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ESSAY

"Narratives into Problems": The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion

Jonathan Z. Smith

I AM GRATEFUL FOR the opportunity to meditate publicly on the task of introduction. While I am aware of the debate, at least as old as Hegel, and recently revived with passion by Derrida, on the status of the "preface" (*Vorrede*) and "introduction" (*Einleitung*), I set this aside, for the present discourse, in obedience to a counsel of prudence. For it is a fact, despite what we may sometimes claim, that the majority of us, as teachers, earn our living (and our departments get FTE'd) by means of the introductory course. This is recognized, albeit in an unfortunately grudging manner, in the widespread pejorative term, "service course." *As college teachers, our primary expertise is introducing.* Thinking about introducing should play the same role in our profession as meditating on first principles plays for the metaphysician. It is not a task for amateurs, nor, as is too often the case, should it be assigned casually (or punitively) to neophytes.

I take as my starting point the proposition that *an introductory course serves the primary function of introducing the student to college-level work*, to beginning work in the liberal arts. Its particular subject matter is of secondary import. All of my remarks in this essay are aimed at unpacking this proposition from several vantage points.

All college curricular thought, and most particularly thought about

the introductory enterprise, must begin with a recognition of its rigid temporal constraints: for example, the average introduction, under the quarter system, consumes less than one calendar day of instructional time, some 21 hours, 20 minutes. As there is no reason to presume that any student who takes such a course will go on to take another in the same subject—indeed, there is every reason to assume that most students won't—less than one calendar day represents, at best, for a significant number of students, their sole course of study in a given subject. As traditionally conceived, from the point of view of subject matter, for most students an introduction is simultaneously a finale. Clearly, subject matter, thought of in some lineal progression, cannot be our primary organizing principle. Given these temporal constraints, no introductory course can do everything; no course can be complete. The notion of a survey, of "coverage," becomes ludicrous. As long as we do not allow ourselves to be misled by the notion that every introductory course is an introduction to the major program, and that the major is a preparation for graduate study in the same field—a notion that has neither factual nor educational warrant—then, *there is nothing that must be taught*, there is nothing that cannot be left out.

I take as a corollary to these preliminary observations that each thing taught is taught, not because it is "there," but because it connects, in some interesting way, with something else, because it is an example, an "e.g.," of something that is fundamental, something that may serve as a precedent for further acts of interpretation and understanding by providing an arsenal of paradigmatic data and strategies from which to reason, from which to extend the possibility of intelligibility and significance to that which first appears novel, incomprehensible, or self-evident. One of the prime tasks of the introducer is to make such exemplifications explicit.

As I have argued elsewhere (1987), the difference between college and high school-level work, that which ought to be, above all else, an object of continual reflection in higher education, nowhere more so than in the context of the introductory course, lies primarily in an attitude towards words and discourse. In college, words are no longer thought to be expressive of things; in philosophical terms, they are no longer "real"; they are no longer vocabularies to be mastered ("30 minutes a day") or to be judged by the degree to which they correspond to something "out there." In college, it is we who master words. Rather than evaluate the relationship of words to things, we evaluate the relationship of words to other words and to other acts of human imagination. It is a process that has many names, but, above all, it is known as argument.

For it is argument, in particular argument about interpretations, that marks the distinctive mode of speech that characterizes college. What John Robert Seeley, Professor of Modern History, and one of the leaders of the late Victorian educational reform movement, said of history, in an introductory lecture to Cambridge college students in 1881, applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other fields as well:

In history, everything depends upon turning narrative into problems. . . . Break the drowsy spell of narrative; ask yourself questions; set yourself problems; you will become an investigator; you will cease to be solemn and begin to be serious. (139)¹

"*Turn narrative into problems*"—I know of no better imperative for college-level work, in distinction from secondary schooling. I should like to develop its implications for three areas of relevance to introducing: reading and writing, argument, and lying.

If an introductory course is an introduction to college-level work, this means, above all, that *an introductory course is concerned with developing the students' capacities for reading, writing, and speaking*—developing them in such a way that narrative is turned into problems. This leads to some general prescriptions. An introductory course must feature a good bit of activity. For example, there should be short weekly writing assignments on a set task that requires reflection, argumentation, and risk-taking. (The traditional term or research paper is wholly inappropriate to the introductory course). Written work should never be reportage ("mere narrative," in Seeley's term), but rather should require an appropriation of the material in a format in which there is never a "right answer." Mastery implies the capacity to "fool around." (Example: How would Lévi-Strauss interpret a Budweiser Beer advertisement?) Each piece of writing must be rewritten at least once, regardless of grade, and this requires that every piece of writing be returned to the student, with useful comments, no later than the next class period. Collaborative work among groups of students should be encouraged, whether with respect to oral or written work, and an ethic of revision rather than originality should prevail. Among other devices, I ask my students to keep two notebooks, one for class and one for their reading. They are to make their notes on the right-hand pages and register queries, thoughts, conversations (with attribution) with other students, and, above all, revisionary proposals and rereadings on the left. At least once

¹On Seeley's activities as an educational reformer, see the general account in Rothblatt, and the more particular narrative in Wormell: 48-74.

a quarter, I call in all students' notebooks and texts. After reading them through, I have individual conferences with each student to go over what they've written and underlined and to discuss with them what this implies as to how they are reading and reflecting.

Please note, these sorts of pragmatic prescriptions raise a fundamental issue of professional responsibility. Bluntly put, we have as solemn an obligation to "keep up" with the literature and research in education and learning as we do in our particular fields of interest and research. *No one* should be permitted to teach an introductory course who is not conversant, among other matters, with the literature on the cognitive development of college-age individuals, with issues of critical reasoning and informal logic, and with research in reading and writing instruction. (This latter has, in the past two decades, become a separate and highly developed academic discipline).² While there is surely art in teaching, it is, above all, a skilled profession.

Beyond anecdotal gossip about this or that teaching device with respect to writing, beyond the requirement of knowledge of serious research in the field, there are important theoretical issues that entail choices that must be made by any teacher of introductions.

There are, in fact, at least two distinct introductory tasks that we confront daily, regardless of field. The first is the introduction, the initiation, the enculturation of our students into the community of college as different from those other communities they know best, most particularly the communities of home and secondary school. The former difference we tend to address largely through the extra-curriculum, ranging from residence halls (in some institutions) to a planned diversity of admissions and student services (in most). Curricularly, we address difference from home only obliquely, by challenging notions of authority, by instilling an ethic of everything (at least in principle) being open to public suspicion and question. By largely confining the contrast of college and home to the extra-curriculum, the faculty has allowed itself to remain officially unconscious of this most central, and often most painful, process of enculturation.

The second introduction, the initiation into the difference between the intellectual community of high school and college, is seen chiefly as a matter of general education—more recently, as the responsibility of programs in generic skills such as writing and critical reasoning. However, there is latent in such a conception of the tasks of general educa-

²For the development of writing as a distinct academic discipline, see the important historical study of J.A. Berlin.

tion a set of issues that have yet to be addressed widely by the educational community and that require consideration of a third, distinct and more traditional, educational task: the initiation into a disciplinary community as separate from the community of college.

Whether one turns to newer studies in rhetoric, linguistic researches in fields such as pragmatics, or to important polemic works such as John McPeck's *Critical Thinking and Education*, one finds a widespread suspicion of the notion of a "universal audience," and, therefore, a denial of the plausibility of generic argument and omnipurpose, omnicompetent writing and reasoning capacities. Allow me to quote three quite different statements in illustration of this latter point. The first is taken from Gilbert Ryle's attack on the adequacy of universal notions of formal logic:

A first-rate mathematician and a first-rate literary critic might share the virtue of arguing impeccably, while their other intellectual virtues could be so disparate that neither could cope even puerilely with the problems of the other. Each thinks scrupulously inside his own field, but most of their scruples are of entirely different kinds. (21)

The second is a bold, even hyperbolic, assertion from McPeck's book, *Critical Thinking and Education*:

There are as many types of legitimate argument as there are fields or subjects that may be argued about. . . . And fields, with their corresponding modes of reasoning, differ more widely than species of animals. (79)

The third example is, in its way, the most telling, for the author is innocent of any theoretical or educational purpose in reporting the anecdote. It is from a recent best-seller, *Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman*, by the late Nobel prize winning physicist. Feynman writes that he decided to spend his summer vacations not by traveling to a different place but by studying in a different field. One summer, and one sabbatical year, was spent working on phage experiments in the biology laboratories at Cal Tech. According to his account, his results were significant enough to interest James Watson and to have him invited to give a series of seminars to the biologists at Harvard. Nevertheless, he writes:

(The) work on phage I never wrote up . . . I did write something . . . on it. I sent it to Edgar (a biologist) who laughed when he read it. It wasn't in the standard form that biologists use—first procedures, and so forth. I spent a lot of time explaining things that all the biologists knew. Edgar made a shortened version (of my paper) but I couldn't understand it. I don't think they ever published it. . . . I learned a lot of

things in biology . . . I got better at pronouncing the words, knowing what not to include in a paper or seminar, and detecting weak technique. . . . (62-3)³

This is indeed an extraordinary testament. A Nobel laureate in Physics is "laughed at" by his biologist colleagues when he writes up his biological experiments. Conversely, when a professional biologist writes up Feynman's experiments and results "in proper form," Feynman "couldn't understand it." Just how complex a matter Feynman signals with the phrase, "it wasn't in the standard form biologists use," may be illustrated by a number of recent, careful studies, most especially the work of Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*,⁴ which traces and prints out the development of a scientific research paper from the original experiment and lab notebook through all the intermediary draftings and revisions (including those by readers and editors of journals) to the final published form, and Charles Bazerman's paper, "Codifying the Social Scientific Style: The APA Manual as a Behaviorist Rhetoric" (Bazerman: 257-77).⁵ For this readership, to take an apparently modest example, one need only reflect for a time on the implications of the difference in the manner of citation between the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and *Semeia* or *History of Religions* and the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and on what they suggest as to different presuppositions with respect to authority and exegesis.⁶

³From a different perspective, Feynman's anecdote provides a rudimentary curriculum for an introductory course devoted to the task of enculturating students into a particular knowledge community, as a first course in the major or the like. (1) A student needs to learn something of the domain of the knowledge community, its characteristic topics, especially as expressed in the particular jargon of the field (Feynman's comment about "learning to pronounce the words"). (2) Even more important, in many respects, than learning how to articulate is the contrary skill of mastering the repression of speech, learning the tacit conventions, those matters stipulated or take for granted which do not have to be said (in Feynman's term, the "things that all biologists know"). (3) Learning what counts—as data, as arguments, as persuasive—according to the conventions of the field (what Ryle, in the passage quoted above, called the indigenous "scruples" of a discipline; what Feynman refers to as detecting "weak technique"). (4) Becoming adept in the necessarily fictive modes of accepted disciplinary discourse, suggested by Feynman's remarks on "proper form" and that he learned "what not to include in a paper or seminar," and raised to a procedural principle in the oft-cited observation by the distinguished biologist, P. Medawar (169), that the conventions of the biological research paper not only "conceal but actively misrepresent" what occurs in the laboratory.

⁴While less clearly focused on the written product, see also Latour and Woolgar.

⁵Bazerman's entire collection of essays should be read in conjunction with the works cited in note 4.

⁶Allow me to develop this comparison. The "humanistic" format of footnotes and citations was first developed for the study of classical texts. It is relentlessly hermeneutic. It requires the reader to view what is being set forth by the author as deriving from the interpretation of some other, quite specific, text. It invites the reader to pause and compare that text with the author's interpretation as

Reflecting on these examples has any number of educational implications for curriculum development in upper-level courses. It may well be the particular knowledge-communities (as institutionalized, in most places, in the departmental majors) that ought to take primary responsibility for college-level writing instruction rather than freshman programs in generic, expository writing aimed at an imagined abstract and universalized audience. Conversely, reflecting on such examples may lead to the conclusion that other modes of writing—especially more reflexive or playful styles and genres—ought to be to the fore in general education courses and in those introductory courses that are thought of as being particularly appropriate to the task of enculturating the student into the academy at large, as opposed to the introductory courses that aim to enculturate the student into the several disciplines and knowledge communities. The question of writing is but a variant of the basic educational decision: What does the introductory course introduce?

Closely related to the above—and my second reflection on the injunction to “turn narrative into problems”—is the role of argumentation, especially argument about interpretations. For me, this question entails two other propositions, both social in nature. The first is that a central goal of liberal learning is the acceptance of (and training in) *the requirement to bring private percept into public discourse and, therefore, the requirement to learn to negotiate difference with civility*. It is this requirement that, in our culture, makes religion a useful subject for an introductory course to the community of college and to college-level work. The second is the insistence that *argument exists for the purpose of clarifying choices* and that choices are always consequential, that is to say, they require the acceptance of responsibility. I emphasize the first proposition to counter the adolescent caricature that argument is what occurs at home around the dining room table when everyone shouts and no one listens. Conclusion: keeping one’s thoughts to oneself is the wisest

well as with alternative interpretations cited in the note. It is a paradigmatic view of reading, and an understanding of argument which privileges the conflict of interpretations. The “scientific” format of citation was first developed for legal and parliamentary writing. It provides authority by citing precedents, by locating the author’s intellectual pedigree. A citation such as “(Lévi-Strauss, 1964-71)” does not invite pausing and interpretative activity. It associates the author’s opinion, in the mind of the reader, with a position adumbrated by a recognized authority—with no expectation that the relevant passage will actually be ferreted out by the reader from a four-volume work of some 1600 difficult pages. It is a syntagmatic view of reading which privileges genealogy. A decision by an author (let alone an editor) as to the format of referencing and citation will produce fundamentally different texts, even if the words remain the same, which presuppose different sorts of knowledge and capacities on the part of the reader and which articulate different visions of “what counts” as persuasive.

strategy; privacy is protective coloration that leads to some ethic of immature toleration; "let everyone do their own thing." I emphasize the second proposition to counter the caricature often denoted in political and parental discourse by the improper label, "relativism," the notion that there is "always another point of view" and that, therefore, decisions can be seen either as provisional and irrational or as being endlessly put off until certainty obtains.

Attention to matters of choice and responsibility ought to begin on the first day of class with a discussion of that most primary text, the course syllabus—a disclosure of the choices made as to its order, the kinds and format of the data, the relationship among the topics, the relative time spent on each item; a discussion of the options considered and rejected as well as the reasons why; an attempt to account for the intended intellectual benefits and costs of the various decisions. That is to say, I want to use the syllabus as the first occasion for reflecting aloud on choices and consequences. I want to impeach the apparent self-evidence of the syllabus and make plain its status as a constructed argument. For this reason, textbooks ought *never* to be used in introductory courses, and anthologies, but sparingly. They shift constructive responsibility away from teacher and class to an external, all but omniscient, narrator and authority. It is important that moments of reprise be scheduled throughout the course, moments of reflection on the relative adequacy of the choices made as well as time available for the entertainment of revisionary proposals once students are more "in the know."

For example, my year-long introductory course, "Religion in Western Civilization," is organized around a single question that represents an argumentative definition of 'civilization': "What is tradition?" "How are traditions maintained, through change, by acts of reinterpretation?" This issue is made concrete and consequential, on the very first day, by reference to the current political debates over the Constitution and the Supreme Court. That is to say, there is nothing innocent about a definition of 'tradition' or 'civilization' as a contested construct rather than a stable deposit. Students have strong feelings about the question (when put in this way) and a stake in its answer—the notion of a stake being the proper sense in which a matter is "interesting." Ventilating this, and encouraging students to commit themselves publicly, sets up opinions to be tested, reformed, and revised into arguments throughout the course. The same sort of discussion is invited by the decision to begin the study of the "West" with the Ancient Near East rather than with Greece. What are the implications and consequences of constructing the political history of the "West" as essentially monarchic rather than

democratic? Again, engagement with current political discourse and with students' expectations serves to make the question both open and interesting.

All of my introductory courses are constructed around a few formal rules, each in the service of argument and consequence. To cite but two: first, *always begin with the question of definition*; second, *nothing must stand alone*. I have just illustrated the first. The second rule requires that every item encountered in an introductory course have a conversation partner, so that each may have, or be made to have, an argument with another in order that students may negotiate difference, evaluate, compare, and make judgments. While historically grounded contrasts are common coin-of-the-realm, I find that anachronistic, surprising juxtapositions are often more useful pedagogically. For example, after reading Durkheim's romantically optimistic account of "collective effervescence," show and discuss Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film of the Nazi Nuremberg rally, "The Triumph of the Will;" after reading Eliade's romantic account of initiatory ordeals, read the sadistic, ritualistic pornographic classic, *The Story of O*. The effect is to reveal the hidden consequences latent in a given position. More recently, I have adopted the practice of regularly juxtaposing Supreme Court cases to the topics studied, if possible reading closely split (5-4) decisions. I do this for a variety of reasons. Students often know the results reached by the Court, they rarely have any sense of the processes by which the decisions are reached. At the level of the Supreme Court, the data are stipulated, and there is general agreement as to the relevant constitutional provisions and legal precedents. (That is to say, difference is not a product of one side knowing something the other side doesn't know, or knowing "more.") Students are able to observe, and participate in, the construction of alternative arguments and plausibility structures, reasoned from a common base, concerning issues of social consequence. For example, after reading Durkheim on the distinction between the sacred and the profane, I have my students read the text of the Pawtucket Crèche case,⁷ where the arguments depend on the question of whether the crèche, and other displayed symbols, serve a "religious" or a "secular" purpose. If Durkheim had presented a brief to the Court, what would he have said? Both Durkheim and the American issue of "separation" become mutually complicated, and yet a decision needs to be reached. By the conclusion of the exercise, the students, having read Durkheim, "see" aspects

⁷Lynch v. Donnelly, 465 U.S. 668, 79 L. Ed. 2nd 604, 104 S. Ct. 1355 (1984). The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a new crèche case during its current term.

of the case that the Court ignored; likewise, the students, having read the case that describes a familiar rather than an exotic religious activity, discover new implications in Durkheim's position.

The third aspect of the injunction, "turn narrative into problems," is the most reflexive of all, for it concerns how we, as teachers, problematize our classroom narratives. That is to say, it concerns our habit of "white" lying in introductory courses—I know there are happier euphemisms such as "simplification"—when we persistently disguise what is problematic in our work. For example, we traditionally screen from our students the hard work that results in the editorial production of exemplary texts. Despite what we know, we treat them as "found objects," reading them with our students as if each word were directly revelatory. Moreover, we conceal from our students the time-bound conditional judgments that make the objects exemplary, and we ignore their revisionary histories. We display texts as if they were self-evidently meaningful and significant and allow our students to feel guilty or dumb if they do not immediately share this perception. That is to say, we convey to our students a specious perfection of the object studied, a specious ease to the processes of reading, and a specious necessity to the history of that object. Think of the educational consequences. If we present a theoretical work as perfect, as having no revisionary history, then we present a work that no student can hope to emulate. Of more gravity, if we present an exemplary text without its attendant reception-history, we appear to reduce its evaluation to the vagaries of taste or, more recently, to the politics of self-interest. In either case, in the name of simplification we have mystified the object.

Similarly, in the name of simplification, we lie by treating theories as if they were facts. We treat difficult, complex, controversial theoretical entities as if they were self-evident constituents of the universe we inhabit. Students coming out of introductory courses in the Humanities know that there is such a "thing" as an author's intention, and they regularly and effortlessly recover it from whatever text passes into view. Students in introductory courses in the Social Sciences know that there is such a "thing" as a society that functions, and they effortlessly and regularly claim to observe it doing so. Students in introductory courses in the Natural Sciences are soon wedded to what Nietzsche called "the myth of the immaculate perception," and regularly, effortlessly, and without embarrassment gaze at "naked facts." Despite the oft-repeated claim that, in our introductory courses, we teach the "how" rather than the "what" of a given field, we do not. When I read my students' texts with them in conference, it is always the theoretical punch-line that

they've underlined, never anything of the process that led to its formulation. That is to say, theoretical proposals are being reduced to naked facts. Discussion often takes the format of "show and tell," with students displaying to one another these now unproblematic and self-evident conclusions. We have successfully concealed from our students the methodological force of Carl Friedrich Gauss's remark, "I have my results, I do not yet know how I am to arrive at them." This ignorance of process (as different from conclusion) is buttressed by a false generosity with respect to matters of method and theory, presenting this method or theory in summary one week, that method or theory the next. None of them is allowed to have the kind of monomaniacal imperialist power a good theory or method displays. Lacking this force, theories and methods have been reduced to gossip, to mere opinions, without entailments or consequences. Again, in the name of simplification we have encouraged mystification.

The point of the above is to insist on an *ethic that students be "in the know."* If the purpose of an introductory course is to introduce students to college-level work, then a part of that task consists in introducing the students to the academy's ethos of disclosure. The problem is not one of difficulty; it is one of time. We need to decrease coverage in order to allow for frequent structured pauses in which our narrative becomes problematic. To take only the first issue raised above, that of the concealment of the editorial work that produces exemplary texts, ten pages of reading, a one-page handout of translated material, twenty minutes of homework, and twenty minutes of class time is sufficient to allow my students to debate and vote on a set of carefully chosen "variant readings" in the New Testament, giving them some sense of how a text is constructed by acts of scholarly judgement. Experienced once, this exercise needs only to be alluded to again with each new text encountered.⁸

Permit me three concluding observations. To the degree that an introductory course serves as an introduction to college-level work, the proper context for its discussion and evaluation is not the department. One might wish for the creation of a regular, college-wide forum where everyone involved in the teaching of introductory courses, regardless of their putative subject matters, might gather to discuss their common pedagogical problems and resources. To the degree that an introductory course serves as an introduction to college-level work in a particular

⁸For a stunning set of examples of editorial and compositional histories, drawn from modern American literature, which I have used with profit as supplementary reading in my introductory, year-long course, "The Bible in Western Civilization," see Parker.

community of discourse, one would expect that one's colleagues would have detailed knowledge of what has been introduced and would build, explicitly, on it in subsequent courses.

For myself, I know of no more interesting educational exercise than meeting, two or three years later, for an evening, with small groups of students from my introductory courses, to reread and discuss one text from the introduction and to reread and discuss their first papers on that text. By and large, our current grading systems give no means by which a student might gauge whether he or she has gained "depth." We need scheduled moments of reprise, formalized moments of return during a four year course of study, so that students can see for themselves the distance they have traveled, the mastery they have acquired. To this end, I am much taken with experiments such as student portfolios of their four years work coupled with "exit interviews" to review them, or senior seminars which reread texts.

All that we do is in service of what is, for me, the chief goal of a liberal arts education: *the empowering of a student so that she or he gains possession of an intellectual autobiography*. This sort of mastery requires a trained self-consciousness, the acquisition of skills in public discourse, the capacity to negotiate complex materials, and occasions for representing one's ownership in focused products. Above all, it requires an educational environment in which students are "in the know" in every possible respect. The introductory course, as it works on turning narrative into problems, is a first chapter in this endeavor.

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