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ABSTRACT

In recent years, distinctions between expository and narrative modes of thought, as between personal and academic motives for writing, have become less clear cut. Looking for ways to tap the potential of journal entries in which students tell stories about their own experience in response to literature yields useful connections between narrative and critical sensibilities. For instance, Raymond Carver's short story "Boxes," prompted one student to write a poem that explored the same theme of flight from responsibility. This narrative exercise became part of an interpretive process which students too often find forbiddingly abstract and mysterious. The process of telling their own tales helped students become markedly less adversarial toward literary texts in general. Similarly, allowing students in an introductory literature class to select the reading material prompted them to fashion interpretations out of the stories they chose. Practice in developing their narrative abilities contributes to students' ability to develop critical insights. It helps them bridge the gap between their own stories and those of recognized authors. (SAM)

Telling Tales:
Bridging the Gap Between Narrative Acts and Critical Insights

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In graduate school, I took an 18th Century Literature course in which the professor, an old and distinguished scholar, insisted on lecturing about cultural history. We read Tom Jones and had a talk about the Diary of Thomas Turner. We read Boswell's Johnson and heard more than we really cared to know about Wedgewood china. It might have been fun, if most of us had not been preparing for comprehensive exams. We quickly grew impatient with a professor who was not telling us what texts meant.

The professor engaged in what I would call narrative acts. We sought critical insights. The gap between what he wanted to teach and what we expected to learn is one that I find myself straddling more often as a teacher of literature than I ever expected I would.

On the one hand, the study of literature in the university today is primarily a study of interpretation. The emphasis falls on making sensible meanings through textual analyses. Hence, the approach is essentially expository. The strategies by which meaning is made--whether formalist or feminist or reader response--require skill in explanation, in argument, in critical thinking.

On the other hand, we have begun to recognize in recent years that distinctions between expository and narrative modes of thought, as between personal and academic motives for writing, are less clear cut than we sometimes

pretend. Nancy Sommers argues, for example, that narrative is as elemental to us as language itself, that our minds are structured for story telling. Narratives of personal and professional growth, such as those crafted by Richard Rodriquez or Mike Rose, now merit the same serious attention as more traditional research in the field of rhetoric and composition. What I have to tell here is something of a tale as well, a story of why and how I have begun exploring with my students the ways in which the narrative impulses that often leap to life in their journals may constitute a good deal more than simply warm-up exercises for the sort of critical writing about literature valued in the academy.

My own drift in this direction was prompted in part by frustration with the introductory literature textbooks available for my students. Each term, the choice of a textbook has become more difficult. In too many, the literature is submerged beneath a sea of what is most often New Critical apparatus. My own inclination to invite students to read, say, some Faulkner or take a look at some Langston Hughes runs repeatedly up against textbooks that focus attention on technique over substance, on the elements of literature over the body of an author's work. Stories or poems--presented as examples of plot or irony or tone--float free of historical and cultural contexts, disconnected from the narrative substructures of literary study--the social, the political, even the literary life and times of writers--, ghost texts, if you will, awaiting a reader to breathe interpretive life into them.

But how readily does this happen? It is not unusual for students, no matter how one tries to persuade them otherwise, to pay as much attention to the apparatus in such textbooks as they pay to the literature it presumably frames. The result is often dull, prosaic papers that begin "In 'A Rose for

Emily' Faulkner makes outstanding use of setting" or "Hyperbole, which is a form of exaggeration, is well illustrated in the poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers.'" At the same time, it is not enough simply to teach against a textbook, since an introductory literature student tends to bring along basic notions about writing from freshman composition that can do a good deal on their own to stultify the student's response to literature.

Periodically, I will begin an introductory literature class by handing out "Theme for English B," a poem that Langston Hughes wrote as if in response to a freshman composition assignment. It begins,

> The instructor said,
>
> > Go home and write
> > a page tonight.
> > And let that page come out of you--
> > Then, it will be true.

The poem goes on to catalogue the conflicting elements of Hughes' experience as the only African-American student in his class at Columbia University. I ask my students, most of whom have just completed the English Composition class, to read the poem, give it a grade, and explain their reasons. The idea is to generate a discussion of the extent to which the meaning of a text is determined by a reader's point of view.

Here are some typical responses.

There are usually a few 'F's, mostly from students who can make no sense out of the poem. "It was not clear," one wrote, "I had to read it twice to really understand it."

Some students fault Hughes' grammar or syntax. The harshest was an older woman who wrote, "If this is what our young college students are turning in

for grading, then I feel that our education system has failed. I do believe that this page flowed from him because of the many grammatical errors. Quality work it wasn't, and I feel that it should receive no more than a 'C'."

A lot of students give the poem a 'B' grade. Although it strikes them as sincere, they feel it lacks a good introduction, or unity and coherence, or a detailed explanation of the themes it raises, or some other quality that they have learned to associate with good expository prose. "My EN 101 teacher," wrote one student,

> would have given it a "Good effort, nice ideas, B-." His reasons for this grade would be Hughes didn't stick to his subject. At first the poem says three things: "I feel and see and hear." He barely touches on the hearing, avoids sight and elaborates on feeling.

Another student gave Hughes a 'B', because he "was to write a paper and not a poem," although she added that it was "an excellent poem." But a third, who gave it a 'B+', felt that Hughes was not wrong for writing a poem, "seeing he was told to just write a page that will come out of him and be true."

The highest grades come from those who focus on this, on the idea that Hughes fulfilled the expressive aim he was assigned. One student gave the poem an 'A', despite some qualms: "However, I believe that if the author's thoughts were more organized or the issues mentioned were in more chronological order, a more powerful impact could be made." Another wrote,

> He followed the instructions. He wasn't told to write an essay. . . . A poem was, at the time, the best way he could express himself on a page. I believe any original poem should receive an 'A' for creativity.

Even the 'A' grades then are sometimes tainted. A poem may have been the best Hughes could do at the time. Presumably, after a semester of English Composition, he could do better. He could write an expository essay.

The exercise itself, perhaps, prompts students to judge the poem as if it were a formal essay. Still, the thoroughness with which they often read it from an expository point of view has left me wondering. I have wondered about the degree to which our emphasis in the university on explanation and argument might actually work against students' efforts to make meaning out of lyric or narrative or dramatic utterance. I have wondered how much we mislead students about the nature of literature as we encourage them to treat reading poems and stories and plays as an act of translating a kind of hieroglyphic literary language into a supposedly more comprehensible logical English prose. I have been especially struck by the contrast between the the narrow range of thinking my exercise generates and the thinking I see going on in my students' journals--where all sorts of insights about their reading seem to arise out of the uncensored feelings they tap and the self-expressive stories they tell.

A student named Yulia, for example, included a story about her own father in an entry on Faulkner's "Barn Burning." When she was a child, her father made her and her sisters tend his orchard, what she called "his pride and greatest concern." This was in Eastern Europe. "We worked like slaves," she wrote, "fetching five or six buckets of water for each tree. . . . We felt like we were serving in the army." Yulia grew to so hate the orchard, for a long time after her father had died, she would have nothing to do with plants, although now she has begun to keep them again: "I never leave my house in the morning," she confessed, "without watering my plants, and I do it absolutely

voluntarily."

Her story led her to speculate about the motives not only of her father but also of Abner Snopes, whose excessive pride, she felt, similarly made him a tyrant, insensitive to his family's feelings:

> I think this is his protest against the misery and poverty. The self-esteem of the man opposed all attempts to [make him] surrender. . . . I find in many ways he resembles my father. In many ways he is the same type. Nobody in the family could stop him. . . . Only a boy revolted against the father because he couldn't stand it anymore.

Yulia's story about her own father turns, I think, sharply referential. Her telling it serves as a strategy for interpreting "Barn Burning." Her narrative act leads to a critical insight, because it prompts her to see the story of a man who burns down barns and the story of a man who is blindly devoted to his orchard as alternative versions of a more archetypal tale of tyranny and rebellion.

What I have begun to look for are ways to tap the potential of such entries, to see if my students might make by design the sort of connections between their narrative and critical sensibilities that appear in journal entries like Yulia's. I will offer here two examples of assignments that have helped my students explore how a tale may underlie an interpretation.

The first is an exercise that begins with Raymond Carver's short story "Boxes," in which a divorced man (the narrator) seems caught between his desire to settle down with a new woman and the anguished guilt he experiences because of his mother's unsettling habit of endlessly moving from one city to another, without ever feeling at home. The story begins and ends with the man looking passively out a window, an act he engages in repeatedly through-

out the story as well, at home, in his memory, and at his mother's apartment, where he and his girlfriend go for a last dinner before the mother moves once more to another state. I ask my students first to write a poem about this man. Next they each write about their poem and what it means. Then I have them write about a series of other poems--Frost's "Stopping by Woods," James Wright's "Lying on a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm," Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree"--, poems that seem to reflect a mood similar to the mood of wavering doubt and self-division expressed by Carver's narrator. The idea is that the students' poems--themselves acts of interpretation of the Carver story--might get us talking about the implicit stories behind other poems and hence serve as a scaffold on which to compose meaning.

Carver's story itself could be read as a version of any number of more paradigmatic narratives. It is a typically American tale of flight from responsibility. It is a tale of Oedipal arrestment. It is a tale, perhaps, of existential dilemma, of the embrace of the absurd rendered, for example, in Camus's sketch of Sisyphus.

For a student named Zheng, it proved a tale of mid-life crisis. She wrote a poem called "My Mother's Goodbye Meals" in which she listed images the narrator sees when he looks out the window. About her poem, she explained,

> The voice of my poem is powerless and sorrowful. By reading the poem, I can picture the character in the story. He was wondering about his mother's behavior. Meanwhile he felt [and she focuses on an image from the story] just like the man on the power line pole, "supported only by his safety belt." His mother was his only family member left; he felt that he could lose her when she moved away, but he didn't know what to do or think. "Traffic moves slowly on the street out in front and the sun has started down over the trees" [she quotes another image]: things and life kept moving on, and nothing could be changed by

> the man. He watches his neighbors embrace. Such a warm family feeling used to be his dream, but it has been blown away by the wind.

Zheng already knows the story behind what she calls the "voice of middle-aged confusion and unfulfillment" in her poem. It then serves her as a gloss on the poems by Frost, Wright, and Yeats--whose voices strike a similar note:

> The voices in these poems are deep and profound. Life has not been easy to them and they have started to feel too tired to move on. Instead of saying their feelings directly, the authors of these poems created some kind of nice, peaceful scene that might allow them to hide from the problems they cannot solve.

One might, of course, ask students to work with other stories and poems. The exercise is useful in that it lends the substance and familiarity of narrative to an interpretive process that students too often find forbiddingly abstract and mysterious. To imagine the life behind the voice in a lyric poem is to tell a tale about that voice. It is to engage in a narrative act. If we can see poems, in this sense, like stories, as versions of more paradigmatic tales, the poems too may take on meaning for us as we set them against other versions of the paradigm.

My second example involves the writing of a student in an introductory literature class that I taught a few summers ago, a class in which I ordered no text at all, instead inviting students to select the reading material themselves and in effect compose a canon of their own. The why and the how are subjects for another paper. But one of the interesting results was the way in which the opportunity to select their own texts prompted students to fashion interpretations out of the stories behind their choices.

One student, a young Muslim woman, raised her hand during the first class, said that she wanted to read something romantic, and proposed we add A Streetcar Named Desire to our list. I said that I did not think it was particularly romantic. But the student would not be dissauded, and the class agreed to include it.

In her journal, the student began writing about herself and what lay behind her choice. She was a refugee from Afghanistan, was involved (happily) in an arranged marriage, was studying nursing, and was pregnant with her first child. Her life was one heavy dose of reality after another. She wanted some romance.

Unfortunately, Tennessee Williams disappointed her. "Never judge a book by its cover!" she wrote in her journal once she had read the play. "When I saw A Streetcar Named Desire, with a picture of a beautiful woman surrounded by young men and the word 'desire' on its cover, I thought this must be a romantic play." But the story of her disappointment served her well as she went on to write a paper about how instead she found the play to be about the dangers of living in illusion and not facing up to reality. The story behind the choice of her text helped her fashion an interpretive point of view, a frame for understanding the play.

In such ways, the process of telling tales has helped my students grow markedly less adversarial toward literary texts in general, less intimidated by the task of developing thoughts about such texts. They seem to take possession of the literature we read more easily, while their papers often seem more original. In this sense, their practice in narrative has contributed to their ability to develop critical insights.

And what once seemed, when I was in graduate school, to be a gap has curiously become a bridge.

THEME FOR ENGLISH B

The instructor said,

> Go home and write
> a page tonight.
> And let that page come out of you—
> Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear. Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.

I guess being colored doesn't make me not like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

Langston Hughes