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Professing American Literature

A Report from Brazil

Arnold Gordenstein

This American professor discovered that although his Brazilian students appeared to be entirely receptive to American literature, they were often culturally blocked from the concepts the books contained. He also found that some key American ideas don't translate well into Brazilian culture and that it is nearly impossible for a professor abroad to present literature in a politically and culturally neutral way.

It wasn't fair. I had arrived in Brazil fresh from a good American university, eager to teach the glories of American literature to the Third World. But the beaches were busy and the samba schools were preparing for Carnival. In the Rio clubs, the drink of choice was Chivas Regal, the filmmaker one discussed was Woody Allen, and the pianists and patrons knew all the Cole Porter and Jerome Kern lyrics. The smugglers sold as many Lee jeans as they could row in from the ships anchored offshore Copacabana beach, and Rocky Smith, an American basketball player, was showing the Brazilian pros how they played the game in Harlem. English-language courses were held on every street in downtown Rio, and even our small southern city boasted more than a dozen private English schools. All the students wore Adidas shoes and collected Bruce Springsteen records.

At the university, our graduate course in American literature was thriving, drawing students from a dozen Brazilian states and adjacent countries as well. Our university's American literature conferences attracted professors and graduate students from five thousand kilometers' distance, even though Brazilian students are notorious for studying near home. The relationship with the giant to the north seemed warm and positive. But there were time bombs in my luggage of which I was unaware — and I didn't discover them for some time.

The unpacking proceeded gradually: I found myself watching a much-heralded cultural event on Brazilian television, a dubbed *Rocky*. I watched Rocky gulp raw eggs, jog in the grim Philadelphia dawn, and sprint up the steps of the Museum of Art, just as he did in the American movie. But when the voice-over announced the judges' decision on TV Globo, Rocky defeated Apollo Creed and won the title. That, at the very least, should have taught me that the movie produced for North

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American sensibilities would not satisfy Brazilian viewers, but I was new in Brazil and not yet equipped to absorb the lesson. Only after several experiences of cultural disalignment did I learn to assimilate what *Rocky* had to teach me and how I could apply these insights to teaching American literature in Brazil.

For when I ventured beyond the warm glow of the bars and the beaches, other experiences increasingly suggested that I was not on entirely friendly ground. For instance, I was routinely told that the U.S.-owned foreign debt held the Brazilian economy in thrall and was responsible for most of the country's ills. When I discovered and reported that U.S. banks held only about one fourth of that debt, my Brazilian friends had no rejoinder and, more ominously, never repeated my findings in my hearing. When the U.S. fleet bombed an Iranian oil-digging platform in the Persian Gulf, I heard on regular, major-channel Brazilian TV news that the United States had totally destroyed Karg Island and in one blow wiped out the entire Iranian oil industry. The news story was very specific, estimating the damage at half a billion dollars. On the following days I watched in vain for more on the story, but elaboration never appeared, and neither did a retraction. Nor did the story ever appear in the newsmagazines, either Brazilian or American, which I read regularly.

The story of the first downing of an Iranian fighter plane that threatened a U.S. carrier in the Gulf was, by now predictably, described as an unprovoked attack by the Americans, a slant wholly absent from the same story in *Time* and *Newsweek*. In other words, I was told that the United States was omnipotent and exploitative, the Oedipal father in boots and jeans. U.S. failures were celebrated and successes ignored. The list of journalistic discrepancies could go on and on, but the point about political bias is easily made.

However, beyond that lies another point, one more subtle and more disturbing. Even if one is not an admirer of *Time* and *Newsweek*, as I am not, nor even a reflexive defender of all American policies, as I trust I am not, one finds oneself at the very least jostled out of one's smugness about the world one looks upon. If the parameters of our perception are determined by a stock of verifiable facts that are interpreted by a painfully acquired value scheme, to lose both of these components at once is to find oneself in a world with neither certitude nor shape, with neither recognizable boundaries nor familiar values. And this is precisely the world in which an American teacher who professes American literature in a foreign country finds himself or herself.

But no matter, I thought. I was a literature professor, and a liberal one at that. Ambivalence toward U.S. culture was never a Brazilian monopoly. I, too, had always been ambivalent; I had had my 1960s; I had my reservations about American culture and tried to incorporate them in my teaching. When I read Barry O'Connell and Myra Jehlen and Sacvan Bercovitch, I found that I had agreed with their analyses of Anglocentric U.S. history all along. But my own academic politics, a blend of old liberalism and sixties radicalism, constituted a cultural imperialism of its own and was the time bomb in my baggage, which would increasingly emerge. In the meantime I made certain choices in my teaching that were meaningful to me but, I learned later, less meaningful to my students.

I developed courses that privileged texts by underdogs and minorities, and I presented them as free from assumptions about manifest destiny and the virginity of the land as I could. In Walter Benjamin's wonderful phrase, I tried to brush history against the grain. I taught a revolutionary Thoreau concerned with the reification of

nineteenth-century economic life to establish my credentials. When I taught Poe and Melville, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Bellow, I pointed out their peculiar characterizations of women. I taught David Levinsky to show how a socialist criticized U.S. capitalism and how our immigrants struggled. I taught *The Sound and the Fury* to illustrate the desirable decline of the Old South. I tried to suggest an approach to the Brazilians' own racial and sexual problems by indirection and by modeling, by displaying the United States, warts and all, and then the country's response, warts and all. I taught Malcolm X and *Black Boy* to show the pain and ambivalence of black youth. I taught Frederick Douglass, African history, *Native Son*, and LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*. And when I taught a non-American like James Joyce, he became at least partly the product of an oppressed culture in a colonized nation. But as I continued self-assuredly on my project of bringing light to the dark Third World by alerting Brazilians to the evils of racism, sexism, and unchecked capitalism, I became aware that I was an increasingly alarming presence to my more paranoid students. And I was flattered when a student confided in me one day that his classmates had concluded amiably that I was, on one level or other, a spy.

But I was in good company. Junketing Yanks had long played variations on the same tune. When Gore Vidal visited São Paulo in 1987 to plug a new book, he pleased an audience of Brazilian historians by revealing that the writers of the U.S. Constitution had acted in their own economic self-interest, a view that Charles and Mary Beard would have appreciated had they not been forty years dead when Vidal delivered his opinion.

Visiting novelists often made our university a stopping place, and they took extraordinary pains, like good guests, to show their regard for Latin-American magic realism and point out its influence on their own fiction. The late Raymond Carver did so, as did Douglas Day, a one-time novelist. Douglas Unger actually leafed through the pages of his novel, *Leaving the Land*, to point this out, however unconvincingly. Stanley Elkins, who might be genuinely regarded as an occasional practitioner of an American magic realism, did so as well, but Elkins's connection is through his colleague and friend William Gass, who wrote knowingly about magic realism some years earlier. But none of these writers, secure in their own fictional gifts but less secure in their literary history, seemed aware that magic realism is a particular province of the Spanish-speaking countries of South America rather than of Portuguese-speaking Brazil, so they unknowingly patronized the students they meant to compliment.

A word about my students, especially those at the graduate level. They had their own problems with American culture. One bright such student, tormented by a patriotic desire to study Brazilian literature alongside American literature, gave up her master's thesis and withdrew from the course when she failed to find a Brazilian influence on an American writer that she could trace. The more pragmatic and career-oriented students forfeited their scruples and simply pursued purely North American subjects and went off to the United States or England to complete Ph.D.'s there.

But I had early learned to respect these students. They had invariably read less than their American counterparts, were not accustomed to the total kamikaze dedication we often find among American graduate students, were sometimes unfamiliar with the definition of plagiarism, were innocent of research strategies since they had few research libraries, and were addicted to a priori reasoning. Yet they read difficult texts with enthusiasm and intelligence, often bringing to them angles of entry

unavailable to the North American reader — all in a second language in a country which, as the popular and definitive newsmagazine *Veja* pointed out, is simultaneously the eighth economy of the world and a complete social disaster. One is reminded of Melville Herskovitz's observation that since blacks were able to score acceptable levels on white middle-class-oriented IQ tests, they might be racially superior after all.

For instance, my male Brazilian students, who had usually been educated in seminaries, could bring to *Ulysses* a far greater familiarity with church ritual than my American students could. Because of their European orientation they could provide mythological parallels that this former graduate student had had to sweat to learn fresh. Their bilinguality, especially their facility with Latin and Latinisms, invariably ferreted out many Joycean puns. But their relationships with the texts of Joyce, Faulkner, Abraham Cahan, Bellow, LeRoi Jones, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X were a new country of the mind for me, and certain books like *Walden* became a touchstone for the comparison.

My American students had invariably been beguiled by their version of Thoreau's natural economic system. One of them, after reading *Walden* and *Huckleberry Finn* back to back, renounced a summer job and actually built and floated a raft down the Mississippi River. But my Brazilian graduate students were mainly dismayed by *Walden*. Go live in the woods? they cried. Never mind the solitude and the poverty, what about the snakes and the insects? I had anticipated that the Brazilian students would be somewhat different, but I'd forgotten that Brazilian nature was different as well. But there was more to come.

We were reading the Jason section of *The Sound and the Fury*. Jason is talking to a drummer about farmers:

"Let him make a big crop and it wont be worth picking; let him make a small crop and he wont have enough to gin. And what for? so a bunch of damn eastern jews, I'm not talking about men of the jewish religion," I says. "I've known some jews that were fine citizens. You might be one yourself," I says.

"No," he says, "I'm an American."

"No offense," I says. "I give every man his due, regardless of religion or anything else. I have nothing against jews as an individual," I says. "It's just the race. You'll admit that they produce nothing. They follow the pioneers into a new country and sell them clothes."¹

After a peculiar and prolonged silence one of my best graduate students patiently explained to me that there was nothing to discuss, that it was true, that Jews were always unproductive and rich and did manipulate the wealth of the United States. How was a teacher, especially a poor one named Gordenstein, to respond? Only that I had no way to prove it was not true but wished that it was.

Another time, Malcolm X described his behavior in early manhood to illustrate that even he had once played Sambo, conking his hair, bedding white women, dealing drugs, Lindy Hopping in the Boston dance palaces. My American students, familiar with the context of Malcolm's life and his fate, recognized that we were reading a confessional book, a conversion book, but my Brazilians insisted that blacks always behaved that way and especially that they were born dancing well and that their skills had nothing to do with upbringing and cultural values. One student argued that black joints were actually more "oily" — he was perfectly fluent in

English, a well-read painter who had exhibited at the local museum, but he used the word *oily* — and therefore were capable of motions that whites were not.

But many times these same students had awakened me from a superior lethargy of my own. My American students had always assumed, as I did, that Beneto Cereno was the slave and Babo the master, that Malcolm X was damning his own Sambo behavior, and that *Dutchman* was an understandable statement of black rage. But the Brazilians pointed out that everyone, black and white, was starving aboard Beneto Cereno's ship, that there is a special and distinctive beauty to black dancing, whether from Africa or Roxbury, and that if only that man and woman in *Dutchman* could propagate they would leave a smaller problem for the next generation.

Early in my stay in Brazil I began to accept rides home through the evening Rio traffic with an older returning student, a familiar enough figure in a U.S. university, but an anomaly in Brazil. He was, he said, attending my class only to improve his English. My students, politically wiser and tougher than I — after all, they risked arrest and torture for transgressions for which we Americans were forgiven — had alerted me that he was also probably a spy. Keep in mind that the year was 1970, not only the year of the World Cup but also the climactic year of Emilio Garrastazu Medici's brutally repressive presidency.

After a month of such rides, during which I expressed my misgivings about the reception of the course I was teaching, it dawned on me that he was not spying on me at all, he was spying on the students. He had already assumed that I was a spy, and by his definition I was. That is, I was trying to influence my students' value system by presenting the current American academic left-of-center point of view with literature as a medium. So he didn't want to know where I stood. He knew where I stood. He only wanted to know how the students would receive my message and which ones might cross over and join their beliefs to mine so that the government might anticipate subversive activity. This was a shocking realization. For if the country's government and many of my students were secretly hostile — though for opposite reasons — if the news was falsified, if even the ending of *Rocky* was changed, how was the literature being received and where did I stand?

Neither my position nor that of my students was simple anymore. I had a variety of auditors and a multitude of texts that could be read in countless ways, and I was no longer sure what position I should endorse. I would later read an essay of Barry O'Connell's in which he wrote that he looked forward "not to some original synthesis defining American history or a newly composed canon of American literature but to a near Babel of tongues in an anarchy wonderful enough to riddle the very idea and power of nationalism."² But I didn't have the luxury of celebrating Babels and chaos. I was teaching in one.

I realized that the aspirations of Willy Loman and Jay Gatsby were mainly a puzzlement to native Cariocas. I found that Joe Keller's cry, to me heartrending, that perhaps these were all my sons in the play of that name hardly resonates in the Brazilian playgoer. For, unwilling to aspire to the American dream and unable to perceive the social dimension of the failure portrayed in these works, my Brazilian students usually did not see the fates of these fictional characters as socially resonant catastrophes but mainly as personal disappointments. I discovered that though the books had always been half known to Brazilians as "the canon," the values they once represented in the United States were never assumed in Brazil. Therefore, though it might have been easy for me to undermine the American myth, say, of

manifest destiny or of the “discovery” of America, of American individualism or of social justice for all, it was harder to gauge the moral universe in which these ideas were being received.

In a culture that begins with a relaxed and tolerant attitude to individual foibles based on a deep skepticism about the possibilities of social improvement through a chronically, almost acceptably corrupt central government, the largest discernible values have to do with family and blood loyalties. So a Brazilian Hester would be forgiven at once — if she were even charged — and find satisfaction in her private life. The Brazilian dissident, instead of going to jail for refusing to pay his taxes, would ignore the government and go home to live with Mother and tend his beans. Although American culture is “social to the core,” as Carolyn Porter has written, even when it challenges the dominant society, Brazilian life and literature reflects a flight from social issues to a concern for smaller nuclei like the family. My Brazilian students, therefore, began their relationship with American literature by examining the terms of the discussion, did not accept them, and therefore were not impressed with the resolution the gringos found.

But although I had long ago winked away the apolitical attitude to teaching literature in Brazil and had, in this reading, accepted my political responsibilities, I came to realize that I had been encouraging catastrophe. For if my students absorbed and acted on Thoreau in the way I was suggesting, they might land not in Concord jail but in an unmarked grave. I even had fleeting thoughts of seeking my professional virginity and teaching the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of my beloved texts once again.

I cast around among my Brazilian colleagues, but they had an even more tortured relationship to the American literature they studied and taught. Since they were regarded as turncoats — *entreguistas* — by some of their Brazilian colleagues, teaching American literature was a treasonous activity that sometimes left them deeply disturbed. Once, teaching during a noisy student protest, a colleague shouted at his class, “It is impossible to go on teaching unless we become numb, unless we pretend not to hear the voices of protest.”³ How much more painful when we consider that he was teaching American literature at the time. Another colleague, citing scholarly sources, proposed an approach called cannibalism, in which scenario the smaller culture would devour the larger one in order to avoid being overwhelmed by it. To quote the author, Sergio Bellei: “The method consists simply of the ritualistic imitation of the celebrated event in Brazilian history in which a European bishop was devoured by indians when when he decided to christianize them. In this case the christian message, far from being imposed upon the indians, was literally absorbed by them and transformed into a source of energy for the creation of the kind of original work in which cultural identity is not cancelled, but preserved. Cultural cannibalism is then a form of reading foreign texts in which what is foreign is digested and transformed into a source of energy for the production of originality. It implies understanding foreign texts not in terms of passive comprehension but in terms of active appropriation.”⁴

Well and good, but how the hummingbird was going to digest the eagle was never made clear. Another colleague, in a ringing phrase that Arthur Miller would have admired, wrote that we professors should never defend a cause smaller than all mankind,⁵ but how this brave position actually worked out in an arena where neither side represented all mankind but only another conflicting national perspective was

equally unclear. In any case, this sentiment, which resonated in American ears, was probably inspired by my colleague's American training and meant little besides the eloquence to our Brazilian students.

If the most creative debate in current American studies scholarship is about the dismantling of the Anglo point of view, then from the vantage point of another only half-sympathetic culture the task is both unnecessary and essentially complete at the very beginning. The marginalization of the central books of the American canon is accomplished automatically when one simply shifts to another culture that operates on another paradigm. But for the American professor abroad it is both impossible and necessary to define early on both his or her relationship to the literature being taught and to the culture it sprang from or will find himself (or herself) being regarded as an agent of the U.S. government or of international capitalism or worse. Indeed, in some ways the role is unavoidable — no matter how much you may try to avoid it, you may actually be an agent of the U.S. government and of international capitalism. And to move toward rejection of the home culture leaves you in a most vulnerable position of isolation from one's past, enfeebled and dangling.

Although the barriers to intercultural understanding can hardly be overstated, there is fertile, if tortured, ground for speculation about these relations in the interplay between these books, students, and professors, both Brazilian and gringo. For the American, the other culture provides a remarkable cockpit for viewing the implicit beliefs of one's home culture. But this also places him or her in a highly exposed position. For we carry our professions — in both senses — in our gestures. If you have invested the time and commitment to study American literature, it is nearly reflexive to defend the point of view and values being showcased by your favorite books — both canonical and marginal — and, by extension, American culture as you read it. However, one's assumptions about an acceptable canon as well as one's purely aesthetic judgments are soon undermined. In the very effort to gain ideological and political neutrality by choosing books with negligible explicit political content, by cozying up to the host country, or by damning one's own, one discovers another ideology and another political position.

My cannibalizing colleague suggested that the time was ripe to prepare a Brazilian curriculum of American literature in which texts that were culturally translatable, like Poe and Dickinson, by his reckoning, would be taught first, regardless of chronology, and then writers like Twain and Whitman, who did not translate as well culturally. But my Brazilian colleagues knew better than I that the canon and even the peripheral texts carried unavoidable political freight and were never the innocent instruments of self-knowledge we had all learned about when we were students and not yet professors.

We only read the books we are prepared to read and only whether these are the books the authors prepared for us we cannot know. Two readers from different cultures sharing a common book might be similar after all to two ants talking it over after visiting an elephant, unable to decide who had seen the tusk and who had seen the tail. When I returned to the United States, I found that the same problem of the shifting relationship between text and reader was under critical scrutiny here also. To reverse the formula at the end of *Invisible Man*, who knows but that on the higher frequencies I speak for you? 🐜

Notes

1. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Random House, 1946), 209.
2. Barry O'Connell, "Putting Down the Puritans and Starting All Over Again: Towards the Abolition of American Literature." Paper presented at American Studies Association National Convention, Miami Beach, November 1988, 29.
3. Dilvo I. Ristoff, "Educating Rituals — The Uneasiness of Teaching American Literature in Brazil." Paper presented at American Studies Association National Convention, Miami, Beach, November 1988, 1.
4. Sergio Bellei, "Teaching American Literature in Brazil: Reading as Cannibalism." Paper presented at American Studies Association National Convention, Miami Beach, November 1988, 1.
5. Ristoff, "Educating Rituals," 12.