CHOOSING ENGLISH

PATRICIA DUNCKER

When I was at secondary school in Jamaica fifty years ago I was taught Creative Writing in English by a teacher called Mrs Davies. We didn't actually describe this activity as creative writing. We were not encouraged to be creative. Creativity was subversive and intellectually suspect. People who were creative were either sodomites or had affairs with other men's wives. So we weren't creative. In any case, we were all girls. Poetry counted more than prose, so we left out prose, and only men wrote poetry. This contradictory problem was never addressed. We called our poetry sessions English Composition and were told that anything we wrote, or better still, copied out into our exercise books, had to be properly spelt, punctuated with elegance and grammatically correct. For English Composition we were required to compose a poem in a recognised form, or learn one by a Great English Author, then stand up in class beside our desks, and speak the lines aloud. Mrs Davies had read everything already and knew it all by heart. Therefore, if we were not word perfect, she noticed. If

any one dared to write a poem of her own, she would be wise to rhyme. If Mrs Davies didn't like what you were reciting, whether copied or original, after about the first line, she pulled no punches whatsoever. She simply shouted 'NEXT!' And you were rarely allowed to complete a poem without interruption.

'Straighten your back. Breathe. Louder, girl. Head up! Don't mutter. None of us can hear you. NEXT!'

A wave of nationalist poetry, celebrating all things Jamaican, swept the island. Mrs Davies didn't think much of this phenomenon. One such unfortunate poem, written by Hugh Doston Carberry, known as Dossie, became quite popular and sticks in my memory. The title, 'Nature', led the unsuspecting to think that it might compete with Wordsworth, and this is how it begins.

> We have neither Summer nor Winter,
> Neither Autumn nor Spring.
> We have instead the days
> When the gold sun
> Shines on the lush green canefields-
> Magnificently.
>
> The days when the rain beats like bullets on the roofs
> And there is no sound but the swish of water in the gullies
> And trees struggling in the high Jamaica winds.

One member of my class, which was thirty-five strong, no one daring to whisper or fidget, stood up to recite H.D. Carberry's effusion, and took a false turning.

'We have instead the days

When the lush green canefields…'

'Shine on the gold sun I suppose,' yelled Mrs Davies contemptuously, 'NEXT!'

The next girl began, 'The moon like a yellow banana on a blue enamel plate….'

She got no further. 'NEXT!' shouted Mrs Davies. I can still hear her, shouting 'NEXT!'

Mrs Davies used to teach English Literature in exactly the same way- we learned massive chunks of poetry by heart, stood up in class and recited line after line after line. I scored quite a coup with 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' simply because I was word perfect and the poem was gratifyingly short.

'Very good, girl. Now describe a daffodil in your own words.' Mrs Davies knew all our names but never used them unless she intended to pounce. There was a momentary diversion. 'Leslie Lewis, take that gum out of your mouth. Spit it out now. Into your handkerchief. At once. Go on girl, go on. Daffodils. What are you waiting for? '

None of us had ever seen a daffodil, because we were children of the tropics. Great English Authors didn't write poems about bougainvillaea or hibiscus. So when Wordsworth described daffodils we all just looked blank. And I had no words other than his to praise the miraculous dancing host. I stood there, hesitating, my recent triumph fading away. Mrs Davies went home and came back with a calendar called Flowers of Britain. She turned to March, held it up for us and said, 'This is a daffodil.' We all looked at it, and I remember Leslie Lewis whispering to me, 'Oh, it isn't golden, it's yellow.' And there was only one daffodil, its great powdered trumpet leering towards us.

The thing that now strikes me about the daffodil incident is this: if you have never seen the earth die, if you have never seen it go grey, brown, blue, all colour disappearing into a mound of damp mulch, if you have never smelt frost on dead leaves, then

you have no idea what daffodils mean, for they are the first real sign of spring. They are the first sign of colour that comes back. But for us the resonance of the seasons had no meaning. We saw a single yellow daffodil. And we had indeed never seen either summer or winter, neither autumn nor spring. Those northern time-markers were empty words.

I was the only white-skinned child in that class. Some of the other teachers were white, but not Mrs Davies. She was a middle-class Jamaican, educated in Jamaica, who had never, I believe, visited 'the mother country', anymore than I ever had. I can remember everything Mrs Davies taught me. Contrary to all appearances and conventional expectations, she was a very effective teacher. I can still see her straight back, powerful brown arms, thickly powdered face and flowered dresses, the dark purple of her lipstick and the matching varnish on her nails and toes. She never sweated or looked hot. She carried a shiny black handbag. We dreamed that she marched the concrete walkways of our school, dangerous, armed. Her powerful perfume eddied through the still air when she turned to write on the blackboard. Studying Great White Male English Authors in the tropics had a very peculiar effect on my brain.

Mrs Davies told us that we must always do our best and write well in English because the greatest writing in the world is written in English. Here is the gist of what she told me during the years I sat in her class, concentrating, anxious. Many other languages have been poured into English: Greek, Latin, French, Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and all those Celtic languages. English is a magpie language; she has stolen and absorbed all other tongues. She has grown rich and fat through appropriation and theft. It's a very supple language, because it will reach out towards Caribbean

languages and embrace unintelligible dialects. Dig and you will find English words hidden there. English has archaeological levels of history and time left buried in the language, like a fossil record. These levels are astonishingly beautiful, subtle and multi-coloured. English is one of the richest languages in the whole world. English has a vocabulary like Ali Baba's cave. This is because of the Empire. The English have left their language lurking in Africa and Asia, India, Australia and the Americas. But English has taken as much as she has given, absorbed other words, - jodhpurs, Tiffin, camouflage, déja vu, - into her capacious skirts. She has a hierarchy of registers, formal English, Biblical English, judicial English, casual English, in which you can greet your neighbours and chat. You must never use obscene English. Young ladies do not swear. But you must understand it when Shakespeare does. You must choose English. And you must respect your language. You will never be disappointed when you dig down into that language. You will be astonished at what you will find.

Mrs Davies taught me to love the way this language can produce gorgeousness, without necessarily producing meaning. The grandeur of English, she explained, lies in its capacity for excess. You must never be excessive, but English can be. Shakespeare is, of course, the master of excess. The greatest English writer is Shakespeare. I believed her. Here, once again, are the daffodils, from *The Winter's Tale*, where Perdita praises the flowers of spring,

daffodils
That come before the swallow dares and take
The winds of March with beauty.

I remember reciting that speech and memorising a great parade of flowers that I could not imagine and had never seen. Thus Shakespeare became a sacred text, flooded with secret meanings. The other passage, which I recited, standing to attention in that cool classroom haunted by sea winds, is from *Timon of Athens*, when he says,

> Come not to me again; but say to Athens
> Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
> Upon the beachèd verge of the salt flood,
> Who once a day with his embossed froth
> The turbulent surge shall cover.

This is Timon's epitaph, spoken with great authority and dignity. He is transformed into a mollusc, and in the house of many mansions he has chosen the seashore, where he will spend eternity. I was born on an island, I heard the sea throughout my childhood, I smelled its presence. I knew where to find Timon, for I too had walked the beachèd verge of the salt flood.

Shakespeare is never on a man's list of the writers who have influenced him. He was, however, on Iris Murdoch's list as the 'patron saint of novelists', and for me he remains a big, big love, possibly because he is so intensely imagined by other writers, re-written, re-interpreted. Virginia Woolf said, 'This is not "writing" at all. Indeed, I could say that Shakespeare surpasses literature altogether, if I knew what I meant.' I know what she means. He's like a glossary with which we can interpret everything else. The poetry of the plays hollows out an empty space for other writers to occupy. There is an emptiness at the core of Shakespeare's work, where the author is not. That space is taken up by the Renaissance tradition of arguing both sides of the case with equal conviction. Shakespeare unites the two things I value enormously in writing: poetry and the plot. He gives us the big scenes. His plays are like

grand operas with the poetry as the music. And he always gives us the huge, dramatic confrontations - I am thinking of the temptation scene in *Measure for Measure* where Lord Angelo confronts the novice nun, Isabella, and indeed himself, for the first time. 'What's this? What's this? What dost thou or what art thou Angelo? Dost thou desire her foully for those things which make her good?' Big scenes don't come better than that one.

Which plays haunt me most insistently? Sometimes I brood about individual characters. I am very attached to his villains, Iago and Edmund in particular, for their intelligence, ingenuity and inventiveness. Shakespeare's villains are usually in charge of the plot and as a writer to whom the plot, any plot, whatever the plot, remains crucial, these characters represent a rich field of admiration and inquiry. Villainy in Shakespeare's plays is always excessive. But sometimes there are plays without real villains; especially modern in its cynicism and daring is *Troilus and Cressida*. The character that beguiles me most in that play is the dog-fox, Ulysses, for his scepticism and love of argument. Troilus is his opposite, the romantic and passionate lover, who, during the debate concerning Helen,- should they keep her or give the mad bitch back to Troy and save their young men's lives? – he declares to Hector, 'What's aught but as 'tis valued?' Indeed! All writers reveal what they value, - in their languages, silences, praise-songs, class structures, their choice of work, for their characters and for themselves. I listen hard to other writers, to their fictions, their poetry, their secrets. What do you value? What do you really desire: wealth, fame, the eyes of the world, or this man's art and that man's scope? Those are the usual things. Shakespeare, however, keeps his cards close to his chest. I don't know what he valued.

Even his sexuality proved a bit of a mystery. Bring on *The Sonnets* for bi-sexual rage, especially - 'The expense of spirit in the waste of shame is lust in action…' Give me *King Lear* for the savagery of the politics imagined therein - 'So distribution should undo excess and each man have enough.' *The Tempest* for intellectual cussedness, *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the laughs and for making the upper classes look pompous, ignorant and silly.

I once gave a rare interview where my questioner had done her research and read my books, all of them, carefully. She pointed out, taking me by surprise,

'You have written: 'As a woman writer I am in the business of luring the Furies back out of their hutch and into the field.' What did you mean?'

To answer this question I have to address the issues that never were raised, defended or disputed in Mrs Davies' classroom, but simply assumed. Prose does not count and women cannot write. I would never have dared to argue with Mrs Davies then, and in some ways I don't wish to quarrel now. She gave me daffodils and Shakespeare. But I would have loved to learn by heart the poetry I have learned since, the poetry written by women: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets, Brontë's 'No coward soul is mine,' Rossetti's *Goblin Market,* and anything, anything at all, by Emily Dickinson. I possessed no knowledge of that long submerged stream of women's writing which raged, invisible, beside and beneath the wonders of Palgrave's Golden Treasury, and the various poetry anthologies ransacked by Mrs Davies. And I would have liked to get started somewhat earlier on the great novelists, women and men, banned from our narrow colonial curriculum. And yet, and yet. I may have been cheated of

other women's writing when I was a child, but I was not silenced. Mrs Davies gave us to understand that women do not write and then taught us how to do so. She celebrated complex literary English. But it was up to us what we did with it. She abhorred facile, clichéd, easy writing. I cannot imagine her ever reading a romantic novel. But I can easily see her reading Oscar Wilde and Swinburne. We would never be able to write as well as Shakespeare, but then nor would anybody else, whatever sex they were. She taught me to love poetry and to speak out in public. No audience would ever be as fearsome as Mrs Davies. She expected, and demanded, perfection. But never, for the rest of my life, will I ever accept the pernicious gospel that was fed to me by every institution I encountered, that women are necessarily second-class, second-rate, second-best, just because we are women.

Be good sweet maid and let who will be clever. Women are still often the recipients of these insidious double messages. I was praised for being clever, then, obscurely, punished for refusing to think or act as women are supposed to do. It takes time, courage and the solidarity of other women to acquire the virtues of insolence, which cannot, in my opinion, be overestimated. A woman who says no and means no, as our mythic ancestor Lilith once did, leaves chaos in her wake. In my early world, order and injustice held hands. The creation of chaos, and this lies within the grasp of every angry woman who desires to act, blooms like a subversive blessing.

What do I value? The freedom I have to think for myself.

Who were the Furies? They are the instruments of women's vengeance. The Furies, who appear to Orestes in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, are avenging the death of a woman, the woman he murdered, his mother Clytemnestra, who murdered her husband

Agamemnon, to avenge the murder of her daughter, Iphigenia. This chain of familial deaths in the House of Atreus appears endless. The Furies are the manifestation of a woman's anger. Anger is the least acceptable emotion in a woman and the one that is most necessary. Women are supposed to be very calm, docile, peacemakers, life-givers. We are supposed to be charming, conciliating, helpful, kind. Listen to that list. Is that supposed to be a row of virtues? What do we do with the dissenters, the women who resist? How on earth do we read ambitious, difficult writing that regards this list as a recipe for creating super-serviceable slaves? I wanted to make writing that resists. Anger gives you clarity, information, energy and fearlessness. I think it's very healthy to be a savagely angry person.

Anger affects the plots of fictions. Especially the endings. Many readers expect and look for resolutions that involve compromise, reconciliation and forgiveness. Even the *Oresteia*, beautiful and suggestive as it is, ends in a law court with justice handed out to mortals by the gods. The Furies are bought off with a shrine and obligatory honours paid to them by all the people of Athens, including those who might have been toying with the idea of murdering their loved ones. This is where Shakespeare becomes very interesting. Some things cannot be repaired, healed or made good. And he knows it. There is always a loose end in his plays - a question mark. Sometimes it's a spare character- like Antonio at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, who can't be married off, because the man he loves is going to marry Portia. Think of Malvolio, or Kent, or Jacques – the characters who refuse to be part of the happy endings, who gather themselves up, make excuses or stalk off the stage. But sometimes it's an odd final twist to the plot that remains unresolved, unexplained; as in *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream when the fairies invade the palace, chanting their threats and blessings, or the strange and terrible end to *The Tempest* when Prospero doesn't speak as an actor, but in character, drawing attention to his own exhausted powerlessness. I like uneasy endings. I treasure the loose ends. I think it's a good idea never to be assimilated into the collective happy ending and, like Jacques, to remain unashamedly enraged.

So I choose Shakespeare and I choose English. In many ways it was a literary language I had to learn. So much within its walls and histories seemed mysterious, meaningless. English is the language of diplomats, negotiators and liars. And it's the ideal language for writers, for that's the same thing as being a liar, because you can say one thing and mean forty different, other things. If you are any good as a writer you have made it all up, even the truthful parts, all the bits that really happened. And, above all, the ironies and ambiguities you can produce in English, give the language its edge. And yes, of course, it's a reader's language. When I finally went up to university, nine years after leaving Mrs Davies' classroom, reading a subject simply meant reading books, and the books had to be the best. Poetry still came first. The languages of poetry were more intense, elusive and metaphorical than anything else I read. Poetry appeared closer to philosophy, to a real literature of ideas. But I discovered torrents of prose, as intense and poetic as the modernist writing that seduced me entirely, and at last, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Henry James. I have spent my writing life trying to reconcile those two recalcitrant sisters: poetry and the plot.

English will reward you as a reader, but you have to be a very active reader, concentrated, anxious and engaged. Or you

will miss something rich and vital. I hear Mrs Davies. 'Wake up, girl. Don't doze off. NEXT!'

PATRICIA DUNCKER is the author of *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), winner of the McKitterick Prize and the Dillons First Fiction Award, *James Miranda Barry* (1999) *The Deadly Space Between* (2002), *Miss Webster and Chérif* (2006) shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, 2007. Her fifth novel, *The Strange Case of the Composer and his Judge* (Bloomsbury, 2010), was shortlisted for the CWA Golden Dagger award for the Best Crime Novel of the Year. She has published two collections of short fiction, *Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees* (1997), shortlisted for the Macmillan Silver Pen Award, and *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* (2003), all of which have been widely translated. Her critical work includes a collection of essays on writing, theory and contemporary literature, *Writing on the Wall* (2002). She is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Manchester.