

Appreciation

Letter to Dick

David Bleich

Dear Dick,

I'd like to record this note of thanks for helping to prepare us for how things are now: we are finding it increasingly difficult to represent our subject "English" to students seeking a professional life in the academy; we are finding ourselves without the political tailwinds of the fifties and sixties, when there were jobs for almost all who wanted them; we are observing how the profession of "English Studies" has turned in on itself, so that its outlook as well as its idioms of discourse are fearful and furtive; we are being barely able to find any venue for us humanist scholars to relate our subject to the rest of society; we are being forced to mind our own business; we are being tempted to believe the lie of "cultivating our own garden," because the current paths of social change are so repellent that they seem unsusceptible of amelioration. Thanks for getting us ready to live affirmatively under these circumstances.

Although you are not the only member of our profession who has been committed to the project of *tikkun olam*—the betterment of the whole society, you are one of very few who has, for a lifetime, reminded us of how, at every moment, in our teaching, our scholarship, our uses of language, and even in our MLA cash bars, we are responsible for the common welfare. Your voice has helped to teach how the details of our daily professional activity relate to the efforts of the very rich to steal our livelihood and the livelihood of others like us who have only modest wishes and expectations for a safe and healthy material life.

It is true, Dick, that I reject Karl Marx and his arrogant academically protected urging that others should fight and die to secure the "means of production" while he sat in the library giving marching orders. It is true that I am disgusted by his opportunistic uses of European Jew-hating to further his economic theories. It is true that

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I have never found inspiration in the fluent abstractions of academic theorists, many of them Jews, who have considered Marxism “the answer.” Yet as much as you use the vocabulary of Marxian theory your importance and appeal as a scholar and member of the profession, most of your work, your vision, your reading and writing, is just not Marxian: it is human and humanist through and through. Why the Marxian discourse appears in your work has been a bit of a riddle to me.

I don’t know that I have learned more from any other figure in academic life than from you. I remember, when you were editing *College English* and decided on printing one of my essays, you took the trouble—it took some back and forth correspondence—to force me to change my pronouns to “he or she.” (I think it was the early seventies.) I remember trying to think through what was happening and why: what was Ohmann up to? It took some time for me to recognize *tikkun olam*. Then the issue guest-edited by Louie Crew came out in 1974: for God’s sake, who in the world would take such a risky initiative, and in what cause? Who would recognize that the path toward full equality means facing what no one else would face? Well you did it, in the cause of *tikkun olam*.

When I read your work, even to this day, I often find myself wishing to have formulated your sentences, your phrases, to have chosen your terms. You have access to the vernacular, willingness to let all the parts of your language “out” and make it point, simultaneously, to the action of your personal tastes and to the larger actions of your many memberships in society. This is the language of someone who already feels himself a part of others, who already speaks to others as if, at once, they matter and he cares. I also feel this way about the language of Adrienne Rich, but I am hard pressed to name many, or perhaps any, more academic figures whose language uses are so compelling. Academic life tends to drill this trait of plain talk out of us—I think we all have it in the fourth grade—but for some reason you and others from time to time resist the academic imperative to speak as if we were not a part of what we are studying.

I realize that no one should be held up as a model. There is a fundamental difference between a model and a caring figure whose behavior merits emulation. Your writing helps to prevent the confusion of the two. In your essays and books, I feel the struggle, the missteps, the hesitations, as well as the sweep and visions of your thoughts. Even if I don’t believe that Holden Caulfield’s critique of phoniness was a critique of capitalism, I can teach others that asking the question is essential for understanding literature. And I can say that those who have the courage to ask such questions are those who take literature seriously as a scene of social action that tells truths that no other kind of writing does. Your understanding of literature, of the canon, of the works that have been held up as “models,” has helped to revoke their status as models and has, instead, taken them seriously and as practical formulations that we can overtake in our approach to political scenes in society as well as to our daily lives.

Who would not smile while contemplating a title like *English in America*? Ain't I an English speaker? I did not come from England. Wordsworth was not my ancestral poet, nor was Chaucer or Shakespeare, and definitely not Spenser or Milton. But they do not seem to be your ancestral poets either, and you have successfully presented yourself, a nice white American Christian male, as someone whose responsibility has been to notice every citizen and to ask if the literature is for them, if the literacy they are learning is the kind that will contribute to *tikkun olam*. The canon happens, you said, through a "shared historical process." You said this while people were still teaching New Criticism, which took received "great works" as given and said that they should be insulated from the contaminating forces of collective interest, individual taste and feeling, and processes of negotiated interpretation. You showed that history is what is happening to those who are doing the reading, and that unless we wake up to that process, the practice of honoring literature as isolated goodness and beauty is idle. It has been years, but perhaps you have had an effect! We have gradually stopped staring at an imaginary English navel, and we are asking what others are thinking while we read.

You observed recently that "if any group of academic and nonacademic intellectuals has changed minds and changed the world over the past twenty years it is feminists;...they have done so through a body of revisionist scholarship that has changed how we understand reality, through challenges in the streets and in the electoral process, through the building of thousands of feminist organizations and institutions, through pressure on gender relations in the recesses of the professional-managerial class domestic sphere..." This strand, this interest, this recognition in your work lays the foundation of *tikkun olam*. In advancing this observation, you are noticing as much about how slowly things change as how they are changing.

However, if we study your work, we learn that the principles of change are embedded in the language we teach, and the pace of change may be compared with the pace of the change of language. For me, this is the zone of your most valuable achievements. You wrote an essay some years back that described how you asked your students to learn to interview and to describe and communicate the interviewing experience to others in the course called "Writing as Social Exploration." Here the substance of the course was the students speaking and listening to one another, and then in placing you the teacher in the same area of exploration. Everyone's uses of language became important, and whether the subject was called writing or composition or the use of language, the efforts of the students focused on what to say and how to hear, how to interpret and how to contribute.

This is a course that challenges one of the secret wishes of academic intellectuals: the wish that language remain transparent and purely referential. In your course, the language begins to disturb both speakers and listeners. Sure one can say that the subject matters of sexual coming out, of rape, of poverty, of degenerate social conditions are doing the disturbing; in part, that is the case, but

your course shows that the announcement of these social facts in school are what disturbs the most. You have said, in effect, to your class: we will say out loud what is really happening as we speak to the wider variety of “others” around us in this class, around us in this university, around us in this Middletown of Connecticut. In your class, in contrast to the ordinary composition class where the students are “pressed to submerge their identities in academic styles and purposes that are not their own,” the language begins to matter, as the students overtake the language of their own experience in the cause of, once again, *tikkun olam*. The students are using the language to build their experience, to recreate the experience of others regardless of how unpleasant it begins to feel, and to use the language of our common subject, English in America, to integrate themselves into the perspectives and struggles of friends, colleagues, loved ones, and, perhaps, those not lucky enough to go to school at Wesleyan University.

You created this course because again, unlike most others in our profession, you noticed the poverty in our textbooks which have become necessary helpers to the thousands of inadequately prepared teachers of writing and the use of language. You said out loud what many have understood but have not said out loud: that textbooks in writing subtly teach that history is unrelated to writing, that surfaces of things matter more than substance, that we can treat complex things and systems as the sum of their parts, that we can consider our own perception as enough of a subject matter about which to write, and that the classroom is no place to articulate, let alone face in substance, the many conflicts in family and society that each of us faces all the time.

Your classrooms have been mobilized and socialized, and you have created “classes” that can actually be called social classes. True, you have also spoken repeatedly to thousands of teachers and other interested parties in our profession, and we have enjoyed these moments, these talks, these contacts with your voice. But in your social classes, we see the inexorable movements of change, slow though they are. It is inconceivable that the students would not pick up your language as all persons pick up the influential language uses around them, a process especially salient throughout childhood and youth.

Although you have urged that our job is to tell the truth and expose lies, you have also noticed that this was a starting point. You have been among those who, traveling further on this road, have shown that it matters a great deal which words, which languages, which sentences are used and to which constituency and for what purpose. You have shown that telling the truth and exposing lies is not quite enough if we are not also alert to the substance of our words, to the choices of words made by those who are not humanely oriented. As a stand-alone principle, telling the truth and exposing lies, as attractive an ideal as this may seem, brings us dangerously close to wishing again for the transparency of language, rather than understanding each utterance in its social membership, its locus of living human interests, the project represented by your

English in America, your politics of letters, your politics of knowledge.

So thanks, Dick, for making it possible, reasonable, and appealing for us all to persevere in the common project of *tikkun olam*.

Part III:

A Conversation with Richard Ohmann