

# English in the Catholic University

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English may be the most interdisciplinary of the disciplines. A literary work cannot help either reflecting or challenging the sociological and political patterns as well as the ethical, scientific, epistemological, religious assumptions of its historical period. Composition studies too has discovered how very interdisciplinary it is, inevitably intersecting with linguistics, ethnography, politics, sociology, psychology, even neurology. Moreover, composition as a field, is chiefly interested thus far in pedagogies, each one of which, as Parker Palmer has reminded us, inevitably bears and bares an epistemology. Certainly all of these related fields raise questions of ultimacy which finally only faith can address. So, potentially at least, in the context of a broader Catholic university curriculum, English offers two of the most promising territories for exploring various ways in which religious assumptions and convictions intersect with the rest of human life.

Already the University of St. Thomas Department of English is well on its way to serving the larger curriculum. Topics courses offer the most obvious opportunity, our fall schedule giving just two of almost innumerable possible examples of topicality linking literature and faith. The Problem of Evil puts both Christian and non-Christian reckonings with theodicy into conversation with each other. Growing Up Christian in the Modern World explores growing up in the faith, into the faith, and out of it. It draws from 20th-century literature (not surprisingly, usually Catholic) from Japan, Nigeria, Germany, Mexico, Argentina, Ireland, and of course, the United States — including recognizably ethnic and regional as well as mainstream sources. Since Christianity has over the centuries shown itself to be translatable (or at least importable) into many cultures, a full exploration of its literary manifestations is inevitably multicultural.

Both of these topics courses address questions arising characteristically, if not uniquely, from Christians themselves — issues of perennially pressing concern to those who find themselves situated within a religious tradition, as many St. Thomas students do. But another type of topics course would address issues of more general relevance, being sure to include among the assigned texts Christian contributions to this broader conversation. For example, the spring 1995 semester's Nature Writing course included Wendell Berry. Some critical and integrative questions for the class may have been: How are writers' ultimate commitments and presuppositions suggested in their work? And to what degree are their views and textual practices consistent with those commitments? More particularly, does Berry's Christian faith require his views? Are his views and practices uniquely Christian? And are they at odds or in concert with students' views? Such questions provoke students to make the autobiographical connections Parker Palmer has insisted are necessary to meaningful learning. Such questions, of course, are natural candidates for any course in any university, Catholic or otherwise. But, alas, they often are neglected. As Bell Hooks has observed in "Toward a Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy" (1989),

At this historical moment, there is a crisis of engagement within universities, for when knowledge becomes commoditized, then much authentic learning ceases . . . . Students . . . suffer, as many of us who teach do, from a crisis of meaning, unsure about what has value in life, unsure even about whether it is important to stay alive. They long for a context where their subjective needs can be integrated with study, where the primary focus is a broader spectrum of ideas and modes of inquiry, in short a dialectical context where there is serious and rigorous critical exchange. (76)

Hooks exults that consequently, "This is an important and exciting time for feminist pedagogy because in theory and practice our work meets these needs" (76). Surely both the curriculum and pedagogy of a Catholic university meet these needs as well, even more holistically than a gendered approach can. The pope certainly hopes so, choosing the historical present tense to declare in section 2.23 of *Ex Corde* that Catholic university students

are challenged to continue the search for truth and for meaning throughout their lives, since "the human spirit must be cultivated in such a way that there results a growth in its ability to wonder, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgments, and to develop a religious, moral and social sense." This enables them to acquire or, if they have already done so, to deepen a Christian way of life that is authentic.

Since many ethicists have recently turned from proposition to narrative and from dilemma to character (virtue ethics), a promising prospect for an interdisciplinary course devoted to the moral and reflective maturation the pope envisions would join literature with philosophy or theology for the encounter. It is certainly an offering I would love to team teach.

But the pope is convinced that still other kinds of topics courses are vital to a Catholic university's curriculum: "interdisciplinary studies, assisted by a careful and thorough study of philosophy and theology, enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality" (Section 1.20). And why does he find that aim so important? "It is necessary to work toward a higher synthesis of knowledge, in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that thirst for truth which is profoundly inscribed on the heart of the human person" (Section 1.16). Undergirding the pope's view here is the conviction that Truth is one, whole and that the universe does hold together. So interdisciplinary initiatives are especially important in an era when "the explosion of knowledge . . . together with the rigid compartmentalization of knowledge within individual academic disciplines, makes the task increasingly difficult" (Section 1.16). As I read and share the pope's dream, I see a theological, and not only a social and fiduciary, rationale for the English Department's participation in the paired courses UST is beginning to offer this year (1995-96) as a freshman program. The pope assumes such approaches are available at a Catholic university simply because they confirm and strengthen our confidence that in a fragmented age all truths nonetheless remain God's Truth.

Last year UST's English Department began offering two elective courses that are intentionally and intensively integrative with Catholicism: *Christian Writers and*

Christian Approaches to Literature. These courses were added to the catalog with nary a dissenting voice. The appropriateness was intuitively obvious to everyone involved.

My own likely approach to teaching Christian Writers would be to join my students in asking how a writer's ultimate faith commitments might affect his or her rhetorical situation and consequent textual strategies. But, of course, this question, too, belongs in a consideration of any philosophically committed artist, Christian or not. And, in recognizing this reality, I find myself drawn to teaching a course on ideological authors rather than on Christian writers per se. Why? Because I think I could draw more students into the course and hence eventually into a conversation about Christian writers as well. I don't want to "preach just to the choir."

I do celebrate the attention to Christian writers we are ensuring by offering a course by their name. I do long to explore the variety of ways Christian writers have navigated notably unfriendly waters: Marianne Moore's approach quite different from T.S. Eliot's, Walker Percy's different from Flannery O'Connor's and Muriel Spark's. And I do long to explore with students why poets such as Eliot, W.H. Auden, and Wallace Stevens found their own engagement with words and images irresistibly drawing them to eventual professions of faith. But I long more to have all my students reckoning with the broader issue of what differences different assumptions or commitments can and do make. Certainly, it would be dishonest to tilt such a course's emphasis disproportionately to Christian writers. Feminist, ethnic and political writers have all encountered the dilemmas involved in writing an ideologically committed work of aesthetic integrity and avoiding the eventual irrelevance which dooms propaganda. But it would be dishonest as well to teach such a course without including Christian writers who have had acute audience problems such as those endured by Flannery O'Connor. With such a course, in such a context, I have more confidence that a fair consideration of Christian writers alongside others just may actually contribute positively to the evangelistic effect Pope John Paul II has said the Church seeks in establishing and sustaining Catholic universities in the first place.

I am pleased about another course our English Department has elected to include: Christian Approaches to Literature. We have a rich heritage. For example, might it not be significant that the leading figures of New Criticism and Archetypal Criticism, Cleanth Brooks and Northrop Frye respectively, were Christians? Some agnostic and antagonistic critics have begun to think so. And aren't Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Ong able mentors for those of us currently wrestling with the exigencies of literary theory? And wouldn't it be fruitful to explore how two recognizably Christian theorists such as Brooks and Bakhtin could propose such different theoretical approaches to texts? What is different about their Christian allegiances that might account for their literary, theoretical perspectives? For that matter, is one's view more characteristically or more wholly Christian than the other's?

Wait. These figures are not only Christian in their approach. Anyone studying literary criticism and theory simply has to reckon with them. Their import and influence has not at all been confined to Christians approaching texts. Granted, such a limitation might be

ascribed to Nathan Scott and Wesley Kort (however much I want my students to know about them), but certainly not to Brooks and Bakhtin.

Ironically, the critic who has had the most influence on my work is the openly agnostic Frank Kermode. In *The Sense of an Ending* he explored possibly eschatological implications of narrative endings in 20th century literature. He took an historical change in a genre seriously, much as Marxist critics do. This is fascinating stuff. But it is not a "Christian" approach to literature. For Kermode, novelists' repeated attempts to eschew endings only reinforce his own conviction that history has neither telos nor terminus. It is only endless, meaningless chaos. And his discovery that no writer yet has succeeded in averting an end to a novel only convinces him that we cannot bear such bad news. The "sense" of an ending, not its actuality, is all we have. Not surprisingly, as a Christian, I find in no end to endings some very good news, even an implicit apologetic for an eschaton. But Kermode's approach as an agnostic inspired me as a Christian to explore other possibly theological implications in the form of the novel, more particularly in authorial narration and its changes over time. It is the work of an overtly atheist theorist which assured me of the theological significance of my project: Roland Barthes declared that his now famous obituary, "The Death of the Author," was "anti-theological activity." I knew I was on to something if he could protest that much.

I find it problematic, too, to designate "Christian" as just one or more perspectives among others. We see our faith as a way of life, not only a philosophical stance or even a collection of such stances. Christians in the trenches of literary criticism and composition pedagogy tend to be eclectic, incorporating insights from other consonant views — unable and unwilling to regard Marxism, for example, as the totalizing vision Patricia Bizzell recently claimed it to be for composition studies. In Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* she finds the promise of "a Marxist theory of interpretation that encompasses all other theories, not one approach among many but the intellectual horizon of them all" (56). For Christians, such an horizon is simply not high enough. But to Christian theorists Paulo Freire and Mikhail Bakhtin some Marxist discoveries have seemed, nonetheless, perfectly compatible with the genuinely "totalizing" Christian faith. They have found Marxist thought shining light on often overlooked biblical notions of justice, personhood, and community. And it just might be that Bakhtin's views have more in common with Cleanth Brooks' than current theoretical, usually secular, discussions recognize. They seem opposed — one almost completely textual, the other almost completely contextual. But granting that any human vision is partial, I nonetheless would bet that these two radically different theorists share a priori commitments to Logos, to meaning, to mystery, to humility, to authority, to wonder — commitments their secular counterparts tend to dismiss.

In advising care in the appropriation of current theories, Clarence Walhout has warned:

The presuppositions which lie behind comprehensive theories are of no little import for anyone assessing the theory. Whatever is of value in any particular theory needs to be rethought and reshaped if it is to be employed in the context of different presuppositions. Comprehensive theories are not philosophically or religiously neutral. (viii)

It would be a project of no small interest to assess the degree to which both Freire and Bakhtin "rethought and reshaped" Marxism to suit the context of their Christian presuppositions. Many discussions of liberation theology, far outside the usual parameters of composition theory, are devoted to this very issue and could be useful in evaluating at least Freire in this regard.

But, granting the wisdom of Walhout's warning, Christians must remain convinced nonetheless that St. Augustine was right, that "all truth is God's Truth." Maintaining such a faith, Christians are, it seems to me, free to be shameless borrowers and adapters, refusing only those conceptions genuinely at odds with necessary presuppositions of the faith. A Christian's response to almost any of the current theories dominating literary discussions is likely to be, "Yes, but ... ." Certainly the Christian scholars contributing to the recent volume *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* were unanimous in that response.\*

As should be obvious by now, my enthusiasms and reservations about our distinctively Christian course offerings carry about equal weight. I favor them. But I worry. I don't want Christian writers and Christian theorists marginalized. I don't want questions having religious or theological resonance relegated to an irrelevant sub-species of the discipline of English. I don't want religious issues in literary and compositional studies confined to special courses any more than I want them confined to special journals, e.g., *Christianity and Literature*, *Literature and Theology*, *Religion and Literature*. I want to see Catholic or Christian or religious concerns integrated with the learning our students and faculty do in a broad range of non-elective courses too. Questions of ultimacy should be neither ignored nor bracketed on a Catholic campus.

Throughout the week of our seminar, I sensed that others agree.

Support seemed to grow not only for somehow assuring that all students at a Catholic university have a winsome encounter with the Gospel and Christ's people, the Church (such opportunities already available through the theology requirement and Campus Life activities). Sentiment seemed to grow as well for somehow assuring that students reckon with how the Christian faith has intersected and might intersect with the rest of life, including the experience of academic disciplines. (Of course, we agreed, the aim should be honesty and full disclosure, not pretense, not whitewash. As Janine Langan wryly observed during our seminar, "The Church has much to teach the world about how to do much harm in pursuit of dreams.")

My thinking during and after our seminar has led me to propose the following. As is already no doubt obvious, my thinking about what we already are doing and what we might yet do in English has led me to these broader curricular suggestions:

1. Each major would be well-served by a capstone course devoted to the theoretical and ethical issues germane to its discipline. Such a course would include (but not at all be limited to) Christian thinking and practice that could challenge or guide the discipline.

Conversely, where relevant, the course would include questions and challenges that the discipline poses for Christian thinking and practice.

Our conversations this summer convinced me that it would be no infringement of academic freedom to ask faculty to include these issues when relevant. This would mean not that these issues should be emphasized out of proportion or, for that matter, cast only in a positive light. It would mean only that these matters are included in the course's conversation.

In English, such a request would mean, for example, that in a literary theory course, Christian perspectives would be included along with or put in dialogue with Marxist, New Historicist, Feminist, Post-Structuralist, etc. In a composition theory course, Christian perspectives would be included alongside or put in dialogue with expressivist, social constructionist, Marxist, phenomenological, etc.

It seems fair that in a Catholic institution some attention be paid to voices raising Christian questions, whether they have been joined by large populations of the discipline or not. And if there is no such voice being raised, it seems fair to include some discussion of possible reasons for that silence and possible questions a Christian voice might want to raise.

Christian academics must be willing to hear and respond to critique. The last place a Catholic university should even dream of silencing such critique is its own classrooms. And the policy of welcoming faculty of different faiths or no faith at all would seem to ensure that UST wants students and faculty alike to be subject to such critique and constructive conversation.

2. Interested, invested faculty from each department could be included in exploratory seminars and, perhaps subsequently, on teams to design and/or implement general education courses that integrate theological and ethical issues with disciplinary or interdisciplinary learning. Such a requirement would emphasize how holistic matters of faith really are, would show that faith is not something separate, peripheral, irrelevant. Perhaps at least one current general education requirement could be replaced by one of these integrative courses. Perhaps each of these courses could include either a philosopher or theologian on its planning and/or instructional team.

3. As often as possible, each discipline could offer an elective that explores in much greater depth some possible intersections between itself and Catholicism. The English Department's electives — Christian Approaches to Literature and Christian Writers — are examples.

4. Interested faculty could be available for independent studies, perhaps for as little as one credit, for students wanting to integrate their service learning or their volunteer experiences with their growth in understanding their faith. The pope himself hopes for such an opportunity for students when he writes: "Christians among the teachers are called to be witnesses and educators of authentic Christian life, which evidences an

attained integration between faith and life, and between professional competence and Christian wisdom" (Section 2.22).

As an outsider, as one who grew up in and attended a college within evangelical Christian circles, as one who feels welcome to declare her own, now Episcopal, allegiances, as one who recognizes the unity of the catholic (small "c") Church, I have been much encouraged in reading the pope's *Ex Corde* on Catholic higher education and in watching initiatives take shape here at UST and at other colleges and universities dedicated to articulating what a Catholic identity means. I treasure the openness to different voices that the pope says all Catholic colleges and universities must share. I believe UST is serious about that openness, noting it is the first of its convictions listed in the catalog. And I now realize that UST is serious too about full disclosure and frequent conversations about its Catholic commitments and allegiances. I recognize that I am no longer on a state campus where matters of Christian interest or significance usually meet with scorn or silence. I now feel welcome to share with my students my own ongoing and often questioning pilgrimage of faith. And, as I have laid out here in this rambling essay, I can foresee ways in which the university's curriculum (and pedagogy) can more fully celebrate and critique the faith of its Church; indeed, I have come to see the pursuit of truth on this campus as the "troth," which Parker Palmer calls the best definition of truth. The term highlights the trust the Church has placed in the university to commit itself to the humility, courage, sincerity, freedom, and even love which authentic learning always entails. Truth is Troth — among the faculty, with the students, with the subject matter, and with the diocese, with the larger Church. It is a troth I am willing to pledge.

\* Note

And they could as yet add no distinctively Christian Literary Theory to the contemporary panoply. The only scholar attempting such a project I know of is Wesley Kort at Duke University. Kort has postulated religious import in the four basic elements of narrative, "each inevitably related to mystery and belief." Atmosphere, suggesting the "boundaries of the narrative world," is ontological, "always bound to the question of what is possible." Character, evincing views of human nature and moral agency, is ethical. Plot is teleological; it "leads inevitably to the mystery of human time" and "addresses the question of whether time is to be trusted or defied." And tone is axiological, "all three of its aspects — material selection, voice, and attitude toward the material — lead to uncertainties of relationship and value which only belief can answer" (34).

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