

Apples and Oranges

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One of the most fundamental tools that language and literature deploy is the metaphor. Perhaps the most basic but nevertheless extraordinarily difficult question I ask my students to consider is how one thing can be *like* another. Similarity is not found in nature, but in the points of view of the people who contemplate it. “Il est des parfums . . . verts comme des prairies,” Charles Baudelaire wrote (“there are fragrances . . . as green as prairies”); “My love is like a red red rose,” Robert Burns related. While common sense and poetic tradition allow us readily to accept the latter comparison and appreciate its sentiment if not its internal workings, the former equation is less straightforward: The synesthesia coupling a smell and a color interrupts any intuitive understanding of what a smell is like. And yet, both comparisons require us to do the same kind of work to produce meaning. That is, nothing inherent in either love or a red rose allows them to be compared, just as—and more obviously—nothing in a fragrance is unproblematically green. We produce meaning by arbitrarily selecting in the objects to be compared features that, in another context, can be shown to have something in common. And it is precisely in the necessity of *having to show* what they have in common—of synthesizing a meaning that is putatively obvious or natural—that we demonstrate why, in fact, we make comparisons in the first place: Through them we illustrate something not easily stated in everyday discursive language. Metaphors, perhaps especially the more difficult or outrageous ones, allow us to make the irrational rational, or at least to put it into words. They anchor inchoate thought, and they insist we view the ordinary as extraordinary. It seems to me, then, that that is the basis for literature as a mode of understanding: The literary work is not so much something one must consume in order to place in a repository of artifacts the educated person must possess. It is, rather, a way of

knowing some remarkably complex human concepts for which there are no satisfactory, unproblematic terms.

By inviting my students to reflect on the intellectual work we all do as a matter of course each time we process a simple metaphor, I ask them to consider the immense complexity involved in reading and interpreting a literary or cultural text. Literary language posits itself as simultaneously opaque and transparent: It gives us a world or a thought to consider, but at the same time it does so in language which, through its deliberate density, calls attention to the very means of expression. Consequently, we are conscripted by the literary work to consider not only the contexts in which it is produced, but the complex of aesthetic, social, and political currents that govern it and to which it in turn speaks.

By introducing students to this basic understanding of the metaphor, I focus my undergraduate teaching on developing critical thinking and writing skills. In the process, I strive to wean them away from any analytical authority they might consider greater than their own—including and, indeed, especially mine. By helping them to develop an appreciation for and an understanding of the literary text, I strive to foster in them tools for analysis that they can deploy in a wide variety of critical circumstances, and I help them develop strategies for assuming their own critical and analytic voices. Furthermore, by maintaining highly demanding—some say “nitpicking”—expectations for students’ writing, I ask them to consider writing as not only coterminous with thinking, but as a skill to be practiced and developed not just throughout their college years, but over the course of a lifetime.

The great majority of my teaching focuses on questions of language, literature, and culture, and perhaps the most important thing I want my students to grasp is that all languages are foreign. The more able we are to keep in mind that language, no matter how transparent it seems, always mediates between us and the world, the better we can understand how different perspectives based on historical and cultural circumstances inform how we are able to think about that world. To consider all languages foreign, then, is not to subscribe to some ineffable essence inhering in the words and the works they form, nor is it to posit a timeless truth that language continually but only ever asymptotically strives to

reach. On the contrary—it is to understand meaning not as something that inhabits the world or the languages or texts in it, but as a dynamic production, one constantly in flux and therefore never fixed or stable. The more foreign or other one considers both literature and the language used to create it—even when that language happens to be English—the better one can grasp the multiple, often contradictory elements that, taken together, constitute what we generally, often even naively, refer to as meaning.

I teach courses on a somewhat broad range of material: 17th- and 18th-century French fiction, 19th-century French poetry, contemporary critical thought, psychoanalysis, great books, the new Europe, and occasionally the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures' Major Seminar. In all of those courses I ask my students to consider the conditions that allow for the production of meaning (the barest outline of which I elaborated above) in the specific cultural and historical context of the work or works in question. Not only must we ask of a text how it allows us to generate meaning; we must also ask what particular concerns, peculiar to that text alone, contribute to the generation of the specific meanings we find there. Why does it matter, for example, that Mme de Lafayette's 17th-century story about a young princess who fails to negotiate the complexities of the royal court differs radically from Denis Diderot's novel, written only a couple of generations later, about a young nun who fails to negotiate the complexities of convent life? I expect my students to learn how to ask the texts they consider questions that are subtle enough to distinguish between and among works that appear similar on the surface but which nevertheless conceal profound cultural and historical differences that in-class analysis can explore.

If metaphor produces unexpected meanings generally unavailable in ordinary discursive language, I urge my students to consider literary works as extended versions of this very phenomenon. Literature can explore cultural contradictions and competing popular sentiments in ways unavailable to ordinary language, either because no language has yet developed to address the problem or situation in question, or because the artistic work expresses an issue only on the edge of contemporary consciousness. In introductory classes I ask students to isolate these issues

by comparing how different works address a similar topic: Euripides' *Bacchae* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, for example, can work together to produce a dialog concerning a new intersection of conflicting gender and ethnic roles in a given culture. In more advanced classes I assign students guided research problems in which they work in groups outside of class to investigate a series of critical issues surrounding the course's topic: censorship, realism, sexuality, or philosophy, for example, as crucial elements in the production of 18th-century French fiction.

Working toward producing new knowledge, and especially toward writing coherent, concise, and logically argued written work is a principal goal I set for every one of my students. I normally set aside two or three "writing labs" in every class over the course of the semester in which we discuss strategies for defining a thesis, forming and illustrating an argument, and editing first drafts to produce the most persuasive and—why not?—elegant writing possible. A series of peer editing guides that I have developed over several years helps students at advanced levels read and comment on each other's papers, since I have discovered that often students can learn to write better by finding imperfections in another's work. Identifying a structural flaw in a peer's paper helps students recognize the error in their own work, and learning how to help improve another's argument benefits the students when they sit down to work on their own drafts. (Some of these guides are available at <http://troi.cc.rochester.edu/~tdip/MajorSeminar.html#CourseInfo>; recent course Web sites available at troi.cc.rochester.edu/~tdip.)

Our students today rely on technology a great deal more than most of their teachers ever did, and since they spend so much time online, it has seemed appropriate to me to try to capture some of that time. My courses nearly always involve a Web component, generally comprised of two parts: A "Critical Reading Guide" that accompanies course reading walks students through the more difficult material they're considering (and I have found that extremely useful for assignments on the works of, say Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, or Michel Foucault). The Guides provide important textual and background information at key points in the readings, and ask students pointed questions—which they answer either online or in writing, depending on the

assignment—designed to help them formulate their thoughts. The second online component I use in my courses consists of either a newsgroup or, now that WebCT is easily available, a “Discussion” group. Students less likely to speak up in class tend to post more freely to these sites, and if one revisits their Web ideas in the classroom, they generally seem more confident and willing to discuss their insights with their peers. Furthermore, asking students to focus their thoughts by committing them to writing more often than they might otherwise do allows me to gather their early, sometimes inchoate musings on course material and show them how those thoughts can be turned into more sophisticated, formal written work. (I am pleased to note that at least one of my Web sites has achieved a modicum of success outside the University of Rochester: The “Great Books” site [course last taught fall 2002] continues to receive hits from all over the country and from some international locations, and as of this writing has racked up over 6,000 visitors.)

Classroom dynamics are crucial for producing the kind of work elaborated above. Specific questions about daily readings train students to focus their thinking; there’s nothing less productive, in my view, than asking, “What did you think of the reading?” Likewise, insisting on well-formed answers using properly defined terminology further concentrates thought: Although I believe the classroom should be reasonably informal, I don’t believe I’m doing students any favor by letting them, for example, add “and stuff” to conclude a thought. Furthermore, I try to discourage them from self-deprecating openers such as, “I just think. . . .” Encouraging them to care enough about their critical interventions that they take responsibility for them by claiming them from the very beginning is not just good pedagogy; I take it to be an ethical imperative.

As I re-read my remarks I fear that I’ve described a sort of recipe or bag of tricks that anyone might deploy in a given pedagogical mission. What I am unable to describe here about my approach to teaching, of course, is my interaction with students on a daily, personal level. What appeals to me enormously in the kind of teaching I do is the freedom I have to adapt to individuals and their different talents and needs. I am extremely proud of the students who have come to me without the slightest idea of how to put together a paragraph, and who left confident both in

their newfound skills and in their capacities for continually improving them. I am very happy for the students who challenge their intellects and their inhibitions by volunteering to lead a discussion, and I am gratified by those who write to me, sometimes years later, to tell me that they now understand a particularly difficult concept I was hoping to help them grasp. To call the way I teach and the materials, techniques, and convictions I bring to it a “philosophy” seems simultaneously too grandiose and, paradoxically, not descriptive enough of what I do. I teach as an expression of the way I think and the way I believe, and I want to provide my students the means to express themselves similarly in their careers and their lives.