

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

## Growing with It

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Surely the best path to an aesthetic education in literary studies is to read literature itself. But who can deny the allure of—first, instead—reading books *about* books? Of particular and perennial appeal are those books (and interviews, podcasts, and columns) about writers' habits and methods: what they read and how they composed and where they sat and what, as in the popular series “By the Book” in *The New York Times*, their “work space” or “night stand” looked like (Paul 2, 5). We might also add biographical studies in which we glimpse the childhood enthusiasms, city walks, and literary friendships that would eventually wind their way into the beloved classic we pull off the shelf next or return to again. Also on the pile are the popular how-to-write books combining advice about plot construction with anecdotes drawn from the working methods and stylistic choices of living authors. So enduring are these that we can click play on a podcast recorded last week to discover how Scott Turow wrote the first draft of *Presumed Innocent* in thirty minutes a day on a Chicago commuter train (Murphy), or we can crack open *How to Write a Novel*, from 1901, to learn from its second chapter, “Where Do Novelists Get Their Stories From?,” that Thomas Hardy never “rides in an omnibus or railway carriage without mentally inventing the history of every traveller” (14). Readers' interests in the desks, lunches, notebooks, daily schedules, and habits of mind of novelists, poets, and playwrights have been fed with nearly the same diet of anecdotes, interviews, personal letters, and practical advice for at least a century and a half. This reading of books about books might seem secondary or peripheral to the reader's experience of “the text itself.” But readers' enduring interest in the life history of the literary text and the habits and lifestyles of literary writers suggests something much more central.

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These examples of books—or podcasts or interviews or profiles—about the writing of books are largely drawn from outside literary studies, from the “paraliterary” realms of the “bad readers” Merve Emre describes or the writerly corners of the global self-help industry Beth Blum has studied. Yet they also, we contend, share a set of interests, modes, and methods with a core pedagogical tradition in literary study—a central form of aesthetic education that seeks to give students a sensuous, aesthetic, and creative understanding of a literary text by tracing the history of its composition, at times all the way back to an author’s childhood. Students and teachers have read authors’ notes, learned about their reading histories and composition habits, and tracked down stories about lost manuscripts and heavy editorial hands. As Hoxie Neale Fairchild writes in *An Approach to Literature*—a book indebted to his teaching in the adult education “Home Study Department” at Columbia University as well as his undergraduate teaching at Barnard College—“A poem or essay or novel does not come into existence with a ‘plop.’” “[T]he best way of understanding a growing thing is to go back to its roots and grow with it” (43). Learning about how a text was made—treating texts as growing plants rather than sudden plops—has been a core practice of literature classrooms for a very long time. Further, for many teachers, the purpose of this mode of study was not to prepare students for a life of scholarship but rather to encourage their creativity. As Fairchild put it, “great literature will have fulfilled its highest function if it arouses in you the creative impulse” (32).

You won’t find this classroom history if you believe formalist critical schools when they claim to have had a monopoly on aesthetic education in English. Such accounts depict English language and literature as a benighted discipline that focused on lecturing students about word roots and dry historical facts until around the 1920s and 1930s, when the pedagogical school of close reading arrived to restore students’ sense of wonder in the power of literature and to train their ability to judge it. They imagine that, since the rise of mid-century New Criticism, aesthetic education in English happens in a tight relay between a teacher, a student, and a

text (usually a poem on a single mimeographed page). And they imagine that this triad’s efficiency offers a newly democratized version of literary study, one that jettisons an expensive apparatus of scholarly historicist infrastructure. But what this scene occludes is a robust pedagogical tradition of tracing the broader, messier network of a text’s composition history, its author’s biography, and the historical context of its production and reception. This tradition has been taught for decades in undergraduate classrooms by scholar-teachers who themselves aim to democratize aesthetic taste and demystify the making of literature itself.

Rather than rely on a received history about literary formalism, we can turn to the evidence of actual classrooms to trace this mode of aesthetic education as it unfolds in colleges and universities of various kinds. In our book *The Teaching Archive: A New History of Literary Study*, we show that by turning to classrooms at a wide range of more access-oriented institutions than disciplinary historians usually consider, we find that long-standing forms of historicism have been core to our discipline and its teaching despite the vagaries of disciplinary metadiscourse. Here, we show how many past classrooms drew on historicist texts and methods specifically to teach students to think like writers of literary works—like poets, like novelists, like playwrights, like essayists, and even like literary critics. These classrooms were not explicitly devoted to the craft of creative writing, but rather asked students to put themselves into the positions of particular writers in order to help them read carefully and notice differently by thinking about how texts are made. As David Gershom Myers argues in *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880*, “creative writing” in the university began as an “institutional arrangement for treating literature as if it were a continuous experience and not a mere corpus of knowledge—as if it were a living thing, as if people intended to write more of it” (4). In these classrooms, the amateur world of how-to-write manuals, literary biographies, and contextual sources shares space with the pedagogical methods used by teachers of courses on literary periods, literary surveys, and literary genres. Disciplinary historians have

long imagined that critics have a pedagogy while scholars don't, but in fact scholars' modes of teaching come closest to the kind of "growing with" that Fairchild prizes.

Literary biography has featured centrally in received histories of the literature classroom; boring lecturers droning on about the dry facts of authors' lives form a set piece in stories about the bad times before New Criticism when no one ever thought or taught about "the text itself." But biographies, even as they have fallen in and out of critical fashion, have remained a staple of undergraduate classrooms, at least in part because they show students how an everyday person (perhaps even someone not unlike themselves) becomes a writer. In these classrooms, biographical lectures often serve not as replacements for close attention to literary texts but as preparations for that attention, expanding the possibilities for textual meaning. For example, Arthur Rickett, lecturing on George Eliot in 1905, recommended to his students three biographies of Eliot, including John Cross's *George Eliot's Life*, Mathilde Blind's *George Eliot*, and Oscar Browning's *Life of George Eliot*. Rickett focused his lecture on Browning's anecdote about how Browning and other friends of Eliot's regarded her as a "Mother-Confessor"; for Rickett this offered one part of the story of Eliot's development into the "founder of the psychological novel" and prepared his students to look more closely at Eliot's approach to characterization (20). Likewise, T. S. Eliot began his weekly discussion of each of the Victorian authors he taught in 1917 and 1918 with a lecture on their life—their influences, personality, education, and, in some cases, their marriages. These framing comments were not substitutes for the class discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Rise of the Duchess* or Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, but rather preliminary to it. The fact that teachers used author biography to give students a glimpse of an author's development, rather than as a backward glance at their pre-ordained greatness, is reinforced, for example, by an examination question from 1937 that prompted students to "[g]ive a section of a biography of Shakespeare from 1592–1598, omitting attempts to

name or discuss his writings"—to write Shakespeare's life from a perspective before his canonization ("English 297").

A major part of an author's development involves, naturally, the texts that the author reads. So, like literary biography, source studies have also been a staple of undergraduate classrooms, since they allow teachers and students to track influences and identify the presence of other texts within the one being studied by looking at what Dirk Van Hulle calls the "literary alluvium" of "notes, drafts, marginalia" (xv). The Smith College professor Elizabeth A. Drew distributed a typed handout of Charles Elton's poem "Luriana Lurilee" to her students in 1959 to prepare them to understand how that then-unpublished poem brings Virginia Woolf's literary milieu into the pages of *To the Lighthouse*. Likewise, in his 1964 course on James Joyce's *Ulysses* at Northwestern University, Richard Ellmann assigned selections from Joyce's source texts alongside the corresponding episodes ("English D33"). The class read parts of George Moore's *Hail and Farewell*, Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, and Bishop Berkeley's *On Vision* alongside episodes 1, 2, and 3; they read Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, and Edouard Dujardin's *We'll to the Woods No More* alongside episodes 4, 5, and 6; and so on. Texts like Dujardin's would have allowed students to see how Joyce adapted experiments in stream of consciousness to *Ulysses*. Yet we can also imagine that Ellmann traced these source texts in order to reconstruct for his students one of the contingent yet transformative moments in an author's life, as he does in his biography of Joyce, which describes how Joyce made a friend "who was also reading at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, and arranged with him to go to Tours to hear a remarkable tenor sing there at the cathedral. On the way he picked up at a railway kiosk a book by Edouard Dujardin, whom he knew to be a friend of George Moore. It was *Les Lauriers sont coupés*. . ." (Ellmann 126).<sup>1</sup> Assigning Dujardin allowed Ellmann, we can guess, to show his students how the origins of the key narrative form of *Ulysses* were—if not quite

accidental—contingent on Joyce’s social life and quotidian choices.

Classroom teachers not only focus closely on looking backward from a text to those moments in an author’s life when we can see a particular everyday experience begin to take on literary form; they also move outward to teach students how political and technological developments shaped authors’ personal experiences, sometimes in ways that require the remaking of literary forms. In his 1919 class titled *The Literary Inspiration of the Great War*, Mordaunt Shairp lectured on “some new elements in poetry,” showing his students how “[t]he poetry of a new experience” that began with the radical shift in the soldier-poet’s perspective forced by new wartime technologies of the air and sea—airplanes, submarines, mines—required a revised lyric form (8). Shairp assigned poems in which the class could trace how that shift in individual perspective became central to the form of poetry about the war. In order to suggest how the “[t]he soul of flying, and the psychology of the Airman” made the poet “reconsider his position” (8), students read poems including Paul Bewsher’s “The Changed World,” which thematizes this shift:

He who has knelt high on the night and seen  
The glow of Brussels, Antwerp, and Malines  
.....  
He who has seen all this before his sight  
In one wide sweep—from Brussels to the coast—  
Will lose his mind’s perspective.

It is also possible to trace the slow transformation of the author’s experience into a text through the story of publication, printing, and circulation. In *History of English Studies at Oxford* in 1913, David Nichol Smith taught his students how the history of bibliography, editing, book collecting, and library access was central to literary composition. Even great literature was shaped by what books an author had ready to hand; as he pointed out, “[I]f Shakespeare wanted to know anything about English literature what book would he go to? There was only one book in print at the time that he could use. That was Bale’s” (307).<sup>2</sup> Nichol

Smith offers an account of the origins of literature that deflates ideas of authorial greatness in favor of a closer account of the material, book-historical, and contingent origins even of Shakespeare. A few years later in London, Alfred J. Wyatt used images of authors and characters, pictures of the settings of authors’ lives, and even artifacts drawn from authors’ milieus to help his working-class students grasp the genesis of works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, and William Morris. In his 1917 extension school course *Three Poets and Their Times* at the University of London, Wyatt set up exhibits for his students to view and touch, including “a selection of Morris wall-papers” and “a few of Morris’s original designs for wall-papers and fabrics, for comparison with the wall-papers and fabrics themselves,” which allowed the students to trace Morris’s creative process from sketch to finished object (16, 19).

The study of authorial source texts and authors’ material settings often opens into scenes of reading that prompt a rededicated attention to the sensory lives of authors, in particular to the raw experiences that will later become transmuted into fiction or poetry or drama. J. Saunders Redding, lecturing on Dickens in a course on the novel at the Hampton Institute in 1954, gave an extensive account not just of the classical texts that Dickens *didn’t* read as a child but of the world of print ephemera that he did consume, including the “Penny Dreadfuls that were popular in his day” and “contemporary journals, and popular sketches of urban and rural life from the 1820s, 30s, and 40s, such as Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* or Robert Surtee’s *Sporting Sketches*” (Course notes: *The Novel*). For Redding, the fact that Dickens’s reading was neither “wide” nor “important” prepared the class to focus on other kinds of influences on his work, including how particular scenes from his autobiography—such as ordering a beer at a public house on Parliament Street as a child—find their way into novels like *David Copperfield*. “[T]here are passages in the novel that passed into it directly from the notes he kept for his autobiography (or vice versa),” Redding explained to his students. We might read Redding’s careful tracing of

the strands of life experience that Dickens braided into *David Copperfield* as a kind of how-to guide. It was important to Redding to show his students that even without the apprenticeship of “wide or important reading,” they, like Dickens, might begin to tilt their own life experiences toward the world of fiction. Just as popular writing instruction manuals used Hardy’s habit of imagining backstories for his fellow travelers as an example of fictional creation, in Redding’s classroom students learned that seemingly unpromising materials—desultory leisure reading, books read for class, and even gossip or daydreams—could be the beginning of a canonical work of fiction.

For Redding and for others, this focus on the everyday origins of literary works opened up, ultimately, to a perspective on the historical creation of entire concepts like “literature” or the “aesthetic” itself. Redding was consistently critical of the ways that mid-century conceptions of “aesthetic” literature promulgated racism. He pointed out that such categories served to separate writing by Black Americans from writing by white Americans, designating the former as historically valuable and a potential object of sociological study that offered insights into the condition of a race, while deeming the latter as aesthetically valuable and therefore worthy of study as literature conveying universal values as expressed by an individual author. In his teaching, Redding sought to undo this distinction by showing the very recent, twentieth-century origin of “aesthetic” literature. “Until relatively recent times, writing by both black and white Americans had little to do with aesthetics either as philosophy or in practice,” read the opening premise of Redding’s syllabus for his course *The Negro in American Literature*, which he taught at the same time as his course on the novel at the Hampton Institute. Redding’s courses approached literature, that is, by growing with it. By focusing on historical context and the circumstances in which texts are composed, Redding’s teaching argued that all literature can be thought of as what he called “literature of . . . necessity” (*To Make a Poet Black* xxix).

We’ve gathered these examples from many different types of higher education institutions, but

they are all from literature courses that show us a history of aesthetic education that bridges the disciplinary boundaries that we usually imagine as carefully policed. Disciplinary historians have tended to see the early decades of the twentieth century as a period of foundational competition in English between very different models of literary expertise. Myers and others imagine clear and agonistic divisions between three early strands of literary study: historicists and philologists embodying “the German research ideal,” teachers of composition and rhetoric, and professors of creative writing (Myers 5). Yet, in the wider set of teaching materials that we have looked at here, such distinctions are blurred. Most of the figures we’ve mentioned worked across such supposed disciplinary divides in their own careers: Drew edited Jane Carlyle’s letters and wrote a play about them in addition to writing articles for *The Coleridge Review* and other scholarly journals; Redding wrote a campus novel and a social documentary as well as literary history and literary criticism; Shairp was a playwright and, later, a Hollywood screenwriter; Wyatt was a translator and an editor of medieval and early modern texts who collaborated with Morris on the publication of the Kelmscott Press *Beowulf*; and Ellmann was a scholarly editor and wrote many award-winning literary biographies. None of these professors taught creative writing per se, nor did they assign creative writing work as part of their courses. But in their period courses, surveys, and introductions to the English major, they invited students to experience literature from the position of a writer preparing to write. By drawing their students’ attention to the contingent and uncertain moments of influence, choice, and experience that precede the writing of particular parts of particular literary works, they sharpened and expanded interpretive possibilities, showed that texts and texts’ reception were living and changeable, and suggested that current iterations of literary history and the literary canon were far from fixed. And by positioning them in the place of nascent writers who eventually came to be canonical or widely read authors, they suggested that their students, too, might one day become authors.

In introducing these figures and reviewing these examples, we are not holding up particularly exemplary forms of teaching or suggesting that any of these figures are paragons of literary pedagogy. We're more interested in the work as it occurred, whether or not the teachers made metadiscursive claims for the value of their practice. This tradition of literary pedagogy—one that blurs boundaries between amateurs and professionals, between creative writers and literary scholars—opens up to a classroom study of the history of the composition not just of texts but of the entire category of the aesthetic or the literary. A study of literature that begins with its composition rather than its forms and effects allows for a potential rerouting of what Kandice Chuh identifies as “the historic and ongoing intimate link between Literature and racism” (73), and for a clearer view of how the connection between aesthetic value and racialized hierarchies, while often seemingly immovable, is contingent and open to revision. It is no surprise that we find this form of literary study more readily when we turn to literary study's widest, most populous, and richest context—the classrooms at the kinds of colleges and universities that most people have attended. Our own disciplinary history, particularly a history built from this wider range of scenes of literary study than usual, contains some of the crucial tools we need to firmly ground our current moment's tendency toward anxious self-examination in evidence of what our discipline has actually been and who has grown with it.

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## NOTES

1. *Les lauriers sont coupés* (literally, *The Laurels Are Cut*) is the French title of Dujardin's work that was published in English as *We'll to the Woods No More*.

2. Nichol Smith is referring to John Bale's *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum, hoc est, Angliae, Cambriae, ac Scotiae summarium* (1548; *A Summary of the Famous Writers of Great Britain, That Is, of England, Wales, and Scotland*).

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