ON TEACHING WEST’S BLACK LAMB AND GREY FALCON

As do many of us who want our undergraduates to benefit from Rebecca West’s artistry and intellect, I have taught her novel The Return of the Soldier a number of times in my classes on British modernism. I suspect the reasons behind my choice of this book are shared by other instructors. First, it invites productive comparison to any number of contemporaneous modernist novels—what a “snug fit,” for instance, nestled between D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf! Second, its concise plot and relative brevity afford well-focused class discussion, so that students can walk away with a greater confidence that they now “possess” the story’s meanings than they often do with, say, the (wonderful) sprawl of Women in Love. I have found that Return is a dream to teach.

That having been established, I decided last fall that it was time to place a different challenge before my upper-level students. On the syllabus for my “British Women Modernists” seminar there appeared for the first time a tome called Black Lamb and Grey Falcon. It did not supplant Return, which was also present there, but, at roughly 1150 pages (in the Penguin edition—a hefty doorstop), it certainly took up more of the semester’s calendar. In addition to West’s texts, the course focused in equal measure on two Woolf novels and a score of Katherine Mansfield stories. Late in the semester, after the students had become familiar with all three writers, we “tackled the mountain,” reading four sections and the “Epilogue” of Black Lamb, in addition to Christopher Hitchens’ remarkable 2007 introduction to the Penguin edition. All together, these portions added up to a total of 401 pages of reading, just over a third of the book.

A brave group, the students approached West’s magnum opus (having learned the meaning of this useful term) with more pride than apprehension, enjoying the attention of fellow undergraduates in other classes, who oohed and aahed over the heft of this tome being hauled around. Evidently, reading West’s book encouraged my students to consider themselves members of an elite cadre—kind of like literary Navy SEALs—amid the English and Humanities major. I did nothing to discourage their high self-opinion.

To help these undergrads manage their writing responses to so many pages of dense material, I told them first to concentrate on one of West’s historical axioms or extended metaphors, and to base their first of two 750-word essays on close analysis of the way in which West organizes the fine-grained details of centuries of Balkan history within her patterning tropes. Each student chose his/her favorite aphoristic quotation for scrutiny; e.g., “It is sometimes very hard to tell the difference between history and the smell of skunk,” or “it should be admitted that governors are inferior to those whom they govern…for it is the truth that we are not yet acquainted with reality and should spend our lives in search of it,” etc. By limiting the essay to a close reading of the text in the immediate vicinity of the selected dictum, each student succeeded in articulating an aspect of West’s historical vision.

For their second short essay, students examined a passage selected from West’s hundred-page narrative of the historical currents, both personal and world-historical, that flowed into the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and thereby started the war. One student deftly analyzed the purple passage in which West foreshadows the future slaughter in the trenches through the blood-lust of Ferdinand in his youthful hunting frenzy; another did a great job of analyzing West’s darkly comic technique in the farcical depiction of Gavrilo
WE WORDS FROM THE PRESIDENT

After serving as president of the Rebecca West Society for six years, I have decided to step aside and let somebody else take the reins of this organization. I am happy to say that our indefatigable vice-president and resourceful Rebecca West scholar, Ann Norton, has agreed to stand for election to president at the General Meeting in September. While I am looking forward to seeing the Society grow, galvanize scholarship, and raise the public profile of Rebecca West in the years to come, I also take this opportunity as an opportunity to look back at the past 10 years of the Society’s existence. In that time, we have held 6 conferences (including this year’s event), to assemble a few simple statistics that may shed a revealing light on the course of Rebecca West studies.

First, I have divided all talks given at the 6 conferences into three basic categories, with influences on the direction of a given conference.

1. Discussions of specific works by Rebecca West. These talks study one (more rarely two or three) works by Rebecca West.

2. Discussions of a theme. These contributions focus on a theme like music or constructions of masculinity or pacifism as reflected in West's work in general.

3. Discussions of connections beyond West's work. These presentations look at the work of Rebecca West and other writers and thinkers (say, the connection between Rebecca West and Elizabeth Audley) or they compare works by West written by others (say, The Return of the Soldier and Ford's Parade's End).

Here is the distribution of talks at West conferences based on these three approaches:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Works</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Connections Total</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>(15%)</td>
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Note: The distinction between "themes" and "connections" talks is not always straightforward and occasionally some amibvalence pertains as to the correct classification, but by and large, the margin of error is small.

A few things stand out in this comparison chart. Generally, the percentage of talks discussing individual works by West has remained quite stable across the years, making up about 40% of all conference talks (with the exceptions of 2009 & 2011). The other half of conference talks is split between thematic approaches and connection talks, with themes usually outperforming connections (with the exception of 2013). There are a few outliers:

1. The most notable “anomaly” in the distribution of talks concerns the 2009 conference—the only conference not held in New York and the only conference organized by a non-Board member. At that conference, thematic approaches predominated (55%), with close analyses of individual works taking a backseat. If nothing else, this shows that the place and person of the organizer can significantly shape the direction of a given conference.

2. The pendulum swayed to the other extreme at the following conference, in 2011, when the overwhelming predominance of talks (72%) addressed individual works by West.

3. In 2003 connection talks rated very low (8%), which can be explained by the fact that the conference was titled “Rediscovering Rebecca West,” and other connections to luminaries would therefore be considered less relevant.

4. 2013 marks the first time that connection talks clearly outnumber thematic approaches. A significant trend, as I will explain further down.

It gets even more interesting, in my view, when we scrutinize more closely what works were selected for the text-based treatments. Below is a ranking of the frequency with which certain texts appeared in the titles of conference talks:

3. The Strange Necessity

2. The Judge

3. The Meaning of Treason

4. The Return of the Soldier

5. “Indissoluble Matrimony”

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Louise Adley in her April 27, 2013, review in The Weekend Australian of Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In. Adley noted that Sandberg, who has written the sometimes hostile reactions the book has elicited. Adley noted that polemicists made a famous quote. “The assumption behind the criticism, almost entirely from other women, is that women are always to blame, either for proving genuine in advocating women seize control of their own lives or for getting too close for comfort.” It is no help but wonder that Sandberg had to gain from writing this quintessentially American, at times overly excessive, and often a feminist manifesto. Feminism has never been a vise-winner. As with the war way back in the early 20th century: I am a feminist today I offer an opinion that differs from a discussion.”


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SO YOU SO YOU THINK YOU CAN EDIT: AN ADVENTURE IN FACULTY-STUDENT COLLABORATION

A few years ago, I taught an English graduate class on “Methods in Research and Criticism,” and for the final course project, I assigned an innovative task. I divided my class of sixteen M.A. and Ph.D. students into four groups, asking each group to choose a short literary work from the syllabus in order to produce a mock-critical edition of the text, complete with scholarly apparatus, introduction, notes, and bibliography. Although the assignment was straightforward (we had analyzed different kinds of critical editions during the course) and although the distribution of tasks was clear, three of the four groups struggled to make progress and to settle into productive working units. The collaborative spirit was lacking, and problems among group members quickly escalated. My expectations with regard to the students’ level of maturity, responsibility, and motivation may have been set too high. As one colleague advised me, I should have “baby-stepped” them through the process of collaborating. In any case, three of the four groups experienced problems ranging from open disagreement and cheating to intractable incompetence. Only one group came through with a solid product—a nice, theoretically-oriented edition of Rebecca West’s first novel The Return of the Soldier. Since no critical edition of this text existed yet, I proposed that the students work with me to bring the project to publication.

This was several years ago, and thus before the onset of the current recession. The future looked bright for the students work with me to bring the project to publication. The financial crisis that began in 2008 was at the same time firm and purposive. But I was pleased with their professional demeanor, and it seemed evident to all that my graduate students had taken a stake in this project and “owned” their share of it.

Buoyed up by the positive feedback at the conference and equipped with a host of constructive suggestions from the participants, I wrote a book proposal. After a few rejections, I approached Broadview Press, which signaled strong interest in the project. However, their contextual approach necessitated a wholesale re-conceptualization of our Bedford-style, theory-driven edition. The summer of 2008 was entirely consumed in the conference and proposal, and I was not worth it. After an external review of the manuscript, Broadview Press offered a contract in December 2008. At this point, my group of three co-editors surprisingly shrank to two. As one member of the initial collaborative withdrawal, I continued to work on the project, having chosen to do so out of love for the project. And, having chosen to do so out of love for the project. And, having chosen to do so out of love for the project.

LESSON TWO

The staying power of graduate students through a long-term project cannot be taken for granted.

But my pool of co-editors was to shrink even further. A few months of intensive work on this edition—sifting through the feedback from the external readers, gathering the complicated apparatus of textual sources and visual documents, honing the interlocking mosaic of the apparatus, rewriting the general introduction, and composing numerous contextual head-notes—I was increasingly haunted by the conviction that one of the two remaining collaborators was not up to the task. Despite my best intentions and close supervision, there was no learning curve, the conceptual input was lacking, and mistakes proliferated. It wasn’t for lack of trying on the collaborator’s part. Simply, this collaborator didn’t have the necessary skills to be an editor.

LESSON THREE

Some graduate students who perform well in class will not cross the threshold into real professionalism, despite dedicated faculty mentoring.

Although faculty-student collaboration amounts partly to an extension of the faculty’s educational mission, and although mentoring is a crucial aspect of such an endeavor, there comes a point when “baby-stepping” is no longer a viable option for dealing with junior members of a project. Collaboration is not only a matter of mutual respect, team-spirit, and effort; it is also simply a matter of individually meeting a minimal standard of professional competence. And this rather basic expectation is neither negotiable, nor is it sufficient for faculty-student collaboration. Ultimately, incompetence cannot be rewarded with endless patience, or else we would be condemning precisely the kind of free-riding that had become such a major problem during the initial stage of collaborative work among my graduate students. So, although it was definitely not well received, I had to say goodbye to one more collaborator, uninviting him from the project.

I was now left with one former graduate student—Charles Thorne—as my collaborator to try to make this work. He had been outstanding throughout the whole process. He had immersed himself in Rebecca West like a scholar and had read deeply and widely. He even asked me to provide him with original documents, which I gladly gave him. He made several deep dives in Henry James, Marcel Proust, D.H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis studies to trace the hidden connections between their literary approach and that of West. Then, when he knew how to do it, he made it. His apprenticeship was not free of glitches, as his responsibility and close supervision, there was no learning curve, the conceptual input was lacking, and mistakes proliferated. It wasn’t for lack of trying on the collaborator’s part. Simply, this collaborator didn’t have the necessary skills to be an editor.

LESSON FOUR

When faculty-student collaboration works, it is a rewarding experience, both for the faculty member and the student. Indeed, my graduate students brought a fresh energy to the project and helped me to see a text I had known very well from new perspectives and in different contexts. For that I am grateful to all my collaborators, even those who had dropped out (their contributions are duly credited in the Acknowledgments). It was a protracted process, more unpredictable and far longer than the reality-show pumped in the title. Indeed, it extended over almost four years; but the one graduate student out of 16 potential candidates who stuck it out to the bitter end, I am proud to say, is the winner of a whole stanza and redoubled his efforts to hunt down the last mistakes in a proof-reading session that seemed to be asymptotically approaching the necessary level of perfection. His apprenticeship was not free of glitches, but he demonstrated versatility, enthusiasm, hard work, and real professional growth precisely at times when he met the greatest challenges.

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Note also the authoritative tone of his message. This is faculty-student collaboration at its best, i.e. beneficial to both parties. I had obviously succeeded in making my collaborator feel comfortable enough to address me as an equal, although he never crossed a line into unprofessional chumminess. Always correct and polite, he was at the same time firm and purposeful. While he was steadfast, he was not stubborn either. Although he did not relish the idea of including selections of celebratory pro-war poetry (e.g. Rupert Brooke and Louis MacNeice), he was in addition to the profoundly disillusioned works of Owen, Sassoon, Jacob, etc., he did eventually relent on that point. Besides being intellectually gifted, resourceful, and dedicated, my collaborator was also proactive. For instance, he quietly drew up a whole spreadsheet of permission contacts, complete with an overview of the legal status of the various copyright holders involved in the artworks we wanted to reproduce. Even he had a learning curve, of course. When it came to proof-reading the galley, I found some blunders in the section for which he had been responsible. Still, his response was immediate and professional. He took the problem seriously (e.g. the accidental use of a whole stanza) and redoubled his efforts to hunt down the last mistakes in a proof-reading session that seemed to be asymptotically approaching the necessary level of perfection. His apprenticeship was not free of glitches, but he demonstrated versatility, enthusiasm, hard work, and real professional growth precisely at times when he met the greatest challenges.

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Return to the main content
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Princip and his bumbling associates on the fateful date of 28 June 1914. In class, the student read this final passage of the “Serbia” chapter aloud – and I will never forget how most of the ten students laughed along with him. I asked the class: “Did you ever think you would read an account of the event starting World War One that would make you laugh out loud?” A teachable moment if there ever was one.

While it is true that these readers of Black Lamb constituted an unusually sophisticated bunch, I believe my experience teaching it proves that if the instructor establishes the proper literary-historical contexts, West’s masterpiece can provide students with a truly formative intellectual encounter.

—Marty Hipsky (Ohio Wesleyan University)

UPDATE FROM THE REBECCA WEST ESTATE CONTINUED

attracted interest from both an opera writing duo and a playwright, but neither has brought productions to fruition yet.

Meanwhile, as I pursue my own new career goals of being a screenwriter, I have made the first moves in getting a documentary about Rebecca made. No promises, but I have at least filmed Alison Macleod, as well as my parents, Marion and Norman Macleod, talking about Rebecca. There’s a lot of work to do on this, but it seems utterly crazy that there is no documentary of even the most basic sort about Rebecca, and I thoroughly intend to rectify this.

Stay tuned. She’s alive and well and living in more heads than she was last year.

—published by the Chinese publisher Shanghai Sanhui Culture and Press Ltd.