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## Topographies of Knowing in 299B: Junior Seminar

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## TOPOGRAPHIES OF KNOWING IN 299B: JUNIOR SEMINAR

*Laura McGrane, Associate Professor, Department of English, Haverford College*

*The critic who over the close texture of a finished work shall pretend to trace a geography of items will mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. (Henry James, "The Art of Fiction")*

Every English major at Haverford College takes the two-semester Junior Seminar course, an intensive entrée into theory, narrative and lyric that also encourages iterative writing and revision in small-group tutorials. This spring semester (2013) our class met in additional tutorials to explore the idea of thresholds. These class conversations took place in conjunction with the Bryn Mawr Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) on the topic. I am grateful to the ten students in this group for their candor, persistence, patience, and wisdom.

Each of the students in the course had already taken English 298 with me in the fall semester, so we knew each other pretty well by the time we embarked on these conversations. My somewhat loose methodology reflects my own eclectic 18<sup>th</sup>-century humanistic style, so I apologize up front to the social and natural scientists reading this. Early in the semester students read brief excerpts on the idea of thresholds. We then met in tutorial groups of five every few weeks to discuss reading, writing, and critical practices from a pedagogical and cultural perspective. (These meetings supplemented the course's usual tutorials in which we workshopped essays and discussed course texts in more depth.) As students spoke about various topics, I scrawled notes on a legal pad then typed up the thoughts that I could decipher from my writing. The comments in this essay, attributed and non-attributed, have been filtered through that listening, note-taking, note-typing process. Where students are identified and quoted directly, I asked for their permission.

Students pointed out that none of them come to Junior Seminar without preconceptions. They are told by others that they will be "dumped" into a morass of poetry and prose; they hear tall tales of the thousands of pages they will read, of the papers that will never be fully finished; of the whiplash speed at which they move from Shakespeare to Derek Walcott; George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. And then there's the "theory bomb." They expect, and this was largely borne out in many of their experiences, that they will misread and misunderstand as they grapple with just what is at stake for a given theorist and how his or her approach fits into a larger canon of literary production from the New Criticism to post colonialism.

The English Department website offers a slightly less harried vision of Junior Seminar, but the intensity of the course is present even in this straightforward description:

Junior Seminar aims to cultivate in the student some sense of the variety of English literature and its criticism, and to introduce the student to the activity of criticism as it interacts with literature and as it participates in the more general intellectual life of our time. This active criticism will lead students to grasp both the nature of literary

convention and tradition and the perspectives that “open up” the canon to a richer diversity of voices and expressive forms.

The first term is devoted to poetry, poetics, and practical criticism, . . . the second term focuses on narrative and its theorization and criticism, and readings include George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, stories by Henry James and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

These paragraphs focus on “active criticism” in field-specific and broader cultural context. Students will be introduced to the activity of criticism, which will lead them to “grasp” new perspectives. So how to trace the winding route from grasping (at) theoretical trends to activating these critical practices in one’s own intellectual practice? Students from English 299 shared what they found to be useful signposts and maddening dead ends along this journey, described by one as a traversal across texts, youthful assumptions, and deep anxieties. (We also became conscious in our use of journey motifs of both our paltry metaphors and our motivations for clinging to them a la the poet Wallace Stevens.)

From these conversations students identified three key concepts that they felt broadened their disciplinary practices even as these ideas exasperated their efforts to find tidy closure:

- (1) READERSHIP as active construction
- (2) CRITICISM as iterative process
- (3) WRITING as innovative praxis

While we appreciated the idea of the threshold with a focus on integration and “troublesome knowledge” (Meyer & Land, 2005), we decided that the trope of a single or singular crossing failed to capture the dynamism of what one student referred to as “punctuated equilibrium—we climb, we plateau, we slip, we plateau, we climb again.” In exploring such intellectual activities—and the experiments that arose from them—we learned anew just how powerful experiences of alienation, labor and frustration can be (for good or ill) depending on how we frame them in the classroom.

### **(1) READERSHIP as active construction**

*And yet, it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives: has anyone ever read Proust, Balzac, War and Peace, word for word? (Proust’s good fortune: from one reading to the next, we never skip the same passages.)* (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*)

What do we do, then, when we read? If narrative is dynamic, if texts are formed and reformed via our reading processes, how do we articulate our reading acts to ourselves? Students commented on the intensive preparations for each seminar meeting: They recognized the need to “show” something for the reading process, the importance in the academy of both being called to

account, and receiving credit, for the unseen labor of reading a text for class. They also noticed that much of the “work” of the seminar meeting itself took place before they walked into the room and after they left (propelled to new ideas and avenues), even as they shared their individual drudgery, wonder or boredom in the directed 90 minutes of seminar.

To experiment with the idea of active readership we toyed with meta-reading in tandem in a tutorial read aloud. Each student read the same paragraph of theory, one they had not yet been assigned, commenting as they read on what they were doing: “Here I would pause on this term and note that I have no idea what it means; here I am thinking about the TV series “Breaking Bad”; here I would underline the word “Oedipal” and think briefly about a high school lecture on Freud” and so on. It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, tedious to listen to others unpacking their reading while reading, and there was also a subtle pressure to imitate others’ practices as the act was repeated multiple times. Students were also, however, struck by all that we *don’t* think about when we read, and the ambiguities inherent in an assignment to *read for class*: paraphrasing, skipping, eliding, explaining, emoting, pausing, connecting, (re)citing similar texts, translating—each of these actions and hundreds more were cited by students as part of their habitus.

As students observed these strategies of analysis and distraction, they also began to discuss how context, discipline, and cultural literacies informed their practices. We realized, for example, that students reading a Barthes passage in the second semester of the course were already shaped by many months of “Seminar-style” reading. Those who were pre-med, majoring in Sociology or Anthropology, concentrating in Gender & Sexuality, or studying French each brought specific disciplinary approaches to the text. More subtle, but equally important, we discovered that each student’s—and the professor’s—intertextual literacy (the corpus of texts, television shows, movies and performances they have absorbed) shaped this moment of reading – now.

## (2) CRITICISM as iterative process

*If the art of criticism is an art of growth and flowering which becomes an art of flying, a way of doing levitation with words, as blossom becomes butterfly, this lighter-than-air feat uses the text it criticizes as but a mountaintop airfield from which to take off.*

(J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*)

Simply by reading, students acted as critics from the first class forward, though they did not always perceive their early responses as critical interventions. A key moment of recognition came, as one student pointed out, when she realized that a specific theoretical paradigm would not, could not, ever be complete. At that point, she acknowledged that synthesis was not the key aim of her reading, that she could hold onto conflict and controversy and position her voice within these disagreements. We could all pose our own readings alongside, on top of, around the corners of the various theories that we were reading.

Students noted both the importance and difficulty of adapting to the role of critic in their Junior Seminar Work:

- I have come to view myself as a critic both of course texts and peer texts over the semester because a) I have confidence in my own abilities to analyze, integrate, create, and comment on literary theory now that I have built a context and vocabulary for the work; and b) I have new confidence in my peers as scholars writing arguments rather than mere commentary.
- The Seminar is good preparation for the world: it teaches us to find a place and voice with authority figures—while also being critiqued: we learn ways to navigate within hierarchies.

They also described the importance of being candid about the hierarchies of the academic institution and how hegemony positions students in a necessarily vertical understanding of our discipline-specific critical enterprise:

- We need to be honest about the power of publication and author function; we need to be explicit about the role of a syllabus, a department, in selecting a critic as exemplar.
- We need to understand the relationship between criticism as play and criticism as improvement (revision in tutorial is framed as such) and how these two work in tandem.
- I feel like I have to emulate Laura's [the professor's] reading and commenting practices since she is the professor.

With these caveats in mind, and the invitation to use play as improvement, students sought new opportunities for dialogic encounters with our course theorists that were less mediated by the professor or course syllabus. In particular, they experimented in small groups with two variations on the traditional annotated bibliography—one virtual, the other a video.

In the virtual annotated bibliography, five students created an electronic labyrinth of responses to public blogs, pop culture sites, academic articles, and book reviews—each posting comments that linked to another student's post on a different site. Their goal was to intermingle their critical responses with public voices of various kinds, forming a web of interaction that drew the theorists, students and public critics together in a horizontal network. On a blog entitled :::PPandA (problemsparadoxesandalliterations), for example, one student wrote on a photo series of theorist Paul Ricoeur:

The ordering and presentation of these portraits is particularly intriguing if considered alongside Ricoeur's theory of "narrative time." Pushing away from a chronological vs. achronological model (a resistance illustrated by the repetition of certain images here), Ricoeur offers three 'new' temporal models. . . . This language is perhaps clarified in Peter Brooks' discussion of how temporality relates to narrativity in "Reading for the Plot" (he might consider the question: how do these images, the way they are ordered, tell a story?). More information on the relationship between Brooks and Ricoeur can be

found in the comment, here: <http://www.booncotter.com/story-plot-and-narrative-not-the-same-thing/>

(Jenny Sanford)

The embedded citation at the end of this passage takes the reader to another site and another comment by a student, and on. I paste a segment of the visual rendering of the project below. If these links were live, you would be able to follow the student's voices across the web:

[D.A. Miller](#) → [Kermode](#) → [Riffetarre](#) → [Macherey](#) → [J.H. Miller](#) → [Auerbach](#) → [Ricoeur](#) → [Peter Brooks](#) → [D.A. Miller](#) → [Kermode](#) → [Riffetarre](#) → [Macherey](#) → [J.H. Miller](#) → [Auerbach](#) → [Ricoeur](#) → [Peter Brooks](#) → [D.A. Miller](#) → [Kermode](#) → [Riffetarre](#) → [Macherey](#) → [J.H. Miller](#) → [Auerbach](#) → [Ricoeur](#) → [Peter Brooks](#) → [D.A. Miller](#) → [Kermode](#) → [Riffetarre](#) → [Macherey](#) → [J.H. Miller](#) . . . .

The video annotated bibliography, in contrast, engaged students in a more intimate project. Using chalk and a traditional blackboard concept map, they discussed with each other and the intended audience on the other side of the camera how the theorists related to one another. This hybrid form demanded that students articulate theories out loud and in dialogue with each other, and the results were most telling in their acts of synthesis and shared elucidation. This link takes the reader to a 30+ minute edit of the extended annotated bibliography session:

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#search/annotated+bibliography/13d21e8b5ba5028b>

The first two minutes of the clip show the starting and finishing points (with a visual map on the board). The video then returns to the construction of the map in chronological fashion to narrate for the audience the movement by which connections and arguments were made. Students outlined their goals for the video in the introduction (excerpted here):

We would videotape our creation of the project and use that video *as* our project to see how we produced and reproduced (...) What we want to capture was not only what we've got up on the board but the process of putting it on the board (...) Looking at this theory not as separate from literature that we read but viewing it as a text that we also (...) create through our directions with it.

Especially revealing and effective (from my pedagogical perspective) were the video's pauses, the moments of laughter, the disagreements, the physical gestures toward exhaustion and frustration, and the genuine struggle at points to make sense of specific critical arcs.

### (3) WRITING as innovative praxis

*A bird in the context of the cage. A bird in the cagetext.*

(Ryan Rebel, “A Sense of Something or Other”)

The rhythms of Junior Seminar, students noticed, are very different from those of more traditional humanities courses where papers appear primarily as midterms and finals. In the Seminar/tutorial dyad, as one student explained, there was a constant blending of roles: from writer to critic, from critic to reader, from question asker to respondent. Such fluidity was seemingly beneficial for students preparing for orals examinations in the English major, but it also required a more process-oriented approach to acts of writing and criticism.

As we talked, students lamented (and celebrated) the sense that they were always “in the middle of something.” And they began to realize somewhere in the midst of *Ulysses* that that something extended beyond the syllabus, the semester, and the liberal arts classroom. At the same time, they grew evermore confident that what they would take forward with them needed to be theirs rather than a mere imitation of critics foisted upon them. As one student worried, “If faculty are being paid to change us, where is our agency to resist? To unlearn? Or conversely, to make over as our own?” From this series of questions students articulated a desire for projects, alongside the traditional essay, that encouraged innovative and creative praxis. Casaubon, the sterile scholar of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, epitomized for one student the researcher unable to “apply” his learning. Students, in contrast, sought opportunities to think their way back to people and society, actions and interventions, intellectual and physical constructions.

One student took the challenge directly into his essay writing, creating a fictional response to the short stories of Henry James and inviting students to join the authorial process through a Google doc. I include below a short passage and the comments (mine included) that were then typed in the margins:

Upon returning to my room, I was committed to the idea of compromising for the sake of the essay at hand. It was not as if I hadn’t applied veritable excrement to paper before in pursuit of a good grade. I would merely have to fake it until I made it. As Barthes relates, ‘To keep these spoken systems from disturbing or embarrassing us, there is no other solution than to inhabit one of them. Or else: *and me, me, what am I doing in all that?*’ (Barthes 29)

Comments:

**Jenny Sanford**

**10:38 PM Apr 23**

Is this format any less ‘compromising’ though?

**Laura McGrane**

**1:03 PM May 2**

And what are we compromising here? Or when we write an essay more generally?  
(Genuine question)

**Ryan Rebel**

**9:58 PM May 7**

Does this format compromise the ability to write something like “(Genuine question)”?  
Does humor even further complicate my genuineness or lack thereof? Or did I leave  
enough cues to let people track my irony? Or does that previous sentence sound too much  
like Kermode’s secrets?

Every writing style is a compromise. As soon as we write a single paragraph, or even  
single sentence, or perhaps even single word, we have already lost a world of possibilities  
that it doesn’t make sense to pursue anymore in the work we are creating.

**Jenny Sanford**

**10:40 PM Apr 23**

Man oh man can I relate

**Laura McGrane**

**1:04 PM May 2**

Are we really reliably able to discern the difference between faking and authentic  
making? i’d like to believe so but would love to know how you distinguish it for  
yourselves.

**Ryan Rebel**

**10:03 PM May 7**

Sometimes we can. But sometimes one man’s faking is more authentic than another  
man’s making. This binary is further problematized by our discussions on threshold  
concepts. I firmly believe that the way we learn is by being thrown into the pool despite  
not knowing how to swim (here we go with pools again). I’ve often felt like I’ve been  
faking a certain discipline until that mysterious ethereal retrospective moment when I  
realize I have crossed the threshold and am actually doing it. But is there any threshold  
after all? Is there only a continuous scale of less and less and less faking until you’re the  
person in the world who is faking the least and so nobody can call you on it anymore?  
That’s kind of depressing. Or liberating, maybe.

(from Ryan Rebel, “The Sense of Something or Other”)



The language of faking our intellectual pursuits—pretending until, well, we are not pretending anymore; or, as the comment above puts it, “faking the least so nobody can call you on it”—resonated strongly with the English 299 group. As we thought about crossing thresholds, forging topographies of new-to-us knowledge, we were called upon as students and professor to understand how we shape, and are shaped by, our intellectual practices. As we read, write and grasp at new fields of theory and literature, we also shape those spaces for each other and those who come after us.

Building on the generative insights from this semester’s conversations, I hope to experiment more in future courses. They might, for example, include a more sustained and intentional making component—an assignment like the creative annotated bibliographies or story that will reach beyond the closed-off classroom. Such *creative praxis* would supplement the essays, revisions, and oral examinations that establish a regular writing praxis in the classroom. Future Seminar sections could also include communication with students from previous years (on paper, blog, Skype or in person) who can reflect on their own horizons of intellectual growth, perhaps each one noting where they still hover or sink. My current students imagine a variety of ways the course will prepare them to do things in the world, from practicing medicine and corralling horses to running for district attorney and writing movie scripts. These seasoned students and alums might model for current students some real outcomes based on more than hypotheticals. At the same time students still making sense of Milton’s *Lycidas* may revise those earlier alum encounters as well.

Finally, new iterations of the course will include a regular reflective component that will complement creative praxis and duration vis-à-vis explicit integration. We will take up questions of how the work of Seminar spills into other major courses, across the curriculum, and beyond Haverford. Should we be able to discuss Michael Riffaterre or Homi Bhabha with our parents? Perhaps not. But we might settle for a more sophisticated ability to ask good questions about social conflict and political turmoil. Should trauma theory teach us something about Chaucer? Or cell division? Perhaps it can indirectly. As we share these moments of potential *integration* we might envision how our critical and imaginative enterprises in 298 and 299 will sustain us (and predictably fail to do so) beyond these few hours a week together.

**My thanks to the students of 299b , including Jonny Black, Josh Bucheister, Farida Essa, Ayana Peterson, Ryan Rebel, Jenny Sanford, Erin Seglem, Arman Terzian, Josh Thorn, and Cyrus Vastola (& in spirit Sonia Giebel and Nick Kahn); TLI student consultant Hannah Bahn; and my colleagues in the TLI Thresholds Seminar , especially Alison Cook-Sather and Peter Felten. This piece also reflects the vocabulary of Jan H.F. Meyer’s and Ray Land’s “Threshold Knowledge and Troublesome Concepts.”**