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“Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction”: A Pedagogical Experiment

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Genesis of “Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction”

This essay is an interpretation of a pedagogical experiment that I undertook in the spring term of 1997. It grew out of several previous years’ experience of developing and piloting a model for an “Introduction to Literary Studies” course for undergraduates at the University of Virginia—a course that would be open to all, but required for English majors. This course was being developed by a small group of faculty who worked out the design of the course with groups of graduate students.¹ The faculty and the graduate students would each run a section of the course, and the faculty and graduate students would meet together for an hour of teaching workshop once every week during the teaching term.

The experience of teaching the course and participating in the teaching workshops revealed certain gaps in our program that were not being filled by the current course design. For instance, the teaching workshops led the graduate students to want more pedagogical mentoring and instruction from the teaching faculty. Undergraduate classes led me and some other faculty to try to imagine how literature courses might be designed specifically to improve the undergraduates’ critical reading skills. In particular, the course

exposed reading problems that could not be addressed adequately in such a general-purpose setting.

Most notable, and in a way surprising, were the problems students had with reading fiction. These problems were a direct function of the relative ease with which the undergraduates seemed to negotiate the fictional texts of the course—as compared with the poetical texts, for example, or complex works of nonfiction. Classic novels held their interest and they were ready and eager to discuss them. So long as the fictions were not self-consciously reflexive and experimental, the undergraduates met the texts with pleasure and a certain kind of understanding. That pleasure and understanding, however, proved a serious obstacle to the students' ability to think critically about the works and their own thinking. It generated a kind of “transparency effect” in the reading experience, preventing the students from getting very far toward reading in deliberate and self-conscious ways.

To address both the undergraduate problems with reading and the graduate problems with teaching highlighted by the “Introduction to Literary Studies” course, I imagined the “pedagogical experiment” described here. “Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction” paired an undergraduate literature course with a graduate-level seminar on teaching literature. The plan offered clear opportunities for enriching undergraduate instruction, since integrating the two courses meant, first, that graduate students would attend all of the undergraduate classes and participate in instruction, and second, that all aspects of the “Reading Fiction” course would be regular subjects for study and reflection in the parallel “Teaching Fiction” seminar. Likewise, it promised to fill a gap in the graduate preparation by focusing on the very complex issues involved in teaching literature to undergraduates. I describe this experiment from the initial plan through its various twists and turns during that spring because it serves to underscore the difficulty of creating what I would call a “critical aptitude” for thinking about classroom instruction. While such a critical aptitude parallels the kinds of critical reading ability we hope to encourage in our undergraduate majors, the experiment of “Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction” mainly serves to highlight the struggles and small steps that must be taken to fulfill this promise for both graduate students and undergraduates. The tentative successes we achieved in the paired courses act primarily as calls for similar experimentation in collective reflection on the problems of teaching fiction, a collective reflection aimed at training not only undergraduate majors but also the graduate students who will teach them in the future.

Genesis One: The Initial “Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction”

To read well we have to see clearly what is being read. That requirement is difficult to realize—its *difficulty* is difficult to realize—because the work (or text) to be read is far more complex and demanding than its typographical existence may suggest, as M. M. Bakhtin reminds us; and the typographical work is itself less easy to negotiate than we often imagine, as we come to see when we ask ourselves, or our students, to read passages aloud. In this regard fiction is probably an even more deceptive medium than poetry. The notorious “licenses” of the latter force us to attend to “the word as such” and to language in all its physical and conceptual aspects. For this reason, perhaps, many read novels but shy away from poetry, which they find “difficult.” Poems come in a frankly intransigent medium, and while the medium can be thematically and conceptually transacted, these kinds of explication usually run at a diagonal to the most central concerns of poetry (whose immediate object, as Coleridge said well, is pleasure, not truth).

Fiction is different. In its classic form (telling a story), it draws the reader away from its medium—its language—encouraging us to attend to character, event, scene, and the ideas referenced through the words. It is thus always leading us beyond its world of words, engrossing us in imagined events and people. Only trained readers have the skills to negotiate, back and forth, the relation between the textualities of fiction and its sublime imaginary constructions.

We all know how young students, in discussing a novel, want to talk about characters (as if they were “real”) and plot (as if it were a sequence of events). They usually try to “understand” characters, for example, in terms of types and in more or less generalized psychological terms. They deal with plot and events in a similarly schematic way. Events are viewed not as a structure for exposing (for example) more and more complex features of the characters, but as a sequence of connected happenings meant to interest the reader in the outcome of the fictional events (the story). In this context we also see the students’ inclination to seek thematic and conceptual interpretations of character and event, often completely abstracting away those literal textual levels that license such thematic moves. They are, for example, largely incompetent in dealing with historicalities of all kinds—not just the significance of dates and places, but of fashion, mores, class, the social significance of language, and so forth. When they do respond to such matters, they commonly have little self-conscious awareness that they are doing so, or how, or why. All of these reading procedures make it difficult for the students to engage with those most distinctive features of novelistic discourse: “thick

descriptions,” “realistic details” (social or psychological), “minute particulars.” Events that stand in a more or less oblique relation to the main plot are barely registered. Similarly, the students tend to want to fix and define the characters, rather than to study their complexities, and then to follow their progress through the plot, rather than to see the plot as a vehicle for exposing the nuances of the characters. Least of all are they aware that one might usefully study the art of their fictional construction. These habits of reading replicate the students’ problems with recitation, where an engagement with textual detail is also elided (i.e., most are largely unaware that recitation will yield to attention and deliberateness). Thus, we don’t introduce students to the house of fiction with *Tristram Shandy*, *Maldoror*, *Nightwood*, or *Ulysses*. Because these works expose the fictionality of fiction, we tend to withhold them until we judge that students possess advanced reading skills. But how are we to develop those reading skills with writers like Austen and Scott, Eliot and Hardy? Writers, that is, who are masters of fictional illusion, writers who do not commonly “lay bare the device”? More difficult and, perhaps, finally more important than that: how do we help develop those self-conscious reading skills and preserve at the same time the theatricality of the fiction, or the reader’s readiness to experience these theatricalities?

“Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction” was undertaken to address those kinds of questions. It was to be an experiment in pedagogy as much for the benefit of the undergraduates who took the class as for the graduate students (and myself) who undertook it.

Scholarly research and interpretive writings leave almost entirely unengaged the kinds of basic questions I’ve just posed. As a result, when highly trained graduate students enter their classrooms, they regularly find themselves as bewildered as their charges. The latter have difficulty understanding much of the best that these new teachers know and think, and the former feel themselves stumbling about, uncertain where to begin or how to proceed.

For my own part, I felt at the outset of both courses that I knew something about how to do these things. We would begin with a tight and “classic” text, *The Bride of Lammermoor* (the book Hardy called a perfectly made novel). It would introduce us to basic formal issues, and, in addition, it would bring forward in a clear and effective way the important Bakhtinian subject of “discourse in the novel.” The course would ground itself on a good (traditional) instance of a complex and influential fiction whose style called us to engage with a demanding body of critical and theoretical materials. From that point, we could move through a series of works that introduced the moment

of modernism and, thence, to some examples of postmodern divergence. And voilà! A schematic run through two hundred years of fiction plus a serious introduction to the most up-to-date scholarship on that material.

The Undergraduate Course: “Reading Fiction”

Thus, “Reading Fiction” (formally called “Studies in Fiction” in the syllabus) was imagined as a general introduction to different kinds of fictional writing. The idea was to choose a selection of long and short fictions and read them with two goals: first, to expose some of the basic formal qualities of specific works of fiction; second, to sketch a history of fictional forms as these developed from the eighteenth century to the present day.

A course packet of critical and theoretical texts was prepared as required reading. These works, to be brought into class for analysis and discussion, included a representative selection of serious critics and theoreticians of fiction—people like Bakhtin, Joseph Frank, Roland Barthes, William Gass, and a number of contemporary academic writers (the initial syllabus and course requirements are given as appendix A). As we’ll see below, it became necessary to alter or abandon much of the original syllabus. One crucial alteration involved the undergraduates’ keeping student notebooks and the transfer of the course’s writing assignments from a final paper to much-expanded notebook assignments.

Besides the syllabus protocols (classic, modern, and postmodern fiction), the course was planned with two important pedagogical features:

1. *Recitation.* Over some years I have observed the (perhaps increasing) disability that students have in negotiating language in an articulate way. This weakness seems to propagate others, most especially an inclination to “read” texts at relatively high levels of textual abstraction. With diminished skills in perceiving words as such comes, it seems, a weakened ability to notice other close details of language—semantic, grammatical, rhetorical. Recitation—I am talking about oral recitation of the fictional text—forces students to return to elementary levels of linguistic attention. To be effective as a pedagogical tool, however, it must be performed regularly and explicitly discussed and reflected upon. These exercises form the basis for developing higher-level acts of linguistic attention.

2. *The Learner’s Classroom.* “Reading Fiction” had a discussion format that veered away from the so-called Socratic method (often wickedly characterized by undergraduates as the Read-My-Mind class). The Learner’s Classroom is

organized to ensure, as far as possible, that the instructor will leave great latitude for the agenda of topics to be covered in any class and will not select the passages from the assigned readings that are used to focus class discussion. The instructor is urged to assume a learner's posture in relation to the students and what they need to learn. The instructor's task is to set the day's readings, to elicit from the students (randomly or through some arbitrary rule) the issues to be discussed and the texts that focus those issues, and to monitor a conversation/inquiry around these matters. Initially, the instructor plays a dominant monitoring role, but if the course is running well, instructors will often find themselves moving to the periphery of the exchanges.

An important premise governs this kind of classroom procedure. It assumes that students—who are in possession of their language and many of its discourse forms—know “how” to read, in a Wittgensteinian sense, even if they often can't easily articulate how and why they have certain views or come to particular conclusions. One can, on this premise, *count on* the students' raising issues that will be relevant to the reading of the novel. Their views will implicitly (or sometimes explicitly) contain the reasons why they have come to such views. It is important that the students, both individually and collectively, come to see that they have these reading competencies, and also that they often don't perceive how and why they do. Coming to such realizations, students are positioned to see as well the limitations inherent in their own competencies. It is only at that point that they begin to gain access to *critical* reading skills.

Finally, it's important that they develop an ability to explain their judgments to others. Students (and we teachers as well) give inadequate attention to this problem of communication and its relation to critical thinking. Discussion formats implicitly address the problem, but the address will remain at a purely experiential (i.e., uncritical) level so long as the class doesn't consciously engage with—attend to and unpack—problems of critical exposition as they arise in class discussion.

The Graduate Course: “Teaching Fiction”

Since “Teaching Fiction” was to be tied so closely to the undergraduate class, the graduate seminar was imagined as a regular series of reflections on the undergraduate course. “Teaching Fiction” was to be partly a workshop on classroom pedagogy and partly a means for thinking in general ways about course design, fiction, and theories of fiction. The character of the imagined course is best reflected in the final course requirements. Graduate students

were to produce individual reports on the entire pedagogical event (that is, a report and critique of both graduate and undergraduate courses), and they were to design a model of their own for an undergraduate course in “Reading Fiction.”

In addition, graduate students were to be involved in teaching the undergraduate classes. Initially, this requirement was structured in two ways: first, I planned for each graduate student to teach two undergraduate class periods; second, each would be responsible for a group of three to four undergraduates whose final course papers—research papers calling for library work—they were to oversee and direct through a series of weekly tutorial meetings.

As it turned out, the general shape of the seminar/workshop held to its initial conception, although the subject matter changed because of modifications made to the undergraduate course. But, as I will describe later, the planned engagement of the graduate students in the undergraduate course pedagogy underwent a serious midcourse adjustment. Having the graduate students teach the undergraduate classes raised unanticipated problems of several kinds, and the plan had to be abandoned. Furthermore, when the undergraduate final research paper was dropped, as it would be in the reconceived course design, the nature of the graduate tutorial work also changed.

A course packet of critical and theoretical materials was prepared for the graduate students. The packet did not contain any pedagogical materials as such. Its contents ran a close parallel with the undergraduate packet, only in this case the materials were much more extensive. (The original syllabus for the graduate course is given as appendix B.)

What Actually Happened (Part 1):

The Undergraduate Course in Reading Fiction

The course began with an assignment to read chapters 1–13 from Scott’s *Bride of Lammermoor*. The book was to center the first course unit in a series of three classes that would introduce the students to some basic elements of fiction writing, especially plot and character, and to Bakhtin’s important critical concept of “discourse in the novel.” The second reading assignment, for the third class, would be to finish the novel.

For each class session students were to choose a passage from the assigned reading—relatively brief, no more than a page—that they determined would be interesting for class discussion. They were required to discuss the passage in their notebooks and to be prepared to recite the passage in

class as well as explain why they found it interesting.² I began the first class by asking if anyone wanted to volunteer to bring his or her material forward—when no one did, I randomly chose the students.

Although apprehensive about being put “on the spot,” the undergraduates didn’t realize just how difficult the task of articulate recitation is. They skip words, read too fast, muffle their voices, wreck the syntactic and rhetorical organization—in general, all but a few mangle the language when they recite. (The few who can recite well give a powerful example to the other students.) For their part, the graduate students were surprised to see how useful these exercises can be as an introduction to the reading and interpretation of the text at hand.

A good deal of time is needed to undertake a useful engagement with recitation so that it becomes a device for heightening readerly self-awareness. In the first class, we never passed beyond issues of elementary language structure—especially how to recognize and reproduce sound relations and linguistic rhythms. We read and reread several passages and debated the effectiveness of different recitations as well as the criteria we thought appropriate for making such judgments. After the first class, then, we were already “behind schedule” as far as the syllabus was concerned.

It was important that the class as a whole should perceive that we had begun to fall behind and think about why this had happened. The perception helped them recognize the varying levels of reading skills in the class. I also wanted to make them aware right away that the course’s own process of development was something everyone had to be conscious of. What would take place in the course was always to be a function of their engagement as well as mine, of what they did and wanted as well as what I was asking and expecting of them.

As the recitations moved beyond a discussion of elementary issues of oral articulation, the students brought forward their own “critical” and interpretive views of the material. These views were for the most part extremely superficial, and where they were not, the students were unable to explain their reactions very well. My task at that point consisted of forcing them to set their views in a close relation to the selected passages and to get them to see how little of the passages’ materials were being engaged by their commentaries. (Later, as they improved their work in these areas, I pushed them to address not so much myself as a reader of their work as the other students, their peers, as their readers: to see if what they had to say was understood, and—more important—whether it was able to generate critical reaction in others.)

The general problem of critical reading came dramatically to the fore

in the third class. At that point I observed to the students that of all the passages from Scott introduced for discussion, no one had asked us to consider the Privy Council scene, which concludes chapter 5. I noted that the passage seemed to me clearly an arresting one because (a) it was strategically placed to culminate an important chapter, and (b) it seemed, on its face, to have little to do with the story. The material thus drew attention to itself. I asked if anyone would simply report what happened in the scene and identify the characters involved. No one could do this.

The situation (I argued to them) was dramatic evidence that they were reading not to investigate the book on its own terms but to process the book in terms that they could “understand.” I proposed that if they wanted to learn to read fictions, they would want to pay special attention exactly to scenes and materials like this—indeed, to seek out such scenes and materials. “Understanding” a scene like this one, I argued, was less important than being alive to its presence and its difficulties. I told them that an aptitude for such awareness (which necessarily also involved self-awareness) was, in my view, the ground on which the reading of fictions was based. And I said, finally, that the course would only be successful if they were able to develop these kinds of aptitudes.

I “lectured” on these matters because I wanted the students to understand the rationale for a change of direction that (I told them) I was about to institute. The change would slow our progress through the assigned class texts in a drastic way. I told them we would continue the initial schedule of reading Scott’s novel until we finished it. At that point, instead of moving on to another book and author, we would begin a process of rereading and reengaging the passages they originally chose for class recitation and discussion. This process would also entail a critical reengagement with their own original sets of comments, questions, and reactions. As usual, they would record this activity in their notebooks and be prepared to present their critical comments in class.

Under these new conditions, the class discussions began to change and deepen. More importantly, perhaps, as the students reflected on their own work, they began to discover an interest in the views of others and a desire to argue with or elaborate on what others had to say. As it happened, the three classes I had originally scheduled for reading Scott’s novel turned into a five-week unit (ten classes), and we could easily have spent much more time with the book. While I had planned, in the original conception of the course, to monitor the progress of the undergraduates closely and to make in-course adjustments as necessary (to meet their reading needs as these were exposed

in class), I did not anticipate how often and how particularized these adjustments would have to be (see appendix C for the sequence of in-course assignments that were made in response to what was happening in class).

These changes proved difficult, somewhat disorienting, and invaluable. Difficult and disorienting because we were unable to plan very far ahead—never more than a couple of classes. A constant process of assessment governed our progress and the assigned readings. A positive benefit of this procedure was that everyone—myself, the undergraduates, and the graduate students—was paying close attention to what was taking place in class day by day. The effect of that kind of attentiveness began to appear in the undergraduate notebooks right away, but it reached a new level when the undergraduates began to comment on their earlier notebook entries.

Because the notebooks developed a doubled record of the undergraduates' reading experiences—a precritical as well as a critical encounter with the book—they opened themselves to a second-order process of reflection in which students could assess the relation of the two moments of reading. Furthermore, their precritical and critical readings were both engaged as primary acts of awareness and attention. This result came about in part, I think, because of the tactical ways we were moving through the course. What I mean is that the critical reflection was itself transacted as an experience, as something to be discovered and exposed, rather than as a predetermined goal. That experiential quality of the work during the first five weeks of the course allowed the students to begin the next unit—a reading of Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*—on a higher level of attention from the start.

In terms of reading skills, the students remained variously distributed. A few had more or less fully assimilated some basic methods for promoting their critical engagement with the novels. But most of the class still had only an uncertain grasp about how to cultivate this kind of engagement. These differentials were important because everyone could see that specific persons had acquired visible new reading skills in a few weeks. These gaps in reading aptitudes would prove a great pedagogical benefit. They meant, for example, that as soon as we began reading West, certain students were forcing the class to engage the book in ways that they would not have thought to do five weeks before, and everyone could see the difference. Moreover, that students raised these matters profoundly altered the class dynamic. We began to have class discussions that were constructed entirely from topics and problems initiated by the students.

At this point, a new type of problem and opportunity started to emerge. The students began to realize not simply that some people articulated

their ideas well and some did not; they saw both how difficult and how important it was to be able to explain themselves in clear ways. Critical acuity couldn't be separated from communication skills. Because they could move reflexively on the texts with greater ease, they also began to see the critical usefulness of purely speculative explorations. And we were finally able to begin exercises in which the students were asked to select passages that illustrated authoring and constructing presences in the novel. The students found themselves repeatedly drawing comparisons and contrasts between how West went about constructing his work and how Scott operated.

By the time we finished with West's novel, the basic critical goals of the undergraduate course had been fully articulated as an integrated pedagogical sequence. That is to say, the undergraduates had been moved through a triple reflective process. They had, first of all, turned reflexively on *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and on their ideas about that book, in a series of integrated classes. Second, they could see (they learned by doing) that "comparison and contrast" exercises setting two or more works in dialectical relation—in this case, Scott's and West's—could be a powerful critical tool. About the ninth week of the course, reading these novels in relation to secondary critical and theoretical works became yet another stimulus to the students' thinking. In the remaining five weeks of the class we wanted the undergraduates to test their reflective powers on another pair of very different kinds of fiction: Henry James's *Washington Square* and Lautréamont's *Maldoror*. In this way, reflexivity became the means for developing an understanding of critical methods of reading.³

What Actually Happened (Part 2):

The Graduate Course in Teaching Fiction

This sense of reflection as a means of developing undergraduates' critical reading ability found its parallel in the graduate instructors' critical reflection on teaching. In fact, just as the undergraduates brought reading of the various texts into dialectical relation, so did we in the graduate seminar on teaching fiction attempt to bring the "texts" of our teaching experiences and theories into dialogue for the weekly seminars around "reports" prepared by the students and distributed to the seminar the day before we met. These reports could (and did) engage with two kinds of matters: first, questions and problems dealing with the assigned (undergraduate) novel and the related theoretical readings assigned for the graduate class; second, questions and problems related to what had happened in the undergraduate classes during the prior week. We also reflected on general tactical problems of teaching as they peri-

odically arose, and occasionally we discussed problems they were having with their tutees as well as issues we wanted to undertake in an anticipated undergraduate class.

I originally planned to have the graduate students “teach” specific undergraduate class periods. Because of the limited number of undergraduate classes, I formed the graduates into pairs and scheduled a set of class periods that they would “team-teach.” The plan was that they would do this twice. After the first run-through, however, I canceled the second. The graduate students were not happy with this outcome, but they did understand why I felt it necessary. The most important reason was that their classroom skills were not strong, and in fact—as one might expect—they varied widely. Having an actual experience of their awkwardness in the undergraduate class was dismaying but quite useful, and it spawned some valuable seminar discussions. In particular, the graduate students’ teaching difficulties parallel, in some ways, the undergraduates’ reading difficulties. But the undergraduates’ needs contradicted the graduate students’ in a serious way. To run the original plan would have meant that ten of the twenty-eight undergraduate classes (more than a third) would be run as “teacher training” classes. Given the level of the graduate students’ classroom skills and the undergraduate needs, I couldn’t let this happen.

The problem was exacerbated because of the artificial conditions under which the graduate students were being asked to conduct a class. Unlike the “Introduction to Literary Studies” course, the syllabus of “Reading Fiction” was entirely my design, and the course changes described above were my decision. It’s clear to me now that courses like “Introduction to Literary Studies” (many undergraduate sections) and “Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction” (one undergraduate section plus a tandem graduate course) are simply two different models for promoting pedagogical instruction for graduate students. A paired course model like the latter should involve the graduate students in tutorial work with the undergraduates, but probably not with the responsibility of running the class sessions.

The relative failure of the few classes that the graduate students did run, however, proved quite instructive, and left me with the conviction that both models are useful for developing the graduate students’ classroom skills. The hands-on nature of a course like “Introduction to Literary Studies”—a collectively designed course where all have their own sections and “workshop” their experiences—needs little justification at this point in time. Likewise, being in the position of involved observer, as the graduate students were

in “Reading Fiction,” gave them room to reflect critically on methods of classroom instruction.

Let me elaborate on this. As already noted, “Reading Fiction” evolved quickly as a scene of discovery. I was having to adjust myself (and the syllabus) on an almost daily basis as I tried to locate and address the needs of the undergraduates. As we took up these matters in the graduate seminar, I kept noticing a puzzlement, and sometimes unease, among the graduate students. The situation’s difficulty arose partly because of the contradiction, mentioned above, between the differing needs of the two groups of students (undergraduate and graduate); and partly from a widespread commitment graduate students make to the “Teacher’s” rather than the “Learner’s” classroom. Like many before them, graduate students give considerable attention to the Teacher’s Classroom. So they think to prepare a more or less firm and/or elaborate set of topics to be “covered” in class, and the success of the class is measured in terms of how well a “teacher” delivers a body of knowledge to his or her students. This is a scene of instruction, of course, but it was specifically not the scene being explored in the courses — graduate and undergraduate alike — that I had imagined.

So while the graduate students understood theoretically, as it were, that they should be approaching the undergraduates not to teach them something that had been prepared for delivery, they were not ready to execute that model of instruction in practice. In the graduate seminars, I pointed out that the “Reading Fiction” class “preparations” should be confined to choosing a set of salient passages for discussion, but that the Learner’s Classroom teacher should hold these in reserve and look to have the class period’s events dictated directly out of the undergraduates’ notebooks. We would be looking at the class not in relation to our preparations — in effect, these preparations were “our” notebooks — but in relation to what the undergraduates brought to the table. If our preparations intersected with those of the undergraduates, well and good. But if that eventuality came about, it would happen quite arbitrarily. Of course, all along we would be thinking about fiction and how to read it skillfully and hence would be thinking of certain questions and topics. But we would be trying to fix our attention on these matters not according to what we might think, ahead of time, to be best, but according to what we discovered about the undergraduates’ reading skills as these would be self-exposed in the notebooks.

Although the graduate course originally had a stable syllabus of readings and a clear set of purposes, the change in plans about the undergraduate

classroom underscored the volatile status of everything we were doing. Several of the graduate students were uneasy, and sometimes unhappy, with this situation. From my point of view, however, as I pointed out, it simply exemplified the character of the pedagogical model I was trying to develop and examine in the graduate course and carry out in the undergraduate.

Some Conclusions about the Experiment

The courses were both “successful,” I judge, in opening doors of perception, as Blake might say. The necessary reciprocal of this judgment, however, is that the courses reveal a whole series of problems and, in certain cases, failures. The marks of these are apparent: the several shifts in the course design; the resistance of many of the undergraduates to certain requirements (“public” recitation and discussion of recitation; “public” presentation of ideas and, more difficult, of one’s reflection on those ideas; forced engagement with “advanced” critical and theoretical materials); the puzzlement and sometimes the unhappiness, of several graduate students in particular, with the relatively unstructured form of the course; the desire of the graduate students to be more involved in classroom teaching and to acquire some more determinate, “top-down” teaching tools and models. By the end of the two courses, many of these unsuccesses appeared in a more positive light. But not all.

The undergraduate course was probably more successfully negotiated than the graduate course. From postclass evaluations we could see that the students finished the course with a clear understanding and, most important, a clear appreciation of the relation and the difference between (as it were) naive and critical methods of reading. They also came to see how certain fictions try to make a display of their own processes while others disguise or even hide their artistry. It was also clear that the students came to be able to see themselves as readers and to realize that the “meaning” of a novel is something they themselves construct on the basis of certain determinate ideas and materials; they understood that they can access the basis of their own judgments, though only with serious reflective thought. I think many of them also came to see how difficult and rare that kind of thinking is, in themselves or others. Many—but probably not all—even came to understand the importance of reading critical and scholarly materials and to appreciate them as a means of developing a conversation about books with persons who take a serious pleasure and interest in such things.

These results could only develop over time, however, so the day-to-day class situation was fraught with difficulty. The game was worth the candle, but keeping it lit was not easy, and—perhaps most dispiriting of all—you

always knew when it blew out. One wanted methods and procedures for ensuring a high level of intellectual engagement, but often all one had was intuition. In this regard, we came to judge that the notebooks were extremely useful. They helped the undergraduates keep up with the work in a regular way, for they knew they would be expected to present their notebook work to the class at any time. The notebooks were even more useful as tools for practicing critical self-reflection. Assignments from, say, week 2 would be revisited in, say, week 5, and the notebooks reported the process. In addition, the notebooks were turned in to the graduate students every two weeks for instructional comments, and the undergraduate students would then discuss those comments with the graduate students in individual tutorials. The notebooks thus became the locus, throughout the course, for the undergraduates' thinking and rethinking, as well as for their thinking in relation to the responses of others. For the graduate students, these notebooks were also useful. The notebooks centered their regular tutorial meetings with their undergraduates, and, in doing that, they gave the graduate instructors a student-centered ground on which to engage the reading problems their tutees were experiencing.

Because the graduate course focused on the problems of "teaching fiction" to undergraduates, perhaps it had to rest in its failures. For the success of the graduate course would necessarily be measured, at least in part, as much by the exposure of problems as by the discovery of solutions. As in-class educators we tend only to address the "problem of defining problems" by ourselves and in an experiential way, over a long period of time—years. This experiential method is, surely, deep and serious, and it yields—if only slowly—good results. How does one reconstruct that process of experiential thought in a single seminar? It can't be done, of course. But such a seminar can encourage a critical aptitude for thinking about classroom instruction, and it can expose the graduate students—and their professors—to ideas and materials they would probably not encounter working on their own.

So if their course revealed to the undergraduates some of their habits of thought (and nought), and if they found some means for getting past these habits and for exploiting some underdeveloped intellectual resources, it produced some parallel discoveries among the graduates. How does one pose an incisive question? How do we help the undergraduates learn to develop a process of thought and analysis or to articulate what they think so that others understand (whether to agree or not)? More importantly, how do educators give their students means to address their questions in a practical way?

These problems are closely related, in my view, to our instructional obligations to both graduate and undergraduate students. I am not speaking

here of “cultural literacy” (whether liberal, on the right, or on the left). The politics of culture, an important issue in its own right, was explicitly set aside as a criterion for choosing texts and for making decisions about the work in class—at least until the last third of the undergraduate syllabus. The emphasis was on reading “skills,” though that necessarily included an engagement with social and historical issues as well as formal ones. Equally, it involved problems grounded in long-established institutional practices and ideas about classroom instruction.

Courses like “Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction,” where faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates involve each other in learning about learning, are badly needed by all parties concerned. Faculty sometimes—perhaps too often—lament debasements in students’ intellectual abilities, but our graduate programs give almost no serious or sustained attention to the pedagogical face of the problem, which therefore perpetuates itself through the educational mechanism. *Critical reflection about the problem*, which in this situation must function in practical and institutionalized ways, stays largely unattended. And yet we remain champions of the idea of critical reflection! Senior educators themselves—tenured faculty and their departments—rarely organize to address these central vocational issues. Yet we can’t set programmatic policies and goals unless we construct the means for examining the problems collectively and at all institutional levels.

Have our departments stopped learning about learning? Individuals rightly protest their personal commitments and interests, and perhaps the protest serves in the isolated classroom. It *is* an isolating scene, however, and all the more so because its ideological space is mostly defined by “teacher” rather than “learner” models.

Notes

1. The faculty who have worked to design the “Introduction to Literary Studies” course are Steve Arata, Steve Cushman, and myself.
2. The assignment for the notebooks was this: The undergraduates were to record questions and observations about each day’s reading. After each class they were to use the notebooks to reflect on the class and on their previous notebook entries for the class. The notebooks would thus force not only regular attention to the material, but regular reflection on that attention. It was also required that the notebooks be turned in every second week to the student’s graduate tutor. The graduate students would then meet with each of their undergraduates and discuss the notebooks—in particular, to point out ways the undergraduates could utilize the notebooks to improve their critical skills.

3. A word about the pairings of these novels: In each case, works were selected that drew sharp lines of difference in form and style. The second pairing was meant to replicate the first under a “modernist” horizon. James’s work seemed particularly apt for such a move because the book hovers so delicately on the brink of a modernist approach to fictionality. We — myself and the graduate students — were especially hoping that the class would be stimulated to draw comparisons (and contrasts) not only between James and *Lautréamont*, but between James and Scott. This result did come about. Furthermore, we chose West and *Lautréamont* because we wanted to force the class to deal with important substantive issues — social and moral issues — as well as with the stylistic and formal issues that centered many of the engagements with Scott and James.

Appendix A: Syllabus for “Reading Fiction”

ENLT226M: “Studies in Fiction”

University of Virginia

Instructor: Jerome McGann

This is a course to introduce students to different kinds of fictional forms. Its aim is to make a march through a variety of these forms, so that students may gain a greater consciousness about how fictions work, and hence a greater facility in reading different kinds of fictions.

All artistic works are dialectical and involve intersections: between the intentions of authors and the intentions of their readers; between readers now and readers in the past; between the formal conventions of imaginative works and the historical pressures that cut across those conventions. In the house of fiction alone these intersections are of many kinds, so that a course like this can only hope to make a beginning. The fictions to be read range from the early nineteenth century to the present. All the readings are in English, though some will be translations from other languages.

We will be reading novels, allegories, symbolic narratives, as well as a variety of what William Blake called “unnamed forms.” We will be reading short stories as well as other fictions of longer (and longer) lengths. We will be mystified and amused. We will also, we trust, be instructed. Everyone.

Texts

(*Note:* We will almost certainly not read all of these texts. They are listed as the options we’ll take as we move through the course and discover what we ought to be reading.)

1. Primary Texts

Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor* (Oxford)

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Oxford)

Henry James, *Washington Square* (Penguin)
Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Stories* (Penguin)
James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Penguin)
Lautréamont, *Maldoror* (New Directions)
Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers* (Grove Press)
Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (New Directions)
Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (Harcourt Brace)
Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (Penguin)

2. Secondary Texts

M. M. Bakhtin, from "Discourse in the Novel"
——, from "Epic and Novel . . ."
Roland Barthes, "Writing and the Novel"
Robert Caserio, from *Plot, Story, and the Novel*
T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth"
E. M. Forster, "Flat and Round Characters"
Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature"
William H. Gass, "The Concept of Character in Fiction"
J. Arthur Honeywell, "Plot in the Modern Novel"
Philip J. M. Sturgess, from *Narrativity*

Course Requirements

This course is meant to develop your skills in reading fictions. As such, its shape cannot be fully determined at the outset of the course, since the course will have to be in large part an investigation of your needs as readers. This investigation will unfold as the classes unfold, and the specific assignments will evolve in response to your needs and performances. *Under such conditions, you have a responsibility (and opportunity) to shape the course of study according to what you feel will be most useful to your interests and needs.*

You will keep a notebook (typed), which will be a running record of your engagement with the materials in the course. This notebook will be turned in at midterm and again at the end of the course. There will be no exam. Grades will be determined by class performance and by the character of these notebooks.

The course will demand a continuous involvement, with specific assignments for every class. The notebook will be used to record the performance of these assignments, as well as the questions and problems that the assignments raised for you. *Everything you do in relation to the course should be recorded in the notebook.*

The notebooks must be brought to every class. They will be your source for the issues and questions we take up in the class.

A good deal of time, especially in the first half of the term, will be spent on class recitation and discussion of the recitations. It is very important that everyone spend time preparing to give these recitations. Reading the texts in a clear and fluent way is

not a simple task; it is also fundamental to understanding the work. Your notebook should carry a record of your responses to these recitations and the preparations you make for them.

1. Keep a journal of your readings in the class and questions/problems/issues you are interested in and want to see addressed. This journal must be brought to class every day and is to be turned in at the time your final paper is turned in.
2. Each student will do a research paper on a particular book. The paper will be researched and written under the supervision of an instructor, either Mr. McGann or one of his graduate assistants. The book will be one of the following:
Jane Austen, *Persuasion*
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*
Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*
Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*
Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Syllabus

The course schedule will be assigned in small units, at least initially, as we try to gauge the study needs of the class. (By “small units” I mean a week or at most two weeks of class assignments at a time.)

Appendix B: Syllabus for “Teaching Fiction”

ENSP970: “Teaching Fiction”

University of Virginia

Instructor: Jerome McGann

This course is being run in tandem with an undergraduate seminar ENLT226M, “Studies in Fiction,” which properly should be titled “Reading Fiction.” The course description for the latter is given below. Graduate students are expected to attend the undergraduate classes.

In this course, we will focus on how to facilitate a high school or undergraduate student’s understanding of fictional works. There will be some readings in criticism and theory, but at all points our direction will be toward the students and what they need to understand and appreciate these texts. To do this requires not only a mastery of the art of fictions, but a cultivated sympathy with the art of reading and how it may be developed. Consequently, we will spend much time with the undergraduate class, interacting with it and trying to clarify the questions and problems that are raised in that class.

No more than ten students may take the course, which is closed to first year students.

Seminar Requirements

1. Each student will oversee the researching, writing, and rewriting of one undergraduate student paper in the parallel UG course ENLT226M.
2. Each student will keep a journal to record questions/issues/problems with the readings, with the classes, and with the individual students whose papers you're overseeing. These journals will be turned in at the end of the course along with a brief general report assessing the course and making recommendations about developing and teaching an undergraduate course like ENLT226M.
3. Each student will conduct at least one undergraduate class in ENLT226M.

Texts

1. Primary

(same as ENLT226M)

Secondary

(same as ENLT226M, plus the additional critical materials in the course packet made up for this class, which includes the following):

Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, pp. 9–59

Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1660–1740*, pp. 1–22

Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, chaps. 1, 5, 6

Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, chaps. 1, 14

Edward Said, *Beginnings*, pp. 81–188

George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, chaps. 1, 2

Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, chap. 1

J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, chap. 1

Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, chaps. 1, 2

Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, chaps. 1, 2

Robyn Warhol, *Gendered Interventions*, preface, chaps. 1, 2

Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, pp. 1–64

Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”

Class Schedule

The schedule includes the schedule of classes for the UG class ENLT226M; these latter classes are marked *UG* in the class schedule below. The first two classes will be devoted to readings in the theory of fiction. Thereafter (as you will see) the agenda for the graduate classes is left open. The agenda will be set by the students assigned to present reports for those days. The material for discussion will include both assigned texts as well as the ongoing undergraduate classroom events.

Appendix C: Undergraduate Syllabus Changes

Syllabus Addition: 22 January 1997

1. *Notebooks*: To help you develop useful notebooks you will each be assigned to a particular graduate instructor. You will turn your notebook in to your instructor every other Wednesday after class and meet with him or her at an arranged date on the Thursday or Friday after that Wednesday to discuss the notebook. This means that the dates for turning in the notebooks are as follows: 5 February; 19 February; 5 March (this is the “midterm”; Mr. McGann will be looking over all the notebooks at this time and will hand them back on 17 March. If you work in the notebooks over spring break, keep your work on loose sheets to be added to the notebook); 26 March; 9 April; 23 April.

2. *Next Assignment*: 27 and 29 January 1997

Do not read further in the novel. But in the course packet, read the selections of critical material by M. M. Bakhtin. Summarize (in your notebook, as always) the key points of these selections. Note for class discussion topics or problems you want raised—matters you don’t feel you understand clearly, or matters that interest you and that you’d like to have discussed in greater detail. In particular: be prepared to illustrate with examples Bakhtin’s discussion of the difference between poetry and novels (on the matter of “monological” and dialogical” discourse). Second, prepare a passage in chapter 7 for recitation.

(Notes on recitation: You should practice reading the paragraphs out loud until you feel you understand what you are reading, so that the recitation itself goes a long way toward explaining the passage to your listeners. This will involve, of course, deciding what sort of tone the content and style merit. Be prepared to defend your reading comprehension as well as your tone. We will often be setting your reading against another’s to see if there are differences in the interpretation of a passage’s performance [and therefore of its meaning and style].)

Syllabus Addition: 27 January 1997

Finish reading *The Bride of Lammermoor* by next Monday (3 February). Prepare a passage for recitation in chapter 14, 20, or 23.

Syllabus Addition: 10 and 12 February 1997

Read the essay materials by Barthes and Sturges in your course packets. Write a two-paragraph report on one or the other. The first paragraph should locate and explain one idea in the essay that you regard as central to that essay. (Reflect that these essays deal with complex matters, so that their ideas often need to be unpacked—paraphrased and expanded—if they are to be clearly grasped.) The second paragraph should explain in some detail why this idea is so important. In this case you will confine your remarks to an explanation of either (a) why the idea is important “for understanding the Barthes/Sturges essay as a whole”; or (b) why the idea is important

“for understanding novels or literature in general” and perhaps *The Bride of Lammermoor* in particular.

Syllabus Addition: 17 and 19 February 1997

1. Prepare a recitation passage from chapter 24, 34, or 35. (Just a reminder: the commentary and notes on this recitation preparation are to be written up in your notebook.)
2. Go back to chapter 5 and look at the Privy Council scene again (read it again, think about it again). Question 1: why is it there? Or, question 2: what did you think about this scene when you first read it; what did you think about it after you'd finished the book? (If nothing changed between those two events, revert to question 1.)
3. Read the Forster and Honeywell selections in your course packets. Write a summary of one key point in each essay (one or two paragraphs). *Illustrate the idea you take up with a passage or scene from Scott's novel.*

Syllabus Addition: 24 and 26 February 1997

1. Read West's *Day of the Locust*.
2. Prepare a passage from the first half of the book for recitation.
3. Read and summarize the Joseph Frank and T. S. Eliot essays in your course packets. (Reminder: as always, assignments 2 and 3 are to be written up in your notebooks.)

Syllabus Addition: 3 and 5 March, spring break, and 17 and 19 March 1997)

1. Remember that your notebooks are to be turned in to Mr. McGann on 5 March.
2. For 3 March read in the course packet (pages 54–59) William Gass's essay on “character” in fiction.
3. For 5 March (as part of your notebook) write a short piece on one of the following subjects. This short essay should be as long as you think necessary for the topic, but in any case not longer than four pages. (Note: it would be well for you to begin this writing assignment as soon as possible—it would be a bad idea to wait till 4 March, though our 3 March class might be helpful with what you have done to that point.)
 - a. Give what you take to be the main ideas in the Gass essay. Respond to these ideas—how are they interesting (or not), how do they help one to read fiction (or not). Your discussion should use examples from the two novels we've read.
 - b. Choose a character from West's novel and make a list of words and phrases that this character is regularly associated with. Comment on what this list shows about the character.
 - c. Specify some nonhuman “character” (in Gass's sense) in either the Scott or the West novel. Discuss the significance of this character (its development through the novel, its relation to the novel and the other characters, whatever seems pertinent to you).

4. Over spring break read Henry James, *Washington Square*. Prepare a passage for recitation on Monday, 17 March, from chapters 1–8.

Syllabus Addition: 19 March 1997

In your notebook write up a commentary on Catherine's reserved and taciturn behavior. Questions of relevance: (1) What do you think of her and why, and what do you think of her "history"? (2) What do you think James (or "the narrator") thinks of her? Come to class with "chapter and verse" to illustrate your views (which might be your "questions" as well as your "judgments").

Syllabus Addition: Final Assignment

1. Choose one of the sections of *Maldoror* and augment it. (The added texts can come wherever you choose.)
2. Write a commentary on the section and on your additions to it. Explain what you had in mind to do and why you did it as you did.