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Examining Exams

"But who could have examined me?"
George Lyman Kittredge
(when asked why he didn't have a PhD).

Exams have a troubled history in the American university. Their inadequacies, which provoked at least one recorded riot in the nineteenth century, still incite protests. Last year, for example, the merits of a more finely calibrated grading system was hotly debated in the editorial pages of the college newspaper at my home university--an issue very similar to the one that incited students at Harvard more than a century ago.

Harvard's way of distributing points and fractions of points . . . not only failed to distinguish between conduct and scholarship, . . . [it] also failed to convince students of its honesty. Instructors could not agree on the scale of points, one critic wrote: 'Some frankly admitted that it was impossible to get within five or ten per cent of absolute exactness; others were so delicately constituted that they could distinguish between fractions of one per cent. (Veysey, 271-272)

Like their 19th century precursor who invented a "marking machine," many of my colleagues determine grades on computers, though no one I know offers "marks less than zero" (272).

Veysey's observation that "the Harvard plan" for grading "was devised in the 1820s, primarily to discipline the conduct of unruly students rather than test their mental ability or keep insecure students in a perpetual state of intellectual preparation" accords with Foucault's remarks in Discipline and Punish about the function of exams.

The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth. At the heart of the procedures of discipline, it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected. (184-185).

Though more than a century later exams are purportedly designed to ensure the uniformity of disciplinary practices, like their precedents, they often ensure conformity to cultural practices as well. The examination system of the Modern university to which we are heirs, Veysey notes, "aimed to graduate a single model of a civilized gentleman--not a variety of eccentric individuals" "by means of a uniform curriculum and a uniform social routine" (271-272). This agenda is correlative to the hidden agendas of 19th century Humanities programs that attempted to acculturate an ever enlarging emigrant population (Giroux/Purpel, 1-9). Recently, these rationales have been reclaimed by William Bennett and his successor, Lynne Cheney, as well as the advocates of the "cultural literacy" as espoused by E. D. Hirsch in the hope of acculturating an ever enlarging "illiterate" minority of our present population. The normalizing force of exams usually exceeds its disciplinary boundaries. This is particularly true in the Humanities. Consequently, exams on literature deserve some scrutiny.

We might begin by considering that the exams given in traditional Humanities programs attempt to make students docile adherents of a canonical culture. In this regard, their successes are most often temporary. Nevertheless, routine exam procedures encourage students to mimic (if not accept) their teacher's beliefs (at least for the duration of the exam). And, though their positive effects are not usually long lasting, sometimes their negative effects are. As Foucault's analysis of discipline helps us to see, the

negative effects of exams are related to the way they punish and thus subjugate students. They are often experienced as painful exercises in which apprentices, subject to the threat of punishment, must predict what their masters would say or do under the same conditions.

In exams on literature, questions about texts are formulated in ways that imply interpretive conclusions. For example, a teacher might believe that "Araby" is a prototype of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. She thus asks "is this story an initiation story?" The question anticipates that students who have been attentive (docile) will answer yes and offer a reading to support this claim. From this perspective, the logic of literature exams is a simple extension of inferential logic. A reader offers an interpretive claim based on accepted premises about literary texts and offers textual evidence in its support. When teachers give exams to student readers, they formulate their interpretations as claims to be supported by evidence from texts, anticipating that studious readers will be able to read the texts in a like manner by employing the assumptions about literature their teachers favor.

In the logic of such exams, the terms of the question often contain premises that students must recognize in order to assemble the appropriate evidence for their responses. The question, "is 'Araby' an initiation story?" attributes to that text a conventional combination of narrative features associated with the analysis of genres. Most students, however, form their assumptions about genres from the uncritical use of TV guides. "Initiation story" is not a category they use. Thus, unless a student attends to his teacher's identification of the generic features of initiation stories in classroom exercises, he will not be able to find them or remember them on an exam. Often enough, students try to remember textual features identified by their teachers without practicing the style of reading that selects them for a reader's attention. But, it is nearly impossible to memorize extended arrays of textual details outside of the interpretive strategies that generate them. Thus, the best preparation for an exam in literature is to mimic the reading strategies of the teacher.

Sometimes, in misguided attempts to communicate, teachers do not give their students sufficient information about their interpretive strategies. In these cases, students rightly ask "but what do you want me to do?" The crux of the matter is terminological. Technical vocabularies usually supply students with more information about reading strategies than non-technical equivalents. When a teacher asks an apparently commonsensical question such as "what happens in 'Araby'?", it is likely to be a translation into ordinary language of a more complex concept. Though the word "happens" is ordinary English, it is usually understood by critics as part of a framework that includes the concepts "plot," "story," "event," etc. A teacher who uses it in a question might be implicitly referring to a wellarticulated theory of narrative anywhere from Aristotle to Chatman. Teachers habitually use "framing" terms in questions because they fit into the frameworks of beliefs about literary texts that governed their training. These frameworks usually differ from those students employ in their reading. Thus, a more particular way of reading than the question seems to imply is frequently presumed by teachers who ask "what happens in this story?." Unless students read in the manner prescribed by their teachers' questions, their responses will be unsatisfactory. In effect, students who did not comprehend the ways their teachers wished them to read will not understand the instruction presupposed by the questions asked. Students will not be able to answer these questions because they did not know what to look for while they were reading the text in preparation for the exam. Such students do not know what warrants the claims that answers their teachers' questions. This experience is one of frustration and anxiety. The frequency of such painful effects is evidence of Foucault's claim that exams subjugate. Should students be blamed for avoiding such punishment?

Anyone who has spent a few years in classrooms can testify to the ways in which students learn to "mimic" their teachers' ways of doing things, for instance--their ways of reading texts. Literary training proceeds largely by way of imitation. Such imitative practices are not culturally innocent. Teachers, by and large, subject students to the cultures teachers affirm. This is no less true when teachers, however aptly or ineptly, affirm their students' culture. However, as I have already intimated, such training (at least in the Humanities) seems less and less efficacious. In what follows, I express reservations about the appropriateness of exams on the interpretation of literary texts. Though exams are the principle mechanism of disciplinary training in most academic studies, we should not assume that they are

appropriate to the study of cultures in which interpretation is at least a coping skill if not a survival skill.

Questioning the Questioners

Sometimes it is difficult for teachers to appreciate the full force of the exams they create for their students. Already in possession of considerable expertise, they do not always comprehend the extent and difficulty of the tasks they require of their students. So, assuming that as a likely reader of this essay you are a teacher, let me ask you to take the following test under the specified conditions by way of a "thought experiment." [If you are not a teacher of literature, you may have to extrapolate from this experience into your own field.]

Imagine that each year you were called back to your degree granting institution and asked to take an exam which would establish whether you had "kept up" with the progress of your profession. For a moment consider yourself a Chaucerian returning to University College. A sleepless night is followed by a hollow Saturday morning in which only your footsteps resound in the corridor. You find the appropriate classroom and choose a desk at random. You are handed a sheet of paper. It has purple type. It reads:

CHOOSE THREE OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

(Spend approximately two hours on each question)

- Should the traditional conception of Medieval allegory (D. W. Robertson *et. al.*) be revised in the light of recent conceptions of the figural nature of all language (Paul DeMan *et. al.*)? [Note: as a preface to your answer, defend (however briefly) the possibility of historical understanding. If time allows, indicate how your view of historical understanding relates to recent New Historical developments.]
- Would an "action" model of a narrative (Todorov's, Teun Van Dijk's or Gerald Prince's) more accurately disclose the narrative structure in "The Knight's Tale" than the "satellite/kernel" model (Seymour Chatman's via Roland Barthes')? [Note: you may offer another view of narrative, for instance, Leo Bersani's or Peter Brooks' psychoanalytic ones. If you hold a postmodern view of the reductive linear character of narrative that goes beyond Bersani's or Brook's, you may write an essay on why narrative structure cannot be "disclosed." This tactic, however, is not recommended.]
- The line, "And prively he caughte hire by the quenynte" (1.3276), in "The Miller's Tale," has been discussed as an item of Chaucerian "realism." Since "realism" usually implies referentiality, can this traditional literary-historical concept be reconciled with prevailing views of the non-referential nature of literature? [Note: in your answer, either support or refute or emend the deconstructive position (of Jacques Derrida, *et. al.*) or offer a counterposition (for instance, John Searle's interpretation of speech act theory, Gerald Graff's view of literature as knowledge, or New Historicist and Neo Marxist attempts to historicize deconstructive strategies of interpretation.)
- In a semiotic analysis of "The Wife of Bath's Tale," it is not possible to interpret the word 'wyf' (1.957) in the tale of "Myda" as signifying "Midas's wife" in Ovid's tale for there is no "wyf" in Ovid's tale. Consequently, is it possible that the occurrence of the word "wyf" can be explained as a sign that Chaucer's unconscious substituted for the sign "barbour" which could have referred to the sign "famulus" (the slave-barber) actually occurring in Ovid's tale? In other words, rather than construing the word "wyf" as a purely potential lexical unit, could we not consider it as signifying, as a minimum, "here is an-image-of-a-wife"? From a semiotic point of view, can it be argued that Chaucer's unconscious simply left the imprint of the image-of-a-woman-as-wifely on Chaucer's consciousness--a relationship which would

seem to parallel the physical connection between the natural phenomenon and the sign in Peirce's notion of "index" as he applies it to a photograph? In such an event, Chaucer's unconscious would be the code; and, since we have no access to his unconscious, we then would have to regard the word as "codeless" and, therefore, parallel to Metz's "a kind of Here is," or Barthes' description of the photographic icon as a "kind of natural being-there of the object." (In this sense, it would carry with itself its own actualization, as a kind of "here is," or "voici"--the very word which Andre Martinet considers to be a pure index of actualization.) Or, on the other hand, should the word be understood as an indirect and ironic reference to the fact that in Ovid's tale the narrative function of the barber, who is male, is "gossiping"? [In your answer be certain to avoid confusions between Peirce's, Eco's, deLauretis', Metz's semiotics and Barthes' pre S/Z semiology.]

- Does Chaucer's "self-portrait" in the Canterbury Tales reflect a rejection of reality to the extent that as a "mirror-image" (cf. Jacques Lacan's "le stade du miroir") it allows Chaucer, as artist-child, to govern his relations with other imagined (projected) people, and to turn them into participants in games of master and slave, actor and spectator? [Note: You may answer this question by arguing a case against psychoanalytic criticism in general or against the specific use of Lacan's notoriously inaccessible terminology in psychoanalytic readings. This tactic, however, is not recommended.]

Three hours later you reluctantly turn in your answers to the three questions which you have selected. Three weeks later you are called into your chairman's office. Sadly he tells you, "I regret to inform you that I have just received notice from University College that you have failed the exam. Unfortunately, it is the official policy of this university not to renew the contracts of members of our staff who do not pass their 'annuals.'"

This exam is preposterous. In some respects it reads like a parody of contemporary literary studies. Yet, it raises the question of whether teachers can examine other teachers about their "knowledge" of the interpretation of literature. Clearly, however, the exam I just offered skews the study of literature toward theoretical concerns. It could be justified on the grounds that students of literature must be aware of the most recent challenges to the assumptions that govern their "disciplined" interpretations. It presumes that any teacher of literature should be informed about any currently viable premise of interpretations. In effect, it assumes that teachers should be familiar with every conceivable method of interpretation and all the debates that accompany their practices. This is palpably unrealistic. Let me reframe the exam in the vocabularies of methods of literary interpretation:

2: Methods of Interpretation Exam

Monday: Do an historical analysis of Beowulf. (Develop either a Marxist, Neo-marxist or some species of "New-Historical" argument.)

Tuesday: Do a formal analysis of Chaucer's "The Parliament of Fowls." (Develop either a Russian, French, British,* or American formal argument.) *Assumes I. A. Richards belongs to a formal rather than a reader-oriented school of thought and construed "rhetorical analysis" as a formal matter. [NOTE: If you are so disposed, do a feminist analysis instead of a formal one but be certain to identify which brand you are using. In particular, be careful not to contaminate American feminisms with the work of French feminists. If you do choose to base your analysis on the work of Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray, *et al*, then be certain to take into account how their work is related to their male precursors.]

Wednesday: Do a semiotic analysis of Shakespeare's King Lear. (Develop either a Jakobsonian, Peircean, Mukarovskian, Barthean, Lotmanian, or Econian argument.) [Bakhtin may be construed as a semiotician for the purpose of answering this question.]

Thursday: Do a psychoanalytic analysis of Pope's Essay on Man. (Develop either a Freudian, Lacanian, Kohutian or Laingian argument. Avoid Jungian arguments!)

Friday: Do a reader-oriented criticism of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (Develop either a Fishian, Jaussian, Culleresque, Iserian, Schweichardarian, or Radwayian argument. No Bleichian or Hollandesque arguments allowed!!)

Saturday: Do a postmodern analysis of Gravity's Rainbow. (You may base your reading on any one of the following: Derrida, DeMan, Foucault, Deleuze/Guattari, Lacan, or Lyotard. Avoid Althusser, Jameson, Habermas, or other highly politicized theorists.)

In this version of the exam, I added the equally implausible assumption that every teacher should not only be familiar with every interpretive method but also with most canonical literature. The abilities, energies and resources presupposed by this exam belong to no scholar of whom I have heard. Not Rene Wellek, not Eric Auerback, not Gustave Lanson. So, we can safely say that either of the first two exams are unrealistic. It is unrealistic to assume that every teacher is thoroughly informed about not only about every canonical work but also about every interpretive method. Then, what would be the basis of an examination of teachers of literature?

We assume that professors of literature are specialists in some field and practitioners of some method of interpretation. So, it would appear to be more realistic to develop an exam upon this assumption. However, if any professor can choose any recognized field and any recognized method, as my newest proposal assumes, how can we test professors whose practices are eclectic? And, who are the experts that could grade such exams? Even leaving that perplexing issue aside, though the first and second exams may seem unrealistic, they do not have the serious flaw that the more realistic exam I just proposed has. Recall that, if the questioner is vague about the terms of the question, the answerer will have difficulty predicting the correct response. So, though the first and second questions seem skewed toward any and every theory and any and every text, they are less vague than any allegedly more realistic exam is likely to be. Allowing for this circumstance, let us assume that every teacher commands an interpretive method and is capable of interpreting accessible texts in terms of their own practices whatever they might be. Let us try an examine that does not imply a method, one that is "theory-free." Of course, to write this exam, we have to assume some field of competence. So, let's try "19th Century British." (I will leave aside here the difficulty you no doubt have noted--the test entails some "list" of works in the specified "field" upon which such examinations can be based, the very sort of canonical list that was developed by earlier educators to impose cultural standards upon a divergent population.)

3: Theory-Free Exam

ANSWER ALL FOUR QUESTIONS ON THE FOLLOWING POEM

THE SICK ROSE

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

1. What is the FORM of X's poem?
2. What is its STRUCTURE?
3. How does the PATTERN of the poem differ from its FORM and STRUCTURE?
4. What is the SHAPE of the experience X presents to us in this poem?

I offer this particular exam as an instance of the difficulty of asking questions about the meaning of literary works in non-technical language. This exam implies no criteria by which the answers can be judged to be satisfactory answers. Any and every answer to these questions that is not nonsensical has to be judged a fair answer. When technical terms enter the questions, so do the theories in which they are embedded. The most "theory-free" exam that can be given was actually commonplace before the twentieth century.

4: Recitation Exam

Recite the first twenty-five lines of "The General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales.

Our 19th century predecessors believed that every educated gentleman should have the classics committed to memory. Many critics still believe that we should be able to recite the opening lines of The Canterbury Tales as well as passages from Milton, Shakespeare, and other canonical writers.

So far, we have not found an exam suitable for teachers of literature. However, many would argue that I have left out the most obvious kind of exam--one that tests our "knowledge" of literature, our scholarship. You may wish to offer counter-examples, but, if an exam on literature is to be based on "facts" about texts, then I think it would have to take the following form:

5: Factual Exam

Who was the Parnell to whom Joyce alludes in "Araby"?
Which names of which characters in James Joyce's *Portrait* are real?
What is the date of James Joyce's *Ulysses*?
On what Dublin street, does . . .

The more testable facts about literature can be, the less interpretive they must be. Unfortunately, this proposition can be restated as--the less interpretive statements about literature are, the more trivial a pursuit they become. At the other end of the spectrum, the more questions address interpretive strategies, the more subjective they become. Rank the following questions in the order of their subjectivity.

6: Meaning of Meaning Exam

IN A STATION OF THE METRO
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

- What does this poem mean?
- What does Pound mean by "The Apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough"?
- What does the utterance "The Apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough" mean?
- What does the reader understand by the sentence "The Apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough"?
- What do you mean by this poem?

The most "factual" answer students could offer in this exam is in response to the very last question, the one that explicitly asks for their subjective interpretation, the only meaning to which they are actual witnesses. Perhaps a lexicographer could claim more objectivity about the ordinary usage of Pound's words, but this is not a very satisfactory account of the meaning of the poem. Moreover, answers to questions "b," "d," and "e" are all appropriate answers to question "a."

I may have overlooked some types of exams or exam questions, but surely none of the ones I have so far offered could constitute a fair exam by teachers of other teachers. Granted that I have slanted the

rhetoric of my putative exams toward parody, nevertheless, I have offered instances of the five most common exam-types used in the study of literature (the recitation exam is the exception). My first exam tests teachers awareness of current controversies about the interpretation of literature, the second tests awareness of methods of interpretation, the third asks for a demonstration of a cogent practice, the fourth (the recitation exam) reminds us of common examining practices in the 19th century, the fifth tests for facts about literature, and the sixth points to the difficulty of basing an exam on the act of interpretation by showing how familiar questions about the "meaning" of texts are inescapably ambiguous. To me, all six of these types of tests on literature are suspect.

If the most common types of questions found in literature exams are suspect when addressed to teachers by other teachers, then what exams would be appropriate for students of literature? It is hard to imagine asking students questions that are different *in kind* from the ones I proposed for the examination of teachers. All of the questions that I suggested above frequently occur in examinations of students. Though the content would be different and germane to particular courses and fields, there would be no substantive difference in the type or form of the questions were they addressed to students. This raises the perplexing question of the relevance of such exams to anyone. In the next section, I try to answer the question--if exams on literature are so perplexingly difficult to conduct, why do English departments insist upon them? What do teachers of literature hope to accomplish by examining their students on their readings?

Argument: The Foundation of Literary Study

Any defense of exams in literary study is necessarily based on some account of the activities that are presupposed by the exams. I am reluctant, however, to answer the question I posed at the end of the previous section with a commonplace like "exams on literature test readers on their critical skills" without specifying what they are. Thus, I start with critical activities already "in plain view"--to use Wittgenstein's phrase. Rather than begin with a novel theoretical account of exams, I will proceed assuming that it is "of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it" (Philosophical Investigations, #?). Since there is no agreement about what literary criticism is, we can hardly claim it is "in plain view" and must seek a more palpable point of departure. So, I propose that we begin with a nominal definition of criticism; and, thus, having set some parameters on our subject matter, we can develop a more exacting view of it. The nominal definition I suggest is the following:

Criticism is what critics do, assuming that critics are those persons who have been designated "critics" by their appearance in bibliographies of "criticism." In other words, critics are those persons who have been named "critics" and their work "criticism."

Having pointed to a particular group of individuals, how can we describe their activities? What work do critics do? I propose that the following activities of literary critics are easily discernible though not transparent.

1. Nearly all critics READ some text.
2. Nearly all critics DISCUSS FORMALLY & IN PUBLIC the texts they read.
3. Nearly all critics MAKE SENSE of texts regarded by other readers as difficult to understand.
4. Nearly all critics MAKE CLAIMS about how other readers should make sense of texts.
5. Nearly all critics MAKE COMPARISONS among texts, especially those similar to the one they are reading.
6. Nearly all critics GENERALIZE about texts.
7. Nearly all critics GIVE EVIDENCE FOR their readings.
8. Nearly all critics TRY TO JUSTIFY their readings.
9. Nearly all critics SEEK AGREEMENT with other critics about how texts should or should not be read.

This seems a sensible, if rather general and not exhaustive, description of what critics do. The various activities named on the list are, however, by no means discrete but rather in every way interrelated. It is

difficult to describe the interrelations because the activities often appear to be random if not chaotic. Many of the activities entail each other and it is possible to delineate them in a more or less orderly pattern commonly called PERSUASION BY ARGUMENTATION. It hardly seems new to remark that critics argue in public about how to read literary texts with other readers of those texts. If we accept this description of critical activities, then we can use the rather well accepted views of persuasion and argumentation that are typically taught in the textbooks of those university departments that offer courses in literary criticism.

If the description I have just developed is as sensible as I claim, it could justify giving exams. That is, if critics draw inferences from texts on the basis of warranting assumptions about those texts, then this pattern of reasoning can be repeated. Hence, exams can be justified to the extent that they ask students to duplicate the reading practices of their teachers as a way of demonstrating that they have acquired specific interpretive strategies. Please note, however, that this argument hinges upon the possibility that readings can be, in some measurable ("gradable") way, replicated. If they can be replicated, then readings also can be refuted if they diverge from the norm. This is one necessary condition of the possibility of an exam on reading.

Literary Arguments Depend Upon Analogical Warrants

Literary study, if you accept the description I offer above, aims at the understanding of literary texts and the purpose of exams is to determine whether a student does or does not comprehend particular texts. By understanding, I mean making sense of texts by finding patterns in their complex discursive features. Admittedly, any understanding will not do. The variegated senses of complicated texts are not available to common sense; they emerge from specialized reading communities that share various interpretive strategies. The usual purpose of an exam in literature is to decide whether individuals belongs to a given community of expert readers and rank their competence hierarchically--undergraduate, graduate, professorial. Exams professionalize readers--make them members of a professional group of readers. Through the passage of exams, amateurs enter "occupations with special power and prestige" (Larson, x). "Society grants these rewards [power and prestige] because professions have special competence in esoteric bodies of knowledge" developed from "techniques which the professionals apply in their work" (x). In sum, exams make you a more expert reader than you were before studying for them. Exams ensure that, by practicing the activities delineated above, amateur readers will develop "competence."

In speaking of reading as a "special competence in esoteric bodies of knowledge," a problem surfaces. Shall we stipulate that the meanings of texts are stable in order to call an understanding of a literary text "knowledge"? Reliable understandings presuppose relatively stable meanings--at least ones that do not shift unpredictably from one interpreter to another, from one period to another. If meanings shift in unstable or undecidable ways, basing an exam on such an unreliable outcome presents something of a difficulty in justifying them as training in reading competence. The stability or decidability of meaning provides an examiner with the decisiveness that is called for while grading. Conversely, for postmodern critics who assume the indeterminateness of meaning exams can only discipline students by arbitrary constraint through the exercise of authority (through the power to punish). Compliance does not, however, entail competence.

Let us assume for the purposes of this essay that meaning can, relatively speaking, be determined, and therefore that literary arguments can be adjudicated on the basis of the logic they presuppose. Let us propose, then, that interpretive claims can be justly made, warranted, and supported by evidence from the text. But, even assuming the relative stability of meanings, another problem arises--is meaning derived from texts as a logical inference from observable facts or as an analogical inference based upon particular metaphors for texts? Are exams tests of facts or tests of taste? The same teacher who might be happy with an array of distinctive answers to the question, "what is the meaning of Joyce's "Araby"?", might be quite disconcerted by a wide range of answers to the question "what is the narrator's point of view in "Araby"? Whereas the first question depends upon loose analogies among the text and various intertexts or contexts, the second is a an inference that can be drawn from specific linguistic markers in Joyce's text.

Let me return to the nightmarish fiction I called "the annuals." In that exam, many of the questions borrow conceptions of texts from other disciplines and use them *by analogy* to literary texts. Since 1977 when I wrote "The Use of the Word 'Text' in Critical Discourse" in which the first version of this "annual" appeared, we have seen an extraordinary importation of literary theory from Europe. What I said then, can be said even more forcefully now. When the conceptions of texts presupposed by readings are borrowed from other disciplines, they are used in literary arguments only analogously. For instance, a text does not have an unconscious. Psychoanalytic critics read texts *as if they were dreams*. Thus, any re-understanding of the structure of the unconscious (such as Lacan's) is also applied analogously. Lacanian critics read texts *as if literary texts were structured like a language in the way that the unconscious is*. In this conception of the literary text, the primary analogy between it and *langue* (like a systematic structure--architectonic) is understood through a secondary analogy (like the unconscious--dream-like) that doubles back upon the first (which unconscious is like a systematic structure--langue-like) thus creating a "reflexive" tertiary analogy. This explanation of how a text works is like a computer specialist explaining that e-mail is like real mail if you understand letters to be like bits coming from post offices like nodes at whose gateways there are "mailers." Such analogies can be instructive but they are not logical inferences.

The more one looks at the warranting conceptions of texts that govern readings, even the formal ones New Critics used, the more one uncovers analogies. To say that a text is ironic suggests a conversation between an speaker and a listener in which their tones of voice are clues to their meanings. The reader has to place the text in the context of lived experience. Understanding texts requires an analogy to the reader's experience. Virtually any attempt to discern a pattern in the chaos of intertextuality that flares up in acts of reading demands some analogy to a thing that has a recognizable order. If we speak about the structure of texts and inquire into the pattern a given reader discerns, that "structure" will be imaged from the reader's experience as architectonic or organic or cosmic or chaotic or ... Readers make sense of texts by comparing them to other texts in an infinite variety of vague resemblances made graphic through an analogy with some tangible experience. Critical warrants are metaphoric. Tropes on our own experiences. This is what gives them such power.

Reading experiences depend more upon intuitions than logical inferences. Generally, a reader comprehends a literary text by comparing it to other articulations of experience (often those from remembered conversations) all the while detecting fuzzy resemblances. These articulations or intertexts mediate experiences for the reader. Readings are not inferences from the *con*-texts to which the text is compared. Meanings are transferred "synthetically" (holistically) to the text from its *co/n*-texts. For instance, when a reader encounters the sentences, "I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes / Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand," a series of intertexts, not only from medieval romances, but also remarks about "chalices," "foes," "gauntlet" (appearing in a related sentence but linked to "through throng of foes," etc.) which *resemble* Joyce's signification in "fuzzy" ways come to mind. These associations take form by a process of embedding wherein one articulation frames or structures the others. The embedding usually hinges upon the memory of a specific sets of sensations associated with personal experiences that readers recall because of their emotional resonances. In short, the text is translated into the meaning of lived experiences and the emotions or feelings they evoke. This translation is not an inference from a set of facts but an insight into intertextual resemblances.

When the meaning of the text is reduced to specifiable literary or historical contexts rather than evocative personal ones, the experience of reading literature is sterilized into cultural themes and motifs. There is no doubt that exposure to literature and its conventions increases the "density" of meanings that can structure a reading experience. There is also no doubt that the exposure to a specific string of intertexts can produce conforming readings of a specific text. But the situation is quite volatile.

Why Exams are Experienced as Torturous

A situation in which a novice reader must reproduce the reading of a master reader is certainly

constrictive. To make similar sense of the text, the novice must make every effort to remember the intertextual contexts the master characteristically uses. This constrains the apprentice's intuitions. Conventional wisdom says that such exams, however constrictive, nonetheless acquaint novices with traditions of intertextual relations and inculcate interpretive strategies that establish apprentice readers as members of professional reading communities--as experts called "scholars." There are, however, several difficulties with such training.

From the point of view of the trainee, exams that grant or deny readers a particular academic status are indeed torturous (in the sense of "anxiety producing") but this not the form of torture upon which I wish to focus here. The tortures I have in mind, as Foucault notes in the passage I quoted earlier, appear to be those modern equivalents of primitive rites of passage that make exams memorable events in one's life. From my point of view, these tortures derive from the appurtenances of objectivity accompanying exams. Though often employed to describe the quality of critical activity, "objective" seems less a descriptor of exams on literature than "subjective." The conventional wisdom that frowns on identification questions, true or false questions, matching columns, and other forms of objective tests seems quite appropriate in cultural study. However, literary exams still follow procedures and often employ formats that presuppose objectivity.

Objectivity is established when any observer can describe an event in terms that match those of other observers. The "social trait" that accompanies an objective report of an experience is that "all speakers assent to such [reports] under the same stimulations" (Quine/Ullian 16). In the case of an examining committee, say for the MA degree, a student's reading of a text must gain the assent of all the examiners who have read that text whether or not they have taught the examinee. The notion that a reader can be examined by another reader with whose personal reading practices she has no acquaintance presupposes that readings are objective matters. But here we run into something of a problem. If belonging to a community of readers requires exposure to their intertextual repertoires, can we assume that all of the members of an MA committee are members of the same interpretive community? Obviously not. This is why the "annuals" I described earlier are a nightmare. In that exam at least a dozen radically different schools of reading are represented. If we add the unmentioned schools of criticism (as I do in the second version of the exam), we arrive at a remarkable number of interpretive communities. Considering how little uniformity exists in such broadly gaged communities, the scenario quickly becomes Kafkaesque. (Are Fish, Iser, Bleich, Holland, Schweikart, Radway, Jauss, Culler, and Riffaterre in the same interpretive community?) Students facing an exam that claims to be objective are likely to be tortured by the complexity of their task. (What would be a precise answer to the question--how would the meaning(s) of Julio Cortázar's "Axototl" be derived by a reader-oriented theorist? And, is not this question both less complex and more "objective" than the question, what are the meanings of Julio Cortázar's "Axototl"?)

Schools of reading are not in as comfortable relations to each other as some advocates of pluralism might be inclined to suggest. Critics characteristically contend with each other. Yet, the underlying disagreements about literary texts that separate readers do not usually surface when they are appointed to exam committees. In fact, the enormity of the differences among examiners is most often covered over by their willingness to co-author denominated questions. Teachers, in the interests of clarity, speak about critical schools as denominations of criticism. The work of several thinkers is linked together by resemblances among them that, in effect, generalize the group by leveling the differences among the theorists involved to arrive at the lowest common denominator of belief. When this occurs, many of the key concepts lose their specificity and are "denominalized"--reduced to a common denominator. The term, "deconstruction," for example, has been denominalized to the extent that M. H. Abrams can call Stanley Fish a "deconstructive" critic (Fish 268). Such denominalizations of critical terms characterize the formulation of exam questions. This results in the third example of the annuals I offered earlier, the exam inviting a demonstration of a critical practice, which removes the arcane and highly specialized terms from the exam questions and uses the vaguest of terms instead (form, pattern, shape, and so on).

This situation is even more torturous than the first. Now there is virtually no hope of identifying

the interpretive community whose perspective is required to answer the question. The range of possibilities is not narrow enough for reliable hunches. For example, imagine that your friend suggests that she will buy the next round of beers if you can guess the number she is thinking of. You promptly blurt out "five." When she informs you that you were mistaken because she was thinking of 345 and that you are wrong by some 340 numbers, you would be likely to regard her game as unfair. The range of possibilities is too large. A narrower one is necessary, say 1-10, or better 1-5, or, to be really fair, 1-2 (giving you a 50/50 chance). However, *if you wanted her to win*, you would not object. We have to consider that English professors do not object to an extremely wide range of possible answers on exams and encourage this likelihood by the use of denominations in their questions. In literature exams, the range of possible answers usually exceeds the limit of probable ones. This ratio sounds ideal for students--the vaguer the question, the wider the possible range of answers. But, this situation can have adverse effects. It leaves students without any defense. In posing questions in vague terms that offer no clues about how readings should be conducted in order to obtain consensus from the exam committee, does not prevent any examiner from interpreting the vague question to imply a specific mode of reading. This renders any alternative answer incorrect. For all practical purposes, the more denominalized the exam, the more it is a guessing game. Students who have scoped out their instructors can prosper in such circumstances, but students who decide to define the terms for themselves (or worse, who decide to use the idioms of a "hot" theory) run an awful risk of offending the members of the committee who are either offended by the theory or likely to perceive any theory but theirs to be naive.

Whereas exams that invite you to demonstrate your reading practices are familiar to contemporary literary students, most students are less familiar with the tortures associated with quoting passages by rote or memorizing countless facts, activities required by my fourth (recitation) and fifth (factual) exams. Though these exams are now easy to dismiss as reductive, it is worth recalling how widely they were used not only in the 19th century but earlier in this century. These exams have a singular virtue when it comes to grading them--they are based on the "facts" of the text. It would probably surprise critics who are younger than fifty that graded recitals and quizzes on the names of characters in stories and the details of poems were the most common form of examination of literature (especially in classical literatures) in their older teachers' youthful studies. The *critic* did not that long ago replace the *philologist*--quite a different breed of taskmaster who has come down to us as the legendary pedant. A pedagogue who has given way to a much less dogmatic (if not relativistic) teacher.

This brings me to the sixth example (the meaning of meaning exam), an attempt to take into account the individual differences in reading styles that examiners typically embody. Unless explicitly asked for their own interpretation, in such exams students must assume they are being asked implicitly to duplicate the readings of their instructors. In most respects, this is what happens to undergraduate literature majors as they pursue their education. As they travel from one course to another, they learn to mimic the reading styles of their teachers. When tested, they reflect those styles and strategies in their own readings. The torture starts only when what works in one class does not work in another. Since students are rarely appraised of the different assumptions upon which the various classes they take rely, they must construct the "whole picture" from the parts to which they are randomly exposed. This task is torturous because it is so confusing. Moreover, the confusion multiplies as the differences among teachers are obscured when they denominalize the views of other teachers. For the most part, teachers present views of texts so general as to make the differences among competing schools of criticism appear non-existent. Most textbooks demand a denominational style, one that flattens out the differences among readings and thus among readers. Marxism seems little different from New Historicism which is hardly distinguishable from Historicism or Literary History (in general), a perspective easily conflated with Textual Scholarship, and, thus, with close readings that rely on tropes shared by New Critics and Deconstructors who use Foucault when they are not quoting Lacan's version of Freud in their own personal metaphors for reading and so on. It's a hodge podge.

Nonetheless, to the extent that a teacher can acquaint particular students with her ways of reading those students have a better chance of passing her exam. But what is accomplished by such an exam? Specialized exams, dependent as they are upon a spectacular array of highly personal intertexts from the

enormous catalogues of literature now mostly out of print, take professional reading out of public spheres or communities. Highly specialized interpretive communities have limited social uses. Trekkies write for persons interested in the canon of "Star Trek" episodes. Their constituency is rather small. Experts in other literary phenomenon have seen their constituencies diminish. This is a problem.

Future Dilemmas

It must be obvious by now that I have little, if any, faith in the efficacy of exams on literature. I do believe that they can inculcate in students habits of reading that loosely resemble those of their teachers. However, since I am not an advocate of an American cultural canon of literature, I do not find this result necessarily beneficial. We face some interesting but frustrating dilemmas as we approach the 21st century. Let me mention two by way of conclusion. The first I will call the dilemma of solidarity or difference. The second I will call the dilemma of significance or insignificance.

On the one hand, if we taught everyone to read the same texts in the same ways, we would provide one condition of the possibility of cultural solidarity. This, of course, has long been identified as an important rationale for the study of literature--it educates the citizens of this country to share a common literary heritage. This rationale was quite powerful in the 19th century and led to the establishment of long lists of texts that every American should read and to the establishment of nation-wide tests on these materials (Giroux/Purpel, 1-9; Veysey, chapter 4). Historically speaking, literature departments are failing in this mission. Not only have their members become such specialized readers of the literary canon that it is now almost inaccessible to the public which allegedly entrusted them with the mission in the first place, but the public itself does not regard the canon of its educators *as its own*. Once the perquisite of the literati, as many commentators have pointed out, the mission of acculturation has been taken over by the media (especially tv). On the other hand, if we taught everyone to read different texts in different ways, we would encourage cultural diversity. In many respects, this is a more common rationale in the literature departments I know about than the rationale of cultural solidarity. Ironically, we are failing in this newer mission as well. Specialization in literary criticism does not create diversity in ways that reflect the diversity of our culture but, instead, in ways that reflect the diversity of professors. Most training in literary criticism is text-oriented. The problems of reading texts are defined as problems professors have with the text rather than as problems non-professional persons have reading those texts. Critics who attend to the problems ordinary readers have with texts (composition teachers, for instance) are rarely advocates of the latest schools of criticism and generally find the sophisticated modes of reading engendered by deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Jamesonian neo-marxism, or even traditionally belletristic schools unhelpful in dealing with the problems students bring to them about reading texts--an attitude for which they are pilloried by some of their colleagues. Unhappily from my point of view, to students who have been indoctrinated to believe they "need" information to contextualize their readings, Hirsch's Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, which simplifies intertextuality to a few brash and selective commonplaces, appears to fit the bill. Lack of prior reading is the main problem in teaching reading. Students don't read much. They have little, as Iser might put it, in their literary repertoires. But Hirsch-like tactics hardly encourage diversity in the sense of cultural differences. Quite the opposite--they discourage it.

The second dilemma, significance or insignificance, is even worse. We like to believe that what we do has significance. Thus, for students to pass difficult exams on literature has significance. It means that they have accomplished something of importance. However significant such accomplishments may be to the individuals involved, however much students feel enriched by their ability to emulate their teacher's readings, this feat does not have the social significance we like to attribute to it. As Evan Watkins remarks in his Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value, "it matters less *how* you were taught Romantic poetry say--what socialization or countersocialization of expectations took place--than what grade you got at the end of the process" (6?). From this point of view, however significant we believe our work to be as a "socialization or countersocialization," it lacks social significance. Exams, then, have less significance as instruments of acculturation than they do as the generators of grades. As Watkins notes, classes can be understood as a "particular complex of relations among students and the

instructor engaged in the study of Paradise Lost." This activity is thought to be valuable. However,

It's not value in quite the same sense as one might speak of the value of Milton's altering the conventions of English blank verse. But unless you imagine that the whole process of drawing up a syllabus, assigning readings and papers, making comments on the results students generate, "translating" those comments into a number grade, and filing a grade report at the end of the term is just a meaningless ritual, then the social relations that exist in the classroom represent an organization of work whose result is "value" in some sense. Indeed, what *circulates from* the classroom most directly and systematically are not all the value relations specified through concrete labor tasks, but the form of value derived from "abstract labor," from the social organization of the classroom. For you don't report to the registrar that Paradise Lost is a revolutionary fusion of contradictory ethical claims, or even that John has a remarkable grasp of English history for a sophomore. You report that 60239 got a 3.8 in Engl 322, which in turn, in a couple of years, is then circulated to the personnel office at Boeing as 60239's prospective employer. There's a chance the workers in the personnel office at Boeing will hear something from 60239 about the fusion of ethical claims in Paradise Lost, but not a very good one. They will, however, hear about the 3.8 in Engl 322, which they can read and exchange against any number of similar "value terms." (17-18)

From Watkin's perspective, from the point of view of the value that is *circulated* socially as a result of readings of literature, the salient social significance of an exam in literature is that it results in a grade. We may wish to make greater claims and we may base them upon individual testimonies but the social significance of our work (acculturation) has been diminishing since the late 19th century. I do not take as bleak a view as Watkins does, but I believe his analysis is telling. If we are to speak about the social significance of what we do, then the values put in circulation by what we do is as good a test as any.

This brings me to the other horn of this second dilemma. What could be significant enough about what we do that it would be circulated as a value? This is a question that, to a startling degree, has been successfully answered by E. D. Hirsch and his followers--we could provide lists of great books, offer digests of them, and index it all in an encyclopedia of important cultural concepts. This strategy could make literature as accessible as pop culture. By the extension of such motives, the Hirschean approach could be modified to commodify the culture in the ways the media have developed for mass entertainment. Then, perhaps, our work will be on the best seller lists like Hirsch's has been. Then, finally, our work will be in general circulation like copies of latest rock albums. Then, our exams might take the form of trivial pursuits.

I began this essay with the question, do exams in literature train students to be model citizens by shaping their attitudes or do they train students to be model critics by shaping their methods of inquiry? I have not answered the question. Instead, I have put it into another context wherein it appears as a dilemma. As you might have noticed, the dilemmas of solidarity/divergence and significance/insignificance are simply different perspectives on our ambivalence toward discipline. On the one hand, we have inherited a mission to create a national heritage from which a national character might emerge as we shape the attitudes of the citizens we teach by giving them canonical readings. On the other, we have inherited a long-standing ambition to be as exacting as our neighbor disciplines, the sciences, in our research methods and accumulate significant knowledge. As we near the 21st century, these two 19th century rationales for our profession have produced a particular dilemma. The more we move toward cultural uniformity by training readers to read alike, the more we move away from the specialization of reading. Yet, the more we move toward specialization, the more we move away from diversity. Exams normalize; difference is unexaminable. The more one examines exams, the less they seem to accomplish what they were designed to do--make critics, and the more it looks like their secondary effects--making docile citizens--keep us in business, at least *for the time being*.

Notes to Examining Exams:

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