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Teaching with Style

Brooks and Warren’s Literary Pedagogy

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If your educational experience in any way resembled mine, you have been uncertain about what style is. Style was a familiar enough word for you, but your concept of style was probably vague . . . because our own teachers spent little or no time talking about style. . . . If we listed ourselves as members of that post–World War II generation of students who regularly practiced the Brooks-and-Warren method of close analysis, we could talk about the linguistic features of a poem with great specificity. Yet we may well have been stymied when we wanted to talk about the linguistic features of a prose text.

—Edward P. J. Corbett, “Teaching Style”

IN A 1954 article for The Journal of Higher Education, Clarence Kulisheck assessed the influential and “widely used . . . storm center” of Understanding Poetry—the most famous textbook by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks—and the consequent entry of New Criticism into the “hurly-burly of the sprawling undergraduate world” (174). Positioning Brooks and Warren’s collections as the primary texts which “herald[ed] the entrance of the New Criticism into the textbook field,” Kulisheck maintained that works such as Understanding Poetry were “so conceived and so constructed as to change radically conventional conceptions of how literature should be taught . . . and what literature should be taught” (174–75). Arguing that such textbooks “recognize and emphasize the prime importance of a critical
apparatus designed to acquaint the student (and the teacher, too . . . ) with the exacting techniques of close reading,” Kulisheck identified several “radical” features of these textbooks: an “introductory essay on applied aesthetics as it relates to the particular type of literature under consideration”; “detailed editorial analysis” following the excerpts of literature; “questions and exercises designed to stimulate further analysis along the same lines” of the criticism provided; and a glossary highlighting critical, often specialized, terminology (175). Kulishek concluded that the “elaborate apparatus was perhaps the most controversial feature of the original Brooks and Warren text” (176).

In 1953, a year before Kulisheck’s article, the field had already felt the need to evaluate the mark made by the New Criticism, as evidenced by Randall Stewart’s article in College English, which summarized the results of a questionnaire administered to thirty-four “New Critics” and “old scholars” alike. In nearly all the replies, professors noted re-animated attention to both literature and the teaching of literature, asserting that New Criticism promoted a productive move away from locating the “sources” of literary influence or inspiration, shifted graduate study toward critical subjects, and “tended to encourage the Socratic method in teaching and to discourage straightforward lecturing” (106–9).

In this article, I consider the specific pedagogical innovations Brooks and Warren introduced across editions of their first textbook, An Approach to Literature. I have deliberately chosen to investigate a New Critical textbook which has not received nearly as much critical attention as the Understanding Poetry series. Moreover, I focus on what I read as the most challenging literary genre the textbook duo tackled—the essay. In addition to surfacing the pedagogies involved in addressing a less central area of New Critical interest—nonfiction prose as opposed to the poetry typically venerated by the New Criticism—An Approach to Literature provides an especially useful site for considering the wider pedagogical practices that Brooks and Warren encouraged, practices which continue to be used not only in introductory English courses, but in literary studies and the humanities more widely.

What is most interesting and instructive about Brooks and Warren’s theory and pedagogy on the essay emerges through small changes from one edition to the next, as the team encounters difficulty describing the essay’s slippery, semi-literary form. The challenges of this task are registered through discussion of the essay’s “style” and the necessary evolution of the textbook’s pedagogical apparatus (the questions, exercises, definitions, explications, and structure that implicitly and explicitly “teach”). Brooks and Warren thus use the undertheorized genre and style of the essay as ground on which to build an increasingly useful apparatus.
The section that follows first provides a brief sketch of Brooks and Warren’s relationship and the exigency for developing New Critical practices, as well as a consideration of the critiques the broader movement received. It then turns to the historical reception of *An Approach to Literature* and my analysis of its evolution across editions. By providing a genealogy of the changes made across editions, the final sections illuminate the texture of a particular form of New Critical pedagogy in order to demonstrate how close attention to texts read *qua* literature—in the manner Brooks and Warren advocated through their work with the essay—remains useful today.

**Pedagogical Beginnings and the Growth of New Criticism**

The story of the Brooks and Warren textbooks begins at Louisiana State University, where the two men were reunited as colleagues and as teachers. Although they had worked together previously as friends and fellow students—at both Vanderbilt and Oxford—it was at LSU that, faced with teaching four classes each semester in addition to producing scholarship and editing the journal *The Southern Review*, they developed a pedagogy of close reading for the classroom. The aim of such a pedagogy was democratic: to provide students a method and the necessary tools to interpret texts on their own, especially at large state universities such as LSU. Brooks later recalled the beginning of four decades of collaboration with Warren:

Robert Penn Warren and I found ourselves in the mid 1930’s teaching at the Louisiana State University. . . . Among other things, each of us was teaching a section of the department’s course in literary forms and types. Granted that Warren and I were young men excited by the new trends in literature—Warren was already a published poet—and granted that our heads were full of literary theory—drawn from the poetry and critical essays of T. S. Eliot and from the then sensational books on theory and practical criticism written by I. A. Richards—nevertheless, our dominant motive was not to implant new fangled ideas in the innocent Louisiana sophomores we faced three times a week. Our motive was to try to solve a serious practical problem.

Our students, many of them bright enough and certainly amiable and charming enough, had no notion of how to read a literary text. (“Forty Years of ‘Understanding Poetry,’” 167–68)

As Jewel Spears Brooker notes, Brooks was clearly “stimulated in part by pedagogical earnestness” in his drive to move beyond early-twentieth-century
textbooks whose “theories of mimesis, of genesis, and of reception seemed to have exhausted themselves” (131). According to Brooker, Brooks did not exclude these approaches as entirely unproductive, but read them as often ineffective in pedagogic isolation, instead favoring “an approach that stimulated readers to focus with intelligence on the text” (131).

Brooks and Warren began working on this “serious practical problem” by collaborating on Sophomore Poetry Manual, a pamphlet which expanded upon notes that Warren had developed for teaching an LSU poetry class. This initial foray into pedagogy was then expanded to include a range of genres; Brooks and Warren (along with John Thibaut Pursur) entitled this reader An Approach to Literature, which was printed by LSU in 1936. Thus began a sustained collaborative endeavor on textbooks. A few years later, as Brooks and Warren began revising a second edition of An Approach to Literature (1939), their next textbook, Understanding Poetry, had already hit the stands in 1938. This frenetic pace of textbook publishing continued for the next four decades, with new textbooks such as Understanding Fiction (1943) and Modern Rhetoric (1949) rounding out the mix. In addition to their creative and scholarly work, Brooks and Warren released or revised a new textbook every few years.

Understanding Poetry undoubtedly came to be the best known of their textbook series. First used at LSU and soon taught across the United States, notably at Yale where Brooks and Warren would later teach (Brooks arrived 1947; Warren in 1950), this popular volume was regarded as instituting the “New Critical approach.” Each textbook aimed to establish links across several spheres of academe in order to allow critics authoring textbooks, teachers using them, and students studying from them to work together on problems of interpretation. The introduction to Understanding Poetry indicates the broad goals of the textbooks: to “dispose of a few . . . basic misconceptions . . . and therefore to prepare the student to enter upon an unprejudiced study of the actual poems” (xviii). These “misconceptions” are pithily named as “message hunting,” “pure realization,” and “beautiful statement of some high truth” (10–18), statements which still capture prevalent ideas about the interpretation of literature today. This opening statement in Understanding Poetry also makes evident New Critical assumptions broadly present across the textbooks: that students are intelligent yet prejudiced, and that students will easily relinquish their prejudices and misconceptions through exposure to the methodology of the volume.

This excerpt also assumes and addresses an implied teacher.¹ Faced with an enormous influx of students after the Second World War, many teachers
were both overworked and undertrained. Accordingly, the editors seek to cleanse them of unwanted prejudices as well, to create the kind of level playing field that would be assumed by the New Critical methodology. Such an approach is democratic, then, not only because of the range of readers toward which the text directs itself, but also because of the ways that it discounts prior knowledge and experience, so that all readers may proceed in the same manner. Indeed, democratization of literary study, and of reading practices more broadly, was among the most prominent goals of the Brooks and Warren textbooks. To allow all readers equal access to textual interpretation, the textbooks focused on what was theorized as “the text itself,” establishing as the object of study the words in front of the reader, whose accessibility did not depend on esoteric bibliographical knowledge that some students might possess and others might not.

From the outset, Brooks and Warren advanced their New Critical strategies as a corrective to approaches associated with other “popular” or current textbooks, which in their view often substituted for the primary object of study—the poem itself—other foci: paraphrase, biography, “historical materials,” and/or “inspirational and didactic interpretation” (iv). The authors aimed to defend students from these practices by encouraging them to strive for precision, ground their analyses and interpretations in the primary texts, attend to all aspects of the text instead of isolating out particularities, and proceed through a series of questions toward articulation of the “grounds” for certain interpretations. The apparatus accompanying each primary text established, and implicitly theorized, a new pedagogical method which would persist for many decades.

A key implication of the textbook apparatus was that students could be liberated via the New Critical method, through both their increased knowledge and their increasing engagement with the particulars of literary work. This liberatory aspiration dovetailed with Brooks and Warren’s effort to rescue literary theory from the limited interpretive frameworks of philology and literary biography that had marked pedagogy well into the twentieth century. Regarding these approaches as elitist and dilettantish, they sought to combat these with a democratic, reasoned, and incisive method.

Even now, though the field of “English” perceives itself as beyond the New Criticism, commentators such as Gerald Graff and Frank Lentricchia agree that the specters of the New Critical perspective continue to haunt contemporary theory and practice. Lentricchia notes that the New Criticism lives on not only as an “imposing and repressive father-figure” but also in the ways that contemporary theory is connected to, rather than discontinuous
from, New Criticism (xiii). Graff further suggests that even opponents of the New Criticism often use the very methods and tenets of New Criticism in order to critique it.²

From our contemporary vantage, the tenets of New Criticism—and their attendant dangers—ring familiar in English departments across North America. The roster of charges usually runs somewhat like this: that the New Critics treated literature as a sacred text cordoned off from the world and from history, regarding it as art for art’s sake; that the “Intentional” and “Affective Fallacies” theorized by the New Critics assisted in this exclusion, thus constricting the range of fruitful reading practices; that the focus on organic unity in texts, combined with a drive for recognizing universal systems of humanistic understanding applied in a scientific manner, flattened the dialectic between reader and text and among conflicting ideas; that these practices implicitly sought to establish a limited canon out of highly privileged, arbitrary and elitist values; and that New Critical tenets resulted in a hierarchy of proper reading practices (and thus “proper” readers), often elevating academic critics to its apex. These portraits of dehistoricized, exclusive, mechanized practice persist in representations of the New Criticism. And there is truth to many of these charges.

Yet, as Gerald Graff suggests, such representations always risk oversimplification and caricature, and often fail to distinguish between what the New Critics initially advocated and how their methods later came to be “routinized” and broadly applied. Accordingly, Graff’s discussion of New Criticism is crucial for understanding the original impetus of New Critical methodology, as well as why it ultimately faded from dominance—and, some would say, failed. Some of the reasons for this failure can be gleaned from the list of charges listed above: as Graff puts it, “the necessity to fight battles on so great a variety of fronts forced the New Criticism to stretch its concepts till they became ambiguous,” and moreover, muddled and contradictory (141). To ward off the “hedonistic impressionism and genteel moralism” residual from earlier periods, the New Critics advocated an interpretive practice that did not linger in rapturous pleasure or didactic lessons (140). To guard against the popular practices advocated by biographers and philologists, the New Critics recommended concentrating on the text itself. And in order to defend literature from scientific positivism, the New Critics argued for literature’s connection, as Cleanth Brooks put it, to the “facts of experience,” a realm which could be objectively recognized as its own mode of knowledge (The Well Wrought Urn, qtd. in Graff, Literature against Itself, 142).

Literary works in this view were thus both objective and self-sufficient, while still somehow connected to the larger world and worldly experience.³
From this New Critical perspective, focusing on the text in isolation was (also paradoxically) a way to restore literature’s place and value against the mechanistic, industrial, positivistic forces of society—a way to train students, as Mark Jancovich puts it, to be aware of “the paradoxes and contradictions repressed by capitalist rationality” (88). The method designed to fulfill these contradictory goals was, of course, close textual analysis. Graff summarizes the range of critiques this method was intended to dispel:

The method of close textual analysis was a response on one side to those who dismissed literature as a frivolity and on the other side to those who defended it in terms which rendered it frivolous. Close textual analysis, producing evidence of the richness and complexity of literary works, simultaneously answered the impressionist, who viewed the work as a mere occasion for pleasurable excitement, the message-hunter or political propagandist, who reduced the work to mere uplifting propositions, and the positivist, who denied any significance to the work at all. And close analysis of meaning could also demonstrate to the historians and biographers that a literary work was more than a datum in the history of ideas or the life of the author. (141)

The New Critical method of textual analysis, though often perceived in retrospect as isolationist, was intended to result in precisely the opposite phenomenon: it sought to restore to literature a central place in the culture at large. Moreover, the New Critics sought to extend the values associated with literature to all, employing a democratic method of criticism to allow readers of all kinds to cultivate humanistic endeavors.

Given the number of challenges this method set out to correct, it comes as no surprise that it ultimately fell from disciplinary dominance. Part of the problem was the New Critics’ oversimplification of the foes they set out to attack. As Graff suggests, for instance, the New Critics mistakenly equated rational thought with the mechanized societal forces they sought to disrupt, which prompted them to “oppose rational objectivity to experience and doom themselves to the polarizations they aimed to heal” (149). And in attempting to save literature from its host of differently antagonistic opponents, the New Criticism was not only pulled in too many directions to sustain itself, but also experienced a fundamental dislocation of its body of theory from its methods of textual interpretation.

However, from a pedagogical point of view, the effects of this dislocation are minimal, particularly in the *Approach to Literature* series. Indeed, the pedagogical apparatus analyzed below reads as an important site from which
theoretical nuances can emerge: I argue for this analysis as a new avenue into the theory associated with the New Criticism. In the sections that follow, I am particularly interested in the theorization of style as a literary feature, a way to reveal and access what is specifically “literary” about a text. As Brooks and Warren develop their handling of style via the pedagogical apparatus across editions, they also explore and refine their theoretical commitments. This is evidenced most clearly when style as a topic vanishes from the theoretical discussion of the essay, only to be pursued in the pedagogical apparatus. The apparatus thus becomes the central site for finding language to describe the workings of style and “literariness,” so that students might learn to recognize, discern, and describe stylistic effects as part of their interpretive repertoire.

Barely Literary: An Approach to Literature

Although Understanding Poetry is popularly understood as the textbook which institutionalized the New Critical approach, An Approach to Literature—Brooks and Warren’s first textbook—also importantly disseminated the New Criticism beyond LSU. As James Grimshaw, Jr., notes, as early as 1939, An Approach to Literature was being taught at institutions as geographically diverse as Auburn, Tufts, Cornell, Colgate, and North Dakota (27). As the textbooks swept the nation and as theoretical scholarship related to New Criticism continued to grow, the reception of Brooks and Warren’s textbooks grew as well.5 The textbooks ushered in new pedagogies that quickly gained ground. Josephine Miles describes the influence of the textbooks in a 1947 review:

I do not think that any younger writer growing up in the 1930s and reading one or two years of the Southern Review and later the Brooks and Warren textbook could have failed to absorb some of the patience . . . some of their straight attention to every complex structure and every simple whole. . . . Every poem makes the more sense by such treatment. (185–86)

Generally positive, reviews of the literature-based textbooks note their wide influence on the field and the productive pedagogies they fostered.

Indeed the only critique the literature textbooks typically received considered the extent to which the text should offer a pedagogical apparatus. Geoffrey Wagner, for instance, reviewing in 1956, writes that
The Brooks and Warren readers . . . consist of admirably selected passages of literature—poetry, prose and drama—with pertinent and often profound comments. They are challenged as being too pedantically the fruit of the American school of New Criticism, of which Professor Brooks is allegedly the Dean. However, I personally feel that this is one place [the undergraduate classroom, especially in the first two years] where the New Criticism—close textual analysis keeping historical and biographical data to the background—is vitally to the point. My only criticism of the Brooks and Warren textbook is that it tends to do too much for the teacher: the numerous questions appended after each selection exhaust the topic and tend to rob the teacher of opportunities for exercising his own gifts. (227)

The problem that Wagner notes is certainly always an issue in textbooks; they walk a fine line between pedantry and providing a range of materials useful to both teacher and student. As Brooks and Warren often note in their introductions, volumes are rarely used from cover to cover, exercise by exercise; accordingly, their aim is to present more material than necessary from which the teacher may choose.

Given the impact of the Brooks and Warren textbooks, as well as the ways that An Approach to Literature preceded and influenced the approaches later featured in the ubiquitous Understanding Poetry, this understudied volume merits enhanced critical attention. As the textbook where Brooks and Warren specifically considered differences between genres as well as differences between poetic and prosaic form, An Approach to Literature provides a valuable site for assessing the evolution over forty years of both New Critical pedagogical and theoretical approaches to the essay, as well as their theoretical premises and allegiances more broadly. I first sketch the editors’ efforts to describe the relationship between the essay’s content and its form, attempts which initially read as somewhat muddled. The section that follows illuminates how Brooks and Warren develop richer and more productive attention to the form of essays—and to their “style”—across revised editions of the textbook via the pedagogical apparatus.

An Approach to Literature addresses not only the essay, but several literary genres, seeking to “bring into the classroom some of the insights that had been provided by criticism since Coleridge and to set these insights, especially when dealing with more mature students, in some context of literary and social history” (v). The textbook devotes a section to each featured genre—fiction, poetry, biography, the essay, and drama—accompanying most selections with exercises. The preface details primarily the fiction and poetry
sections, devoting less attention to the other three generic divisions, which mainly serve as connective devices between earlier selections.\(^7\)

By the time we reach the introduction to the section on the essay—framed as one of the “most flexible of forms” and one which has suffered with the rise of the modern short story—we have already learned much about the authors’ understanding of form and style as they operate within literary texts. Here, however, the authors do not spend as much time with how essays “are made” as they do when addressing fiction; nor do they fully elucidate topics such as “style,” “movement,” or “exposition” as they do in the section on fiction. Instead, the introductory section on the essay seems more intent on differentiating the essay from other prose forms through defining what exactly makes an essay an essay. They begin by addressing content:

Of all the various forms of literature, the essay comes closest to having as its purpose merely the presentation of facts—for the sake of the facts. The essay lies therefore in a sort of borderland which touches on the one side the realm of “pure” literature and on the other the realm of practical and scientific writings, the realm of chemistry texts and medical prescriptions and cook books. In the essay the writer is concerned primarily with the explanation of a set of facts or perhaps with convincing the reader of the truth of a particular set of ideas. (113)

In this first nebulous attempt at defining the essay, the authors situate it broadly within the vast “borderland” between strict exposition and what they demark as “pure literature.” Crucial, they point out, is the essay’s purpose of relaying information that is chiefly factual. As the editors develop this basic definition, they elaborate the purpose of the essay as employing a story or incident as the means by which to illustrate or explore a general idea or position. This “separates the essay as a form rather sharply from the other literary forms we have mentioned,” in that the “particular” is used in service of exploring the more “general” (509). This definition reads as both purposely broad and unnecessarily vague: the authors have a feel for what qualifies as essays—not magazine articles, for example—yet they can only begin to articulate the boundaries of the essay, primarily via taxonomies.

The introduction’s discussion of the role of style in the essay highlights Brooks and Warren’s tendency toward both categorization and broad description, as well as underlines the characteristics that, in their reading, qualify a text as “literature.” Arguing that the essay may be “heavily burdened by the weight of facts,” they note that the essay “can become literature,” although the assumption remains that it must aspire more than other literary forms
to do so (113). Despite the implication that the essay is more burdened by its content and accordingly less literary, however, the authors are at pains to point out that “form and style” have an important and necessary place even when the main interest of the author may be in convincing his reader of the truth of some practical proposal” (113; original emphasis). Thus they emphasize what qualifies as a “literary” dimension of the essay: since the essay uses language, and language is interpretative and expressive (words are not, as the editors put it, “exact”), the way in which ideas are presented is constitutive of the essay’s meaning. Thus, “form and style”—what they read as “literary” characteristics—are important to consider even when analyzing more factually driven pieces of writing. “Colored by the writer’s own special and personal conception of them, and colored by his attitude toward them,” the facts that the essayist presents always have—as even a cook book does, the editors remark—“the possibility of going off into poetry” through style and form (113).

Brooks and Warren provide several different ways of considering the content the essay details—the facts, as it were—and the form through which these facts are presented. Variously, the editors refer to “not statements of fact,” but “comments on the facts and opinions about the meaning of the facts”; “an arrangement of facts”; “an interpretation of facts”; and finally, facts which are “shaped by his [an essayist’s] writing to win the reader to his own interpretation” (509–10; original emphasis). Here the editors begin to move from content to the style of the piece—the ways in which the author shapes the content so as to persuade and engage. Brooks and Warren name this rhetorical impetus “emotional coloring”: “The essay, then, may attempt to stir the emotions as well as offer facts to the intellect; and, therefore, it may be one of the works of the imagination, and as such, a form of literature” (510). The process leading up to the possibility that the essay might operate as a form of literature reads as arduous indeed, as the logic moves from content, to how content is shaped and presented, to the effects of this presentation, and finally, via imagination, to the possibility that some essays may therefore be understood as literature. Hence the essay is in some respects not literary—due to its factual content—while in other ways it is crucially literary, particularly by dint of the artistic arrangement of its parts which combine to create a “style” perceivable by the reader.

In an attempt to clarify the matter, the editors take pains to discuss the style of the essay as it both relates to and differs from those associated with other forms of literature (115). They note, for example, that the structure—in addition to the tone and atmosphere—may have a more “informal quality” (115). The structure of what they name the “informal essay” proves particu-
larly difficult to pin down. The structure “at its best . . . is not a haphazard one”:

Ordinarily, the logic of exposition or the logic of the argument determines the arrangement of the essay. But since in the informal essay this matter does not bulk very large, the arrangement of the material often follows the apparent whim and impulse of the author himself or the apparently casual association of ideas. . . . (115)

However, the editors are careful to point out, twice, that this impression of random or chaotic “arrangement” of the essay’s structure is only “apparent,” and is most likely constructed purposefully to give that impression. After this round of vague clarifications, Brooks and Warren arrive at the final paragraph, where they most clearly attempt to define essayistic “style”:

It is this fact that sometimes causes us to think of the informal essay as having preeminently style and the other types of essays as lacking it. But the proposition is true, of course, only in a very special sense. It is impossible to have style in a vacuum. The style, in its broadest sense, is the arrangement of the writer’s materials, the adaptation of his means to his ends in the use of language. If style is an arrangement, there can never be just style—there must be an arrangement of something. But the statement is true in this sense: namely, that in the familiar essay the material is not so much objective fact as it is the sort of fact which one finds in a poem or short story. Consequently, the form is prominent in the familiar essay for the same reason that it is prominent in the poem or short story. (115; original emphasis)

Despite its somewhat circular reasoning, this argument makes common sense: informal/personal essays “seem” as though they have more “style” in part because they have less “fact”; thus their material bears greater similarity to that of a poem or short story, and likewise, they are more literary than those essays the authors have deemed formal or factual.

Definitional slippages here mark the authors’ attempts to acknowledge the more literary dimensions of the essay. They begin with the term “structure,” which is related to the tone and the atmosphere of the piece and which comes to be synonymous with the essay’s “logic” and its “arrangement.” Yet the “arrangement of the writer’s materials” is also the way that the editors broadly define “style.” To add a layer of complication, the term “form” is introduced at the end of this exposition: “Consequently, the form is promi-
nent in the familiar essay.” Although not clearly defined, “form” is understood here to be associated with the style and arrangement of the essay; and form, like style, becomes more visible in the informal/personal essay than those essays more driven by factual content. Despite the overlap in these definitions, the goal remains the same: to acknowledge, pinpoint, and describe the essay as a literary genre.

These attempts at defining the essay, its style, and accordingly how it functions as a form of literature remain fraught for Brooks and Warren throughout the four editions of *An Approach to Literature*. The relationship of form to content within the essay reads as at the heart of these difficulties. The editors consider content to be the driving force of factual, personal, and speculative essays; and this, their maneuvering implies, threatens the ability of the essay to operate as literary text. Although the editors aim to narrow the gulf between “fine literature” and the essay’s “practical exposition of facts,” ultimately they present the essay as a genre that is barely literary, bound and determined by its content and the attendant presumptions of truth, fact, and the author’s direct and sincere presence on the page (509). Over the course of the four editions, however, and despite their struggles to describe and deal with the literary aspects of the essay, Brooks and Warren eventually develop more effective ways to guide students’ work with essays. For all of its murkiness, the struggle to elucidate how the essay works gives rise to a considerable enhancement and refinement of their pedagogical apparatus. In turn, the apparatus acts as a whetting stone which further sharpens the articulation of the textbook’s theoretical assumptions—for students, teachers and for the editors themselves.

**Pedagogy in Action:**
**Defining Essays and Student Reading Practices**

The organization of the first edition of *An Approach to Literature* provides a point of departure from which Brooks and Warren then adjust and diversify the pedagogical points they wish to emphasize. In the first edition, selections are organized thematically, and most of the questions which follow each selection focus on content. The editors do encourage dialogue between the readings, often asking students to compare two essays or points of view. But by and large, the apparatus in this first edition remains (like the authors’ definition of the essay) focused on the facts. Typical questions address what Author X says about Subject Y or how a student would define the essay’s
key words or concepts. The handful of questions that encourage attention to style—and the relationships among author, text, style, and reader—focus almost exclusively on discerning the author’s “real attitude” toward his subject or his reader.

There are two notable exceptions to the first edition’s pedagogical focus on “what” based questions. The first is a question about Montaigne’s “Of the Resemblance of Children to Their Fathers”: “Does this essay have any formal structure or is it merely haphazard? If it has a structure, what determines that structure?” (195). Attentive students will remember similar language from the Introduction to the Essay and thus assume that the question leads them away from the “haphazard” and toward finding a meaningful logic for the essay’s organization. The second exception to the apparatus’s focus on content also raises the question of style specifically, here in response to Arnold Bennett’s piece “Literary Taste: How to Form It” (one of the few initial essays that disappears from the textbook in the revised edition). The authors ask, “What does Bennett say is the relation of style to content?” (206). Although this question might get students thinking about this relationship, the question itself guides students to report what Bennett “says” without obliging them to engage the connection Bennett makes. Other than the question regarding Montaigne’s formal structure then, the pedagogical principles of this first edition steer students toward identification, comprehension, classification, and straightforward questions about the soundness or fairness of particular arguments—what Brooks and Warren read as the essay’s “non-literary” dimensions.

**Revised Edition, 1944**

Although the revised edition’s Introduction to the Essay remains exactly the same as the original edition’s text, significant changes emerge in the pedagogical apparatus which indicate Brooks and Warren’s attempt to supplement their theories of the essay and the ways they ask students to read and interact with essays. A key new feature is a series of several paragraph-long discussions that follow new essay selections. In these responses which precede the set of questions, the authors highlight specific features of the essays, draw connections between essays, and discuss the more challenging essays which do not fit neatly into the paradigm of a “closely knit, logical development” (133). In addition to the authors’ discussion of the essay, each selection is followed by five to eight questions (rather than the two or three in the first edition) which are much more thorough in their efforts to engage students in the
work of textual analysis. Many of these questions enact similar work as that described above, although in this edition the student is called upon more frequently to explain differences among authors’ arguments and lend their own views to the discussion.

Despite the fact the revised edition constantly raises style—such as in the exposition following Emerson’s essay—it often retreats to the “examination of ideas” as the best way to explain the essay’s work. Such a move is likewise reinforced in the final question about Emerson’s piece which reads, in part, “Even an evaluation of Emerson’s style—if style is functionally related to the author’s purpose—will be impossible, finally, without a broad basis of comparison. In general, this statement applies to all the essays; we can evaluate the style only in terms of the general intention” (133). It’s difficult to discern how to interpret this statement, just as it’s difficult to tell what action students are supposed to take in response. Such confusing directives co-mingle in this edition’s apparatus with questions which ask students to grapple with the rhetorical and stylistic features of the text, such as “How does Pater make his answer to the question seem plausible and inevitable?” This question marks the first “how” question in the *Approach to Literature* series, asking students to account for how a particular effect—here, plausibility—is achieved.

The clearest development of this new line of questioning appears in four of the eight questions following Arnold’s “Culture and Anarchy.” These questions best illuminate the detailed analysis of both form and content to which this edition aspires. After asking students to compare the definition of culture and the key points Arnold makes to elements of another essay selection, the apparatus poses a series of questions aimed at uncovering how the essay is constructed and how its construction contributes to its work. First, students are asked to reread the essay, paying attention to “Arnold’s method of presentation and argument. What has he gained by his special ordering of the ideas which he has used?” (167). This emphasis on the essay’s structure is strengthened in the next two questions, which ask students to attend to Arnold’s use of examples and metaphors/similes. Each question encourages students to justify how these elements assist or detract from the essay’s persuasiveness. Finally, the last question turns explicitly to style: “Consider, for example, the difference in style between the concluding paragraphs of the essay, and, say, the section on Puritanism and the Nonconformists. What accounts for this difference?” (167). Although the phrasing of the question suggests a “haphazard” selection of two sections to compare, questions like these pave the way for ensuing editions of *Approach* to develop attention to more than the essay’s content.
Although there are only slight changes between the revised second edition and the 1952 third edition, a few changes begun in the revised edition begin to come to fruition. The third edition elaborates the questions about style and advances a more substantive taxonomy differentiating kinds of essays. Brooks and Warren note differences between the “perceptible logic” typical of argumentative essays and the characteristics that mark personal essays in which “the organization and the tone are more complex—and in a sense, more important” (591). This edition also offers a new synopsis of what the authors perceive as key differences between these kinds of essays:

[The personal essay] tends to emphasize attitudes and moods rather than a process of logical exposition; and consequently, it characteristically uses a great deal of concrete illustration, imagery, narrative, etc. In its extreme form, as a matter of fact, this type of the essay may seem to be little more than a presentation of the author’s personal prejudices and whimsies. Often, writers of personal essays will prefer to approach their material by presenting some paradoxical situation or idea, or by an overinsistence on some aspect of an idea. (591)

This additional explanation moves beyond the organization and tone mentioned in the first part of the discussion to a more adept description of the form and structure of the personal essay, including its emphases, devices, approach, and movement. Additionally, the editors introduce a spectrum of essay-writing—from formal to informal and from more extreme forms of each to less extreme forms—alongside the spectrum of essay readers, who, the authors hope, are able to perceive the logic and complexities of these multiple essays.

Remembering how the editors previously characterized the personal essay as following the “apparent whim and impulse of the author himself or the apparently casual association of ideas” (the Montaigne question from the first edition, “Does this essay have any formal structure or is it merely haphazard? If it has a structure, what determines that structure?” is a good example) helps to pinpoint the development of stronger questions in the third edition. Specifically, in this edition Brooks and Warren pay greater attention to how the reader is figured in the essay, as well as the tone the essay establishes in relation to the reader.

Reader-oriented questions in this edition include the following:
• What is the tone of the essay? What do the allusions and quotations used by Lamb tell us of his attitude toward the reader? On what terms does he stand with the reader? What kind of reader does he envision?

• To whom is this essay addressed? The author writes: “We have forgotten, etc.” Who is we? What is the tone of the essay?

Furthermore, the third edition offers more precise questions helping the student to engage style. Through modeling, the pedagogical apparatus asks students to articulate similar comparisons between essays. In some cases, the authors encourage students to account for and describe elements of tone, implied content, and specific textual devices—in order to home in on the style of the essay.

• Why does Lamb recur to China teacups at the end of his essay? Is he merely trying to justify the title? Or is some artistic function accomplished by this return? (592)

• Discuss the style of this essay, noting particularly the means by which the author establishes a particular tone. (579)

• How would you describe the style of this essay? The first paragraph, for example, has a number of echoes from the King James version of the Bible. (Can you point them out?) In what other ways is the style “literary”? Compare and contrast it with the style of Hemingway, of Bishop, and of Lamb in his informal essay, “Old China.” (523)

• Is there any difference in style between Churchill writing as a historian and Churchill speaking as an orator? In this connection, consider very carefully the style of the last paragraph. (588)

• As a historian, Churchill is necessarily interested in giving facts—precise dates, places, even tables of statistics. Does he manage to make his facts “come alive”? Does he succeed in presenting the dramatic excitement as felt by himself and the British people? If so, how has he done this? Consider carefully the diction, the comparisons, and the rhythms of the relevant passages. (588)

• What is the function of the French quotations? Thurber sometimes translates the relevant passages. Would anything be lost if he used no quotations in French at all? (601)

Instructed by these precise directives to consider specific words and sentences, students are called upon to describe how textual elements work in concert to achieve a particular tone, style, and overall effect. Moreover, in the final
question students are asked to pay attention to the intricate ways the text is constructed by considering how the text might change if it were missing one or more of its elements. This encouragement to engage style is developed still further in the next edition.

Fourth Edition, 1964

The fourth edition, the last to include essays, exemplifies many of the changes Brooks and Warren struggled to implement in their earlier discussions of the essay. Especially since the fifth edition omits nonfiction prose entirely, it seems that the genre of the essay posed challenges not usually present in Brooks and Warren's other textbooks: reading and interpreting literature not easily categorized as “imaginative” or “pure.” Indicative of these challenges is that essays in the fourth edition now fall under the category of Discursive Prose. This is a substantial reorganization of the section on the essay: the rubric of “Discursive Prose” now combines four categories—the personal essay, the essay of idea and opinion, the critical essay, and biography. Surveying textbooks from 1956 to 1960, Richard M. Eastman observes that the genre of prose nonfiction “is virtually confined to the freshman course” and thus to the texts and anthologies marketed toward such a course (221). Clearly, this redesignation seeks to align forms of the essay more squarely with other modes of discourse—narration, persuasion, exposition, and description—on which another of their textbooks, Modern Rhetoric, relied throughout its editions.

The change of Approach's overall heading to Discursive Prose also indicates larger theoretical changes within the text.\(^8\) The fourth edition is more grounded in rhetorical purpose, a point emphasized at the beginning of each subsection through a discussion of the “occasion” to which writers respond (whether writing a personal essay, an essay of idea, a fictional story, etc.). This stronger focus on occasion usefully complicates the division between literary/belletristic writing and utilitarian writing which underlay earlier editions of the textbook. Moreover, rather than present form and style as merely aesthetic categories, this edition instead frames them as part of a rhetorical project, focusing on the connection of style and structure to “the writer's concern for precision and expressiveness in his exploration and discrimination of meanings” (432).

This shift toward a more rhetorical understanding of literature allows Brooks and Warren to expand their lexicon for and attention to the elements of style in writing, especially through developing richer questions for the
apparatus. Nonetheless, their methods of reading poetry persist as a central way to attend to style, as demonstrated in the exercise example: “Study the characteristic sentence structure. Read sections aloud and catch the natural rhythm of the prose” (436). New to the pedagogical approach, however, is the opportunity for students to respond to readings by generating their own sets of questions. Instead of being directed by the editors, students are encouraged to develop questions that “would serve as a guide to a critical discussion of both content and method” as well as to make pertinent “comparisons with content or method of other essays” (491).

New questions also more fully interrogate sentence, paragraph, and holistic stylistics. One set focuses on “effective” parts of the text—“bits of description, turns of phrase, or bits of dialogue” that stand out to the student (517). The fourth edition also generally applies more pressure to essayistic structure and how essayistic prose differs from fictional prose. More questions emerge in the fourth edition that ask students to attend to specific stylistic and structural moments: “Consider the structure of the next to the last paragraph. By ordinary standards it is wandering and pointless. Do you find it effective here? If so, why?” (440)

The authors also finally return to some of their key essays, by Lamb and others, which have appeared throughout several editions. Although Brooks and Warren typically innovate most in the apparatus around new readings, this edition also presents a productive expansion of the questions for readings retained from edition to edition, which have seen only small modifications over several editions. The result is a more comprehensive and consistent method across the essays. This more even development of the apparatus also allows a new type of second-order question to surface: “What different kinds of styles does Whitman, according to this critic, employ? What examples of critical analysis do you find Jarrell using in distinguishing these styles?” (545). Here students are asked to not only locate and describe multiple styles used by a single author, but to also take into account the types of analysis used to make judgments about style.

In its greater attention to particular uses of structure and style in a wider array of the essay selections, Brooks and Warren’s fourth edition thus illustrates the growth of seeds planted in earlier editions. Although a few of the questions still contain vestiges of earlier editions—such as a focus on discerning the “personality” of the author via the text—and although the rubric of clarity is often used to explain stylistic choices, the fourth edition of An Approach to Literature demonstrates the fruit of an evolving process whereby the editors grappled with essayistic style and how to help students to think about style outside the realms of fiction and poetry. Reading across
editions makes visible the strategies that Brooks and Warren used to adapt a literary approach to a genre that, for them, involved both literary and non-literary elements. The result was not only an enhanced theorization of how style functions in the genre of the essay, but also a more adroit effort to focus student attention on this important literary question.

Thus for Brooks and Warren, the essay—as a creature both literary and non-literary—was decidedly a critical problem, and a generative one. Most interesting is that their shifting pedagogical approach to essays over the course of this textbook’s editions allows them eventually to accommodate in a “literary” way this not altogether literary genre. Struggling with the genre of the essay enabled Brooks and Warren to fine-tune their pedagogical methods—and indeed their understanding of essays and their style. The result was a more developed and consistent approach to the essay and essayistic style, as well as more fruitful questions for assisting students in reading and interpreting these challenging texts. With each new edition there was more to say, more to consider, and more attention to be paid to essays, their construction, and how their style mattered in rhetorical terms. Concomitantly, with each new edition of *Approach*, what students were asked to do and the types of readers they were asked to become shifted and developed. Students were encouraged to become more capable of pursuing their own inquiries and more competent at generating critical responses to complex textual questions. Imagined as careful readers who could make a case for what they noticed in texts, students were asked to become more focused and precise in both their responses to stylistic questions and in the way they noted connections and distinctions among genres.

Mark Jancovich notes that one reason Brooks and Warren’s literature-based textbooks were so immensely influential is that they appeared at a time when there was no coherent practice for the teaching of literature as literature. Their strength was that they addressed this absence, and presented a series of pedagogical activities which could be used both inside and outside the classroom. More than any other New Critical activity, these text-books were responsible for redefining the object of literary study. They directed attention to the linguistic forms of the text, and defined the terms of reference within which literary studies largely continues to operate.

(87)

Jancovich’s point—that it was textbooks that largely developed and defined a practice of literary study (the study of “literature as literature”)) still largely in use today—rightly focuses our efforts to understand New Criticism through
the enterprise that I would suggest mattered most to the New Criticism: helping students to read and study literature qua literature. Investigating the changes to this methodology as they were most present to students—that is to say, via textbooks and their complex, integrated, evolving pedagogical apparatuses—offers the richest site for rediscovering the analytical and interpretive practices Brooks and Warren actually advocated. Moreover, attending to these practical instantiations of New Criticism best reveals the pedagogical imperative at the heart of the New Critical project: how to teach teachers how to teach and students how to read texts as literature.

Made particularly evident through Brooks and Warren’s struggle with the slippery genre of the essay is their strenuous commitment to empowering readers to consider form in rigorous ways. That they did so even when facing a genre whose literary style was less privileged and less well theorized than that of other genres demonstrates their marked dedication to this objective. Despite—perhaps because of—their anxious relationship to the elusive genre of the essay, over four editions of *An Approach to Literature* they continued to refine their pedagogical apparatus in service of this commitment, adapting their techniques for analyzing form used elsewhere to a genre usually not regarded as meriting such attention and formal analysis.

Through this examination of *An Approach to Literature*’s pedagogical trajectory, I aim to encourage more work of this kind—work that reveals specific acts of teaching—in order to illuminate more richly historical teaching practices in context, as well as their lasting influences on current pedagogy. The development of New Critical pedagogical practices, especially those showcased through Brooks and Warren’s ongoing efforts to make interpretation of the essay and its style available for students, displays the difficult balance which must be struck between literary and rhetorical education, between the text and the reader. Noting even small changes across editions is important in discerning innovations in both literary and genre theory, as well as the ongoing process of adapting pedagogy to achieve the most effective classroom practices.

To enlist the concept of “style” differently, the style in which the New Critics taught has been so thoroughly absorbed into today’s classroom practices that we tend to respond to it as we do a longstanding habit, as a “style to which we have become accustomed.” Revisiting the particulars of how that pedagogical style entered North American classrooms to begin with, and how it developed productively over time, can help us respond to New Critical teaching methods not as mere customs used and abandoned without reflection, but rather as thoughtfully developed resources potentially adaptable for coming days.
Notes

1. For more on how textbooks instruct, interpellate, and discipline teachers in addition to students, see Hawhee, Libby Miles, and Reynolds.

2. Graff characterizes the context of the New Criticism as “part of the general revolt against empiricism which characterizes modern intellectual history—and which today animates those who believe themselves to be opponents of the New Criticism” (Literature against Itself, 137).

3. All of the primary scholars of New Criticism I’ve cited here agree that the New Critics did not, as usually charged, divorce the text entirely from historical contexts. Reviews at the time support this more nuanced understanding. See Jancovich, particularly Chapter 8, “Understanding Literature: Textbooks and the Distribution of the New Criticism.”

4. The New Critics are not the only school of thought that Graff charges with falling into this trap. By Graff’s account, many interpretive communities (up to 1979 when Literature against Itself was published) fell prey to the same binary oppositions, the result being that they “assigned ambitious cultural functions to literature while defining literature in a way that obstructed carrying out these functions” (147).

5. For an illuminating history of the collaboration on and release of these textbooks, see the introduction in Grimshaw. Apropos of the influence of An Approach to Literature specifically, sales of textbooks are notoriously difficult to gauge, but one number referenced in the correspondence between authors may act as a rough illustration: in under two years, a fourth edition of An Approach to Literature (1964) sold over 99,000 copies (Grimshaw, 264).

6. In his chapter on textbooks in Fragments of Rationality, Lester Faigley notes that studies focusing primarily on textbooks lack the ability to determine how these texts were used, appropriated, or challenged by teachers and students. Yet his assertion that “if textbooks are not a reliable source of data for how writing is actually taught, they do reflect teachers’ and program directors’ decisions about how writing should be represented to students” makes a useful distinction and, coupled with the context this chapter provides in terms of the reception of these texts, points to the ways that textbook study is important for understanding the representations of writing and reading, students and teachers (133).


8. As Kulisheck notes, textbooks such as An Approach to Literature furthered a “genre-approach in preference to the period or chronological approach,” resulting in a curricular sea change as well: many liberal-arts colleges “completely revised . . . their curricular offerings . . . on an exclusively genre basis” (177).

9. For an alternate view on style—style as pleasure and not as clarity—see the work of Richard Lanham.

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