

Chapter 9. Writing in Literature

Courses Through the Third Year: Learning Close Textual Analysis

Even as I pursued potential science and social science majors, I pursued possibilities in literature, taking courses leading toward majors in both English and German. In both potential majors I was supported and mentored by friends and housemates, although I had mixed experiences with instructors. In all these courses I was learning the skills of close reading and how to present my interpretations. In learning to reconstruct the meaning of texts according to standards of literary disciplines, however, I was also learning to see my personal concerns as reflected in the texts I explicated. Additionally, I started to sort out what I thought of the values, ideas, and stances of the works. Expressing what I thought about those values did not always go well, as I discovered that my professors themselves often saw their own values expressed in the texts they taught and wanted us to appreciate.

Apprenticeship in English Literature

Following my positive experience in first year writing, I enrolled in the second-year, two-term course in English literary criticism for potential English majors. There I found, however, less tolerance for my heterodox stance and opinions, nonconventional style, and organic organization. The emphasis was on professionalization into critical practices, primarily in the new critical mode of the time. There was a nominal awareness of historical and social context as we worked our way chronologically through the two volume *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (not including American, which at that time was still a curricular afterthought). Each of our tri-weekly assigned papers of around 1500 words (5-8 typed double-spaced pages) focused on close reading. I have been mentioning paper length here and elsewhere because for myself and my friends length identified the amount of challenge in locating content and elaborating arguments. Length was also a typical requirement of the prompt. Other than length, the prompts were all general, simply requiring that we do an interpretation or explication of one of the identified texts.

My first paper of the first term examined moral awareness in Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" about Patient Griselda. The paragraphs were structured around an unfolding argument, on the character of the clerk, the genre of his tale as *exemplum* with its moral idealization, the social demands of her situation, and Griselda's virtues and self-awareness as the tale unfolds. I offered detailed evidence through quotations, word choice, and actions as modeled in class discussions. I then ended with

an evaluation of her character and that of the clerk who narrates the tale, in order to analyze Chaucer's narrative intention and stance. The professor did not comment on the substance of the argument, but asked me to tighten my language, maintain appropriate register and diction, and create lexical cohesion (though he did not use these linguistic terms).

The next paper on *Hamlet* again evaluated a character's words and actions to reveal the stance of the work itself. The text moved through a series of logically organized paragraphs with even more evidence from the words and quotations from the work than in the previous one. I seem to have been able now to meet the instructor's expectations of the formality of language, though he still noted a few corrections of this sort. My sentences and sequences continued to rely on oppositions, contradictions, and paradoxes. In accordance with the topic and my evolving style, I attempted witty, epigrammatic formulations, particularly at the opening and closing of the argument. This paper begins "Hamlet's wit mirrors his awareness, but dulls his ability to act in an aware manner." And it ends "Hamlet is a considered wit, but a rash actor." Now I see this argument as static and pre-determined, or at least pre-announced, ending where I began. This was actually a principle repeated often in my classes, that a good way to end a paper was to reprise a beginning. As I found that advice leading to boring writing, I was to modify this principle to reprise initial themes but seeing them in a fresh perspective that the journey of the paper has revealed. This modified advice is something I still tell my students.

The third paper was a close reading of Donne's poem "The Funeral," unpacking the poem's conceits and contradictory logic. I discussed line by line the tone, stance, imagery, and prosody to highlight the frustrated struggles of the narrator to come up with a compelling vision, but ultimately collapsing in comic self-mockery. My sentences are cumbersome, with frequent contrasts, exclusions, and reversals within the syntax ("Not this... but that"). Some sentences reach for epigrammatic and rhythmic conclusiveness.

The final paper of the fall term was on Congreve's *Way of the World*, laying out the code and rules of insincerity. The paper proceeds through the contrast of characters upon which the play itself is structured. An opening paragraph reviews the overall pattern I will demonstrate. The next paragraph examines the shallow concept of wit exemplified by the character Witwoud that contrasts with Dryden's definition of true wit. The following paragraph examines the statements and moods of another character who exemplifies this lower form of wit. Then I examine the more polished wit of Mirabell as exemplifying Dryden's view. Finally, I show how even the most sincere character uses the veneer of wit to hide her true love. The sentences are fairly tight and forward-moving, with no repetition or circling back, and some have a sense of rhythm and aphorism, especially in the closing lines.

From the second term, I have four papers of the same length and all addressing close analysis of a text. But my paper on the Wordsworth's "The Leech-Gatherer"

adopts a perspective at odds with the viewpoint of the poem. I used Lewis Carroll's parody "You are Old Father William" in *Through the Looking Glass* to establish an alternative critical stance. I remember having a lot of fun with this paper and learning a lot, being highly engaged in what I thought was a meaningful argument—perhaps one of the most meaningful of the term. However, while I identified paradox and contradiction internal within the artistic work (highly appreciated in the new critical world of the class), stepping outside the assumptions of the text was not well received. Although the teacher appreciated the fire of my critique, he wanted me to stick closely to the poem itself and take it on its own terms. In trying to articulate my own sense of the limits of the poem, rather than immersing myself in appreciation of the poem itself, I was distancing myself from what I came to view as the ideologies that supported some literary tastes. Perhaps a couple of decades later when ideological critique was more the expectation, the paper would have gone over better.

My next paper for my second-year English major survey, was on Keats' "Ode on a Nightingale," which I found more sympathetic. My analysis was based on a contrary motion within the text, and thus more appreciated by the professor. Fahnestock and Secor later (1991) note that paradox or contraries was one of the major tropes in literary studies. In this case the contrary was in the upward flight of the nightingale and the downward pull of the poet into numbness and forgetfulness. I did bring in an alternative view more cautiously in a footnote, only to reject it, saying a well-known critic missed the point of the poem. The instructor commented I should have made this critique more explicitly in the text—suggesting to me that one could cite a critique, but only if it was being rejected as not understanding the spirit of the poem, as I would then reveal in my analysis. I could criticize a critic, but I should not criticize a primary text or its author, as I had just learned in the previous paper. As Myers later found (1989), this taste for negative citation and contestation is not generally followed outside literary studies, and I later needed to learn more tact as I engaged interdisciplinary studies.

The next assignment on a readily understood essay did not require subtle analysis, only a distilling of the text's perspective and an evaluation of its application in life. After summarizing Ruskin's Christian idealist views on the flaws of laissez fair capitalism, I considered how in some ways his reformist principles had been realized in the US but through the wielding of economic and political power in the progressive, New Deal, and Civil Rights eras and not through Ruskin's ideals of justice. I used contraries and paradoxes as organizing principles while returning to some of the big historical pictures I had taken on in prior years.

However, I had not yet learned my lesson about rejecting the premises of the works I was commenting on. In my last paper for this course, I rejected the values of Browning's romantic escapism in the portrait of "Fra Lippo Lippi." My argument here is not so far from my critique of Wordsworth's "Leech Gatherer," finding in word choice, imagery, and projected character the construction of an unreal ideal that served the longings of the poet rather than providing insight

into the actual characters represented. The ink on the teacher's comments has faded so I cannot tell if the professor wanted to guide me back into an appreciation of Browning.

That same spring of second year I took a course on Chaucer. The only paper I have is a take-home mid-term exam. Possibly there was a similar take home final, but it was not returned to me. The short four-page essay examines the "Knight's Tale" and the character of the knight, tying both to chivalric themes, the seriousness of the prose, and conventional Boethian dullness of thought. Although my essay was seen as interesting by the instructor, he also felt the lack of something more that would show a deeper appreciation—though no clues were offered as to what that would be.

The following fall, before leaving for the Peace Corps, I took two more courses taught by English professors. One was a comparative literature course on contemporary drama with a professor who influenced me greatly, and with whom I took a number of classes after my return. I will discuss my writing for all his courses in Chapter 11. Another was a course on selected Shakespeare plays. I barely remember the course, though I remember my fascination with the dramatic structure of the plays. I have no papers in my files and I don't remember writing any; likely only exams were given, which were not returned.

Aestheticism in German Literature

While I was exploring an English major, I also was considering one in German literature, building on my years of secondary school German. The German literature courses provided me a different critical angle, which I found even more troubling in its assumptions, conventionality, and aestheticism. My first year I took a two-term survey of German literature. We were assigned one ten-page paper each term. Full of ambition in the fall I wrote mine in German, on Gretchen's four songs in *Urfaust*. I was one of the few students unwise enough to take up the option of writing in German. I invested much effort into this and was especially proud of accomplishing such a lengthy paper in the language. My essay was in form similar to what I was writing in my English classes at the time—description and then commentary on each of the songs, looking at various elements and relating them to the unfolding events as well as the feelings and character of the heroines. I considered the songs serially and then made concluding comments about what the songs tell us about the heroine. As in English I had a taste for sentences with contraries, but the prose in German was more ponderous with few of the crafted, rhythmic phrases I was starting to use in my English prose. I also had a series of typos which may reflect my lack of familiarity with German as well as my carelessness. The teacher's extensive comments (27 numbered notes at the end and other marginalia) are in the majority about German lexical choice, grammatical form, and other aspects of my German, including pointing out some howlers (which really are quite funny). He also pointed to a few places where my

interpretation of the text was inaccurate because of my mistakes with key terms. The comments related to the substance of my commentary were fewer, but pointed back to my lack of subtlety with German making my interpretation naïve. For years all I remembered was his final comment that the German was not well developed and the piece seemed like the work of a small child—and then he gave me the lowest grade by far I have ever received on a piece of writing—70. I never attempted to write a paper in German again (or any language other than English).

In the spring I wrote in English on Brecht's *Galileo*, considering Galileo's recantation. This thematic analysis allowed me to explore the value of science for human life, which was very much on my mind at the time. I compared the actions, views, and passions of Galileo to that of other characters, in response to the power and authority of the Church. I saw his passion for science equal to his other more fleshly passions, which he protects in the recantation. I go through the earlier actions of the play rapidly and devote the latter half of the paper to the recantation, and his realization of science as only meaningful in relation to the life of society. This is contrasted with the attitudes of a monk who is afraid science will destroy faith and Galileo's protégé Andrea who sees science in its mechanistic wonders. I recall this play was written in the wake of WWII (and my paper in the midst of the cold war). It is a competent thematic analysis of character actions and thoughts, largely considered chronologically. The sentences and paragraph organization are, however, pedestrian and blunt, with little wit, irony, or sense of textual nuance.

During my second year in the fall, I took a course on Goethe's early poetry and fiction, and in the spring a course on twentieth century German poetry and drama. The professor for the fall course was a prominent Goethe scholar, attached to the poet's values and ideals. Over the term, however, I began to reject those values as unbearably aesthetic and idealized. We had short 2-3 page papers every 3 weeks and a take home exam essay of similar length. The first paper was an explication of the poem "Lilli's Park." My introduction presented the overall theme of the analysis and characterization of the poem; following paragraphs offered details of language, imagery, events, and attitudes examined sequentially; the paper ended where the poem ends with a characterization of the meaning of the final action, placed within Goethe's biography. The teacher's comments mostly pointed to places where he wanted a more elevated style and greater care in diction. In one instance he offered a more precise understanding of a German word, and in two places he makes interpretive points that suggested I should be more appreciative of the poet's stance.

The second paper, a reading of the poem "Zueignung," was structured similarly to the first and carries out a similar task. Here the instructor wanted me to follow up more explicitly on comparisons and details. But the biggest complaint was about my "structure" which apparently had to do with the paragraphing rather than the sequence or logic of the argument. In this paper I was experimenting with shorter paragraphs, separating each action, but he wanted me to combine

paragraphs to about three times their length to reflect larger clusters, so the body would consist of four paragraphs. The third paper on “Harzreise im Winter” follows the same organization and still has short paragraphs, though he no longer comments on them. But here I seemed to have found a way to make the kinds of points he liked with the level of diction he found acceptable. He even marked a number of my statements as good. I remember though not being excited by these papers and finding them burdensome, and rather ponderous.

The fourth paper on *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, however, appreciated the novel’s ironic attitude to the affectation, egoism, and aestheticism of the *Sturm und Drang* self-representation of the protagonist. Noting such things as Werther arguing against revision in the novel that Goethe has himself revised and that the stylized and self-dramatized suicide turns ugly despite all the aesthetic planning, I concluded that Werther is not as sentimental as critics claim but is more ironically crafted. The paper’s organization moves through selected moments and ironies. The professor took issue with some of my comments and found a higher justification for the ironies I noted. He also found some of my diction too common, and even said one of my phrases was not English, though I now find the phrasing perfectly normal, though not elevated. The instructor himself was Oxbridge British and seemed to be holding my diction to his dialect. He also asked me to remove references to the poet’s self to explain the irony although I was discussing reflective subjectivity. The instructor, however, did like my evaluating the novel as subtle and ironic.

The fifth paper was on Schiller’s critique of Goethe’s play *Egmont*. Structurally this paper was much like the previous ones in this class and in preceding literature classes, except that here the assignment asked me to consider a third-party critique to set up the issue for critical examination. This may have given me the idea of how to structure my English paper on Wordsworth at the beginning of the next term (discussed earlier in this chapter). From the professor’s comments I suspect that he wanted me to agree with and elaborate Schiller’s point of view. The underlying issue seemed to be whether the play was a personal story of character complexity or an idealistic story of political heroism (Schiller’s position). I chose the former and saw the last scene (which Schiller liked) as an artifice which pulled attention away from the character’s complexity. From the marginal comments it appears the professor saw this last scene as a transfiguration. Although he liked my noting a transformation in the final scene, he did not appreciate my lack of appreciation of that transformation. However, I did not see anything that warranted or foreshadowed this reversal of everything the play had done to that point, and the professor didn’t point me to any. I did use a more consistent formal diction, long paragraphs, and many details which the professor accepted—though he clearly also wanted something more. His comments treated the paper as though I was working on a puzzle I had not quite solved, though I was quite definite in my judgment. While the play fits into the Napoleonic idealism of the period, I wasn’t buying it.

This rejection was part of my recurrent pattern of having a hard time in accepting some of the values and ideologies preferred by instructors. My appreciation for literature I was coming to learn was based on whether I could also be drawn into the ideological world of the text being considered. I was coming to see more and more how the literary preferences and evaluations of critics and teachers were tied to the texts they studied, in which they were finding their satisfying visions of life. More practically, I realized I should only write about authors and texts that touched me. I later extended this to the study of non-literary texts and authors, as I found much sympathetic in the rhetorical and intellectual growth of Joseph Priestley, Adam Smith, Thomas Edison, and in the development of the writing of various disciplines. Even when I did not always agree with the writers, I could see what they were doing and I learned from them. Similarly, my uptake of theoretical and methodological orientations largely depended on what made sense to me and what was useful. Coordinately, I was learning to deal delicately with readers' ideologies and not rile them unnecessarily. Part of my learning to write was learning how to position myself intertextually—not only to draw on supporting sources, but to place myself among those who inhabit a universe that makes sense to me and I can communicate with. My task became to draw readers into my universe by finding the connecting points, rather than knocking other positions down. Eventually I became more careful in sidestepping minefields for readers and choosing positive claims I could substantiate. I also focused on empirical strategies that made visible instances or cases that could not be denied.

But I had not learned such tact by the end of this course, and I ran full tilt into the windmill in my take-home final exam which asked me to consider Goethe's representation of the poet *Torquato Tasso* as a misfit in society. This paper was written shortly after my father's death, and the instructor gave me permission to submit it late as a take home. At this time I was personally attempting to address what I was coming to consider my own self-pity and overdramatization, accompanied by a sense of alienation. So I had little patience for what I saw as the poet's self-indulgent whining about being an outsider while insisting on being a poet free from social responsibilities. The structure of the paper was similar to previous ones, setting up the problem in the opening sentences, then elaborating through details of character, events, and diction. I contrasted the play's dichotomous representation of two kinds of poet—one as a civic hero speaking to civic values and the other driven by personal needs to express—which is what Tasso elects, leading him to dwell on his personal suffering which he sees as unbearable. He distrusts those around him and makes selfish demands. I rather sided with the citizen role and responsibility which Tasso rejected. The professor's main comment was "I think you have too utilitarian a view of poetry to understand this play fully." Perhaps. At least I had the wisdom or personal distaste not to take the professor's follow-up course on Goethe's later works, as I did not see the point to carry on the fight further, particularly since the professor held all the cards.

In response to the teacher's marginal annotations calling into question my interpretations I wrote my own marginal counter-annotations, with a long argumentative note, though these were not shared with him. I couldn't be sympathetic with the poet's choice to be a self-expressive alienated outsider, no matter how I perceived my own history and perspectives as being different from others. This articulation of my emerging values here and in other papers (for example, the previous year's paper on Brecht's *Galileo*) can be seen as a precursor of my attraction to teaching as well as the rhetorical motives that drove my writing as a professional.

In the spring of my second year, nonetheless, I continued with another German course on 20th century poetry, predominantly Rilke. The first assignment I have in my files is an original sonnet, assigned so we could understand how difficult it was to write one. I took as a challenge to overdo the constraints at the same time as covertly demonstrating my pique and contempt for the assignment. I wrote a pun-, anger- and insult-filled Joycean diatribe, in metric and stanzaic form, drawing on central conceits of eyesight and battle. The teacher seemed to enjoy it and either deliberately ignored or missed the insults in the title (Alphabetichyouary #2), and even more the acrostic insult of his name on the second letter of each line. Anyway, I had malicious fun in intricately designing this over a week, sharing it among my friends, learning a lot about rhythm, puns, emotional stance, tightness of phrasing, and discovery through fulfillment of form. So I guess in a way I fulfilled the intent of the assignment through my pique.

I appreciated the intricacy, rhythm/prosody, and formal tightness in Rilke's poetry. My first regular paper was an explication of Sonnet to Orpheus I, 15 on the experience of tasting an orange. I remember being methodical in preparing the analysis, making multiple carbon copies of the poem, and annotating each with a different element—prosody, imagery, experiential content, assonance and rhyme, etc. In overall form the paper was like the explications I had been doing in a number of classes, though a bit longer (6 pages) and more tightly written. I paid detailed attention to prosody and punctuation, trying to convey a sense of the dance of the poem that went along with the synesthetic and multisensual experience described, starting with an overview and then walking through the poem. According to instructions, the paper was preceded by an attached text of the poem. Then I repeated each line or cluster of lines before discussing each. After finishing this detailed commentary, my final comment related the last word of the poem providing closure to the command of the opening word (wartet. . . füllt). I was getting pretty good at this kind of writing, especially when I found delight in the text analyzed and could whole-heartedly represent the experience.

My final paper for this course was a bit longer, 8 pages, but still in the same vein, demonstrating the thematic similarity of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Rilke's sonnet "Archaischer Torso Apollos," realized in the poetic technique of each. I opened with an overview of the shared theme of the two poems, but I added an additional paragraph offering historical evidence that Rilke probably

had at most passing knowledge of the Keats poem. The third paragraph returns to the comparison, showing the similarity of the climactic conclusions, and pointing back to the several paths by which they got there. This launches over three pages of analysis of the unfolding of the Keats poem followed by about three pages of analysis of the Rilke poem, with a final page elaborating the similarity of the life-changing experiences of the urn and the statue mirrored in the perfection and power of the poems. I clearly was into intricacy and crafted aesthetic objects at this point, although I still had problems with the self-absorption and alienation of the aestheticized poet. I was influenced by new critical appreciation of paradoxes and intricacies to seek an intricate and witty kind of writing. The professor, as others had, asked for an unspecified more, but seemed happy with what he got. This was my first use of an extended comparative structure, which I was to use again in later papers.

These last two papers highlighted for me a pursuit of aesthetic perfection that would overwhelm the readers. The shimmering perfection would be both a pleasure in itself and would transform one through the intensity of experience. “Archaischer Torso Apollos” final words “du musst dein leben ändern” became a recurring motto for me. This pursuit embodied in the two Rilke and one Keats poems became embodied in my own growing ambitions as a writer. When I was to become a researcher in graduate school that was to be transformed into my goal of writing truth-poems, works of scholarship that through evidence would present readers with undeniable realities that they would need to accommodate into whatever ideological views they were committed to. As Nabokov said in his autobiography *Speak Memory*, in a phrase that would also become a motto for me: “Things once seen that cannot be unseen.”