint presentation about the London outrages of 2007. This is someone (man or woman, who knows) travelling on the underground to plant a bomb and Stephens's whole point is that s/he happens to be as ordinary as you and me. Those are twenty minutes of my life that I recall with all their intensity, dry mouth included, and I'm looking forward to taking that tube ride again this time. What a lesson about evil!

As a teacher, I must say it is impossible for me to imagine any other way of teaching theatre than *doing* theatre –whether it's simply reading aloud or turning the classroom space upside down and yourselves. When re-reading the plays, I've been wondering all the time how we're going to present this and that, and here's the challenge –some solutions to this problem I'm already familiar with as I have learned from the students who read the scenes. Others I can't wait to see!!

So, please, trust me –I know what I'm doing and I only hope to give you a very enjoyable time to *play* (I love it that in English texts for the stage are called 'plays' and that actors 'play' parts). And if you're shy, remember that a) you choose how to present yourself on 'stage', b) some of the best actors are very shy for, as I say, they find in playing fake personalities an outlet for this shyness.

See you soon in class!!

4-II-2013 SOUTH OF FINLAND (AND WHY WE'LL NEVER BE LIKE THEM)

Yesterday I watched on La Sexta Jordi Évole's *Salvados*, this time a monographic on the Spanish schools in comparison to the best schools in the world: those of Finland (you can watch the whole programme, "Cuestión de educación", at <http://www.lasexta.com/programas/salvados/sobre-el-programa/>). One of my doctoral students spent last year working there as a teacher and, so, apart from the frequent news about Finland's very high position in all educational rankings, I have his word to rely on for a truthful view of their system. Jaume worked both with children and teenagers and he stressed the respect he had received all the time from all of them (also how well paid he was...) Évole's programme insisted, above all, on the very selective process by which only 10% of all applicants can become teachers –a most respectful profession indeed.

Let's sum up the main points that make the Finnish system work and you supply the corresponding equivalent for the Spanish school:

- 98% of all schools in Finland are public; there are no elite private schools
- they have a drop-out rate below 1%

- parents are deeply involved in their children's education and frequently meet the teachers
- only students with the best grades can train to become teachers
- headmasters are free to choose their teams, teachers are free to apply to whatever school they wish to work for
- children are assumed to be quite autonomous learners and they get very few hours of schooling, with short teaching periods and frequent breaks
- the succeeding Governments do not interfere in the running of the public schools, nor do they set up any reform without the teachers' collaboration (essentially the same system has been on for decades)
- public schools are completely free of cost to parents, and this includes school materials and also the meals children take there
- schools are very similar all over the country in terms of the mixture of minority students with the native children; those with special needs receive help from a second teacher or assistant
- teachers are usually in charge of 20 students or less
- most importantly: the whole society supports the teachers' work

An interviewee spoke of the disastrous situation that happened in the 1990s when the post-Communist world started. Finland was then hit by a terrible economic crisis as its main client, the USSR, ceased existing. The Finnish Government decided then to apply severe cuts to education and this resulted in what this man called a 'lost generation'. Since then, the Finns have learned to implement educational policies aimed at bringing out the best features of their children, no matter what their social class may be; they see this strategy as the only way to guarantee the success of their (small) community.

I'm sure you get the reverse picture.

Évole and his team concluded that, inescapably, each culture generates a particular educational model, which means that we cannot copy the Finns. Or rather, that modeling our education on Finland would require a radical change of all Spanish society. I agree with that – but here's the funny thing: what felt alien as I watched the programme was not the Finnish style in education, but the Spanish one.

I agreed 100% with the Finnish system and disagreed 100% with the Spanish system. Does this mean I'm secretly a Finn?? No, of course. It means that Spain is split between a rational minority struggling to educate children well, and an irrational majority doing all they can to prevent that from happening because they themselves are stupid. Not stupid in the sense of uneducated (well, that too) but stupid in the sense of not seeing into the future of the whole community beyond their individual (or class) noses.

As a person educated in the Spanish public school and working for the Spanish public university, what I most missed in Évole's programme was a more overt reflexion about why the Finns have embraced what can only be called a *socialist* programme of education while here we're trapped in a classist system which is doing all it can to stop people (like me) from declassing themselves. I'm not saying here that we need the PSOE back in power, not at all –I can very well see their own share in the sorry state of the Spanish school. What I'm saying is that we need to see our children as our main collective resource, for, as things are now, the little ones are our only hope in this

hopeless, failing society. Let's stop all that hysterical reforming and let's get down to working on how to build a truly egalitarian, efficient school (well, I can dream, can't I?).

9-II-2013 GOODBYE, SEE YOU LATER?: THE END OF THE SEMESTER

Yesterday I signed the document that makes my students' final marks official. I very much wanted to put an end to the semester before classes begin again next week –this soon!! – even though we have two extra weeks to do so. It's a kind of mental hygiene for me: something has to end before something new begins, I don't like overlappings. Still, I have this bittersweet feeling because there's no proper sense of closure: we never get to see our classes once the final marks are in and I do miss, more and more, some kind of meeting to see how the whole thing went. For me and for them.

Just think: students that require much of our attention for more than fourth very intensive months lapse into complete silence by the end. Some because they have done so badly that they decide not to see us at all –I was waiting for the visit of a student to whom I suggested that she should consider continuing the degree but she never came (I'm not just her teacher in a subject, I'm the degree Coordinator...). Others who failed haven't even bothered to pick up their exams, as I request, which means they're satisfied with not knowing *why* they failed (do they blame *me*? did they know they would fail?). In my other university, UOC, I did all I could to help a student finish his continuous assessment and finally pass the subject – I emailed him to say I was glad he'd managed to finish and, well, I hinted (heavily!) that I was waiting for him to thank me, however perfunctorily. He never did. The good ones also vanish. A student who got an A+ emailed me to comment on something on relation to one book we'd read; I congratulated her on her A+ stressing that it had made me personally very happy to award it to her, but she never replied to that. Um...

The fashion is for feedback to come to us through surveys answered online and preferably anonymously. Students are not too keen on that, at least their participation is very low. Alternatively, we can ask them directly, email them a questionnaire (there's no time to do that in class and, anyway, when?. We never meet, as I say, once assessment is over). That's not, however, what nags me today. What I mean is that I miss a final face-to-face meeting with the classes I teach. I've had one with a student, just by chance, and I found it very enjoyable to be able to contrast our different views on the subject and its assessment (thanks Fran!). Also, there's always this nagging worry that the marks I award are not at least 95% fair –are my students happy and this is why they don't complain (with just very few exceptions), or am I the kind of teacher whose grading is accepted with a groan because everyone knows I'm inflexible (am I)? I don't know...

Students' surveys, which my university runs systematically every semester, are not a tool I value particularly. I have seen how all my colleagues rank (I'm Coordinator, remember?) and although I tend to agree with the bottom rankings I tend to disagree with some of the top rankings, which usually depend on the students' appreciation of how easy it is to pass a subject with particular teachers. And, anyway, this is not what I'm writing about here –I'm writing about how I miss a post-assessment tutorial review, there! Maybe if I had 15 students instead of the 57 I have assessed I might set up this kind of tutorial, but then if we only had 15 students for compulsory subjects, I'd

be out of a job... In contrast, our Fulbright visitor, who comes from illustrious Carnegie Mellon, tells me his undergrad groups are always under 12 students. When I told him that my first year '20th century English Literature' subject that starts next week has 80 students and he asked me whether I had to do all the grading (who else?), I took one more and more frequent deep sighs...

So, 'Victorian Literature' students: congratulations, you did very well and I'm happy that the intensive effort I put you and myself through had paid off. See you sometime in the fourth year!! Don't forget what I've taught you about how to read and how to write, and good luck!

18-II-2013 GROUP PORTRAIT: A SURVEY OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS' PREFERENCES

In order to break the ice and to get to know my new first year students I ask them to answer on the first day a brief questionnaire, which I'll also answer here as if this were 1984, my first year at university:

1. Have you read a complete volume in English yet? (If so, which one?): *Wuthering Heights* and *The Go Between* (chosen by my English language teacher... I had already read *Wuthering Heights* at least twice in translation)
2. How many books do you read every year?: 50 (I swear, I still keep the notebook where I wrote them down; now it's 100 on average, which I believe is a minimum for university teachers)
3. Which is your favourite book (in any language?): *Wuthering Heights* (still... can't get rid of Heathcliff)
4. What book(s) you would like to read in English? Why?: *Ulysses* (I have read it!!)
5. Do you have a favourite fiction genre?: No, but I like fantasy very much, particularly gothic and science fiction (I still do...)
6. Which is your favourite film and TV series? Film: *Blade Runner* (still); series: *Brideshead Revisited* (well, no, now it's *The X-Files*)

Now I'd like to comment on my students' answers, which you can find complete in the .pdf document attached here. There is not a particular novelty I want to highlight, I just want to make them public for anyone interested to consider.

My first concern are numbers: 82 students registered, yes, but only 57/60 attended the first week's sessions, of which just 42 bothered to answer my survey. So, message for the remaining 15/18: why didn't you bother?? Second concern: 6 students claim to have never read a book in English... and this is the SECOND, not the first semester they spend with us. It's true that mine is the first English Literature class they take but, why wait for the teacher to tell you when to begin? Third concern: As regards how many books they read per year, 5 confess they simply don't read at all... 6 read five books at the most. Most students (16) read eleven/fifteen books a year – not enough, clearly. I'm sorry to say that only the 7 students who claim to read more than sixteen books a year are well equipped to face the degree's demands with a certain ease. The rest need to make a serious effort, in some cases a very serious one. A baffling aspect is how often students claim not to have time to read... Too many classes, perhaps?

About the favourite fiction genre, this turns out to be romance (12 students), followed by fantasy (9) and detective fiction (7), though 10 students claim to read omnivorously. Their reading tastes are, obviously, much closer to those of average or common readers than to university teachers of Literature... which is why it is difficult for me to comment on them without sounding prejudiced (arghhh... *Fifty Shades of Grey*?). At any rate, I must say that mainstream fiction and not the classics dominate students' readings, whereas for the next three years this should be the other way round, complemented by a good selection of contemporary *literary* fiction. No more Nicholas Sparks...

The list of books read in English, of favourite books, TV and films are quite eclectic, with no clear generational favourites (well, curiosuly, *The Big Bang Theory* is named by 5 students). Predictably, Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde and William Shakespeare are the most often mentioned classics. Yet, as I'm thinking these days of the Harry Potter elective I'll teach next year –yes, it's official– I can't help noticing that Rowling's name crops up quite often in all categories; also *The Lord of the Rings*, which turns out to be book most students would like to read (it's only 5 nonetheless). Something you might notice is that even though students claim to have read in English great novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Great Gatsby*, these are not among their favourites, a list which, as usual, is a strange mixture of the popular among younger readers and what teachers order to read in secondary school (still Galdós's *Tormento*?)

I'll close with a list of safe recommendations, thinking in particular of those who have never tried reading in English, and those who read too little –all the books are mentioned in the survey:

1984

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Animal Farm

Brave New World

Catcher in the Rye, The

Christmas Carol, A

Dracula

Frankenstein

Game of Thrones, A

Gone with the Wind

Grapes of Wrath, The

Great Gatsby, The

Harry Potter Saga, The

Homage to Catalonia

Less than Zero

Life of Pi, The

Line of Beauty, The

Lolita

Lord of the Flies, The

Picture of Dorian Gray, The

Pride and Prejudice

Rebecca

Romeo and Juliet

Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, The
Talented Mr. Ripley, The
Wuthering Heights

Enjoy!!

24-II-2013 WHAT LIBRARY READERS DO READ IN THE UK

My colleague David Owen emails us, UAB's English Literature Teachers, a juicy article from a *Guardian* blog: "Library lending figures: which books are most popular?" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2013/feb/08/library-lending-figures-books-most-popular>). The subheading cheerfully announces that "James Patterson leads the list of the UK's most borrowed authors in 2011/12" –I had to think twice and end up using Wikipedia to recall who Patterson is (a US author of thrillers), but that's my own ignorance.

Mr. Patterson's books have been borrowed in UK libraries (2011/12) a grand total of 2.4m times. Since the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, we are told is "not at the top, it's nowhere", this means that the library loan list should be contrasted with the best-selling list as there are glaring differences. By the way: "overall, 65 of the authors of the 100 most-borrowed books are men" (I don't know how this compares with the number of women readers). The article also includes a revealing section about the whole decade 2002-12 and, yes, Patterson is "the UK's most borrowed author of the decade", Danielle Steele the British most borrowed author (chart-topper every year between 1992-2012). Predictably, Dickens, Austen and Shakespeare are "the most borrowed pre-20th century classic authors".

I can't comment here on the complete table of the top 100 most borrowed books and authors in the UK, so I'll just copy the top ten:

10th Anniversary, James Patterson and Maxine Paetro
Worth Dying for, Lee Child
Miracle Cure, Harlan Coben
Private London, by James Patterson
The Help, Kathryn Stockett
Gruffalo (children's book), Julia Donaldson; illustrated by Axel Scheffler
Caught, Harlan Coben
Worth Dying for, Lee Child
The Reversal, Michael Connelly
Minding Frankie, Maeve Binchy

+2,000,000: James Patterson
+1,000,000: Daisy Meadows, Julia Donaldson, Nora Roberts, Francesca Simon,
Jacqueline Wilson, MC Beaton
+ 500,000 Danielle Steel, Mick Inkpen, Adam Blade

I might read from this list just *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, the novel on which the truly great eponymous film was based. I'm not, obviously, a user of UK libraries and I should not criticise the tastes of those who are. The best thing I can do is to infer from

this list some trends: a) UK library users are, manifestly, middlebrow readers; b) that an author is borrowed very often does not mean s/he is well liked –it might be even a sign that readers do not like him/her enough to buy his/her books (readers have *bought*, not borrowed *Fifty Shades of Grey*); c) English Literature university teachers are very poorly equipped to understand today's common reader; d) future historians of English Literature will have to make a serious decision about what to do with these data.

These days I'm teaching the Modernist short story to my first year students and I'm making a point of explaining to them that Modernism is just one small corner of the complex map of all reading between 1900-1940. Most educated people read the very authors Woolf attacked (Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy); many less educated readers loved middlebrow authors like Stella Gibbons, Dodie Smith or Nancy Mitford (see, for instance, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* by Nicola Humble); the market for popular fiction, pulp included, was flourishing.

We should not be surprised then that today we also have a multilayered reading territory which the avalanche of data makes, simply, more difficult to ignore. Or not. After all, I can still programme an elective on 'Contemporary British Fiction' based on a tiny selection of 6 authors at the most, and safely ignore the rest. Let students fend for themselves. English *Literature* Teachers (or students), you might object, needn't know who James Patterson is, much less read Danielle Steele. Nonetheless, I can't get rid of the nagging feeling that we should at least tell students about the multilayered map or territory, for they are themselves (see my previous post) middlebrow readers.

I know that many will reply that this is, rather, 'Sociology of Reading', part of, perhaps, Cultural Anthropology or Cultural Studies. Whatever. In the end the question is whether one can make sense of, say, Virginia Woolf, without Arnold Bennett, Agatha Christie or even Sax Rohmer. Perhaps, but only in a limited way. This does not I'll read James Patterson as soon as I can, for the truth is that I can't even keep up with the list of Booker Prize winners; it means that, whatever I read and teach I'll have to bear in mind that common readers do exist and might feel oddly out of place in an English Literature classroom. Whether this is as it should be or not it's up to you to decide.

28-II-2012 YET ANOTHER STRIKE...

Exactly a year ago tomorrow I published a post called 'A Striking Strike' as we, students and teachers, were also on strike, like today. I wrote then and I repeat now that I'm not joining the strike as (I'm quoting myself): "a) my not teaching students for one day does not bother anyone, [much less Minister Wert] 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." I'm not at all against protests, quite the other way round: I'm complaining here about the lack of imagination of the strike organisers, as they will not take alternative suggestions that might result in a wider media coverage and might also do away with the tiring feeling that taking to the streets leads to nothing (except, maybe, beatings and arrests by the also underpaid police –that might explain a little of their violence).

Nothing much has changed in the last 12 months because of last Spring's violent strikes both here at UAB and downtown. We're stuck with the same problem: lack of money. The 84-page long report on the sorry state of the Spanish public university system by a committee of experts working for Minister Wert to improve it, offers the same tired suggestions, it is unbelievably undemocratic and, basically, expresses the self-defeating hope that foreign academic and administrators drop from the sky to change a system that needs to be saved from the inside –by the very same persons wasting money on that report.

Since the increased fees have not resulted in a significant decrease in the number of registered students (logically, there are no jobs to compete with university education), the local Catalan government is satisfied that they have been accepted (not true). The surplus money generated by the new fees has not resulted, however, in a better financial situation for the Catalan universities; the money has gone elsewhere, possibly to paying for the interests of our mounting national debt (so much for our future independence). A tiny part will be soon returned to us as additional grants for doctoral students already enjoying a scholarship –the idea is that they will become as well teaching assistants, which is absurd as this will have a negative impact on their research. We get at UAB only 36 of these appeasing grants, no new jobs at all. This is something, by the way, I already commented on one year ago.

I work for a university founded in 1968, a historic date that makes discussing the effectiveness of teacher/student strikes quite difficult. It even feels disloyal. What I fail to understand again and again is the logic of the strike –if a factory worker goes on strike, nothing is produced, the factory owner loses money, hence pressure can be applied. However, if a student goes on strike s/he is the only loser as the boss (the corresponding Minister for Education) does not care, as we can see, whether students get an education or not. Precisely, that's the whole reason for the protest!!

I'd say that the only sensible in-your-face attitude against these irresponsible Education Ministers would be staging protests that benefit the students' education. A colleague suggested a lecture marathon, 24 hours non-stop, with different teachers and students, or a 24-hour reading marathon in Plaça Sant Jaume. All to show that teachers want to educate and students want to be educated. She was booed down. Instead, we stop all academic activity and, I can't remember how many times I've advanced the same argument, we look to the rest of society as the lazy, privileged bunch they all assume us to be.

For the last two weeks I've seen hanging in the hall of my Facultat a banner announcing an indefinite strike. For whose benefit I have no idea.

9-III-2013 APPLYING CULTURAL STUDIES TO OUR LOCAL UNIVERSITIES: IT'S URGENT

[In case you're wondering, yes, two posts today – I haven't been writing much recently and the ideas pile up...]

I'm going to refer here again to the 84-page report that a committee of professors submitted last 15 February to Minister Wert, for the reform of the public Spanish university system. It's easy to find articles criticising the content of the report point by point, although the report itself is no longer available from the Ministry's website. I don't know whether this has to do with the news three days ago that a

collective calling itself 'La Uni en la Calle', formed by seven universities from Madrid, has demanded that it be withdrawn because it is anti-constitutional (they're planning to present a counter-report today, 9 March).

Many things, as I have already noted, are questionable in that report but I want to focus on an aspect that perplexes me: the lack of references to the local roots of the Spanish university. What I mean is this: both the very many international systems for rating universities and the national (Spanish and Catalan) committees, reports, etc. to try to improve them seem to work on the basis that universities form a kind of transnational network, or system, which remains untouched by local realities. Let me explain myself better: they are assumed to function like, say, Catholic monasteries which can follow the same monastic rule no matter whether they are in France or in Perú. The comparison is not that far-fetched since universities are technically the descendants of monastic life, to the point that we are called 'professors', that is to say, 'persons who profess' ... a faith. I could crack a few bad jokes about whether we behave like nuns or monks, but I'll leave them aside, as I'm trying to make a serious point here.

Somehow monasteries can operate by ignoring the precise nation where they are (well, at their own risk, look at the excellent French movie *Des hommes et des dieux* (2010) for an extreme example of the horrors that can happen when you ignore the culture surrounding you). Universities, though, are not monasteries and do depend on their surrounding environment much more than the authorities running them want to assume. It is true that we work forming international networks of contacts, collaborations and conferences, but we do have roots, and I simply don't see them in the report or anywhere else in university policies. I'll be more specific by referring to the matter of teacher and student mobility (or lack thereof).

The report insists again and again that Spain has too many public universities: 50. It also insists that teachers' and students' mobility should increase and that Spain should be an only university district, with a gradual transformation of these 50 multi-department universities into centres specialising in certain areas and ranking hierarchically. This is the Anglo-American model: Harvard and Yale, Oxford and Cambridge are at the pinnacle of the whole university structure, which has an enormous degree of mobility because the United States and the United Kingdom are much richer (they can offer grants, there are more families that can afford their children's studying away from home). Also, in these countries, unlike ours, family and local ties are much looser and people think nothing of leaving home at 18 never to return (or just to meet their family now and then).

This is not our case at all. Of course, students from rural areas have no option but leave home to attend university but I know that many in UAB stay on or close to campus from Monday to Thursday and spend the weekend at home. Also, many travel for hours every day because they cannot afford living away from home. The percentage of middle- and upper-class families who can send their children to a university elsewhere is smaller in Spain than in Anglo-American countries and this explains the high number of universities, too: someone made the decision that maintaining 50 local universities made more sense given our local reality than financing the mobility of so many working-class or low-middle-class students.

Teachers themselves are subject to local lifestyles. I know quite a few cases in which Spanish teachers have spent years in universities far from home doing all they

could to return close to their families and friends, sometimes even splitting their working week between places hundreds of kilometres away. We also have, by the way, a private life: we marry, have children, have elderly parents to take care of, and that with little help from the state. If you're a woman in the academic profession getting tenured and the matter of mobility are particularly hard to cope with: preparation for tenure usually takes up the crucial years in which a female teacher may decide to become a mother. Not quite the moment to leave your local roots, and much less grandparents whose help might be indispensable. Moving away when you hit fifty because of a promotion to full professor may well coincide with those grandparents' needing care you cannot leave to others. Not to mention the fact that for both men and women combining their own mobility with that of their spouses and children is quite a nightmare today and much more so in Spain, given our poor social help system.

Quite absurdly, the report calls for a general sort of mobility that no other profession has in Spain, without ever wondering why this is so and how it connects with endogamy (obviously... people try to stay close home, small universities try to keep their local talent). Universities, I'll insist, are not culturally transparent and I think it's about time we look at our roots to understand who we are, what needs we service and how we can serve those needs even better and not some odd universalist notion of what a university should be. Just for you to understand the kind of ivory tower in which the report was written, their authors seem to care much more about the lack of Spanish Nobel Prizes in science since Ramón y Cajal than about how to guarantee the very survival of the Spanish university.

9-III-2013 THE MATTER OF MONEY (AND THE WEATHER): MORE ON MOBILITY

My previous post (sorry it was so long) leads to this second post on teacher mobility, also connected with the Wert report. *El Diario Montañés*, published an article on 24 February with the title "Rector UAB: el sueldo de los docentes es poco competitivo para atraer talento" (http://www.eldiariomontanes.es/agencias/20130224/mas-actualidad/sociedad/rector-uab-sueldo-docentes-poco_201302241101.html). In this article, Ferran Sancho, interviewed by EFE, explains that "Sunshine and good weather" are not enough to attract major international talent to our universities, considering that the basic salary for a tenured teacher is only 33,000 euros a year (with no complements). Apparently, Dutch university teachers make twice more (though if you check the website http://www.prospects.ac.uk/higher_education_lecturer_salary.htm, you'll see that in Britain, the salary for lecturers ranges from 35 to 46,000 euros at junior level).

Sancho claims that a full professor may be making 80,000 a year (after taxes) by the time s/he retires at 70. I'll add that this might be so after being tenured for 40 years at least and having completed all research assessments to satisfaction (5 or 6). I doubt that many full professors even reach 65,000 euros. Apparently, Sancho, just appointed president of the Asociación Catalana de Universidades Públicas (ACUP) plans to run a study comparing retributions for all Spanish universities. I'm not sure what for, as we already know that Catalan teachers get less money than anyone else

and also that for those of us living in ultra-expensive Barcelona our salaries are a joke. We're just glorified blue-collar workers.

I'll complete the figures: $33,000 - 27\% \text{ taxes} = 24,090 : 14 = 1,720$. Basically, a tenured junior university teacher makes less than 2,000 or around 2,000 euros a month, since soon we start getting complements for antiquity (they do not count for pensions). This after, on average, 10 years or more of gruelling preparation for tenure. The supposedly very-well paid full professor would make 4,200 at the most. This might seem a lot but please remember that very few tenured teachers ever become full professors and, so, most make around 2,500 or less even after 20 years (or more) teaching. Also remember that our salaries are not only frozen but also decimated by both the Catalan and the Spanish government, who have decided to rob us of part of our wages (the June and December 'extra wages' are not a bonus but a deferred payment for our work each semester).

"Sunshine and good weather" are not enough for us, national 'talent', either. As happens with the medicine doctors, we are all vocational professionals only too happy to have the chance to work at something we love doing. This is why we accept salaries that do not compensate at all for the many years of preparation and the hard work we need to do every day. Having said that, I'll finish by stressing what students often ignore: it's much, much worse in the case of associates, now 50% of our staff, paid less than 800 euros a month for teaching 3 subjects –what many full professors do– and doing in addition much research that benefits all, as they patiently wait years and years for tenure that never materialises...

16-III- 2013 THOSE BICEPS, OH MY GOD!: WHAT SOME STUDENTS VALUE IN TEACHERS (HOPEFULLY JUST A FEW)

A very good-looking male friend of mine from a Southern Spanish university tells me that, to his deep chagrin and mortification, a student (male or female he doesn't know), mentioned his biceps –oh my God!– as the strongest point of the English Studies BA degree for which he teaches. (Yes, we teachers gossip all the time about what students say or do... just as you, students, gossip about us. Obviously...).

This comment on his biceps came up in a questionnaire run by the students themselves and was not made public, nor is it reflected in the questionnaire itself. However, rumours about this peculiar answer soon were rife among my friend's colleagues and students leading to all those inevitable jokes. And worries, indeed. Under cover of anonymity some students may be enticed to write boutades they would never express publicly, yet this student's opinion is worrying in that this person did not really respect the work of his/her own peers, much less the teacher himself.

In any English Studies BA degree the proportion of men to women is around 20%, or less. This means that, inevitably, male teachers are on the spotlight much more noticeably than female teachers as potential erotic objects (of the platonic kind or otherwise), particularly the attractive ones. I say particularly because I know very well that totally unattractive male teachers may become truly handsome in the eyes of some female (and male) students by virtue of their intellectual allure. This doesn't happen to us, women. No matter how sexy and intelligent a female teacher can be, I know of no case in which they have been the object of a male student's interest. I am by no means saying that this would be desirable, rather the other way round: that

male teachers should ideally be seen also with the neutral, detached eyes male students consider us with.

Why's that? Well, think of my good-looking friend, still young enough to be a potential actual 'romantic' partner for a girl aged 18-23. Now think of what it is like to be on the platform addressing a class of mainly female students who are paying more attention to his biceps than to his lectures (I'm not excluding gay male students, of course). This is embarrassing and distracting for the male teacher, who only wants to be appreciated because of his academic qualities. For me, this is what should count in how a teacher, male or female, is assessed: not the looks, nor the chances to get a pass mark easily. In every Department the top-ranking teacher should always be not the most popular for looks or charm, but the most solid one academically speaking.

As you can imagine, this is what bothers my good-looking friend: every time he comes top of his Department in students' surveys, he worries himself sick that his good looks have done the trick again, while his efforts to offer good teaching pass unnoticed. He does not mean by 'good teaching' just 'nice' teaching, of the kind that makes the time in class pass by quickly. He means serious, demanding teaching of the kind that makes students be a little bit in awe of the teacher but finally appreciate the hard work done with him (or her).

So... ironically, he tells me, very few female teachers have ever made it to the top ranks of students' preferences even though, as he stresses, 80% of these students are women. This is also something to consider. In an ideal world, gender issues should not apply to teacher-students relationships but I'm learning that they do in more ways than I had thought of. I mean that although I am aware that serious romantic relationships have come out of many classrooms (and also quite a few more questionable liaisons), I had missed the problems that male teachers face as such. And I mean here teachers that stress the point that they're not available at all but remain nonetheless the object of some students' erotic musings (um, platonic or not).

I'm not jealous, not at all, in the sense that I would not like to be appreciated for ... whatever stands out in my body (or not). I'm irrationally jealous, however, that as an ageing female teacher I cannot compete in popularity with good-looking male teachers like my friend, whether he wishes himself out of that absurd competition or not. Um, and there are some indeed in my Department!!

Well, there's nothing either of us can do. My friend, I'm sure, will try to wear less revealing shirts and I'll dress as nicely as I can considering my age, status and audience. Hopefully, we will all be judged fairly for how we teach not how we look. And no, I have never given high marks to a student just for being male or for looking good...

3-IV-2013 ENJOYING IAIN (M.) BANKS TO THE LAST: A SAD ANNOUNCEMENT

I was planning to make something special of my posting number 200 but the unexpected has taken me over. Completely.

Today I have sent an abstract for a paper on Iain M. Banks's *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), a novel I have discussed here (see 1-XI-2012, LET'S SUBLIME: A POLITICAL READING FOR *THE HYDROGEN SONATA*). The paper is for the 16th Culture and Power International conference on Cultural Studies, to be celebrated in Murcia this time with the theme 'Space' (<http://www.cultureandpower.org/>). I have decided

to develop what I wrote here as a paper and to consider in more depth how Banks's very Scottish sense of humour has altered the parameters of space opera. On this very same day a colleague has emailed me to announce that Iain M. Banks has made it official: he has terminal cancer (see his personal statement at <http://friends.banksophilia.com/>).

Banks, who is only 59, explains that he is "expected to live for 'several months' and it's extremely unlikely I'll live beyond a year. So it looks like my latest novel, *The Quarry*, will be my last." He has just asked his "my partner Adele if she will do me the honour of becoming my widow (sorry – but we find ghoulish humour helps)." As he takes final journeys and says goodbye to friends and family, "my heroic publishers are doing all they can to bring the publication date of my new novel forward by as much as four months, to give me a better chance of being around when it hits the shelves." I don't know what to think of this part of the announcement, shocked as I am by the idea that I'll be considering what Banks means by the Sublime in his last SF novel, as he faces death. There's a grim chance that I present my paper (in October) as he lies dying. A very grim chance. I do hope that 'ghoulish humour' helps us all, writer and fans.

Yet, I know what's coming now: on the fan front, the greediness to buy it all (is *The Quarry* SF or mainstream?); on the academic front, a flood of publications, conferences... you name it!! It is a kind of macabre, advanced necrophilia that is really making me shudder to the point that for a while I have even considered withdrawing the darned abstract. Now I think that this would be wrong for that paper will be my homage to the man I have been calling my favourite writer for many years now. Actually, as I prepared the abstract this morning, amidst nausea caused by stomach flu, I was thinking of re-reading all of Banks's SF novels again –call that a nauseous intuition of the end.

I met Banks once years ago and he signed my copy of *The Wasp Factory*, always, indeed, a little treasure for me. A big, charming fellow, when I told him that I had just taught his novel his reaction was a candid: "Why?" I liked him very much for that. I must confess, as I think it's obvious, that I have never enjoyed his mainstream fiction as much as his first-rate science fiction. I need, though, to thank him for *all* his books and for brightening many, many hours of my life (I have done so already in the guest book of the website I have mentioned). I never thought I could be made so sad by the (inevitable) death of someone who is not an actual friend. This is the mystery of Literature: how we connect with people we may never meet and with the imaginary persons they make up.

I'll miss buying your new books regularly, Mr. Banks, but I will not miss you, as I'll make sure you keep me company until I myself sublime... Thanks, thanks, thanks.

7-IV-2013 ON OUR STUDENTS' AVERAGE COMMAND OF ENGLISH (AND WHAT THE AUTHORITIES THINK THEY SHOULD KNOW)

As *La Vanguardia*, among other newspapers, published this week only one third of all new students in Catalan universities possess a sufficient command of English (that is to say, B2 or First Certificate; see <http://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20130406/54372064211/universitarios-acceden-sin-nivel-minimo-ingles.html>). The local government's Department of Economy and

Knowledge ('Coneixement'), which also runs Catalan universities, is planning to make First Certificate or similar compulsory for graduates from next academic year onwards. Consider some figures: In my own university, UAB, 43,5% of all new students speak English below the B1 level that secondary school is supposed to guarantee; at any rate, only 22,59% know English at First Certificate levels. 7,32% fall below the A1 level (I think all these are roughly also the figures for the Department of English). This is, just consider, after 10 years learning English at school...

The diverse attempts to make language certificates compulsory (2001, 2008) have clashed, of course, with the inevitable dead end: most students cannot afford, either at school or university levels, the cost of studying English (I bet I know which class are the happy possessors of a First Certificate at UAB's first year). The Generalitat intends apparently to make available for free an online English course to guarantee all students a chance to obtain First Certificate. Yet, I very much doubt that the online course solves this pressing problem. My doubts extend to the current fashion among Catalan universities: teaching BAs in English, partly or totally. Well, we have a VERY LONG experience doing that, an experience that our university does not appreciate sufficiently I believe, and what it shows is that the key issue here is not what we offer students but what they're prepared to do.

I think that a language is something one learns, and not something one is taught. This applies to any discipline, matter, etc but much more so to learning a language, which is something that requires constant, dedicated practice. This is not available during the school years, when Spanish children are trapped in a kind of linguistic limbo with overcrowded classrooms and teachers too focused on the text books, too little on practising (logically, given the numbers). Leaving aside the deeply ingrained Spanish resistance to speaking English properly, grounded on reverse cultural snobbishness and on an embarrassment born of the very alienness of English pronunciation, the fact is that here in Spain, to make matters even worse, learning English has always been presented as something that should be easy, a kind of game. It's not: it's very hard work.

In my pre-Erasmus times, back in the mid 1980s, many students in the Catalan English Departments would spend summers or even a year, as I did, working in Britain to learn the language. I myself became for twelve months an au-pair girl, tired of quarrelling with my tight-fisted working-class father over the fees of the language school I attended to obtain a Proficiency Certificate. I took the exam in London at the end of a gruelling working experience that, since the Erasmus programme started, fewer students have been willing to undertake. It was, however, not only the cheapest way but also the ONLY way in which I could acquire the command of English that I needed and that not even my university teachers were providing me with.

Something I discovered back then was that many students from other European countries took a year off in England before they started university to improve their English (mainly students from places like Scandinavia where, happily for them, film and TV dubbing are unknown). I think this is a very good idea, although I hate to think how it benefitted (and benefits) the British economy. Or American if you choose somewhere else (Scotland, Australia, Ireland... just mind the accent!!). Still, worth a try.

Spending time abroad working may sound off-putting to many students, who, besides, as I know first hand, may be besides quite angry or embittered at the idea that

they need to work their way into English while more privileged peers take lessons at the British Council back home. Yet, considering the problems that online courses present, this might be still a realistic solution for working-class students. A year abroad before you start your BA will not hurt, just the opposite. Taking time off in the middle of your degree, as I did, is not the done thing any more because of Erasmus (and I think I was lucky that Erasmus came too late for me, for I could not have afforded it at all – actually I don't even include the year abroad as an au-pair in my CV, another not done thing).

Now, the question is whether, given our sad, sad times that year abroad I'm recommending would become in the end just a preparation for an eventual post-graduate migration...

16-IV-2013 TO 'LA BUTANERA' (AND THOSE CONFUSED WOMEN WHO THINK THAT ALL TYPES OF FEMINISM ARE FINE)

On 8th March, International Women's Day, a group of women at my Facultat, led I believe by Prof. Teresa Camps, decided to decorate a very visible wall in one of the main corridors with four photos (about 50 x 50 cms) of the same series. The black and white photos show a young white woman, blond, stylish short hair, naked from the waist up... carrying on her shoulders one of those orange gas bottles used for domestic consumption.

The 'butanera' (yes, the gas-bottle delivery woman according to WordReference) has breasts you cannot miss: perky, prominent nipples, champagne-glass size flesh as the French like... much on show –in short. I found myself staring at the photos in the company of three male students who were a) puzzled that a group of feminists had considered that these photos represent the Facultat's working women, b) puzzled that they images were not considered sexist, c) not puzzled at all about the sexual attractive of those magnificent boobs. Soon I found myself again staring at the photos in the company of another female degree Coordinator like myself, wondering again why the walls had been decorated with the said tits and not with, my suggestion, a selection of photos of prominent female Coordinators (fully dressed).

I emailed the Dean, another woman, to complain about the images on the grounds that, um, the series of portraits does not represent anyone female remotely connected with the Facultat's women, whether teachers or students, and, well, men were, surely, having a good laugh at our expense. The Dean soon replied telling me that she would not judge the quality of the photos as she trusted they were the right choice, and was I aware that this was the idea of a feminist colleague of high reputation in the world of art? (Yes, I was) Well, excuse me, Madame Dean: since when are women's feminist ideas free from criticism by other feminists?

Every day I pass the darn photos I tell myself I have to do something about them... Not a vandalic act, for God's sake, but something more constructive. What I really would like to do is to hang below a similar series depicting a) four shots of a beautiful male's buttocks, with the model also holding a gas bottle (just to compensate for the visual pleasure that male heterosexuals and lesbians are deriving from the 'butanera'), b) four shots of the real individuals who deliver the gas bottles and who happen to be, mostly NON-WHITE MEN from Pakistan (see how an feminist art project can manage to be subtly androphobic and racist). I don't have the resources to do this,

nor would I like to answer questions about where I got the beautiful male, so my second option is producing a poster explaining why the photos are wrong and planting it below the photos. I could even pretend this is part of the series (would this be regarded as vandalism??).

In the meantime, I put up with the fabulous tits of the 'butanera' every day, hoping one day they'll come down (he, he...). To the Dean I can only say this: when I asked a male colleague 'so, what do you think about the 'butanera'?' he replied with a smile, 'what? Is she carrying a gas bottle?' So much for the obvious feminist message...

PS: Yes, I'm royally ignoring the umpteenth students' strike and the intolerant barricades that have prevented me from reaching my classroom today. Why waste words again?

PPS (Oct 2013): The 'Butanera' left our walls by the end of the academic year. She won't be missed.

20-IV-2013 GOODBYE, MAGGIE: CONSIDERING THE LEGACY OF MARGARET THATCHER

Not even on the day of her flamboyant funeral have the Spanish media managed to pronounce Margaret Thatcher's surname correctly: it's 'zatcha' (more or less), not 'tacher'. I suppose that the visual similarities with the word 'teacher' to our boorish, monolingual Spanish eyes are responsible for the habitual mispronunciation but this is nonetheless annoying. And it's so easy to check the internet for the correct kind of pronunciation...

Having got this matter off my chest, I can now properly begin today's entry. Maggie is dead and the song 'Ding, Dong the Witch is Dead' has topped the charts in Britain. She deserves that and much more in the way of hard-earned public contempt but, feminist me, I can't help wondering whether a male politician would have elicited the same kind of open hatred and resentment. Then, writing also as a feminist, I must stress that I can by no means show respect for the deceased Iron Lady, a woman who was the quintessence of female complicity with patriarchy and who did absolutely nothing to empower other women. No wonder she was represented as a ruthless, rude man in the once famous puppet show *Spitting Image*.

Thatcher pulled Britain out of the deep recession of the 1970s with methods that, on the whole, put her country back in the front line where it still totters. She almost failed at the beginning, which is why she needed the big media push that the pathetic Falkland War gave her. Then she managed to sell to many working-class people (not up in Scotland) the idea that the UK could be like the USA, a land of opportunities in which social mobility would increase enormously and everyone would have properties and money. Many bought this, to their later regret; many others were pushed aside by the opening up of an impassable gulf between poor and rich as she sold most public services. Now it's hard to believe that she could take in so many, but I was in London in 1986-87 (as an au pair girl), at her prime, and you could breathe in the streets this dream of affluence for all, that soon turned into a nightmare. Today certain neighbourhoods of London boast a poverty rate I have never seen in Spain; others, riches that are hard to imagine in Madrid or Barcelona.

They say now that we must remember Thatcher for her contribution to the end of the Cold War, eased by her close friendship with American President Ronald Reagan

—another victim of Alzheimer’s disease— and the first and last President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Perhaps, but tell that to the people who saw a great deal of the impeccable British welfare state dismantled by this woman in the name of political liberalism, decades before this doctrine hit us with the 2007 crisis. I can’t remember who said this (was it Martin Amis?) but possibly Thatcher’s main contribution in the end was her providing the dispossessed with a common, recognizable enemy and, particularly, the more progressive elements in the intellectual establishment. Literature, cinema and other arts flourished under Thatcher as suddenly many found themselves with a socio-political message to preach against her cruel economic *laissez faire*.

Possibly Angela Merkel is as harmful a politician as Maggie Thatcher was, and yet another example of how right-wing women who reach power are more patriarchal than the vast majority of men. It’s hard to say which one of these two women is causing more personal suffering, as Merkel’s hard-hearted economic policies are affecting practically all of Europe while Thatcher’s influence was limited to Britain. Yet, it’s easy to see that Merkel runs much better her PR. Thatcher’s helmet hairdo, her outdated body language, bad dress sense, masculinised voice and harsh manners did not endear her to many. Merkel’s more down-to-earth personal appearance and conduct have managed not to generate the animosity that old Maggie inspired, though, again, I’d insist she might be the more dangerous of the two.

The witch is dead, long live the witch...

23-IV-2013 THE 2013 GRANTA LIST: THE CRYSTAL BALL (AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT?)

Granta is a British literary magazine (and publisher) that earned much notoriety, and kudos, back in 1983 for publishing a list of 20 ‘young’ British novelists (under 40) assumed to become soon literary stars. *Granta* got many of the names right, and the first list remains still today a monument to literary clairvoyance: it boasted among the chosen would-be-stars Martin Amis, William Boyd, Maggie Gee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Adam Mars-Jones, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Pat Barker, Buchi Emecheta, Ian McEwan, Graham Swift, Rose Tremain, Christopher Priest... *Granta*’s crystal ball also worked very well for the 1993 list, though they cheated a little by including a certain amount of overlapping, a debatable practice maintained since then. Nonetheless, names as important today as Hanif Kureishi, Ben Okri, Caryl Phillips, Will Self, Iain Banks, Louis de Bernières, A. L. Kennedy, Alan Hollinghurst and Jeanette Winterson were included in it. 2003 brought a third list, again stunning, including Monica Ali, Rachel Cusk, Hari Kunzru, Toby Litt, David Mitchell, Andrew O’Hagan, Alan Warner, Sarah Waters...

Presumably the fourth list, just published this week, will work as well as the previous ones. Adam Thirwell and Zadie Smith were already present in 2003 (before they had even published a novel...) but I simply have no idea at all who the rest are: Naomi Alderman, Tahmima Anam, Ned Beaman, Jenni Fagan, Adam Foulds, Xiaolu Guo, Sarah Hall, Steven Hall, Joanna Kavenna, Benjamin Markovits, Nadifa Mohamed, Helen Oyeyemi, Ross Raisin, Sunjeev Sahota, Taiye Selasi, Kamila Shamsie, David Szalay and Evie Wyld. My own ignorance worries me, as I’m familiar with 90% of the names in the three previous lists and may have read 75% of those writers. Is this a sign that I

personally have lost touch with developments in British Literature?? Or is it a sign that the newest in British Literature is lost among lots of noise?... Oh, yes, by the way, the list is, for the first time, dominated by women. Kamila Shamsie seems to be the most controversial choice because she's Pakistani-born and not yet a British citizen.

Borrowing shamelessly from *The Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/apr/15/granta-list-british-novelists/print>) I learn that the 20 names, selected from a long list of 150, complete "an extremely international list: the writers' backgrounds –and storytelling interests– include China, Nigeria, Ghana, the US, Bangladesh and Pakistan." I also learn that "Ned Beauman's inclusion will not surprise fans of the precociously playful, genre-bending author of *The Teleportation Accident*; and Adam Foulds has impressed readers with novels including *A Quickenning Maze*, about the poet John Clare." Ah, well... of course, of course. One of the judges highlights that these young writers "are less wedded to nationality than writers have ever been before." Writers that were excluded but should perhaps be in the list include Jon McGregor, Joe Dunthorne, Peter Hobbess, Nick Laird... Those not eligible (too old) include China Miéville, Mohsin Hamid, Rana Dasgupta, Hisham Matar and Scarlett Thomas. It makes perfect sense to me that the list reflects the demographic variety of 21st century Britain, also that British fiction is no longer confined to the territory of Britain. This has been going on actually for quite a while, maybe even for the last ten years, with the Granta list arguably working as a turning point in the consolidation of the cosmopolitan British novel. This is why, in a way, whether the writers included are British or not is somehow a moot point.

I do not, however, know what to do with all this information. I have the same feeling as with the Man Booker Prize: the names won't stay with me, I don't feel motivated to buy the novels. I should maybe blame Amazon.co.uk for my lethargy, as every time I check the readers' opinions about a book I might like, I find negative comments. Usually complaining about the undue hype, the pretentiousness of the writing... and wondering why the book has been praised at all. *The Teleportation Accident*, which sounds as the kind of novel I would enjoy, has 7 readers granting it only 2 stars. One defines it as 'all style, no substance', another calls it 'overwritten and fake.' The highest-rated reviewer (3 stars) confesses that "I'm genuinely not sure whether to say it's a marvel or a misfire." Before the crisis, I would have risked the 9 pounds it costs but, now, being the proud owner of an e-book reader with which I'm reading plenty of freely available classics, I hesitate...Um that must be why I'm losing touch...

PS: Check the Wikipedia entry for *Granta*, and see if you recognise any of the 2010 list of 'Young Spanish Language Novelists'... before you decide whether the problem is that we care less and less for writers at a time when there are more new ones than ever.

27-IV-2013 TWENTY (GREAT!) BRITISH SONGS: A (NON-CANONICAL!) SELECTION

My colleagues in '20th century English Literature' (first-year) and myself have decided to use one spare week that we programmed after the unit on British Poetry for songs. I opened a Forum for students to contribute songs that they found interesting because of the lyrics but since the messages are trickling rather than

pouring down (don't ask me why...) I have spent around, em, six? very intense hours working fast on my own selection.

It is supposed to be a) representative of main trends in current 'interesting' British pop and rock (no Taio Cruz nor Cheryl Cole here...), b) offer an attractive list of songs with well-written lyrics, or, at least, lyrics far beyond the usual romantic trash 'I love you-I need you-I want you.' So here they are:

Adele, "Rolling in the Deep"
Amy McDonald, "This is the Life"
Amy Winehouse, "Rehab"
Arctic Monkeys, "Fluorescent Adolescence"
Bloc Party, "Banquet"
Coldplay, "Viva la Vida"
Dido, "Thank You"
The Editors, "Smokers at the Hospital Doors"
Elbow, "One Day Like This"
Florence and the Machine, "Shake it Out"
Franz Ferdinand, "Walk Away"
Idlewild, "No Emotion"
James Blunt, "I'll Be Your Man"
Kasabian, "Where Did All The Love Go?"
Kaiser Chiefs, "I Predict a Riot"
Keane, "Somewhere Only We Know"
Lily Allen, "Smile"
Manic Street Preachers, "Motorcycle Emptiness"
Mumford and Sons, "I Will Wait"
Muse, "Uprise"

I don't like ALL of them, though some are among my personal favourites. In some cases, I have chosen a song that might be not so good but that has better lyrics than hits by the same artists. I have excluded, as you can see, hip-hop and, generally, any form of rapping, let students enjoy that on their own. Not my cup of tea... as I don't like being preached at.

Personally, I have always preferred British to American music, at all levels, though, very incongruously my favourite band is American (the awesome Interpol!). Actually, I can very well say that British pop and rock played a great role in my decision to take a degree in English, as I'm sure was the case with many of my contemporaries and is still the case with, I assume, some students. When an ex-student sent me a picture of graffiti scribbled on a loo door here at UAB I almost fainted with pleasure: 'Ian Curtis me posee'. Yes, indeed, he still does.

In my profound stupidity, I thought that at some point in the degree someone would lecture on the lyrics that mattered to me so much as a student. Nobody did. And, so, eventually, I wrote myself a few papers on music (Marilyn Manson, Linkin Park, Kylie Minogue, music videos, etc.) and managed to introduce a few songs in class with the excuse of the lyrics and their being, em, a form of poetical writing. I have always wanted to teach an elective subject but at the rate I'm going, what with Harry

Potter, and Gender Studies in the next two years, and who knows what else, I'm not sure this will ever happen.

Actually, one of the factors stopping me is that as I age pop and rock music has come to play a lesser and lesser role in my life. I haven't totally disconnected and the work I've done for the selection has showed me that I need very much to reconnect. Partly this disconnection has to do with my losing the ability to enjoy music as I work (I need monastic silence now). Also with the fact that keeping up to date as regards good pop and rock is somehow even harder than keeping up to date with good fiction (see my last post). Music is gone from TV, except for the trashy MTV, which I do watch now and then. There used to be an excellent music TV channel, Fly Music, a few years ago (2005-8), focused on the best of indie. That, however, went, replaced by... Disney Channel. I-Cat FM, my favourite radio channel has become an internet channel, and I simply don't listen to the radio on the internet (Fly Music is now also there). I'm not a Spotify person, either. And, well, downloading illegally, which everyone does, works only partly for me, as I belong to the generation that used to buy LPs and treasure them as objects (even for their covers). An .mp3 file is, for me, a disposable item, rather than a treasured possession and it has the very negative effect of making it all seem too homogeneous and equally disposable. And, well, as I argued last week in relation to fiction, gone are the times when I'd risk whatever money CDs cost now. So, it's hard to keep up.

So... We'll see how students react to my choices. And which choices they finally make in the Forum. I'm worried indeed that the generational gap will work against me, generating scepticism on their side or even protectiveness of the territory. Or maybe I'm projecting here, I remember being truly annoyed when I saw one of my ex-students wearing a Joy Division T-shirt. Hei, that's 'mine', I complained. She smiled and told me, 'don't be old-fashioned... Music has now no age.' But does it?

Just to finish: do listen to the songs, they are amazing. One must admire very much a culture capable of producing them in such great numbers.

4-V-2013 PERFORMING THEATRE IN CLASS: THE LITTLE MIRACLES

This week we have been working on Simon Stephens's play *Pornography* (2007) in class, within my elective subject 'English Theatre' (well, it's 'British Theatre' but you know what labels are like, and it's not really 'Theatre in English').

The title can be quite misleading, as *Pornography* is actually a play dealing with the historic week in July 2005, which included Live 8, the G8 Gleneagles summit, the official announcement of the 2012 London Olympics and the 7/7 bombings causing almost 800 casualties (52 dead and 700 wounded...). Stephens's title alludes to his view that we live in pornographic times as we treat each other as mere objects, from everyday occurrences to the extreme case of sociopathic terrorists.

The play, apparently inspired by Jacques' speech in *As You Like It* ("All the world's a stage..."), borrows from it the traditional idea of the seven ages of man. Stephens tells a series of overlapping stories each corresponding to one age. I chose for class performance two scenes, corresponding to the lovers and the soldier in Shakespeare: a dialogue between two incestuous siblings whose newly born sexual relationship is cut short by the shock of the terrorist outrages, and a monologue by one of the suicidal bombers, which I myself played.

The little miracle to which my title refers was this: the two students who had to play the siblings, a boy and a girl, were having serious problems to meet and rehearse, as both work. To add to their problems I realised only too late that the scene was too long and some cuts would be needed. Not to mention the fact that Stephens decided not to pre-determine who says what (the lines are not preceded by the name of the speaker) and this requires much hard work on the side of the actors. I exchanged a few frantic emails over the weekend with the girl –who referred mysteriously to a Facebook rehearsal... – and hoped for the best.

To my delight *all* the scenes performed by students in class (text in hand) had worked beautifully and it would have been a pity if this one had gone awry. Then the miracle happened: the moment Ernest and Melissa walked in and looked at each other, I believed them, and so did their classmates. Call that chemistry... By the time the brother gets home from work on the day of the attacks to announce that he can't cope with the horror outside and the situation with his sister, my heart was breaking. Really.

The week before we had seen a video with Simon McBurney explaining that he called his marvellous theatre company Complicité in the double sense that spectators and actors are accomplices (partners in crime or sin) and work in complicity. We saw another video with Simon Stephens calling our attention to how strange the idea of the theatre actually is: you go to a room full of strangers to see other strangers play fictitious characters, often on the barest stage and looking practically the same as they do in their daily lives. Well, I saw that in my class, the complicity between the 'actors' and ours with them. And it was beautiful. I have no better word for it.

Even more so because the incestuous siblings came after a series of truly inspired performances by almost everyone in class. I have no idea whether I myself did well (a student told me I was very scary with my black backpack, so I guess it worked...), but, as happened two years ago, I was very, very nervous after seeing how brave my students were being in our improvised theatre. Whenever I go to the theatre I try to relish as long as I can that moment when the light changes, some people appear on the stage and suddenly they become characters you believe in. I see that every day I go to class, and I want to thank my students.

So: thanks!

4-V-2013 AND ABOUT THE TERRORIST... IN ANSWER TO SIMON STEPHENS

A central scene in Simon Stephens's *Pornography* is the monologue by a suicide bomber that I have mentioned in the previous post. As it is well known, the four terrorists who caused the 7/7 attacks were English men: non-white, like so many Britons, yet English all through. The point that Stephens wants to make with the monologue is that they were by no means the Other but 'one of us.' He stresses not only their full humanity (for him, they were not monsters) but also the idea that what caused the bombings is the state of decadence in England. That the bombs, in short, were the result of certain problems in national English life and not an odd import from foreign lands. Fair enough.

Accordingly, he refuses to characterise specifically the terrorist in his play, so that even though the character refers to 'his wife' it's quite possible to play it as a woman (as I did). A white one. If I am correct, there was even a production in which

the bomber was played by a white actor costumed as a businessman. The monologue itself is, actually, stream of consciousness spoken out loud and, as such, it contains plenty of trivial observations inspired by the journey to London that the bomber is taking (he craves for an almond croissant, comments on a passenger picking his nose...). There is no mention of religion, or race, and the ideological content (an attack against trashy food, trashy childhood and trashy media) could be put in the mouth of millions.

I myself find the monologue, as one of my students noted, bland. I applaud Stephens for being brave enough to let the terrorist speak, as this is not what we are used to in real life. I believe that we need to listen to these criminals in order to understand how the gap between discontent and delinquency is bridged; no, they are not monsters but they do commit monstrous acts and we need to learn why. Stephens, however, tries to be so politically correct that his terrorist ends up being anybody and, so, nobody. He trips himself up. Even though my students and I agreed that the monologue seems likely or realistic enough, we expected more: we get no insight into how this person is feeling about what he is about to do (and this is not just kill but also die).

In the ensuing debate with my students, we discussed how real life belies Stephens's theory: few people actually become terrorists, so there must be indeed a distinct factor that makes particular individuals believe that killing and maiming strangers in horrific ways makes sense. The recent Boston bombings by the Tsarnaev brothers strongly suggest that terrorists actions are the product of individuals who feel rejected, or marginalised, and who feel, in the company of others like themselves or on their own, the need to strike back, take revenge. It's a theory. Race and ethnicity, as a Norwegian Erasmus student reminded me, are secondary: their local horror, Anders Breivik, is white and so are/were ETA and IRA members. I'll leave aside the fact that most terrorists are (disempowered) men...

There have been other attempts to deal with terrorism from another angle –of which, the weirdest one is no doubt the English comedy film *Four Lions*. There, the point raised is that the English terrorists who decide to attack the London marathon (yes...) are incompetent buffoons. Very ordinary guys, yes and quite stupid, yes, but still very dangerous... which the film cannot satisfactorily account for. The problem with Stephens's monologue is different: his terrorist is neither an evil monster nor a moron, yet it's hard to believe that someone carrying a backpack with that content would spare not a single thought for his own death and that of his victims. This has to be faced.

Stephens fails then (honourably) in his bold attempt to humanise the terrorist. He does succeed in making him ordinary; we may gain glimpses of his ordinary humanity, indeed, in the fact that wife and baby daughter wait for him at home. Yet, Stephens crashes against the inevitable moral barrier: either we admit that the need to kill people at random is as human as the need to eat an almond croissant (and think to what chaos this would lead), or we admit that there *are* monsters. Human but monsters, meaning by this not so much individuals that are evil all through their lives but who, given a certain set of circumstances, can perpetrate evil acts in cold blood.

Stephens gets this almost right but the sad mystery of what makes a human being decide to kill other human beings remains, unsolved beyond drama and beyond all our fictions.

8-V-2013 WHAT WORRIES ME ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY (IN THIS WEEK OF PROTESTS)

The students' Assembly of the Facultat asks us, teachers, to use some time this week in class to explain to students what worries us most about the current state of the university. I will do so tomorrow but I have also decided to leave here in my blog the snapshot of what things look like right now. Sad and depressive...

My current worries can perhaps be summarised in just ONE major worry: the Spanish university suffers from a chronic lack of funding, which is now, because of the bottomless crisis we're going through, simply appalling. This lack of funding translates into the following:

***STAFF:**

- we have more or less sufficient staff to cover our teaching but 50% of that are part-time associates with temporary contracts that can disappear overnight.
- the associate positions they occupy are 'fake' since they should have been by all rights full-time junior positions like the one I enjoyed (as 'ayudante') before I got tenure (a permanent contract).
- this also means that, since in our Department the admin jobs done by the teaching staff are not carried out by associates, we, full-time teachers, do an enormous share of that.
- many of these associates have accreditations to be hired as 'lectors' (a four-year contract), which is a tenure-track position. However, there no openings at all. This year a full professor will retire and she will be replaced with a part-time associate with the cheapest contract, instead of using these resources to offer at least one associate a full-time contract. I'm speaking of persons 35-50 years of age who have already worked with us for many years. And, yes, we have six former full-time positions underused in that way.
- the lack of resources for full-time staff or for, generally, new staff also means that the Department's teaching staff is ageing too much in relation to the students we teach. We need fresh blood...

***ADMIN(ISTRATION) WORK ('GESTIÓ'):**

- the principle that universities should be autonomous entities that run themselves with no outside interference has lead to a situation in which bureaucratic tasks have multiplied and fallen into the hands of teachers, who often feel just like glorified clerks. These tasks have particularly increased as regards the amount of paperwork needed for practically everything. For each hour devoted to admin tasks by senior teachers we miss one hour of productive research. This is bad for the Department and frustrating for the teachers who take their research seriously.

***RESEARCH:**

- time: every committed researcher complains against the same problem –we use too much time for admin tasks and for marking, but too little for research (even for plain reading to keep up-to-date). Continuous assessment, which replaces the older final exams, demands plenty of time. At the same time, it's hard to reduce it without

crucially affecting the quality of teaching (we should reduce the size of the groups, with more teaching staff).

- funding for books and for conferences: This Department has always spent money, quite generously, on books (for the Library, never for individual teachers) and to attend conferences. This year it seems that we won't be able to buy any books, without which our research cannot be up-dated, and the money for conferences could be as little as 200 euros each teacher. Considering that our wages have gone down quite sharply and that conferences seem to have less and less weight in our CVs, we might in some cases (particularly the associates) stop attending at all. This is very important, as conferences are essential to make and maintain academic contacts.

***WAGES:**

- I assume that many of my fellow Spaniards would consider me a privileged worker with a big salary. This is, of course, relative to their own situation. What I must stress is that in the fat cow times of the recent past our salaries remained frozen for years, which means that we lost every year around 3% of our real income. Whatever increase I have got since then comes from complements I have earned on the basis of my (good) teaching and (good) research, and from seniority.

- however, for the last two years the Generalitat (which is NOT my employer, as I am a civil servant of the Spanish state) has been taking money from my wages –the full summer pay, which is not a bonus, but part of my salary. This month they have taken 338 euros and they will do so for 8 months (this is much more than the summer pay). Mariano Rajoy's Government, my real employer, will deduct the winter pay...

- I myself can buy cheaper clothing, and do with fewer luxuries but other teachers with a mortgage and children are really going through a very rough patch. We often feel as we have to pay for the privilege of teaching, when what we actually offer is a high-quality public service, scandalously cheap in relation to how much work we do.

***PUBLIC IMAGE (AMONG STUDENTS AND SOCIETY):** Finally, what also worries me very much is how little students and society know about what we do and how little sympathy we get for our troubles. Instead, everyone assumes us to be a bunch of lazy people who do nothing else but teach six or eight hours a week. All of us work at least the 37.5 hours of our contract and in most cases anything beyond that as there's no real limit to what committed university teachers will do.

So now you know...

12-V-2013 THE END OF LECTURING?: NEWS FROM BRITAIN

My colleague David Owen passes us, Literature teachers, two interesting links. Both refer to a recent critique of the usefulness of university lectures by Wikipedia's founder: "Jimmy Wales: Boring university lectures 'are doomed'" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-22160988>) and "Are university lectures doomed?" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/may/05/debate-university-lectures-doomed-philip-hensher-john-mullan>).

The main gist of Wales's argumentation is that increasingly popular online higher education will kill the traditional lecture, or rather, the students' need to attend

lectures delivered live. He claims that uploading pre-recorded lectures should work best, as one can choose when to stop and 'rewind' if necessary. Also, students could thus sidestep boring lecturers: "why wouldn't you have the most entertaining professor, the one with the proven track record of getting knowledge into people's heads?" (See how he rates the ability to teach well as an ability to entertain well...)

Philip Hensher and John Mullan consider Wales's critique in the *Guardian* article. Hensher, a lecturer himself, is puzzled that there are "still institutions where academics stand at the podium and start to read out from dog-eared print-outs of last year's lectures" like in the pre-internet 1980s. He declares, to my dismay, that "Since I took to lecturing myself, I generally approached it as cabaret". Yet, as he himself observes, "realistically, if one wanted to teach anyone anything, I think one should make them participate, interrupt, ask questions, disagree, talk back, and that's the alternative route I've taken." John Mullan, a professor of English at University College London, rejects Hensher's idea that the lecture is "inherently authoritarian and tedious" and stresses that student response should happen in seminars with small groups, not in lectures.

In Spain traditional university teaching consists of lectures ('clases magistrales') that students attend and then vomit back at lecturers in final exams. One advantage of this method for teachers is that, yes, you can recycle your notes the following year(s); second, you can be as dense as you wish (em, offer high standards) as you needn't worry about whether students follow your lecture or not. In the English Department I work for the habitual practice is NOT to lecture, unless it is absolutely necessary, as we believe that classroom time should be used for what students cannot do alone, namely, practice English (for the equivalent of lectures we can upload texts for them to read, or send them to the library). We believe, in short, in teaching our students seminar-style, with all the limitations that this entails when your class is any number between 25 and 80, with most groups around 50. My own teaching practice is based on that methodology: minimal lecturing, as much close reading followed by dialogue as I can cram in 80 minutes.

I had this week a very interesting conversation with a brilliant first-year student taking a combined degree in Catalan and Spanish. Very candidly, he acknowledged that the Catalan side of the degree fulfilled better what he expected university to be, as teachers lecture (and students take notes, and cram for final exams). My own class, he said, works fine as far as the choice of reading matter is concerned but is quite light in comparison, as I depend on what students can contribute (we do continuous assessment, by the way). With most students below the required B2 entrance level, I agree that class dialogue suffers much. In the last class, I had to ask him not to answer when I asked a question, as he puts off less advanced students from participating. Which was not very nice of me... though he said he's used to it.

I worry all the time that I should lecture 'properly', but, then, Jimmy Wales might not find me the kind of good entertainer that deserves to have his/her lectures uploaded. Yet, if I lectured, I would deprive my students of the chance to combine forces with me and, well, think (and, remember, Socrates invented interactive teaching...). But, again, if I base classes on interacting with students who are not motivated, or do not know enough English (or both), I end up losing the interest of the really good students, who think that I'm not, um, scholarly enough.

In my fourth-year elective, English Theatre, for which I needn't worry about my students' English (it's good enough) and I have around 25 students I lecture half the session and speak with them the other half. It works, at least for me, so here is the solution: keep groups small for everyday teaching, offer lectures only when invited to do so... and online if you think your cabaret act will please Jimmy Wales and all those who think that lecturing should be a form of theatre.

If you think about it, Wales's argument is plain silly, as uploading lectures on the net does not mean they will or must disappear in their live version –they can be complementary. There's also something else: online learning requires a strict discipline regarding the student's daily schedule, whereas live learning imposes a routine that most students need. By the way, even though I do mention the Wikipedia often in class as a wonderful resource I couldn't enjoy as a student, and one should imagine that my students are all the time learning from it, this is not, Jimmy Wales, the case...

15-V-2013 FEAR OF POETRY AND OF THE ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY: HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

In the last few weeks both my UAB and my UOC students have been learning (English) poetry. To my dismay and that of my teaching colleagues, even though we have insisted that they should NOT produce text commentaries and we have provided them with samples of the kind of argumentative essay we want to see applied to poetry, the ensuing essays have been mostly text commentaries –resulting in many fails. So here's a tutorial for both.

A text commentary is the kind of exercise taught in secondary school for dealing with poetry (among other texts). It is DESCRIPTIVE and, basically, it is a paraphrasis (or repetition in the students' own words) of the poem's content. My colleagues and I think that this is too limited for university students and, so we decided to use the argumentative model for all literary genres, poetry included.

The problem is that students are very much afraid of poetry and feel much more confident counting lines, stanzas and rhyme schemes than arguing a point, idea or thesis about a poem. For you to understand the difference, the text commentaries we have been marking are the equivalent of discussing, for example, a play by simply mentioning how many acts, scenes, lines of dialogue, characters, and settings it has and then offering a plot summary. Can you see the sense in that?

An argumentative essay argues a thesis statement about a particular topic, offering arguments in favour and against this thesis. We prefer this to the text commentary because the argumentative essay forces the student to ask him/herself a relevant (research) question about a text. The answer (= the thesis) must be solid and coherent, and the process of developing arguments to accompany it forces the student to THINK, which is NOT the case of the text commentary (by the way, an ARGUMENT is an idea open to agreement or disagreement).

Obviously, the main difference with the basic argumentative essay ("Are you in favour of the death penalty?") is that in the argumentative essays we teach the writer MUST defend his/her thesis as convincingly as possible. Counterarguments (ideas that might contradict or invalidate your thesis) must be taken into account but this is never a simple case of 'on the one hand/on the other hand.' If you're arguing that "Hamlet is

a hero" you need to take into account the possibility that others disagree and call him a coward, but you cannot agree with them –you need to DEFEND your thesis.

With a short story, a play or a novel students feel more confident and they find it easier to ask a (research) question ("Is Hamlet a coward or a hero?") and a thesis in answer to that question ("Hamlet is a coward"). With poetry, students have an enormous difficult to ask questions. Jenny Joseph's "Warning" expresses the speaker's wish to find freedom in old age –yes, but is the imagine of old age that the poem offers realistic? Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum" is a superb war poem –yes, but is the strategy to scare the reader with such violent images the best one to offer a pacifist message? John Agard's "Half-Caste" is an anti-racist poem –yes, but is the argumentation that the poet offers, with all those allusions to non-racial issues, effective? Dylan Thomas's "Do not Go Gentle into the Night" deals with the death of the poet's father –yes, but does it make sense to ask anyone to rage against death rather than wish that they die peacefully? And so on...

If you need to inform us that a poem has three stanzas, or a abc abc rhyming scheme, this should only be done if it helps your argumentation. Imagine an essay in which you're arguing that Jimmy Porter's anger in *Look Back in Anger* is caused by the loss of his father and suddenly you inform your reader that this is a play in three acts with four characters. This would be absurd. Quite another matter is mentioning the fact that Thomas Hardy's "On the Departure Platform" is divided into two parts of four and two stanzas each if you're arguing that the pessimistic message of the poem, found in the second part, is exaggerated in view that the first part simply narrates the woman's temporary departure and not her leaving for ever.

So this is it: a measure of description is always necessary in an argumentative essay but it should never replace argumentation. A strategy to get rid of the text commentary would be to write it first and then, on its basis, write a second argumentative essay, which is what you should hand in. Use the text commentary, if necessary, as a kind of preliminary exercise useful for a close reading of the poem, then start again: ask yourself a question about the text, answer it and *voilà*, here's your THESIS. The rest will follow.

20-V-2013 ... AND FEAR OF THE TITLE FOR ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS: HOW TO OVERCOME IT

If I had a euro for every time a student has handed in an essay with no title, I'd be... in less fear of the current crisis. Not rich but possibly in possession of, say, a much better handbag. Actually, if I think about it, there are two variations to this problem: essays with no title at all, or essays that simply use the title of the text analysed. Yes, "*Wuthering Heights*" is a title that exists though it should not.

The resistance to using titles is hard to explain in view that nobody would read a newspaper article, or a piece of Literature, without one. Imagine going to the cinema and having to point to the ticket seller what you want to see because the film has no title (or do people ask anyway for 'the new Leonardo Di Caprio?'). So, there's not really an explanation for the absence of the title in many (most?) students' essays, unless it is a bad habit caught from exams of the traditional kind in which, if I remember correctly, I was never asked to supply a title (apparently my examiners assumed that the question was title enough).

Any literary writer will tell you that choosing titles is very important and that a bad title can kill a good novel (a good title can, of course, make a bad novel an instant success –anybody will want to read something called *The Da Vinci Code*). Kazuo Ishiguro defines the process as “a bit like naming a child” as “a lot of debate goes on.” Sometimes, strange accidents happen and so he explains that the intriguing title for his masterpiece *The Remains of the Day* comes from “a semi-serious game of trying to find a title for my soon-to-be-completed novel” (Michael Ondaatje suggested *Sirloin: A Juicy Tale...*). Judith Hertzberg, a Dutch writer, mistranslated Freud’s phrase ‘tagesreste’ as “remains of the day” (apparently it’s ‘debris of the day’) and Ishiguro borrowed it, as this “seemed to me right in terms of atmosphere.” *Voilà*. (This comes, by the way from the, um, juicy *Paris Review* interview with Ishiguro, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5829/the-art-of-fiction-no-196-kazuo-ishiguro>).

Argumentative essays, which is what should concern students and academics, are very demanding in terms of finding a title as this title should reflect the thesis of the essay and still be attractive (not a long explanatory sentence, as some offer). Apparently, finding a title is so hard that I have already come across a couple of automatic essay title generators on the net –they produce hilarious results... also scary, as we teachers seem to be asking for very predictable essay topics.

As a general rule, an academic essay should have a title and a subtitle, which are open to different possibilities. Basically, though, the title should advance the thesis and the subtitle refer to the text/author analysed or add an explanation to the title. Producing witty titles is only possibly for very advanced students and for a handful of teachers. Aspiring to writing ‘clever’ titles is often a mistake, as this usually only results in embarrassing, silly titles. It’s hard to give advice beyond a) titles should be concise but also sufficiently informative of the contents, b) they should be attractive and invite the reader to read on and c) wait until you have completed your essay to find a suitable title (it may be one of your own sentences).

Since I expect the reader will be waiting for some example, I have checked the MLA for titles of published academic work on the novel I’m currently teaching – yes, *The Remains of the Day*. Here are five that seem to me if not perfect (what is perfection, after all?) certainly up to the task of transmitting a clear idea of the thesis and contents, and of sending an invitation to the (possible) reader:

“Escape from Responsibility: Ideology and Storytelling in Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*”

“The End of (Anthony) Eden: Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* and Midcentury Anglo-American Tensions”

“Serving a New World Order: Postcolonial Politics in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*”

“The Butler in (the) Passage: The Liminal Narrative of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*”

“Being an Other to Oneself: First Person Narration in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*”

To check whether they’re really good, you should now read the corresponding essay and see if the title truly fulfils its function... I’ll leave that to each reader.

And I truly hope that one day I will no longer think of buying an expensive handbag every time I mark an essay with no title or with an unsuitable one...

25-V-2013 WHERE'S MY MAGIC WAND??: PLANNING HOW TO TEACH THE HARRY POTTER SERIES

As a consequence of a post I published here last Christmas I have finally embarked on the very difficult mission of teaching J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series next year. Yes, very difficult, believe me.

Since the subject is formally 'Cultural Studies' I have decided to use the first few weeks for an overview of this research methodology, which I'll base on my colleague David Walton's excellent academic best-seller *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning through Practice* (London: Sage, 2007). Students will take an exam on this volume for me to make sure that they have grasped the essentials. The remaining 12 weeks of this (semestral) elective course will be focused on *Harry Potter* as a significant case (or cultural phenomenon) worth studying within Cultural Studies.

I have the same feeling now that I had when I wrote my book on *The X-Files* (*Expediente X: En honor a la verdad*, now out of print, hopefully soon to be available as e-book). The material is so huge that the main difficulty is how to organise its study. Logically, I cannot have students in class who are not already familiar with Rowling's seven volumes, nor can I follow a chronological order to teach the books as the whole point is to be able to treat them as a single text, which is what they are: the *Harry Potter* series.

So, after making a list of the issues I would like to deal with, checking the bibliography (more than 450 entries in MLA...) and checking the syllabi for other courses (about 50 mainly in English-speaking countries), I have come up with a list of topics, quite obvious but also, I hope, quite solid. Here it is:

1. Is *Harry Potter* Literature?
2. The construction of the hero: Myths and stereotypes behind Harry Potter
3. Why not a heroine?: Gender dynamics in *Harry Potter*
4. Voldemort and blood purity: Racism in the world of magic
5. The construction of the secondary characters in *Harry Potter*
6. Hogwarts: Social prejudice in British 'public schools'
7. Fandom and fan fiction on *Harry Potter*
8. Beasts, creatures and different humans in *Harry Potter*
9. At what age should we read *Harry Potter*?
10. Against *Harry Potter*: Religious readings and moral censorship
11. The film adaptations: lights and shadows

I am now ready to re-read the series this summer, pencil in hand, to find the passages and ideas I need for every topic (this is for 4, this for 10, etc.). Ideally, my students should also do the same BEFORE the course starts in February 2014 so that they come to class ready to discuss whatever topic is due with their own notes at hand. Difficult, I know..., but I will put my faith in them and hope for the best as, after all, I am teaching the subject on demand, that is, because they asked me to.

The other matter that worries me is the plain logistics of how to carry the text to class. Obviously, I can't ask students to bring the whole seven volumes every day to class, so my own set will have to be always there. Yet, what nags me is how we're going to find a particular passage if the need arises... Um, tricky.

As for students' implication in classroom activities, I have had the crazy idea of not opening my mouth at all during these 11/12 weeks and leave all the teaching in their hands –now, that would be radical!! The problem I have right now is that I have no idea about what the real number of formally registered students will be (a few have already asked to attend as unregistered students or 'oyentes'). Depending on how many finally enrol (anything between 25 and 70), I'd think of having as many oral presentations as it is feasible to have, with intense debate as a main target throughout the subject.

I have already spoken with some students regarding the subject as my main doubt is what exactly they expect from me. They tell me that the idea is using the subject to learn more about *Harry Potter*. Yes, of course, but this will not happen fandom-style in the sense that at the end of the course we will not have accumulated information to compete with the Wikipedia. My aim is quite different: to turn the students' pleasure in the popular texts they love into proper academic material, as this is what I do academically most of the time. I did warn these students that they would have to take exams, write a paper, read bibliography and they were still enthusiastic, so that's the challenge for me: to make the most academically of that enthusiasm and keep it alive to the end of the course. I don't want Harry to become another boring chore...

As for myself, I have vowed to write, finally, that overdue essay on Sirius Black which I started long ago and abandoned overwhelmed by the enormous amount of bibliography on Rowling's saga. My focus will be, of course, masculinity (as this is what I have been working on for the last ten years) but also what exactly appeals to us as readers in relation to Sirius – I won't anticipate more here, but I'm considering the idea that Freud missed much by limiting relevant roles in childhood to the nuclear family.

Now, for feedback from you... (Thanks!)

29-V-2013 AND THE SORTING HAT?: MORE PLANNING ON *HARRY POTTER*, WITH SOME WORRIES ABOUT THE BIBLIOGRAPHY...

My thanks to the prospective students of the *Harry Potter* elective for their positive feedback, it seems I'm on the right track regarding the issues they expect me to raise in class. Now, this post refers to a problem that I'm having regarding this subject in particular but that can be extended to any other university course: the bibliography.

You might think that the problem is the lack thereof considering that Rowling is not a literary author. Well, you're dead wrong: the MLA carries more than 450 items though this list is by no means complete, as a quick check of WorldCat.org confirmed. I'm speaking about academic publications and not the type of book aimed at fans (pop encyclopaedias, reading guides, personal essays, etc.). The complete list must be truly staggering. (You would be surprised, by the way, at the very high number of academic and non-academic publications that address *Harry Potter* from a concerned or

censorious Christian point of view... yes, mostly by American authors. *Vade retro Voldemort!!*)

With the usual patience these things require, I have managed to produce a 'reasonable' bibliography which, nonetheless, includes 13 monographs (2 in Spanish), 14 collective books and 23 articles in academic journals. Of all these, my guess is that maybe 30% of the articles are available from UAB ('downloadable'); the rest is not available, at least not near home, that is to say, in the Catalan universities (I have checked CBUC, which to my surprise does carry some of those non-academic titles but just one decent academic monograph).

Thinking of buying some of the collective books, at least, for the UAB library I spent some time checking Amazon prizes. Now I honestly don't know what to do.

Prices run from £15 to £45, with *Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter: Applying Academic Methods to a Popular Text*, which sounds perfect for my needs, reaching £200. At this point my Department has no money to pay for our phone bills (really) and I very much doubt we'll have money for books. I think I should need to spend at least 150 euros on a minimally serious bibliography (I already bought Rowling's series for my personal use –with my own money– and for the UAB library with public money). I will simply not invest that money on a subject I might teach just once in my lifetime and I am beginning to feel guilty that, if that's the case, I should not ask the Departament to spend a single euro on it.

Then, there's the option I won't even mention considering that CEDRO has sued my incredibly impoverished university for thousands of euros on the grounds that we are damaging the rights of authors by uploading books or parts of them onto our Virtual Campus. I'm sure you understand why, though as a CEDRO member this is not a practice I should encourage (I don't, but then I need to ask publishers why the price of academic books is so high).

I can always ask students to buy just one book for background reading, which might be, I think, Cynthia Hallett's Casebook, *J. K. Rowling: Harry Potter* (2012) and which sounds at just £15 reasonable enough. The problem is that this choice puts the edition of the materials I need for my subject in her hands, not mine...

So, when I claim that this problem can be extrapolated to any other subject you can see what I mean: learning costs money and so does teaching. Students complain, rightly, that they cannot spend money on their education and we, the institution that educates them, are more and more constrained by lack of funding to provide what they can't afford.

So... it'll have to be the Casebook...??

2-VI-2013 SIMPLY PUZZLING: WHY ARE THE (ACADEMIC) SKILLS WE TEACH SO SOON FORGOTTEN?

A recurrent topic of conversation among us, teachers, these days (we're marking tons of essays...) is that students seem to forget from one year to the next how to apply the academic skills we teach them. Even from one semester to the next.

Let me explain myself: they need to learn in the first year (for '20th century Literature') how to produce a bibliography, which includes monographs, chapters in collective books, articles in academic journals and academic internet resources. This is, they claim, new to them (which begs the question of what kind of research projects

they do in secondary school...) but we trust that once they learn how to do it, this will not be forgotten. It's a basic academic skill not just for English Literature or English Studies but for any discipline and field of knowledge. Mathematicians, say, also write the kind of academic productions they need to list.

The skills we teach with this bibliographical exercise include not only finding the information but being able to edit it correctly, for which not only do we make a set of guidelines available to them but also the Department's "Stylesheet" (which matches the guidelines 100%, I know as I have edited both). I have just marked the bibliography and, like every year, I'll have to ask a few students to repeat it as the sources located are not adequate (often very old...) or the edition is not satisfactory. My general impression is that students have many problems using catalogues and data bases and they lack a certain intuition required to complete a bibliography (if there's nothing on 'liminality in Wordsworth', check 'liminality' and 'Wordsworth' separately...). I have no idea, however, why it's so hard in some cases to distinguish a monograph from a collective book. Or why the idea of the academic journal is so alien.

What causes major puzzlement among us teachers is that students have many difficulties to apply what they learn in the first year to the papers they must produce in subsequent years. We ask them, very modestly, to start including three secondary sources in their (short) papers in the second year (some teachers think even that is too much!), in preparation for third and fourth year longer papers and for the BA dissertation, which at this point asks for quotations and references from just *seven* secondary sources (I said 10 to 12...). A point we do stress is that the search for information applies to all the subjects in the degree and to all aspects of professional life, but that doesn't seem to be enough.

Editing correctly a paper with its bibliography is for students clearly much less relevant than it is for us. I get routinely titles of books and plays with no italics or between quotation marks, and titles of articles with italics. *Hamlet*, "*Hamlet*" and *Hamlet* are all mixed up (and I even get "*Hamlet*" meaning the play, not its hero). Perhaps we don't impress strongly enough on students that editing conventions are basic for academic life and that, well, a bibliography **MUST** be in alphabetical order by author's surname because that is the way we have collectively agreed to arrange it. I know that even professional academics are guilty of producing atrocious editions of their own papers but no badly edited text is ever published...

So, I don't know, I'm lost. We already insist that the Literature subjects are not tightly compartmentalised so that what is learned in one applies to all others, particularly the academic skills. Students, though, still have difficulties to grasp this. One of my tasks this summer is to produce a very short document that evidences this problem and that helps students to see the complete map of the academic skills we teach them. I don't know, however, whether this will do the trick. Whatever document we publish seems to be ignored and Facebook rumourology given more credit.

Any feedback is welcome... from either teachers or students.

8-VI-2013 ASYRAS: A TOAST TO ITS GROWTH AND TO THE FUTURE OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS IN SPAIN

I have had a memorable birthday present as one of the guest plenary speakers of the third ASYRAS conference, celebrated at the University of Oviedo. This was

intriguingly called “The Significance of the Insignificant in Anglophone Studies”, a title apparently inspired by Bergson. Very philosophical!

I cannot sufficiently thank organisers Alejandra Moreno and Irene Pérez for this wonderful present, nor for their constant attention to my person, their friendliness and warmth. As a further way of thanking them and ASYRAS’ current president, the very charming Pedro Álvarez Mosquera (of Salamanca), I have decided to publicise here what ASYRAS is, as it deserves that and much more.

ASYRAS is the acronym of the Association of Young Researchers in Anglophone Studies. It was born in 2007 out of an initiative carried out by a group of just 8 post-grad students in Salamanca and it is plainly meant to generate much necessary networking among its members. I asked whether ‘young’ meant in this context under, say, 40, or whether it had to do with being untenured. The answer was that ‘young’ refers to any researcher up to five years after his or her obtaining a doctoral degree. Fair enough. I myself got tenure 6 years after becoming a doctor but I know very well that many young people today face a much harsher time and that tenure, which for me was testing enough, is for them practically utopia... This is why ASYRAS seems to me so necessary.

One of the aims of ASYRAS is to provide guidance to graduates starting post-grad studies in any Spanish university, which means in practice guidance into how to start doing research. Thinking of my own shortcomings as a rookie post-grad student and of what I see around in conferences whenever young researchers offer papers, I believe that this is still very necessary. We rely on a person to person transmission of how to do things academically speaking but I know of no general guidelines to help you start doing research in the Spanish context. I would ask ASYRAS to provide them, and also to contact all master degrees Coordinators for them to pass on information about ASYRAS to the new students.

Just consider that a few years back, before MAs were generalised, students who registered for doctoral courses already had a certain idea about what PhD dissertations meant whereas now post-grad students often have a hard time to complete a much simpler MA dissertation. We need to start helping them as soon as possible. Also gone are the times when one could/should wait to have a doctoral degree to start publishing. Competition is fierce. I myself ask my doctoral students to try to publish a first article in their first year. Soon, we might have to prepare MA students for this daunting task. If not undergrads.

Something else that came up over dinner: although I see many novelties in the quickly expanding field of Cultural Studies, with, say, the TV series of the day being the object of interest of unprejudiced young researchers, in general national conferences evidence a certain lack of imagination. What I mean is that the list of literary works on which research is done seems to have become fossilised in the last 20 years – this means that we, seniors, need to suggest new titles as this is our job. My uppermost worry, though, is what I call the constant rediscovery of garlic soup, by which I mean that too often young researchers, particularly pre-doctoral, tend to ignore the key bibliography of their field (MLA basics...) and seem to have discovered on their own primary texts already very well known. We had a person narrate *Alien* to us in a SF conference... and with no bibliography. This should change urgently.

Finally, I think ASYRAS should also teach young researchers to quote senior Spanish researchers –and we seniors (I count as senior after 20 years in the conference

circuit) should also learn to do that and to acknowledge the research done by our peers on national territory but with totally proven international validity.

All my best wishes for the newly elected President of ASYRAS, Jimena Escudero Pérez. And all my help if you need it!!

12-VI-2013 THE CLASSIC YEARLY ENTRY: THE LITERATURE QUIZ...

My entry of 6 June 2012, about the poor results of the quiz on the handbook *Introduction to English Literature* which first year students must take, offended, I know, many students. Two sent furious comments, criticising me for publicising students' mistakes (even though I did so anonymously, nobody was 'outed'). A girl was particularly angry. She told me off for not using more class time to train students for the quiz, since this exercise, she wrote, appears to be so very important for me.

Remembering her complaint, I warned my class this semester that a) I don't care about the exercise, I care about their *education*; b) I do not use class time for this because studying the handbook is an *autonomous* activity which, well, they're supposed to carry out on their own. I did explain in detail what the quiz would consist of, and offered a class tutorial (with practice) that few attended. I even proposed that we suppressed the quiz: all they had to do was promise me that they would study the handbook. No such promise was forthcoming, so, here we go again: they hate me for the massive cramming the quiz demands, and I am as usual hugely disappointed since many have failed to identify very prominent titles and authors of English Literature, and place them in their correct historical context.

Just consider this: even though the first weeks of the course focused on Modernism and included a short story by Virginia Woolf, few students have attributed her masterpiece *To the Lighthouse* to Woolf and she has been called Victorian by at least one very disoriented student... Let me insist on the obvious: there's no way around studying if you're a student, and that includes memorising. If we produce lists for you (we did offer anyway a period and author chart) this will not help you, as memorising is best approached by producing your own lists, as we teachers did as students and still do. Ask the students who scored above 30 points (out of 40) how they managed the feat.

Amazingly, this year's quiz included some misidentifications also present last year. John, not Jane, Austen has been named again as the author of *Sense and Sensibility*, whereas JK Rowling's masterpiece turns out to be again *The Lord of the Rings*. *Wuthering Heights* still causes much confusion: it's the work of Emily Gemmë or Emilie Worton, not Emily Brontë. A student has called it a WWI poem. Mary Shelley (Mery Shelly...) is still alive, once more, though David Stroke happens to be the author of *Frankenstein*. Shakespeare (Sheakspeare, James not William) has become a Romantic (or Victorian) playwright. Salman Rushdie, mentioned in class a few times and whose review of *The Remains of the Day* I quoted from (and students were supposed to read) remains massively unknown.

If I sound sarcastic you misread me, I'm not laughing. I'm sad. This is very serious.

I was about to say that the errors are less blatant this year but this is irrelevant as I believe there were more blanks. Last year I wrote that I was worried above all by the students' "inability to study in a systematic way". I still am. I will stress, though,

once more my main worry, what I called the truly scary factor: “that those approaching us lack the basic cultural capital that a student of English should possess (and indeed acquire in the first year).”

We are very much concerned that a majority of our students are below the required B2 English language entrance level, as placement tests reveal, and work hard to correct this situation. We don’t use, however, placement tests for Literature and Culture and I’m beginning to think that they’re very urgent. This would need careful, systematic planning for all the concerned courses and we simply lack the time and resources to embark on what is indeed a daunting task, but there MUST BE a minimum standard, an equivalent B2 for a general cultural background in English (and the native languages/cultures).

The quiz is very difficult to pass (at least the first part) precisely because students must learn the author’s names, titles and periods from scratch. And this is something we teachers do not understand. Those of us who teach now Literature took a degree in English because we wanted to be able to read in this language what we were already reading in translation - massively. Learning a language means learning a culture, and if you are interested in the language, how can you not be interested in the names and works of the individuals who have used it best? This is why we teach Literature – to reach the rich world that lies beyond the boring grammar exercises, to take students into the core of the language’s beauty. And this beauty comes indeed from any of the 20 major authors we ask you, students, to memorise, hoping that one day you will want to read their texts. That’s what I care for, not the quiz itself.

I’m bracing myself for the hate mail but, what can I do?, my job description includes being nasty whenever this is needed. I wish, though, I could stop being nasty for, generally speaking, I would not call myself nasty. And no, the solution for that is not eliminating the quiz, not as long as students do not promise to study hard on their own –which, by the way, we prefer to call ‘educate oneself autonomously’.

That would have me smiling all the time.

VI-2013 RETURNING TO STEINBECK (IN THE BLEAKEST MOOD)

One of the masterpieces I have been meaning to read since my student’s days (but never got round to) is John Steinbeck’s monumental *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). I love John Ford’s film adaptation of 1940, but I’ve kept on putting off reading the book. Sorry but Steinbeck is one of those authors that makes me feel lazy as a reader despite my admiration for him. I got, though, eventually curious to see whether his portrait of Depression America is still valid today. It is, so much so that I ended wrapped up in the bleakest mood (my! that final scene...). This, anyway, is not a novelty these days: add to the pay cuts and the general attack against the welfare state the death this week of my favourite writer, Iain Banks.

The Grapes of Wrath tells in compassionate, humane detail the story of the Joad family. These poor Oklahoma croppers lose their jobs and home when the greedy banks that own their land replace whole farming communities with a handful of men driving tractors. The Joads and thousands of other ‘Oakies’ take then the road to the promised land, California, only to discover after an arduous journey that the scant jobs available there are too meagrely paid to guarantee basic day-to-day survival. Same old story.

A reader at Amazon called the novel ponderous and perhaps it is. Chapter 3, very famously, focuses on a turtle crossing a country road. You might also tire of so much dialogue in dialect although, naturally, this is how the Joad family and the others that people Steinbeck's world would speak. I had, nonetheless, the clear feeling from page one that I was reading a masterpiece, the kind of literary novel nobody can write anymore (remember that Steinbeck is a Nobel Prize winner, not that I care very much about that).

I do not mean that there is no literary talent today. What I mean is that *The Grapes of Wrath* is an ambitious novel by a novelist who cared more about what he was narrating than about his own career, at least that was my impression (I cannot get rid of this feeling that writers today write mainly for narcissistic reasons). Steinbeck's writing is dominated by his anger and indignation at the political and economic situation of 1930s America. I don't know whether he was repeating facts and ideas well known at the time or whether he himself had a crystal-clear perception of the abuses of capitalism. What baffles and moves me at the same time is how he made first-rate literary material out of that personal and collective suffering.

I do not know whether Greek author Petros Márkaris (a recent Carvalho award), who is writing a trilogy about the deep crisis in his country, is up to the standard of literary greatness that this catastrophe calls for. What I know is that we need someone as big as Steinbeck to narrate these hard times (the Dickensian allusion is not accidental).

Logically, this major novel of the current crisis should come from the South of Europe (Italy, Portugal, Greece and indeed Spain). This great novel should draw, in the style of a Hugo, Balzac, Tolstoi or Dickens, a vast panorama of interlocking stories with corrupt politicians, long-term unemployed families, migrant post-grads, victims of fraudulent bank practices (and university teachers scared of eventually losing tenure...). Or, as Steinbeck does, this great Spanish novel could focus on just a family – hopefully not in the style of the awful TV series *Cuéntame* (I wonder whether our local talent is already stretched to the limit with *Aída*...). I just wish that any of the members of the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca could turn out to be the novelist we need. And no experimentalism, please.

The hardest part of reading Steinbeck is how the hardships of the characters get under your skin. How deep, one keeps wondering, can injustice gnaw into people's lives? This is no simple melodrama but something much darker, which shows how the same untrammelled evil let loose then, in 1929, is still sweeping up the lives of many that deserve much better (and I do know this is white ethnocentric). Perhaps one could read *The Grapes of Wrath* fifteen years ago and think of it as a quaint reminder of a distant past; not any more, for the dividing line between the Joads and any of us, working or middle-class, is gone (just think of the thousands of Greek public TV workers that their Government left cold in the streets a few days ago).

In the bleakest mood, I'm telling you (any great novelist out there??)

20-VI-2013 SHAME ON YOU: AFTER MEETING CHRISTIAN GREY

This is a post I wish I didn't have to write, as I wish that E L James's *Grey* Trilogy did not exist. I'm even deeply concerned that by publishing this, I might be calling anyone's attention to this disturbing, revolting piece of trash. After meeting Christian

Grey I can only say that I am ashamed that this has been written by a woman, and that so many women have not only bought the books but also enjoyed them (some even fanatically). I can only call the success of the trilogy, which has outsold *Harry Potter*, a clear example of the slave mentality that feminism cannot eradicate. Men must be having a very loud laugh at our expense.

I vowed to myself that I would never spend a euro, not even a cent on either Meyer's *Twilight* or James's *Grey*. None of the *Twilight* books has materialised in my path, but *Fifty Shades of Grey* appeared recently on a bookshelf where I myself opened a book crossing space for the Department's teachers and students. (Did someone leave it for me, I wonder?) So I took it home and yesterday I read the first half. This morning I have decided not to waste more time and after reading a handful of reviews with as many spoilers as possible, I have decided to exorcise *Grey* off my reading list by writing this post.

As everyone knows by now Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey actually descend from Bella and Edward, as James first wrote their story as part of *Twilight*'s booming fan fiction. Bella and Edward are, yes, a sorry twenty-first version of that other lamentable couple, Cathy and Heathcliff, but with a happier ending. It is as if time stopped long time ago in the early nineteenth century for (most?) women, while others still struggle to accomplish the equality that brave Mary Wolstonecraft demanded then. James very explicitly mentions Alec D'Urberville as another milestone in the constructions of her repulsive fantasies, which at least 70 million book buyers have shared and many more cinema-goers will soon share.

James's trilogy has the dubious 'merit' of having exposed what many women really dream of and, beyond the appalling prose, poor characterisation and trite plot, this is what concerns me: the absolute confusion of abuse with romance. You can read the *Grey* books as a story about too seriously disturbed persons who match each other to perfection in their absurd *folie-à-deux*. Yet, whereas nobody would (or should) read Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* with sympathy for Patrick Bateman (so close to Grey that Ellis wanted to write the screenplay for the adaptation), the whole point of the *Grey* trilogy syndrome is that it has generated veneration for Anastasia's ultra-patriarchal lover rather than disgust, as it should.

Who am I to say what other women should feel? Well, someone who is fighting hard to convince women that if they want love in their life and happen to be heterosexual, they ought to choose good men –the beast never turns into a prince, as the cruel deaths of so many women show, and telling yourself that as long as you enter it freely an abusive relationship is fine, is sheer madness. We need urgently new stories by and for women, and we also need to return to the nineteenth century to read the 'other' stories. Mary Wollstonecraft but also others like –my most recent reading– the autobiography of pioneer American feminist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. This has plenty of anti-patriarchal good men who did help women to acquire the rights we enjoy now. If I were that kind of man and read the *Grey* trilogy today, I would give up on women in despair. And, what is worse, I might feel that abuse is justified because this is what the ladies want, secretly or not so secretly.

Cady Stanton explains that the American feminist movement grew under the shade of abolitionism and came to a crucial turning point when, after the Civil War, enfranchisement was offered to black *men*, still excluding *all* women. Cady Stanton, her soul mate Elizabeth B. Anthony and many other women fought then for full

citizenship as the US law proved again and again that they were in practice slaves. It's clear to me that for all the legal, professional and personal advances in women's lives in the West (and in men's thanks to feminism as well), not fifty but a hundred shades of black, rather than grey, still darken our lives.

The slave mentality has not been purged out of romance. I see many women calling themselves post-feminists downplaying this danger and even arguing that producing and reading (sick) romance is part of our empowerment, a position I cannot share. Very simply: if good guys do not turn us on and we cannot write sexy romance about them, then let's abandon romance. Actually, I thought that the whole point of romance was offering compensatory fantasies about Prince Charming to women trapped in sad, bad or boring lives but it turns out that romance is becoming a way to compensate for the lack of abuse in your own (post-feminist?) life... I have never liked Jane Austen but I clearly see now how preferably fantasising about Darcy is to fantasising about Christian Grey.

As for myself, I'd rather fantasise about disseminating ideas that help other women live better lives, including the idea that we must celebrate and enjoy the company of good men, not of fucked-up (patriarchal) bastards. Of these we've already had and still have too many.

25-VI-2013 MASCULINITY EMBODIED (AND THOSE MANLY VOICES!)

Today I need to say something about men's voices.

A few years ago I got contacted by an American man with a warm, husky voice, Dave Muldoon, who asked me to help him develop a PhD dissertation on men's voices –he is himself the voice of Tom Waits in an Italian tribute band (here's Dave singing live, enjoy!!: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6ySDaqmAjM>). I said no to him, worried that the topic was too abstract for the conceptual and theoretical tools we use in Masculinities Studies. I still think this is the case, with much regret.

We agreed instead to work on a dissertation about the representation of masculinity in a series of biopics about iconic pop and rock male singers. He's hard at work on it and, funnily, we've come full circle as it might well be that the final element he needs to tie up all the diverse films is the fundamental presence of the male singer's voice. Since the chosen ones are Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, Ian Curtis and Johnny Cash there is surely a case to be made about how Dave is, after all, dealing primarily with how male voices articulate a certain image of manliness (I don't know what to make of the fifth one, Bob Dylan, not a voice I listen to with pleasure).

I have already mentioned here Joy Division's suicidal lead singer, Ian Curtis, as a key figure for those of us who were young and wanted to be alternative in the early 1980s. What I didn't mention is that the contrast between his baby face and his deep, baritone voice was what got all fans hooked. Since he died I have been looking for a replacement (found him!: Paul Banks from Interpol), and paying attention to men's voices and how they signify masculinity. I'll acknowledge that I'm rethinking all these matters not only because of Dave's dissertation but also, oh my!, because of chef Jordi Cruz's of *MasterChef* fame. There is another angelic, babyish face with an unexpectedly manly, velvety voice.

Logically, when it comes to male voices I tend to pay attention to performers, whether actors or singers. In Spain we have recently lost Constantino Romero, the

most important dubbing actor of recent years. Romero, the kind of chubby, moustachioed man you'd call sweet, dubbed most famously Clint Eastwood, Schwarzenegger's Terminator, *Blade Runner's* replicant Roy and Darth Vader. For us 'Luke, yo soy tu padre' comes in his voice –it seems young people used to stop Romero in the street and begged him to say that. Ramón Langa is also dubbing male icons like Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, which of course is annoying because this means that in Spanish most Americans actors you'd identify with action movies and a certain kind of ultra-manly manliness share their voices. I hate dubbing!!

So, believe me, the reason why I want to see *Fast and Furious 6* in the original version is Vin Diesel's beautifully manly voice (see the animated film *The Iron Giant* in which he dubs the robot). If you want another example of attractive manly voices, and this one is unusual, believe me, see any episode of the BBC's *Sherlock* and see what odd-looking Benedict Cumberbatch brings to the role with what I can only call a voice that makes intelligence sound sexy. More examples? Yes, the perfect father of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (the amazing 1960 classic film) has Gregory Peck's lovely, serene voice. You want scary? Um, Ralph Fiennes both as Heathcliff and as Voldemort. A feast for your ears... By the way, Clooney's appealing voice is the reason why the Nespresso ads are not dubbed.

Recent scholarship in Masculinities Studies by big names such as Jeff Hearn and Victor Seidler insists that we need to understand how masculinity is embodied (as you can see, I myself am more interested in how 'manliness' is embodied –see my essay on Zack Snyder's Spartan film *300* in my web, section articles in books). Actually, Cultural Studies have been taking a close look at men's bodies for quite a long time now in books as diverse as Richard Dyer's *White* or Susan Bordo's obvious *The Male Body*. The voice is missing, though, possibly because it is very difficult indeed to find the adequate vocabulary for description and analysis (um, as you can see here).

Long time ago I was at a Tindersticks concert and I heard a girl say 'I don't care if he doesn't sing, I'd give anything for Stuart [Staples] to whisper sexy words to my ear'. Maybe we need a new definition of oral sex (or sexiness?), I don't know... Now, seriously, ehem, listen to men and tell me what you hear (and Dave, thanks!!)

2-VII-2013 UNWRITING, EDITING, TAYLORING, PRUNING...: FITTING THE WORD COUNT

English is an infinitely flexible language and so, the word 'unwrite' does exist. Oxford Online ignores it but not Merriam-Webster: "to obliterate from writing: expunge, rescind". I have also come across an article by learned Laurence Lerner, "Unwriting Literature" (*New Literary History*, 22: 3, Summer 1991, 795-815) and an article in, of all places, *The Wall Street Journal*, by Karen Blumenthal. She is the one that uses the verb in the sense I mean –more or less.

I don't mean by 'unwrite' the effort made at having to "rip out my work to fix mistakes" as she does in her embroidery and her young adult fiction, but rather the need to cut off from one's work that for which there is no room. She means cases that have to do with expunging material that is not strictly needed for the internal coherence of the text; I mean rather, *having* to cut material that makes perfect sense but that can't fit the pre-given word count I need to respect. In both cases, yes, "thanks to unwriting, days of work became a mere 10 lines of text." Or less.

Here's the particular case that has been driven me bananas in the last few months. The research group I belong to, 'Constructing New Masculinities' (<http://www.ub.edu/masculinities/>) is working on a volume on alternative masculinities, *Moving Ahead*, about which I am truly excited. I decided to contribute a chapter on Orson Scott Card's hero Andrew 'Ender' Wiggins, of whom you'll hear plenty when Gavin Hood's film adaptation of *Ender's Game* hits the screen in November (if you're an SF fan, of course you know Ender!).

Now, Ender appears in many, many texts since the Enderverse is a multimedia megatext in constant expansion—I focused on 'just' five novels: *Ender's Game*, *Ender in Exile*, *Speaker for the Dead*, *Xenocide* and *Children of the Mind*. The notes alone occupied thirty pages, the first draft 16,000 words. Here's the corner I painted myself into very naively: I'm only allowed 4,800 words as there are many other contributors to the book (logically!). After gruelling pruning of the branches that needn't be there, my article is now at 4,825 words, ready for a last thorough unwriting.

To be honest, it's a better article than the 16,000 word version and, incredibly, I argue more or less the same points. I have sweated out, however, every single sentence, happy that English can accommodate so much meaning in its synthetic nature (no way you can do that in circumlocutious Spanish). I haven't passed the article yet onto trusted readers, so I have no idea whether it works but I hope it does (I had to summarise five novels, remember, while I argued that patriarchal Card quashes Ender's atypical masculinity to prevent it from becoming a real alternative).

In the good old times, you could write as much as you wanted for instance in your PhD dissertation—mine, on monstrosity, is itself a monster at almost 600 pages. Last week a doctoral student of mine was told that any manuscript over 250 pages runs the risk of remaining unpublished as, apparently, costs double past that mark. She is aiming for 400 pages at the last count, against my injunction not to write more than 350. Articles of 10,000 words are now a rarity and, let's be honest about this, a trial for our patience. So, yes, 4,800 sounds about right, just as 2,500 is the perfect measure for conference papers. In our rushed times, our attention span is fast dwindling—Twitter will kill it off for good...

What kills me is that to reach the 2,500 or the 4,800, even in 'simple' cases which 'just' one text under analysis, I usually must write four times more and then spend weeks agonizing about how to reduce my big trees down to bonsai size. I unwrite, as you can see, much more than I write (except here, thankfully...). Now, English lacks the very colourful Spanish verb 'jibarizar', which I first heard philosopher Antonio Marina use, and which is exactly what I must do to my articles—this is why as I unwrite I think of bizarre mummified heads (and of bonsais, certainly).

What is the recipe? The first thing to go is the bibliography you only mention (see Smith 2009) but that, anyway, you spent time reading, underlining and assimilating. Use as few quotations as possible, which is hard in our times of sprawling bibliography, and as short as reasonable. Second, off with the footnotes—none will learn from my article that Card based the abusive relationship between Ender and his brother Peter on his own with elder brother Ray (this was a hard one to let go). Third, one can always be less loquacious and communicate the same ideas in fewer words, from 10% to 50% (less than that and you sound too hard-boiled!!).

Ironically, I agree with Laura Pallarés, an ex-student interested in writing the first PhD dissertation ever on Card (if she can afford UAB's fees...), that Ender is

enough to fill in not one but several dissertations, of 250 pages and even longer. So, there we are: size matters after all.

11-VII-2013 ON THE NEW BA DISSERTATIONS (OR TFG): THE FIRST BATCH

Our ever expanding academic duties have included this year the novelty of participating on the examining boards for the new BA dissertations or TFG ('Treball de Fi de Grau'). July has thus yet another day of very hard work that, as usual, must be deducted from research and that delays the official date for the end of teaching to 5 July—very, very late.

The TFG is a very confusing concept, beginning with its name, as it suggests it must be something that caps or crowns the whole BA degree. The word 'dissertation' is not, however, included in its official description, so we opted for giving students the chance to write simply an academic paper with at least 7 secondary sources. The particular topic must be agreed on with the tutor and must suit one of the three choices each teacher offers.

I was supposed to supervise two TFGs but ended up supervising three: on domestic abuse in Roddy Doyle's moving *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, homoeroticism in the thrilling BBC series *Sherlock* and the use of high culture in the demanding SF novels by Dan Simmons, *Ilium* and *Olympus*. In the three cases, both the process of tutoring my very intelligent tutorees and the end result have been extremely satisfactory, with clear possibilities in the three cases of doing further research within an MA and perhaps even a doctoral programme. It's been also very hard work.

The TFG has become a personal elective subject, tailored to suit the needs of each student's topic. In principle, my personal teaching account will receive seven hours for each completed TFG, which is far less than I have used (multiply by three at least). I don't very much care because a) I have enjoyed the conversations with my tutorees, b) I have learnt from their projects, c) I consider these hours a kind of hybrid between teaching and research. Yet, it's clear that spending so many hours on a teaching extra is a very hard to afford luxury.

All of us, teachers, are wondering besides what will happen when the less proficient students demand our help, as we'll have to invest even more time on them. This means that soon there will be a fierce competition among students to choose the best tutors and among teachers to choose the best students. Tricky...

I attended 9 of the 10 Literature and Culture presentations (30 minutes each, 10 for the presentation and the rest for debate) and I must say it was a very positive experience. The topics seemed to me all very interesting, quite up-to-date as regards research. The students did generally very well, braving questions and comments that often seemed more apt for an MA viva. Perhaps the only problem is that as third year students did not attend these public oral examinations, we'll have to repeat the effort of setting up a clear standard next year again. This is something we need to correct.

I can't help, however, wondering why the whole process has been so stressful for both teachers and students, considering that, ultimately, they're doing a kind of exercise they're already familiar with, whether this is writing a paper or offering an oral presentation. My guess is that the label 'TFG' impresses them too much and that if

we used, say, 'Applied Academic Skills' the whole concept would work much better. As usual, others decide for us and not always with the best pedagogic criteria.

To all our first TFG students: well done!!

17-VII-2013 WELCOMING OUR NEW STUDENTS: WHY MUM AND DAD SHOULD NOT BE THERE

As the BA Coordinator, one of my duties is to welcome our new 'English Studies' students in a joint session before registration. Apart from helping them regarding choices they need to make on their registration form, I give them a few pointers about how to become successful university students. I have gone as far as drawing a quite formal document, which I distribute and read with them, giving common-sense information about what we expect from them: be autonomous, check the syllabus, keep an up-to-date diary for the assessment activities, use the Library, participate in class, read the books in advance...

This is the second time I offer this welcome session and in both cases, I'm sorry to say, I have started by sending a few mums and dads out of the classroom.

I'm really appalled by the presence of so many mothers and fathers in our Facultat on registration days. I do not mean parents lending a hand to children who can't be at UAB because they work, or are elsewhere (well, if they're on holiday, that's another matter...). I mean parents that stick to their children throughout the whole process and who wrongly believe that their presence is indispensable. As I told the very surprised new students, their registration with us is a rite of passage into adult life they should undergo alone, and never under the wing of parents who, though caring, are often simply distrustful of their own children's capacities. I'm told that actually some kids welcome parental help as they are happy enough not to bother about the often unnerving registration process. Yet, I hope this is a tiny minority. For their own sake.

Whatever the case, at the end of the session a girl approached me to clarify the matter that worried her: her English is B1 and not B2 as we require – so, what should she do? Suddenly, her mum appeared and when I told the girl it was her responsibility to make sure her English was good enough, the mother started a fantastically anxious tirade about how her daughter was too relaxed about the whole affair, didn't do enough, etc, etc. I told this mother that she should let the girl make her own mistakes and trust her. When I asked her why she had accompanied her daughter at all, she told me the girl needed a ride, which the girl herself denied, as she had already been to UAB on her own. It was not easy to tell this mum, who was more or less my own age, that she should have total confidence in her daughter's ability to do well on her own and that, anyway, she wouldn't be able to come to class and check on her daily... It was very complicated not to be offensive, and I don't know what the consequences of this conversation can have been for the girl.

In a way, I sympathise with the mother. Also with the other mother who called me last Friday at 9:00 asking for information about our degree, sounding very concerned because her absent daughter hadn't chosen a BA yet. I have no children myself and I don't know how I would react if a kid of my own behaved in this non-chalant way. Yet, the parents of my own generation, those between 40 and 50, seem

to me too overprotective, which is not doing their kids, my students, any favour. This, of course, also makes me sympathise with the daughter(s).

Believe me, it was not easy to start the session by telling those mums and dads they were not welcome. I believe, though, it was necessary and that's what I'll do as long as I coordinate the BA. By the way, all my colleagues, mums and dads included, supported my decision –for them the ultimately sinners are the university teachers that, as I was told, also accompany their children on registration day. Wrong, wrong...

22-VII-2013 211%, OR THE MYSTERY OF HOW MANY HOURS I ACTUALLY TEACH

I have just checked my personal teaching account, wondering whether hours I'm owed had been finally counted. Yes, whoever does this has entered the hours corresponding to my supervision of a PhD dissertation (or is it for two dissertations? I'm confused). Not yet, however, the 21 hours corresponding to the three BA dissertations submitted in the current academic year. Whatever the case, UAB considers that the total count of hours I have taught this year amounts to 211% of my expected workload (plus the 21 hours..., etc.).

Technically, I have worked in class for 150 hours (I teach three subjects, as my Coordination duties allow me to drop one of the four I should teach –or not really, as UAB doesn't apply to me last year's Wert Decree, which they should). Add to this 21 for the BA dissertations, 60 for the PhD dissertation(s), 9 for an MA collaboration, 10 more for an MA dissertation soon to be submitted... UAB's teaching accountants have determined that teachers' workload should be worked out in part on the basis of the number of students we have in class, which is only fair. Thus, my biggish 'Victorian Literature' and '20th Century Literature' classes (around 60 each) are actually enough to cover all my workload, and I seem to have taught 'for free' all the rest.

I must clarify that the acknowledged 211% dedication has no effect whatsoever on my teaching for 2013-14, that is to say, I cannot ask for a 'reduction' to compensate for this year's excess. Why's that, since common sense would dictate the opposite? Well, easy: we don't have enough teaching resources to make up for what I'd drop. The English Literature section –11 teachers, only 5 of us tenured, the remaining 6 part time adjuncts–will be teaching next year only 7 electives (we must teach a minimum of 5 to guarantee the Literature and Culture itinerary). Since I'm not the only one in the section above the 100% mark (most of us are there), if we all ask that our teaching hours to be evened out next year, we'd be in very deep red numbers and the whole section would collapse at all levels.

Obviously, we need more teachers, that is as plain as daylight, for we 11 can no longer sustain the weight of teaching the BA and the MA and supervising BA, MA and PhD dissertations. We're giving plenty away for free, whether we're tenured or just adjuncts and this is, simply, a shame. This is, however, a no-win situation for if we complain, as I'm doing here, the authorities that be will find a quick solution: drop the BA, put an end to group-size below 60 (a luxury it seems, despite our intensive continuous assessment in English). Be a worse section and Department for nobody cares, and, anyway, people also got 'Licenciaturas' in the good old days of 200 students per class and lecturing with no student participation (some Departments are still stuck there).

This is particularly galling in the current situation in which so much part-time staff between the ages of 35 and 45 is waiting for much-deserved tenure. In September, for instance, our Professor of American Studies is retiring but she is to be replaced with an adjunct with the lowest possible contract (I'm told this is 600 euros a month, after taxes, for the same amount of hours our Professor has been teaching). If you consider that this Professor is the highest paid teacher in the Department, given her very long seniority, you will soon realise that much would be saved even by hiring full time one of our adjuncts (four have the corresponding accreditations).

Instead, the policy of saving the maximum amount of money is resulting in, well, my 211% (and that of many others, I know). The 211%, by the way, might also possibly explains why I feel so tired this summer and why it's being so hard to focus on the research that I have left aside for too long. To think that I call myself a researcher is beginning to be a bit of a joke...

17-VIII-2013 DAENERYS AND ALL THE REST: ON READING/SEEING GEORGE R.R. MARTIN'S *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE* (UM, OR IS IT *A GAME OF THRONES*?)

Last Christmas holiday I published a post on the *Harry Potter* series which has led to my teaching next academic year an elective subject on Rowling's dark yarn. Having enjoyed season one of TV series *A Game of Thrones*, I told myself that perhaps soon it should be the turn for George R. R. Martin's dark saga, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. This consists of seven volumes: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), *A Dance with Dragons* (2011) and the still unwritten *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*. This will amount to between 9,000 and 10,000 pages, maybe more. So far I have read volume one, seen season 2 of the TV series –and decided to stop until Martin is done.

I was among the fortunate few to see Martin when he visited Barcelona back in July 2007. I knew about his very high reputation among fantasy fans and so queued patiently with them. The house (library Jaume Fuster) was packed, the interview was highly enjoyable. I did not start reading the saga then, though, simply because I find pseudo-medieval fantasy too suspiciously patriarchal. Then, there's the matter of the dragons, which I, an SF reader, don't much appreciate. I did grasp, however, the very clear impression that Martin was delivering an exciting story that might eventually become the next *Lord of the Rings*. When he's done.

The TV series, a mere summary of the novels, is a good aid to navigate the densely populated feudal universe that American Martin has imagined (he is the chronicler that an imaginary medieval USA would have needed). The girl Daenerys is the one that (logically) got me hooked, as she starts off as a princess sold by her brother to a tribal warlord but soon becomes an ambitious contender for Westeros much disputed throne. I even enjoy her role as the 'mother' of three cute little dragons. Then, there's the spunky Arya Stark, her patient bastard brother Jon Snow and, surely, the best character: the cynical but humane dwarf Tyrion Lannister, played by that immense actor, Peter Dinklage. Reading the first novel, however, was not the enriching experience I expected.

Martin writes soap opera, very easy to digest once the reader gets over the hurdle of remembering who is who (the actors' faces do help...). Yet it's nothing but soap opera. An Amazon reader described his fiction as fast food and I share that

impression. It's not fast food of the *Da Vinci Code* denomination, as Martin has, at least, made the impressive effort of imagining a myriad characters and subplots. Still, beyond the platitude that people will do appalling things to access power, there not much else. When this is narrated against a historical background (think *The Tudors*, or *The Godfather* trilogy) we gain a deeper insight into human psychology but when narrated against a fantasy background, we just get a gigantic cliché.

The other main problem, or perhaps merit, is that Martin has the habit of killing off his main and second-tier characters at an alarming speed. This is indeed how History functions but makes me wary (and weary) as a reader of investing too much emotional energy on his characters. His saga also has in common with History the fact that he has no real protagonist. I have told myself that *A Song...* will turn out to be the story of how Daenerys finally becomes *the* Queen... but I worry it might well be Ned Stark's 'lost' dream before dying. Or even worse: that it is as pointless as History.

And something else: Martin is an unhealthy-looking 64-year-old individual too fond of writing overlong books with too little discipline. The man does not even know whether the saga will really stop at book seven and although he has written a basic summary for his TV producers just in case his ticker collapses too soon, once more, I'd rather he finishes before I continue reading/seeing the saga.

I may be totally missing the point and failing to see that Martin is the real post-post modern writer, offering not so much a well-crafted story with a sense of closure but a storyline that must be enjoyed at particular points, or scenes, with no expectations about where all this is going. Once more: this is exactly how soap opera works, imitating life's entrances and exits (or History's). The problem, for me, is that I grow increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of investing so much time on an ongoing series (TV or print), particularly after the *Lost* fiasco. So, yes, I'll wait until he's done and then we'll see. Or read.

25-VIII-2013 READING AND SEEING, SEEING AND READING: A NOTE ON DOCUMENTARIES

I love documentaries. Not nature documentaries, whether they are of the cute, cheesy variety or of the ultra realistic kind –which, for some reason or other, always include grisly scenes of bigger animals killing smaller animals. I mean culture documentary films. My second dream job after university teacher, is 'documentary film maker'. (Actually this is what I wanted to be in the first place though I never found out how to set about becoming one. Too late!)

Anyway, I find documentaries a very good complement to reading non-fiction and, generally essays, as this what they are: 'audiovisual essays'. Of course they are films (they have two Oscar categories for short and long), and, thus, not to be confused with print essays, yet the point is similar: offering information articulated on the basis of a thesis supported by plenty of research. This morning, for instance, I have seen an excellent production by Jordi Fortuny, *La gran aventura de la Canadiense* (2012, RTVE, TVC and Batabat) which narrates how a combination of local engineering talent and the visionary energy of American *entrepreneur* Frederick Stark Pearson resulted in the building in the Pyrenees of the dams that brought electricity to Catalonia in the early 20th century (<http://www.tv3.cat/videos/4368090/La-gran-aventura-de-La-Canadencia>). I had previously read Xavier Moret's also excellent *Dr.*

Pearson, l'home que va portar la llum a Catalunya (2004) but missed an audiovisual illustration to this volume, so I'm happy that Fortuny has supplied it. And, outlandish as the subject may seem, believe me, it is very interesting –as a Catalan, I have learned about the modernisation of my country, and as a specialist in English Studies, I have also learned that the hand of American industry reached unexpected places in the 20th century.

YouTube is, of course, a wonderful tool regardless of all its illegalities and I have enjoyed three very good hours this week watching the BBC's mini-documentary series *Servants: The True Story of Life Below Stairs* (2012). This is particularly touching, as the presenter, Dr. Pamela Cox, explains that she would like the series to be seen as an homage to women like her two grandmothers, both lowly maids of all work. If you think that *Upstairs, Downstairs*, or *Downtown Abbey* are reliable guides to the British class system this series has much to teach you. If you have read Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Dr. Cox provides a fascinating complement, teaching you for instance that Darlington Hall is after all, a little miracle as 1,000 big houses like that have been pulled down since World War II. Also, that very rich people were (or are?) amazingly stingy with those who, literally, cleaned up their shit. (I was myself an au-pair for one year ... and that's a subject for yet another mini-series.)

All this is a sort of overlong prologue to what I really wanted to comment on today. I read a comment on You Tube by an American viewer, thanking (piratical) YouTubers for uploading thrilling material. If it weren't for you, this person writes, "I might have to read a book to learn!". To be fair, I think this person means that without the UK YouTube pirates, s/he would miss much of interest for him/her at the other side of the Atlantic. In the same way, I would never have seen *Servants* (not available on DVD) and so, if interested in the topic, should have read instead, for instance, *Life Below Stairs: True Lives of Edwardian Servants* by Alison Maloney (2011), or the similarly titled *Life Below Stairs: The Real Lives of Servants, the Edwardian Era to 1939* by Pamela Horn (2012). I want to believe that this person is NOT saying that documentaries make reading unnecessary particularly because, well, it takes plenty of reading (yes, research) to make a documentary. I don't know, by the way, whether I'll read Maloney's and Horn's books, but Dr Cox's documentary certainly got me interested in Margaret Powell's 1968 best-seller *Below Stairs: The Bestselling Memoirs of a 1920s Kitchen Maid* –which, ironically, seems to be one of the sources for *Downtown Abbey*.

In my own cultural practice, in short, there is an absolute continuum between reading and seeing. I want to believe this is the case with most educated people and that the separation between seeing and reading is not as widespread as I fear. Simply, reading a book-length essay, which may expand for many hours, tends to offer much more detail than seeing a documentary (even a mini series), whereas seeing may offer audio-visual documents that print texts cannot accommodate (not to mention the fact that those that can be indeed offered, like photographs, are still absent from most academic writing). To go back to my first example, I have learned much more from combining Fortuny's documentary with Moret's book about Pearson that I would have learned by consuming them in isolation. It's only common sense, isn't it?



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