

The Writer as Teacher*

Mordecai Richler

Having served a full term with the English lit. department at Sir George Williams University, in Montreal, as well as visiting the University of Toronto, and even venturing into the hurricane's eye, Simon Fraser U., I'm now an authority on student unrest, the new militants, and the generation gap. An affluent society's modish problems. I am also, suddenly, resentfully, thirty-eight years old, teeth loosening, hangovers more onerous, teetering on the precipice of middle-age, which naturally sours my conclusions. The student militants, though sometimes engaging, are mostly know-nothing paper tigers. Though they are served by the occasional inspired original teacher (and I honour no man more), they are also asked to endure too many professors who are mediocre and running embarrassingly scared.

A word about tenure seems in order here. Though there may be many valid, enlightened reasons why an academic, if only he performs well in his first five years, is usually granted permanent employment — that is to say, cannot be dismissed unless he behaves absolutely outrageously — the truth is, you and I, who hustle out in the cold, whether we play hockey, sell insurance, or write books, must continue to produce if we want to get paid. No goals, no NHL contract. No sales, no job. Bad books, no publishers. Tenure, by its very nature, allows academic dead wood to pile up.

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Anyway, when I was a student charged with juice, scorn and hope, it was the old who were respected, feared, and emulated, an unselective attitude I rejected, because I believed — and still do — what may be obvious to the rest of you, that aging in itself is not an accomplishment but an inevitable condition. Similarly, being young is nobody's happy invention. Once, we were all immortal. Yet today the old outdo each other grovelling before the young and their icons. And nobody renders more uncritical obeisance than those desperately turned-on professors I've encountered who echo an idiom and manners foreign to them, the stuff of another generation, so that in faculty clubs everywhere they can be heard vying incongruously with each other to say, "It's not my bag" or "I'm doing my thing," as well as puffing the occasional withit stick of marijuana, and, most abnoxious of all, loping about the campus, potbellies bound punishingly tight in Nehru jackets, ceramic pendants swinging from their knotted necks, pathetically switched-on, the intellectual community's counterpart of those sixty-year-old ladies who festoon the beaches of Florida, their hair rinsed blue and obese bodies defiantly, tastelessly, bikinied.

If today's students seem to be rampaging unreasonably, then it must be said that many of their teachers are sycophantic, inadequate, and in craven retreat, with only the rare untrendy scholar redeeming academe by taking a stand for classic values.

The students do have a case, then, though they represent it inchoately. Even stupidly. And so, while I'm not entirely against today's Canadian university apparatchniks, neither am I mightily impressed.

Item: Early last November more than 100 students were arrested for sitting in at Simon Fraser U. The crucial strike issue, when I visited the campus a week or so later, was whether the acting president would intervene with the attorney-general to ensure the release of the students and, even more important, that none of them would be tainted with a criminal record. In the heat of battle, then, what aroused Simon Fraser's red guard most was the fear that five years hence, when they applied to the Hudson's Bay Co. or Shell for a job, they might be compromised by an old police blotter. Surely such circumspect lads are not about to storm the Winter Palace. Though they may devour Lenin, Mao, and Che in paperback, they lack the ardour of the suffragettes, who wore their police records like badges of honour.

Unlike their American counterparts, Canadian student militants have no Vietnam draft to protest, no real colour problem to fight against. They have style, but almost no substance. On the evidence, they don't relish writing exams or being governed by their elders. Fair enough. Neither did I. But I can only be scornful of a generation whose rebellion is not so much an attack on the roots of social injustice as it is fired by irresponsible "shit-disturbing," not as informed by truly subversive ideas as shaped by turn-of-the-century dandyism. That is to say, the young demonstrate their individuality or other-clubbiness by nothing so much as their similar, attention-catching garments and coiffures. Yesterday's rebels (some of them, incidentally, now our most admirable teachers) found each other out by their attitudes towards the Moscow Trials, Spain, and the Stalin-Hitler Pact; today's insurgents recognize each other by their choice of haberdashery. They tend to be resolutely self-confidently illiterate, taking McLuhan as their licence, but having the same relationship to him as, say, Mickey Spillane has to Hemingway.

Which is still not to say that arts students, anyway, are without cause for complaint. Some of them are being misled, dangerously misled.

Hitherto, non-specialist students went to the university to learn to appreciate the arts, to study the best that had been said and thought in the world and, perhaps, to emerge with higher standards, a finer moral sense. Now, such is the state of democracy gone mad, students can attend university to practise the arts, much as if it were a birth-right. Make no mistake. This is the hallelujah do-it-yourself day of take-a-course-in-anything. Creative writing, drama, painting. You name it, the with-it university has got it as well as a time-server on tenure to teach it . . . which brings me back to Simon Fraser, out there on the mountaintop, where, bless them, they even have a course in film-making.

Well, now. I should have thought that students would be astute enough to grasp that anybody who could afford to cross the Rockies for an indefinite period to teach film-making in Burnaby, B.C. could not, to put it as sweetly as possible, be in overwhelming demand by the industry; but more about that later, in more generalized terms.

Ten o'clock one morning last November I was shown a film made by one of the Simon Fraser group. Briefly, we faded in on

a succulent nude girl who was shown in a variety of adoring close-ups and long shots, until a young man, appropriately dungareed, appeared and proceeded to strip, breathing heavily. He made love to the girl, the camera lingering here sexily, there lyrically. The young man who had directed the film also starred in it, producing, writing, and acting out his own nocturnal emission, as it were, he and his fetching girl featured in a spill of blatantly narcissistic shots. All right; no harm done. But, to my astonishment, the film instructor did not josh the boy good-naturedly, dismissing the whole thing as a moderately horny skin show. Instead she was eager to discuss it, as if the boy, unarguably healthy, were an emerging Ingmar Bergman; which is clearly to mislead the innocent.

Which brings me back to the thorny question of whether it is possible to teach the practice of the arts at a university. Well, the short answer is no, not at all.

Film-making, let me say at once, is a special case. It's an industry, a trade, as well as an art form, and only the National Film Board is properly equipped to offer instruction in technique, for only they have talented film-makers available to demonstrate the proper use of machines, how to cut film, and so forth, should a school ever become attached to the NFB.

Writing is unteachable...