

CanLit and Class(room) Struggle

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Article abstract

The university, once a site of anti-authoritarianism and resistance to power, has become apathetic, perhaps even reactionary, as a result of the consolidation of capitalist powers under free trade and globalization. The study of Canadian literature, once an oppositional practice to American cultural and economic hegemony, has of late been co-opted by the de facto Americanization that is free trade and university/business incorporation. As Canadian governments, and by extension Canadian universities, redefine themselves in neoliberal terms, CanLit should reassert its oppositional ethos and be taught in ways that question and test the limits of the institution and of educational practices.

CanLit and Class(room) Struggle

STAN FOGEL

“Poems are perfect; picketing is sometimes better.”

Edna St. Vincent Millay

“One of the problems of communism is that it is a dictatorship of intellectuals and professors.”

S.I. Hayakawa

IN THE MID-SEVENTIES when I was beginning what accidentally became my (brilliant?) career at St. Jerome’s College, University of Waterloo, I sat on a University of Waterloo committee with the acronym I have always thought of more accurately as a homonym: UGAG, short for Undergraduate Affairs Group — though that gloss is probably superfluous for the academic readers of our often acronymic journals. The relevance of Louis Althusser’s ideas about Ideological State Apparatuses could narratively begin here — where all young faculty start, in service and untenured servitude. I will, however, leave those ISAs for my foray into the antinarrative theory that works all too well for many of us as theory rather than practice; of course, we’re after the narrative a career offers. This, incidentally, applied to Althusser, whose life, academic and otherwise, revolved around *École normale supérieure* (where he had an apartment), his relentless critique of narrative notwithstanding: “Not to indulge in storytelling’ still remains for me the one and only definition of materialism” (*Future* 221). (That yours truly has advocated denomination and nomadism at the same time as he has been located in one university department for over twenty years should likewise not be ignored.)

Not so incidentally, because this is the irony I would like to play on throughout this piece, academic journals and conference proceedings are filled with *aperçus* of destabilization that anchor a career (if not weigh it down). Dashes and slashes go marauding over portentous pages while university walls (in Canada, anyway) are free of graffiti. Bakhtinian heteroglossia, say, redeems even the most ponderous text, letting it speak in tongues and, as it were, flail away charismatically on — or above — the

assistant professor “floor.” This is supposedly how we theorize the monolithic and therefore the tyrannical out of existence.

Nonetheless, producing fissured texts doesn’t seem to have made the university milieu particularly open. Usually the only time anyone hits the floor of a classroom it is because soporifics drive him/her into the kind of stupor not often associated with fervour or ecstasy of any kind. Althusser (in *Lenin and Philosophy*) speaks of criticism as a “wild” practice. Despite his restlessness with the normalization and standardization of critical practice, and despite the legions of scholars who adopt his disruptive reading strategies, homogeneity and conservatism mark departmental and pedagogical style. Deference, authority and propriety — nothing wild there — are still major elements of extratextual politics.

To choose a specific example of contemporary criticism, Caren Kaplan’s *Questions of Travel*: she is, on the one hand, sharp as to the conservative nature of some postmodern scholarship. Witness her quarrel with the following fashionable diction:

terms such as “borders,” “maps,” “location,” “space,” and “place” do not necessarily liberate critical practices from the very conundrum of aestheticization and universalization that spurred a search for alternative metaphors and methods in the first place. (144)

The theories of such well known critics as Edward Said, bell hooks, Jean Baudrillard and Deleuze/Guattari don’t travel well according to Kaplan’s criteria — or rather they travel too easily for her, allowing criticism’s grandees to travel in style. Kaplan’s overt sympathies are with genuine nomads and refugees, travellers of necessity.

On the other hand, Kaplan has a blind spot which is pertinent to my focus here: namely, for all the one-up-(wo)manship she and others engage in regarding the glamour of travel theory (orientalism, postcolonialism, etc.) and deconstructive techniques, there is a horde of academic migrants producing this kind of up-to-date discourse who get no sympathy from Kaplan and would be happy to be tenured stay-at-homes. Publishing *Questions of Travel*, bulking her c.v. as it does, mitigates against her being one of those dispossessed. (Again, ironically, the current governmental model in Canada — privatization — introduces destabilization and discontinuity into the contract work none of us experiences pleasurably as indeterminacy. In other words, “marginal” is attractive as a designatory label but not as a career option.) Moreover, unlike the inquisitive narrator of the Elizabeth Bishop poem that gives Kaplan her title, who asks, “Should

we have stayed at home, wherever that may be,” little but lip service is paid to the classroom conditions in our home universities.

The only Others, it seems, for whom dis-location is a term of discomfort and not one of postmodern possibility are students. The major difference between the Sixties’ disruptions and the theory-booming Eighties’ and Nineties’ *détournements* is that campus upheavals “then” had as much to do with resistance to authoritarianism in the university as they did with resistance to American militarism; “now” academic authorities theorize resistance without rooting it in academe. “Then” Jerry Farber’s “The Student as Nigger” was as close to canonical (that is to say, read by a good many students, but not represented in curricula) as anything this side of that oft-reprinted *Berkeley Barb* article that hypothesized LBJ fucking JFK’s just-deceased corpse.

Long before what Geoffrey Hartman called *errance joyeuse* was a permissible and legitimate way of reading, though, which is to say at about the time of the anecdote with which I began this paper, one of UGAG’s agenda items was the approval of a Canadian Studies program. A dissenting voice — reactionary, as we all know, seems always already to be a characteristic of our enterprise instead of a reaction, say, to the putative deformation of the canon — denounced the proposal, going so far as to declare it Marxist-Leninist. Culture coalescing as country clearly threatened the speaker for whom content’s supposed autonomy did not implicate *his* fixed address which, students of his scornfully told me, was insistently “Doctor.” (Sorry if this is too gossipy, a mixture of *National Enquirer* and an inquiry into nation, but it relates to my topic, namely pedantry, politics, and our discipline. I don’t mean by this story to suggest that stuffiness is any less rife now than it was then. If anything most of the professionalized graduate students who manage to get jobs are as dogmatic and inflexible as the hoary scholars of bygone days.)

Twenty or so years after that UGAG meeting, the anecdote reads in an antiquated way, as if the recalcitrant committee member were the Cyril Belshaw of *Towers Besieged: The Dilemma of the Creative University*. He wrote, around the same time as our unnamed Waterlooovian was carping about Commies:

In some countries (Canada, Switzerland, Malaysia, African States) it is necessary for socio-political reasons, for reasons of self-respect and the continuity and viability of the State itself, to seek out deliberately the elements of the cultural tradition, and to make them visible and conscious for the public and savants alike. But to say this is itself the

goal of the university is to open the door to the dead hand of repetition and authority, lifelessness and artificiality.... It seems, up to a point, to be Soviet orthodoxy. (Belshaw 24)

In addition to the stolid and essentialist rhetoric, this passage features another reference to the twinning of CanLit and totalitarianism.

Commies everywhere, it seems. That is also how Paul Berman in his recent — and over-praised — book on the Sixties and that decade's legacy, *A Tale of Two Utopias*, thinks the protests played out: too much doctrinaire Marxism, too much Stalinist rigidity and the naive counter-cultural (but right-thinking) hippies were muscled out of the revolutionary vanguard by dogmatic leftists. According to Berman, grassroots energies were thus shanghaied and the spontaneous movements lost their momentum and popular support.

Since I am often in Havana, Cuba, teaching at Instituto Superior de Arte, Cuba's leading university for the performing arts, I am bemused by these dispersed invocations of the Commie menace. They make me think fondly and sympathetically of Robin Mathews, a professor at Carleton University when I was an undergraduate there in the mid-Sixties. That CanLit and anti-Americanism (to conflate a certain kind of anti-imperialism with anti-capitalism) are necessarily yoked is his major contribution to Canadian cultural politics. Further, whenever one engages issues of nation, literature, and capitalist alienation one should not overlook his combative presence. Not too long before Canadian Studies made it into the University of Waterloo calendar, Mathews, along with his colleague James Steele, published *The Struggle for Canadian Universities*, a strong indictment of Canada's neocolonial status *vis-à-vis* the U.S.A. His CanLit was — and still is — anything but an apolitical corpus.

Not merely anticolonial, Mathews's work since *The Struggle for Canadian Universities* emphatically claims for CanLit and CanCrit an anti-capitalist agenda. Recently, in a letter sent to the editor of *Canadian Poetry* that he photocopied and mailed to selected friends, he offers a stinging rebuke to Frank Davey, whom many would call a champion of Canadian content. For Mathews, Davey's recent book *Post-national Arguments* displays a "reactionary political-aesthetic ideology"; it is, according to him, an example "of the characteristic of Canadian post-modernism that refuses to engage the major metanarratives presented by corporate capitalism and U.S. imperialism in Canada, and, indeed, supports them actively." In his selection of the term "metanarratives" Mathews, as does Althusser, challenges the story, a capitalist one, that gets its apotheosis in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*, his paean to the end of the Cold War.

In the copy of the letter he sent to me personally, Mathews, responding to a piece of mine published in the activist Canadian education journal, *Our Schools, Our Selves*, adds a revealing and apt coda to a sentence I wrote which begins, "Race, gender, and sexual orientation have been factored into books." His addendum is, "and class, capitalism and imperialism have been factored out."

There is little evidence of which I am aware that the politicized texts of most academic journals get translated into a politicized classroom. Certainly Mathews, and I would have to agree with him, is far from enamoured of the way postmodernism has introjected "the political" into literary criticism, much less the daily life of the classroom. Similarly, despite Raymond Williams's insistence in *Keywords* on the political nature of most seemingly disinterested terminology regarding education, cultural studies as a *métier* has not caused a notable reorientation of classroom practice. Leftism, be it in citing Derrida's or Althusser's interpretation of Marx or Williams's textualizing of "culture," gets left on the *curriculum vitae* of its interpreter.

CanLit, then, is a commodity for the specialist to fashion and regulate, not an anti-imperialist, anti-American practice; it is one that could easily be capped with a cappuccino at Starbucks. Moreover, the venues in which resistance flourished in the late Sixties and early Seventies on some Canadian campuses have become spaces in which either apathy or business flourishes. The "teach-in" and the "sit-in" seem as antiquated as the salary increments faculty were beginning to receive at about that time. Nowadays, teaching resource offices have helped professionalize and standardize the classroom scene, narrowing it, homogenizing it. Pranks at graduation (especially those mocking the commercialization of the institution) have also disappeared, bespeaking a professionalized arena for students.

A curious reversal has occurred insofar as political activism is concerned. In 1969, along with more grandiose confrontations at other universities, the University of British Columbia's up-to-then somnolent English department bifurcated. Half supported a newly appointed American Head (so they called the Chair then and still do) who was going to make the department "shape up" (a.k.a. do its intellectual exercises in heralded journals). The other half, galvanized by a handful of graduate students (including this writer), rallied against the appointment, held large open-air rallies, sponsored an embargo against one too-insistently pro-Head faculty member, and generally intruded upon the top-down handling of departmental affairs. That battle was lost; a couple of the student ringleaders

were even threatened with reprisals. Regardless, spaces usually reserved for more or less transitive teaching activities were disrupted.

Such a sensibility has become attenuated over the years. Despite the federal Liberals, who have drastically cut transfer payments to the provinces, and the Ontario Conservatives, who first installed the anti-intellectual John Snobelen as Minister (ir)responsible for universities, minuscule numbers of students, staff, and faculties have organized resistance groups. Instead, they let their umbrella organizations, formed to lobby governments, inveigh against provincial and national policies. While in Ontario, for instance, elementary school and high school teachers' unions have mobilized forcefully to contest the Tory reconfiguration of education, activism in Ontario universities has been sporadic and ineffectual. Some of the presidents of those universities have even pandered obscenely to the right-wing agenda, mouthing "standards" and "cooperation with business" as if their made-to-measure suits hadn't been paid for by public monies. Faculty associations and unions — busy battling their own administrations — have been quiescent. The student body, which split acrimoniously some time ago, some aligned with the progressive Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, some with the sycophantic Ontario University Students Association, has been the least combative group of all.

During the Community Action Day, Kitchener-Waterloo (April 19, 1996), one of the series of days sponsored by union and social-justice groups to decry the desecration of public spaces perpetrated by the Tories, it was only an ad hoc group's organization of an education rally that prevented the university sector from being one of the few entities dependent on public funding not represented. As it was, the protest, which was held on the University of Waterloo campus, and featured the awarding of a dishonorary degree to Mike Harris, Premier of Ontario, was attended by hundreds from the teachers' unions; only a handful of university faculty and students appeared.

The union hall, not the classroom building, is the locus of progressive political activity. What does this have to do with CanLit and the way it is taught? Simply that for academics as for the corporate sector the North American Free Trade Agreement is a *fait accompli*. Consequently, CanLit exists as no more than a course offering instead of a *vade mecum*. There is no intellectual vanguard making it more than that.

Not only has the university been diminished as a progressive political force, but it has also lost its cachet as the generator of alternative lifestyles. This is, of course, difficult to gauge, but Canadian counter-cultures appear to be burgeoning on Queen Street in Toronto (despite its recent

commodification), say, rather than at Queen's University. A popular medium for youth such as *MuchMusic*, which frenetically features images, discourses, and venues aplenty, rarely if ever "pans" the university (except, in absentia, in the pejorative sense of the verb to pan). Movies that mirrored rebellion thirty-odd years ago often had university settings — *The Graduate* and *The Strawberry Statement* being two such films. Anti-establishment novels then also frequently had academic addresses. Avant-garde writers at the time, the generators of metafiction — for example, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, and Kathy Acker, who are, of course, still read as postmodern — mixed academic events, languages, and places with parody to destabilize, but acknowledge the status of, the intellectual. The eponymous hero of *Snow White* goes to Beaver College and takes fashionable, which is to say, stylized, "self-help" courses; Barth's *Letters* includes a good many lettered women and men; Acker's "narrator" in *Great Expectations* peddles *Semitist(e)* on street corners.

In Canada specifically, Robert Kroetsch — again now read as the *eminence grise* of Canadian pomo — has a *Graduate*-ish character go "Indian" instead of up the academic hierarchy. More recent literature, with identity politics as its focus, rarely strays onto university campuses. Nor, it seems, does anyone else not having *business* there.

It might be said that the popularity of cultural studies in humanities and social science departments can be traced to the displacement of interest from campuses onto the streets or into the malls. Tracking trends in *Mondo Canuck*, Pevere and Diamond write off CanLit as being as uninteresting as the academic locales from which most of its writers produce it or authenticate it. Not that *Mondo Canuck* isn't simplistic; it is also far less witty than its authors think. Nonetheless, the book's production and reception speak to a prevailing point of view. In their chapter "PopCanLit: Canada's Pulp Mill" (which itself hints at their failed attempt to write zippy, which is to say, unacademic prose), Pevere and Diamond offer the following synopsis of CanLit:

Seeing themselves as the purveyors of the institutionally cherished notion of "CanLit," Canadian publishers have often concentrated on books which are "distinctly Canadian" in terms of content; this means lots of critically praised novels about coming of age on the prairies or, more recently, coming of age as a first generation child of immigrants in one of the country's major urban centres. CanLit has meant a thriving publishing tradition of poetry and books of Canadian history, countless books on Canadian institutions, industrial titans and politicians and scad upon scad of volumes containing the

personal memoirs of the nationally well-known. Needless to say, it has also meant a shitload of books about hockey. (128)

Pevere's and Diamond's clichéd and jejune comments that CanLit is an arid and claustrophobic sphere because "Arthur Hailey's *Airport* wasn't Pearson or Dorval" (130) is risible, deserving of the scorn Mathews vents on the Americanization of values, aesthetic and otherwise. That CanLit plays out as dull to the packaging and consuming crew that thinks *Mondo Canuck* is hip must be disconcerting, nonetheless, to anyone who has registered the shift from the homogenous and caricaturable body of work Pevere and Diamond describe to the plural, postcolonial, contested Canada(s) written by, among others, M. Nourbese Philip and taught by no doubt many CanLiterati sensitive to the multiple identities — gendered, racialized, sexualized — being written, read, and circulated at this time in our country.

Certainly Nourbese Philip, whom I happen to think of as our pre-eminent essayist (and whom I happened occasionally to edit for *Border/Lines*, to disclose my affiliation with her) — not to mention a poet and fiction writer of repute — publishes anything but the quotidian CanLit stuff Pevere and Diamond dislike. She and June Callwood engaged in verbal jousting because the latter resisted accepting a flyer from the group (to which Nourbese Philip belonged) that thought Canada's delegation to a PEN conference was unrepresentative of Canadian diversity. Philip wrote an incisive pamphlet that reveals the reasons for African-Canadian disquiet regarding the premiere of the musical *Show Boat* at the North York, Ontario, Centre for the Performing Arts. She also contested the Royal Ontario Museum's exhibition "Out of Africa" and its attendant colonialism and racism. Wittily, meticulously, and relentlessly, Philip has been reimagining Canada these last twenty or so years. Two noteworthy articles for *Border/Lines* read racism both in the Bernardo-Homolka trial and media coverage, and in the Just Desserts shooting — the killing of a white woman by a black man in a trendy Toronto café. In the first instance, Philip finds that only when Paul Bernardo's penchant to be a "rapper" is disclosed, and "black" then becomes a factor, does race get introduced into the proceedings.

Although I have never taught a CanLit course per se (being involved in more diffuse, more cross-border teaching) I did use Philip's book of essays called *Frontiers*, a collection of pieces she wrote between the mid-Seventies and the mid-Eighties, in a first-year composition course. My purpose was to introduce rhetorical strategies in a somewhat confrontational way. The "enc(o)unter," as Nourbese Philip would have it, was far

testier than if I had used one of those readers which contain a salmagundi of prose samples and therefore no distinctive voice, much less a voice that disrupts and calls into question supposedly self-assured identities. The polyphonic protests over (a) her consciousness of colour and colonialism and (b) her feminism became a chorus of refusal to accept the politicization of what Nourbese Philip calls the “hot, moist parts” of texts (33).

Less pointedly, more whimsically, I selected in addition readings from Joanne Kates, *Globe and Mail* food columns, as well as stories by Eric McCormack from his collection *Inspecting the Vaults*. The latter I could have chosen because of his legerdemain as a fiction writer; instead I picked his stories quite simply because his office is beside mine and because his teaching tactics include, I know, significant ridiculing of pedantry, the sanctimonious stances of the omniscient professor.

McCormack’s is genuinely a “wild” teaching practice in the sense Althusser articulated it, though the Frenchman developed his concept *vis-à-vis* Freudian analysis: “one which does not provide the theoretical credentials for its operations and which raises screams from the philosophy of the ‘interpretation’ of the world” (“Lenin” 65-66). If Althusser’s kind of philosophical practice refuses to pretend that “it is above politics just as it is above classes” (66), we can characterize McCormack’s pedagogical practice with a pun about classes — his classes, in which he contaminates and even reduces the professor’s role. His fictions, too, breezily Borgesian (concepts are rendered as patent artifice) and acutely Ackerian (he plagiarizes himself), are texts upon which to conduct the wild practice that should not remain stranded in the dialogical densities of an academic article or conference proceedings. Besides, McCormack’s dad was a Commie too, another tidbit in the yoking of CanLit, pedagogy, and Communism.

The avant-garde, deconstructing theorist in the sanctity of his/her *vita arcana* is too often, when dis-placed in the classroom or the committee room, the institutional crustacean, dogmatic and positivistic. Penalizing students for essays that come in late or stray from “the” topic or mix discourses that don’t have academic heft: this is no doubt only part of the authoritarianism in academe. Rectifying latent binary tilts has hardly led to a democratized university context in which the professor/student relationship has gotten a visible reconfiguration. It is worthwhile remembering Derrida’s apothegm qua footnote in *Spectres of Marx*: “The word ‘chaire,’ pulpit or professorial chair, is a homonym of ‘chair,’ flesh” (188). If that chair/flesh is — despite its institutional shoring — indeed weak, those who occupy the chaire/chair tend to try to appear strong if not stern.

Jane Gallop's witty and irreverent linkage of academics and Sadian masters is apposite here. In "The Immoral Teachers" she names authoritarian professorial practice with a term used by the libertines in Sade's fictions. That term is "socratiser" (to socratise) and it means "to stick a finger up the anus" (118). This leads Gallop to produce one of her stellar maxims: "Sadian pedagogy depends upon the pupil's virginity" (126). Probing exams, in other words, still determine academic status. Or glossing "to socratize" in another way, one can see the justification of a favourite phrase students have uttered about certain professors: "s/he's a tight ass."

Sensualizing a little less coarsely I would like to bring the third Canadian, Kates, into my constellation of teachable Canadians. Her insistent *reading* of food and her postmodernizing of bourgeois Toronto palates (in other words, her writing the quietus to "home cooking" if not, alas, family values) have not, unfortunately and inexplicably, produced her apotheosis as a writer. (Boundaries still do exist to keep metonymy from working its way along the food chain.) Her prose is arranged on the page the way Susur Lee and Jamie Kennedy have frequently transformed autochthonous vegetables into art. Too bad for your truncated taste buds if the above allusions lack for you the clarity of the former's turnip with wasabi or the latter's potages. Indeed, Lee and Kennedy are undervalued as artists, again giving the lie to the supposed overturning of the oft-cited center/margin duality. Nouvelle cuisine, along with body building, is, to essay a Barthesian maxim, a vital postmodern genre.

No doubt others have decentered the CanLit canon; no doubt there are those teachers of CanLit whose goal is to provide an intellectual enema for their students. Are there, though, all that many outlaws out there at it? Remember, in the good old days of deconstruction, how angry E.D. Hirsch got at Geoffrey Hartman? At the School of Criticism and Theory in the early Eighties (then held at Northwestern University), Hirsch waved the Yale Calendar at Hartman, telling him that his critical legerdemain was piracy, a brigand-like manoeuvre to commandeer the good ship "academe."

Then, too, Derrida himself was deliberately courting the outlaw label. In *Glas* he used the term "arraisonner" (6) which is primarily a nautical term referring to stopping a ship and searching its cargo, substantiating its destination, conditions, etc. In "The Domestication of Derrida," Wlad Godzich amplifies the definition:

Derrida sought to force the French language to yield a term which would describe a mode of apprehension by reason (raison)... But as language would have it, the term, of considerable antiquity, is, in its maritime context, a catachresis (or misuse); its earliest meaning had

little to do with legitimate order on the high seas though quite a great deal with smuggling: it meant 'to seek to persuade' and designated the very project of rhetoric. (28)

Is maintaining order initially a piratical act, an assumption of power and control that an institution then legitimizes? Even now certain dissident groups have formed out of a sense that traditional, conservative university practices are, indeed, tyrannical and self-aggrandizing. In England, for instance, the Radical Philosophy Group, which emerged out of the student movements of the Sixties, has been publishing a journal, *Radical Philosophy*, since 1972. Its leftist philosophical perspective is articulated on its masthead as follows:

Academic philosophy in this country has generally accepted and defended the frame of reference of the dominant bourgeois culture: this culture is supported and mirrored by the elitist isolation, the internal hierarchies and demarcations of academic institutions. The Radical Philosophy Group therefore works for reforms in courses and assessments for the enlargement of students' control over their education.

CanLit, which began as an oppositional practice, should have this oppositional ethos and be taught (to bring CanLit and pedagogy together again) in ways that test the limits of the university, itself an institution bearing the traces of its colonial shaping. Scrutiny of the educational housing of CanLit is necessary to reveal our discipline's stylization and limitations.

Especially at this time, when various Canadian governments appear to be redefining themselves in neoliberal terms, terms beholden to globalization, a.k.a. Americanization, teaching CanLit should mean challenging the boundaries of the state-funded classroom and, indeed, the attenuated principles of the state-funded state. A wild CanLit pedagogical practice would incorporate protests over tuition increases at Canadian universities along with resistance to diminished funding of Canadian publishers who produce the books that form the nucleus and periphery of our heterogeneous literatures.

It is discouraging to me to see how little interest faculty unions and associations have had in the tuition issue, something that is redefining the definition of the Canadian student and concomitantly the pedagogical arena. (A part-time job at McDonald's forces students into a good many compromises with CanLit, from diminished reading time to more insidious socioeconomic effects on them.) If the Canadian student is in jeop-

ardy, so is CanLit. Instead of decrying the decline in so-called “standards” and bemoaning the supposedly unlettered student, faculty should be combatting the material conditions that fashion the student and constrain him/her. Foucault, for one, harped on critique being an instrument for those who fight what “is.” Instead of being heeded, he is a teachable subject.

Which brings me (finally) to Althusser who, it should be remembered, was a Communist all of his adult life. He was, certainly, an important theorist in the redefinition of Marxism, adapting it to late twentieth-century conditions; that, though, needs no airing since there are enough North American post-Marxists to fill the ballroom at the Toronto Sheraton Centre. (That is not a metaphor, since the Marxist literature group of the MLA did just that when the organization met a few years ago in Toronto ... an event made notable because of the modest brouhaha that occurred when American booksellers at the convention refused to accept Canadian money.)

Althusser’s essay “Lenin and Philosophy” is as much about teaching as it is about either of the entities in his title. He quotes Lenin, who in turn quotes Josef Dietzgen on those philosophers — here we can extrapolate to the professoriate at large — who “in relation to Social-democracy constitute a single ... reactionary mass” (35). In what is probably his most famous essay, “Ideology and the State,” Althusser elaborates upon his sympathy for Lenin’s views, presenting his notion of Ideological State Apparatuses — especially schools — and the roles teachers play in maintaining a state’s hierarchies and its dominant ideologies. The professionalization of graduate students, the hordes of underpaid part-time workers, the clashing interests of administrators, faculty and students, the commercialization of the university: all relate in various ways to the operation of ISAs.

In what I think is the best piece on Althusser, the one that emphasizes his Communist more than his Marxist hypotheses and solutions, Antonio Negri’s “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser,” that author updates ISAs. Elementarily put, they once contributed to the reproduction of the relations of production and helped establish domination. Now, they are dwarfed by — dominated by — established power. My “now” immediately preceding should be framed historically so that the full force of Negri’s following comments are registered: “today this domination gets mixed up with the entire social process. The world, we can say, has been subsumed into capital” (57).

The only way to resist that domination is to create and inhabit “zones in which market relations do not reign” (Negri 57). Communism

as a necessary social tactic here commingles with communism as an anti-narrative device. It is necessary, moreover, in CanLit and in the teaching of CanLit so that these spaces and practices can be maintained “in the interstices of capitalist domination” (Negri 57). At this time only the Communist Party of Canada insists on free tuition for university students (the NDP having long since abandoned this goal) and worker solidarity (the professor, need we be reminded, being salaried by the state). It represents to many — and this is all to the good — a jarring, discordant, marginal — not to mention fearsome — element in the political and cultural narrative of North America. It continues to be, in its somewhat distorted consolidation in Cuba — which, not incidentally, offers free tuition, as well as subsidized books, food and lodgings, to its students — a major irritant to the United States. Therefore, communism might be the best choice, as theory and practice both, to present a distinctive CanLit that is worth teaching differently. Then, the dismissal of leftist professors by Hayakawa (remember him and his Reaganite bombast?) — who uttered one of the epigraphs to this paper — just might be re-configured as a genuine Commie menace.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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