

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

## Teaching Literary Value

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My university's first-year students are required to take a small, one-semester writing-intensive seminar, and departments hope this seminar will recruit students into their disciplines. More important, the seminar ushers students into college-level thinking and discourse in a class small enough to permit close attention to writing and to provide a space of sociality in which overwhelmed and anxious students may find not only new ways of thinking but also friends. I had a specific, somewhat personal goal in mind when I designed the seminar I discuss here. I wanted to provide the kind of educational experience I wish my own children had received in their first semesters in university. I felt my engineer son with a second major in economics would have benefited from a course in which he was encouraged to reflect on value along with quantitative analysis, and I thought my policy studies daughter (initially educational policy, ultimately healthcare) would have benefited from a course focused on, say, the place of affect and creativity in contemporary society. So I designed a course on literary value titled *The Uses of Literature* that raised questions about what students tend to value and why, what professors tend to value and why, and why even though final answers are hard to come by, it is important to pose the questions anyway. Which is to say that all first-year students, I believe, regardless of imagined career path, should be encouraged to reflect on life choices, and how higher education may inform those choices. (Don't get me started on the rigidity of most premed advising.)

Thus I did not teach the seminar the way I teach classes designed for English majors. Like Michael Clune, I aim with majors to provide a gradual inculcation of literary expertise that ultimately will help students make informed judgments about literature. My first-year seminar, in contrast, is designed more like general education with a hook: students learn to take on greater complexity when problem

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solving, and they start to see what it might feel like to gain expertise in literary study in particular.

I accurately predicted that the course would enroll more students without a strong investment in literary study than prospective English majors. I did not expect prospective English majors to come equipped with much of an answer for, much less any prior interest in, our broadest question: What is the value of literary study today? (Students giving their preferences for first-year seminars over the summer tend to be seduced by sexier titles; any course referring to “monsters” is sure to draw four times as many students as the seminar can accommodate, and the surplus get shunted into other courses, even into those the student did not list among their three ranked choices.) Complicating matters, owing to COVID-19, this would be the first course I ever designed to be taught entirely online, but that proved to be a good thing, especially for a first iteration. I wanted our courseware to provide a digital environment that would welcome students into college by promoting exchange, critical reflection, and new vectors of thought while at least giving them a sense of what typical face-to-face sociality should feel like for a first-year student. So in order to stimulate as much interchange as possible while also remaining on task with an ambitious agenda, I had to bring to the foreground all the tacit assumptions guiding my pedagogy and this course in particular, what Randy Bass and Heidi Elmendorf call the intermediate cognitive processes that we tend to forget most beginning students do not yet know. Without making those intermediate steps explicit, I would not have been able to draw my students into the level of complexity I was aiming for. My welcome page thus began not only with video instructions on how to navigate the site (and how students could use it to upload video introductions of themselves) but also with a dense mini-introduction to some critical concepts: intrinsic versus extrinsic value; economic, instrumental, and aesthetic value. I knew that my students probably would not closely read or understand the introduction yet, and most did not. Fortunately, by the end of the semester, when asked to revisit it, most did and could experience that wonderful feeling of realizing

that something that once seemed opaque had become relatively transparent.

I anticipated that one of my main pedagogical challenges would be to draw students into free-ranging conversations about literary value while also showing the limitations of the kind of bromides to which many young literature students turn when confronted with the problems of interpretation we literature professors use to derail overly familiar lines of thought. One version: “if literature yields so many interpretations, then clearly literature can mean anything you want it to.” Or: “if the definitive understanding of literary texts that I learned in Advanced Placement English is no longer the privileged coin of exchange, what’s the point of all this?” In a course on modes of evaluation, one gets this version of the flight from complexity and ambiguity: “everything’s a matter of taste; there’s no accounting for taste because taste is purely subjective; therefore we are wasting our time.” Admittedly, syllogism is not the typical form this train of thought assumes in young students; more likely is the commonplace that beauty is in the eye of the beholder or that everything is simply a matter of opinion and all opinions, subjective as they are, are equally valid. Are we done here yet? Regardless of the form such strategies of avoidance might take, I foresaw it as a bogey to be slain repeatedly over the semester. My preferred cudgel in this game of whack-a-mole? The insistence that citizens all have equal value; opinions do not.

Clearly I agree with Clune’s argument that the egalitarian ethos, when misapplied to the realm of the aesthetic, undermines the very project of aesthetic education. Judgment, however mute or disguised it may be, is inescapable in literary studies; we do not do our students any favor by disavowing that fact. But I do not actually use this argument as a cudgel against lazy subjectivism (nor does Clune, I presume). Rather, I aim to draw students into aesthetic experience as a kind of problem space in which their values as well as the value systems, implicit or explicit, of aesthetic objects may contest one another. But how to begin? As Rita Felski has pointed out, attachment is a form of valuation, one that has been underappreciated and therefore underexplored in literary theory (35). So why not

find a particular piece of literature to which students have felt a strong attachment and make that the ground of investigations into why they value what they do? The problem is that in my experience few students, particularly those in a class of nonmajors, enter college with deep attachments to specific works of literature. And if they did, how could the multifarious texts in which they have felt invested be coordinated into a shared object of study? So where could attachment as evaluation be found?

The answer, I decided, was in music, and this, I realized later, was in part an error that showed my age. Many of my high school evenings were spent spinning vinyl with friends. It was appointment music: we sat down to broadcast our preferences, often at high volume, while passing around album covers to share lyrics and images and to roll joints. But for zoomers, unlike boomers, music is an ambient experience; it just beams from their phones, enveloping them whenever they do not have to listen to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, I had two reasons for asking students to pick a song that felt important to them: examples can be shared easily and economically, and I could make use of Carl Wilson's excellent little book, *Let's Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (2007).

What makes Wilson's book so good is that he tells the story of his own effort as a professional music critic attuned to the alternative scene to step outside his own comfort zone with respect to taste by trying to appreciate what had made Celine Dion a global superstar. To do this, Wilson writes in a smart yet informal style not only about Dion's music, background, and reception but also about Immanuel Kant, Pierre Bourdieu, and the notion of aesthetic value as an alternative to the market. Later discussions over the semester return to the voraciousness of the market as the sole arbiter of value under neoliberalism, but at this early stage we pay closer attention to the way Wilson writes about his own life experiences listening to music. Key here is Wilson's concept of the "taste biography, a narrative of shifting preferences" as they have been shaped by social experiences, parental taste, class, regional and cultural biases (15)—in short, by what Bourdieu calls *habitus*. Wilson describes

being introduced to the Beatles by his middle-class suburban parents, discovering avant-garde music on his own, being introduced later to techno and disco in Montreal gay clubs, hearing country and roots music in the United States south, and also being affected by new information about music: by how hip-hop samples disco, and how Bob Dylan links back to Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and the 1960s Nashville Sound, a sequence that returned him, altered, to contemporary country music, which he had always despised. Wilson writes, "I realized my easy scorn [for country] had betrayed an ignorance of whole communities and ways of life, prejudices" he no longer wanted to live with (15). Why not see if he could do the same with Celine Dion, whom he despised even more? Wilson's taste journey culminates in Las Vegas at a Dion show where, having analyzed everything from the demographics of Dion's global reception to the politics of her upbringing in Quebec, he finds his face wet with tears as the sentimental bravado of her performance makes him grudgingly acknowledge that maybe music that gets behind his cool to release deep feelings isn't necessarily such a bad thing. From there he goes on to muse over the democratization of taste.

So, my first unit, titled "Thinking Value," began with Wilson in order to introduce the notion that personal taste may be overdetermined but with reflection it can be grasped with a good deal of complexity, and the unit ended several weeks later with submission of their first college essay. The unit comprised nine Monday, Wednesday, and Friday classes, with three face-to-face *Zoom* meetings, one a week, along with asynchronous discussions, a response page, and videotaped minilectures by me. Now I realize that trying to evoke the texture and atmosphere of a class is something like trying to describe the feel of a dream; and no account of the flow of energies, the sudden crystallization of a new thought, can capture the essence of a class. So instead I am going to risk boring you with a detailed breakdown of this first unit.

For the first Monday students read two chapters in Wilson and I use discussion boards to test students' ability to summarize Wilson's account of

his own positioning in relation to alternative music versus mass or pop music, and also to ask them to evaluate Kant's account, as explained by Wilson, of the sense that aesthetic judgments "always feel necessary and universal: when we think something's great, we want everyone else to think it's great too" (Wilson 82). How true does this seem to you?, I ask them. For Wednesday I assign a selection from Bourdieu's *Distinction* and a Wilson chapter in which he helpfully compares the concept of distinction to the ranked social groups of high school—freaks, geeks, jocks, and so on. That day I use our *Zoom* session to explore their grasp of Bourdieu and to help clear up various misunderstandings that emerged in their online posts on Monday. On Friday of the first week they submit a short response paper in which one paragraph summarizes Wilson's concept of a taste biography and a second sketches their own taste biography. The following Monday they receive the assignment sheet for their first essay, read more Wilson, watch a video of Dion singing "My Heart Will Go On" and a punk cover of the same song, and respond asynchronously to another set of discussion prompts. One prompt, as before, asks for summary, another for their own sense of what the value of arguing about taste and aesthetic judgments might be if, as Wilson suggests, in the contemporary music scene taste is becoming an outmoded concept. Wednesday: a *Zoom* session to assess and, where necessary, shape their understanding of Wilson and to go over the paper assignment, which asks them to "explain [in 3–4 pages] the full range of reasons why you appreciate a particular song, aiming not so much to make your readers agree, necessarily, but to make it possible for them to understand what it would be like to value and enjoy the song as you do." The essays must include students' own taste biographies, which they can adapt and revise from their response paper, and two citations of Wilson or Bourdieu. Ending the second week of the unit, before our Friday *Zoom* session they post to the discussion board the steps of their writing process for essays, and we spend the meeting discussing the value of various ways of going about writing essays. For the third and last week of the unit, they watch my recorded

miniecture on persuasive writing and post a single persuasive paragraph in response. Then, in the weekly *Zoom* session, we discuss the writing process and persuasion by drawing on their posted materials. The unit ends on Friday with their completed music essays. Later in the semester students return to their essays in order to demonstrate that they have grasped the concept of revision not just as editing but as rethinking. Thus the deferred revisions: they revise, but not until the revisions can be informed by two more months of thinking about different forms of value and reflecting on what feeds into valuation as an activity.

I offer this level of detail to show how I tried to break down the idea of acquiring aesthetic expertise into a series of intermediate cognitive and affective steps (that is, throughout I insisted that they aim not only to take into account their own taste biography but also to try to link specific features of their song [rhythm, lyrics, harmony, etc.] to how the song makes them feel). This was my way of making the tacit explicit and of asking them not only to demonstrate their grasp of new concepts but also to reflect on the nature of their own aesthetic responses: know the objects, apply the concepts, and aim to know yourself. The yields here included nudging them into a more subtle understanding of the interpenetration of subjective and objective aspects of their aesthetic response: I've found it is often difficult for students at this stage of development (eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds) to grasp themselves as both individuals and socially shaped beings. Most prize their individuality too much to readily grasp the predictable aspects of their preferences. But the taste biography helped them turn a sociological gaze back on themselves. By the same token, my American students' reflexive investment in their individuality helped them to see the limits of Bourdieu—the ways, for instance, in which his deterministic model cannot account for varieties of preference within the same habitus. My two Chinese nationals were a little less quick to assert their own distinctiveness.

To shift into the literary realm, the next unit, "Literary Value?"—and don't worry, I'm done with the daily blow-by-blow—introduced students to

debates about canonicity through the first chapter of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*. As odious as Bloom's diatribes are against the so-called school of resentment, he speaks effectively to the intuition shared by many students that one can distinguish, in principle, between good and bad literature, and that there may exist something called literary value that is independent of the social and economic dimension articulated by Bourdieu. The Bourdieu-Bloom debate remained the underlying dynamic of the semester, both explicitly and implicitly. Just as I hoped, students found Bloom's criteria for discerning intrinsic merit inadequate, and most were offended by his claim that either you can recognize intrinsic value or you cannot; according to Bloom, there's no teaching recognition of what the canon deems valuable. To be clear, our course was not geared toward teaching students to recognize the canonical; rather, it was designed to encourage them to believe that the canon could and should change over time and that their informed reflections could help make change happen. I therefore follow Bloom with a lovely essay by Jeanette Winterson, "Art Objects," on learning to appreciate painting. Like Wilson, she emphasizes that learning to hear or see in a new way requires taking on new knowledge as well as sustained acts of attention; she both agrees and disagrees with Bloom by prizing Paterian moments of aesthetic ecstasy while explicitly rejecting the claim that one cannot learn to experience these. In short, she is the perfect subject for my students' next response page, and on we go.

Our major literary testing ground for the concepts we had been developing over the semester was Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, a novel that drives home the importance of the reader's taste biography in the reading experience as well as the complex role played by the novel's objective formal features. Indeed, the novel raises many fundamental issues of interpretation: how and why reception may change over time (they are quick to see the relevance of the #MeToo movement), and how the concept of the author is trickier than they may have imagined). The essay I assign, however, returns to questions of value by asking students to explore how they come to terms with a book that may seem morally

repugnant, beautifully crafted, and decentered with respect to its own implied value system. (Like their first essay, this essay too is revised later, this time by incorporating some research.) Less abstractly, the fundamental question is, What do you do with a beautiful book about pedophilia? By this time students (I hope) have learned that moral recoil from a book is a legitimate response and often a necessary topic of discussion, but I also insist that it is important to ask how the novel *wants* them to react and how they know. Of course, you cannot make much headway on the problem without addressing the narrative architectonics of *Lolita*: How do you cope with Humbert Humbert's radically unreliable narration when it is framed by a fictitious editor, John Ray, Jr., PhD, who suggests a moral to the story that Nabokov, seeming to write in his own voice in an afterword appended to all editions after the first, explicitly rejects ("On a Book")? Coming to a stable conclusion is not helped by the fact that Nabokov admits that his voice in the afterword may read like an impersonation of himself.

This is where my recorded minilecture on persuasion comes back into play. Students analyze Humbert Humbert's modes of persuasion while working on their own power to persuade. Usually, just as the afterword seems designed to reshape reception in the wake of what Nabokov considered uncritical celebrations of Humbert, they try to stabilize meaning by grounding it where they imagine Nabokov as author can be located in the text; the afterword thus becomes definitive. Fortunately, in discussion some students will always upset the apple cart by preferring the "moral" perspective of John Ray, Jr., PhD, at which point I raise the question of whether narratology can settle the matter of reliability by introducing the concept of the implied author. After all, Wayne Booth coined the term precisely to deal with problems raised by unreliable narrators. But if the implied author is an imagined "person" constructed by the reader's inferences who stands "behind" the text as a stable origin, how does the reader go about making such inferences in *Lolita*? Who's that Vivian Darkbloom who collaborates with the inscribed author, Clare Quilty? Why would Nabokov insert himself anagrammatically

into the text to align himself with the only person who treats Dolores Haze worse than Humbert Humbert does?

Students are soon productively confused. In a more advanced class I would likely introduce Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" at this juncture; instead I suggest that their best recourse as persuasive writers can be found in the argumentative procedure I lay out in my minilecture, which draws on Stephen Toulmin's model of "Claims, Data, and Warrants." My lecture provides a simplified version of Toulmin's effort to analyze persuasion as a rhetorical, flexible substitute for syllogistic reasoning. Of course that's not how I put it to students. I translate Toulmin's terms into *statements*, *evidence*, and *explanation*. I learned over the years that "warrant" tends to confuse students, so "explanation" of how the evidence supports the statement tends to reduce unproductive confusion. I also acknowledge that *statements* should really be *claims*, but that would ruin my Conradian mnemonic: their sole aim should be to make their readers SEE. *SEE* becomes a mantra over the semester, along with my editing maxim "Good sentences pivot on vivid verbs, such as 'pivot.'"

In our age of cultish disregard for evidence and the ideal of truth, the Toulmin model provides the

most effectively political dimension of my teaching. When politicians flood the zone with shit, spouting wild claims with no evidence or explanation—Matt Gaetz was being extorted; he never took an underage girl across state lines to have sex! And like Humbert Humbert, he's not guilty of a sex crime; he was truly in love!—to be a good citizen means making informed judgments, and an aesthetic education provides a particularly good model for the process of evaluation, in all its affective, cultural, and cognitive complexity.

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