

## For The Record: There Must Have Been A Moment...

Maxine Greene

"Good lads, how do you both?" asks Hamlet of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's play. Rosencrantz replies: "As the indifferent children of the earth." And indeed they are indifferent, lacking in joy and in commitment, prepared to betray their boyhood friend. They are, however, merely incidental to the tragedy. Hamlet, having found them out and sent them to their death, says, "they did make love to this employment," that what happened was of their own doing. They do not touch his conscience, he explains: as men of "baser nature," they should not have interfered in an affair of "mighty opposites." Hamlet was written during the Renaissance, when some men saw themselves as higher than others, nearer to the angels. Kings and princes had prerogatives denied to ordinary people who were "baser" beings, closer to the brutes. Kings and princes were expected to take responsibility for their communities; it was up to them, and to them only, to combat corruption in a state, to heal infection, to restore and to renew.

Today this is not the case; and there is a sense in which each individual in a democracy has the responsibility once claimed by kings. To be among "the indifferent children of the earth" may be, in our time, to deny one's fundamental obligations—to refuse one's very humanity.

It is of some interest that among the meanings communicated by a contemporary play—a kind of para-Hamlet—this one is particularly clear. The play is Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the action of which takes place in and around the action of the original tragedy. But now the "base" characters, the incidental characters, are in the foreground; and, although the setting and some of the language derive from the 17th century work, the vantage point is the 20th century.

A crucial moment occurs near the end, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that the letter they are carrying to the English king holds instructions for the king to cut off

Hamlet's head. Reading it, they are shocked at first; because, after all, they are presumably Hamlet's boyhood friends. Then Guildenstern copes with the sense of shock by putting it all at a distance where it can no longer hurt:

Let's keep things in proportion. Assume, if you like, that they're going to kill him. Well, he is a man, he is mortal, death comes to us all, etcetera, and consequently he would have died anyway, sooner or later. Or to look at it from the social point of view—he's just one man among many, the loss would be well within reason and convenience. And then again, what is so terrible about death? As Socrates so philosophically put it, since we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be. . . very nice.

Surely this is familiar. It is a presentation of the indifference which makes it possible to speak abstractly about another person's death, or about alien people's sufferings and defeats. It is of a piece with the ability to speak abstractly and impersonally about one's self—as, indeed, Rosencrantz is able to do a moment later. He recapitulates everything that has happened since they were unexpectedly summoned to Denmark, as if it were all predetermined, with effects following causes according to some external plot or plan: "We, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from our young days brought up with him, awakened by a man standing on his saddle, are summoned . . ." Telling it that way, seeing it that way, they need take no responsibility, even for betrayal.

Only at the last moment, just before he disappears from view, Guildenstern, reviewing the story one last time ("Our names shouted in a certain dawn . . . a message . . . a summons . . ."), says: "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it."

From a contemporary point of view, this is altogether important; and it holds implications for teachers concerned with the

creation of values and the shaping of a humane, decent way of life. For one thing, Guildenstern's words imply that it would have mattered if they had said no. For another, they suggest that the irresponsibility bred of indifference may be a function of the feeling of powerlessness—of being nothing, mere shells, hollow men.

A similar note is struck in a story written by Stephen Crane, called "The Blue Hotel," in which a character called the Swede is permitted by those around him to drive himself headlong into destruction: "'Fun or not,' said the Easterner, 'Johnnie was cheating. I saw him. I know it. I saw him. And I refused to stand up and be a man. . . . We are all in it! . . . Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede. . . .' The cowboy, injured and rebellious, cried out blindly into this fog of mysterious theory: 'Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?'" And the note is struck still again at the end of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* when, just as Catherine is dying after childbirth, Nick Henry remembers some ants swarming over a log and falling into a fire: "I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be a messiah and lift the log off the fire and throw it out where the ants could get off onto the ground. But I did not do anything. . . ."

There is no need to be a messiah in the modern world; but there is a need to do something, to recognize the moment when one can say no. It seems to us, considering the present crisis, that teachers need to find a way of communicating this to their students—if only to keep them from becoming "indifferent children of the earth."

But how? Certainly not by declaiming to them about "love of humanity" and the "oneness of mankind." Certainly not by prescribing how they ought to act and feel with respect to the oppressed, the victimized, the poor. We know only too well how abstractions like "mankind"—or even words like "oppressed" and "disadvantaged"—function to make individuals invisible. ("I am invisible, understand," says the narrator at the start of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, "because people refuse to see me. Like the

bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.") To rely primarily upon abstractions ("bodiless heads") when teaching the young is to nurture the tendency to see "everything and anything" but the diverse human beings who populate the so-called global village of the modern world. It is to enable young people to put others at a distance, to make objects out of them, to speak as Rosencrantz does in Tom Stoppard's play: "from the social point of view." Talk of "loving mankind" may frequently resemble the hippies' talk of "loving" the entire human race (and their practice of giving flowers to policemen). Love of that sort is depersonalized, oceanic; it appears to be a function of passivity, and sometimes of repressed hostility. Paradoxically, it seldom brings the object of love any closer than does the habit of systematically treating other people as subjects of study—thereby making objects out of them, non-entities, mere things.

To prescribe values to the young may be similarly futile, if the purpose is to cultivate a sense of responsibility, the desire to do something, to say no. At best, a young person will parrot what is prescribed to him, or he will treat the attitudes called "acceptable" like the positions and postures required by the arbitrary rules of a children's game. Only if he himself chooses to act responsibly in particular situations of his life, will he become a responsible person—with something other than a "baser" nature, with a commitment to being a man. But he can only choose in this fashion for reasons he considers good. He can do so only if he believes he counts as an individual. He must not feel that all the decisions have already been made, that the play has already been written. Somehow, he must be enabled to see that the options he confronts are real, that it will make a difference if he chooses one alternative rather than another, that what he does will have consequences in what he recognizes as his world.

It is for reasons like these that we believe it so important to design classroom situations

which are relevant to the lives of children, and to shape environments which stimulate children to search out meanings for themselves. Curriculum, wherever it is made, ought to be presented to the young as an organization of possibilities, opportunities for each of them to order experience by means of concepts structuring particular disciplines. We do not believe that such ordering will simply happen if children are left to their own devices, as some of our contemporary romantics advise. Educators, as we learned from John Dewey many years ago, have to create "educative" environments, not merely responsive ones. An educative environment is one that is appropriate for the children concerned, rich in diverse intellectual stimuli, pervaded by a sense of the problematic and a desire to find the answers to questions which are personally meaningful.

Such questions, however, do not arise automatically or "naturally." They are asked when development is deliberately guided, when the learning that takes place is permitted to generate thinking at higher and higher levels of complexity, when a student is aroused enough (after mastering the fundamentals in any given subject) to go forth and think for himself, to move beyond what he has been told and drilled to do. To be able to act this way with respect to history or biology or a foreign language seems to us to be freed of the feeling that the play has already been written, that the individual has nothing to say.

But what has this to do with morals, and the sense of commitment required if the student is not to be one of "the indifferent children of the earth"? It seems to us that the teaching of morality is not essentially different from the teaching of subject matter. Here, too, a student is asked to become aware of the rules and recommendations governing a particular area of life. He is asked, as he is when he begins to master a discipline, to become critically aware of the reasons for the existence of norms and standards, of the principles by which the members of his group or his society govern their behavior. Taking this point of view, all we can ask is that a young person become intelligent about the existing morality and intelligent about the ethical choices he makes. We cannot guarantee that he will adopt the

principles we prize as his own; yet, if he does not freely and consciously appropriate certain principles and voluntarily decide to act upon them, we cannot in any case call him moral. Recognizing that a principled person is one who has incorporated a set of norms into his very life style, that he has chosen to live and think according to them, all we can do (unless we are satisfied with mere compliance) is teach him some logical, and practical skills—and set him free to be.

Hopefully, however, as we do this, we may also enable him to confront himself and to become subjectively aware. One reason is that we need to counter, as well as we can, the tendency to treat the self as commodity or abstraction. The one who conceives of himself abstractly (as "schoolboy," "Protestant," "American," "businessman," "politician") is the one tempted to perceive others as mere labels, as "bodiless heads." Also, he is the one who is seldom inclined to take a full, a personal responsibility as he acts in the world. Instead, he acts the role by which he identifies himself; he plays his part in a meaningless game—the part written for him in advance. This is what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do in Stoppard's play. They have no notion who they are.

Here literature can play a part. Obviously, works of literary art have numerous intrinsic values and need no justification for being included for their own sakes in schools. But in addition to (and perhaps because of) their intrinsic values they have a unique capacity to engage the perceptive reader with himself, to make him self-conscious in a manner that may serve the cause of life. Conscious of himself, freed to enter into himself through the use of imagination, he may be able to break with routine, conventional modes of seeing the world. He may be able to shatter the "hard, distorting glass" of which Ellison's narrator speaks, to see authentically from the depths of himself. If he can do this, he will be capable of encountering other persons in some direct, immediate relationship. Even when confronted with the nameless crowds in the ghetto streets, with the Vietnamese crowds he sees on his television screen, he may find himself seeking out particular faces, identifying individuals in the mass.

We are not suggesting that this is the only legitimate mode of vision; but it seems to us to provide a necessary counter-point to the "social point of view," be it that of the social sciences or a defensive distancing like that of Guildenstern's. Of course it is interesting and important to take an anthropological view of another society, to discover how to conceptualize other styles of life. But it is equally important to connect somehow in personal terms with individuals living in apparently strange and alien ways.

The student enabled to become conscious of himself, freely relating to the situations of his life, is in a position to grow, as Horace Kallen once wrote, into "a self-transcendence achieving itself in a continuing orchestration of his immediate experiences with the symbolic presence of the absent singularities of the rest of humanity." This is quite different from a commitment to an abstract ideal of "man." Only as an individual realizes his own singularity can he relate himself to "absent singularities" and take responsibility for what happens to other men.

Reading a work like *Invisible Man*, he may come to terms with his own innerness, his own private search for identity and meaning. If he can do this, he will be prepared somehow to relate himself to black men in search of visibility—as a human being involved with other human beings, each one as fallible, induplicable, mysterious as

himself. Reading *Doctor Zhivago* or the poems of Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, he may succeed in feeling a connection with Russian persons if he has an encounter with himself by means of what he reads. The same may be said of *Cry the Beloved Country*, *Zorba the Greek*, Gunther Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Roger Martin Du Card's *The Thibaults*, Marguerite Duras's pre-war novel about Vietnam called *The Sea Wall*, Cortazar's stories of Argentina and Paris, Doris Lessing's tales of Africa, Borges' tales of Brazil, and any other work that may be called a work of literary art.

Like other learning experiences, experiences with literature ought to be liberating ones. Given the fundamental skills required for attending to works of literature as art, the student may be left to enact their meanings in his own authentic fashion. Set free to encounter himself, he may be set free to choose himself, to order and make sense of the chaotic world. Confronted with the overwhelming problems of war, domestic violence, continuing want and poverty, we can do no more than to try to raise a generation conscious of capacity and significance—and to leave them on their own to make their way. Doing so, we may at least equip them for recognizing the moment at which they can say no. We may at least prevent them from becoming "the indifferent children of the earth."

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