Reading Theory and the Teaching of Writing

Patricia Harkin Sosnoski
Department of English
Miami University of Ohio

More and more often today courses in composition and literature are taught by persons who possess considerable sophistication in literary and discourse theory. Other English courses are taught by members of the profession whose understanding of their mission is conservative and sometimes even hostile to some of the tenets of postmodern critical theory.

No matter where you stand on the theoretical spectrum, no matter how much you think curricula should be shaken up or tightened up, I hope you will imagine with me a student who hears in one course that texts are *indeterminate,* and that reading is a radically private activity wherein readers make meaning, and then moves to another course where it is announced that the meaning of *Paradise Lost* was intended by John Milton (who didn't like surprises) and that we can best find that meaning out by clearing our minds of preconceptions and letting the poem come to us. My hunch is that the student is less likely to be enchanted by the theoretical diversity of the Humanities than to decide that the English Departments have problems of coherence.

In response to these problems of coherence, I propose an introductory composition and literature course that uses a traditional anthology, requires such traditional kinds of writing as a library paper and interpretive essays on fiction, poetry and drama, and even employs traditional language for literary analysis. But this course is unlike traditional ones in that it abandons the notion that the text is an object with determinate meaning, and as a consequence, it avoids the simplified definitions that characterize introductory textbooks, definitions that deny our students crucial information about the nature and workings of language. To tell a student, as a best-selling anthology does, that "a literary symbol is something that means more than what it is," whereas "arbitrary symbols . . . have no meaning in and of themselves but . . . mean only something else, not something more than what they are," (Perrine, p. 128) is to "simplify" to the point of mystification. A course that assumes a theory of language as symbol, or a theory of determinate meaning, or no theory at all, does our profession a profound and dangerous disservice: It implies that the humanities stopped growing and changing and thinking years ago. The alternative I propose simplifies instructions, rather than concepts, to do one narrow thing well. Within the tradition, it confronts the problems of *indeterminancy.*

For *indeterminancy,* it seems to me, is the greatest problem encountered by members of the profession who wish to de-

sign a conceptually responsible introductory course in an environment that is sometimes hostile, always in flux, and, at the moment, under the worst possible economic conditions, involved in a struggle for survival. We experience the problem pedagogically: If meaning is *indeterminate*, what do we teach in composition and literature classes, what do we ask students to write about, and when they do write, what do we evaluate?

I wish to propose a course design that confronts these problems by modifying Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (Iser, 1978) and thereby producing a plan for teaching students to raise their consciousness, become articulate about the process of reading itself, and to describe their own reading acts clearly and coherently to other readers. I choose Iser, above the other available theorists, because his model of the reading process describes interaction between text and reader. Thus he mediates between the extreme positions that, on the one hand, regard the text as an object, and, on the other, construe it as a stimulus. What you teach, in the course I propose, is first an account of what happens when you read, and second, a language in which to conduct literary analysis.

The terms or concepts in Iser's system — *repertoire, gap, wandering viewpoint, theme* and *horizon, consistency building* — are easy enough to explain to freshpersons, and they produce immediate and perceptible results in student discussion. *Repertoire* is Iser's word for all the extra-textual reality to which the text makes reference. My pedagogical strategy is to suggest to students that what may have seemed to them to be a distaste for English or an inability to "interpret" is explicable and treatable as ignorance of repertoire. To illustrate, I begin by assigning some ethnic short story from the department's anthology, one that explicitly and evocatively grounds itself in the experience of being a Jew or a Catholic or Black or a southerner. The key is to find a story with whose *repertoire* some students will and some will not be familiar. Philip Roth's **"Defender of the Faith"** is a good example; Frank O'Connor's **"First Confession,"** another. Students quickly see that unless they understand dietary laws or the necessary conditions for receiving the sacrament of penance, their response to character is not as rich as the response of some of their peers. They see, too, that the peers respond more fully, not because they're "better in English," but because they are Jews or Catholics or whatever.

Repertoire leads quickly to *gaps* — places where information

is not given to the reader. Some *gaps* are trivial — we do not know the color of Stephen Dedalus' eyes; others function significantly in literary analysis. We are not explicitly told the connection between Dante's threat that the eagles will pluck out Stephen's eyes and Stephen's unjust punishment for being without his glasses and the Prefect's pedestrian conversation which defines beauty as that which is pleasing to the senses. Students readily assent that we read by closing *gaps* like these, and class discussion can then begin with a list of *gaps* that the students themselves come to class prepared to articulate. Iser's notion that the text guides but does not control the readers' response makes his system readily adaptable to the traditional vocabulary of formal analysis. As one describes *gaps*, in other words, one can use traditional literary language — protagonist, antagonist, plotting, motivation, etc. The form of literary text — as perceived by the readers — establishes parameters within which readers make meaning.

But this is not to say that we *should* or *can* reduce a reception theory such as Iser's to formalism. A clear example of the difference can be seen by comparing Iser's conception of *wandering viewpoint* to the formalist notion of point of view. In Joyce's "Clay," for example, the anthologist's question, "What is the point of view in this story?" evokes the answer "third person limited omniscient." But it does not allow us to account for the ways in which the readers' sympathy constantly changes textual perspectives. If students can stipulate the moments in their reading when the viewpoint shifts — wanders from one character to another character, to the implied readers or even to the narration itself, then they are able to discuss irony with conceptual cogency.

Consistency building, the next important element of Iser's system, lends coherence to the discussion of poetry. As a process of reading, *consistency building* describes both the poem's referentiality and its rhetorical structure. *Consistency* exists, that is, between tenor and vehicle of a given metaphor and among the several image patterns of a given text. Class discussions of Roethke's "I Know A Woman," for example, usually evoke "consistencies" involving grass-hay imagery, or motion-statis, or death-life oppositions. That discussion leads to the question of how these patterns themselves are consistent with the relationship that the poem describes.

Iser's description of the shifting structure of theme and horizon makes a useful overview, for it allows for student response at a higher level of generality than questions about individual strategies. I prefer to work with *theme* and *horizon* in the context of a relatively accessible play, like *Death of a Salesman*, so that students can perceive that a given *theme* is perceptible to them at a given reading moment only against the *horizon* of other perspective segments.

It's easy, and even fun, to talk to students about the reading process. Devising writing assignments that actually evoke the skills at issue, and evaluating them, are considerably harder. The orientation I propose emphasizes thesis as a personal reader's response to be stated clearly and documented. Clarity is measurable in the student's ability to use the language of traditional literary analysis and to name and employ the concepts in Iser's system. Documentation is understood as an enumeration of the clues in the text which guide the reader toward the production of the signified.

Since design of writing assignments is the single most important method of combining writing and reading pedagogies, it is appropriate to begin rather narrowly, asking students to close one *gap*. One might, for example, ask students to distinguish the perspectives of the grandfather and the narrator in "**Battle Royal**," and then, with reference to one or two incidents in this excerpt from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man,* stipulate the clues that suggest to them that one or the other is to be preferred.

An assignment on *repertoire* is an excellent correlate for library research, especially these days when students have read so little, because it allows the instructor to assign a text that ordinarily would be dismissed as too difficult. The assignment causes the student to experience the difference between *repertoire* and the formalist notion of setting, and to test one of Iser's most important and controversial assertions, that is that the text does not merely refer to its *repertoire,* but rather "defamiliarizes" it, forcing the reader to call into question the social, cultural, and literary norms that were in place at the time of the text's production. Obviously, readers need to determine what these norms would have to do with notions of Jesuit education and its techniques and its value contemporaneous with the writing of Joyce's *Portrait.* In order to prevent the reduction of *repertoire* to setting, it is helpful to ask students to list as many as possible of the clues in the text that point to its repertoire. In the *Portrait* example, such a list might include the elder Dedalus' native belief that a Jesuit education will help Stephen get a good job, the conversations between Stephen and the rector about vocations, and between Stephen and the Prefect of Studies about aesthetics. Considerable class time must be devoted to discussing the commonplaces that would implicitly ground the beliefs expressed by the characters. Here, research is crucial. Students find contemporary accounts of Jesuit education, or investigate the Society's own accounts of the importance of logic, etc. Thus informed, class discussion might produce the following generalization:

Many Irish Catholics at the turn of the century believed that Jesuit education was prestigious because Jesuits were highly intelligent men who were trained specifically to be teachers. Such education is an important force for training young people to behave morally and to become economically successful.

Then, however, class discussion turns on the question of how the text makes that commonplace seem invalid. Here, students' responses are likely to be quite specific and personal. One might notice that Father Dolan punishes Stephen

unjustly, and that the Rector's handling of Stephen's complaint evades the issue of justice. Another might point out that the Prefect of Studies lacks a rudimentary understanding of Stephen's aesthetic, etc. The class as a whole sees the *repertoire* of a complicated text being called into question, while its individual members prepare personal articulations of the judgments they have been led, by this questioning, to make. My favorite response came from a young woman who actually researched the *Ratio Studiorum* and discovered that, when Father Dolan punishes Stephen in *"Book One,"* he violates no fewer than three rules for the conduct of discipline established by the order. This information allowed her to perceive several other instances of hypocrisy within the Society of Jesus and to produce a thoughtful essay on that aspect of Stephen's motivation for leaving the church.

What I like best about this assignment is that student research has as its object *information* rather than other professional interpretations of the text, whose assumptions they neither recognize nor understand. This kind of writing avoids a hodge-podge of half-understood conclusions and it demands a genuine encounter with the text.

In the **consistency-building**, poetry sections of the syllabus, it is appropriate to shift the writing emphasis to revision and to argument. In an in-class writing assignment on Roethke's **"I Knew a Woman,"** students are instructed to characterize the speaker, his beloved, and the nature of their relationships, on the basis of one or more consistencies they have found in the text. At the next class meeting, we analyze three short pieces of literary criticism reflecting three professional critics' readings of the poem. What occurs, of course, is that the students encounter in these professional essays other readings of the poem which are mutually exclusive and which call their own into question. Usually the discussions revolve around some issue on which the students want to achieve closure. Is she dead or did she leave him for another guy? Because they have a stake in the argument, having already written about it, they usually evince some interest in refuting the readings and comments of the professional critics or at least in looking carefully at the evidence adduced, and deciding on its condition of relevance. So argument techniques become important to them.

Alas, I know of no better way to teach *indeterminacy*. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that both claim and grounds in these arguments are functions of readers' hypotheses, the readers' reading. Students have to see that the closure for which they so strongly argue is of their own making, the text is *indeterminate*.

They revise their essays. This time I encourage them to come up with a thesis about the *indeterminacy* itself and their response to it. This revision, then, is not just a matter of fixing comma splices and dangling modifiers but it is precisely a revision, a re-thinking in another conceptual context.

Finally, the last writing assignment, on drama, calls for a full-scale reading of a relatively uncomplicated text. Students are expected to use all of the critical and analytic vocabulary appropriately and consistently, and to produce a valid argument. Students might, for example, respond to Charley's assertion at the end of *Death of a Salesman* that "Nobody dast blame" Willy Loman, by stipulating the specific elements of the reading process which warrant their readings. It is helpful to form groups which focus on one specific element of reading. One group might attend to "the American Dream" as *repertoire* for *Death of a Salesman* and as rationale for finding Willy neither wholly blameless nor blameworthy. Another could work with "success" or "being well-liked" in the context of *theme* and *horizon*. Still another might look at how the readers' wandering viewpoint prevents *determinate* sympathy for any one character.

What distinguishes these writing assignments from traditional formal ones is the requirement that students stipulate and describe the reading process. Such requirements go far toward countering vagueness: Writers who *must* point to the moments when their sympathy shifts from Willy to Biff and back again cannot depend on *Masterplots*. By giving students a coherent account of what happens when they read, these assignments do tend to produce more critical readings of texts which have not been "taught."

The course I have just described is in many ways a beginning. It is an introduction to literature which provides instruction in literary analysis and, through *repertoire,* a very sophisticated technique for doing literary history; as such, it is coherent with traditional and non-traditional upper-division literature courses. It is an introduction to composition and to argument; as such it is coherent with advanced writing courses. It is an introduction to reading theory; as such it allows students to begin to perceive the theoretical reading spectrum. It is also, I like to think, a preliminary skirmish in the conceptual revolution that must occur in Humanities departments if they are to survive the current crisis.