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# Areas of Expertise, Proleptic Interpretation, Penultimate Drafts: Three Ideas for the Graduate Seminar in Literature

**Mark W. Roche**

Ohio State University

With few institutional forums for the study of teaching literature, most young teachers intuit the essentials of good teaching from exemplary models or develop their own methodologies through either trial-and-error or informed dialogue with their colleagues. I would like to contribute to such a dialogue by sharing three practices that I have found particularly effective: first, asking the students to adopt several areas of expertise for the course of a seminar; second, thinking through with the students a particular interpretation of a given work and then attempting to undermine or show the limits of the given interpretation; third, inviting students to submit, two weeks before the due date, penultimate drafts of their seminar papers which are then promptly returned full of questions, comments, and suggestions.

## Areas of Expertise

Princeton University's Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures requires its graduate students to prepare one synchronic and one diachronic topic of their own choosing as part of their General Examination. Topics can be conventional, e.g., German *Klassik* or the *Bildungsroman*, but they can also be unorthodox, e.g., notions of infinity in German literature and philosophy (1781-1831) or the trial in German literary history. Ideally the topics lead the student to either a dissertation or the development of a course. During my first two years at Princeton I spent a great deal of time discussing the viability of various topics with my fellow students. This was engaging and fruitful discourse, first, in terms of the insights gained by thinking through individual topics, second, in terms of the awareness we developed for ways of reading or of organizing our understanding of literature.

When I began teaching I decided to vary this idea somewhat and integrate it into individual seminars. During the first class of a given quarter I present the students with a list of topics that seem appropriate to the wider subject matter of the seminar. I ask each student to select three topics from the list (or add his/her own) and present them in ranked order to me at the next session. I then distribute—depending on class size—either two or three topics to each student. The students are invited to become experts in the chosen areas for the course of the quarter.

Most teachers will have little difficulty finding twenty or thirty topics for any course. For an introductory course on German comedy, for example, I suggested the following themes: staging (including stage directions); generational conflicts; the appearance/reality dualism; master-servant relations; male-female relations;

minor characters; tragic elements and the parody of tragedy; structure (architectonic dimensions); levels of realism; dramatic irony; rhetorical language and symbolism; types of comic characters; lying as a form of subjectivity; self-reflexive moments (including, but not limited to, the breaking of the illusion of verisimilitude); historical referents; language and word games; money, poverty, and wealth; theories of laughter; the argument *ad absurdum*; apologetic vs. subversive moments (Does the play uphold or reject society's values?); sexuality and the use of obscenities; expositions; character constellations; semantic and pragmatic contradictions;<sup>1</sup> misunderstandings and miscommunications; types of obstacles faced by the comic hero; dialogical situation; foreshadowing; identity crises; endings. The student focusing on theories of laughter might try to make the theories of superiority, incongruity, and festivity fruitful for individual interpretations of comedies. He/she will likely be motivated to read a work such as Henri Bergson's *Le Rire*. The student who develops an expertise in language may discover word plays in Büchner's *Leonce und Lena* that have been overlooked in the research and contribute to our understanding of the play. The student focusing on obstacles might introduce an interesting dialectic to our discussion of *Weh dem, der lügt!*: the external obstacle to Leon's plans (telling the truth) eventually becomes his internal goal. The student whose expertise is in staging may recognize, for example, that, depending on the placement and size of the mirror, the audience will likely be viewing itself at the conclusion of Carl Zuckmayer's *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* when the hero shouts "Unmöglich!"<sup>2</sup>

Topics frequently overlap. Rather than presenting problems, this merging of interests aids discussion and helps students recognize the heuristic value of individual topics. A discussion of blocking characters, for example, would benefit from the input of students working on such diverse topics as obstacles, generational conflicts, dialogical situation, types of comic characters, language, staging, etc. Master-servant and male-female relations often follow asymmetrical patterns that lead to identity crises in the heroes and may reveal false assumptions of tragic grandeur. In approaching any organic work, students with diverse topics will have much to share. Students frequently find that they can support with their own evidence a reading initiated by other students. Or the reverse may take place; for example, a student specializing in miscommunications may try to undermine another student's harmonic reading of an ending. Such confrontations enrich discussion.

The development of areas of expertise is an assignment independent of the student's obligatory *Referat* on a particular text. In an introductory seminar I grade the students in part on their contributions to class discussion but I do not specifically grade their areas of expertise. Some students become frustrated with their particular topics but nonetheless contribute to the general discussion. Rarely will I call on students, asking them to provide us with insights by way of their areas of expertise. I would likely call on a student only when I sense that the student may have an insight but is not yet confident enough to share it, voluntarily, in the public forum of the classroom.

The areas of expertise can also be used for examinations.<sup>3</sup> In the first part of an examination for the above mentioned course on German comedy the students were asked to deal with comedy in a general manner. They were instructed to answer one of the following two questions:

1. Define the genre of comedy. In support of your definition draw generously on the works we have read this quarter. Discuss the essence of comedy as well as differentiation within the genre. You will be graded on the coherency and thoroughness of your definition as well as on your ability to illustrate the definition with specific examples.
2. Apply one of your two areas of expertise to at least four of the eight plays we have read so far this quarter and show that your knowledge contributes to an understanding of the comic-dramatic action and the development of ideas in the various plays.

The purpose of areas of expertise is fourfold: to help the students prepare for specific classes; to increase the level of insights in class discussions; to invite students to think about diverse questions they might ask of a text; and to encourage them to develop ideas for original paper topics.

### **Proleptic Interpretation**

Prolepsis is the rhetorical device by which one anticipates possible objections to a given position in order that one might refute these objections in advance. Classroom discussion usually begins with a student *Referat* or with a comment or question, from either the teacher or a student. It does not take long for the discerning eye to develop a particular insight into the basis for an overarching reading of a text. As a teacher I try, mainly with questions, to bring the students to the point where a particular interpretation has begun to emerge. I then formulate the reading or ask one of the students to do so. Following this, we as a group try to find evidence for the reading all the while considering the types of evidence employed and the limitations that are to be placed on different kinds of evidence. As our reading and our search for support continues, we ask many questions of the text and of the validity of different types of evidence, and we begin to categorize different types of readings.<sup>4</sup>

We then seek to undermine our own primary reading by looking for blind spots in our interpretation, evidence that we have not yet integrated or were unable to incorporate. We return to the text again and again, seeking new evidence or raising unanswered questions. Whether or not we arrive at a coherent and comprehensive reading is not as significant as the fact that the students develop the skills both to ask appropriate and stimulating questions of a text and to weigh evidence for and against various interpretations. After each such inquiry the students are thoroughly versed in the intricacies of a particular text. When the students write papers, they know not to ignore counter-evidence. They integrate the evidence proleptically, i.e., they clearly demarcate the limits of their own reading, or they develop a more complex interpretation, either a contradictory or a synthetic reading of the text.

Students who are introduced to this approach find that their literature courses become theory courses in the best sense of the word. Theory of interpretation is related to its specific application. In this system teachers become discussion leaders, directing the inquiry and counter-inquiry, integrating student comments into the wider reading, asking the questions that challenge students to marshal yet more evidence in support of their interpretations. Despite the emphasis on discussion, teachers also remain imparters of knowledge, for their training enables them

to help support or refute readings by introducing information with which the students may not be familiar: intertextual dimensions, allusions to the tradition, intellectual-historical context, etc. Finally, the teacher can help students relate their own readings to issues and tendencies in contemporary criticism.

For the sake of illustration I include here a few examples of conflicting readings. The texts, which are taken from diverse periods and various genres of German literary history, include Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, Kleist's *Amphitryon*, Stifter's *Abdias*, Kaiser's *Gas*, and Broch's *Verzauberung*. A selection of subquestions that would help aid the inquiry are also included:

Is Hölderlin's *Hyperion* a novel of edification, or is there counter-evidence which suggests that the hero does not really progress? If the narrator's development occurs through the act of writing, how does one deal with the novel's problematization of language? Does the frequent dissolution of distinctions between the experiencing and narrating narrator undermine the supposed difference between an immature hero and more reflective narrator? What besides our assumption of chronological development speaks for the later statements of the narrator being more advanced than his earlier ones? How is one to explain the novel's one footnote, which appears to dismantle all hierarchies and implies that *Hyperion's* various positions pass before us as "bloße Phänomene des menschlichen Gemüts" (I, 16)?<sup>5</sup> Are not the categories that the novel valorizes—distancing reflection and composure—undercut at the novel's conclusion with its violent condemnation of the Germans? Doesn't the thesis of development imply a certain finality and closure that the last words of the novel, "Nächstens mehr," undermine (II, 124)? Does this phrase perhaps underscore the deferred and suspended nature of the hero's development?

Is Jupiter's assumption of *Amphitryon's* identity in Kleist's *Amphitryon* an example of brutal instrumentalization or of the speculative unity of the ideal and the real, such that the god's choice of *Amphitryon* becomes a great honor for him? Does the fact that *Amphitryon* is subtitled "Ein Lustspiel . . ." support one or the other of the above positions? Is it more legitimate to appeal to the logical structures of a work than to the author's intentions? How does our reading of the final "Ach" affect our answer to the above question (I, 320)?<sup>6</sup> Does an understanding of *Amphitryon's* identity crisis contribute to the debate? What is the import of the play's metalevels? Is the play a tragedy only for Alkmene but not also for *Amphitryon*?

Is the programmatic preface to Stifter's *Abdias* supported or refuted by the following text? What evidence supports which reading? How legitimate are references to biography, to parallel passages, to the history of the use of the preface? What are we to make of the narrator's references to chance? What kinds of cause and effect relationships do we observe in the story? What is the relationship between a logical sequence and its first member? What specific passages support a reading of the text as incongruous? Which reading does the parallel to Job support? What about the relationship between truth and evidence, i.e., is the validity of

the idea of a harmonic chain dependent on our ability to find the links in the chain? In what ways might negativity be constitutive of progress?

Does the Billionaire's Son represent idealism and progress in Georg Kaiser's *Gas*, or is his position of moral authority undermined in the text? How is the Billionaire's Son's taking us backwards any better than the Engineer's taking us in circles? If the Billionaire's Son is an idealist, how is it that he, like the Engineer, seeks the solution to moral questions in material circumstances? The Billionaire's Son appears to be one of the few figures who breaks out of his preordained role (he doesn't act like a Billionaire), or is it perhaps that he simply assumes a different role, the role of evangelist, that he, too, is merely a puppet? Isn't his daughter, who represents the final hope, also acting out a role, namely the role of mother (which was problematized earlier in the text)? Is the optimism implied by her pregnancy sufficiently prepared for and developed in the text? Does the play's symmetry in the final passages of each act suggest an aesthetic perfection and wholeness towards which reality is striving, or does this circularity undermine the idea of progress? Are appeals to the first and third parts of Kaiser's trilogy legitimate in our attempts to evaluate the Billionaire's Son's position? Does the vagueness of his solutions and later parallels between some of his ideas and those of the National Socialists have any bearing on the tenability of his position?

Do the similarities between Marius Ratti and the narrator in Hermann Broch's *Verzauberung* imply that Marius is a partially legitimate savior or does this equivalence lead us to view the narrator as unreliable? How does the novel's handling of such themes as sacrifice and technology support or refute the particular readings? What does Broch's theory of the antichrist contribute to the debate? Are any of Marius' criticisms of the age valid? Does the novel itself undermine a fatalistic view of the world? Is the age in need of salvation? Is the self-narration consonant or dissonant?<sup>7</sup> If both readings are supported equally, what does this ontological contradiction tell us about the philosophical tenability and aesthetic worth of the work itself?

If we encourage our students to think proleptically in class, we must then examine them not only on the clichés of literary history but on strategies of argumentation and their ability to integrate opposing readings into their own interpretations.<sup>8</sup> The second part of my examination for the course on German comedy listed fifteen statements, mini-interpretations as it were. The directions read:

Support or refute two of the following positions. You will be graded not on your decision to support or refute but on the cogency of your argument, in particular your ability to do justice to the ideas at stake and the text(s) in question. You may want to support *and* refute the position at hand. If so, you must argue either why both positions (the one given and its negation) are tenable or why neither is correct. (You may not write on a play for which you have prepared a presentation.)

One position stated what I think is a tenable reading of Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater* but asked the students to integrate into their reading a paradox of literary history:

Romantic irony is normally employed to undercut an aesthetic construct. In Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater*, however, the ironic transgression of boundaries does not destroy, rather it helps make possible, the poet's creation.

Other positions suggested readings that I consider untenable, but for which there seems to be evidence. The students are invited to integrate that evidence and show why it does not undermine an alternative reading. In refuting the initial claim, the student must deal with some of the most complex issues of the plays in question. Two such positions follow:

The comic protagonist of Grillparzer's *Weh dem, der lügt!* does not develop. This is clear from the fact that he lies at the opening of the play and repeats this vice at the play's conclusion.

All social-political satire in Büchner's *Leonce und Lena* is undercut by the relativism and nihilism of the play's ultimate statement: truth is a form of error that serves life in an arbitrary manner; it is an illusion designed to disguise meaninglessness, disenchantment, and powerlessness.

The proleptic approach works in a positive manner against the increasing specialization and autonomy within schools of literary criticism. It brings theory into the classroom in a specific and fruitful sense. It encourages honesty in interpretation: the students are asked to undermine or show the limits of their own readings of the text. Finally, it provides the students with the tools to write convincing readings; by dealing with opposing positions all along the path of their argument, the students have countered possible objections in advance.

### Penultimate Drafts

Graduate students sometimes wish they had more time to write seminar papers, but almost always wish they had the benefit of a teacher's comments before handing in a final copy. First, they want to benefit from whatever exchange of ideas is available to them so that they can write the best papers possible. Second, they naturally want good grades.

Reworking a penultimate draft laced with the teacher's comments is, I think, always a stylistically and intellectually beneficial enterprise.<sup>9</sup> The students not only read, they work through the reader's, i.e., the teacher's, comments. The students are not likely to raise their grades a great deal, let's say from a C to an A, but experience suggests that it is not infrequent for a student to pass from a C- to a C+ or from a B+ to an A-.

Independent of grade considerations, it seems to me that our graduate students need practice not primarily in writing but in writing well. Most graduate students will likely say they write too many papers; this is nothing new. A good graduate student, however, will argue—and I think justly—that once he/she has written one good paper, it is difficult and not always productive to scribble an assignment simply for the sake of the assignment. The student's standards have justly been raised. The solution may be to have students write fewer but better papers. At the same time we should not reduce, indeed we should perhaps increase, the students'

number of classes and obligatory *Referate*.<sup>10</sup> Penultimate drafts would help serve such a reform.

Some graduate seminars require their students to write their papers during the semester. A completed paper is then distributed to other students and discussed during a given seminar session. While this practice serves a purpose similar to that of penultimate drafts, I am not particularly happy with it, especially at universities like my own that function according to the quarter system and in general at the lower levels of graduate instruction. In a more conventional system students write papers that develop from a general seminar discussion, from a constellation of works discussed in common. In fact seminar papers often evolve from *Referate* that raise questions and invite discussion rather than present or attempt to present conclusive information.<sup>11</sup> The chance to draw on the common seminar project is lost when papers are due as early as the fourth or fifth week of the quarter. One's timetable will obviously vary according to the calendar of the university and the number of participants in the seminar. One can imagine an ideal scenario with six students taking a seminar that lasts fourteen weeks. However, one could just as easily run into a situation where ten students are enrolled in a ten week course. A student may then have to prepare his or her paper very early in the quarter. The practice of early submission can also be a problem in introductory seminars where the students are asked to produce at the beginning or middle of the quarter what they are expected to learn in the course of the quarter. Penultimate drafts and the students' voluntary exchange of papers (sometimes, though not always, after the semester is past) seem like viable alternatives, if not already better solutions, to the problems that paper-writing-seminars also address.

Penultimate drafts encourage students to complete their papers promptly, they allow for better student-faculty dialogue, and they offer students a welcome opportunity not only to work through issues but to improve their performances. Finally, penultimate drafts encourage the refinement of the proleptic approach to literary analysis; by reading student papers before they are finished, the teacher helps the students confront issues and positions they might otherwise be tempted to ignore.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The distance between semantic (or analytic) and pragmatic contradictions, though not yet well known within the field of literary criticism, is central to contemporary philosophy, particularly the important work being done by Karl-Otto Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973) and Wolfgang Kuhlmann, *Reflexive Letztbegründung: Untersuchungen zur Transzendentalpragmatik* (Freiburg: Alber, 1985) on transcendental pragmatics, and by Vittorio Hösle, *Hegels System: Der Idealismus der Subjektivität und das Problem der Intersubjektivität*, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987 forthcoming), Christoph Jermann, *Philosophie und Politik: Untersuchungen zur Struktur und Problematik des platonischen Idealismus*, Elea 2 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1986) and Dieter Wandschneider, "Die Absolutheit des Logischen und das Sein der Natur. Systematische Überlegungen zum absolut-idealistischen Ansatz Hegels," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 39 (1985), pp. 331-51, on objective idealism. Semantic contradictions function according to the structure: "It is raining. It is not raining." These are the least interesting contradictions though they play roles in many comedies, e.g., in the comedy of disguise. A semantic contradiction would be, for example, the passage in Schnitzler's *Anatol* where the hero promises eternal love while simultaneously discussing the conditions of a possible



break-up. A pragmatic contradiction is one between content and form, or between what is said and the situation in which it is said. The statement "There is no truth" is not a semantic but a pragmatic contradiction. The claim is that truth consists in the fact that there is no truth. It is a contradiction between the content of the statement and its own claim to being true, i.e., its form. The statement cancels itself. Countless jokes follow the structure of pragmatic contradiction, for example, the joke about the masochist and the sadist: The masochist says, "Beat me!"; the sadist responds, "No!". Pragmatic contradictions are essential to such German comedies as Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*, Büchner's *Leonce und Lena*, Grillparzer's *Weh dem, der lügt!*, and Brecht's *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti*.

<sup>2</sup>Carl Zuckmayer, *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979), p. 128.

<sup>3</sup>Examinations are sometimes given in introductory graduate courses where students are not expected to write research papers. This is particularly true at larger universities where several levels of graduate courses are offered.

<sup>4</sup>This practice has also been successfully employed in the undergraduate classroom. The formulation of a particular reading and the back and forth rhythm of argumentation clearly aid discussion at all levels. The teacher of an undergraduate class might simply want to spend less time on the theoretical repercussions of divergent readings.

<sup>5</sup>Page references are to the original edition of *Hyperion* in Christian Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke. Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, ed. Friedrich Beißner, 8 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1946-85).

<sup>6</sup>Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Helmut Sembdner, 2 vols. (Munich: Hanser, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>The terms may not be familiar to all literary critics. For definitions, see Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1978), pp. 145-61.

<sup>8</sup>Since examinations are not often administered in graduate seminars, it is perhaps worthwhile to point out that the kinds of questions I define here could be adapted for M.A. or General Examinations.

<sup>9</sup>The idea of penultimate drafts can also be effectively used in the undergraduate curriculum, especially in classes that require or encourage the students to write in German. It almost goes without saying that the introduction of word processing to our universities makes what might ten years ago have been considered a chore an especially attractive option.

<sup>10</sup>*Referate*, not in the form of book reviews or summaries of secondary literature but in the form of mini-interpretations or thought-provoking questions, are the only experience many of our graduate students receive in the art of teaching literature.

<sup>11</sup>If the students' papers are not viewed as final drafts, the system of distributed papers resembles the system of penultimate drafts and even surpasses the latter in the sense that fellow students, not just the teacher, contribute comments towards the revision of the papers. The major distinction seems to be the due date, both for the selection of a topic and for the completion of a draft. An additional factor is that in some classrooms the distributed papers replace oral presentations; it seems to me that our students would benefit from more, not less, practice in oral expression.