



Chapter 1

The Anxiety of Teaching

Anxiety Dreams

It's the middle of the semester, and I suddenly realize that for weeks I have been skipping one of the classes I am assigned to teach. Panicked and guilt-ridden, I jump into the car, and drive frantically to the campus, but I get hopelessly lost on one-way streets, driving up and down the ramps of packed garages. Finally I park illegally, and run to the classroom building, which is on a high hill. When I arrive, breathless, to my amazement the students are still in the room, and I try to explain why I have not showed up for six weeks and to pretend that I know what we are supposed to discuss. I know that I am in trouble for this shocking dereliction of duty, and cannot explain to myself why I have been so feckless and irresponsible.

It's a teaching dream, one of the occupational hazards of all professors. My husband, who teaches French literature, has a recurring dream of "lecturing, brilliantly I feel, with unaccustomed eloquence and animation, and then I realize that I am in an L-shaped room, and that another lecturer is speaking out of sight around the corner, but to the same students I am talking to. And their rapt attentiveness is actually for that other course." Just before he retired, after 35 years of teaching, he dreamed that he was "in my old junior high school, a square building with a courtyard, with stairways at each corner. I am lost, looking in vain for my mailbox, where I will presumably find the directions to my classroom, while hordes of students rush purposefully by and bells clang ominously, signaling the start of a class I am obviously going to be late for. As I wake up in mild alarm, I wonder why I am giving my college classes in my old junior high school building, which was torn down years ago."

Isobel Armstrong (Birkbeck) had her most vivid teaching dream when she was at the University of Southampton. “I was giving a lecture somewhere else, on Charlotte Brontë. There was a huge audience but I felt happy and at ease. I had lots of notes. I opened the book to read a passage from the novel – and it was a totally unknown novel by Brontë I had never seen before, with themes of a green arbor, of ivy and feculent scrolls of plant work. I looked at the pages dumbfounded. What shall I do?”¹

After many years at the University of Chicago, Wayne Booth had a dream that he had returned to Haverford, where he had started his teaching career, as Distinguished Professor of the Humanities. But he was unable to find his living quarters, or his classroom. Finally he located a catalog, and saw that he was listed to teach – in Latin. He was in panic – now it would be discovered that he was a fraud.²

Jane Tompkins describes her classic anxiety dream in *A Life in School*: “I’m in front of the class on the first day of school and for some reason, I’m totally unprepared . . . Throat tight, I fake a smile, grab for words, tell an anecdote, anything to hold their attention. But the strangers in rows in front of me aren’t having any. They start to shuffle and murmur; they turn their heads away. The chairs scrape back, and I realize it’s actually happening. The students are walking out on me.”³

Failure, irresponsibility, panic, lack of preparation, fraudulence, disorientation are all too familiar themes of these academic versions of the gothic novel. Michael Berubé (Pennsylvania State University) has written a fascinating essay about “the psychic landscape” of teaching dreams, with their “mysterious building, spectral students, surreal classroom, sheer suffocating terror.” In his own worst nightmare, “I wander into the English-department office as the semester begins to find that my course on 20th century African-American fiction, meeting later that day, has been changed to ‘Avant-Garde and Representation: The Problem of the Holocaust.’ I have no syllabus, nor do I know anything about the topic. Nevertheless, terrified as I am, I manage to bluff my way through the first class by asking the students for their reactions to *Schindler’s List*. Thankfully, they are less annoyed by my incompetence than by the fact that the classroom has window ledges seven feet high – and no chairs.”

“From what all my friends and colleagues tell me,” Berubé concludes, “it doesn’t matter how experienced or accomplished you are: If you care at all about your teaching, you are haunted by teaching-anxiety dreams.” Why so? Because “teaching is really hard to do. If you’re doing it in classes of 15 and 40 students, as I am, you’re teaching in a setting where the students will find out not only what you think about x and y, but also what you are like, in some strange and intimate way. They’ll get a sense of how thoroughly you

The Anxiety of Teaching

prepare, of course, but even more they'll see how you respond to the unexpected – to the savvy young woman who wants to know whether you're using the term 'postcolonial' in a cultural or an economic sense, to the curious junior who wonders aloud why Don DeLillo gave the name Simeon Biggs to a snappish African-American character in *Underworld*. For such moments you simply can't prepare – except by accumulating years upon years of teaching experience and weathering night upon night of anxiety dreams."⁴ The fear Berubé describes is partly the fear of being outsmarted by the students; when I moved to Princeton, my husband reassured me that the brilliant student was actually the teacher's greatest ally.

Perhaps teaching literature feels especially unsettling because, unlike physicists or economists, we are not confident of our authority. Moreover, we believe that what we say in the classroom reveals the deepest aspects of ourselves. Whether we weep over Keats's letters or list his dates of publication, teaching feels like an externalization of our personality and psyche. When it works, we feel that we have succeeded; when it doesn't work, we feel that we have failed. Jane Tompkins believes that anxiety dreams are all about "the fear of failure – the failure of one's authority – and it points to the heart of what it means to be a teacher."⁵ She even writes an Emily-Dickinson-like poem about the "bravery of teachers:"

To teach is to be battered
Scrutinized, and drained,
Day after day. We know this.
Still, it is never said.

"I wish I had been warned," Tompkins laments, "about what an ego-battering exercise teaching can be. Teaching, by its very nature, exposes the self to myriad forms of criticism and rejection, as well as to emulation and flattery and love. Day after day, teachers are up there, on display; no matter how good they are, it's impossible not to get shot down."⁶

Seven Types of Anxiety

Why so much angst in a profession that is outwardly so rewarding? We literature teachers have heard the familiar words of Chaucer's Clerke of Oxford – "Gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche" – intoned at a hundred retirement dinners, and may even have declaimed them ourselves. But Chaucer's clerk did not have to face student or peer course evaluations, a ticking tenure clock, CD-ROMs, or grade inflation. Let's face it, confronting a skeptical

roomful of students every morning is not always a glad pursuit. Richard Elmore, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, writes that teaching “is a messy, indeterminate, inscrutable, often intimidating, and highly uncertain task . . . Exposing one’s knowledge, personality, and ego to the regular scrutiny of others in public is not easy work under the best of circumstances.”⁷ Even talking about our profession with any hint of idealism can bring down the sneers of the sophisticated, while it’s often hard to know exactly what kind and degree of cynicism to adopt.

Moreover, literary study today is a profession simultaneously expanding intellectually and contracting economically like some Spenserian snake. So many books, so little time; so many conferences, so few jobs. The list of articles and books to master gets longer every year, and the gap between the academic star – the frequent flyer – and the academic drudge – the freeway flyer – gets wider. Those who do not have jobs feel angry; those who do feel guilty.

Anxiety dreams, I think, are about our existential sense of quest and vocation as teachers, a quest that does not get easier with age. They are scenarios that dramatize the questions we ask ourselves throughout our teaching careers: Why I am doing this with my life? Does it matter? Do I deserve to be doing it? What have I really been teaching? What have I really been learning? Where am I going? What will happen to me when I can no longer teach? These fundamental questions of identity and purpose are at the heart of literature as well, and I will try to address them throughout this book. But although the anxieties of teaching literature are deep and multiple, I will begin by looking at seven basic types of anxiety that are more immediate, professional, and concrete: lack of pedagogical training, isolation, stage fright, the conflict between teaching and publication, coverage, grading, and student or peer evaluation.

1 Lack of training

The most profound anxiety of teaching is our awareness that we are making it up as we go along. Teaching is a demanding occupation, but few of us actually have studied how to do it. Most tenured professors at the beginning of the twenty-first century picked up teaching through painful experience, doing unto others as was done unto us. Tales of initiation have a common narrative structure – how novices stumble into their first classroom, do the best they can, and gradually find ways to overcome their fears of exposure and inadequacy, and shape a teaching style that seems congenial for their own personalities and environments. Norman Maclean writes that the only advice he ever received about teaching was to “wear a different suit every

day of the week.” He couldn’t afford that many suits, so he wore a different necktie every day instead.⁸

Jane Tompkins really opened up the question of our general lack of preparation for teaching, and our consequent anxiety about it, in a brave and groundbreaking essay for *College English* in 1990, called, with reference to the fashionable work of Paulo Freire, “Pedagogy of the Distressed.” Subsequently “Pedagogy of the Distressed” led to Tompkins’s influential – and controversial – book, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (1996).

Tompkins confessed that “teaching was exactly like sex for me – something you weren’t supposed to talk about or focus on in any way, but that you were supposed to be able to do properly when the time came.”⁹ The essay generated a lot of positive letters, although the respondents also complained about Tompkins’ institutional privilege, as a tenured professor at Duke. They ignored the gender connotations of her sexual metaphor, an apt parallel for women of my generation who went to college before the sexual revolution. Jane Tompkins and I had been dorm-mates at Bryn Mawr in the early 1960s. By 1990, I guess, young professors talked a lot about sexual performance, but still not much about teaching.

After Bryn Mawr, Tompkins had a Danforth Teaching Fellowship at Yale, but “nothing in that experience shed any light on what classroom teaching was about. When I asked the assistant professor I was apprenticed to for advice about the two lectures I was slated to give . . . he said ‘stay close to the text.’ Well, that was Yale’s answer to every question about literature, and I knew it already. But as a teaching strategy, it left me groping.” In her first teaching job, at Connecticut College, “my toughest course as a beginning teacher was a survey of English literature from Chaucer to Wallace Stevens. I’d never taken a survey course and had no notion of how to teach one . . . I needed to know history; I needed biographical information on the authors; I needed overarching ideas to pull the material together – everything I had been forbidden at Yale. The bottom line was I didn’t have enough to say; I was always afraid I’d run out of material before the hour was up and have to stand there facing the students, my mouth opening and closing but emitting no sound.”

Tompkins worried endlessly about what she was saying rather than what her students were learning. “I developed a habit of holding back on my important points, stretching out the lesser ideas and making them last until I could see I’d have enough material to get me through to the end of the period. Sometimes the main point would get lost or squeezed into the last few minutes when the students were already collecting their things, anxious about being late for the next class and no longer paying attention.” Now, she reflects, “I’m amazed that my fellow Ph.D.s and I were let loose in the

classrooms with virtually no preparation for what we would encounter in a human sense . . . If only I'd known, if someone I respected had talked to me honestly about teaching, I might have been saved from a lot of pain."¹⁰

Like Tompkins, many American professors of literature who have written about the contrast between their scholarly training and their sink-or-swim teaching started out at Yale. Alvin Kernan has reminisced about his alarming initiation into teaching under Maynard Mack in the 1950s: "Besides teaching a small discussion session, each of us had to take turns delivering the weekly lectures on the great works of Western literature. Maynard set the pace – he crafted his lectures as tightly as a poem while keeping his words direct and plain – but when we lectured he sat in the audience conspicuously and busily writing in a large notebook. So long as he wrote, you were OK, but when he looked up, paused, and then closed the notebook you had ceased to interest him, and since he was the most powerful professor in the humanities, it meant your Yale career was over. Everything rode on those Tuesday lectures, and because we had almost no experience at lecturing, the learning curve was very steep."¹¹

As an aspiring young black scholar, Houston Baker (Pennsylvania) had learned in graduate school at Yale in the 1970s "how to write critical prose and how to carry myself with professional decorum and collegial good taste. I had not actively prepared myself to teach, however, for I assumed that teaching was merely a technical delivery system for critical knowledge. I thought of the activity as the last relay in the academic olympiad – the final transfer of the fire of the gods by the newly minted Ph.D." Baker was shocked when a student at Yale came to the office to tell him that the class was in mutiny: "Those spirit-of-the-age lectures are driving us crazy." It was much later that he incorporated his own African-American identity into the classroom and into his teaching style.¹²

Michael Cadden, the head of the theater and dance program at Princeton, and a winner of the university's distinguished teaching award, had no pedagogical training at all as a Yale graduate student in the drama school. He was hired to teach in a freshman course in the interdisciplinary honors program, covering the Bible to Beckett. Cadden had no trouble with the discussion part of teaching, where his acting experience and outgoing personality stood him in good stead; but it took him a long time to discover a lecture mode. He wanted to emulate Yale professor Alvin Kernan, who made Shakespeare's characters "sound like friends of his"; and he began with the nervous impulse to write everything out. Cadden endured many an all-nighter. Then his friend Suzanne Wofford suggested that the method wasn't working for him; he was too stiff and tied down to his script. Cadden tried

writing the lecture out, but not reading it, and then gradually moved by stages to using only notes.¹³

Alex Zwerdling (Berkeley) had been a graduate student at Princeton, where one memorable professor “knew none of the students even by the sixth week of the term. The only problems he could take seriously were ones that had already been defined. He lectured to the seminar from yellowing cards without looking up. Once a card literally crumbled in his hands.” Zwerdling’s first job at Swarthmore, and his first teaching assignment, was a course on the gothic novel. He was “very unprepared. I lectured the first day and said everything I knew. I had zero sense of audience.”¹⁴

In Britain too, lack of preparation was the norm. Isobel Armstrong “always thought I could do it better than those who taught me at Leicester.” But before her first lecture at University College London on *Wuthering Heights*, she was “shaking with terror.” For three years, she was unable to sleep the night before a lecture. Lisa Jardine (Queen Mary College) had no training, but changed her teaching dramatically in 1989 after she was sent on a week-long course for broadcasters and “taught how to ask good questions,” and also after she saw Isobel Armstrong conduct a graduate seminar, using small groups and dialog.¹⁵

Coppelia Kahn had been a graduate student at Berkeley. When she started teaching at Wesleyan, “my teaching was a disaster. I was assigned the first half (Chaucer to Dryden) of the required majors’ survey . . . I treated the undergraduates like graduate students, assuming they already understood concepts like period, convention, genre, lecturing them to death and allowing no time for discussion. They rebelled, and I landed in therapy.”¹⁶

The pedagogy of the depressed described by Kahn and others is still all too frequent. Despite recent efforts to improve the training of college teachers, especially in Britain, the myths of the “born teacher” and the mystique of good teaching as the natural complement of scholarly research still undermine departmental commitments to preparing graduate students for teaching careers.

Someday soon, I hope, teaching preparation will be a requirement; meanwhile, every teacher of literature should have a personal collection of well-thumbed pedagogy guidebooks, which provide an overview of research on learning in higher education, plus theories, and techniques for course design, lecturing, leading discussions, giving examinations, grading, dealing with problem students, counseling, advising, and handling cheating or plagiarism. You may have to order them; until a few years back, they were certainly not in my university bookstore or library. Many publishers of educational guidebooks, such as Jossey-Bass and Kogan Page, don’t even advertise or exhibit

at the MLA, which ought to tell us something about the current state of the profession. Keep your eyes open for ads and reviews in places like the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *College English*, and the many websites now available through university teaching centers. If you have such a center on your campus, it will have a library of these books. I think every department should have one too, and keep it updated.

My top pick for a general handbook is Wilbert J. McKeachie's *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, from Houghton Mifflin. McKeachie, at the University of Michigan, is one of the pioneers of the active learning movement in higher education; the tenth edition of *Teaching Tips* also includes sections by other academics from The Open University, Ohio State, and the University of Texas. McKeachie keeps in touch with colleagues outside the United States who are interested in improving teaching, so his advice is not culture-bound. *Teaching Tips* is appropriate for all disciplines and fields, for experienced teachers as well as beginners. Literature professors will find the sections of the book on ethics and higher-level goals such as motivation, thinking, and values especially provocative.

A second book I have found useful is John Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Biggs has taught at universities in Australia, Canada, and Hong Kong, and now teaches at the University of New South Wales, so he brings a more international perspective than McKeachie's American one. He has an excellent chapter on teaching international students. Biggs emphasizes reflection, and sets out a framework to look at teaching reflectively. He believes that there is no single ideal way to teach; what matters is "how we *conceive* the process of teaching, and through reflection come to some conclusion about how we may do our particular job better."¹⁷

The third book I have found essential – alas, now out of print – is Kenneth J. Eble's *The Craft of Teaching*. Eble was a professor of English at the University of Utah who died in 1988. From 1969 to 1971, he directed the Project to Improve College Teaching, co-sponsored by the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) and Association of American Colleges (AAC) and funded by the Carnegie Corporation. Eble is a realist and an optimist, the kind of teaching guru you want to consult at 3 a.m. when the prospect of tomorrow's class seems hopeless. He insists that teaching is a skill that can be learned; and that we need to keep "a sense of play in teaching . . . teaching is an improviser's art."¹⁸

In addition, there is a great deal of information scattered around about what teachers of literature actually do. The Modern Language Association series on approaches to teaching world literature now numbers over 70

volumes. In the earlier volumes, the essays are often more about critical interpretation than actual teaching, but the more recent collections offer hands-on advice. I have cited many of those essays here, as well as others in the new journal *Pedagogy*, and in various scholarly journals from *Shakespeare Quarterly* to *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and *College English* that have published imaginative articles on teaching specific writers, genres, periods, and texts. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *Times Higher Education Supplement* both publish personal accounts of teaching practice. In England, the English Subject Centre at Royal Holloway College publishes a newsletter three times a year and maintains a website (www.rhul.ac.uk/ltsn/english/). Articles in the *ADE Bulletin*, the publication of the MLA for English department chairs, frequently address teaching experience. The millennium issue of PMLA, which came out in December 2000, is a rich compilation of information about the way teaching literature has changed over the past century.

2 *Isolation*

One of the best aspects of the work of teaching is that, unlike scholarship, it does not have to be original to be good. We can borrow ideas and methods from our colleagues and our predecessors, dead or alive; we can imitate, copy, and plunder in the confidence that our students will benefit from every good teaching technique we can put into action in our own classroom. Moreover, as teachers, we are not in competition with each other. Teaching is not a zero-sum game, with the success of one subtracting from the success of another; and indeed an effective, inspiring introductory or survey course in a department will only generate more students interested in advanced courses.

But it is not always easy to find out what our colleagues are doing behind those closed classroom doors. Ironically, according to Parker J. Palmer, “Teaching is perhaps the most privatized of all the public professions. Though we teach in front of students, we almost always teach solo, out of collegial sight – as contrasted with surgeons or lawyers, who work in the presence of others who know their craft well . . . When we walk into our workplace, the classroom, we close the door on our colleagues. When we emerge, we rarely talk about what happened or what needs to happen next, for we have no shared experience to talk about.”¹⁹

Some of that privatization is now breaking down in the United States because of widespread use of the internet to circulate syllabi and to publish student course evaluations. In the UK, since the Dearing Report of 1997, centralized (and much hated) teaching assessment requirements instituted

by the Labour government and the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) have made teaching in higher education very public, at the cost of a great deal of bureaucracy and regimentation. But despite the mockery with which teachers of literature in Britain greet the materials on pedagogy with which they are deluged, the conversation about teaching has clearly changed for the better. In many British universities, beginning faculty participate in a term of workshops with other new teachers. The anxieties of isolation seem to be on the decline.

I was blessed as a beginning assistant professor to be in a department at Douglass College where my colleagues, under the energetic leadership of Barrett Mandel – a pioneer in the development of literary pedagogy – met regularly to discuss teaching approaches and theories. I've also been able to team-teach regularly, and to share ideas and problems with imaginative friends. But I think that the best immediate solution to feelings of isolation is to redefine the experience of listening to conference papers and professional lectures as one of learning. If classroom teaching is private and isolated, lecturing is a public display of pedagogical techniques or their absence. It is a regular opportunity for literature teachers to renew our own student roles, and to reflect on how we respond to various teaching styles.

Moreover, when it takes place outside the classroom in the form of lecturing, we live very comfortably with the necessity of being heard and watched by our colleagues and peers. This paradox is so because we have defined lecturing and giving papers in ways that obscure or occlude their pedagogical elements. On one side, we issue heartfelt calls for greater openness and a wider conversation about teaching, as Palmer notes: "There is only one honest way to evaluate the many varieties of good teaching with the subtlety required: it is called being there. We must observe each other teach, at least occasionally – and we must spend more time talking to each other about teaching."²⁰ On the other side, we spend ever-expanding amounts of time giving and listening to job talks, conference papers, and invited lectures and colloquia, and ignore the opportunity they provide for seeing other people teach, for observing techniques as well as tics, and for talking about the teaching role as part of the professional career.

Certainly listening to professional academic lectures has had the most influence, both positive and negative, on my own teaching practice of anything else I have learned about it. Sander Gilman (Illinois at Chicago) makes every lecture a dialog with his audience. Oxford's Gillian Beer generates compelling enthusiasm and intellectual involvement. Hazel Carby (Yale) was the first person I ever saw using video clips in a public lecture. As audiences, we often waste these occasions, letting our minds wander, applauding politely, asking phony or competitive questions, and finding ways to steer

the conversation around to our own specialties and interests. It's as stylized a routine as a Victorian afternoon call. If only we could leave our cards, with the corners folded down, instead of having to sit through these rituals, we would have more time to plan our own courses. Listening to Stanley Fish, during a summer at the School for Criticism and Theory, ask lecturers questions that were tough, direct, and shockingly honest gave me the courage to ask some real questions myself, and to think much harder about the responses I wanted from my students. I learned a lot about teaching from those sessions.

But we could use bad lecturers as well as great ones to initiate a public conversation about teaching, and to put those weary hours of *Sitzfleisch* to some intellectual use. If we care about teaching, the public lecture should be our laboratory, and not just our duty.

3 Teaching versus research

"I have professors telling me," one graduate student laments, "'Spend as little time as possible on your teaching, and make sure you're a good researcher.'"²¹ For decades, professors of literature have discussed the conflicts between teaching and scholarly publication. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, the president of the MLA in 1963, noted that although those at the MLA annual meeting called themselves scholars, "all of us are also teachers, who earn our bread by teaching rather than scholarship – which is fortunate, since we would not eat the driest bread if we were dependent merely upon the latter."²² On the other hand, as George Levine points out, in a larger sense faculty do indeed earn their bread by scholarship: "While teaching literature is what faculty get hired to do, it would be merely disingenuous to argue that teaching literature – at least at major research universities – is not the primary focus of faculty attention or what most faculty get rewarded for doing or writing about."²³ We call teaching our jobs, but we call our research our work. And the two conflict for our attention and our time.

Gerald Graff, who has written widely about education and the professing of literature, argues that we can't overcome the gap by simply mandating that teaching should count as much as scholarship. His suggestion is that we should reconceive our "research in ways that make it more teachable."²⁴ I believe the opposite: that we should reconceive our pedagogy to make it as intellectually challenging as our research. What we need, in the words of Diana Laurillard of Britain's Open University, is "to find an infrastructure that enables university teachers to be as professional in their teaching as they aspire to be in their research."²⁵ For literature teachers, that means reflecting upon the relationship between what we teach and how we teach

it, in new ways, so that the same problems we deal with in our research, including performance and narrative, become part of our pedagogical vocabulary.

Of course, this will have its anxieties too, as teaching becomes another subject of our research and publication. As Wayne Booth ruefully writes in his teaching journal, “the chief obstacle to my teaching *at the moment* is my half-baked plan for a book about teaching.”²⁶

4 Coverage

As Booth wryly suggests, attending to the classroom is always in competition with other parts of our job. The sheer quantity of literary publication, both primary and secondary, is more daunting every year. Keeping up is hard to do, whether you are a medievalist or a postmodernist. In my area of specialization, contemporary fiction, there’s a whole new truckload of novels and stories to read every fall, not to mention the reviews and the interviews and all the latest theoretical twists and turns from Armstrong to Žižek.

Our internalized anxieties about the infinite amount of literary knowledge and the finite amount of academic time come together in worries about course coverage. How much do students need to know in order to gain real understanding of the complexities of any literary text or author, let alone a historical period? As Stephen Greenblatt (Harvard) observes, literature in English is characterized by “spectacular abundance,” as is “the media through which students can encounter and explore that literature.” Even Greenblatt confesses that “abundance wonderfully complicates the job of syllabus writing” and he himself “nearly tore [his] hair out trying to fit everything in” to his course.²⁷

One desperate professorial solution to abundance is to assign as much as humanly possible. I’ve frequently been guilty of what Kathy Overhulse Smith (Indiana) calls “the mistaken notion that mere exposure to particular ideas, texts, or authors will effect student learning. How many times, during a rushed semester, have we caught ourselves thinking, ‘Well, even if we don’t have time to cover this [author, text, idea] in class today, I have at least assigned it and can therefore be satisfied that my students have been at least exposed to it.’ Such thinking may enable us momentarily to assure ourselves that we have done our duty and thereby covered our professional behinds, but the distress we experience later on discovering how little an impression the author, text, or idea made on our students proves how superficial our rationalization was.”²⁸

The advent of the internet and CD-ROMs, and the age of new anthologies, makes the problem of coverage more intellectually perplexing, even if

it is mechanically more efficient – perhaps *because* it is mechanically more efficient. The seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Greenblatt among others, now comes with an online archive and a CD. With these added materials, Greenblatt explains, the teacher's problems of "textual triage" are greatly relieved. Every text that was cut from the anthology, or shortened, in order to make room for the ever-expanding canon of literary works, is in the Norton Online Archive, along with a Topics section containing 1,000 illustrations and 250 "explorations designed to stimulate critical thinking and generate paper topics."²⁹

But what this richness means for the teacher is an even greater pressure to cover everything. We can no longer offer our old standby excuses of textual unavailability or expense, and our traditional assumption – that first-rate teaching is primarily about content, and the quantity of content, rather than process, and the quality of process – is harder to resist. Yet obsession with coverage and content is one of the main barriers to good teaching. According to Paul Ramsden, "we should rather strive to include less . . . Resisting the temptation to add more and more content is extremely difficult if a lecturer sees undergraduate student learning as an obstacle course or as a process of acquiring huge quantities of information . . . Some lecturers seem to think this approach has the effect of a kind of perverted commando training course, sharpening the powers of the strong and eliminating the weak."³⁰

One of the most difficult tasks for a literature teacher is deciding what to leave out. Instead of aiming for comprehensive coverage, we have to think about what students need to read in order to establish a basis for further learning, and we have to adjust our intellectual aspirations to a realistic workload.

5 Performance

Having struggled with textual triage, with deciding what is essential to teach undergraduates and what is inessential, we have to face the reality of standing up in front of a group to teach, and its symptoms of stage fright and performance anxiety. One professor recalls that "in the early years of teaching, my anxiety level rose as the time to walk into class approached. My breathing was quick and shallow, and often a headache accompanied me through the door. I felt the terrifying responsibility of maintaining control over myself, my words, my body, and, not least, the class . . . It took voice lessons and a Gestalt course in group process to bring myself back into my body."³¹ An Oxford don needed a shot of brandy before he could face his class; medievalist Richard Fraher says "even old stagers in the academic pro-

fession have been known to confess that their hearts pound painfully before each lecture; some have nightmares that the clock hands are moving backwards while they speak, or that they look up to find an empty hall.”³² As Wayne Booth wonders, “how can anyone claim ‘to love teaching’ if he feels such relief when it’s *over and done*?”³³

Teaching the Literature of the *Fin de Siècle* at Princeton in the late 1980s, I suddenly developed a case of nerves and had to steel myself each week to walk into the classroom I had been assigned – the astronomy lecture hall, a round windowless room, like the inside of a cave. I was teaching about decadence, degeneration, colonialism, and homoeroticism in writers of the 1880s and 1890s, including Kipling, Stevenson, Haggard, Stoker, and Conrad, and of course Freud. In the back row of the auditorium sat a group of tall male students, with a body language of extreme resistance and hostility – folded arms, stony faces, occasional snickers and whispers. (Indeed, one of these students has gone on to become the editor of the men’s magazine *Maxim*, and he recently told the Princeton alumni magazine that he still wants to prove that I am wrong about women in slasher films.) As the semester went on, I became increasingly anxious about lecturing, even afraid of losing my voice.

Was it performance anxiety? About halfway through the term, an actor friend recommended that I read a book on stage fright, which interpreted some of the psychoanalytic aspects of performing as oral anxieties. Appearing before an audience is in some sense being nurtured and fed by them – fed by their attention, their applause, their love. But performance is also an experience of being fed *to* them, being devoured and consumed. For this reason, actors or comedians have ritual metaphors about killing or slaying the audience, knocking them dead. Ironically, one of the texts that engendered the most hostile activity from the back row was Freud’s “Medusa’s Head,” that brief allegory of castration fears and the apotropaic act of displaying the Medusa symbol to intimidate the Evil Spirit. And I realized that the classroom I taught in felt like a mouth.

In contrast to the lecture, the weekly discussion section, to which I always brought cookies, was going very well. Bringing the cookies to my discussion group was my apotropaic gesture, a surrogate offering. What I meant by it was “Eat these and leave me alone.” I understood that I was conflicted about being the Medusa-like authority figure who confronted students with such controversial and threatening material, and the nurturer who had played more conventional and maternal roles in the classroom. I stopped bringing the cookies, tried to confront the issues of dissent in lecture and precept, and my stage fright went away.

But I now believe that performance anxiety relates to the ways faculty project their own fears onto their students, just as students project their fears onto professors. In this course, I myself turned the students in the back row into what Parker Palmer calls the generic Students from Hell. According to Palmer, anxiety about the Student from Hell comes from two sources – the “need to be popular with young people,” which he regards as pathological; and the “need to be in life-giving communion with the young,” “to stay connected with the life of the rising generation,” which he sees as part of the generativity that enables us to stay genuine and engaged.³⁴

If I had been able to get to know these students individually, the class would have felt much more comfortable to me, but I was new to Princeton and still nervous about challenging its separation of lecture and precept. In my precept, what saved me was not the cookies, but the personal contact with students. They were not intimidating strangers, but people I knew, and who knew me.

In addition to anxiety about performing, many teachers feel anxiety about the very idea of performance, which strikes them as cheap, hammy, and anti-intellectual. Frank Kermode memorably describes one performative don, D. J. Gordon at Liverpool: “From his gait on entry to his last word, all was theatre . . . He would begin by describing the occasion of the masque or entertainment, or the sterling character, unaccountably neglected by all previous commentators, of some work of art . . . The opening passage of the lecture would contain some thrilling disclosure that opened up a new vista on history, some moment in the narrative that would turn out to be critical . . . The lecturer would require many slides, always projected on two screens . . . The gesticulations, the rehearsed pauses, the refined sneer or downward glance of contempt that accompanied allusions to other workers in the field, the little *moues* of self-satisfaction, all these combined to make his lectures as good as a play; not a mere farce because he was usually saying something new and interesting, and, after all, saying it memorably.”³⁵ Despite the concession in that last phrase, Kermode’s distaste for what he sees as a narcissistic mode is clear.

For Jane Tompkins, who writes about herself instead of her colleagues, classroom “performance” is simply naked ego and showing off – everything she deplores in academia. Her epiphany as a teacher came, she writes, when she suddenly realized that while “for my entire teaching life I had always thought that what I was doing was helping my students to understand the material we were studying . . . what I had actually been concerned with was showing the students how smart I was, how knowledgeable I was, and how well prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose

true goal was not to help the students learn, as I had thought, but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me.”³⁶

Patricia Hampl is another teacher with second thoughts about her own performance as addictive. “My teaching was operatic,” she confesses. “Or maybe it wasn’t an aria with improbable high notes, but a jazz improvisation built of riffs I seemed to maneuver successfully to the delight of my indulgent audience. I remade myself as an unlikely amalgam of the earnest and the hip . . . It felt like a radiance, not a force, and I never doubted it was benign.” But after taking ten years off to write poetry and fiction, Hampl returned to the classroom in a different spirit. “My diva self had stayed back there in the 1960s past . . . I didn’t have the will to perform. I had no pirouettes left in me. I didn’t want teaching to be a high . . . I knew I would not – could not – sustain that kind of performance again. It was like knowing I’d never do cocaine again.”³⁷

In an essay on education that appeared in *Harper’s*, Mark Edmundson (University of Virginia), laments the students’ expectations that he will perform on the podium, and rejects his popularity in course evaluations as false praise: “I’m disturbed by the serene belief that my function – and, more important, Freud’s, or Shakespeare’s, or Blake’s – is to divert, entertain, and interest. Observes one respondent, not at all unrepresentative: ‘Edmundson has done a fantastic job of presenting this difficult, important & controversial material in an enjoyable and approachable way.’ Thanks but no thanks. I don’t teach to amuse, divert, or even, for that matter, to be merely interesting . . . but the affability and the one-liners often seem to be all that land with the students.” Methinks that Edmundson protests too much, especially when he goes on to complain that his students find him “urbane . . . generous, funny, and loose.”³⁸ The poor guy. Yet in the zero-sum games of academe, it’s true that being likable and funny seems to cancel out rigor and intelligence.

On the other hand, being dull rather than entertaining is no guarantee of intellectual distinction either. We have a professional contempt for any kind of teaching that seems phony, flashy, or showy. But, as Kenneth Eble comments, “in my observation of teachers on many campuses over the past decade, I have seen fewer charlatans than mediocrities and been less appalled by flashy deception than by undisguised dullness. And I have never encountered any evidence that a dull and stodgy presentation necessarily carries with it an extra measure of truth and virtue.” Performance, and speaking to strangers, Eble points out, is part of the job; but without courting media popularity, teachers can “learn from the performing arts.” It should be part of a teacher’s training to “develop a speaking voice that has range, force, and direction; a presence that uses the dynamics of physical movement to lend

conviction to inner strengths of mind and imagination; and the dramatic abilities that can fashion scenes, build climaxes, manage stage props and business.”³⁹

Larry Danson, who teaches Shakespeare and other drama courses at Princeton, found ways to overcome his performance anxiety early in his career as a lecturer. Danson now can understand the process by which he became a confident lecturer: “I had to re-evaluate my own feelings and interpret nervousness as eagerness. I think that sometimes what you interpret as fear is actually a terrific desire to do well, and young teachers have to learn to manage that desire and make that nervous energy an ally rather than an enemy.” He believes that “the secret of public speaking is not to give in to secondary anxiety – I’m scared, and I’m scared of being scared. Of course you are scared of going into a classroom and performing in public. Who isn’t? But that’s where your energy will come from. Reinterpret your reluctance to perform as a desire to perform. Your reluctance to make a fool out of yourself in front of your students is in fact a desire to perform for them.” Danson also reflects eloquently on the secret fears of being judged, making mistakes, and being found wanting common to all teachers. “I think you have to get over the feeling that the students are your judges. But remember they don’t want you to hold back. Sometimes beginning teachers are afraid – what would happen if I let myself go? If I spoke on my feet? We’re scared of being found out, so we stop communicating. But you do want to be found out, because inevitably you do know more than these students, you do have something to say. Being in the now, present, at this moment, thinking out loud, rather than being bound to overwhelming notes, is absolutely essential. And when you entertain the students and engage the students and see that happening, you’ll realize, ‘Well, letting go isn’t something I need to be afraid of; it’s actually what I have to let happen.’”⁴⁰

6 Grading

Grading produces anxiety for teachers as well as for students. Indeed, I often tell myself that grading is the part of the job I get paid for (Booth calls it “the detested task”) while the rest of teaching is something I would do for free.⁴¹

In the past few years, anxieties have increased as charges of “grade inflation” have made headlines not only in professional publications but also in the media at large. In the fall of 2001, when Harvard president Lawrence Summers reprimanded professor Cornel West for the alleged grade inflation in his undergraduate course in African-American studies – the second-largest course at the university – the reverberations were heard from Los Angeles

to London. Accusations of grade inflation at Harvard (where half the grades are now either A– or A), and elsewhere, have been perennial for decades; they had been raised in April 2001 by conservative Harvey Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard. Mansfield charged that high grades were the result of faculty flattering students’ “self-esteem” to gain “fleeting popularity,” and were a sign that faculty had become cynical about their teaching. They had begun, he argues, in the late 1960s, when “white professors, imbibing the spirit of affirmative action, stopped giving low or average grades to black students and, to justify or conceal it, stopped giving those grades to white students as well.”

A notable omission in the angry and nasty exchanges about grade inflation at Harvard – and the more polite and subdued, but equally concerned exchanges about grade inflation elsewhere – was any discussion of the relationship of grades to learning and the learning process. Mansfield takes it as self-evident that any teacher would want “to discriminate the best from the very good,” and so on.⁴² But virtually all specialists in higher education, while they acknowledge that assessment is part of the system and that we must devise fair, consistent, and accurate ways of assessing learning, are critical of grades as such, and particularly of grading on a curve.

I wonder how much deans, university presidents, and boards of trustees know that the consistent theme in the best pedagogical writing is, as Wilbert McKeachie – probably the most influential and internationally-used expert on university teaching – declares about assessment, “*assigning grades is not the most important function*” (my italics).⁴³ Assessment is about helping students learn – not about sorting them out for employers, punishing them, or showing how tough you are.

In *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*, Joseph Lowman notes that “colleges, academic departments, or instructors who infer that their students learn more because average grades are lower delude themselves.” The “quality of a college education is more a function of the faculty, the teaching, and the overall student population than of grading stringency.” Further, for “most students and many college teachers, tests and grades are an unpleasant and unavoidable reality.” Some teachers actively dread grading; others deeply enjoy it. But “for everyone personally associated with higher education – students, faculty, and parents – evaluation is an emotionally charged topic.”⁴⁴ The first paper or exam of the course is certainly a shock for the teacher. The honeymoon is over; these smiling, enthusiastic young people who seem so interested in the literature turn out to be incapable of getting the characters’ names right or writing a coherent paragraph. Indeed, Lowman explains, “the first set of exam papers of a term is particularly emotional, reminding instructor and students of the evaluative aspect of their

relationship. Novice teachers' first sets of papers can be particularly disheartening and can lead them to question both their competence and their motivation for an academic career."⁴⁵

Despite all these anxieties, teachers can learn how to plan assignments and construct tests that match objectives to evaluation, and find ways to challenge students without giving in to ill-informed administrative pressure to fight "grade inflation" without concern for learning and teaching. In my view, the real problem is why all the students at Harvard do not get A grades. If these brilliant and intellectually eager undergraduates cannot be motivated and taught by their faculty to master the course material, perhaps we should ask why.

7 Evaluation

Reading student teaching evaluations, professors feel that we have been judged as human beings. I have seen colleagues in tears over these bi-annual comments, and I myself can remember every negative one I've ever received, back to the first round at the University of California at Davis when I was a TA: "Worst part of the course: those ugly pins on those nice dresses." In retrospect, I know the student referred to my peace buttons; then I thought he meant my legs. Public exposure is even worse, and we do not like others to examine too closely the interaction that takes place in a classroom between ourselves and our students. At Princeton in the 1960s, one professor wanted to bring his psychotherapist to his seminar to analyze the dynamics of the group; the administration refused the request, to the faculty's huge relief.

Many teachers are defensively suspicious of teaching evaluations, and dismiss them as nothing more than popularity contests. One of the most persistent myths in academe is that the harsh and unpleasant, or mumbling and droning professor who never does well on evaluations is in fact the one students will remember and cherish in years to come. Wayne Booth affectionately recalls George Williamson, who would "come into the classroom and shuffle, shifty-eyed, to a little platform, open an attaché case in front of him in such a way as to prevent all eye contact, focus his eyes alternately on the text and a far high corner of the room, and proceed to explicate T. S. Eliot's poems." Surprise, surprise – Booth soon realizes that he is "learning a lot, far more than I had learned in many a more engaging class."⁴⁶

All very well; but what about the other students in that room? Teaching is mysterious, and when students are interested in the material, they will learn under any circumstances. But the tough drill-sergeant teacher, or the talking-to-himself teacher is not a model to emulate. Unless we are confident that

among our students sits a young Wayne Booth, we are much better off using student evaluations as guides to improvement. Isobel Armstrong encountered student teaching evaluations for the first time when she was a visiting professor at Princeton. “They gave me a low rating on encouraging student participation. I was startled but completely transformed; since then I’ve made sure that everyone in the class says something. Learning their names is the key.”

With that end in mind, we should supplement the standard university forms, administered at the end of the term, and which are judgmental rather than useful, like final grades, with informal but confidential mid-semester evaluations we prepare and distribute ourselves. The feedback from these evaluations can be used to make quick adjustments, and simply to ask the students early on to tell you what they think is a step towards improved communication.

Up from Anxiety

Of course, these seven types of anxiety overlap and even occur simultaneously. Some teachers feel that their luck is so bad that anxiety determines most of their experience in the classroom. “Teaching is never boring,” Wayne Booth concludes, “but it is a profession that can seem, on a bad day, after a bad class, quite simply intolerable.”⁴⁷

But even if you enjoy yourself as a teacher and have very few bad days or nights, you can avoid the occasional bout of anxiety by overcoming the isolation of teaching – finding out what other teachers do, reflecting on the ways that literature as a subject contains its own pedagogical schema, discussing the challenges of teaching in difficult times, and the methods of teaching dangerous issues. Despite its anxieties, teaching literature offers us the best of all subjects to teach. As one MLA president said in 1942, “We hold in our hands the best cards in the scholastic pack, we are rich in trumps, and if we haven’t sense enough to play them, we shall have no one but ourselves to blame.”⁴⁸ None of us can teach all of the students all of the time. But for those occasions when we are ready to tackle the anxieties of teaching, and go for the grand slam, this book is a guide to playing our trumps.