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The Appeal of the Forbidden: Suggestions for a Different Approach to Literature

In a time of general neglect and even open contempt for literary works, teachers of English who love literature might resort to unorthodox methods in order to tempt young people into the reading of it. The didactic effort, as a rule, strives to make things easily accessible. Good literature, however, dealing with the complications, ambiguities and incomprehensible contradictions of real life, is hardly ever easy to understand. Maybe one should, for a change, represent literature to students as something difficult of access and, instead of coaxing them into it, warn them off – or rather coax them into it by warning them off.

Delight in Disobedience

Things forbidden may become strangely attractive, as human beings have known ever since they found they could not resist the prohibited fruit in paradise. Psychologists in the tradition of Freud explain this, as other irrationalities of human behaviour, in the context of the theory of libido. Sexual pleasure, they observe, is relegated to the sphere of the prohibited and the concealed; hence, they assume, everything which is forbidden or hidden is subconsciously linked with quasi-sexual pleasure. Thus texts which are not fully revealed or even totally withheld from view might become the object of erotic desire. The Freudian parallelism between the sexual attraction of certain hidden body parts and passages of writing which have been crossed out is playfully illustrated in a recently published fake edition of an intimate diary attributed to a young Victorian lady (Froud 2002). The diary, we are made to understand, has fallen into the hands of a sister who feels it her duty to delete passages of, as the Victorians said, 'warm' description. Thus on one page (see illustration) she has attempted to scratch out the womb area in the image of a naked girl as well as an erotically loaded passage in the writing, buttressing her act of censure with exclamations of chaste horror. These, if anything, serve to enhance the interest of prospective readers who, anyhow, are cast as voyeurs. They will be attracted by the difficulty of deciphering the faded handwriting of the young lady's intimate confession and most of all by the crossed-out lines at the bottom of the page. Only bits and pieces can be made out, such as “tingling toes,” “tight” and “moist knees.”

The fascination exerted by a suppressed text does not depend on its erotic subject matter. I have often observed that, with regard to the examination forms handed out to M.A. candidates in Munich, students spend much effort in the attempt to decipher the alternative topic proposed by the supervisor for the Klausur that has been rejected and made (nearly) illegible by the Dean's office in order to signify its total irrelevance for their work. Obviously they do not care that they lose valuable time, time that would much better be spent in preparing the essay on the subject prescribed to them. A topic announced in clear print is banal, it seems, whereas a topic hidden in blacked-out lines is sexy.
Books acquire the attraction of the forbidden when they are banned, be it for political, religious, moral or pedagogical reasons. "I was very intent on getting the list of banned books in Berlin," Sophie von La Roche notes in her memoir of 1799, "I wanted to compare them with the list of Vienna" (I, 180). She takes the lists as a guide for a tour of discovery into the mental world of politicians, scholars and male readers in general which was otherwise inaccessible to a woman. A similar curiosity for supposedly arcane knowledge is aroused, according to biographies and biographical novels, when young people are denied access to adult fiction. A key situation in such narra-
tives is the moment when a child enters the family library by stealth and discovers an exciting world of stories hitherto unknown to him or her. The scene is remembered, for example, in the memoirs of the French author Marie d’Agoult (the mistress of Franz Liszt and mother of Cosima Wagner), in an autobiographical novel by the English critic Edmund Gosse, and in the recollections of W. S. Sebald’s protagonist in Austerlitz (D’Agoult 2009, 64-65; Gosse 1983, 48-59; Sebald 2006, 93). The erotic undertones of the closed library doors come to the fore when, in Samuel Richardson’s novel Sir Charles Grandison, the bridegroom formally presents the keys of his library to the bride on the occasion of their wedding.

Writers of literature have found ways to use the allure of the concealed and its promise of the transgressive for their purposes. Toby Litt recently did so with unusual directness. He published the text of his novel Finding Myself (2003) with lines and whole paragraphs crossed out, suggesting that the reader is not supposed to look at the deleted parts. Hand-written comments are added on the margins, equally difficult to decipher. “I was hoping that the readers would feel they were reading things that they shouldn’t, that they’d see behind the curtain,” Litt states in an interview (Hogg 2003, 22). The device seems to have worked. People bought and read the book because of the mysterious typography.

A traditional way to whet the reader’s curiosity is to establish a text’s clandestine character in a framing narrative. Some authors pretend that their stories are based on old manuscripts whose dangerous secrets have up to then been hidden in dark basements or caves. By offering transcripts of those manuscripts in small portions measured out by the scarce candle-light at the disposition of the reader within the text, the curiosity is upheld; sometimes it is maintained even beyond the end of the novel by suggesting that the printed portions are only fragments of the lost original. Other writers offer their fictions as publications of confidential letters, private confessions, illicit correspondence between lovers, documents of liaisons dangereuses or intimate diaries. Sometimes it is indicated that the text is brought out into the open without the knowledge or against the will of its writer. “Rash young man! – why do you tear from my heart the affecting narrative, which I had hoped no cruel necessity would ever have forced me to reveal?”, the heroine characteristically exclaims at the beginning of a romantic memoir (Hays 1987, 3). In various, often less explicit and rather sophisticated ways, readers are made to feel that they are treated to voyeuristic pleasures in order to enhance their desire for a book.

A Didactic Art of Negation

Maybe we could learn from literature for the purpose of teaching literature to students. We might adapt the devices which writers themselves use to draw attention to their works, and thus convey a new image of literature. That is, we might experiment with the alluring effects of the secret and transgressive. I had some unexpected successes from spontaneous gestures such as characterizing a poem, a novel or a book of literary theory as abstruse, too difficult or totally unfit for students. After the lecture, some students went into the seminar library to get exactly those texts and read them. The apple, signifying superior knowledge, proved to be tempting. One of my colleagues tells me about a similar experience. She finds that the best way to make a class wish for reading a certain work is to tell them that it is (as Lady Caroline Lamb
said about Lord Byron) “mad, bad and dangerous to know,” and to advise them to avoid it.

Of course, the exclusionary method does not succeed with all students. It need not do so. Due to the prestige of cultural studies, the traditional canon of literature does no longer hold a key position in teaching programs. The now fashionable courses in cultural studies tend to select texts and other media as evidence of historical, anthropological and social developments, bypassing most of classical drama, novels and poetry. Thus, in teaching English in the university, nearly all fictional literature may be withheld from those who are unwilling. The force-feeding of literary texts with its fatal effects can be reduced to a minimum or even totally avoided. This makes it possible to risk the non-didactic gesture of putting literature out of reach, resorting to the attraction of the (seemingly) unattainable in order to gain back lost territory. The craze for cultural studies may be answered by a touch of elitism with regard to the classics of English literature.

There is a chance that such an approach would change the attitude towards books from aversion to curiosity or even awe. Much is already gained when students start their reading with the idea that literature, especially ‘great’ literature, does not give up its mystery to the first comer, that it demands an effort which not everybody is able to make, but which might, after all, prove to be profoundly rewarding. If, as a contributor to the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* observed with regard to his teaching experience, young people consider a Shakespearean play as something special and especially difficult (Rau 2004, 186-187), one should cultivate this expectation. One should emphasize rather than play down the historical otherness, the essential strangeness of Shakespeare’s imaginary and admit to the formidable obstacle of his language (even for native speakers!) before starting with the reading of one of his plays. Also, the fact might be stressed that most of the literature offered in the classroom has not been intended for the young but for adults, and that some authors (e.g. G. B. Shaw) strongly objected to the use of their works as textbooks.

That the prohibition of a book which before had been held cheap might lead to the wish of procuring and reading it, was a recent experience of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy. When in 2009, looking at the centralized French school canon of literature in order to see where savings and efficiencies could be made, he wanted to remove Mme de La Fayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* from the list of course books, people immediately began to hunt for copies of the up to then neglected 17th-century novel. Unfortunately, we can hardly hope for a German Chancellor who bans plays on the murder of rulers such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* or *Julius Caesar*, or for a Bavarian Minister of Education who decrees that, instead of *Faust*, only economically or ecologically constructive literature may be introduced into courses offered to future teachers of literature and civil servants.

It is difficult to simulate the banning of books in order to obtain the aphrodisiac effect of prohibition. Information about former acts of censorship – such as the book-burning in Nazi Germany, the ban on D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley* in Britain and other countries, or the prohibition of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in former East Germany – does not create, in my experience, any of the stimulating effects of real prohibition. Yet although the classics are no longer subject to censure in the West, some records of severe bowdlerization have survived. One of these is Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as it is presented in modern editions. They
are all based on the first edition in book-form published in 1881 which is a thoroughly expurgated version of the magazine edition of 1880 which, in turn, is a purged version of the author's manuscript. Most of the many omissions and alterations refer to sexual matters, both homo- and heterosexual. Recently, a new "uncensored and annotated edition" has been published on the basis of the manuscript (Wilde, 2011). This would enable students to compare the current paperback version of the novel with the original, and experience the excitement of discovering things unknown to the general public.

Something like censorship lives on in school editions of literature, in stage productions and in films. Thus the abbreviated versions of literary works prepared for the classroom might be put to a new use. Comparing a school edition of Macbeth or As You Like It with the original text of the play will make students aware of how much has been withheld from them. It enables them to recognize and overcome the pedagogic tutelage and get access to the real Shakespeare, even to his bawdy jokes and sexual innuendos. The act of discovery may become even more exciting when students engage in the search of the Shakespearean original concealed behind a modern Regietheater version of a play and discover Shakespeare's subtle and often politically incorrect play of ideas, which the director did not dare to reveal to the general public. Perhaps an adroit teacher could even transform the homeopathic doses of literature given out to B.A. students into an incentive to private reading, by making the young people feel that they have become victims of an authoritarian gesture which deliberately withholds from them the integral works of art.

It is well-known that the pleasure of discovery can be derived from exploring a novel after having seen the film. A film version cannot avoid tampering with the dense texture of the narrative when it translates it into its own medium. Psychological and descriptive detail has to be cut out; explanations and interpretations given by narrator figures cannot be retained. The attraction of 'the book after the film' derives from the expectation that it would enable the reader to look behind the scenes, to find out about the 'real' and full life of the literary characters. Recourse to the book after the film turns out to be especially rewarding in cases where not only the constraints of the medium but also ideological censorship has contributed to obliterate the original. This is the case, for example, in Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier's Rebecca, where, due to the Hollywood Production Code, the novelist's immoral plot of a murderer who gets away with his crime had to be altered (cf. Spoto 1999, 213-214).

Texts can be difficult to access even though they lie open before the reader. The writing demands a process of decoding before its meaning can be grasped. As a rule, literature of this kind is rather avoided. I would argue that it can be made attractive for this very reason if the appeal of the cryptic is skillfully played out. That is, if the text is presented as a riddle which has to be – and can be – solved by paying careful attention to detail and enlisting all one's forces of intelligence and imagination. Much of English literature at first sight belongs to the category of the cryptic, especially for a foreign reader. Poetry, texts written in Early Modern English and old-spelling texts are obvious examples. 17th-century poems have the advantage that, in their original form, they unite the three types of difficulty. One might take, for example, one of the more mannerist sonnets of Shakespeare (such as No. 138 about loving and lying, or No. 144 on the speaker's two loves) or one of the 'metaphysical' love poems from John Donne's Songs and Sonnets (e.g. the valediction poem working with the conceit
of the compasses) and offer it to the students as a cryptic message to be decoded. When, with the teacher's discreet assistance, the attempt meets with success, a bold and witty message will come to light behind the dark façade.

Literature gains text-appeal when it has to be discovered behind abbreviated or bowdlerized versions or modern adaptations or when its meaning can only be obtained through a strenuous hermeneutic effort. The highest degree of secrecy is given when a text is totally absent. Some avantgarde poets of the 20th century experimented with this, offering blanks surrounded by words indicating a poem's hidden existence. Similar to contemporary painters who presented white canvasses in their exhibitions, they wanted to upset familiar modes of perception and refresh the aesthetic sensibility of the public. The Russian poet Genrich Sapir, for example, instead of the “New Year's poem” announced by a title, gives us nothing but a blank space, followed by a commentary on the unprinted work that appeals to the imagination.1 The reader will probably never get access to the absent (and probably non-existent) text, yet he might retain a curiosity for poetry. A lecture course could strive for a similar effect. Most of the literary works one has to mention in one's lectures, especially in surveys, remain blanks in the students' minds. One might, however, frame these emptinesses with appetizing or provocative comments and thus create a desire which, if not during the period of the B.A. or M.A. course, yet in later life might lead to the reading of literature.

My suggestions are not to be taken as strict guidelines. There are certainly many different ways of conveying the message that literature is something difficult to access which, however, if students are ready to make an effort, will enrich their lives. In The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, Muriel Spark tells the story of a devoted and proud teacher who swears her pupils into an exclusive, elitist attitude to knowledge. The novel might become our model for the teaching of literature. You have not read the book? Don’t – only very few people would really understand and like it.

Works Cited
