Creative Reading: A First-Semester First-Year Course

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There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1960 [1837])

Recently Robert J. Scholes (2002: 166) wrote in this journal that in our teaching of first-year college students “the natural reciprocal of writing—which, of course, is reading—has somehow disappeared, apparently subsumed under the topic of literature.” He goes on to say that “this division of the English project” is the way most college English departments today think of their enterprise. This unfortunate split in our pedagogy has become so widespread that many people have sought strategies to counter it. For example, the Modern Language Association recently accepted a proposal to develop a volume on “Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction in First-Year English.” Scholes would like to replace “the word literature with the word reading” as the proper reciprocal of writing and would prefer to see students read more argumentative texts, including literary criticism (166, 169–70). I have no doubt that large-minded Emerson would have included nonliterary texts in his definition of a book that is read creatively. However, I would like to argue, mainly by example, for a beginning course focused intensely on the creative reading of literature as we usually understand the word. Although it is only
one sort of course among many that combine reading and writing for first-year students, I believe it can achieve some of the objectives Scholes outlines in his article.

There is a well-established tradition in college teaching, extending back at least fifty years, of asking first-year students to treat their reading of literature and their writing about it as two aspects of the same thing. It began at Amherst and Harvard in the 1950s under the guiding spirit of Reuben A. Brower and later spread to other liberal arts institutions. The Amherst course has undergone several permutations but continues to this day with most of its original features intact: staff collaboration on the syllabus and shared exercises, weekly meetings to discuss classes and exercises, frequent writing assignments insisting on specificity, and a constant emphasis on close reading, which Scholes (2002: 165) and others regard as the skill most lacking in entering students.

In this essay I want to describe our present version of this course. It not only avoids the pedagogical split that all too often becomes institutionalized as Comp 101 and Lit 101, but also has its own intrinsic merits. Because it requires, and explicitly focuses on, students’ active engagement with the texts they read and the texts they write, it is less indexed to their high school preparation than a literature survey needs to be, and I would argue that courses like it should be taught more frequently. Like my students in their own writing, I can support my claims only by detailed illustration. So I will describe the principles and design of the course and then the specific conduct of my own section in the fall of 2002. I will also try to state clearly the values that underlie our choices of texts and the questions we ask about them.

First I need to explain more fully what the course is not, and how, in taking an aesthetic approach to high literary texts, it addresses what I consider to be Scholes’s most important objectives. It is not a first-year requirement, though it can be counted toward our English major. It is not conceived as part of a “writing across the curriculum” initiative, although such an initiative is currently under discussion at Amherst. The students write weekly, but it is not a course in composition or argument or “the essay.” Unlike first-year literature courses at some other institutions, it is not an introductory survey. We go from short poems to longer works of drama and fiction with no thematic thread and with no attempt at coverage. We mainly assign canonical works because they teach well and give us continuing satisfaction as readers. We believe they give our students more to learn than works of less established literary value. Student learning is actually twofold: by teaching mainly from the canon, we virtually guarantee that they will learn about artistic uses of lan-
guage, but they also learn about the thoughts and feelings of interesting persons who lived long ago, or who have led lives very different from their own. Scholes well points out that students typically imagine the words they read as belonging to themselves. He notes that “close reading” is perforce “distant reading—reading as if the words belonged to a person at some distance from ourselves in thought or feeling” (166). Our course confronts this imaginative task on a daily basis. Moreover, as will become clear below, our characteristic practice of having students read aloud in class matches Scholes’s (2002: 167–68) enthusiastic approval of the “elocutionary” method of understanding texts set out in William McGuffey’s *Fifth Eclectic Reader* (1897).

The daily conduct of our course rests on two fundamental premises: first, that students’ reading and their writing about their reading are two aspects of the same thing, their critical responsiveness; and, second, that both activities should give pleasure—the more complex and moving the literary pleasure the better. The announced purposes of the course are (1) to increase students’ responsiveness to the feats of language and imagination they encounter in their reading, and (2) to improve their capacity to articulate their appreciation of that reading. Our writing instructions are always about reading the text. To keep their responses fresh, we do not discuss with them beforehand the poems or passages they will write about. We encourage students to see their papers and our written comments on them as an extension of the ongoing conversation in class. We tell our sections, “Your best reading comes in your writing,” which is true for the individual student. Yet the happy irony remains that class discussion about a text is always more insightful after they all have written a paper about it.

The principles of the course grew out of its departmental history. When Theodore Baird’s famous English 1–2 composition sequence ended in 1966, our department kept on teaching two semesters of first-year English in which students wrote about literature instead of their own experience. We adopted the teaching techniques of English 21, a close-reading sophomore course that used the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Its principal architect had been Reuben Brower, who described its pedagogy in his essay “Reading in Slow Motion” (1962). When he went to Harvard in 1953 he applied the same methods in Humanities 6 there. Amherst’s new 1966 first-year sequence, English 11–12, reiterated Brower’s insistence that student papers must focus on the close description of literary properties. We taught it in multiple sections, with a common syllabus and assignments, and weekly staff discussion. Over the years it shrank to one semester, and students wrote not daily but once a week. It ceased to be a collegewide requirement but many
entering students took it, regarding it as a de facto course in freshman English. Those of us who, like myself, had taught in old English 1–2 and 21 continued to teach a version of English 11 with a common syllabus, but it became only one of several writing-intensive courses with different syllabi offered under the blanket heading of “English 1” (how soon a registrar forgets!).

The current version of the course began in 1992 and has not changed its important features, one of which is that we change the syllabus every fall to keep from getting stale. The core staff (all senior faculty) has been remarkably stable over time: William H. Pritchard, reviewer, critic, and biographer; David Sofield, poet and Renaissance scholar; Richard J. Cody, now retired, a Renaissance scholar and film teacher; Helen Von Schmidt, a teacher of film and nonfiction writing; and myself. We have no formal course director or chair. We plan the course collaboratively in the early summer, exchanging suggestions via memos; then we meet to decide among them and to work out the order and pace of the syllabus. If one of us simply cannot bear to teach a particular book, the rest of us accede to his or her wishes. We each take responsibility for a portion of the course, designing exercises for the others to use, and writing up “poop sheets” for each other about the works in hand and ways to teach them. If one of us finds a proposed exercise unsuitable for our particular section, we will write an exercise tailored more to that section, usually as a modification of the proposed exercise. At our weekly staff meetings throughout the semester, we exchange copies of good and bad papers from our different sections. The papers come from those we have selected for anonymous photocopying and discussion in class. Thus our grading standards are relatively transparent to both our students and each other.

Typically the thirteen-week syllabus begins with five weeks on short poems, usually in an anthology (either Reuben Brower, Anne Ferry, and David Kalstone, *Beginning with Poems* [1966], or Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* [2002]). Then we move to a Shakespeare play (sometimes two) for three weeks (*Macbeth, King Lear, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 1 Henry IV, Hamlet*). Then we spend three or four weeks on a big novel: *Great Expectations, Middlemarch, The Golden Bowl, The Ambassadors*. That leaves two and a half weeks in the semester, in which we turn to shorter fiction by contemporary writers such as J. M. Coetzee, Alice Munro, or Philip Roth, and finally to a new volume by a poet like Billy Collins or Daniel Hall.

We start with poetry because it is the richest literary use of language, there is much to notice in short compass, and the vocabulary for describing its
features is well developed. Thus students can, if they only will, become specific in their descriptions right away. Of course, their bad old habits die hard. So we go very slowly at first, recognizing that the learning curve is steepest in the first weeks of college. Starting with poems also helps the more naive students distinguish between literature and life. It lets us immediately introduce the concept of the dramatic speaker of a poem (who is not the author) and the tones of voice to be imagined from the way the lines go. Our favored poets are therefore Robert Frost, Thomas Hardy, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, George Herbert, Elizabeth Bishop, John Keats, and Wallace Stevens. We are unlikely to teach Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, or Jorie Graham. We do not eschew difficult poems (Donne’s “Air and Angels”), but we avoid the obscure or rhetorical in favor of dense, highly structured poems in which the form is easily seen as a constituent of the meaning. We want the students to see how the very sounds of a poem are part of its meaning.

From the single voice of the speaker of a lyric poem we move to the play of several speakers’ voices within a play. Why Shakespeare? Because his is the densest, most experimental, most poetic drama in the language. But we want our students to read the text, not blindly worship the Bard. We focus on how dramatic speech (especially in his blank verse) can effect startling transformations in subject or speaker. In this segment of the course, we do not focus solely on how things are said. We also ask the students to look at characters, scenes, and the arc of action. How satisfying or unsatisfying is the knitting up of the action at the end? How does the genre of the play guide your responses? We try to conclude this Shakespeare segment with a writing exercise on a passage of profundity or ambiguity, or both, in the fifth act of whatever play it is.

From “the story” of a play we move next to our big novel: its plot, characters, scenes, narrative structure, and above all its language, how its author sounds (Henry James is excellent for this), his or her often complex viewpoint on the story (as in George Eliot). We choose a big book because we want the students to lose themselves in a fictional world while they are also paying attention to how it is structured by literary artifice. Again, we tend to select for density of language (we have never taught the work of Anthony Trollope or Theodore Dreiser). We also want to counteract the students’ notion that, while poetry is “hard,” novels are “easy.”

Two to three weeks remain in the semester, broken up by Thanksgiving vacation. Tactically, this calls for shorter works. We also want the students to apply to contemporary works the critical judgment and sensitivity they
have now developed. We select only works that we ourselves find compelling (Coetzee's *Disgrace* would be a prime example). In this segment they typically write one paper each about two books, with the last paper usually coming in during exam period. Some of us make it a retrospective paper. In my section it is one more paper, their thirteenth act of attention and articulation. There is no final exam.

For fall 2002, our catalog description read: “Novels, Plays, Poems: Why does any writer—an Amherst College student, Philip Roth, Emily Dickinson, William Shakespeare—say what he or she says one way rather than another? And what in the expression itself makes a story, a play, a poem effective, something a reader might care about, be moved or delighted by? We will try to answer these questions by reading major examples of each genre, including much recent work, with close and sustained attention to details of expressive language. The course will be taught in four sections of 15–20 students. Frequent writing exercises.” These were our required texts, in the order they were read:


This version of the course had near-perfect pace, except for one soggy spot in *Swann’s Way*. My own section jelled well as a discussion group. It consisted of ten first-year students and one sophomore whom I met Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in fifty-minute classes. On the first day I began with a photocopy of Frost’s “Design.” I had three different students read it out loud, and then asked, “What is it saying? What is it implying?” Two different things, the latter quite terrifying. It took half an hour for them to answer the second question. Once they saw the enormity of the implication, I told them about the Argument from Design that Frost turns on its head, and then asked if he actually asserts that there is a governing design of darkness behind his “Assorted characters of death and blight.” They could see that the three questions of the sestet grow in insistence only to break off at the end of line 13, and that the final line, “If design govern in a thing so small,” is not only a condi-
tional clause but also admits the possibility that its assertion is contrary to fact. This said, we agreed that the weight of the poem’s imagery seemed to support the assertion that the Designer of the universe is malevolent.

Next I asked, What species of poem was it? About half of them knew it was a sonnet, and I spent some time showing how its eight-against-six form was a constituent of its meaning. Then we moved to rhythm and meter. “Why does he say the first two lines as he does, instead of ‘I found a fat and white dimpled spider / Holding up a moth on a white heal-all’?” Someone eventually said “iambic pentameter” and someone else said “rhyme.” I wrote out a made-up line, “And fallen is the glory of your hair,” and then the same words not inverted for meter, “And the glory of your hair is fallen.” This allowed them to hear the first line as regular iambic, and the second as beginning with an anapest. I gave them the prosodic terms only after they identified the rhythms. Could they hear how the first line was more satisfying than the second?

All this was preliminary to their first reading assignment, Vendler’s chapter “The Poem as Pleasure,” which contains a varied selection of examples. For the second class, they read two poems about dancing, William Carlos Williams’s “The Dance” (about Pieter Brueghel’s “The Kermess”) and Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz.” I brought a picture of the Brueghel to class. First I amplified Vendler’s explanations of rhythm, meter, and rhyme; had the students read her examples aloud; and answered questions of comprehension (“Poems can be hard. What don’t you understand about this one?”). I emphasized her term “pleasure,” as we all did throughout the semester. “Every artwork,” she writes, “exists to evoke pleasures that are easier to feel than to describe.” And chief among these in poetry is “the excess of patterning, beyond what is necessary to convey paraphrasable meaning” (Vendler 2002: 73–74). For most of the class, we examined what pleasures we could take in the way the two poems were patterned. We had spent all of the first class on only fourteen lines; now, in the second class, I posed only one overriding question about the twenty-eight lines of the two poems: Each poem is about dancing, but how does its own language dance? They struggled to use prosodic terms, and I encouraged them to be impressionistic rather than to apply cookbook definitions.

Before the next class they had to write and hand in their first writing assignment (set by David Sofield). They were to pick either Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” or Frost’s “After Apple-Picking” and write one page about a moment in the poem, just one, “in which you find yourself responding with pleasure to its rhythm, rhyme, or one of the elements that constitute its struc-
ture. And, in turn, do what you can to give the reader of your prose some pleasure." A fine writing instruction, which a few students could follow for a couple of sentences but not throughout. The problem was, as it always is in the beginning, that most of them just talked at the poem instead of actually describing its literary features.

There are other perennial problems. Our students always begin by writing generally, usually about themes, instead of describing specific poetic features. Also, they want to give their papers a title, introduction, and conclusion. These are vacuous pretensions in an appreciative response of three pages or less. Just give your readers the body, I keep saying. Start right in at the first line of the poem and describe its specific expressive effects and your responses to them through to the end. But that's not what we were taught in high school, they chorus. This is college, I reply. We repeat this exchange for some weeks. Many of them are overly wordy, too. I tell those students to write their first drafts by hand, not on the computer, which usually helps a lot. The main goal of the assignments is to move them from writing about what is said to how it is said, from substance to style. This does not come naturally to most students. It takes another half-dozen assignments for them to adapt to my new criteria, and some of the weaker ones have difficulty all semester finding much to say about "what in the expression itself" moves them. But at least we are off and running.

For the third class they read more poems and Vendler on prosody. We scanned our own names, and discovered that Prof. Chickering was actually Prof. Dactyl. Then they read "The Darkling Thrush" aloud, listening especially to its rhythms and diction. I pointed to the way, as in "Design," the ending asserts and also partially withdraws its assertion. Here it was a matter of how Hardy's uncertain syntax sits within the confidently enjambed rhymes of his final stanza. One student also pointed out that for some blessed Hope to "tremble through" the thrush's carolings is a far more tentative verb than, say, to "be clearly heard." The second half of the hour we examined anonymous unannotated excerpts from the three best papers, and I praised those few sentences that actually showed how features of the poem's lines enacted its stated meaning.

In the fourth class we did the same thing for "After Apple-Picking." There was only one paper to praise in this fashion, though half the class wrote on the Frost poem, but they were becoming more adept orally at this kind of description. We also discussed two very short poems, Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" and Philip Larkin's "Talking in Bed." They needed some historical background to understand the tragic strength of Brooks's minimalist
art, and to be disabused of unreflective responses to “Talking in Bed.” To say “How depressing!” will not cut it. Say, rather, how enlivening and pleasurable are the sharp dark edges of each poem. Again, the ending of the Larkin poem manages a delicate double modulation of meaning by the gentle nudgings of negative particles (“not untrue and not unkind”).

I returned all the papers at the end of class, with copious written comments but no grades. I told them I use a check/plus/minus system to keep track of their progress, and that the emphasis in the course, with its many short assignments and slow-motion reading during class time, was on paying attention to the current text and responding to it in language that might refresh another reader of the same text. Me, for instance. I told them that one remarkable thing about literary works is that novice readers can see emphases and nuances that I never thought of before. The “excess of patterning” by which we recognize “literariness” (Vendler 2002: 74) creates this richness of meaning. We were not reading poems just to “get the point.” Do they listen only once to a CD when they buy it? Of course not. So why not with poems as with music: hear and rehear, read and reread, for pleasure. Virtually all of our writing assignments began with “read[ing] and reread[ing] aloud” the text in question.

We had used Vendler’s anthology before and, as deservedly popular as the book has become, I still disliked several things about it. One was the thematic organization of its chapters (“Nature and Time,” “Constructing a Self,” etc.), though I had agreed to go along with my colleagues’ plan of assigning selected chapters, one per week. More difficult for me was Vendler’s authoritative explanatory tone. Given that she is the premiere American critic of poetry today, this is perhaps unavoidable and not really a fault. But I want my students to cultivate a critical attitude toward received opinion, so they can eventually become their own authorities, and not always look to The Book or Prof. Dactyl for validation. For the next class, I asked them: “How do you characterize the tone of voice in Vendler’s prose? Is there a poem that her explanations have ruined for you? How can you recoup? When should you use her advice, when ignore it?” Alas, they answered these questions mousily. They liked the comfort of her clear and comprehensive explanations.

I wanted them to understand that poetry is alive, dangerous. The encounter with a strong sensibility not your own can change your life, or at least some of your ideas and feelings, perhaps forever. Poetry is a threat to received opinion because it is the strongest possible use of language by a strong sensibility that is not the young reader’s own. In this regard, I was distressed to find Vendler treating poetry as though it could be appropriated wholesale by
their young selves. She makes the unguarded statement that lyric poetry “presumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer’s shoes and speak the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader’s own” (2002: xliii). She quotes the first stanza of “The Road Not Taken” as an example, which I find self-refuting, given Frost’s unique voice signature. I fully believe that students can imaginatively add to their life experience through careful and engaged reading, but not through “identifying with” either the imagined speaker or the actual writer. To do that simply erases all sense of the difference between the reader and the sensibility of the writer; at that point, as Scholes (2002: 168–69) observes, there is nothing left to imagine.

So against the Vendler quote I set Robert Pinsky’s definition of poetry from *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (1998: 8): “Poetry is a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art. The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing. . . . When I say to myself a poem by Emily Dickinson or George Herbert, the artist’s medium is my breath. The reader’s breath and hearing embody the poet’s words.” I regard this as a more accurate account of what happens when we appropriate a poem and make it a permanent part of our imaginative life. Only by reading aloud and learning “how it goes” can the reader truly possess the poem, which is, after all, by someone else.

With this in mind, I introduced a new term from Robert Frost: the writer’s own “performance”—the extraordinary feats of association, of saying, that the poet can perform—and the tones of voice of the dramatic speaker of the poem. And I reminded them that this course was mainly about their own performances: as readers, and then as writers about their reading. For the second paper they were asked to focus on the following passage in Vendler (2002: 83): “Perhaps the greatest pleasure given by poetry is the sense that . . . the structure of the poem enacts (acts out, dramatizes) . . . what the poem says by way of assertion.” Then they were to “write an essay of at least two pages in which you show how ‘The Solitary Reaper’ illustrates this quotation.” I was pleased by the insights of a few, but their writing was no more than dutiful.

We still had much work to do on tones of voice and the topic of wit (not explicit categories in the anthology). In past versions of the course, the poems that have most helped students understand wit and tone had been Donne’s “The Flea” and “The Canonization” (especially the last two stanzas) and Herbert’s “Virtue” and “The Collar.” This year, the paper in the third week was on Bishop’s “One Art.” I told them to locate one moment in the poem—a phrase,
a line, two lines, no more—in which they heard the speaker’s tone(s) of voice clearly, strongly. “Describe the tone(s) of voice at that moment, and show how they are created and controlled by particular choices of words, rhythms, rhymes, and the structure of the poem.” And there was a twist: “One page maximum. Make every one of your words do real work for you.” They still had trouble making their sentences express their perceptions, and most of them had difficulty seeing Bishop’s light-dark duality of tone, how it is supported by the villanelle form and the italicized parenthetical self-directed angry sob at the very end. But these matters became clearer once we spent a class on the papers and the poem itself. (Another Bishop poem through which they can readily learn to hear tones of voice—very different ones—is “Poem.”)

Then, because it fit well into Vendler’s chapter sequence, my section read “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” an experiment that I felt was a complete bust. They had little sympathy for the effete speaker, no ear for his profound musicality, no sense of the lyricism of the imagery. They did better with two more directly erotic poems, Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” and Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” The questions addressed in class were: “What is the speaker’s situation? What is his (in both cases) mode of address? Whom does he address? What is the argument of the poem? Where does the argument gather most force—poetically? Logically?” It was necessary to introduce the notion that poems can have arguments in order to track the development of these two. (This is also the case when I use “The Flea.”)

The pedagogical connection between the two Renaissance poems and the assigned text for their next paper, Keats’s “To Autumn,” was simply Frost’s (1972: 412–13) observation, which I told them they were in the process of acting out: “The way to read a poem . . . is in the light of all the other poems ever written. We may begin anywhere. We duff into our first. We read that imperfectly . . . but the better to read the second. We read the second the better to read the third . . . the fifth the better to read the first again, or the second if it so happens.” The writing instruction about “To Autumn” asked them to attend specifically to its tone(s) as they are created by the rhythms of lines, word choices, and rhyme sounds, especially in the third stanza. “As you write about tone, be sure to say something useful about how the sentences in all three stanzas are constructed and deployed.” To my surprise, this time seven of the eleven students wrote better than average papers. They were beginning to actually pay attention to instructions, and to the poetic features in front of their noses.

I thought my group had done well enough that I could give them a
freer rein for their fifth and final paper on poetry. I told them to select any poem they liked from a section of Vendler (2002: 258–82) that contained fourteen poems from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By this point, the instructions were familiar. What pleasure do you take in the uses of language and the tones of voice you hear? I also asked them to exemplify the whole poem by reading one part of it very closely. The two most popular choices were Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and Robert Hayden’s “Night, Death, Mississippi,” a poem I had not read before. It gained in value for me during our detailed class discussion on their papers, because they had fudged on its word choices, terrifying in their oblique references to castration and lynching. Even so, the papers, as a group, continued to show improvement.

I have gone into detail about the poetry segment because it is the first 40 percent of the semester and introduces concepts that we use throughout the course. When we turn to drama and fiction, the pace of out-of-class reading quickens, but we continue to read in slow motion in class. Since we can’t “slow read” entire plays or novels, I focus discussion on passages that either epitomize the style of the work or display the interpretive problems the work presents. With Shakespeare, we continue to pay close attention to the words but, as the genre changes, so does my pedagogy in one respect. Now I emphasize voices and tones even more: “You need to dramatize the speeches in your mind’s ear, not just let your eye slide over them. Ideally you stage the play in your mind: you get to be the director and all the actors.” This emphasis is not merely genre-bound; its deeper goal is to make them more active readers.

None of them had read either play in this segment (we try to avoid the high school standards). We picked Richard II because we hadn’t taught it recently and because, as his only play entirely in verse, it let us continue to work on the students’ critical writing about poetry. We added Measure for Measure because it presents clearly defined, perhaps insoluble, interpretive problems. We spent a week and a half on each play. The students wrote twice about Richard II and once about Measure for Measure. After they had finished Measure for Measure, Christopher Ricks of Boston University lectured on it to all four sections.

The first class on Richard II was spent, as it always is, no matter which Shakespeare play we teach, on act 1, scene 1. Who is who? (A chart from the Riverside Shakespeare helped answer this.) What is the situation on stage? How does it develop during this scene? Easy enough questions if one sees it on stage, but harder when students must construct the scene for themselves from the lines on the page. How do Bolingbroke, Mowbray, and Richard each sound? What do the lines suggest they are feeling at different moments? And—
the important question—how do metaphors and rhythms intensify those feelings? These, too, might seem like simple questions, but in a close-reading class they can be answered only by trying out different renditions aloud, which takes time. There were other questions, too. What does “blood” mean at different points in this scene? What is the stage business with the gage of challenge? If you were the director, when would you have it occur? What do you make of King Richard’s peremptory assertion of power at the end of the scene? All this made for a packed hour.

For the next class, I set a two-page starter exercise on Gaunt’s “this England” speech: “Read, and reread, aloud Gaunt’s speech at II.i.31–68. What is the dramatic situation in which he speaks? In what tones of voice do you hear the speech (they may change as the speech progresses)? What is the ‘argument’ of the speech? To what, to whom, does Gaunt appeal? How (and this is the key question) do specific poetic effects enhance the argument or the appeal?” Only the better students wrote direct and specific responses to these questions, but in class everybody saw more subtleties in the poetic structure of the speech.

Subsequent classes dealt with balanced pairs of characters in scenes, balanced scenes in the play, but most of the time we read aloud and asked, “What do these lines sound like? What is their tone?” The staff agreed that our major objective with Richard II was to lead students to see how the force of poetry could transform the audience’s perception of Richard’s character in the second half of the play. How was it that Shakespeare could make this petulant, self-pitying whiner into an attractive character whose introspection and sense of mortality we admire? In the class before the next paper was due, I led up to it by applying its questions to Richard’s earlier speeches in act 3, scenes 2 and 3. I also adjured my students to show their readers their pleasure in Shakespeare’s powers of language by their own sprightly writing. The exercise asked them to reread act 5, scene 1, lines 162–318 and act 5, scene 5, lines 1–66 and track the character of Richard through both passages by describing his sentiments, images, rhythms, and tones of voice. It produced the first solid A paper in my section, in which the student wrote as his own critical authority (see appendix A).

Then we jumped into the first two acts of Measure for Measure for the next class, finished the play for the following class and on that same day all sections heard Christopher Ricks lecture on the play. Although we continued to attend passages of vivid poetry, we went through the play rapidly in order to consider the problems raised by its full action. Ricks provided a historical view of Jacobean betrothal, marriage, and fornication and an energetic analy-
sis of the ethical quandaries of an attempted crime unachieved. He helped the students see how the icy rectitude of Angelo and Isabella match up, and started them thinking about the problems that arise when “justice” comes about through such implausibilities as in this play.

Shakespeare’s treatment of potentially tragic material via the genre of comedy results in an unsettling mixture of tones and ideas. We wanted them to realize there are genuine ethical conundrums at the heart of the play’s action, and that the tinniness of the happy ending may represent Shakespeare’s understanding that the finale does not resolve all issues. That meant rereading the play over two more classes. Then the writing exercise asked them: “How do you read the tone of act 5? What ironies do you see in this act? How do you respond to its several turns of events? How do you assess its happy ending?” The day the paper came in, we went through act 5 speech by speech, trying to determine what was satisfying or unsatisfying about each revelation. As usual, there were disagreements, to be left unresolved. The students were less engaged with the play than I was, and the papers were generally disappointing. I think two factors contributed to this. First, students these days affect a blasé attitude about premarital sex, so they have a hard time taking the play’s problems seriously. Second, it is really difficult to imagine act 5 from the page. It is one long ensemble scene, with many reversals to react to, and much of its effect depends on groupings of figures on stage and the timing of entrances and exits. All this is very hard to envision at one’s desk.

However, we were to ask for even more sustained attention in our next book, Swann’s Way, on which we spent three weeks. They wrote one paper at the outset and another at end of this segment. I was initially fearful that Proust’s prose would be too dense and long-winded for our students, and that much of its effect would be lost in translation. However, Bill Pritchard and David Sofield claimed that the translation was much improved over the one I had read forty-five years ago and that Marcel’s memories of childhood would touch a chord in the students. They were right. But I wasn’t taking any chances. I wrote my section a memo: “Your desire for ‘what happens next?’ is going to be thwarted almost completely for the next three weeks as you read through the six-hundred-plus pages of Swann’s Way. If you persist in looking for a plot, a story-line, if you look for things to happen quickly or consecutively, you are going to be a very frustrated reader. You need to change your usual assumptions about fiction. Look upon it not as a story, but as writing. On every page, at every moment, you have the author before you, manipulating his long sentences with care and imagination. Pay attention to what he is doing, not to what the sentences seem to be ‘about’. Proust’s style is deliber-
ately ‘long-winded’ (though not the very first sentence!) because his perceptions are rich and interconnected. . . . Whenever you see the word ‘like,’ put a box around it: ‘like’ will almost always introduce an extravagant and much-developed simile (often about sensory responses), which will almost always astonish you with its exactitude, or metaphorical power, its capacity for ‘thinking aside.’”

Before this segment was over, most of them were converts to Proust’s surprising similes and secret resonances. One average student held forth at length about how he had been reading Proust all afternoon, then went to the dining hall, and had the distinct impression that he was seeing the social types there through Proust’s eyes. He came up with the verb to Proustify and said he went downtown the next day and Proustified everybody he saw! So the choice of the book was an unexpected success. But it was a lot of hard work and meant focusing repeatedly on how individual sentences would unfold (and unfold and unfold). The reading assignments were sixty to seventy pages per class, for nine classes. We read aloud, as always. We stuck to the sensory, the comparative, the recapitulative. They learned to recognize “free indirect discourse.” We concentrated on scenes, rather than the structure of the first volume, although by the end of the segment they could make some comparisons between Swann in love and the young Marcel.

The first Proust writing exercise directed them to the passage where the young Marcel walks along the blooming hawthorn lane and first sees Gilberte. The core instruction read: “Write two pages on what strikes you as interesting or new or pleasurable or important in this passage. Feel free to make associations to prior passages as they occur to you. Make sure you suggest, in your own writing, something of what it is like to read a sequence in ‘Combray.’” This paper came in after four classes, and the students showed themselves capable not only of remembering what they had read one hundred pages back but also of making their own Proustian associations between passages.

Then we started “Swann in Love.” In comparison to “Combray,” the students were less responsive to Swann’s obsession with Odette, to the difference in class and breeding between them, to Proust’s social observations and his wicked satire, even though we had spent some time earlier on Mme. Verdurin and her coterie. Two-thirds of the way through, the going gets pretty soggy as Swann moons over Odette in his aesthetic/sexual obsession. I told them as much and said not to worry about that particular thirty-page stretch. Instead, I asked them to reread the beginning of the long scene of a musical evening at the Marquise de Saint-Euverte’s. It contains exquisitely comical descriptions of the footmen (which we went over in class), monocles, several
frowsty grandes dames, and the ever lovely Princesse des Laumes, whom Swann has known from the very highest circles of society. For class they had to compare one of these descriptions to Swann’s perceptions of Odette, and to the earlier descriptions of the Verdurins and their “little clan,” and then say what they could see when they put these comparisons together. They wrote their second Proust paper about this same passage: “What immediate pleasures and what more far-reaching associations does Proust’s writing offer you?” This produced several A papers (see appendix B for one of the best). The weaker writers did not improve above their midsemester achievement levels but were no worse, either. Average to strong students continued to improve in tone, insight, syntax.

Because some students in another section were curious about the rest of Proust’s grand project, the staff handed out a photocopy of Roger Shattuck’s précis of the whole novel in his 

Marcel Proust (1982: 45–52). But a sense of the whole was never our aim, nor could it have been, given the subtle interweavings and mysteries of the book (at the end of “Swann in Love,” Swann wonders how he could ever have been obsessed with Odette, exclaiming that “she isn’t even my type!” Yet in the earlier “Combray,” which takes place half a generation later, Odette has become Mme. Swann and the mother of Gilberte). I was teaching sentences and a sensibility—an exquisite and powerful sensibility, and not one that the students could “identify with” as Vendler would have them do in a lyric poem, despite their association of their own childhood experiences with the young Marcel’s.

At this point, it was a few days before Thanksgiving, and the students were restless. We turned to Ian McEwan’s highly acclaimed 

Atonement, published in 2002. We spent two classes on the first section, some ninety pages that bear resemblance to Proust in their density and the tucks and folds of their timeline. It is a very rich, very written section, set in an English country house in 1935. I had them distinguish between sentences of direct statement and free indirect discourse. McEwan is very tricky as a narrator and becomes even trickier later in the book. The last class before Thanksgiving they read the second section, a harrowing description of the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940. There was not much to do in class except point and gasp. There was also considerable yawning.

This was all right, however, because we wanted them to finish the book on their own over vacation, without discussion. The final section, shockingly, turns the entire book into a metafiction written by a character, Briony, a daughter of the manor and now a successful novelist in her eighties. The
claim is that she has written the book over and over again in a lifelong atone-
ment for having destroyed the romance, and the lives, of her older sister
Cecilia and Robbie, the gardener’s son. After Thanksgiving we experimented
with rereading earlier portions as though they were written by Briony (then
everything became free indirect discourse). This set up the two-page exercise,
which asked them to write about the last two pages of the novel, in which the
now-declared character-as-author proposes several alternative endings, claim-
ing, and simultaneously withdrawing the claim, that these endings never hap-
pened, did they? McEwan’s rhetoric is at its most complex here, and it has
misled several reviewers to believe the romantic couple died in World War II
(one alternative), even though he only poses that possibility as a question in
the subjunctive.

So the preparation for the exercise was to “focus on the exact fictional
and/or ‘real life’ status of each sentence. Spell out their implications for your-
self.” The writing direction asked them to describe “how McEwan teases you
as a reader of the novel—as a reader of novels generally—through these sen-
tences which you are invited to regard as Briony’s. Do you like being teased
this way?” Some did, some didn’t. Some made good use of their prior expe-
rience of the difference between the young Marcel and the cynical narrator in
Swann’s Way. As a group, they did not go as far as I would have liked into the
reading problem the text presented them. They tended to make facile formu-
lations, as they had done with Measure for Measure. But you can’t have every-
thing, and they enjoyed the novel. This was the first encounter with meta-
fiction for most of them. Perhaps they are not of an age that likes to be teased,
or likes to play games with the truth.

The course concluded with three classes on Brad Leithauser’s 2002
novel in verse, Darlington’s Fall. After one class on the poem, Leithauser
came up from Mount Holyoke College and gave a talk with readings to the
assembled sections. Many students were thrilled to see the actual author who
had written our text, and to be able to ask him questions. We have had equally
successful author appearances in the past when our last books were by the
poets Billy Collins and Daniel Hall.

Darlington’s Fall is 5,708 lines long, in ten-line stanzas of loose iambic
pentameter, bracketed by two sonnets. It follows a fictitious Midwestern turn-
of-the-century naturalist, Russ Darlington, over forty years of his life, from
boyhood and college, early marriage and divorce, to a back-breaking fall from
an island cliff in the Pacific, through its gloomy aftermath of many years, end-
ing with a new romance with his young, musical housemaid. As the dust
jacket says, it offers “an ingeniously plotted story and the virtues long associated with [Leithauser’s] elegant stanzas: wit, music, and a keen eye for the natural world. His independent careers as novelist and poet come together brilliantly here.” When I first proposed this book as our finale, I thought it would be an opportunity for the students to bring together their skills at reading both poetry and fiction. However, as we found upon rereading it, you don’t notice the poetic form at every moment, only when the imagery coalesces and transforms the narrative subject, or when there are strong flourishes of rhetoric and wit (which occur frequently). Leithauser told the students that he wanted to get the rooted dailiness of a novel without having to create lengthy scenes and found that by working in poetry he could convey a novelistic sense of life by allusion, synecdoche, and temporal shortcuts. So we read it as a story told in verse, talking in class about the characters and action sometimes, at other times (as in the first class on the poem) bearing down on its diction, wit, and cadences. Its opening is especially brilliant for its vivid sensory qualities and the enthusiasm with which the poet throws himself into the fears and joys of a seven-year-old boy capturing a giant green frog.

I found myself teaching to the following points: voice and sensibility (How does one take the world—how does Darlington, how does Leithauser?) and recognizable characters and locales (Does the poet “get them right”? Do any of the comic or tragicomic characters resemble, in the writer’s treatment of them, any of Proust’s characters?). I didn’t want to press hard on a loose poetic form, but we looked closely at the frequent word games the poet plays with himself. We also said, in our last class, what little we could about the writer inscribing a fictional version of himself late in the novel-poem as the discoverer of documents that allowed its reconstruction. Students could see how this might compare to McEwan’s trickery at the end of *Atonement*, but we treated these postmodern reflexivities merely as the tics (and tricks) of our particular era, so heavily burdened with self-consciousness. There wasn’t much more to say. We gave *Darlington’s Fall* the light touch. Some years, we don’t even discuss the last book in class at all, or else only in the last class, so as to set up the final exercise.

It took them back to some of Robert Frost’s notions with which we had begun the course: “I look at a poem as a performance. I look on the poet as a man of prowess, just like an athlete. He’s a performer. . . . You speak of figures, tones of voice varying all the time. I’m always interested, you know, when I have three or four stanzas, in the way I lay the sentences in the stanzas. . . . Emotions must be dammed back and harnessed by discipline to the
wit mill, not just turned loose in exclamations. No force will express far that isn’t shut in by discipline at all the pores to jet at one outlet only” (Frost 1960: 115; 1972: 413). After quoting these and other remarks by Frost, the instruction (again by David Sofield) read in part: “In Darlington’s Fall—without question a ‘performance’—the variety Frost speaks of is dazzlingly on show. Examining in some detail two passages in the ‘novel in verse,’ and staying alert to the presence of wit and its relation to feeling, write a coherent essay on how Leithauser’s stylistic resourcefulness contributes to your sense of the work’s meaning.” Everyone in my section responded enthusiastically, and five of the eleven wrote superior papers, but none matched their best efforts earlier in the semester. And there was no opportunity to make anything of the papers in class, since the course was over. Minimal comments, then, and return by campus mail.

Where, on the whole, did they get to? Most of their new learning (as opposed to the consolidation of prior learning) occurred in the segments on poetry, Richard II, and “Combray.” Most of them increased their appreciation of different literary textures, forms, and tones. The better students learned to articulate that appreciation in lively prose. Almost all of them moved from the overused passive of high school to active verbs, and from the third person (“the reader”) to their own subjective “I.” Throughout the semester they were asked to do close readings and to exercise their own critical judgment. They understood that these writing goals could be met successfully only through attention to detail, conveying a sense of “how it goes,” and by being precise, specific, and euphonious oneself. In the second half of the course, they also learned how to make a part of a text stand for the whole. Everybody’s writing got clearer in its ideas and more engaged with the text at hand, even if not everyone saw the performative possibilities in their own writing. What they learned about reading is harder to measure, but it was something, I hope, about valuing voice and verbal music in and of themselves. More broadly, if “read and reread aloud” stays with them, they will have learned that Emerson’s “labor and invention” are necessary for bringing any text to life in their own mind’s ear.
Appendix A

His kingship destroyed, Richard is abandoned by his former subjects and now seeks refuge in the confines of his own poetic imagination. That he was born a King is the great tragedy of Richard's life. He has the soul of an artist, not a ruler. The narcissism which made him a bad politician contributes to his strength as a poet. For, it takes a man of considerable ego to recreate the world according to his own aesthetic and thematic interests. And it is a man of even greater ego who believes that this expression is something the rest of the world needs to experience. For a King, narcissism is a liability, for an artist, it is a necessity.

As he prepares to abdicate, Richard compares himself to Christ. “Yet I well remember / The favors of these men. Were they not mine? / Did they not sometime cry ‘All hail!’ to me? / So Judas did to Christ; but he, in twelve / Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand none.” This dubious comparison rings falsely in the audience’s ear; there has been nothing remotely Christ-like in Richard’s behavior and the only aspect which gives his analogy any credence is the assumption that the King has a divine right to the throne. It is not clear whether Richard has the self-consciousness to understand that references to the sinful usurpation of his heaven-mandated kingship are wholly unpersuasive. Yet, he admits this much in the next line when he asks, his voice quavering with mock surprise, words rolling ironically off his tongue, “God save the king! Will no man say amen?” He feigns shock when this question goes unanswered. For Richard realizes that none of his loyal followers remain alive to respond; he has nothing but the company of a thousand Judases to remind him of the false esteem with which he’d been previously showered. He is alone, and must answer the question for himself “Well then, amen!”

In Act 4.1, the contrast between Richard and Bolingbroke is an example of two human personalities in almost polar opposition to one another. As Richard’s situation worsens (he is about to surrender his crown and will soon be murdered) his lexicon grows more dynamic. Richard doesn’t converse, he performs, incorporating metaphysical conceits and grand irony in marvelous poetic interludes for which Bolingbroke has little time; he is concerned with only one thing. For, in the “dialogue” between them from 185–220, Bolingbroke has only three lines “I thought you had been willing to resign. . . . Part of your cares you give me with your crown....A re you contended to resign the crown?” In this same span, Richard composes a wonderful simile likening the crown to a deep well with two buckets (one dancing emptily and the other filled with tears), philosophizes on the nature of grief, delineates how his tears, hands, tongue and breath contribute to abdication (“With mine own . . .”), and twice uses three separate definitions of care all within one line. The contrast between a man of poetry—dismissive of life and concerned now only with aesthetics—and a man of practicality—a heartless embodiment of realpolitik—creates a dynamic effect. We know that Bolingbroke has nothing in common with Richard, and thus sees his life as a meaningless impediment to power.
The fact that Richard is more concerned with wordplay than confronting Bolingbroke in any substantial way (“Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be / Therefore no no, for I resign to thee”) communicates just how far removed he is from political reality. In fact, his final request as King is to be brought a mirror with which he can immerse himself in self-reflection, the most intrinsic province of poetry. In this incredible passage, a moment of great theatrical resonance (never under-estimate the power of a prop) that illuminates completely the scope and aesthetic beauty of Richard’s narcissism, he speaks into the mirror and says, “Was this the face / That every day under his household roof / Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face / That like the sun did make beholders wink? / Is this the face which fac’d so many follies / That was at last outfac’d by Bolingbroke?” This passage is undoubtedly a reference to Christopher Marlow’s Dr. Faustus, in which the protagonist, when faced with Helen of Troy, asks “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships / and burnt the topless towers of Illium?” Shakespeare wanted his audience to understand the infinite range of Richard’s ego. For, Richard’s own Helen of Troy is nothing but the idealized image of his own former self.

In response to Richard’s laments, Bolingbroke offers up an aphorism that is shot down with vehement sarcasm. “And I thank thee, king / For thy great bounty, that not only giv’st / Me cause to wail, but teachest me the way / How to lament the cause.” It is not the most prudent course for Richard to mock mercilessly the man who has ultimate authority over his life. But it sounded good, and aesthetic matters gave way to practical concerns.

Richard’s final soliloquy in Act 5 is his greatest artistic achievement. Shakespeare doesn’t allow Richard a moment of moral clarity, nor does he express regret for the caprices of his rule or project any sense of empathy for the people he has hurt. (He does mention that suffering is universal, but this is only to make a point that the ubiquitousness of pain can give others comfort. “Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves / That they are not the first of fortune’s slaves.”) But Shakespeare does give him a speech that amply demonstrates Richard’s true vocation: metaphysical poet.

Rather than beg for salvation, the typical reaction of a man facing death, Richard opines on the paradoxes of existence and the limits of thought. For, his soul and his brain “beget a generation of still-breeding thoughts” and he comes to understand that, “no thought is contented.” He likens his prison to the world, for in both he is spiritually encaged. This leads him to the nihilistic conclusion that, “But whate’er I be, / Nor I, nor any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased / With being nothing.” Then, in a moment that no doubt has great theatrical power, he hears music that motivates him to contemplate the nature of time, imagining that he, the King, has been transformed into a clock. This conceit is another example of Richard’s narcissism: when he is gone, time stops.
Swann’s anguished love for Odette refreshes his sense of the social world; he sees it anew, with merciless detail and a sharp eye for pretension. For, the “melancholy indifference” he feels towards everything that is not related to his lover produces an ironic detachment, coloring his view of the party described on pp. 457–489. This detachment is reflected in the passage’s language, in which detailed descriptions veer toward sarcastic near conclusions (i.e., passive aggressive scene setting such as “the foreground of that fictitious summary of their domestic existence which hostesses are pleased to offer their guests on ceremonial occasions” that cut through the layers of absurdity and affectation which, though inherent in all formal human interactions, seem markedly prevalent in the culture and time period of Swann’s Way). I write near conclusions because the book’s style is a dense clausuropia of associations, often making definite conclusions difficult to come by. Part of this is undoubtedly related to point of view. For, the novel is written in the first person, with the narrator reflecting upon events; however, much of the action is told from the third person perspective of Swann. Thus it is difficult to know when the narrator ends and the character begins, because Proust often seems to switch point of view in mid-sentence. As critic André Aciman (2002: 56) notes, “Self doubt, insecurity, tentativeness modulate each and every one of [Proust’s] sentences, which explains, among other things, why they are so long. With them, Proust made an art not just of introspection but of irresolution.”

Though Swann is a talented creator and purveyor of social artifice, it no longer distracts him to the degree it once did; his every desire has been inextricably bound up in an all-consuming vision of Odette that relegates other trappings of “fashionable life” to mere targets of his charming mockery. The result of Swann’s detachment is that, in the words of the narrator, the social world “appears to us in its own guise” (p. 459). While Swann’s previous view of this guise was one of playfulness and fluidity (he is remarkably dexterous in his movement from one social situation to the next), his attitude in this passage is one informed by melancholy and longing, giving negative connotations and sarcastic bite to the details of the world around him. Thus the satiric ante of “Swann in Love” is upped in direct proportion to the intensity of the “indifferent, offhand, irritable” demeanor with which Odette tortures Swann.

A tone of detached clarity is immediately apparent when Swann enters the party. “The tendency he had always had to look for analogies between living people and the portraits in galleries reasserted itself here, but in a more positive and more general form; it was society as a whole, now that he was detached from it, which presented itself to him as a series of pictures” (459). He is aware, for possibly the first time, of the footmen and their “noble, greyhound profile” seeing them profiled perhaps as a painter would. And when the novel observes, through Swann’s perspective, that his headwear is taken by the headsman with “utter contempt for his person and the most tender regard for his hat,” it is not a criticism of the servant, but a telling critique of the system which forces this man to hide resentment of his social superiors behind the “soft cotton” exterior of his gloves—the piece of apparel which gives the illusion of
tenderness and caring. It is thus an ironic comment on the divide between appearance and reality—the most fundamental subject of satire.

This tone continues as Swann observes the many monocled men drifting throughout the party, and begins to assign individual images and associations to each respective piece of eye wear: a twinkling badge blinking at the festivities, the eye of a Cyclops, or the “sole instrument of psychological investigation and remorseless analysis,” as worn by the society novelist (465). Previously, Swann might have paid little attention to this collection of monocles, seeing no deeper significance in their existence. However, Odette’s presence within his mind has sharpened his artistic temperament, so that the world’s details are no longer dismissible, but imbued with profound, painful feeling. This is part of the overwhelming experience of being in love. It manifests itself when Swann climbs a set of stairs and is saddened by the fact that Odette has never climbed them. He is jealous of all who see her when he is not present and thus “possessed of some part of his mistress’s life that was more real, more accessible and more mysterious than anything he knew” (461).

These descriptions give the reader immediate pleasure and illuminate the way in which Swann’s erotic obsession with Odette has influenced every facet of his life, producing a detachment within him that effects something so simple as what he deigns to notice when entering a room. When compared to the beginning of “Swann in Love,” the extent of this influence becomes very apparent. For, before meeting Odette his existence could be summarized as such:

Then he belonged to that class of intelligent men who have led a life of idleness, and who seek a consolation and perhaps an excuse in the notion that their idleness orders to their intelligence objects as worthy of interest as any that might be offered by art or learning, the notion that “Life” contains situations more interesting and more romantic than all the romances ever written. (272)

He is a man who will dine frequently with a middle class family for the sole purpose of having a liaison with their cook; a man whose affection for women does not discriminate based on social prestige. In a wonderful metaphor, Proust writes, “He did not immure himself in the edifice of his social relations, but had made of them . . . one of those collapsible tents which explorers carry about with them” (271). Yet, this affable social itinerant is utterly mournful in the party passage, “in that tremulous condition which precedes the onset of tears” (486). Indeed, when Swann sees the Princess des Laumes, her royal presence incites within him nothing but grief, for she reminds him “of Guermantes, the estate next to Combray, and all that country which he so dearly loved and had ceased to visit in order not to be separated from Odette” (483).

The episode in which the Princess sees Mme. Cambremer expressing her passion for music with a series of enthusiastic gesticulations likens back to the Verdurins and their “little clan” enjoying the young pianist. Of course, the princess refrains from any
such displays herself, for she “had a natural horror of what she called ‘exaggeration,’ and always made a point of letting people see that she ‘had no desire’ to indulge in displays of emotion that were not in keeping with the tone of the circle in which she moved” (470). Yet, being unfamiliar with the specific piece of music being played, she worries that maybe Mme Cambremer’s action is appropriate and expected, a necessary component to the perceived proper appreciation of the piece. She thus decides to make a compromise between her conflicting inclinations. She “would beat time for a few bars with her fan, but, so as not to forfeit her independence, against the rhythm.”

Music is an integral part of how both Swann and the narrator perceive the world. It is a sense linked inextricably to memory, and it proves itself as such when Swann hears the “little phrase from Vinteuil’s sonata” that reminds him of a happier time, now painful to contemplate, when Odette loved him. For, Swann’s vision of love is inseparably from his aesthetic sense. Whether music or painting, he associates great art with love. He is an aesthete who longs to evoke the beauty of art in his own erotic life. “He told himself that in associating the thought of Odette with his dreams of ideal happiness he had not resigned himself to a stopgap as inadequate as he had hitherto supposed, since she satisfied his most refined predilections in matters of art” (317). For even after he has possessed her physically—enjoyed her person to the fullest extent nature allows—he is still not satisfied. The Odette he loves is primarily a figment of his own creation, an “apparition” invoked through his aesthetic sense. Her corporeal embodiment will never satisfy him and it is only in its absence—that his imagination takes hold—that pangs of love are truly felt. To paraphrase Lolita’s last line, the refuges of art are the only reality they share. Viewing Swann’s love as primarily an imaginative act gives credence to the fact that, “Proust was fully prepared to accept, and from a very young age, that happiness is the one thing in our lives that others cannot bring” (Aciman 2002: 55).

Notes
1. Personal communication of 1 August 2002 from the editors of the proposed volume, Judith H. Anderson and Christine R. Farris, Indiana University.
2. For the genesis and history of English 1–2, see Varnum 1996.
   For his teaching practices in the present English 1 and its precursors, see Pritchard 1991.
   For accounts of Brower’s personal presence as a teacher at Amherst and Harvard, and of the conduct of Hum 6 at Harvard, see Pritchard 1985 and Poirier 1992.
Works Cited


