
Shame

BOB BLAISDELL

A follow-up to 'The jockey and his horse', in *ET*75, focussing on this occasion on Anthony Trollope rather than Samuel Johnson, and once again on his remedial students in New York

Neville thought of showing Kate's letter to Miss Mellerby, but when he read it a second time he made up his mind that he would keep it to himself. The letter was all very well, and as regarded the expressions towards himself, just what it should be. But he felt that it was not such a letter as Miss Mellerby would have written herself... He was a little ashamed of his Kate, and he thought that Miss Mellerby might perceive her ignorance if he shewed that letter.

Anthony Trollope, *An Eye for an Eye*

I am proud of my remedial students' writing. There are often moments and occasionally entire essays where the student, amused or moved and communicating her feelings, moves me to laughter or tears.

Writing about a moral dilemma in the special-education author Torey Hayden's memoir *One Child*, my student Nabil, who, in several short pieces until this essay, had shown little interest in explaining anything, was reminded, he said, of an experience back home:

I know one person from my former country, Pakistan, who was retarded and physically disabled. Doctors said about him that he couldn't walk by himself and also couldn't think like a normal person. Yasir got around the house by a wheelchair and sometimes Shahide, his brother, picked him up in his arms to move him one place to another. Yasir doesn't have parents because they died a long time ago. His parents gave another son, Shahide, the responsibility to take care of Yasir. Shahide took care of his brother as his mother and father did. He loved him very much. From my point of view, they couldn't live without each other, because they had a very good understanding. For example, whenever they were hungry they ate together. If Shahide was out his retarded brother would wait for him until he got home and then they would eat.

Shahide didn't feel as if he were the servant of his retarded brother. He loved Yasir a lot and would do anything for him.

Their lives were going perfectly all right until Shahide fell in love with a girl of his village. He loved her a lot and he wanted to marry her. She also got ready to marry him. After a few days, when she heard that her fiance had a retarded brother and that she would have to take care of him after the marriage, she refused to marry him even though she loved him very much. He asked her,

"What do you want me to do to convince you to marry me?"

She said, "You have to send your brother to a school where retarded people live."

He agreed to do so. I was there when people from the school came to pick up his brother to take him to the school and Yasir was crying loud and loud. He was saying, "Shahide, I don't

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want to go away from you! I love you a lot, Shahide. Don't let them take me away."

After a few days Shahide got married with the girl he loved a lot. His life was going very well. One day Shahide went to meet Yasir at the school and he looked like an animal. Yasir didn't eat anything at the school, because he used to eat with Shahide at home. When Shahide came back home from the hospital he was angry at his wife. Shahide blamed his wife for his brother's miserable life in the hospital. They had a huge fight on this matter. Finally, he said to her, "I am going to bring Yasir back from the hospital. If you want to live in this home with my retarded brother you are most welcome. Otherwise you can go anywhere you want to go, because I can't live without my brother. Another reason that I am going to bring my brother back is that I gave a promise to my dead parents that I am going to take care of my brother until I die."

He brought his brother back home and his wife left his home for a long time. After a long time she went back to Shahide's home and said sorry to him for the mistake she made.

I remember feeling appalled at myself as I choked up reading the handwritten first draft of this story. As usual, it was in Nabil's lazy, curving, block capitals. As usual, there were misspellings, a lot of confusing punctuation, and no names – just "the brother" and "the other brother" and "the girl" and "the girl who became his wife." But, essentially, what you have just read was in the first draft; I queried various points and phrasings, but the essence and substance of what you see was there. All my querying and fixing, and pointing out errors did not prevent me from being overwhelmed by feeling.

When I handed back to Nabil this draft, I looked at him with interest for the first time, and I told him, "The story about the brothers – it's great."

He looked at me as if he had no idea what "story" I was talking about, and flipped through the pages. "Yes," he nodded. "It's true."

But my pride in their work is also my shameful secret. All of those remedial students failed reading and writing assessment exams; many are recent immigrants and are learning English as a second or third language; many are New York City public school drop-outs who earned their General Equivalency Diplomas. And yet, before the semester is over, most of them will have written at least one piece with deeper thought and feeling than I usually can manage.

(Is it that they grasp language as if with their hands, where we well-behaved, educationally socialized native speakers only use packaged phrasing?)

I am able to remove myself from my stirred responses if I have to, and I often have to, because my students' mechanics and grammar are rather faulty. But what about that fact – that fact that what they wrote stirs me, gives me a sense of life, quick and hot as fire? (I read our professional journals and find all suggestion of feeling mushy or ashamed, all language rigid and self-conscious. Original? Thoughtful? Isn't it just properly mannered in order not to say anything?) So many of my students so often say something with their imperfect, ungrammatical English that I feel as if I'm reading the voices of characters that Charles Dickens would enjoy.

So, in their communication of feeling, produced by unaffected sincerity, are those rarest of all literary effects to go for nothing because they misspell the name of their school, of their sports hero, of their teacher – because they write: "Their was nothing for me to do, so I gone home"? I am so ashamed of liking what I like! Of loving the directness of their language, of their saying exactly and deliberately what they mean. I regret that as some of them become good students they will lose their freshness, their ability to write what they mean – I regret their socialization. It's sad to me!

The Hemingway Book Club of Kosovo is a beautiful recent memoir by Paula Huntley, a novice teacher, a professional business woman who took a job teaching English in post-war Kosovo, to pass the time while her husband helped train lawyers and judges there. In it, she notes about her Albanian Kosovar students:

I think the power of their language is that it speaks to the very incomprehensibility of the experiences they are trying to describe. Their sparse language, and even their misuse of words, draws the reader's attention to the fact that there are some things no skill with vocabulary – and no perfectly chosen combination of words – can come close to capturing.

I don't think Nabil's story, given the details, could be much better. In draft after draft it got a little clearer, but it did not get better – if we are using "better" in a literary rather than academic sense. But my shame! After one of the drafts, I read aloud his story, and some of the students seemed moved. Nabil, however, was

not in class that day, and Kurt, a male Bangladeshi student, noticed eyes on him, and he turned to his peers, and smiling, said, “Sorry, that’s not mine!”

“Why you say it’s not if no one said it was?” asked Sonya. “Besides, it’s very good!”

“It’s great,” I said. I am nearly shameless with my students.

“It’s sad,” said Gertrude. “It is very sad. But I kind of understand the wife not wanting the brother around.”

“Right! The husband can blame her, but we don’t! Isn’t that amazing! One of you wrote this! But you all write things like this! With this quality!”

“Everybody’s got a story, professor,” said weary Gertrude. “I know you’ve heard lots of mine.”

But with my colleagues, most of them anyway, I don’t share my students’ work. I’m disappointed by their reactions. I want to talk about the stories, about the neat turns of phrase, the feeling conveyed in spite of all the obvious errors – but they’re tired, or they’re less charmed, or they just don’t see it. I think I do see it, but most of time I’m too ashamed to say so.

There are stories in my students’ papers I have never seen in literature, and I’m astounded, amazed, and, when I first came to New York City and was more academically naïve, I was proud to share what my students wrote with my friends. This was literature, after all, and I was sharing it. It’s not a phenomenon limited to my classes, as it innocently seemed to me. When I read colleagues’ students’ portfolios, there (in any set from a professor who is not tyrannical) are several moving essays. Perhaps because I don’t have a corner on the market, I’m less of a champion – there are many fair maidens. I have some perspective. But with that perspective has come a loss of pride, and the pride veers into shame.

Even back when I was their writings’ giddy popularizer, I learned to be ashamed of their

Some points on Anthony Trollope

BOB BLAISDELL, in ‘Shame’ links his feelings regarding the expressive but syntax-deficient writing of his students with a Trollopiean character’s embarrassment in a comparable situation. Below are some highlights on Trollope from Margaret Drabble’s *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1998 revision):

- life dates: 1815–82
- after his father’s death, his mother Frances Trollope salvaged the family’s fortunes in her fifties with a bestseller, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832)
- began his career in the Post Office as a clerk, first in London then in Ireland
- undertook major Post Office missions to Egypt, the West Indies and the United States
- introduced into the UK the pillar box for letters
- edited the *St Paul’s Magazine*, 1867–70
- is best known as a novelist for his ‘Barsetshire’ series, set in an imaginary West Country county, and written over a twenty year period.

spelling, and so when I presented their work I preferred to type it up myself, silently correcting the spelling and regularizing some of the grammar. But I’m older and duller, and when I read my remedial students’ work now, I’m thinking like a censor – yes, very nice, but that won’t pass. I have become complicit with the rules. I disagree with all grading rubrics, but I acknowledge them and try to get my students to satisfy them, as if we’re playing a game. I am not willing to confront everyone anymore with my argument that what many of students are writing is literature, and that art versus anything else deserves to win. My shame. ■