

Literary Studies in the Border Zone

International Students Studying American Fiction in Dalarna

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This paper aims to show how advanced literary studies in an international context can help students develop not only their critical reading skills, but also their self-knowledge and capacity for self-expression as truth-telling speaking subjects in a Foucauldian sense. For six years I have taught a graduate course at Dalarna University called “Contemporary American Fiction: Constructions of Subjectivity in the 1990s,” consisting of five novels and one collection of short stories which have all won critical acclaim by the literary establishment in the US during the last decade of the twentieth century. The majority of the literary works have also won one of the most prestigious literary awards in North America: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. The focus of the course, as well as in my own research, is to investigate what type of subjects or subjectivities that are constructed in these highly acclaimed fictional representations of American culture and society. Together with an increasingly international group of students I have studied what possibilities the characters in these narratives have to construct their own identity among the more or less limited and limiting subject positions offered by the American society represented in these texts. As I will show, this search for a subject has resulted not only in a deeper knowledge about contemporary American fiction and its constructions of subjectivity,¹ but also in a better knowledge of how students can search for and develop their own subjectivity and critical agency by reflecting on these issues in an open international setting.

1 This is the subject of a forthcoming book dealing with 31 award-winning works of fiction from the 1990s.

Therefore, this paper focuses more on the *study* of literature in a border zone than on the actual border-zone literature itself.² By this I mean that also the students are situated in a kind of border zone in-between languages and cultures. The student responses that I have analyzed are all written by students with a native language other than both English and Swedish, and a clear majority of them have grown up in a cultural environment which cannot be described as western. Typically the international students come from East and Southern Europe and Asia, particularly from countries such as Poland, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. Apart from some of the European students, most are in Sweden for a whole academic year to complete a one-year master degree in English. After their one-year stay in Sweden the students tend to either return to their home country or to continue west for further studies. Thus their study period in Sweden functions as a literal border zone in which students can develop a new understanding of their own subjectivity.

As a theoretical point of departure for my meta-analyses of the student responses I have used some of Michel Foucault's later writings from the 1980s, such as "The Hermeneutic of the Subject" and his concepts of the "culture of the self" and "reading and writing the self." What I believe I can see in the written and spoken responses of my students is what Foucault witnessed in the theoretical formulations and practices that were important in classical and late antiquity: "Through all the culture of antiquity it is easy to find evidence of the importance given to 'concern with oneself' and its connection with the theme of self-knowledge" (Foucault 1994b:93). My application of Foucault's ideas on subjectivity and truth to pedagogy has also been greatly inspired by Tina Besley's and Michael A. Peters's *Subjectivity and Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self*, and I share their joint intention "to use Foucault's insights on subjectivity and truth as a basis for the investigation of contemporary forms of truth-telling in the constitution of the educational subject" (Besley & Peters 2007:5). When the students learn to see how a "culture of the self" is construed as a universal essence (exemplified in the literary works studied), they also learn to see "the arbitrariness of institutions and ...

2 The six works of fiction studied in the course all deal with characters moving across various borders (e.g. social, cultural, sexual, national) in order to redefine their subjectivity.

which space of freedom we still can enjoy and how changes can still be made” (Foucault 1988:11).

In particular, I am indebted to Besley and Peters for turning my attention to a series of six lectures that Foucault gave at the University of California, Berkeley, in the fall of 1983 entitled “Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia”.³ In these lectures Foucault discusses the practice of parrhesia, meaning “free speech”, in classical Greek culture. According to Foucault, the philosophical goal of parrhesia was “not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of truth-teller or truth-telling as an activity” (Foucault 1983:lect 6). As Besley and Peters point out, Foucault thus “aligns himself with [the] ‘critical’ philosophical tradition that is concerned ‘with the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth’ rather than the analytical tradition,” which is concerned with “ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in determining whether a statement is true” (Besley & Peters 2007:88).

This philosophical objective of parrhesia, I would argue, is reflected in the practice of my students who in their critical responses show no new truths, but clearly develop new relations to truth. As Foucault himself puts it in an interview: “What is philosophy after all? If not a means of reflecting not so much on what is true or false but on our relation to truth? How, given that relation to truth, should we act?” (Foucault 1994c:321). This philosophical and moral aim may seem obvious in a liberal Swedish university setting, but my experience is that still today students—Swedish as well as international—are very much brought up in an analytical and essentialist tradition where the goal of education is to hide oneself in order to demonstrate that one has internalized an already existing objective truth. What is interesting with the old Greek practice of parrhesia is that it so clearly challenges today’s academic conventions of hiding the “I”, or the speaking subject, in academic writing.⁴

3 These lectures were later edited by Joseph Pearson and published as *Fearless Speech* in 2001. Semiotext(e) (Foreign Agents) (February 19, 2001). All references in this article are to the online text available at: <http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/>

4 A good example of this convention of hiding the “I” can be seen in guides of academic writing in literary studies, e.g. Kelley Griffith’s *Writing Essays about Literature* (2005:263).

This is how Foucault summarizes the practice of parrhesia as it developed in Greek and Roman culture:

Parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault 1983:lect 2)

Following Besley and Peters one can discern five “major characteristics” in Foucault’s discussion of parrhesia: frankness, truth, moral courage, criticism, and duty. Below I will show how I have identified these characteristics in the verbal responses of international students studying constructions of subjectivity in contemporary American fiction in a Swedish “border zone.”

Foucault begins his lectures by explaining that the word parrhesia etymologically means “to say everything”: “The one who uses parrhesia, the parrhesiastes, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse” (Foucault 1983:lect 1). Unlike a speaker using classical rhetoric, “the parrhesiastes uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find,” without trying to hide the “subject behind the opinions to which he refers” (ibid.). Foucault also emphasizes that “the commitment involved in parrhesia is linked to a certain situation, to a difference of status between the speaker and his audience, to the fact that the parrhesiastes says something which is dangerous to himself and thus involves a risk” (ibid.).

To achieve this frankness in an educational setting is not an easy task, especially when the students come from a cultural background where speaking frankly from your own opinion not only goes against the goal of education, but is also illegal, thus literally involving a risk, and sometimes even death. Consequently, most students, especially those from the Middle East and South and East Asia, typically will begin the course by hiding their subjective opinion, providing responses to the literature and answers to the seminar questions which are taken almost verbatim from other sources. It is not uncommon that foreign students are accused of plagiarism when they are quoting what they believe to be authorities

“speaking the truth”. To develop a subjective frankness is thus a laborious process for many of the students, who simply want to give the “correct” answer. Many of the students are shocked to learn that they have to rewrite assignments and journals because of a lack of independence from other sources. Many are simply not used to expressing their own opinion, especially not to an authority like a university teacher.

However, the students are greatly helped by existing in an international setting, I would argue. First of all they discover that the other students in the class tend to have very different responses to the fictional works and theories studied. This plurality of ideas tends to encourage students to express their own subjective opinions even though they might go against that of the majority of the class. Secondly, the experience of living in a foreign country, a border zone, can in itself help students to be freer in expressing their previously hidden subjective opinions. As Foucault himself explains in an interview, “we very often have the experience of much more freedom in foreign countries than in our own. As foreigners we can ignore all those implicit obligations which are not in the law but in the general way of behaving. Secondly, merely changing your obligations is felt or experienced as a kind of freedom” (Foucault 1994a:123). Thus I would argue that the international students exist in a kind of double border zone, or a kind of liminal space in which they have left their native, often highly regulated, culture and its conventions, but still have not yet internalized the unwritten rules and regulations of how to behave in a Swedish university setting.

Evidence of the students’ growing frankness can be seen in the web-based forum on which they post their initial responses to the literature studied. At the beginning of the term the responses tend to be brief and closely tied to the texts studied. Very seldom do the students make references to their own lives and situations, seeking instead controlled answers trying to use the “correct” terminology. As the term progresses, however, and as the students dare to comment on each other’s responses, they start to be more and more frank, gradually developing a more subjective and “truth-telling” voice.⁵

5 Since I have not been able to obtain permission from the students (most of whom have now graduated) to publish examples of their writing I have refrained from giving direct quotations from the students’ written responses to the texts studied.

The second characteristic of parrhesia according to Foucault is that “there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth” (Foucault 1983:lect 1). But unlike the objective Cartesian truth, the truth of the parrhesiastes is true because he sincerely “knows that it is true” (ibid.). Whereas Cartesian truth always needs a coincidence between belief and truth in the form of some external evidential mental experience, “for the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a verbal activity, namely, parrhesia” (ibid.). In other words, the truth of the parrhesiastes is subjective, but at the same time, it is more than just opinions, which is what Foucault calls the “pejorative sense of the word”. This pejorative type of parrhesia, he says, is “not very far from ‘chattering’ and ... consists in saying any or everything one has in mind without qualification” (ibid.).

Here it is interesting to note that when the students come to realize that what is valued in the course is subjective frankness rather than learning the objective truth of the authorities they sometimes initially tend to overdo it, falling into a kind of “pejorative parrhesia”. Many of the students also come into contact with postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory for the first time during their studies in Sweden, which can add to this fallacious belief that “anything goes”.⁶ As the term progresses, however, and the students have to qualify their increasingly subjective responses, they become more and more confident in themselves and their own beliefs, until they finally “know that it is true”.

Thus the only “proof” of the parrhesiastes’ sincerity as a truth-teller is his or her moral courage, to dare to put him- or herself in danger by telling the truth, which also is the third defining characteristic of parrhesia. Foucault gives a number of examples of how a speaker may put him- or herself in danger by telling what he or she believes to be the truth: “Parrhesia, then is linked to courage in the face of danger... And in its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the ‘game’ of life or death” (ibid.). Even though an international university student in Sweden does not risk death by speaking the truth against the authorities (the teacher or exami-

6 This is a common misunderstanding of contemporary literary studies among Swedish students as well, that it is all about opinions and that you cannot fail as long as you give voice to an opinion, however far-fetched it may be.

ner), the analogy is not too far-fetched. The students are dependent on the teacher's final assessment; a failing grade for a foreign student could result in difficulties for the student to prolong or renew his or her visa.⁷ Thus a student may feel a certain "risk or danger for him or her in telling the truth" to an authority, since that authority may actually "exile him," to use Foucault's words (*ibid.*). But there are also other ways for a student to put him- or herself at danger and thus fulfill this third criterion for becoming a parrhesiastes. "If, in a political debate," Foucault says, "an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority's opinion, ... he uses parrhesia" (*ibid.*). This moral courage to speak one's subjective truth even though it may jeopardize one's social position in the community of students is something which takes more time for students to develop. In the beginning they are quite concerned about receiving approval, not only from the teacher, but also from the other students. Toward the end of the course, however, students dare to disagree more and more, to actually stand up for their beliefs, and to speak what they believe to be true even though it goes against the opinions of the others. By doing this, I would argue, they prove their moral courage as parrhesiastes.

Related to moral courage is the fourth characteristics of parrhesia according to Foucault, that of criticism: "The function of parrhesia," he says, "is not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but has the function of criticism: criticism of the interlocutor or of the speaker himself" (*ibid.*). Even though students are encouraged to take a critical stance toward what they are reading and hearing—both the fiction itself and the literary criticism and theory as well as the responses of the other students—it does take time for them to develop this critical attitude, especially if the student is alone in his or her critique of an authority. But also here they tend to encourage each other. When they see or hear another student challenging a critical or theoretical authority, or some aspect of the fictional work under discussion, or maybe some aspect of US society or culture as represented in the fictional text under discussion, they tend to catch on, emboldened

7 Over a one-year period foreign students need to pass 50% of their courses in order to renew their visa. Swedish students need to achieve the same goal, but they only risk losing their student allowance and loan.

by one another. What is interesting to witness in the parrhesiastic development of the international students is how they are able to transfer their growing critical skills, from being applied to seemingly harmless literary texts, to critical and theoretical texts, and then on to larger political and ideological “discourses” in the Foucauldian sense. For example, they tend to draw more and more parallels between the sociopolitical situation in the United States represented in the fictional texts studied and that of their home countries. Eventually, this critical stance will be turned against themselves when they start to realize that they too are part of the social and cultural conventions they are criticizing. As Foucault says, “Parrhesia is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself” (ibid.), which leads the parrhesiastes to correct his or her interlocutor, or him- or herself, saying: “This is the way you behave, but that is the way you ought to behave. . . . This is what I have done, and was wrong in so doing” (ibid.). This critical stance toward oneself and one’s own culturally constructed subjectivity, I would argue, is something that is greatly enhanced by the international context of the seminars, in other words, by the fact that they are situated in a literal and literary border zone. With a safe distance to one’s own cultural background as well as to that of the literary works studied, it is much easier to voice one’s criticism, and to realize how one has been wrong in accepting certain truths as ontologically, rather than epistemologically, given.

“The last characteristic of parrhesia,” according to Foucault “is this: in parrhesia, telling the truth is regarded as a duty” (ibid.). By duty Foucault means that the speaker chooses to speak the truth even though he or she does not have to. The duty to do so is toward oneself rather than toward an authority. In a traditional educational setting the student would have to provide the correct answer, or “objective truth,” in order to receive a passing grade; that is, the duty to speak the “truth” is toward the teacher or examiner. But what I argue here, and try to encourage in my course, is that we as educators must create an environment in which students feel free to say what they honestly and frankly believe to be the truth, even if it goes against what they have been brought up to believe, or if it challenges public opinion. A truly democratic educational setting is one in which the voices of the minority are allowed to be heard, and where it is felt to

be a duty to speak one's own truth rather than that which is felt to be the truth of the teacher or the academy.

As I hope has been made clear from the discussion above, Foucault's concept of parrhesia, or truth-speaking, can be very helpful to highlight and explain what I see as the great advantages of studying literature in an international context, or border zone. The study of literature always involves a certain engagement with the other as well as with one self. But here I have argued that literary studies in an international border zone greatly enhances the student's achievements in terms of personal development as truth-speakers and in the form of critical self-awareness.

The concern with the self which this kind of literary study involves is clearly something new to the international students who come from a non-western, non-Christian, cultural background, which has emphasized communal identity and social belonging over individual subjectivity. But at the same time it might even be easier for these students to practice this kind of Greek parrhesia described above since they are relatively unfamiliar with the Christian tradition of self-renunciation. Swedish students are sometimes afraid of disclosing what they see as the truth about oneself.

Therefore, I also agree with Besley and Peters's conclusions about how Foucault "links this parrhesiastical form of education to democracy" (Besley & Peters 2007:101). They argue that education today has "deviated from our historical models and begun to shed the concern for truth and truth-telling in favour of entrepreneurship" (ibid.). They provide examples of parrhesia in action in different educational contexts, such as the radical response to the 2003 war against Iraq, during which many were using the Internet "not only to find information about the war, but also to communicate with each other." (Besley & Peters 2007:105) Therefore, they argue, "teachers now need to pay attention to the ways that youth construct themselves in a globalized postmodern world in relation to the Other, and in response to threats to the security of their world—threats that currently include terrorism and war" (Besley & Peters:106). Thus I would also argue that international literary studies in a border zone like Sweden is another way for students to construct, or rather reconstruct, themselves in relation to each other, and in response to the literary fiction and theory studied.

That the primary goal of higher education is to prepare students for effective and democratic action is something that Besley and Peters share with educational theorists John Bowden and Ference Marton. In their *The University of Learning* they argue that the purpose of learning

is to enable students to engage in effective action in relation to purposes and criteria which they have accepted as their own. This action takes place in various situations, and each situation can be viewed in different ways. We act and react to a situation as we see it and the way we see it decides how we act... We can prepare our students for effective action by enabling them to see certain situations in certain ways. By developing their seeing, by developing the eyes through which they see things... New ways of seeing might occasionally replace old ways of seeing. Once we have seen a pattern in an ambiguous picture it may be difficult to 'unsee' it. (Bowden & Marton 1998:7)

As I have argued above, one of the most effective ways to develop and widen students' "ways of seeing" is through literary studies in an international context with a focus on questions of subjectivity. Only through this type of engagement with self and other—involving frankness, moral truth, danger, criticism and duty—can one achieve what Foucault in another context calls the "ethics of transformation." Thus, to be true to ourselves, we need to constantly question what we and others see as our true identity: "...the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring" (Foucault 1994d:166).

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