BACK TO THE TEXT: DISCUSSING AND WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

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Too many students have hold of a pernicious idea. It undermines their ability to read and enjoy literature. It prevents them from risking intelligent and sensitive comments about literature both in writing and in discussions. The idea is this: somewhere there is *only one right answer* to any question that can be asked about a piece of literature.

From this mistaken notion, a logical fiction builds. Students think that only a privileged few (i.e., teachers) have this right answer. Teachers, after all, have gone to school a long time to earn this privilege. Along with their bachelor or advanced degrees (continues the story), teachers have packets of top secret information — the right answers to all sorts of literary questions. And teachers, of course, read over the right answer before coming to class or refer to it while grading papers.

Students are also caught up by another fiction about literature. They think each work is like a jig-saw puzzle. Teachers (so the story goes) have seen the picture of the assembled whole. Students, however, have only certain pre-cut pieces, solid things that can only connect with certain others. The placement of the pieces, then, is either right or wrong; the parts either fit or they do not. To a point students are right: literature *is* like a jig-saw puzzle. There are, at least, a finite number of pieces that can be assembled somehow into a coherent whole. But, unlike the bits of a jig-saw puzzle, the facts of literature (words and groups of words in the text), when read, become *elastic*: that is, they must first pass through an individual's mind — a complex of unique memo-

ries and associations. These facts, therefore, take on meanings as unique as the individual perceiving them.

A method I have found successful when teaching literature capitalizes on this individualizing process by encouraging students to concentrate first on facts that they notice in a text and the inferences that they may make based on those facts. Because the name of this method is ostentatious (I call it the cumulative inferential paradigm) a few words about verbal ostentation are in order. Many students love it, if they are in on the joke. A tag that makes perfect sense to them but is sufficiently obscure to the rest of the world is a pure gift received and used with joy, a membership card in a secret society. It is, also, a key that opens up unexpected and exciting worlds. For students, part of the joy of using the cumulative inferential paradigm (CIP) is the simplicity of its operating principles as opposed to its mouth-contorting name.

To make sense of a literary text, all readers go through a similar two-step process: (1) they selectively perceive certain facts in the text and (2) make interpretative connections both among those facts and with their own experience. For example, a former student of mine noticed the words *pistil* and *flame* in Robert Frost's "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" (Lathem 241) and went on to write an essay about an imminent nuclear conflagration and its effects on the present and future generations. The student's thinking was, in a way, ingenious: a pistil is shaped somewhat like a mushroom, and the flame associated with mushroom led her to a nuclear holocaust. The occasionally "ingenious" results among less experienced readers, however, follow the basic movement from *selection* to *connection* that characterizes all readers, even the most experienced. For instance, a major portion of the critical material written about Shakespeare's *KING LEAR* falls into two opposing camps: one insists on the play's sad ending, while the other, equally adamant, insists on the play's happy ending (Hibbard 1-12). To support their respective contentiousness, the sad-endians and the happy-endians draw on the play's facts and whatever else they, as readers (and writers), consider appropriate.

My point here is that my former student and those engaged in the great battle over *KING LEAR* read literature in basically the same way: by selecting details and connecting them. What distinguishes the more from the less experienced

readers is the range and number of relevant facts that they bring to a literary work.

I divide facts relevant to a text into two categories: internal and external. By "internal facts" I mean words and groups of words that exist in the text, independent of any individual's association with them. They are verifiable evidence that can be pointed to. Thus, *pistil* and *flame* are facts internal to Frost's poem. On the other hand, making the leap from such internal facts to the idea of a nuclear conflagration requires the use of "external facts": information (memories, associations, values) that readers bring with them to a text, but outside the text itself.

What my student needed, then, was a way of recognizing and using the relationship between internal and external facts: a method that would systematically give her the power and confidence to read more effectively. The cumulative inferential paradigm (CIP) is such a method.

To introduce my students to the CIP, I first give them a reading assignment, Part I of *Beowulf* for instance. Before class, I determine a specific focus of discussion (a task) and draw up a list of between 10-20 relevant, internal facts culled from the reading. I then prepare a handout. (See Illustration 1.) The task goes at the top, and the facts, numbered and identified by page and speaker, go into the first of three columns. From each detail I draw an arrow to the second column. The arrow is key: it represents the inferential process, at the end of which is a conclusion/judgment based on that one specific fact.

When I arrive in class, my first concern is to establish what an inference is. For example, I might say to my students, "What would you think if you saw me do this?" Then I leave the room and come back slightly disoriented, lean on the door frame, slur my speech, and then walk wobbily to the center of the room. The students get the idea: "You're drunk" or "You're high" is an immediate reaction. The brighter students may say, "You're acting drunk." But no matter. All have made conclusions/judgments based on the observable facts of my behavior. Snapping to, I point this out, being careful to say that any conclusion/judgment they made may be called an inference. We then discuss the basis of inference-making: the movement from observable fact to judgment/conclusion. I find that students have no trouble thinking of examples of inference they or others have made.

Then I distribute the prepared sheet that has certain

internal facts about Beowulf's character. Together we draw inferences from the first four or five. At this point anything goes, even the most outrageous. Once, a student inferred from fact #1, "[Beowulf] was for main strength of all men foremost/that trod the earth" that the author was a seventy-five pound weakling who unduly admired Beowulf's strength. I let the inference stand unchallenged, since facts considered later, along with other students' reactions, tend to modify such extreme positions. (This student, after going through the rest of the process, wrote a critique, condemning the glorification of Beowulf's physical strength, a glorification unwarranted because it results in nothing but a temporary peace, followed by slaughter. The student did grant, however, that a temporary peace is better than none at all. But I'm getting ahead of myself.)

I then ask the students to make the rest of the inferences on their own and suggest that they add other details, along with the exact page reference and speaker, that strike them about Beowulf's character. I limit them only by insisting they write the "facts" out. I thereby avoid such generalities as "Beowulf's fight with Grendel," which covers several paragraphs of continuous text, and "what Hrothgar says to Beowulf," comments that are spread throughout Part I of *Beowulf*. Their writing out the facts guarantees that the students are looking at specific details upon which specific inferences can be made. During this part of the process, I urge students to concentrate on individual facts and inferences, and to resist leaping to any more generalized conclusions. This suspension is crucial, since it allows the full interplay of a reader's background (external details) with very localized textual information (internal details).

In the final phase of my introduction to the CIP, I ask students to detect inferences that are related in some way. For example, the four facts

5. Beowulf: To you [Hrothgar] I will now put one request . . . that I alone may be allowed . . . to cleanse your hall Heorot
6. Beowulf: I abjure utterly/the bearing of sword or shielding
8. Beowulf: it was my part then to put to the sword/ seven sea-monsters
9. Beowulf: I'll show him [Grendel] Creatish strength

often yield inferences about Beowulf's uncomely bragging.

"He's got a fat head" and "He certainly has a high opinion of himself" are generalized inferences based on a series of specific inferences. The specific inferences may be said to have accumulated. Or, consider these facts:

      10. Hrothgar to Beowulf: Bend your mind and your body to this task . . . There'll be no want of liberality

      11. Narrator: [Beowulf] called to mind/that evening's utterance

      13. Narrator: Not for anything would the earl's guardian/let his deadly guest go living

      14. Narrator: Beowulf's feat was much spoken of

Each of these may lead students to consider the importance of Beowulf's reputation; perhaps, then, he fights Grendel because he does not want to be thought a coward. Again, inferences about individual facts accumulate, allowing students to form a valid conclusion that is firmly grounded in the text.

At this point the teacher's role becomes problematic. Should students be pushed to consider fact #10, "Bend your mind and body to this task . . . There'll be no want of liberality," as a kind of contract Beowulf has with Hrothgar? And from there, to consider the social relationships implied by *comitatus*? And then to compare *Beowulf* to "The Wanderer" or "The Battle of Maldon"? The prudent will sense how much students are ready to absorb and how best to satisfy the demands of syllabus. I tend to introduce the CIP early in the term and let the students revel in the feeling of power that the procedure gives them. I am pleased, at this point, that the process of effectively reading literature has begun: students have noted some of the text's internal details and made inferences about them by using external details.

Two final matters. The first involves leading students and was voiced by a group of high school and college teachers in my rhetoric seminar. At the end of one class period, I had hastily explained the theory behind the CIP and asked them to draw up a task and a list of "facts" from Eudora Welty's "A Visit of Charity," (Welty 113-18). (See Illustration 2 for the CIP I drew up.) At the next meeting, one teacher said that when he was choosing the facts he wanted to present, he found himself basing the choice on certain inferences he had already made about the story. Then he asked, "Is it fair to lead the students in that way?"

Leading students is natural and probably unavoidable,

but teachers should be prepared for inferences they themselves had not considered. For example, I had taken #6, "As if she [Marian] were walking on waves" and connected it with other biblical images:

    7. Narrator: "Sound like a sheep's bleating"
  14. Narrator: "Retrieved a red apple she had hidden there"
  16. Narrator: "Took a big bite out of the apple"
  17. Author: "A Visit of Charity."

One of the teachers, however, said that #6 shows the dream-like quality of Marian's state and connected it to

  2. Narrator: "She walked vaguely up the steps"
  10. Narrator: "Like being caught in a robber's cave, just before one is murdered"

and an important item not on my CIP:

> Now she [Marian] could see the old woman in bed very closely and plainly, and very adruptly, from all sides, as in dreams. She wondered about her — she wondered for a moment as though there was nothing else in the world to wonder about. It was the first time such a thing had happened to Marian.   (p. 117)

This teacher's inference about #6 was valid (though unexpected), and added to my own appreciation of Welty's craft. Something else is important: the unexpected inference drove me and others in the class back to the story for a fact not on my sheet. In short, we dealt with the story's details rather than the vague generalities that often fog up class discussions on literature and at times perfectly obfuscate students' essays about literature.

Which brings me to my last point: the cumulative inferential paradigm helps students write more effectively about literature. As we all know, the preparatory stage of any writing process consists of gathering information. Free writing and more methodical heuristic procedures serve this purpose while focusing a writer's attention on the problem, in this case the designated task. The paradigm helps. Once I have explained it in class and students have had an opportunity to experience its power, I require my writers to submit their own CIP with any essay they write. They set their own task; they draw up their own facts.

However, making the transition from teacher-selected facts to self-selected facts presents a major hurdle for students. Worried, they ask me what facts are suitable for selec-

tion. My first response is "Whatever interests you." My second response is a little more helpful. I suggest that they note (by making marginal checks, underlining, highlighting, or using whatever method best suits them and complies with school policy) anything at all that strikes them. When they've finished the play (or poem or novel or short story), I suggest that they go back and look at what they have noted. The notations, I assert, will fall into certain clusters of interest. One such cluster will have a number of facts that they, as writers, can work with.

In order to give these directions confidently, I hold to two assumptions. The first is that I see my job as a teacher as a process of becoming dispensable. By the end of the term my students ought to be doing on their own what they could not have done at the beginning of the term. Translated into the present circumstance, this means that I have to resist the ego-flattering basis of the students' question: the facts that I select are better than the facts that they themselves select. In the classroom, my objective is not to show how much more competent I am than they are, but rather to give them tools that will make them more competent than they were when I first met them. The CIP is such a tool.

There is yet another consideration. Underlying the students' question of what facts should be selected are the pernicious fictions of the jig-saw puzzle and of the mysterious packets of top secret, correct answers. Maybe, the students reason, this CIP thing worked because the teacher chose the right facts. And the students' fears about this matter cannot be underestimated. In many texts, there may be quite literally hundreds (possibly thousands) of facts that students could choose. But all novices must make a beginning on their own, just as a surgeon at some point in his career has to make his first real incision on a real patient. Such a first operation is generally a simple one, and, after all, an experienced doctor is nearby, probably telling herself that she could do a better job, but willing to stifle the impulse to grab the scalpel and make the incision straighter, more accurate. Though this analogy cannot be pushed too far, its point is valid: once students grasp a principle and have had some controlled exercise in its practice, they must be allowed to make a beginning on their own.

The second assumption I make as I send students off on their own involves the clustering of information. Each person brings to each text what I have called external facts: a unique

combination of attitudes and knowledge. These attitudes and that knowledge fashion a complex filtering system through which a text is perceived. This filtering system, interposed between reader and text, makes certain kinds of details more visible to the reader than others. Put another way, a reader's background is a kind of magnet that attracts from the text certain particles (facts) charged with interest for the reader. But, whether we think of reading a text in terms of details that are more visible or details that are more charged, the result is the same: every reader ends up with a number of facts, many of which, for some good reason, fall into interest clusters.

When starting on their own, students should limit themselves to twenty facts from the text. Even with such a limitation, some students need help coming up with any coherent cumulative inferences. Putting the students into small groups (three of four) gives them an opportunity to see not only what facts their peers selected but the inferences grounded in those facts. If one member of a group is having trouble, such peer contact is often enough to provide the necessary help. If not, as a class, we all work on the student's facts to come up with cumulative inferences that satisfy the restrictions imposed by the facts that the student chose.

Requiring students to submit their own CIP makes for better papers, since all conclusions, from the central point of the paper to the subconclusions that support that thesis, can be traced back to specific passages in the text. The CIP also encourages informed class discussions because the students will challenge others in the class (including the instructor) to point out specific evidence for an assertion that has been made. Both for papers and for class discussion, the CIP is useful because it focuses the students' attention where it ought to be: not on whatever privileged information may be in the teacher's mind, but on the text.

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ILLUSTRATION 1
CUMULATIVE INFERENTIAL PARADIGM
Using *Beowulf*, Part I

Task: What kind of person is Beowulf?

Facts from Part I of *Beowulf*	Inferences	Cumulative Inferences
1. Narrator: [Beowulf] was for main strength of all men foremost/that trod the earth p. 57		
2. Watchman: I have not in my life/set eyes on a man with more might in his frame p. 59		
3. Beowulf: To Hrothgar I would/openheartedly unfold a plan p. 59		
4. Hrothgar: The seafarers used to say . . . that this fighting man/in his hand's grasp had the strength of thirty other men p. 63		
5. Beowulf: To you [Hrothgar] I will now put one request . . . that I alone may be allowed . . . to cleanse your hall Heorot p. 64		
6. Beowulf: I abjure utterly/the bearing of sword or shielding pp. 64-65		
7. Beowulf: I thank my friend Unferth, who unlocks us this tale/of Breca's bragged exploit; the beer lends/eloquence to his tongue p. 67		
8. Beowulf: it was my part then to put to the sword/seven sea-monsters p. 69		
9. Beowulf: I'll show him [Grendel] Greatish strength p. 70		
10. Hrothgar to Beowulf: Bend your mind and your body to this task . . . There'll be no want of liberality p. 71		
11. Narrator: [Beowulf] Kept watch how the ravager/set to work p. 74		
12. Narrator: [Beowulf] called to mind/that evening's utterance p. 75		
13. Narrator: Not for anything would the earl's guardian/let his deadly guest go living p. 76		
14. Narrator: Beowulf's feat was much spoken of p. 78		

ILLUSTRATION 2
CUMULATIVE INFERENTIAL PARADIGM
Eudora Welty's "A Visit of Charity"
Task: What is Marian like?

Facts	Inferences	Cumulative Inferences
1. Narrator: [Marian] stopped for a moment behind a prickly dark shrub p. 113		
2. Narrator: She [Marian] walked vaguely up the steps p. 113		
3. Marian: I'm a Campfire Girl . . . I have to pay a visit to some old lady p. 113		
4. Narrator: The visit would give her a minimum of only three points p. 113		
5. Marian: Any of them will do p. 113		
6. Narrator: As if she were walking on waves p. 113		
7. Narrator: Sound like a sheep's bleating almost made her turn around and run back p. 113		
8. Narrator: Marian stood tongue-tied p. 114		
9. Narrator: Her heart beat more and more slowly, her hands got colder and colder p. 114		
10. Narrator: [Marian felt as if she were] caught in a robber's cave, just before one is murdered p. 114		
11. Narrator: She had forgotten to look at the plant herself before giving it away pp. 114-115		
12. Narrator: Marian could not remember her [own] name. [Marian] "I'm a Campfire Girl." p. 115		
13. Marian: "She's crying." p. 117		
14. Narrator: [Marian] retrieved a red apple she had hidden there p. 118		
15. Narrator: Imperial command p. 118		
16. Narrator: [Marian] took a big bite out of the apple p. 118		
17. Author: "A Visit of Charity," title.		

BACK TO THE TEXT

NOTE
[1] I am aware of the distinction Hayakawa makes in "Reports, Inferences, and Judgments." For my purposes, however, this distinction is not helpful.

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