A Defense of Publicity

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1. A MINIMUM RESPONSIBILITY of academics as citizens of a national and a global society, I suggest, is to respond to the off campus when asked about matters for which we have proven expertise—in my own case to respond to a request to speak to a Canadian literature reading group, to serve on an awards jury, to answer invitations to speak to Canadianists abroad, to investigate a pedagogy question for a government ministry, to comment on a book or an author's death or the construction of a news story if telephoned by a newspaper or radio station. Those outside the academy don't necessarily view us as especially objective, but they often believe that we have information they may not have or questions they have not thought to ask. And what about those occasions when one is not asked but one suspects that one's knowledge might change events outside the academy were it disseminated there? Don't we still have a responsibility to educate—not necessarily to change minds but to enlarge them?

The expertise which most qualifies me and many others to speak out on public issues is interpreting images, situations, promises, and various speech acts. It also qualifies some of those off campus, such as CBC's Terry O'Reilly, host of the program "Under the Influence." U.S. poet Charles Bern

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stein has repeatedly argued that it is only through a society's intellectuals being willing to contribute to "the education of the public at large" that a society can be "innovative, vibrant, and socially responsible" ("Poet" 28) and its politics avoid stagnation. It was a similar thought that motivated me in the 1990s to write books on Kim Campbell and Adrienne Clarkson and on the Mahaffy-French murder cases. I doubt that these books by themselves did a huge lot of good. Education is necessarily a collaboration. Yet some accurate understandings of once complex academic concepts—constructedness, situatedness, discourse, deconstruction, representation—have, surprisingly to me, penetrated parts of popular culture. Possibly that's an effect of our on-campus teaching once our students go back out into the wider society. And once they are out there, possibly they read some of the few books or articles we send out after them.

2. Does such academic outreach constitute "activism"?—a word panel organizer Clint Burnham foregrounded in offering parameters for this discussion. Activism doesn't always involve scholarship any more than scholarship must involve activism. It can be a method of disseminating scholarship but can also be, unfortunately, a way of diluting it. The two are usually directed toward different audiences, at different intensities and with different social aims. At its intellectually least substantial, activism can be mere lobbying. Being an activist, that is, says nothing about the quality of one's research or one's worthiness as a citizen—only that one wants to address a large audience and hopes to cause societal change. Charles Darwin didn't intend to be an activist, although he was perceived as such; his work led indirectly to explicit activisms such as those of Fanon and Martin Luther King. It also led to the State of Tennessee's explicitly activist Butler Act, which prohibited the teaching of evolutionary theory. Rachel Carson on writing *Silent Spring* intended to be an activist but remained much more a scholar than has David Suzuki.

Activism can be as scholarly or unscholarly as scholarship itself. Back in 1969–71 the activist scholarship of Robin Mathews and his Carleton colleague James Steele resulted in legal requirements that Canadian universities advertise academic job vacancies and make them open to Canadian candidates. It was a well-argued citizenly intervention for which most of us should be grateful. In 1995 Mathews published *The Treason of the Intellectuals* in which he accused Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon, George Bowering, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Robert Kroetsch, and others, including myself, of being "treasonous" Canadians whose ideas in some cases had descended from Derrida and Heidegger and therefore from those of Nazi Germany (11, 67–69, 77, 102). Again, Mathews was doing what he believed

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was his citizenly duty. Activism usually involves, as in both Mathews cases, appeals to emotions as well as judgment, in various proportions, while academics—in their research and teaching if not in their citizenship—are expected to put judgment and disinterested research first. As scholars, we can be passionate about making public whatever our research has revealed, but we can't fail students or ideas merely because we don't like them—however passionately.

3. Activism among literary commentators can sometimes lead, unfortunately, to their selectively presenting information on an issue and then instructing readers about how to respond. Canadian examples include Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and John Ralston Saul's "three pillars" books on Canadian culture. I think that today some postcolonial criticism moves toward diluting scholarship with activism when it openly proclaims having included "ethical" considerations in its choices of which authors and texts to read or in its evaluations of the overall literary field. In strikingly contrasting ways, both Auden, when he wrote "Time will pardon Paul Claudel / And pardon him for writing well," and some postcolonial critics appear to link literary quality with moral views. I don't think they can be directly linked, although literary quality is a subjective enough concept to have permitted a lot of activism. I doubt that time will forgive Claudel, just because he wrote "well," for having publicly welcomed the collaborationist Vichy government in 1940, or that time will forgive Ezra Pound for his activist anti-Semitism. Auden eventually deleted the Claudel lines from his memorial poem for Yeats. Unforgiveable, anti-social, self-destructive, or otherwise personally unadmirable people can write structurally and linguistically edgy texts, while kind, congenial, and politically progressive ones can have difficulty thinking past clichés. I don't believe that novelist Gwethalyn Graham deserved the 1944 Governor General's award for *Earth and High Heaven* no matter how movingly the novel protested Canadian anti-Semitism. I don't believe that "time"—by which Auden presumably meant evolving human culture—will consecrate anyone as a writer merely for having written in unsurprising forms from within the viewpoint of a discriminated-against constituency. But, how many of us have not made subjective curricular preferences—ones we thought progressive or provocative, timely, or perhaps useful? Arguably, good academic citizenship can include the exposing of one's students to ranges of literary argument, complexity, and innovation.

4. Outside of memoirs or biographies, a literary scholar's citizenly responsibility to writers, including living ones, is probably to treat them impersonally. It may sell books, or popularize a course, to present the

author name as a referent to a wise and socially conscientious person, but it is more socially responsible to teach that it is the name—or trademark—of a group of texts. Otherwise we are in the business of judging authors as if they were activists and training students to read them as if they were activists. What I'm arguing here, as some may notice, is one of the implications of Charles Olson's essay "Against Wisdom as Such," in which he argued that a writer is not free to be a part of any "sect," that for such a "man or woman" there are only one's "own composed forms." "Otherwise," he wrote, "art is washed away, turned into that second force, religion" (69).

Bernstein, who is undoubtedly a kind of outreaching activist scholar, has added that scholarly preferences for literature believed to be morally good for society and its citizens often have the counter-effect of erasing the formally irregular and innovative and thus lowering the social value of provocative creativity. Calling such preferences "anti-poetic," "anti-philosophic," and "normalizing," he has written:

> Within the academic environment, thought tends to be rationalized—subject to examination, paraphrase, repetition, mechanization, reduction. It is treated: contained and stabilized. And what is lost in this treatment is the irregular, the non-quantifiable, the nonstandard or nonstandardizable, the erratic, the inchoate.[...]
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> Poetry is turbulent thought.[...] It leaves things unsettled, unresolved—leaves you knowing less than you did when you started. ("What's Art" 42–43)

I believe good scholarship is not all that dissimilar. It can clarify a factual ground or a rhetorical field, offer plausible readings of texts, even offer ironies or paradoxes, but it can rarely resolve the social choices that may have to be made on the basis of the information it generates. Yet on university administrations there are not many who are against answers as such.

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