

I am deeply honored to be this year's recipient of the Fortin Award. My thanks to all of my colleagues and students, who, through the years, have taught me so much, and have given so much to me. My thanks to my wife Alice, with whom, these days, I spend a lot of time talking about teaching (don't worry; we talk about other things as well!). Thank you to Michael Fortin, who, to honor Roger, has bestowed a great and inspiring gift upon the humanities at Xavier. And special thanks to Roger's old friend and colleague, Ernie Fontana. It was Ernie who, in 1980, had the confidence to hire a rather unseasoned 26-year old graduate student about to finish an absurdly long dissertation on modern poetry, and with a young family, very much in need of a job. Thirty-eight years later, Ernie has retired after an extraordinary career, and for the time being, I'm still hanging in there.

Some years after my coming to Xavier, the faculty was given the task of revising the Core. (I'm sure this sounds familiar to some of you.) Ernie was on the committee, out of which came the Ethics / Religion & Society focus, which remains with us to this day. He invented a new literature course for ER/S to go with the first Philosophy course, the first Theology course, and the elective. It was called Literature & the Moral Imagination, and as he described it to me, frankly, it gave me the willies. I won't rehearse all the problems I had with the title and the intent of the course, despite his reassurances that the moral dimension of literature was to be *investigated*, and that no one ethical or religious perspective was to be put forward as unquestionable. (I may have claimed to be a Marxist back then, but I was also something of an aesthete, and hence my anxiety. Blame it on writing poetry.) As the course gradually became a regular part of my teaching load, however, I realized that it had a great deal to offer.

One of the wonderful things about teaching in the Xavier English Department has been the relative flexibility we have in regard to the courses each of us is able to offer. We often have the opportunity to develop new courses, following our scholarly interests. Over the years I have taught courses in modern American literature, literary theory, Jewish literature, poetry, and creative writing. But the many versions I've taught of *Literature & the Moral Imagination* (I think I'm up to ten at this point) have offered me something that no other course has: the chance to teach a wide variety of works far beyond my areas of expertise, to the general student body, so that together we can explore literary worlds in ways that constantly challenge me and renew my sense of myself as a reader, which is to say, as a student of literature. From Shakespeare and the 19th-century European novel to forties film noir and contemporary cyberpunk fiction, *Literature & the Moral Imagination* has led me to frame and re-frame not only my understanding of literary history, genre, and form, but most importantly, to rethink my methods of interpretation, as my students and I raise questions about the ethical, religious, social and political aspects of the texts we read together. What does it mean, I ask these students (many of whom will not take another literature course at Xavier), to read a text deeply—to let its strangeness unsettle you as it challenges your assumptions about the world, to let it lead you to unfamiliar places in language, and to places within yourself that you might not be so willing to go.

It makes sense, therefore, that the current version of *Literature & the Moral Imagination* that I'm teaching is on the uncanny. I have become increasingly interested in the literature of the uncanny, but also in literature as an uncanny art—and in the teaching of literature as an uncanny practice. What do I mean when I call teaching an uncanny

practice? You may be surprised to learn that, starting with Freud in his foundational essay on the uncanny (*das Unheimlich*—the “unhomelike,” the alien, the foreign...), there is a fascinating body of work on this subject. For Freud, the uncanny involves “intellectual uncertainty” (221). Many horror stories, for instance, pose a basic uncanny question: is the thing before me alive or dead? Furthermore, Freud tells us that “everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret” (225). If we bring these concepts into the classroom, especially the literature classroom, we discover some remarkable implications for a psychology and philosophy of pedagogy. Here is the English critic Nicholas Royle, explaining how this is the case:

Who is speaking and to whom is one speaking when one teaches? One of the most ‘obvious’ yet still perhaps incomprehensible truths of psychoanalysis becomes evident as soon as one questions, in the classroom, who is present and who is not: am I not, as a teacher, inseparable from those who have taught me? And does the classroom contain only those who are ‘literally’ present? Are there not mothers and fathers, friends and others, alive and dead, and even not yet born, known and unknown, also in the classroom? There is no teaching, it may be said, without this experience of radical uncertainty about whom one is addressing and, by extension, who is teaching whom. The experience of such uncertainty is not a negative thing: it is rather the condition of teaching and learning. To love teaching, to love certain texts, to love certain ways of thinking: this is possible only in a context of mortal uncertainty. (56-57)

Some of you know that for the past five years, I have been a research candidate, that is, a student, at the Cincinnati Psychoanalytic Institute (and that at present, I’m also

teaching a course on Freud here at Xavier with Dr. Karl Stukenberg). I hope to finish my studies there this year. But in an uncanny fashion, study of this sort, like teaching, never really comes to an end. Shoshana Felman, another commentator on psychoanalytic pedagogy, tells us, in an essay appropriately called “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable,” that

The analysand is qualified to be an analyst as of the point at which he understands his own analysis to be inherently unfinished, incomplete, as of the point, that is, at which he settles into his own didactic analysis—or his own analytical apprenticeship—as fundamentally interminable. In other words, as of the moment the student recognizes that *learning has no term*, that he can himself become a teacher, assume the position of the teacher. But the position of the teacher is itself the position of *the one who learns*, of the one who *teaches* nothing other than *the way he learns*. The subject of teaching is interminably—a student; the subject of teaching is interminably—a learning. This is the most radical, perhaps the most far-reaching insight psychoanalysis can give us into pedagogy. (37)

If I think about teaching, especially teaching literature, in terms of the uncertainty and interminability upon which the analytic tradition insists, I realize that the best I can do for my students when I am in the classroom is to model those states in our discussions of the texts before us. How do we develop an interpretation of a challenging, estranging poem or story? What does it mean to *know*, to be *familiar*, with a work of literature, when we sense that something of its meaning is always hidden from us? Digging up the deep meaning of a literary work is an uncanny activity: is it alive or dead? That we do it again

and again, that teaching literature involves what Freud calls a repetition compulsion, makes it all the more uncanny.

“Turn it and turn it again” the Talmud tells us, “for everything is in it.” Freud, the great Talmudist of our mental life, is no longer studied in American psychology departments. Like the Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* (or the Wandering Jew), he cannot seem to rest or find a home in the academy, though he sometimes finds temporary respite in English Departments. To borrow some lines from the *Mariner*,

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.

Coleridge, not accidentally, was the first poet I loved; to a greater extent than any other poems afterward, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, along with “Kubla Khan,” turned me into a poet, and it is to those poems that I compulsively return. I could no sooner stop teaching them, than I could stop writing poetry myself, however frightening that might sound. So let me close with a poem of mine that brings all these concerns together. It’s called “Teachers,” from a little sequence called “Terminable and Interminable.”

Interestingly, I didn’t reprint it when I put together my new and selected poems a couple of years ago. It seems to have come back on its own.

Teachers

Everyone grows tired of the search for the father,
who, to hear it said, cares for no one but himself.
Fatigued but determined, we walk now through our lives
as if shopping for our destinies in some suburban mall.
So you are surprised to find yourself feeling quite young again
when suddenly faced with that old man on the street corner.
Had that been your teacher? or was it only someone like him,
the years’ little joke, deceptive and cruel.

Is this the moment that occasions so many complaints?
It seems less like a lesson than a chance encounter,
a few words exchanged in an uncanny repetition,
too casual for anyone to revere or resent.
Yet you never stop longing for approval,
as you never stop longing for knowledge.
The path to the sciences leads only through the teachers;
only after you win their affection
will they tell you what you yearn to know.

But they go off alone while you grow up.
What point now in feeling nostalgic for men
whose identities are never secure?
Their truth lies only in the uncertainty of recurrence,
the dim transference of envy and love.
In some aberrant moment of strayed affection,
you see his world narrowing into a sad shape of wisdom
forever receding from your grasp.

Compelled to live a life of deferment,
you think of how wandering is the best compensation,
and the only one that ever occurred to you.
You are the teacher, as old as the men you meet.

Works Cited

- Felman, Shoshana. "Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable." *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 21-44.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" (1919). Trans. Alix Strachey. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*: 217-256
- Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003.