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TEACHING NARRATIVE

Edited by RICHARD JACOBS

The Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre

Teaching the New English

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Series Editor's Preface

One of the many exciting achievements of the early years of the UK English Subject Centre was the agreement with Palgrave Macmillan to initiate the series 'Teaching the New English'. The intention of Philip Martin, the then Centre Director, was to create a series of short and accessible books which would focus on curriculum fields (or themes) and develop the connections between scholarly knowledge and the demands of teaching.

Since its inception as a university subject, 'English' has been committed to what is now known by the portmanteau phrase 'learning and teaching'. The subject grew up in a dialogue between scholars, critics, and their students inside and outside the university. Yet university teachers of English often struggle to make their own tacit pedagogic knowledge conscious, or to bring it up to a level where it might be shared, developed, or critiqued. In the experience of the English Subject Centre, colleagues found it relatively easy to talk about curriculum, but far harder to talk about the success or failure of seminars, how to vary modes of assessment, or to make imaginative use of virtual learning environments or web tools. Too often, this reticence meant falling back on received assumptions about how students learn, about how to teach or create assessment tasks. At the same time, we found, colleagues were generally suspicious of the insights and methods arising from generic educational research. The challenge for the extended group of English disciplines has been to articulate ways in which our own subject knowledge and forms of enquiry might themselves refresh debates about pedagogy. The need becomes all the more pressing in the era of rising fees, student loans, the National Student Survey, and the

characterisation of the student as a demanding consumer of an educational product. The implicit invitation of the present series is to take fields of knowledge and survey them through a pedagogic lens.

'Teachers', people used to say, 'are born, not made'. There may be some tenuous truth in this. There may perhaps be generosities of spirit (or, alternatively, drives for didactic control) laid down in early childhood. But the implication that you cannot train or develop teachers is dubious. Why should we assume that even 'born' teachers should not need to learn or review the skills of their trade? Amateurishness about teaching has far more to do with the mystique of university status than with evidence about how people learn. This series of books is dedicated to the development of the craft of teaching within university English Studies.

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Suzanne Keen would like to thank Kate Higgins, Assistant Archivist at the Library, the London School of Economics and Political Science, for her guidance in reproduction of images from Charles Booth's poverty maps.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Richard Jacobs

Enchantment/Disenchantment; Closure/Narratability

Narrative is everywhere: and its pervasiveness makes it, in a sense, harder rather than easier to teach. Defamiliarizing what is so familiar, in students' lives and in the texts they've consumed, all the way from bedtime infancy to 'set texts' for exams, can be an unsettling experience. In addition, for a lecturer to convey and gauge the power of narratives, especially over his students' own lives (as well as his own: in teaching narrative, I make this very clear and personal) can seem intrusive. Fiction is fictive but narratives can occlude their own fictiveness so seductively as to seem true. This isn't just the trivial matter, say, of early readers of *Gulliver's Travels* indignantly complaining that they didn't believe a word about those little and big people (presumably such readers gave up before they got to the talking horses); it's serious.

I'm writing this in July 2017 not long after a momentous general election in the UK in which, to everyone's astonishment, a narrative of hope, communality and desire for a fairer society was at least as much listened to and believed (especially by students and other young people) than the narrative of fear, cynical inequality and hatred of others, a narrative relentlessly

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elaborated by the 'free' world's most aggressively partisan newspapers, that have poisoned British politics for so long. Earlier we had Brexit and Trump. Narratives swung both those results. The coerciveness of narrative—its power to lie, oppress and enslave—is just as significant as its more widely acclaimed and more benevolent powers: narrative being (in H. Porter Abbott's words) 'the principal way our species organises its understanding of time' (Abbott 2002: 3) and, through that, the way we come to terms with mortality; its power to make sense of our world, our lives and ourselves; and its power to give us an infinitely enriched understanding of alternative worlds and lives—and of a better future. Students can more readily accept the plausibility of the latter life-enhancing powers rather than the former coercive ones. Enchantment with narrative is more easily taught than disenchantment.

The balance between enchantment and disenchantment also operates differently across the student's educational experience. It may be one way of distinguishing what happens in university teaching from what comes before it that the balance there tips sharply towards the disenchantment pole, as we teach the application of critical literacy, with its attendant and necessary scepticisms, to the reading of narrative, whereas, at the other extreme, in childhood, enchantment with narrative very much has its 'uses' (Bettelheim 1976).

But students also come to see that what is involved in their later reading of narrative is an oscillation between enchantment and disenchantment, in their experience not just of different sorts or genres of texts, or as to the liberating or oppressive nature of the narrative, but even within the same text. The narrative enchants us and simultaneously we are aware of, and meant to be aware of and meant to resist, that enchantment. It would be conventional to map this process or oscillation, and to assess the balance between the two processes, on to and in terms of the differences, or alleged differences, between realist and modernist narratives, with their sharply divergent allegiances to notions of coherence, wholeness, plausibility, dimensionality and hierarchies of discourse.

Students of literature at university are encouraged to see those differences in terms of linear chronology as they move from the great nineteenth-century realist narratives of, say, Jane Austen, Dickens and George Eliot to the high modernist post-war experiments of, say, Joyce, Woolf and Ford. These would conventionally be taught on separate modules. But this cleanly demarcated linear development should be destabilized and I give some examples of that process in the last chapter of this book, in relation

to 'Bartleby' and to the 'Alice' books in dialogue with Freud's 'Dora'. And it's very pertinent that D. A. Miller observes that the standard account of the realist novel serving 'the repressive order of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie' whereas the modernist novel 'registers an implicit protest against this repression' (Miller 1981: 281) is too simple. He doesn't say it but one complicating point would be to note that when realism was being heralded as a new breed of narrative fiction, in the form of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert's novel and realism itself (though Flaubert hated and rejected the term) were being defined by reviewers as the politics of 'discontented democracy' and 'implacable equality' (Heath 1992: 51). Miller draws on Fredric Jameson to argue that modernist fiction can be 'suspiciously consonant, not to say complicitous, with aspects of the social order that provides its own context' (Miller 1981: 281).

Even more telling, however, is for students to come to see that single texts in the so-called realist or modernist traditions can be read as containing unstable compounds of the two traditions—both, in Barthes' famous terms, 'readerly and 'writerly' (Barthes 1990: v), that reading them is a matter of negotiating between enchantment and disenchantment, and that it's less a matter of modernism being a chronological development from and break with realism and more that the two represent a tension in narrative texts that has been with us from the start (from at least Cervantes) and is still with us today (see Josipovici 2010). The 'realist/modernist' dynamic can be traced in manifold ways and places: students on a first-year 'Re-Viewing Shakespeare' module have been stimulated to notice the shifting proportions of 'realist' and 'modernist' narratives in the proto-realist *Hamlet* and the proto-modernist *King Lear*. As suggested above, it's a tension that's inherent in the very fictiveness of narrative.

Teaching nineteenth-century 'realist' novels to students who have been introduced to the critical approaches to narrative fiction pioneered by Peter Brooks and D. A. Miller has proved a very fruitful and bracing experience, whether working with second-year undergraduates on a 19th century module that takes in some of the usual landmarks or an MA module on rhetoric that pays close attention to Jane Austen (and, as we'll see, Mary Shelley). And we might relate the enchantment/disenchantment dynamic to the crucial feature that Miller (who is at his dazzling best on Jane Austen) identifies in narrative fiction as the permanent tension between closure and narratability: closure can only 'work' by abolishing the possibilities of what can be narrated, a process that involves the 'discontents' of Miller's title (Miller 1981). For Miller closure depends on 'a suppression, a simplification, a sort of

blindness' (Miller: 89), and is 'an act of "make-believe", a postulation that closure is possible', a postulation of 'self-betraying inadequacy' (267). There is, writes Miller, 'no more fundamental assumption of the traditional novel than [the] opposition between the narratable and closure' (267) and 'what discontents the traditional novel is its own condition of possibility' (265).

To put it another way, closure is defined, only made possible, by the elements that refuse closure. When closure in narrative means happy love, that happy love may only be achieved because it chooses to forget the price of its happiness. That narrative closure is guiltily aware of exclusion (the coercions dictating who gets left out of the final happinesses, like Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*) accounts for the sense of exasperation that students can hear as accompanying closure itself. The narrator, in the very act of managing the married couples, can suddenly betray an exasperated note as if aware of what has to be left out in novelistic management or housekeeping. We can hear this with varying degrees of intensity in Jane Austen, notably so in the chillingly bitter treatment (which students are invariably shocked by) handed out to the adulterous Maria at the end of *Mansfield Park*, condemned to live in a purgatorial misery with Austen's least 'liveable with' character, Mrs Norris:

> …where, shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other no judgment, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment. (Vol. 3, Ch. 17)

In an equivalent way, students are taken aback by the implausible (exasperated?) ending of *Bleak House*, which they find difficult to take seriously. This only 'works' by what Dickens himself must have realized was the staginess of superimposing an identikit new but happier Bleak House upon the old (bleak) one, so that Jarndyce can give Esther the appropriately grounded happiness. This is designed to justify the way Dickens simultaneously superimposes Woodcourt as Esther's 'new' husband (as-if her brother) upon the old one, Jarndyce himself (as-if her father).

Teaching Conflicted Novels

Miller's analysis of the dynamics of narrative in the realist novel is developed, in a more obviously Foucauldian direction, in his *The Novel and the Police* (Miller 1988). Here the narratives of Victorian realism are shown to be complicit in a process by which readers, deluded by the image of private power offered by the narrative, are blinded to the operation of more press-

ingly real social and public power in which they are caught up, the narratives 'enlisting the consciousness of its subject in the work of supervision'. The effect is that the reader, the liberal subject, can only recognize himself fully 'when he forgets or disavows his functional implication' in a system of 'restraints or disciplinary injunctions' (Miller 1988; Hale 2006: 554, 543). The enchantments of narrative, in this respect, are the necessary occlusions of disenchantment, precisely in not knowing that by reading you have become your own policeman.

David Musselwhite, in an often brilliant and under-rated book that anticipates Miller's arguments, shows how in the classic realist novel, from Jane Austen to Dickens, the 'exuberance and threat' of revolutionary forces are 'steadily but ineluctably worked within a new axiomatic, a new set of rules and constraints, of prescribed places and possibilities that made them both manageable and self-monitoring', while at the same time 'the potential of desire, which should be social and productive' is 'slowly asphyxiated' (Musselwhite 1987: 9).

These ideas have usefully informed discussions in university seminar classrooms during the MA rhetoric module when I've brought together two novels written within a few years of each other—years in the period between 1811 and 1819 when 'the possibility of a violent revolution in England was greater than at almost any other time and was contained, with ever increasing difficulty, by the resort to force alone' (Musselwhite 1987: 31). The two novels are startlingly different but share submerged structural anxieties: *Emma* and *Frankenstein*. (They also share an early recourse to doubling and othering, much more subtly so in *Emma*.) The asphyxiation of potentially social and productive desire is one way of describing what happens to Shelley's Creature, whose last words (deriving from Milton's Satan as he first observes the embracing Adam and Eve) register the agony of 'wasting in impotent passions' and permanently unsatisfied desires (1818, ed., Vol. 3, Ch. 7). Musselwhite notes that in these last pages the Creature pointedly refers (twice, actually) to his life not as a narrative but as the 'series of my being': as if he and he alone belongs to the non-narratable (despite his being the most eloquent narrator in the novel), with his plea to be 'linked to the chain of existence and events' (Vol. 2, Ch. 9), as if in a narrative signifying system, so cruelly denied.

But students recognize something similar about the structure of *Emma* in which marriage brings an end, but in a sense an arbitrary (discontented) end, to what has characterized Emma's life hitherto—a 'series of being' lived as an arbitrarily strung together series of match-makings (driven in Harriet's case by the displacements of narcissistic pseudo-homosexual

desire), a kind of anti-narrative or what Miller calls 'radical picaresque: an endless flirtation with a potentially infinite parade of possibilities' (Miller 1981: 15). And this match-making is like a 'bad' or 'othered' version of the novel's marriage-orientated dominant narrative: Emma's match-making (as 'bad novelist') is in effect positioned to empty the master-narrative of its ideological purposes, to naturalize and legitimize it.

Emma's desire to live through and in that picaresque 'series' must be bound up ('corrected') in closure, in effect asphyxiated in hetero-normative marriage. Students regularly see the radical feminist potential in what Emma desires to be and to do, to assert and exercise control and power, in effect to usurp power in a patriarchal world, to be the subject of her sentence, and students connect that desire with Frank Churchill's more obviously subversive undermining of social protocol—and they are very alive to the sharp irony of Emma discovering that it's Frank of all people whose power games have exposed the weakness of her supposed autonomy, that she's all along been a pawn in his game, the object of his sentence, in a feigned relationship, and then of Mr Knightley's, in marriage.

And students are richly exercised when we come to discuss the multiple ironies of the novel's version of 'closure', in which the married Emma and Mr Knightley will live chastely and as if childishly together with the tyrant-baby Mr Woodhouse—and as if forever: I've found that students feel that Mr Woodhouse will as it were 'live forever' when they project beyond the last pages (after all, as they say, there's nothing actually wrong with his health). In effect, and absurdly, the married couple will never be released into fulfilled desire in Donwell Abbey but instead will live suspended in Hartfield, which early in the novel is significantly mentioned as 'but a sort of notch in the Donwell Abbey estate to which all the rest of Highbury belonged' (Vol. 1, Ch. 16). We leave Emma and Mr Knightley living in a notch, she still mistress in her own home and he displaced and emasculated.

Marilyn Butler famously identified the political 'war of ideas' in the inner workings of Austen's novels (Butler 1975) and students can see in both these novels conflicting elements of conservative and Jacobin ideas and the way both texts have thereby generated contested critical readings. Chris Baldick in his indispensable study (Baldick 1990) makes it very clear that the Burke–Paine post-revolutionary pamphlet-war shaped the intrinsic and internal debate that Mary Shelley articulated in the conflicted presentation of the Creature, especially in the poignancies of his demands for

love and to be loved, and in the recognition that his murders were a direct result of the cruelty of his several rejections, most painfully by his 'father' Frankenstein. Baldick's careful assessment is that Shelley's own response is 'an uneasy combination of fearful revulsion and cautious sympathy' for the Creature, an 'anxious liberalism' (Baldick 1990: 55). My students usually read Shelley's sympathies for the Creature and the novel's radical politics more forcefully than that.

Both novels have at their centres a conservative message about the dangers of playing God (Emma with Harriet who, Creature-like, turns on her 'maker' by aspiring to marry Mr Knightley) and of seeking to undermine given hierarchies of gender (Frankenstein appropriating the maternal role) and class (Emma's plans for Harriet). But many students are startled to discover that Frank Churchill, that great opener of windows and fierce advocate of the class-dissolving opportunities of balls, is rewarded (especially after he treats her at Box Hill with such callow cruelty) with the most desirable and 'perfect' of all Austen's young women, Jane Fairfax, in sharp contrast with how Austen handles those other deceptive charmers Willoughby, Wickham and Henry Crawford.

This may be a measure of Austen's critical scepticism about the values of landed conservatism, what D. W. Harding long ago called her 'regulated hatred' (Harding 1940) of much that sentimental Janeites (and makers of costume-drama films, and students who have only seen those films before reading the novels) profess or assume to see in her, as well as her not quite suppressed sympathies for and attractions to those pseudo-revolutionaries who come in, like the Crawfords, from outside to undermine and even destroy it. (Miller and Musselwhite in different ways are excellent on what Austen had to fight against in herself when dealing with the contradictory forces in *Mansfield Park*.)

Emma uses very strongly worded, indeed for her unusually politicized language (again evoking Satan) when condemning Frank (and Jane) after hearing of their secret engagement. She describes him as deploying 'espionage and treachery—to come among us with professions of openness and simplicity' (Vol. 3, Ch. 10). This is Jane Austen's sole use of 'espionage', a word that only entered the English language in 1793. French words like this and 'finesse' are associated with Frank and add to the sense of his allegiance with Jacobin ideas. But it remains the case that the Frank–Jane relationship, though breaking all courtship protocols, has an intensity of process and outcome that marks it out as unique in all of Jane Austen. Students regularly find that Frank and Jane coming together is more

credible and moving (and closer to later Victorian novels) than Emma and Mr Knightley doing so, about whose future they're often sharply sceptical (even allowing for the death of Mr Woodhouse), and some of them even suspect that Jane Austen, in another and final subversion of conservative values, intended her readers to respond in just that way.

When I ask students to assess the different 'weightings' the novel accords to the married couples, they recognize and quite properly question the narrative coercion involved in the way the novel privileges Emma and Mr Knightley's love as ontologically more 'real' than Frank and Jane's ('being' in love rather than 'falling' in love). This is because the former is positioned as an 'in-built', secreted feature of their relationship since she was a teenager, only activated and made visible to them both when dramatized in Girardian triangular jealousy (his love made 'real' when he thinks Frank is in love with her; hers when she thinks he's in love with Harriet), whereas Frank and Jane are as it were 'only' lovers brought together in casual (holiday) intimacy.

This is a coercive opposition, one drawing on what I encourage students to see as a 'depth-effect' illusion in narrative fiction whereby the 'revelation' of hidden 'truth' (that Emma and Mr Knightley have 'always' loved each other without knowing it) aims to persuade us of a 'deeper' reality attendant on some relations and characters at the expense of others. Students debunk this readily enough when we discuss the fact that the novel itself openly jokes with the notion of Emma and Mr Knightley being in effect brother and sister and is silent with the notion of their being in effect (with the sixteen-year age difference) father and daughter.

Narrative and the Erotics of Reading

The discontented conflict between the narratable and closure that Miller identifies connects powerfully with the no-less exemplary work of Peter Brooks in his brilliant and influential study *Reading for the Plot* (Brooks 1984). This is very evident in his chapter on *Great Expectations* where Brooks argues that, quite against the usual traditions of revelation through plot and its applications for happiness (in marriage), Pip in effect moves beyond plot and at the end his life has 'outlived plot, renounced plot, been cured of it' (Brooks 1992, ed.: 138). This is because, having at last, like a novelist or detective himself, solved the mystery of Estella's true parentage, he can do absolutely nothing with that revelation, least of all use it to marry her. Steven Connor reads Pip's situation at the end in a way that