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Sabbatical Leave Report

Review of Program of Independent Study

During the sabbatical leave, I was able to complete the independent study under the guidance of Dr. Stephan Waterworth (Professor of English at El Camino Community College), as specified in the sabbatical leave application. Specifically, I began the project with an exploration of the contemporary responses in England during the British Civil War, also known as the Great Rebellion. I began by focusing on an incomplete project begun by Abraham Cowley, simply titled *The Civil War*. I began my study with this work because Cowley, an unabashed royalist, wrote the poem with the assumption that King Charles I and his forces would easily dispatch the rebellious forces; underwriting Cowley's poem and his confidence was his complete investment in a royalist ideology in which the sovereign is the linchpin of a set of mutually reinforcing social, political, religious, and cosmic orders. Thus, when confronted with the disastrous results at the Battle of Newbury, which resulted in the death of Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland, he simply ceased to write the poem because the traumatic event shattered his assumptions about the operation of the world.

Next, I focused on the Puritan critique of the monarchy and the Anglican Church. Although a number of critics have called into question the extent to which religion played a role in the British Civil War, I found myself drawn to the Puritans and the role they played in the rebellion because on the level of literature, it seemed that many royalist poets and writers were responding not simply to the religious positions of the Puritan elites (many of whom were members of the Parliament), but their concomitant social and cultural critique of a royalist

culture that was (from the Puritan vantage point) too ceremonial, and too closely aligned with Catholicism.

After this unexpected detour, as I had not planned for it in my sabbatical plan, I turned my focus to Robert Herrick, among the most well known of the Cavalier poets. Herrick's poetry is deeply fascinating for several reasons. On the one hand, his poetry is often treated as amusing and well crafted, but ultimately inconsequential because it seems to be written in a vacuum; however, closer examination reveals that Herrick's poetry is simultaneously a defense of the role of convention and ceremony, and a pointed critique of Puritan ideology. In particular, poems like "Delight in Disorder" and "Corinna's Going A-Maying" emphasize the importance of ceremony and tradition, however artificial, in maintaining a stable social order in a post-feudal world. Herrick's celebration of the importance of ceremony and custom constitute an indirect criticism of Puritan ideology by exposing the desire for "pure and precise" relation with God to be a misguided fiction.

At this point, I turned to Milton's great epic *Paradise Lost* and focused on his implied aesthetic protocols and I argued that like Herrick, Milton argues that one's relationship to Deity is mediated and contingent; like Herrick, Milton acknowledges the mediated nature of relations, whether they be social, cultural, political, or religious. Where I found the two differed, however, was that given Milton's contingent epistemology, he rejected convention and custom precisely because blindly adhering to "set forms" – whether they take the form of Anglican ceremony or Mayday customs – led only to a stultifying religious and social experience that was at odds with the liberty that he valued.

Because I spent more time than expected examining Puritan ideology, I had less time than anticipated for the rest of my project. I was able to briefly examine representative works by

John Dryden and Thomas Hobbes (*Absalom and Achitophel* and *Leviathan*, respectively). What struck me was that both works demonstrated that after the British Civil War, monarchy could only be understood as a conventional and artificial construct, and that the appeal to a natural notion of sovereignty was no longer available. In addition, from the retrospective vantage of Dryden, the Civil War was represented a trauma brought about by an extreme ideology that sought to break free from conventions and norms – Puritan ideology, in other words. What is most striking is that in the British literary imagination, the Great Rebellion is represented as a product of extremism, and in subsequent literary generations, serves as dire warning against the dangers of revolution, literary, social, and political.

Benefit for Faculty and Students

After completing the bulk of the essay for this project, I developed a set handouts and short exercises in which literary criticism and select primary sources are paired with literary works. In each case, I have several study questions associated with paired work and source. Having taught English 15A at El Camino Community College, I have found that students often struggle to make sense of literary works that are culturally, temporally, and politically foreign to them. By providing strategic “entry points” in the form of brief passages and secondary sources that illustrate key historical events or concepts, I hope that students will be able to better understand literary works of the 17th century and beyond. Too often, they experience literature as a sort of disembodied aesthetic experience, and they are unable to make connections to, for example, a poem by Robert Herrick about agricultural workers celebrating the fall harvest. By providing a contextual “ground” for the students, I hope to develop a conceptual bridge that will allow them do more than pay lip service to great works of literature like *Paradise Lost*. I would be happy to share my findings with my colleagues, though I would not be so forward as to assert

that I have found “the method” or the only interesting approach to teaching the works mentioned above. What I would like to do is be part of a dialogue with other English instructors who do teach literature and discuss the ways in which we attempt to make the culturally and historically foreign works less daunting for our students.

Faculty Proficiency

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Stephan Waterworth, El Camino Community College, and the Sabbatical Leave Committee for the opportunities to rejuvenate my teaching practices and to pursue the intellectual questions that had been accumulating in my mind as I taught English 15A, English 1A, and English 1B over the last sixteen years. On a professional level, I gained significant insight into the causes and the consequences of the British Civil War in the 1640s and beyond. I began to understand that the English reaction to events like the French Revolution was always and already tempered by the perceived religious extremism of the Puritans, and that this perception (which, to be fair, did not adequately address the complexity of religious dissent in seventeenth century), shaped, and in some ways restricted, the development of British literature. On a more personal note, the sabbatical reinvigorated my intellectual vigor, and I plan to continue the line of research that I started in this sabbatical project.