Learning to Transgress: Embedded Pedagogies of the Gothic

Jan Wellington, Utah Valley University

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/jan_wellington/2/
Pedagogy

Critical Approaches to Teaching
Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture

Winter 2008
Volume 8
Issue 1
Learning to Transgress:
Embedded Pedagogies of the Gothic

Jan Wellington

Not long ago, I taught a 300-level course in the Gothic to a class of eighteen students — mostly English majors — at Utah Valley State College. The course proved to be the most pleasurable, rewarding one I’ve ever taught, generating a level of excited engagement I’d yet to experience in a dozen years of college teaching. Pondering why the class was so successful, I hit upon several factors: an especially fortuitous mix of congenial, motivated students; my own enthusiasm for literature channeled through a course design that (I hoped) married flexibility and structure; and of course the allure of the subject itself. In the midst of my meditations, I happened upon a concept that shed more light on the course’s allure. The concept, which I encountered in a review article by Dale Bauer (2003: 428), is that of “embedded pedagogy.” According to Bauer, within the texts we are drawn to study and teach are pedagogies that influence why and how we teach them (and, I would add, how students respond to them and us). To discover what these pedagogies are, suggests Bauer, is to make us more conscious teachers (428).

Curiosity piqued, I wondered what pedagogies might lurk within the texts I’d chosen. In the semester’s first half we read four early Gothic works: Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, Beckford’s Vathek, Polidori’s The Vampire, and Radcliffe’s The Italian — finishing with Stoker’s Dracula. In the second half, we consumed stories by Americans such as Hawthorne, Poe, Gilman, Lovecraft, and Plath, topping off the term with Toni Morrison’s Beloved. As I recalled the class’s shared experience reading, discussing, and writing about these works, I noticed that the course and its dynamics indeed seemed to play out such commonly observed aspects of the Gothic as shifting subjectivity, confrontations with authority, ambivalence, confusion, even fear: a constellation of qualities I intuitively christened “transgression.” To transgress, in its simplest sense, is to go beyond or over a limit, be it personal or social. Though the term is loaded with negative cultural baggage, in what follows I’ll tell a tale of how, under the tutelage of the Gothic’s transgressive pedagogy, my students and I enjoyed liberation and self-reflection.

On the first day of class, I asked my students to brainstorm a list of words and phrases that the term Gothic brought to mind. The result was a plethora of predictable images — including vampires, ghosts, castles, crosses, spooky music, the color black — typically emerging from students’ impressions of contemporary Goth culture. Along with this propensity to view our subject through the lens of the present, another related one soon became apparent: my students expected our readings to be scary. Thus, I was not surprised when the typical reaction to the first few works we read was disappointment. Most students maintained that these texts, though they included so-called Gothic elements, simply were not scary, and thus were “not Gothic.” Intrigued at this conclusion, I asked, “How could that be, when scholars regard writers like Walpole and Radcliffe as definitive, and when readers in their own time described their work as Gothic?” Discussing the matter, the class admitted that their preconceptions about the Gothic (fed by a liberal diet of twenty-first-century horrors) shaped their reaction to the texts, which in turn disrupted or transgressed the notions they’d brought with them to class.

Such cognitive dissonance was repeatedly provoked by my students’ attempts to define what scholars agree is a notoriously slippery phenomenon. Is it a genre, a mode, an aesthetic, a construct, or all of these things? Although early on I’d hinted we might not ever be able to define the Gothic to their satisfaction, most students were compelled to try. As the following journal entries suggest, they often failed in productive ways. One student wrote, in the semester’s second half, “I still cannot completely define the
Another mused, “I would never have thought of calling Nathaniel Hawthorne Gothic. I never really considered ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ to be a Gothic short story either, although I definitely agree that it is.” And this from yet another: “Almost all literature has Gothic elements.” In short, these students’ developing ability to recognize transatlantic, transhistoric, and transgeneric connections productively transgressed the boundaries academic institutions have erected to delimit literary study. Conceiving of writing as a conversation that both respects and transcends borders of time, place, and genre and considering myself a facilitator rather than a preacher, I was pleased to see my students struggling with these issues.

But are my intentions always recognized or applauded? What about a certain young man, a nontraditional student who brought with him keen intelligence, little academic experience, and an attitude both eager and skeptical? “I can see no way to define Gothic,” he wrote. “Every time I pin it down the answer eludes me more pervasively than before. Every rule I think I could use to measure what a Gothic is has some sort of exception . . . . I need a definition. I need a clear understanding. I need order.” Though a trifle guilty to learn of my student’s sense of lack, I was encouraged. After all, in the process of experiencing the disorientation of the Gothic victim, he was negotiating the labyrinth of possible definitions and generating some light. But what else he wrote gave me pause: “How can I ever be sure that there is a Gothic genre out there? How do I know this whole Gothic thing isn’t a fallacy perpetuated by ‘The Man’ in order to keep me literally oppressed . . . . Oh well. I guess I’ll just sit back and take the medicine I am being fed. I will just enjoy the high and delight in the buzz of this supposed Gothic genre.”

Reading this, I was both amused and nonplussed at being linked with the literary oppressors. “If my student sees himself as oppressed, does that make me the Gothic villain?” I wondered. Early in the semester, this writer had expressed to me his insecurity as a returning student—his fear of not being accepted as a Gothic student in the academic enterprise. And here I am, I mused, forcing him to wallow in painful complexity and foiling his need for closure. What is more, his conflicted desire on the one hand to be an obedient student, and on the other to simply enjoy, raised the nagging question, What is reading in an academic setting all about? Freedom and enjoyment, discipline and pain, or (like the Gothic itself) an adventure in painful pleasure? Wisely, my student, believing that even a specter is worth pursuing, opted to revel in his confusion: in other words, to be a Gothic reader. As a result, this same student’s cogent comments about readership later helped his classmates conclude that one of the keys to the Gothic is the reader’s perversity and pleasure in breaking the rules: in other words, the pleasure of transgression.

Part of this pleasure, I believe, stems from what this student and the Gothic have in common: their outsider status. Along these lines, another student’s journal entry is revealing: “When I tell people I am taking a Gothic class they kinda smirk, as if to say, ‘the English degree is a joke!’ I myself thought the same thing when I signed up for the class—not so much that it was a joke, but . . . that it would be a less serious English elective.” Though she and others of the same persuasion quickly got over this notion, the subject of the Gothic’s conflicted reception was one we had to confront. While students debated over work by contemporary writers like Stephen King—Is it literature or not? And who decides?—they rewarded my “transgression” in assigning such works by concluding there are many reasons to read and many things to “get” from texts, even those that flit on the canon’s margins. The following reflection provides an illustration:

Besides being just a bunch of scary tales, I have seen that the Gothic . . . has been used to expose social injustice . . . and [as] a way of expressing issues that were taboo at the time. I have seen that the authors of the Gothic . . . were just as interesting as those of traditional fiction. . . . I could spend hours studying the Gothic and be more satisfied as a reader than studying traditional veins of literature.

Why is this? In addition to loving “scary tales,” I suspect, my students—perceiving themselves as “low men” on the totem pole of higher education—felt an affinity for a body of literature that, until very recently, has garnered scant respect in academic circles. For as state-school undergraduates in a conservative community, and, in most cases, as Mormons, they’ve been acculturated to defer to authority—to practice forms of obedience that even the most compliant sometimes feel the need to resist. And what about the least compliant—for instance, a tattooed and pierced “Goth” student who embodied the Gothic in her classmates’ eyes? This student, observing how people stereotype her because of her black garb and “tribal” symbols, wrote that many contemporary Goths “use the Gothic way of dress to combat society or religion which was my connection.” What she and her classmates had in common, they soon found, was a love of Gothic fiction, whose noncanonical othersness afforded them a means of identification and dissent. The Gothic, it turned out, was theirs—what they had in common despite their differences.
In fact, by semester’s end, the consensus among the clean-cut was that they had all along been closet Goths for whom the course was a “coming out.”

The course was a coming out for me as well. Though I’d assumed out of habit that my position as Gothic “authority” (and sometime villain) entailed a certain unbroachable distance, my students, empowered by the sense of ownership I’ve just touched on and incited by the delightfully transgressive spirit they sensed in their texts, continually nibbled away at the teacher-student gap. One way they did so was through the infectious spirit of playfulness they brought to the class. There was the student, for instance, who arrived for the midterm with symbolic props that he set in front of him for the exam: a toy Dracula complete with coffin, and a crucifix (to ward off failure, he explained). Then there was the day I entered the room and noticed the class smirking conspiratorially; after unpacking my bookbag, I looked up and found myself facing eighteen hideous grins, thanks to the plastic vampire fangs they’d smuggled in and donned. Upon being presented with my own set of vampire teeth, how could I help but “lighten up” and confess, when pressed, that I found Coppola’s Gary Oldman a very sexy Dracula?

My students also overstepped the teacher-student divide in more substantive ways. Throughout the semester, each was to give a short presentation on one of the entries in our supplemental text, Marie Mulvey-Roberts’s *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (1998). Each succeeding presentation became longer and more elaborate, with students introducing unrequired secondary research and audiovisual aids and leading increasingly wide-ranging discussions. My initial instinct was to snatch back the reins of authority and reclaim our precious class time, but the truth is, I was impressed with what was going on, deemed it valuable, and relished my new role as participant in—rather than conductor of—the conversation. This is not to say that the class “bought” my new role uncritically; rather, they clearly enjoyed casting me as eager overachiever-cum-know-it-all and cutting me down, tongue in cheek, to sophomore size. While we remained aware that we were playing roles, our play was liberating: gradually, my Gothic course was slouching toward something like democracy, and I savored the development with guilty pleasure.

I say “guilty” because, after a late-semester classroom observation, my department chair suggested I wait until students finished their presentations to offer my questions and comments. Still feeling my way through the transformation in progress, I chose not to explain the ongoing slippage in student-teacher functions. It was not until I shared my Gothic saga with a colleague that I learned about bell hooks’s classic book on critical pedagogy, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and read a line I might have penned about my own past as a student academically oppressed: “The classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility.” It was this sense of oppression, I now recall, that helped quash my early desire to become a teacher, and that I’d hoped to counter when I finally abandoned a career in business to teach. Intoxicated by the relative freedom of college teaching, until recently I would have disagreed with hooks’s assertion that “to enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement . . . was to transgress” (7). But to plumb the lessons buried in the Gothic is to unearth the ghosts of the repressed.

As a former student in the class put it recently when I introduced him to the notion of embedded pedagogy and asked for his input, “The class had a way of turning our speculative, wandering minds inward. Truths and fears were uncovered in a way that seemed to mirror a lot of the Gothic stories” we read. His comment reminds me of one of those stories—H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Outsider” (1926)—in which a character lives imprisoned in a dark and gloomy castle. Desperate to escape, he ascends a dizzying tower and wrestles open a trap door only to find himself in an eerie landscape that leads to another castle in whose halls he encounters a horrific monster. Stretching out a hand to ward off the demon, he touches not the fearsome other, but the surface of a mirror in which his own image is reflected. As I recall this scene, my own speculative, wandering mind entertains a fleeting fear that not only are we imprisoned in a moldering edifice, in the clutches of a system that squelches autonomy and pleasure, but that I am the system’s agent.

At least this is what I fear in gloomier moments. But when, like a Gothic reader, I turn the page and get over the horror, I’m rewarded with a happy ending. For me it is an expanded notion of what it means to teach. After all, a pedagogue is, in its original sense, a “child leader”—a deliciously ambivalent construction that invites students to teach and teachers to be students. For this “old dog,” at least, it took eighteen college underdogs—in love with the Gothic and liberated by it—to teach me not to fear, but to welcome the invitation.
Note
For their enthusiasm and inspiration, I thank the students in my Gothic class. Special thanks are due to those whose ideas and reflective writing I have used (with their permission): Jeff Bond, Mandy Chesley-Park, Kristine Hall, Angie Higdon, Brian Lakes, Robin Leatham, Kaia Mickiewicz, Trent Nelson, and Dominique Replogle.

Works Cited

doi 10.1215/15314200-2007-032

A Note from the Associate Editor

Mark C. Long

Who reads books about teaching? Where are they read and discussed? How do these books shape the classrooms of graduate students and faculty? In this issue of the journal, we approach these questions through the work of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign pedagogy collective. Guided by Professor Dale Bauer, this group of fifteen graduate students prepared for teaching a literature course at the UIUC by immersing themselves in current discussions about teaching.

The students in this graduate course on teaching read five books: Patrick Allitt’s I’m the Teacher, You’re the Student, Shari Stenberg’s Professing and Pedagogy, Paul Kameen’s Writing/Teaching, Gerald Graff’s Clueless in Academe, and one textbook, Mariolina Salvatori and Pat Donahue’s The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty. In their collaboratively written essay, the students reference a range of other writing on the college and university classroom—including works by bell hooks, Ira Shor, Jane Tompkins, and Elaine Showalter.

Their essay elaborates, in their own words, a “rhetoric of teaching,” using excerpts from teaching statements they composed as they worked through the current debates in literature pedagogy. Bauer asks her students to write a critical review as well, and we include two of those full-length reviews: Merton Lee’s discussion of Elizabeth Ellsworth’s Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy (2005) and Melissa Tombro’s assessment of Steven Mailloux’s Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition (2006). We offer the voices of these students, a remarkable testimony, as one set of answers to the questions about who reads new books on teaching—and how those books are used.