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The Allure of Radical Alterity:
Teaching Literature as Critical Estrangement

Abstract

Although literature teachers often aim to find texts that jibe with student experience, that are "relatable" (in the argot of the day), or that allow student readers to identify with familiar characters, nearly the opposite strategy may be more effective in producing life-long readers. Texts which present a familiar world, with recognizable characters and experiences, are also well liked, but it seems that students grow weary of them quickly, eventually conceding that they "already know" this stuff. I have found that students are far more likely to embrace a world of apparently radical otherness, whether in the form of an actual fantasy world like Tolkien's or through the estrangements of different times and places, as in medieval literature or "foreign" texts. As bestseller lists reveal, the fantasy genre remains popular, but I have found in my introductory courses that even works by Melville, Hawthorne, Dante, or Cervantes function as launching pads for further engagement with and love of literature. In encountering such radical alterity, students maintain both a critical distance from the subject that enables them to read analytically, but also marvel at the weird and fascinating world presented. It seems to me that one of the great strengths of literature, as distinct from other forms of writing, is this imaginative world that both *is* and *is not* like our own. Drawing upon China Miéville's recent discussion of fictions of estrangement versus those of "familiarity," I argue that teaching literature's inherent alterity paves the way for life-long love of reading.

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Teaching Literature as Critical Estrangement

Robert T. Tally Jr.

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There's a scene in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables in which Holgave, a daguerreotypist (among other pursuits), reads one of his short stories to Phoebe. The story is filled with fantastic elements, as a mysterious Matthew Maule (who may or may not also be a warlock) casts a spell over young Alice Pyncheon and, unwittingly, causes her death. Meanwhile, Holgrave discovers that by his own storytelling, he has momentarily bewitched Phoebe, who, now enchanted, appears to be totally within his power. For a moment, Hawthorne allows the reader to linger on this narrative precipice, wondering whether Holgrave will somehow reenact his own tale, and [QUOTE] "complete his mastery over Phoebe's yet free and virgin spirit."

Whenever I teach this novel, with its themes of wizardry and wild romance, I like to pause at this point, and invite my students to consider the "magic" of storytelling and the implications of this scene. Inevitably, the question arises:

"What's a daguerreotype?"

Admittedly, even in a fictional universe that might contain ghosts, sorcery, and curses from beyond the grave, the outdated technology of the daguerreotype is perhaps the weirdest thing my students encounter in *The House of the Seven Gables*. That the daguerreotype is, within the time of the novel, a cutting-edge technology is weirder still, as my students struggle to picture the historical situation evoked by the novel. The nineteenth-century society in which daguerreotypes are new and perplexing, rather than so thoroughly old-fashioned as to be nearly unknown, is almost as strange and otherworldly as a world inhabited by dragons and goblins. In my view, the introduction to, and exploration of, such worlds is among the most exhilarating delights for the student of literature, and is most likely to create the conditions for the possibility of a life-long love of reading.

My thinking on this matter emerges from the overlapping territories of my own teaching, often focused on fairly canonical texts in American and European literature, and my amateur's interest in fantasy (such as the Tolkien stuff, *Game of Thrones*, or Harry Potter, for instance), a genre – and, more broadly, a narrative mode – that seems to have taken over the publishing industry in recent years. In teaching "classic" or canonical texts, I have found that they provide to student-readers the sort of imaginative pleasures quite similar to that of works of fantasy, and I believe a big part of it is the radical alterity of both "literary" and "fantasy" stories. That is, whether a given work presents a fully formed "Otherworld," such as Dante's Inferno or Tolkien's Middle-earth, or they develop fictions taking place in a recognizable setting (London, for instance, which is a geospace equally "real" in <u>Harry Potter</u> and <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>), the estrangements of the literary texts are captivating.

Although teachers sometimes try to use texts that more directly jibe with their students' own experiences, that are "relatable" (as people say), or that allow student readers to identify personally with familiar characters, I have found that nearly the opposite strategy may be more effective, particularly if one of the goals is to produce

readers who will go on to read further, outside of the course. (I've never quite understood this siren-call of the "relatable," which suggest that, like some perverse version of the Lacanian mirror stage, students can only enter into literature's Symbolic Order when they have looked into the mirror and seen, NOT the face of the Other, but the already identified and embraced Same or Self.) Narratives depicting an all-too-familiar world, with easily recognizable characters and experiences, are certainly well liked, especially in the context of a required course, where ease of understanding makes for less anxiety over grades. However, it seems that many students grow weary of such fare, eventually conceding that they "already know" this stuff. *Strange* people, places, and events, by contrast, may be more difficult to get a grip on at first, but this frequently leads to greater interest and enjoyment, as well as to the desire to read or learn more about the subjects.

I don't mean to argue against realism, exactly, but fantasy-versus-mimesis dichotomy (to cite Kathryn Hume's marvelous study) might offer an instructive example. In a recent controversy over the status of genre fiction in the publishing world – the particular instance, in this case, was the Man Booker Prize and whether its judges were willing to take seriously books written in the fantasy or

science-fiction genre – China Miéville suggested that the
distinction between realism and fantasy was not
particularly apt. Miéville suggested another way of
thinking about it, distinguishing between fictions of
"recognition" and of "estrangement." In response to the
question of "what the Booker Prize *really* excludes,"
Miéville said: [QUOTE]

> the tradition of, if you like, 'mainstream literary
> fiction' […] has tended strongly to celebrate the
> former over the latter [i.e., *recognition* over
> *estrangement*]. There's an obvious relation with
> realist versus non-realist work (thinking on these
> lines might help map links between the pulpiest SF and
> more celebrated Surrealist and avant-garde work),
> though the distinction maps only imperfectly across
> the generic divide. All fiction contains elements of
> both drives (to different degrees, and variably
> skilfully). That very fact might be one way of getting
> at the drab disappointment of, on the one hand, the
> clichés of some fantasy and the twee and clunking
> allegories of middlebrow 'literary' magic realism
> (faux estrangement, none-more-mollycoddling
> recognition), and on the other at those utterly

fascinating texts which contain not a single impossible element, and yet which read as if they were, somehow, fantastic (<u>Jane Eyre</u>, <u>Moby-Dick</u>, etc). Great stuff can doubtless be written from both perspectives. But I won't duck the fact that at its best, I think there is something more powerful, ambitious, intriguing and radical about the road recently less feted. I'd rather be estranged than recognize. [END-QUOTE]

Miéville's broader category of "fiction of estrangement" usefully brings together so-called genre fiction such as fantasy or Sci-Fi and those more culturally valued productions like romanticism or surrealism, but I don't mean to suggest that so-called realism is to be avoided. For one thing, a great deal of literary realism is remarkably strange, if I can put it that way. Dickens, for example, is usually thought of as a rather realistic writer, but part of his power lies in the way his novels reveals the magical aspects of the real-world, as in the marvelous anecdote of the "MOOR EEFFOC." According to G. K. Chesterton, a young Charles Dickens discovered these magical words by seeing the sign "Coffee Room" from the other side of a glass door. Chesterton concludes that

[QUOTE] "it is the masterpiece of the good realistic principle — the principle that the most fantastic of all is often the precise fact" (47–48), and he referred to this as [QUOTE] "that elvish kind of realism Dickens adopted everywhere."

However, as my example of Holgrave in The House of the Seven Gables demonstrates, one needn't even look for the "elvish realism" in many classic texts, since the historical situation itself is so strange, particularly to those of us or among our students who have "forgotten how to think historically" (as Fredric Jameson would have it, we postmoderns!). Part of the immense allure of Tolkienesque fantasy, it's clear, is the quite real, but relatively unrecognizable, medieval world itself. It contains such a radically different social formation, so intriguing to modern readers, that it may as well be otherworldly. I sometimes feel this way about *The Game of Thrones* saga, which a colleague of mine charitably referred to as a mix of Tolkien and *Dallas* (and it definitely reads like a soap opera, including the seemingly interminable length); yes, dragons and ice-demons and magic are there, but one can go hundreds of pages at a time without thinking of them, focusing instead on court-intrigue, war-strategy, or interlacing plotlines. *That* the plot seems loosely

modeled on the War of the Roses only underscores the point: the Past is itself Otherworldly.

In the end, the question is not whether a sober realism or a romantic fantasy offers the best mode in which to engage artistically with the world, but rather how we are to engage at all. Otherworldliness may indeed be the best way of seeing our own world with fresh eyes, and, in an age which seems to have forgotten how to think critically, historically, or speculatively, the sort of conceptual work accomplished by literature is all the more necessary. As the Tolkien scholar and medievalist Tom Shippey notes, an opposition to the strange or unrecognizable often corresponds to the poverty of one's imagination. Speaking of a character in Tolkien's "Smith of Wootton Major," Shippey writes: [QUOTE] "He has only a weak […] notion of fantasy himself, but assumes that this is all there can ever be; and since he is well aware of the feebleness of his own imagination, he assumes all images of the fantastic, of Faerie, must be feeble too." Coming from a very different critical tradition, Jameson has said something similar about our own postmodern condition, in which for many it is easier to envision the end of the world than an end to the present economic system; but

Jameson adds, [QUOTE] "perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations."

How does one strengthen the imagination? Another great critic, theorist, and teacher provided the answer: through the study of literature, explained Northrop Frye, in his passionate defense of that field of study, titled *The Educated Imagination*. The individual student needs literature the way that a starving man needs food, writes Frye, for literature will disclose to students a second world largely unknown to them: *not* a secondary world in which to escape, but above all the window into a place far more real than the illusory society to which students were previously limited. The strange world discovered by the educated imagination is not illusory. [QUOTE] "It is the real world, the real form of human society hidden behind the one we see. It's the world of what humanity has done, and therefore can do, the world revealed to us in the arts and sciences." Students who explore this world, I think, are less likely to find comfort in the ironically false, "real-world" of the crass, familiar, and everyday life. Perhaps, with strengthened imaginations, they will even finds ways to change it.

So maybe literature is sort of practical after all, but not in the utilitarian way that we see proposed so

often nowadays. I sometimes fear that the studies, experiments, and arguments designed to demonstrate how useful literature really is, in the end, undermine literature's true power. This is not to say I doubt the conclusions, for instance, that (to cite a recent headline that popped up all over my Facebook feed in the last two weeks) "Brain Function 'Boosted For Days' After Reading a Novel"; of course, I believe reading complex works of the imagination is a valuable and beneficial experience. But I think that the more we argue for literature's value in merely utilitarian terms, the less likely it would inspire a "life-long love of reading." (Since when has "But it's good for you" ever made people want to eat something, after all?) Moreover, the pragmatist argument for literature ultimately degrades the literary works and the reading process themselves. It becomes something like a "Lumosity.com" argument for neuroplasticity exercises (highly dubious, not surprisingly), where a work of literature is merely a puzzle or game to help you be a better accountant or computer programmer or what have you. This view of literature and its study grants only the crassest value to literary estrangement, turning it into a brief, piquant sensation, readily lost and adapted to the

most familiar, recognizable, and ideological frame of reference in the everyday.

What we think of, teach, and study, as literature *is* strange. The estrangements of literature are what distinguish it from so many other forms of knowledge and entertainment. The "Great Refusal" of the aesthetic sphere, as Herbert Marcuse called it, makes literary art an inherently impractical, non-utilitarian field, which may also mean that it is a field devoted to pleasure, the pleasures of the text. It offers the allure of alterity, of worlds containing dragons and daguerreotypes, which (as Hawthorne's mysterious daguerreotypist suggested) may reveal more about our own world than is always visible under the sun. For those who encounter them early and often, such revelations, such estrangements, may foster a lifelong love of reading.