Studying Literature in the ’60s

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> At 5:30 A.M. the police began to withdraw. Fifty-one students and seventeen police needed hospital treatment…certain students were undoubtedly guilty of the most appalling vandalism, in particular the attack on the office of Professor Orest Ranum and the destruction of both his notes and original sixteenth-and seventeenth-century French manuscripts—manifestations, no doubt, of bourgeois culture. Still, the students did gain concessions on all their main issues [beginning with the cancellation of the gymnasium project on the edge of Harlem], and one huge symbolic victory, the resignation of President Kirk.
>
> —Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties* (1998).

Did confrontations like this one, which took place at Columbia University on May 22, 1968, really occur? From the perspective of 2014, the above account seems surreal. Today, as I hear it from colleagues as well as from my grandson (a very engaged sophomore, majoring in political science and economics, and performing his electronic music at different venues on weekends for tidy sums), could hardly be more different. Given the steep tuition and the even steeper cost of living in New York, given the large student loans so many undergraduates are carrying, given the sense among students that huge fortunes are there to be made on Wall Street or in the Silicon Valley, and especially given that the faculty and administration at Columbia are surely more left-wing than the largely wealthy student body, the world of 1968 has been turned literally upside-down.

But before we wax nostalgic for those idealistic days, when student radicals were committed to overturning a reactionary World Order, let’s drop the decade label and see how the university actually evolved, from the idealism of the Kennedy era to the dark days of Nixon’s Draft Lottery at the height of the Vietnam War.

The birth control pill, which came on the market in 1961, is emblematic of the promise the decade held for women like me. I was a married mother of two small children in 1961 when I decided to go to graduate school in English at nearby Catholic University in Washington, D. C. Teaching assistantships were not yet common, and in any case I could only go to school part-time, but since tuition was roughly $150 a course, I just applied for admission, was accepted, and four years later I had my Ph.D. and had been offered a job at my own university. I began as an Instructor (four courses a semester, of which two were Freshman Comp, two advanced undergrad seminars) and within five years I was an Associate Professor. At that point, I received a job offer from the University of Maryland in College Park and moved there.

When I tell my students I never applied for a job, they are incredulous. It worked like this: one day I was standing at the card catalogue (no online facilities then!), looking up material for my dissertation on Yeats’s poetry, when the Chair of English, one J. Kirby Neill, a Renaissance scholar from whom I had taken a seminar on the sonnet, came up to me and said, “Mrs. Perloff (no first names then!), would you like a position with us next year?” I nearly flipped, swallowed, and said yes. No applications to fill out, no interview, no meetings with faculty or administrators! And when I moved to Maryland, it was not very different. I did visit the College Park campus for a lunch and chat with the Chair and a few of his colleagues, but I never gave a job talk or underwent the grilling we now routinely put candidates through on campus and at the MLA convention “job market.” Indeed, when I was first hired at Catholic U., there was no short list: there was only me. And Ph.D. candidates at top universities like Berkeley routinely had three or four offers, from other top universities or colleges, usually via their dissertation directors, and chose the best offer.

The early sixties, let’s remember, was a time of incredible expansion for higher education. In 1960, the University of California had only four campuses (Berkeley, UCLA, Davis, and Riverside); by 1965 there were seven: UC San Diego was founded in 1960, Irvine and Santa Cruz both opened in 1965. Junior colleges sprung up all over the country: in the Washington area, Montgomery County Junior College hired two of my colleagues at Catholic U; George Mason College, later a university, in Fairfax, VA., hired two others. Marymount College in Arlington morphed into Marymount University; my best friend Alice Mandanis, like me a mother of two who went through the Catholic U Ph.D. program in English in her thirties, was to become Provost at Marymount. Indeed, there was such a demand for English instruction at the college level that Catholic U seriously considered introducing an intermediate degree between the M.A. and Ph.D. called “Doctor of Arts,” so as to certify those Ph.D. students who decided to forego writing a dissertation. The D.A. degree never quite caught on, but in 1965, our placement rate was almost 100%. Then, too, the Ph.D. was still a big deal: students addressed us as “Doctor,” while fond relatives congratulated us with awe. A Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature! Well, well!

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Today, with the rhetoric of Crisis-in-the-Humanities in high gear, it is difficult to understand just how much the study of literature mattered in the decade 1956-65. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) provided generous graduate fellowships, not only for the sciences but also for language and literature. Graduate students did not feel they had to justify literary study: they just wanted to be good at it, to master a literary period of their choice, and to read poetry or fiction or drama in the light of theory, which was then still literary theory. The New Criticism was then dominant but everyone felt it had to be supplemented by Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), by Russian Formalism, now coming into vogue, perhaps because Roman Jakobson was teaching at Harvard, by French phenomenology, by various theories of semantics and semiotics—for example, the work of Umberto Eco—and by the then new Structuralism. Although the criticism of I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke loomed large, it was the moment of Continental European émigré critics. Every grad student at Catholic U read Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946) and the essays on stylistics of Leo Spitzer. And René Wellek’s *Theory of Literature* (1948), a basic textbook for graduate students in English and Comp Lit, convinced otherwise diverse students that, whatever literature was, it was not equivalent to “life,” that a “character” was not a real person but a representation of some sort made out of language, and that the first-person in a lyric poem was not simply equivalent to Wordsworth or Emily Dickinson. By 1967, Roland Barthes had published “The Death of the Author,” and put to rest all traditional notions of the literary text as the expression of one individual’s unique experience and that hence the author was the critic’s best guide and biography the key to criticism.

I cannot stress enough what a difference the study of literary theory made. There was so much to analyze, so much to discuss! I remember taking a course on Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819), where, all semester, we were trying to understand how mock-epic transformed various conventions, how it related to irony and satire, and why ottava rima was the perfect form for this particular long poem. And in the case of the novel, weeks would be spent on Faulkner’s *Sound and the Fury* (1929), figuring out the treatment of time and space, the varying linguistic registers and points of view, the conflicting responses to the decay of the South. When we came to the cast of characters in the Appendix, where Dilsey, the matriarch of the black servants, has, next to her name, only the two words, “They endured,” my African-American friend Eleanor Traylor objected strenuously. “Dr. Hafley,” she exclaimed to the professor, “They endured! Is that all black people are allowed to do?” Hafley replied that these were the words of the narrator, but not necessarily Faulkner the author. And a big debate followed.

What no one would have said—and this is what made literary study so strenuous and exciting—is a kind of remark now heard all too often: someone, in, say, a Russian novel course, will raise her hand and say, “I can’t relate to Eugene Onegin.” Or again, “I don’t sympathize with Anna [Karenina].” Such remarks indicate, or so we would have said, a naïve belief that world and text are equivalent. Ordinary people—lay people—might think such things, but we, who had undergone rigorous training and were the keepers of the flame, knew better!

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive! It was also an exciting time for poetry! The decade 1956-65 witnessed the publication of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956), Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959), Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* (1964), John Ashbery’s S*ome Trees* (1956) and *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), and Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* (1965), to mention just a few U.S. works. Donald Allen’s groundbreaking *New American Poetry* was published in 1960. Perhaps most important for the arts: it was the heyday of what is, to me, the most important avant-garde movement of the period: the collaboration, under the sign of Marcel Duchamp, of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, retroactively celebrated in a recent exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Dancing Around the Bride* (2013). The Cage cenacle literally changed the way we read a printed page, listen to music, look at painting, or understand the relationship of music to dance. Now there was a revolution!

But by mid-decade, the academy had become heavily politicized. Perhaps the death of Frank O’Hara (1966), accidental as it was, can be considered emblematic. The pleasure of the text, relished by a Frank O’Hara, gave way to a growing stridency. It

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was not the didacticism of the Marxist '30s, but a demand for change at all costs and in every area. The enemy—capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism—was everywhere. The burgeoning affluent youth culture now populating the university questioned all authority and made way for the liberation movements, especially the long overdue civil rights movement. But the immediate occasion for protest was, of course, the despised Vietnam War, in which one might easily be drafted to go into combat. Today, when there is no draft, it's hard to imagine how immediate and terrible its threat must have been. Think if right now all college seniors knew that they might soon be dispatched to fight in Syria or Afghanistan.

University administrators bore a disproportionate part of the brunt of the youth malaise in the '60's: witness the Columbia anecdote with which I began. And of course the faculty became deeply involved as well. At Catholic U, where most students had been trained to be respectful supporters of the status quo, the change was especially dramatic. As students and faculty became radicalized, the canonical works we were studying in graduate school came under withering attack: "Hey hey, ho ho, Western Culture's gotta go" was the new battle cry.

The '60's response to the Vietnam War is entirely understandable, but it also became a pretext for the violence now endemic. Most unfortunately, a big role in campus revolution was played by drugs. Some of my best students were disappearing in the middle of the semester, having taken an overdose or involved in some drug-related prank that got them into trouble: many were in rehab. It was all supposed to be quite glamorous and daring—think of all the "I was an addict" memoirs of the period—but in fact it was painful and nasty, and many lives were destroyed.

I must confess that I have never understood the drug culture of the sixties or what it had to do with "revolution." Was Lenin stoned when he arrived at the Finland Station? Can one create a genuine revolution when one is always looking for the next fix or even just partying around? What do drugs have to do with radical politics? Can one help the poor, devise new programs, change the economic system in this condition? '60's slogans say it all: "Make love not war," "Tune in, turn on, drop out," "Flower power," "Never trust anyone over thirty"—could anything be more irrational or anti-intellectual than these mantras? "Make love, not war": in other words, care only about your own satisfaction, never mind the larger community.

At the tail end of the decade, when I began to teach at a large state university (Maryland, which then had 35,000 students), I was obliged, every morning, to make my way through the trash in the corridors of Talliaferro Hall. The long-haired, scruffy students sprawling on the floor, some of them stoned, were sitting among discarded newspaper pages—the *Campus Daily* as well as the *Washington Post*—that covered the floor along with bottle caps and other rubbish. The students did not so much as take notice. Concern for the environment? Not a jot. In Freshman Composition, the text read that year was *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (1968).

When I think of my 1960's at the university, I feel no nostalgia, only a great sadness.

In 2010 (Feb. 14 issue), the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article on Orest Ranum, the distinguished professor of French history whose notes and documents were burned by members of the SDS (Students of a Democratic Society) in the Columbia protest of 1968. Ranum, then thirty-five, was already the author of a leading book, *Paris in the Age of Absolutism* (1968). The *Chronicle* quotes Ranum, who had moved from Columbia to Johns Hopkins soon after the uprising, as having tried to reason with the student leaders, to whose goals, if not their tactics, he was not unsympathetic:

> I held over their heads, as dramatically and forcefully as I could, the possibility of counterrevolution at Columbia and I said that the United States is a fundamentally liberal society but with politically conservative, authoritarian elements, and that, rather than accept a radicalized university, the society would snuff out the university.

This was an oddly prescient observation. Today, the Humanities divisions, if not the entire university, have witnessed a fair amount of "snuffing out" at the hands of the larger society. All those dramatic changes fought for in the '60's—Equal Opportunity Employment, the demand for diverse faculty and student bodies, the reliance on student course evaluations, and especially an open and "diverse" curriculum—have been honored in name, but what good is EEOC hiring when there are no jobs? How does one rely on student course evaluations (an innovation at Catholic U just when I had begun to teach), when most of the courses are taught by transient adjunct faculty? And what is the use of the opening of the literary field to all those courses in non-Western literature, when most students aren't taking courses in any literature?

When I think of my 1960's at the university, then, I feel no nostalgia, only a great sadness. So much potential, so many possibilities, such sheer hunger for knowledge, such pleasure in the text! I often wonder what would have happened if the '60's had been a less affluent society, if students (and younger faculty) simply had not had the wherewithal to cut classes, fail their courses, and drop out for a semester or two so as to organize protests and demonstrations. What is urgently needed today is a study of the student economics of the period: who funded the SDS leaders Mark Rudd and Dotson Raider? How did the drop-outs all over the US afford their drugs, their stereos, their room and board, even their transportation? At 50, we who began the decade living in what was, after all, still an Ivory Tower, need to rethink the monetary basis that made it possible to chant "Make love, not war!" and sport "Hell no, we won't go!" bumper stickers.

You can't, after all, have a bumper sticker if you don't have a car.

Marjorie Perloff has written many books on the poetry and poetics of the 20th and 21st Century: the most recent is Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Millennium *(2010). She is Professor Emerita of English at Stanford University.*