"Reading and Interpretation": The New English IA Course, Department of English, University of Natal, Durban

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Summary

This article examines a new first year course, "Reading and Interpretation" devised by the Department of English at the University of Natal, Durban. The course represents an attempt to assimilate the influence of theory on English studies into teaching methodology and course design. Particular attention is paid to the expansion of analysis beyond the traditional generic boundaries, as well as the changing composition of the student body.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word die nuwe eerstejaarkursus, "Reading and Interpretation", soos ontwerp deur die Departement Engels van die Universiteit van Natal, Durban, bespreek. Die kursus verteenwoordig 'n poging om die invloed van teorie op literatuurstudie te assimileer – veral die wyse waarop dit die fokus van literatuurstudie verbreed het en 'n hersiening van onderrigmetodologie nodig gemaak het. Spesiale aandag word gewy aan die uitbreiding van analise buite die tradisionele grense van genres. Die kursus verteenwoordig ook 'n poging om te reageer op die veranderende studentesamestelling.

1 General Background

It is by now a commonplace to assert that Literary Studies, in their international context, are in a state of transition. The indications of this are abundant to the point of self-evidence. Differing degrees of complexity and indeterminacy are at work in this process, but its causal components are generally agreed to have two central aspects.

(i) The printed word is undergoing a steady displacement as the central communicative medium of modern societies. Though the extent and the implications of this are open to argument, what does seem foreclosed is why the audiovisual media, with their powerful and often insidious repertoire of representations, must become the object of a critical "reading". Similarly, the strategies of representation in mass print/graphic media like newspapers and magazines must undergo systematic critical scrutiny.

(ii) The growth of literary theory, in all its contrariety has, over the last two decades, decisively undermined the foundations of the canonical "body of texts" approach to English studies (the Arnold-Leavis-New Criticism axis). Yet theory has broadened the methodological base of literary studies, allowing it to extend its analytic range beyond its traditional boundaries.

If it is within these broad (if somewhat diffuse) parameters that Literary Studies is seeking a new orientation, then the question becomes: what shape will they assume? How, exactly, will they reconfigure?

We are now on contested ground, of course, because no single approach has established itself with anything like the dominance of the previous

paradigm. Though it is true that "theory" is now firmly enshrined within the curricula of English studies, this does not necessarily lead to any substantial transformation of the received "canon". Indeed, allowing interlopers such as Feminism, Theory, etc., to take their place alongside the traditional core courses can often have the effect of vitiating the real challenges of these approaches. Writing from the United Kingdom, a team devising a new English course at the University of Strathclyde observed of theory that it:

> has remained at the level of energetic but abstract critique or programmatic statement of intent: there has been relatively little serious work – in textbooks written, curricula passed, materials tried out – on what should actually replace "corpus-based" courses when these are in any given situation displaced.
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> (Durant, Mills & Montgomery 1988: 11)

The necessity then, as Nigel Durant and Alan Fabb express it, is to devise courses "informed by theory – which use theoretical awareness to explore issues and practical concerns in new ways – rather than new courses in theory itself" (Durrant & Fabb 1990: 2).

If theory has presented itself under this ambivalent guise, at once dissident and assimilable, what of the "issues and practical concerns" which require exploration "in new ways" if theory is to assume a more enabling role? In a recent examination of these issues, Jonathan Culler has argued that the very miscellany of the genre "theory", drawing as it does on a diversity of disciplines, has served to transform literary studies into what F.R. Leavis, in an altogether different context, called "a discipline of thought". It is Culler's contention that the strength of literary studies, and the promise of its future, rely precisely on its polymorphous ability to absorb the practices and possibilities of other disciplines and transform them into a more "capacious" generalised system of critique that can range freely across a variety of representational forms. In this view, "theory", far from diluting the literary, considerably enhances its scope and complexity:

> Instead of reducing literature to a manifestation of something non-literary, these various theoretical enterprises – in fields as diverse as anthropology, psychoanalysis, historiography – discovered an essential "literariness" in non-literary phenomena. They identify the literary not as a marginal phenomenon but as a ubiquitous logic of signification. Literariness is no longer the property of a canon of poems, plays and novels, but a problematical and inescapable aspect of signification, which can be studied in a variety of ways.
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> (Culler 1987: 30)

From this perspective (by no means confined to Culler) it is theory which provides literary studies with the impetus, as well as the analytic skills, to cross over into a wider semiotics, or the cultivation of what one might call cultural literacy. Of course, within this position, variations of emphasis are possible. Eagleton, for example, also advocates an inclusive study of signifying practices in a society, but explicitly singles out for attention the social conditions of "discourse production" (Eagleton 1983: 194–227) – an emphasis that is absent in Culler. Whatever variations exist within this position, however, it offers a coherent new direction for literary studies.

Such an overview of the present state of Literary Studies (a rubric in the process of erasure?) is of course partial, and to a certain degree, tendentious as well. It is offered as a rough index of the general theoretical background which informed the devising of this course. Finally, it ought to be observed that such courses (at least in this context) are not embarked upon with the intent of abolishing the "privileging" of literature or downgrading it to just another province in the Empire of Signs. One of the dangers of such an approach is that it all too easily falls into *ressentiment* and negative critique, and takes little heed of the complex and liberatory pleasures that literature releases in the intelligent reader, as well as its ability to renew, in a manner at once sensuous and empirical, our perception of the past. To abolish and debunk canons without setting in place other forms of continuity, other means of preserving a sense of what is valuable in a cultural heritage, is surely not to be encouraged. At the same time, however, the exclusive privileging of selected literary works as canonical "secular scripture" increasingly strikes one, especially in the South African context, as indefensibly anachronistic.

The South African context:

Literary Studies in South African universities are increasingly responsive to international developments in the discipline, and with the demise of the "cultural boycott" it is likely that this tendency will grow. At the same time, however, our South African context brings with it particular problematics of its own, which must be neither ignored nor made peripheral.

This is not the place to rehearse the various debates, crucial though they might be, around such questions as how far formal criteria act as a valid estimate of the "intrinsic" worth of a varied literary production or whether one can validly collapse the lines between text and context. What does seem essential though, given the sheer pressure of contestation, is that students understand representation as at once a formal and a political term. We need also to engage explicitly with the equivocal nature of "English", its complicit roots in the colonial past, and with this the nature of our present relationship with the metropolitan centres. At the same time, however, it ought to be realised that our context is increasingly a globalised one, and that the charge of "Eurocentrism" often conceals a doctrinaire refusal to recognise our inescapable affiliation with the "first" world. How we manage this affiliation is surely what is at stake, rather than whether it ought to exist or not.

On a more pragmatic level it is essential that English departments in still predominantly white universities begin to take proper account of the growing though not (yet) dominant constituency of black students. It is foolish to imagine that these students can be perpetually quarantined in "Academic Support" until such time as they emerge with a cultural capital commensurate with that of their white counterparts. This is a major challenge and it will not be met by creating buffer zones while business goes on as usual. It is one thing to raise this problem, however, another to offer workable and sensible alternatives. Other options will not be explored in any detail here, but the following suggestions are offered.

Academic Support should cease being an activity that is ancillary to other activities in the department and carried out exclusively by various hired hands. All members of the department should attempt to adjust their teaching practices to accommodate this shift in the composition of the student body. This process must be effectively monitored if it is to be of any use. As a correlative issue it ought to be considered whether the current emphasis on research (in terms of financial perquisites, appointment and promotion) is justifiable in a situation which increasingly demands "hands on" teaching, the development of new course material, and so on. This is not to suggest that research is abstract and merely individualistic, but simply that there should be some parity of recognition and reward operating here.

2 Practical Details

How then to devise a viable and coherent course "informed by theory" that manages to encompass some of the broader objectives outlined above and at the same time imparts to students a range of useful skills?

As teachers of English at universities will know, the largest practical problem they face in introducing new courses is overcoming the sheer institutional inertia holding old courses in place, not to mention the need to gain the approval of various plenipotentiary "boards" whose collective mentality is not always disposed towards innovation. The Durban Department was fortunate, perhaps, in being able to act decisively and with a fair degree of unanimity in implementing this course. In addition it was able to draw upon lecturers from across the board – i.e. it did not have to rely on junior staff and "temps" to do all the legwork (although it must be said that this was not the case in so far as the initial formulation and structuring of the course was concerned).[1] What has resulted is certainly not now being held forth as an exemplary model and is already being modified for 1993 (when no doubt it will be modified again). It is simply offered as a possible way forward in the hope that it may be of benefit to others.

3 Course Outline

Section one: language, community and convention

1 Introductory lecture: outlines and aims of the course.
2 Interpreting the verbal environment.
3 Interpreting the formal written text.
4 Interpreting the formal academic register.
5 The academic community: reading and understanding the university.
6 Durban as a text: reading the city.
7 Durban in texts: reading and writing about the city.
8 Text and context in Literary Studies.
9 Narrative: an introduction.
10 Narrative; varieties of application.

11/12/13
Reading the news (newspapers).

14
Reading the news (Television).
15/16/17/18
Mapantsula: narrative and film.
19/20/21/22/23
Reading the short story (Hodge (ed.)) *To Kill a Man's Pride.*
24/25/26/27
Women and the media.
28/29/30/31/32
The Lying Days: the novelist and the art of telling the truth.
33/34/35/36/37
In the Fog of the Seasons' End: the novel as a site of struggle.

Enumerating each component of this course would probably serve no useful purpose (the tedium of itemisation aside) since readers of the *JLS* will be familiar with literary, film and media analysis. It would therefore seem more sensible to briefly summarise the opening section, "Language, Community and Convention", and to scan the subsequent sections, making connections where necessary. A certain amount of elision seems unavoidable here.

The first lecture, which served as general introduction to the course, dealt with the problematic nature of English in a multilingual society like South Africa. Some current debates over language policy were raised in order to highlight the ways in which languages are intricated with their communities in complex and contentious ways. Against this background the historical formation and future role of "English Departments" were examined and the lecture ended with a consideration of the language and context of the University's Mission Statement.

The working principle informing the first section of the course (beginning after this introductory lecture) was that of building on the familiar, proceeding from the known to the unknown, situating at least the initial section of the course within the ambit of the students' everyday knowledge of their social and linguistic environment before extending it into a critical probing of how this environment is represented. The move toward a more specifically literary analysis, in the final section on Text, Context and Narrative, then took place within this continuum.

The conceptual trajectory of this initial section could be roughly delineated as representation-register-text-narrative, with a brief synopsis of its lecture components running as follows.

The first block of three lectures began with the assertion that language is a representational and constructed medium rather than a neutral and transparent one, and this was illustrated with reference to everyday usage. Subsequent lectures then went on to examine varieties of language usage, and introduced the notion of register as a means of underpinning the importance of context and convention in this usage. A version of the register model developed by the RAU "Language in Action" team was used as a means of identifying the salient characteristics of literary language.

The second block of lectures began by looking at the institution of the university and the history and status of academic study as well as its faculty divisions and their empirical methods. The lectures then moved towards the idea that a university is a community of parts and functions that can be deciphered or "read" in a particular way. This led to the introduction of the notion of a "text" as a kind of ligature between "reading" and "interpretation", enabling the two to be seen as interrelated activities. The city of Durban, in various representations, then served as a focus for the application of this idea.

The final lectures in this introductory section then moved closer to the literary, first by investigating the genealogy of the concept of the "text" as a means of illustrating how literary studies has drawn on other disciplines (linguistics, structural anthropology) to extend its analytical range.

A section on narrative began by considering narrative structure and expectation as a constitutive feature of our everyday perception of the world and how at the same time narrative functions as a transcultural phenomenon which is translatable into a variety of different mediums. The structure of story narrative was then looked at, with particular emphasis on the notion of plot, and definitions of narrative drawn from Todorov and Peter Brooks were given. Finally, the notion of narrative was expanded into three broad categories: (i) local narratives or narratives of the particular (of which literary narrative is an example); (ii) national narratives, or narratives of national definition which shape a people's sense of their place in the world and their past and future history; (iii) grand narrative, or totalising belief systems, which subsume the particular into a teleological historical design (examples Christianity and Marxism).

The remaining sections of the course structurally duplicated the progressions in the introductory section in so far as they too moved toward literary discourse through a consideration of other types of discourse. Obviously the intention here was to introduce literary analysis proper through a graded spectrum of analysis, not in order to disclaim the singularity of the literary but rather to emphasise the adaptability of methods of analysis. The placing of the section on "Women and the Media", due to unavoidable organisational problems, was slightly anomalous in terms of this progression (and here it ought to be mentioned that considerations of gender and representation – not remarked upon before – are considered a central component of the course).

All students were provided with a 34 page glossary in which lecturers defined the key terms in their respective sections in whatever detail they considered appropriate. This glossary was intended to supply a degree of conceptual cohesiveness to the course, particularly in the opening section and in the sections on TV news and newspapers, where research into these areas has developed a specialised vocabulary. Lecturers were not constrained to develop their material within any particular theoretical orientation, but there was agreement that, wherever practicable, continuities with earlier sections of the course would be incorporated into subsequent lectures. An important consideration here was to more fully contextualise – and in the process expand – students' understanding of the predominantly conceptual content of the first section.

The lecturers in the sections dealing with Television news and newspapers emphasised the degree to which these were constructed mediums which nonetheless exercise powerful and pervasive legitimations for certain points of view. Elements from the section on narrative were then supplemented and expanded by demonstrating how the news format uses narrative devices to shape and structure its presentation of events. At the same time the veridical status of narrative, when used to "construct" a certain point of view, or "frame" events within a certain context, was also examined as a means of investigating how compatible this was with the claims these discourses make to represent the factual.

Mapantsula, with its parallel narrative structure, offered opportunities to explore open-ended narrative structure, and contrast this with the closure of linear narrative. The multilingualism of the film provided a context in which to examine the language issues which had been raised earlier in the course. *Mapantsula* obviously also offered an occasion to examine the medium of film itself and its specific representational status, particularly in relation to popular struggle and politics in South Africa. A decisive turn in the course was the transition to fictional discourse and its deliberately constructed use of narrative forms. Hence the short story lectures began by comparing Dhlomo's short story "The Dog Killers" with his previous journalistic account of a similar event. Subsequent lectures then stressed the manner in which the short story (all the stories were by South African writers) mobilised a number of narrative levels – in terms of its general referentiality and context – while still retaining its status as an imaginary narrative about a particular event. The section on "Women and the Media" then concentrated on magazine narrative and graphic representation in relation to the construction of gender, and made use of extrapolations from earlier sections in interrogating what kind of functions and ulterior aims such representations served to reinforce. It also anticipated subsequent lectures on *The Lying Days* which, inter alia, investigated Gordimer's use of popular romance and the tensions between "history" and "her-story" in the novel's depiction of a female protagonist.

The lectures on *The Lying Days* explored the paradox in its introductory rubric ("The Novelist and the Art of Telling the Truth") by investigating the ways in which fictional realist narrative elaborates a certain version of the socially and historically "real" and the complex interaction of emphasis and exclusion that this entails. The final lectures on *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* then moved to consider the La Guma novel as transforming the novel into a "site of struggle", where divergent discourses and their registers are played off against each other in a dialectic which offers its own resolution in the form of redemption through a revolutionary future. In addition, students were invited to consider that the novel genre itself may be read in terms of conflicting, complexly interrelated "languages" rather than necessarily in terms which stress the unifying development of character and moral theme.

Obviously summary of this sort does not do full justice to the various components of the course, all of which (and especially those outside the introductory ten lectures) included elements that have not been mentioned here. Nonetheless, the underlying intention was that students develop an

expanded critical framework within which to respond to a diversity of signifying practices; in addition, it was hoped that when they encountered literary discourse proper they would be able to transfer to it some of the skills and conceptual categories with which they were already acquainted and that these would then acquire an expanded resonance in this different context.

Clearly, categories like narrative and register found ready application and enlargement in the analysis of literary texts, but it was also intended that this graded approach to the literary would encourage students to develop a sense of the historical and societal affiliations of literature, as well as the way in which it both incorporates other discourses and marks itself off as distinct from them. The fact that the course had an almost exclusively South African focus was designed to emphasise how a single (reasonably unified) phenomenon could be "read" and "interpreted" across a variety of mediums using skills that had a common base.

Finally, a word about Academic Support structures. The format for this has shifted around over the last two or three years, partially due to fairly rapid staffing turnover and also perhaps to timetable limitations on academic support allocation. This year has seen the introduction of Language Practicals, which consist of biweekly classes, taught by postgraduates and supervised by the academic support tutor. A handbook devised especially for this purpose is used. Voluntary academic support tutorials are held to clarify and summarise the contents of lectures and the academic support tutor is available for consultation with students on a daily basis. In all other respects the course is entirely unsegregated. Departmental policy on academic support is that, in so far as this is possible, it should be closely integrated into the main body of the department's work and that all members of the teaching staff should address themselves to the problems (and challenges) raised by the rapidly shifting composition of student enrolment.

4 Conclusions

The course was not without its problems and while adjustments to meet these will have to be made, the general consensus is that the new English IA course worked somewhat better than could be reasonably expected. Such objective criteria as mark spreads and external examining have confirmed the sense that the course offered students a practicable and coherent set of objectives and the skills relating to them.

Amongst students themselves reaction was at its keenest (that is to say at its most critical) in the introductory ten lectures. Much of this had to do with students' traditional expectation of what an "English" course should provide – i.e. immersion in "great" literature, and they were disappointed that this expectation was not met. While we intend to engage with this disappointment, it is not something which we feel obliged to capitulate to – and it demonstrates, perhaps, how little revisionary work has been done in the teaching of English at the secondary level. Interestingly, this was not an objection voiced by African students, the majority of whom, at least, found this approach a lot more congenial than African students in previous years have found the

traditional "opener" to the English IA course: a series of lectures on poetry.

A more cogent and widespread objection to these lectures was that they attempted to encompass too much, and that despite handouts, the glossary, etc., they lacked a sufficient degree of connection and continuity, in addition to lacking a core text of any sort that might have provided such cohesion. This was an objection that could not be ignored (not least because members of staff were uncomfortably aware of it when these lectures took place). In retrospect it is obviously very difficult, if not impossible, to launch undergraduates on their first year in English without providing them with some kind of referential ballast. At the same time, however, one is implicitly seeking to steer students away from certain aspects of their schooling. It was therefore decided that in 1993 the initial section would be cut from ten to four lectures, that all these should be delivered by one lecturer, and that their focus be more concentrated.

Other parts of the course will not be significantly altered, although there will be some minor adjustments: TV news will receive an extra lecture, and the section on "Women and the Media" will be refocused into a broader investigation of "technologies of gender" in their popular representation. The only other alteration will be a switch of text, with Ben Okri's *Stars of the New Curfew* replacing the La Guma novel *In the Fog of the Seasons' End.* This decision was made partially in order to shift the formal emphasis of the course away from a preponderance of social realism, and with it a rather loaded emphasis on social critique. It is hoped that the Okri novel will make space for a sense of the aesthetic of the literary and its transformative and utopian possibilities, as well as opening up the course to a wider African context.

Notes

1 The following members of staff lectured in this course: Tony Voss, Linda Palazzo, Matthew Shum, Duncan Brown, Jack Kearney, David Newmarch, Phil Joffe, Sally-Ann Murray, Johan Jacobs. The course coordinator was Sally-Ann Murray. I would like to thank Tony Voss, Jack Kearney and, in particular, Duncan Brown and Sally-Ann Murray for reading (and removing the more egregious errors from) preliminary drafts of this article.

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