Resistance to Teaching

Kevin Pask

THE ADMIRABLE ACHIEVEMENT OF RACHEL SAGNER BUURMA AND LAURA HEFFERNAN IN *The Teaching Archive* is to reconnect the classroom with some important achievements of the century of academic literary criticism since the 1920s. In this brief response, I focus on what is less often an explicit item on the course syllabus, but which nevertheless informs many syllabi: the critical judgment which underlies the canon of university study. Literary criticism, as opposed to literary scholarship (to the extent they can be opposed) was a practice explicitly concerned with the formation of literary judgment. It was central to the teaching practice of I. A. Richards and did not need await the publication of *The Teaching Archive* in order to theorise the relationship between the classroom and research. For Richards, in *Practical Criticism* (1929), the problem of the classroom was that of judgment, usually bad judgment, which a practical criticism might address. How much do undergraduates (and graduate students) respond to the inculcation of good judgment in the classroom? Should they? They certainly sense that the reading culture they bring with them to university—often genre fiction, especially YA fiction—is not generally that of the classroom (even if that is also changing), but the reason for its absence is less often examined *in* the classroom. The tendency now is for the question of the university canon to be theorised around social questions of inclusion rather than questions of judgment. (Likewise, the transition from 'criticism' to 'critique' to describe the productions of academic interpretation seems to justify them as political interventions.) My own

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experience, both as a student and as a teacher, suggests that students are less willing to abandon their other reading culture for the university one than I was forty years ago, sheepishly expunging (or at least marginalising) my own literary bad taste standing in the way of the fuller appreciation of the literary syllabus of the time: the mighty battles of anxiety and influence in the Marvel Literary Universe c. 1980.

Practical Criticism is built on the 'protocols' written anonymously by Cambridge students in the late 1920s. Students responded to a variety of unidentified poems, and the student protocols were then dissected by Richards in hugely popular lectures, 'so popular that at times they had to be held in the streets' (Russo 93). Richards's biographer, John Paul Russo, suggests that the popularity of the lectures was due to the new model of close analysis of poetry developed by Richards (93). Buurma and Heffernan reject Russo's suggestion—the lectures were not focused on the poems themselves—and propose instead that 'The popularity of the course was due to Richards's incorporation of the voices of the students themselves. Like a tutor in a small seminar, Richards stepped aside in order to make his students' commentary the center of attention' (79-80). I'm skeptical about this explanation, which lends itself to an idealised version of teaching. It seems more likely that the frisson of seeing members of one's cohort, perhaps even oneself, held up for a certain amount of public shaming, mercifully without naming, exercised perhaps the greatest attractive power. His original focus had been the students' judgments of the poems, as indicated by the subtitle, 'A Study of Literary Judgment'. In Richards's application of experimental method to the art of literary criticism, a significant aspect of the appeal of the lectures, students themselves were the experimental subjects. At the same time, the atmosphere around the lectures was gossipy and social, and the afterlife of the lectures was such that there remained speculations for years afterward about the authorship of particular protocols, including possible contributions by William Empson and T. S. Eliot. By the second series of lectures (1927-1928), writes William Haffenden, Empson's biographer, students 'flocked to have their feeble efforts flayed by the prophet, and to be fledged anew as practising critics' (180). This describes the seminar room less than it does a revival meeting. For Christopher Isherwood, writing in 1938, it was the experience of baptism into a new scientific culture of criticism: 'But, to us, he was infinitely more than a brilliant new literary critic: he was our guide, our evangelist, who revealed to us, in a succession of astounding lightning flashes, the entire expanse of the Modern World… We became behaviourists, materialists, atheists' (74-5). For such students, the public technique of the lectures was something more than the honing of ideas in a seminar or tutorial (where, of course, Richards was also influential). It was the promise of a kind of scientific transformation of what had appeared the muddled world of mere literary opinion.

However, by the time Richards published *Practical Criticism*, the problems of understanding poetry revealed by the protocols had deferred the problem of judgment. 'A complete understanding of the poem, Richards had come to see, must precede the evaluation of its worth: "Unless we have really read the poem correctly we are in no position to judge it". In the coming years, Richards began to regard comprehension as the proper focus of his classroom experimentation, and to nudge the matter of literary judgment to the wings…' (Buurma and Heffernan 82). The move anticipated a good deal of the history of academic literary criticism over the next century: the deflection of the question of the formation of literary judgment into exercises in the proper understanding of the literary text. However, Richards himself, writes John Guillory, 'notoriously offered no positive methodology of reading, only a set of tactics for removing the sources of misreading' (13). This opened the door to 'strong' critics, such as Empson, a Prometheus Unbound for academic literary criticism, to retrieve the flame of 'ambiguity' and its multiple possibilities from Richards's more Olympian project of clearing away misunderstandings.

A secondary aspect of this process of understanding literary texts in order to judge them is that the work of understanding a difficult text tends to be conflated with the value of that text: otherwise, why all the bother? In other words, difficult texts come to be considered better texts. As Muriel Bradbrook recalled the Cambridge of the Richards era, 'We tended to prefer the difficult poets—Donne, or Marvell, or Eliot. "Strenuous" was a word of praise. We were not very charitable to fools' (69). Richards's own project was simply to clarify misunderstanding in order to make a critical distinction between literary texts. As practical criticism was carried forward, with the ambiguities of Empson or the tensions of American New Criticism, the act of distinction was already implicitly lodged in the syllabus. We study what is difficult in order to understand the complexity that makes the difficult appear better than the simple, making the classroom into the necessary instrument of critical judgment. Students, who instinctively recognise this process, sometimes resent it. The literary record of Cambridge in the 1920s is largely a record of the transformative effects of Richards's lectures, but is there any record of the students, presumably the majority, who did not 'fledge anew' as literary critics as a result? This would also be a very interesting contribution to the Teaching Archive. Such students might not belong to the history of literary criticism, but they belong to the history of reading as well as to the teaching archive. What do we make of the readers who did not sign up for the program?

Students pass through literature departments on their way to doing a variety of things in the world. Or at least we hope so, since the possibility of teaching literature seems so diminished. As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, many do not necessarily internalise the canonical judgments that form the basis of the university syllabus. They retain their affiliation to what Franco Moretti has called the 'social canon' of bestsellers and popular fiction. Increasingly, I find myself interested in the experience of students who steadfastly refuse, or 'fail', to internalise the university canon as superior to their personal favourites, much more likely to be part of the social canon. When I teach a survey course on Edmund Spenser, for example, I find a wide range of responses to Spenserian fantasy. Probably most students find *The Faerie Queene* tedious. ('Pask tries hard, but it is Spenser after all', is a remark that once appeared in my student evaluations.) Some, however, are intrigued by the poem, and these are often students with a passion for fantasy fiction or role-playing games. Rare are the students who respond to the poem as a test of their own critical skills. These are generally the students who might go to graduate programs in literary studies. Earlier in my career, I was probably more interested in the last group of students, which is not unusual for teachers of literature. We teach to the students who are like us, who generally accepted the literary judgment of our professors and tried to emulate the methodologies associated with those judgments. Now, however, I find that I'm almost as interested in the ones who belong to the second group.

One such student visited me several times in my office hours a few years ago. Like many of our students at my urban university, he was balancing working with university study, in his case working long hours in his parents' 'dépanneur' (Québécois French for a convenience store). His parents, he said, couldn't afford to give him enough hours away from the store to put his best effort into my course. This was part of the reason for his visit to my office hours. His other reason was to discuss the character of Spenser's Britomart (the female knight of chastity in *The Faerie Queene*), about whom he was planning to write his final paper. In addition to the paper, he also wanted to discuss something else about Britomart: her resemblance to the heroine of his own favourite fantasy series, written by Jacqueline Carey, built around a character named Kushiel. Kushiel is, very much unlike Britomart, a courtesan, but also, like Britomart, a woman warrior, and the novels feature on their covers the scantily-clad Kushiel in fantasy settings. I now own two of the books in the series, thanks to this student, who passed his extra copies along to me (Figure 1).

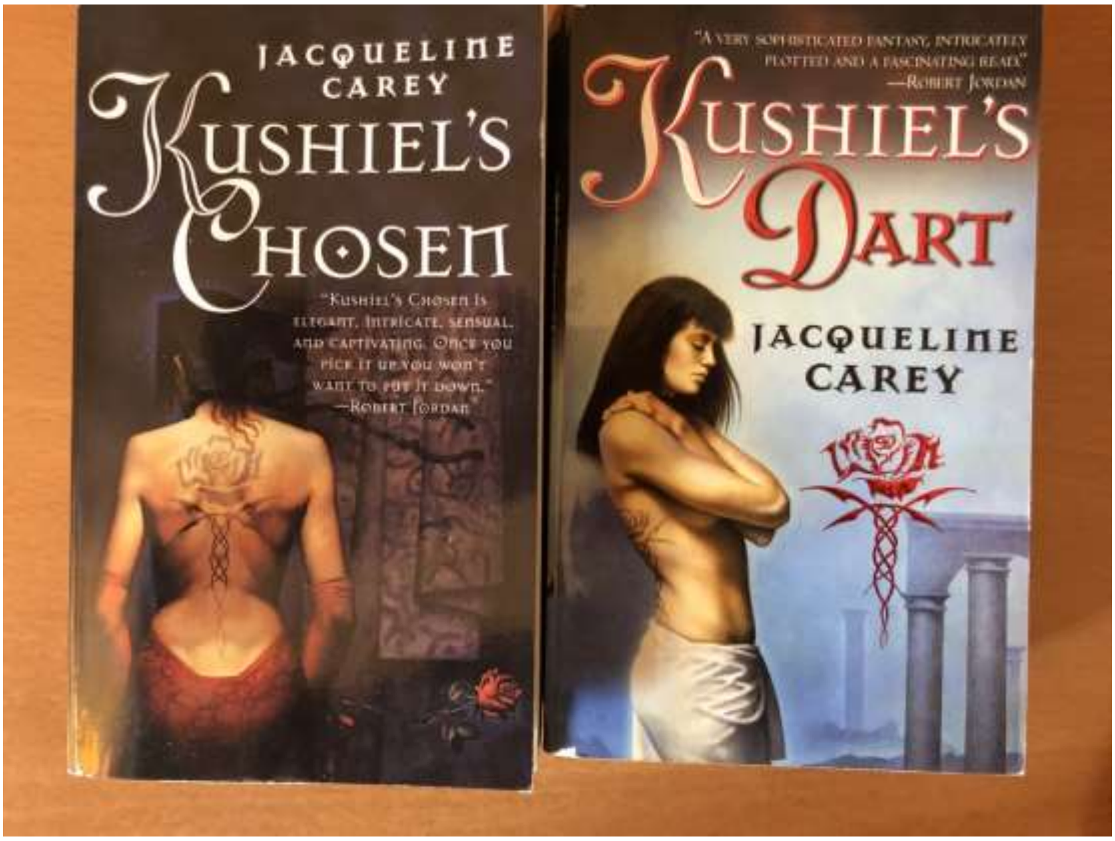
JACQUELINE CAREY
KUSHIEL'S CHOSEN
"KUSHIEL'S CHOSEN IS ELEGANT, INTRICATE, SENSUAL, AND CAPTIVATING. ONCE YOU PICK IT UP YOU WON'T WANT TO PUT IT DOWN."
—ROBERT JORDAN
"A VERY SOPHISTICATED FANTASY, INTRICATELY PLOTTED AND A FASCINATING READ."
—ROBERT JORDAN
KUSHIEL'S DART
JACQUELINE CAREY

Figure 1. Jacqueline Carey, *Kushiel's Chosen* and *Kushiel's Dart*.

To this point, I have done little more than glance at them, but they intrigue me nonetheless as a context for reading Spenser in the twenty-first century. If Kushiel belongs in the Impossible Teaching Archive, it is due in part to her participation in the Resistance to Teaching Archive. This is not to say that that the student was consciously resistant to my teaching of Spenser. Rather, he did not acknowledge the implicit pedagogical demand of the university curriculum to suspend his identification with the social canon and replace it with a professionalising identification with exciting readings of Spenser. (It is also true, however, that I have signaled to the students my own interest in the other reading contexts that they bring to any given course.) Some of my best students, both graduate and undergraduate, have bristled when I have offered the opinion that the Harry Potter movies are better than the books. The book series constitutes a foundation of specifically literary interest for their generation, and they don't see any reason why it should be abandoned.

The academic canon itself suggests that they have a point. In Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the rogue Autolycus fully participates in the play's mythic renewal, which is grounded in the classical myth of Proserpina's return to the earth. Exiled from court, Autolycus makes a living as a thief and peddler of ballads, the most popular literary form of the time. In the semi-literate peasant world of the beginning of Act Four, Autolycus sells ballads as true narratives, credible because printed with testimonials. 'I love a ballet in print, a-life, for then we are sure they are true', exclaims one of the peasants. Autolycus has an obscure but important role in the social totality of the play, and his ballads are part of the world of popular and mythological 'tales' that provide the play with its title. The popular world of Shakespeare's countryside, just emerging into popular print culture, is the deep precursor to the forms of mass literature that circulated later: penny-dreadfuls, pulp fiction, supermarket romance. Those literary forms are also part of the vast manifold of literature, often important to literary renewal and innovation. Even in the domain of literary theory, one might also think of the interesting recuperation of H. P. Lovecraft as a theoretical model for philosophical and cultural analysis in the past twenty years, a status hardly anticipated by his association with pulp fiction in the twentieth century. In this instance, a writer associated with the resistance to teaching re-emerges in a different academic environment as a model for theory and teaching. In the longer history of the literary academy, the resistance to teaching can itself become a pedagogy.

Kevin Pask teaches English literature at Concordia University in Montreal. He is working on a study of academic literary criticism in relation to other cultures of reading.

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