

TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE: THE MAKING OF AN ANTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

We conducted research to prepare an anthology of twentieth-century North American Literature for students of English in the Department of Modern Languages at Universidad de Oriente, Núcleo Sucre. Our search revealed that, despite the racist image of the U.S.A. broadcasted through the mass media, literature in the United States of America has developed in accordance with the ideals of equality contained in the main American political documents: the literature of this century is very diversified and is representative of the many groups which inhabit the country. The concrete result of our investigation was a volume of 400 pages which reflects the above mentioned diversity and which will facilitate individualization in the teaching of North American Literature. The volume approaches literature as an art which allows a pedagogical practice based on the ideas of thinkers such as Socrates, Aristotle, John Locke, Michel de Montaigne and Bertrand Russell.

KEY WORDS: North American Literature, twentieth-century, pedagogy, anthology.

RESUMEN

Realizamos una investigación documental con el objetivo de preparar una antología de la Literatura Norteamericana del siglo veinte dirigida a estudiantes del Departamento de Idiomas del Núcleo Sucre de la Universidad de Oriente. Nuestra investigación fue doblemente fructífera. Por una parte, la diversidad étnica y cultural de la literatura norteamericana de este siglo nos permitió elaborar un trabajo que demuestra que, a pesar de la imagen y realidad racistas que transmiten los medios de comunicación, la literatura norteamericana se ha desarrollado de forma considerablemente con-

gruente con las ideas democráticas expresadas en los documentos históricos estudiados en los cursos de Historia y Literatura Angloamericana. Por otro lado, la abundancia de material posibilitó la elaboración de un trabajo voluminoso (400 páginas) que facilitará una práctica pedagógica individualizante. Nuestro énfasis es en la literatura como arte, no como ciencia, y considera las teorías de crítica literaria como útiles, pero de importancia secundaria. En nuestra labor de preparación de esta antología, nos hemos guiado por las ideas de pensadores tales como Sócrates, Aristóteles, John Locke, Michel de Montaigne, y Bertrand Russell.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Literatura norteamericana, siglo veinte; pedagogía; antología.

As our experience during the past year demonstrates, the preparation of an anthology of Twentieth-Century American Literature can be a very fruitful and rewarding task. First, it can allow the researcher to assess the manner in which some American democratic ideals have affected the present literary situation in the United States. Second, the overwhelming variety of literary material can permit the anthology maker to select an abundance of literary works so as to increase the opportunities for individualization. And third, although in the teaching of literature in the United States critical theories have taken a central stage, an adherence to some of the pedagogical ideas of men such as Socrates, Aristotle, John Locke, Michel de Montaigne, and Bertrand Russell, can enable the anthology maker to prepare a volume in which literature can be treated as an art which, as such, can be of enormous use for the teaching and increase of thinking and analytical skills.

Newspapers and television intermittently remind us of racial problems in the U.S.A. and, alas, one wishes they were exaggerating. Racial problems do exist in the United States. James Baldwin deplores this; in «The Price of the Ticket» he says: «Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other one—male in female, female in male, white in black, black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly

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inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often do I. But none of us can do anything about it» (1961). And so, racial strife continues.

Our research shows, however, that this divisiveness is only part of the country's reality. Perhaps because of the fact that in the U.S.A. racial animosities are acknowledged and are subject to legislation, and also perhaps because the academic and cultural establishments agree with Baldwin that we are part of each other, the literature of these days—the latter part of the 20th century—is not dominated by only one or two majority groups. Nowadays, North American Literature is undeniably diverse and includes the work of a variety of minority groups such as African Americans; Native Americans (Indians); Arab, Jewish, Latin and Asian groups of diverse nationalities, etc. Minorities may still have a great deal to fight for, but they now have written language on their side, they have control of their own expression, they are no longer artistically silent. On the contrary, to judge by the popularity of many minority authors, it seems as if the exuberance with which they are expressing themselves is sweeping much of the rest of the country off their feet into realms from where prejudices can be viewed by many as the embarrassing pettiness they happen to be. African-Americans, Native-Americans, Hispanics of different derivations and national origins (Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, etc.), and Orientals, have climbed on the stage and claimed their share of the spotlight. The literary «show» has been infinitely enriched.

Here are some examples of this. Amy Tan's novels about Chinese-Americans have won large numbers of readers and have been successfully filmed (1989). Maya Angelou's poetry makes it possible for her to be the second poet ever (and the first African American) to be invited to read poetry at the inauguration of an American President (Bill Clinton). She read the poem «On the Pulse of the Morning», which has as a theme an inclusive United States of America where all races will be equally valued (Urovsky, 1994). Then there is Oscar Hijuelos, the Cuban-American, who turned the rhythms of Caribbean life and music into prize-winning, best-selling fiction (Augenbrau and Stavans, 1993). And, of course, they are all very different from Louise Erdrich, whose lyrical prose gives us such dazzling views of the mental universe of some Native-Americans (1988). The list goes on to include people like Raymond Carver, Edward Delaney and Tess Gallagher who guide us into worlds very different from what is called «mainstream America,» worlds which are not pervaded by the American cult of success and happiness (Carver and Jenks, 1987). Together

with Julia Alvarez, Ellen Gilchrist, Joy Williams, Jamaica Kincaid, Gish Jen, and many other authors impossible to include in one volume, they constitute a literary occurrence which has transformed the country into something probably unique in the history of humankind: a place where minorities raise their voices, as Grace Paley believes they need to (1977), and are heard, with pleasure (as demonstrated by the best-selling nature of much minority literature), by many.

In literature, at least, the United States seems to be living up (though, surely, not with great ease) to some of the political ideals of equality contained in The Declaration of Independence and in more recent Civil Rights legislation. This is very evident in the case of some authors for whom not even a foreign language has been an impediment. As we have shown, Isaac Bashevis Singer is an example of this. Singer did not have to write in English to make himself heard. Expressing himself in Yiddish and writing predominantly about his original Polish-Jewish culture and group, he still became a highly valued and widely read American author (Nobel Prize 1978), whose works have been translated into many languages (Gibbons, 1995). Other Jewish writers, like Grace Paley, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Allen Ginsberg, Arthur Miller, Stephen J. Gould, Carl Sagan, etc., writing in English and concerning themselves with life in the U.S.A., have mingled with Mark Twain, Robert Frost, John Cheever, Adrienne Moore, Archibald MacLeish, T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Tennessee Williams, and many others to continue forming what is today the most powerful and productive literary establishment in the world. And also the most varied.

A good anthology of Twentieth-Century American Literature should endeavor to reflect that productivity, diversity and power. It may be a good idea to stick to very established authors—like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams—in drama, for example, and include some previously anthologized short stories and poems, about which there is the certainty that they are unsurpassed and timeless. But one must also include authors and pieces of quality whose future is not yet clear, and even some authors who are not considered literary figures but whose writing is superb and whose ideas can be both attractive and useful to university students. Among these latter, Carl Sagan (1977, 1979), Steven Jay Gould (1982, 1985), Susan Sontag (1978), Bowra (1967), and George Smith (1979) stand out for their devotion to rationality and their belief in the intelligence of the average reader. And Lewis Thomas is living proof that, even in today's world, a man can be a busy physician and researcher and still write poetry and poetic scientific articles (1978, 1990). Dave

Barry can make gentle fun of his own gender in very accessible prose (1995), while Woody Allen may invite a more sophisticated audience to engage in hilarious self-mocking (1989).

Of course, the productivity and diversity we so gleefully celebrate have resulted in a literature too vast for any one work to represent. No selection can do it justice. Even in poetry, a genre which is supposed to be elitist, obscure, remote, almost rarefied and rarefying, there is enough of a boom to justify Bill Moyer's television special about it and to turn his subsequent book, *The Language of Life*, into a national bestseller (1995). The largest, most unwieldy collection will only give the reader a mere idea of what is occurring in Twentieth-Century American Literature

Length is a consideration, but one thing is indispensable in this type of anthology. In addition to providing a glimpse into what is happening in literature, a collection of literary works designed for university students should also serve as an aid in developing thinking and analytical skills. For literature can help in the endeavor of developing the mind and increasing self-knowledge. Each human being is unique and irreplaceable and has, therefore, the (enjoyable) duty to develop his potential as fully as possible. And literature, because it concerns itself with the individual, can be instrumental in helping the young (and the not-so-young) in their struggle for self-differentiation, authenticity, and autonomy.

Pedagogically, a modern anthology for college students should be informed and guided by the ideas of thinkers such as Socrates, Aristotle, John Locke, Michel de Montaigne, and Bertrand Russell. For teaching in general and the teaching of literature in particular are in a sorry state nowadays. There is a need for sobriety, for humanistic reflection, and for simple common sense.

In the United States of America, for example, English Departments have come to be dominated by literary critical theory. Of course, these theories are useful, particularly if presented as impartially and soberly as David Lodge does (1990). Nowadays, however, professional esteem and promotions are bestowed according to ingenuity in the handling of the critical theories most in vogue at the moment and "critics talk abundantly of scientific theories of which they have, at best, a very vague understanding . . . [demonstrating] a veritable intoxication with words combined with a superb indifference to their meaning" (Henly, 1997). Knowledge (and love) of literature and pedagogical excellence are relegated to low positions in the value hierarchies of most universities and colleges.

In their eagerness to compete for money with schools of science, schools of humanity have deformed themselves. Instead of devoting their efforts to the production of good human beings and devoted educators who strive to be experts in a particular branch of humanistic knowledge, they vainly seek to emulate departments of physics and mathematics. In the process, schools of humanities reveal a certain envy of science's legitimate claim to objectivity. Self-defeatingly, they insist on asserting that the laws of nature are social constructions. There is an obstinate reluctance to remember that nature is governed by impersonal laws, and to realize that it is dangerous to undermine the belief in a rationally understandable world on which all academic activity is based. And there seems to be a disregard for what art, the art of literature included, is. As Jacob Bronowski has pointed out, the act of creation is the same in science as in art but the works of science and art match human experience differently. Intellectual experience, like the rediscovery of a theorem, can be exactly matched while a painting or a poem cannot be replicated. «In the arts it is not possible for the experience of an individual to match that of another, as if it were a blueprint» (1977).

Literature has its own realm and its own peculiar way of contributing to the betterment of humanity. It is not a science and no literary theory, however ingenious, can make it so. On the contrary, such lack of authenticity can only do harm. Nowadays, for example, Departments of English are graduating young M.As and Ph.Ds who are so harassed by the need to publish fashionably «scientific» papers that they have scant time and energy for the art of literature, for pedagogy, and for their own human growth and that of the young creatures whom they are supposed to teach.

The drive toward intellectual growth is endogenous. Socrates recognized it as so in the formulation of his main teaching technique of questioning the student, as well as in his calling teaching an «art of midwifery» (Plato, 1952). Thus a good anthology should contain a series of questions to accompany every work and assist the student in his approach to new authors and literary pieces as well as to encourage and guide analysis. These questions can also help students explore and enlarge themselves and enrich their understanding of the world.

Aristotle in his *Politics* advocates using leisure to improve ourselves and he says in his *Ethics*: «The pleasures arising from thinking and learning will make us think and learn all the more» (1952) And of course, it is pleasure, which helps teachers «to get and keep the attention of the scholar» in order to insure that «everyone's

natural genius [is] carried as far» as it can (Locke, 1977). Thus, students should be offered an array of different literary works to choose from so as to increase the probabilities of pleasure. And they should be permitted to pursue their own interests and form their own opinions. Otherwise, we teachers would be committing the unpardonable sins of wielding our authority to hinder true learning and development, and of preventing the formation of autonomous individuals.

Guided by the great teachers of humanity, we have steered away from the dangers of authoritarian (as opposed to authoritative) behavior in our task of preparing this anthology. Our attempt to insure delight, pleasure, is based on the keen awareness of the potential destructiveness of despotic and punitive ways in education. We follow Michel de Montaigne, and Bertrand Russell in this. Montaigne «condemned all violence in the education of a tender soul who is being trained for honor and liberty,» and thought that there was «a sort of servility about rigor and constraint» (1965). Bertrand Russell saw the enforcement of obedience to teachers as disastrous for students and society because it inculcated passivity. He thought that the habit of passive acceptance caused «men to seek a leader, and to accept as a leader whoever is established in that position» (1961). We aspire to the opposite and, accordingly, have endeavored to produce study materials that can contribute to the production of independent individuals—each of whom, as Pericles once said about his fellow Greeks, «is able to show himself the rightful owner of his own person, and do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility» (Thucydides 1952).

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