

WRITING AND TEACHING

It will not surprise you to know that, as a poet, I have always considered the universality of language as an obstacle to my art. The task is to possess this universal means and make it a private medium of expression. The task is to battle among traditional coherencies and find a new, and individual coherency. The task is to convert the most common, communizing tool of society into a distinctive, distinguishing vernacular and rhythm.

Let me suggest that the perspective of a poet presents simply an extreme view of problems common to everyone, to every student. As a citizen, the challenge is to develop your own political voice and to have that voice heard, unmistakably. As a social creature, the necessity is to wrest a personal accuracy from among general, shared and therefore blurred definitions. As a student, the dilemma may be described as a dilemma of simultaneity; at once, the student must accept, must treat with language as he finds it, and he must translate what he finds into a now personal value.

I mean, English is a foreign language to all of us. It comes to us predetermined and fabulously loaded with associations no one of us dares, sanely, to reject entirely. Through art and through craft, the poet supercedes the barriers to personal expression. Perforce, the citizen repeatedly translates various political phrases such as "top priority," or "law and order." And the consumer is constrained to deflower the lipstick from its covering verbiage that assures an abruptly tropical paradise once money crosses the counter.

Let me be clear: I am not speaking to those programs for so-called disadvantaged students that teach English as a foreign language. I am speaking about all students. I am speaking *from* the perception one specific situation delivers for our general use. We should stubbornly exploit every specific situation for its general meaning.

As teachers, we have to acknowledge that, when students read, theirs is an exercise in familiarizing the hitherto foreign. That is, if we ask students to read Henry James, we are testing whether or not literature can make familiar the unfamiliar historical period, the hitherto unknown persons who preoccupy the novelist. Our job is to ease and to grace this process of translation.

As teachers, when we ask students to write — creatively or critically

— we ask them to translate into their own understanding (their own words) the used language of somebody else. Beside this, the student, as he converts a common language into his medium of special statement, must nevertheless deploy his special coherency so that its chances of meaning, for others, are maximal. This last aspect of the translating process depends upon accuracy and control which, in turn, depend upon a comparatively objective embrace of language as a ready-made tradition. Presumably, whatever literature we judge to deserve student attention will exemplify the most inspiring kind of creative translation we have on record.

Still another dimension of the translating process needs mention. We are all foreigners to each other. We are all different and unknown to each other. And, like it or not, we compose a human marketplace of secret requirements and desires. Or, we embody requirements and desires best termed secret until they have been well, or not so well, communicated and then answered, one way or another. Mastering our language intricately involves the public sale, the public promotion of our interests, our private values, within the competitive drama of society. Mastering English supports our efforts to make ourselves, foreigners to all others, familiar, recognizable and yet desirably distinct, and valuable as a social entity.

The process of translation falters, our mastery of English fails, to the peril of our individual prospects for happiness. Even so, it seems to me that every English/language department should equal the living, the enabling center of education. If we cannot confidently claim such a function, then we ought to close shop for a while and reconsider the content of our teaching purpose.

Foreigners all, together and separately in constructive conflict with language, we must maintain a striving for relevance. That is the purpose of translation: Relevancy to particular person, particular place and contemporary time.

I offer this enlarged view of curricular relevancy as the full frame for our thoughts about the teaching of "disadvantaged students."

When we say "disadvantaged," we probably mean urban and non-white. We certainly mean students who are, comparatively, powerless. The development of a personal politics of language is not generically different, for these students. It is a difference of urgency and degree. Even as the poet incorporates a merely extreme perspective on common problems of language, the "disadvantaged" student merely raises the urgent extreme of rightful demands regarding curriculum and its service.

When we approach Black students, we have to intensify our attempts

to aid accuracy, control and usable translation. Not abandon — intensify. For the literature and the language of English pose problems beyond those of a foreign but neutral body of social knowledge. In America, we grip with a language and a literature frequently hostile to the self-esteem, frequently destroying the valid history, of Black students. Any child can tell you what to expect if somebody says: "I'm putting you down in my *black book*." Lawrence Durrell has written one of those.

Or, consider two examples from Shakespeare: It so happens that Caliban in *The Tempest*, an emphatically black creature, is the product of copulation by a witch and a devil. And it so happens that Othello, "*such a thing as thou*," confronts the question: "Are you a man? Have you a soul or sense?" It so happens that William Blake, in his time a poet characterized by rare humane concern for all society, wrote a poem called "Little Black Boy." And this poem culminates with the promise, meant to reassure the little black boy, that when he gets to heaven he will be like the little white boy. Note: heaven will not bless the black boy's identity, it will change his identity. Now you may have some trouble teaching *The Tempest*, or Blake's poem, to students, generally. If you attempt the teaching of these to Black students, you will have a whole lot of trouble, i.e., a whole lot of work to do. If not, something is wrong. Translation is not taking place. Relevancy has not been sought and found. The foreign phenomenon remains remote material, i.e., useless to the student.

Across the country, Black students call for Black Studies. It has been asserted that "the proper study of mankind is man." Let us surely understand that Black Studies for Black students is absolutely just one phrasing of a universal summoning: Studies Relevant to *my* Life. In the instance of Black students, the summons comes out of a social history that has denied the factual relevancy of Black American life. Curriculum changes, to present, accurately, the continuing fact and relevancy of Black life, should be demanded by all of us. That is: perpetual revising of curriculum, in the light of truthfulness, should undergird all the knowledge we accept as humanly valuable.

In the instance of English teaching, Studies Relevant to *My* Life translates as progress towards a personal politics of language.

It has been my privilege to teach a perhaps unusual variety of students: I have taught Freshman English at City College where my students were mainly young, white men interested in engineering or medicine; students of an Upward Bound Program — who were mainly

Black teenagers from economically impoverished backgrounds; writing courses at Connecticut College where the students were mainly white and middle or upper class; and currently an English course in the S.E.E.K. program at City College, here in New York. The students at City College are mainly voting-age adults, or older, and Puerto Rican or Black. I have tried to serve all of these students according to my goal for English studies.

I have asked students to read and then critically enmesh Freud's lectures on the psychology of errors with Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. They have studied Whitehead's *Aims of Education* and evaluated their own education according to these and their own criteria. They have selected advertisements they regard as persuasive and analyzed the verbal factors explaining the appeal. They have written their own, rival copy for advertisements and tested the force of their word power by presenting the material in class. They have selected numerous examples of daily political rhetoric and composed their own rejoinder editorials. They have experimented with word power by writing a composition of 500 words and then rewriting to a limit of 150. As to readings, perhaps the Upward Bound program will illustrate.

I was permitted to design the curriculum for half the students, last summer. Mindful of Shelley's dictum that ignorance is at once the cause and the effect of tyranny, I thought to organize our readings so that we would widely circle the human experience of poverty. We began with Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, then we read Swift's "Modest Proposal," then Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, then *My Childhood* by Maxim Gorky, and last, the *Mask of Anarchy*, "Song to the Men of England," and the "Fifth Canto" from "Queen Mab," by Shelley. In addition, the students searched the papers and magazines for current examples of poverty. We included every form of poverty: not only imposed or inherited poverty of place, status and pocket, but poverty of spirit, poverty of imagination and the poverty of conscience concerned us. Much happened. When I told these children about the children of Biafra, and we looked at *Life* magazine photographs showing literal starvation, the Connecticut children became incensed and, on their own time, they wrote to the Governor, the congressmen, state newspapers, members of national magazine staffs, television personalities and so forth. They wrote asking for action. That was the first breakthrough of the summer. Quite apart from the political effectiveness of their campaign, which was no worse than our adult effectiveness, the students' writing leaped into an eloquent fluency that had never even been hinted in their earlier work. When we discussed Steinbeck's hopes

as he created his novel, we decided to secure NET's 1967 documentary on American migrant workers, *What Harvest for the Reaper*. The shock came when we realized that *The Grapes of Wrath* sustains a horrifying relevance to migrant workers today. Angry about the political consequence of their Biafra protest, the students elected, again on their own time, to organize a Wrath Rally. Purpose: to focus public concern on the appalling status of migrant workers in America. For the rally, students wrote 1968 "Modest Proposals," and invited the public as well as appropriate state officials to attend and participate. On the programs issued to the audience, the students chose two stanzas from Shelley's "Song to the Men of England": "The seed ye sow, another reaps: / the wealth ye find, another keeps: the robes ye weave, another wears: the arms ye forge, another bears. / Sow seed, — but let no tyrant reap; Find wealth, — let no imposter heap; Weave robes — let not the idle wear; forge arms, — in your defence to bear." I will never forget the dedication of the students to their purpose, the intensity of their reading and planning, the fantastic transformation of their writing into compositions of pamphleteer strength, the merciful vigor of their competing Proposals à la Jonathan Swift.

If it can be said that their work produced no necessary legislation and reform, it can also be said that this very failure instructed us all. We learned, from the unsuccessful Biafra campaign, from the unsuccessful Wrath Rally and from Gorky's depiction of violence as a corollary of impoverishment much more than we could have imagined, about poverty.

We learned about the bone and blood ironies the poor confront: We found that the elimination of poverty requires the creation of love and the protection of life within the context of chronic and terrible violence.

The elimination of poverty requires powerful, right action by those who have no power.

Thus, the elimination of poverty demands an impossible challenging of the status quo.

And we concluded that we should begin by insisting that the spirit poverties of the rich and of the powerful are the first poverties to be erased and then replaced by rational generosity and moral service.

Everything we read and everything we wrote, quite literally, translated into action: it became part of our hopeful, conscious lives.

June Jordan

THEATER 69

The 1968–69 theater season was chiefly notable for an efflorescence of "black" plays and for the fullest diet we have yet had of "new theater" — particularly as presented by The Performance Group (*Dionysus in '69*), The Living Theater and the Open Theater. These are the two features of the season I want to comment on at length, but let me first mention briefly a variety of other theatrical events, if for no other reason than that many have been praised out of all proportion to their merit (and a few unwarrantably ignored).

A number of our better-known writers were represented this season, but in almost every case, their plays were a disappointment. Jack Gelber's *The Cuban Thing*, at its core contrived and trivial, was a far — and alarming — cry from his earlier work, *The Connection*, a play of intense seriousness, of almost obsessional authenticity. . . . Equally depressing was Tennessee Williams' *Bar in a Tokyo Hotel*, an album of lifeless photos from his earlier plays — the sexual aberrant, the suffering artist, the tyrannical female — all further deadened by being embalmed in a stilted, pseudo-philosophical prose. Williams has lately been giving his plays to directors who are pretentious lightweights (last year it was José Quintero, this year Herbert Machiz) — but perhaps the plays have only been seeking their proper instruments. . . . At the Gelber and Williams evenings my primary reaction was bewilderment and sadness, respectively. At Joseph Heller's *We Bombed in New Haven*, it was anger: the grandiosity was so immense, the accomplishment so slight; Heller's "philosophizing" is on a par with his dramatic sense — which is to say, rudimentary. . . . Another talented writer gone bad this season was Israel Horowitz. His *Honest-To-God Schnozzola*, a grab-bag of overworked symbols of decadence (even to a dwarf!) à la Isherwood and the thirties, proved a poor successor to his impressive debut last season in *The Indian Wants the Bronx*. . . . Harold Pinter fared slightly better. His two short plays, *Tea Party* and *Basement*, at least had effective moments (especially *Basement*). But they suffered from their origins as television scripts, designed as they obviously were to take advantage of the medium's ability to accomplish visually sudden shifts of mood and scene. The stage can't accommodate such quick shifts; they come through only as painful pauses, unexplained transitions. Pinter's best work is characteristically spare and elusive, but these two