

Silver Screen and Golden Days

BOOKS AREN'T IMPORTANT: movies are. You can't hold hands, let alone neck, reading books, but you can, or can try to, at *Casablanca* or *I Know Where I'm Going*. You can't clap while reading without dropping the book, but they clapped at the end of *Dead Poets' Society*, as Pauline Kael notes in her *New Yorker* review of the film (26 Je 1989, 71). Movies, not books, have animated the seasons of my life, and the memories of those seasons.

It's not that I've rushed to be the first in line for a new hit at the box office, at least not since the *Tarzan* series of childhood, and my viewing has tended to fall increasingly behind release dates. Not only the volume of films, but also a tendency to get hooked on a few epics, have contributed to my failure to keep up. I saw *Dr. Zhivago* three times before reading the book, an afterthought followed by the sneaking sensation that *Zhivago* was sort of a Russian Walter Mitty, writing verse while healing the afflicted, misunderstood and confined by marriage, but empowered by the loved of Julie Christie, from whom he is nevertheless torn by implacable fate.

Perhaps it takes one to know one. My Walter Mitty is the college English teacher and scholar, who for years struggled to escape the banker's three piece flannel suit, still hanging in the closet, emblematic of Mitty's loss of nerve and the difficulty of distinguishing illusion from reality. But surely, you might argue, the English teacher, real or imagined, must own the primacy of books. Not so; the axiom of movies' dominance over books remains unchallenged. Hollywood has seen to that, and in the *Dead Poets' Society*, which my wife and I rented from the video shop Saturday, literature, life, and teaching "combine and mingle," sparkling on the screen to "bring a strong regard and awe," as the devout are moved by light streaming through stained glass in Herbert's 17th century poetry. The devout worship; the *Dead Poets' Society* audience applauds.

Well, yes, there are differences. For instance, we did not applaud, and the poet of choice in the film is not Herbert but Whitman, although Herrick and others get nods. It may be that I identify more with the high school oafs at the high school princess' party than with the Welton Academy preppies, and from lack of experience am unconvinced of sadistic, vicious headmasters. And maybe it takes the deeper illusion-creating gloom of the movie house than is offered by our den and dog-haired sofa to encourage "buying into" this melo-

drama, and the extreme polarities of good and evil occupied by its characters.

Indeed, so extreme are the characterizations, that I mentioned to Wendy that the story is like a fairy tale, although instead of the Wicked Witch of the West we have the headmaster, and a psychotic father as stand-in for the malevolent stepmother. Of course, we need a few gender changes, but in fairyland that is no particular problem. When later I learned that the film was produced by Touchstone, the "adult label" of Walt Disney Studios, it all made sense: the *Dead Poets' Society* is a male version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, personified by the seven members of the secret society named in the title. Honors, however, for discerning the cartoon classic sub-text behind screen writer Schulman's story must go, I believe, to Peter Travers' review in *Rolling Stone* (29 Je 1989, 29), where he admits surprise the "Schulman didn't try to squeeze in Sneezy, Sleepy, and Dopey."

The figure of Snow White, by the process of elimination and our magic gender wand, must be awarded to the teacher of English, Keating. How good a fit is this match up? Whiteness abounds in *Dead Poets' Society*—the schoolboys are white as can be, the high school princess is an alabaster blonde, and their purity is set off by snow-covered scenery, with snow still falling in the most melodramatic moments.

As the dwarfs followed Snow White, so Keating leads his students outdoors, where he commands them to march, but not together or in step, as befits independent spirits. Semanticists may argue whether walking by command constitutes marching, but the single file parade he organizes as coach for soccer practice includes reciting verse by the seven as they step forward sequentially to kick. One might expect them to break into "Whistle While You Work." The favored poetic line in the story is Whitman's "O Captain! my Captain!" applied by the students, whom he does not discourage, to the charismatic Keating. A leader, then, of troops. Dwarfs with a mission.

So what about the teaching of English? Teachers learn with their students, a dynamic which denies the leader in combat role of Keating. A truth, if clinched, is that "writing is thinking," and the same principle would hold true for the parallel process of reading. Despite their overlapping names, not for Keating is Keat's approval of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts." For the "Captain," the voice of literature is a call to

action, not hesitation and thought. *Carpe Diem* is the slogan he brandishes before his troops, or dwarfs. If my Walter Mitty is an English teacher, he does not look, act, or think like Mr. Keating, let alone Snow White.

Literature belongs to the world, not to a private club. At Welton Academy, however, the students resurrect a secret society, founded by Keating in his student days, meeting at night in a cave where they share old literary chestnuts with each other. Their enthusiasm is suggestive of Christopher Isherwood's visit in 1932 Berlin to a "pathfinders" clubhouse, with its arcane symbolism, and his notes on their magazine, "written in a super-enthusiastic style, with a curious underlying note of hysteria, as though the actions described were part of a religious or erotic ritual." Youthful allegiances were passionate but fluid, like the woman "talking reverently about 'Der Fuhrer'," although she voted communist at the last election. (*Goodbye to Berlin*, 247, 255).

There are enough echoes of secret clubs, privatization of art for the elect, anti-hegemonic posturing, and the word-play of "Fuhrer" and "Captain" to suggest that the spirit of 1932 Berlin is not frozen in time and place, but may materialize at an exclusive boys' school in 1959, perhaps even on a Maine college campus. The movie, in fact, tends to make appealing the teacher-student relationship, style, and philosophy, which unfold grimly in the earlier film, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, with the central character's overt endorsement of Franco and fascism.

Keating inscribed the title page of his poetry text with Thoreau's explanation that "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, . . . and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (*Walden*, 81). Thoreau, however, did not stay in the woods, justifying his departure with the observation that "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one" (288). One wonders if Keating's dwarfs will ever emerge from the woods and recognize the possibility of other lives. Perhaps Walt Disney Studios already is working on a sequel. Meanwhile, perhaps I'll read some books.

Citations

- Herbert, George. "The Windows." 1633.
Whitman, Walt. "O Captain! my Captain." 1865.
Keats, John. Letter to George and Tom Keats. 21 Dec. 1817.
Isherwood, Christopher. *Goodbye to Berlin* (1945). London: Folio, 1975.
Thoreau, Henry. *Walden* (1854). New York: Modern, 1937.

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