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Did you expect at some point to be asked for your collected papers?

No, I had truthfully never given a day’s thought to having this work [archived], and certainly not in my lifetime. I must have thought about it a bit, because I didn’t throw everything away. But the idea that I would do it while I was still a functioning individual just had never crossed my mind.

And of course collecting and note-taking aren’t the same thing—you can be something of a packrat without thinking of archives. No, it’s not the same thing. And certainly, I must say, even at the point at which I agreed to do it, it still didn’t occur to me that there’d be an exhibition. It’d be an archive, and if people wanted to study stuff, they could come and study it in a kind of book-stack private way. Never occurred to me that it would be under glass.

I don’t know which would be more alarming to me, my own scribblings writ large, or my face at six by six feet. Well the thing is, I’m used to seeing my face—the face doesn’t bother me—but I’m not used to seeing my scribblings. These other things were never supposed to be seen by anyone. Of course what is even odder is that I have virtually no memory of them.

As you said at the archive’s opening, they were “things on the way to other things.” You don’t remember your notes. In the Times article today, the journalist quotes some passage and I have absolutely no memory of writing that. People could tell me I said anything. I want to talk about teaching a bit. I saw you and Vice President Rosemary Magee talking about it during a “Creativity and the Arts” event a couple of years ago.

That was very enjoyable. She asked you about teaching and what rules you had, and you said something along the lines of “Abandon all theory, ye who enter here.” Well that’s the thing that I feel has happened in the teaching of literature, that a kind of pseudo-science of critical theory has been imposed upon it. And it gets away from why people read books. We read books for joy. The old-fashioned idea of close reading is much closer to that. Really it’s just me saying there’s no point in my pretending to be a literature professor in the ordinary way, because it’s not my training. And what I bring to the reading of books has to do with the practice of writing and how that makes me think about what other people do.

Are the students surprised by this?

Either they’ve gotten more used to me, or they’ve heard what it’s like from other people, because the first year I did it, there was a sort of genuine shock when I said that they ought to park their theory at the door. Then there was a sort of unburdening, and they seemed to enjoy it. The last couple of years that sense of shock hasn’t been there. So I think they’ve heard from other people coming in that it’s going to be like this.

Are you teaching graduate students as well as undergraduates?

It’s been some of both. Contemporary World Literature is sort of a grand title for the seminars. And so far I’ve not repeated myself. The first year I took modern classic novels, including Günter Grass and Gabriel García Márquez, and taught those. Last year I tried something that was so successful I think I might do it again next year, which was to talk about turning books into film. The conventional wisdom is that films are less good than the masterpieces they’re based on. And often very great films are made out of second-rate books. But what I wanted to look at was the phenomenon of the great book turning into a great film—the sort of best-case scenario. And so we did a few of those. We did Great Expectations, for example, the David Lean film along with the novel.

Did any work less well than you hoped?

We also had Scorcese’s Age of Innocence along with the Wharton novel, and Lampedusa’s The Leopard along with Visconti’s film. The one that didn’t work was John Huston’s film of Wise Blood, which in my memory had been very good, but when we saw it again we thought it was rather weak. It just misses it—misses the darkness, with a lot of hillbilly music which makes it all seem jokey. It removes completely the essence of the book. A certain amount depends on what you can find good quality prints of. Still, it was clear that there were many more than one could do in a single seminar.

So I think I might do it again next year with different movies. I think I want to do the first of Ray’s Apu Trilogy, Pather Panchali [Song of the Little Road], which is the film that I would choose when asked for the greatest film ever made. In my view Citizen Kane would probably come second.
And in spite of all its eccentricities, I think Kubrick’s film of Lolita is wonderful. Even though he’s ridiculously too old, and so is the girl, nevertheless it has that astonishing performance by Shelley Winters as Lolita’s mother, and Peter Sellers as Clare Quilty. Also John Huston’s film of Joyce’s The Dead. Much better than his film of Wise Blood.

There’s also a very rare film that I’d be interested in teaching. It’s a Polish film by Wojciech Has called The Saragossa Manuscript, which is based on an early-nineteenth-century Polish classic rather more worldly called The Manuscript Found in Saragossa, by an eccentric nobleman called Jan Potocki. Sort of early magical realism, it’s about a traveler in a valley full of ghosts and monsters and the like, and hanged men who come to life. Wonderfully zany book.

How do you find students’ reactions to such stories and films? Do they find them unsettling at all, in not telling you what to think about them, forcing you to make up your own story in a way?

I don’t know whether it’s the people selected to be in this seminar are more sophisticated, but these kids all seemed to get it, easily. And certainly what I haven’t had is a desire for old-fashioned form. I’ve been teaching short stories this year, and it’s interesting how many of the best contemporary short stories, if they’re not actually surrealist, go somewhere very strange. It’s been very interesting the way the students react to it, that it pushes itself naturally toward something very strange. It’s been very interesting for me, actually, to spend this time reading so many stories.

And so it’s great about teaching stories is there’s such diversity there, all kinds of different ideas coming into my own thoughts but also into the conversation. So it’s been fun, I’ve enjoyed doing it.

I realize this admits of a Marx Brothers answer, but how have you found the Emory students?

I’ve been very happy about it. Because, to be frank, if the students weren’t smart this would be a very bad gig. If you’re teaching students who can’t see what you’re trying to say, then you’d think: Well why am I doing this—I’ve already got a job. But it’s the opposite, really. Of course there are some who are better in their written work than in the classroom, and you have to weigh that up as well. Because shyness is shyness.

Is there an initial period in which students are scared or intimidated by you?

The first fifteen minutes of the first class, yes. Perhaps even less. For me it’s strange because I don’t scare myself. It really doesn’t occur to me, walking into a room, that people are going to be tongue-tied or awestruck or whatever it might be. I mean, it’s just me. I’m a pretty informal person, and I think once they see that, they realize that you’re not going to be any trouble. For me it’s strange, you know—going into a room, that people are going to be tongue-tied or awestruck or whatever it might be. I mean, it’s just me. I’m a pretty informal person, and I think once they see that, they realize that you’re not going to be any trouble.

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