

Fall 9-1-2001

ENCR 595.01: Studies in Literary Form

Padgett Powell

University of Montana, Missoula

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi>

Recommended Citation

Powell, Padgett, "ENCR 595.01: Studies in Literary Form" (2001). *Syllabi*. 6112.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi/6112>

This Syllabus is brought to you for free and open access by the Course Syllabi at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syllabi by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

ENCR 595, Studies in Literary Form, Fall 2001: LA 212
Phone: 243-5267 Office hours: T 1-3, R 5-6
Padgett Powell

This is a course, first, in writing. Its rubric--studies in form--misleads. More precisely, I should say that as I conduct it, its interest in form, its formal interest in form, if that is not redundant, is secondary to its interest, which is my interest, that you write in new ways which may happen to be formally different from the way you might have written before exposure to its novelties and mysteries. That is to say, I have selected some books which do offer perhaps a broader formal range than a typical historical list, and they are perhaps novel and mysterious, and some of them are, to my mind, important as well--authors of whom you should not be innocent should the Examiners get ahold of you. But, again, I want you to be able, first, to write your way out of the custody of the Examiners before I want you to pass their exam.

Somewhat like Miss O'Connor's characterization of herself (which link I tender to alert you not to any connection between us but to her position as Holy Mother at my tiny critical altar), I am innocent of theory but not without certain assumptions about fiction and writing it:

1. That fiction always seeks to render the implausible plausible. If you place plausibility of effect over plausibility of premise, you have the quotient of outrageousness. The writers with higher quotients of outrageousness are The Biggies.

2. That it seeks an investment of credulity (credit) from the reader, and that investment can be of two kinds, with hybridizations:

- a. Belief, or "suspension of disbelief" in Coleridge's clever dodge. No one is expected to really believe a fictional story, that is, but one is expected to believe it all could be true.
- b. No such suspension of disbelief. In fact, open disbelief is allowed, even encouraged.
- c. Hybrids of a and b above exist.

3. That regardless of type of credulity, fiction can and indeed should elicit also an emotional investment.

- a. In suspension-of-disbelief fiction, conventional emotional discharge, hankies encouraged.
- b. In unsuspected disbelief, conventional emotional

discharge, hankies not discouraged.

If there are indeed these two different types of credit, it seems at first surprising that they should both elicit "conventional emotional discharge," whatever I might mean by that. I mostly mean something I can relate best by retailing a Pedagogical Moment from the Life of Barthelme. Q: What must wacky modes do? A: Break their hearts. Thus the unwacky and the wacky would seem required to break hearts, and some investigation into this supposition might be fruitful.

This investigation, while serving as a kind of grid for the surveying of some fiction, is not finally to obscure the fiction itself or certain other concerns we should have with the reading of it. Each author, while (it is hoped) fixable at a point on the spectrum of belief suspension, is also to be regarded as a stylist, independently of this concern with type of credit. Most of them have been selected in the belief that they are distinctive stylists who have something to teach in vacuo. You will find, in pedantry, that a little Latin, even improper, goes a long way. You will find, in life, that a little of what Miss O'Connor called lowering the interest goes a long way and is necessary in a long life. You will find, if I am successful in these endeavors, why I have not relegated these last remarks to parentheses, or cut them altogether. With them I shall have seduced you out of one kind of credulity into another, with the result that you are believing in this document and its sentiments more now than you were before I broke the spell of its tone. This "believing more" after being told not to believe is the thesis of our investigations. (A student once skewered me on her evaluation of me so: "Man is you pompous." This hurt me to the quick. But I must--musn't we all?--limp on with the gear God or Darwin gave me. We must all, to continue to raid the trunk of Miss O'Connor's wisdom, do not what is easy for us but what is possible.)

Regarding an author for his or her style can involve looking for a "fingerprint." The fingerprint if locatable is reproducible.

If the fingerprint is reproducible, a style is imitable; if imitable, dismissable. In all this imitation and rejection, the process of selection by which an original style derives.

The reading list, then, is formed by these two ideas: that a taxonomy of fiction can reveal at least our two large branches, the verisimilitudinous and the verisimilitudinousandless, the study of which may be interesting, and that distinctive stylists confer new styles.

Upon the Spectrum of Credulity and the Factors of its Equation

To be redundant: The Turgenev-Kleist-Trevor branch is "like life" in conventional dramatic ways; the Diderot-Beckett-O'Brien-Stein-Bernhard branch is hysterical, more or less, with respect to any obeisance to depicting life in conventional dramatic ways. One is beginninged, middled, ended and has real people in it who change; the other is governed more by a concern with the immediate psychology of a speaker or author, and if concerns of dramaturgy enter at all they do so obliquely and underhandedly and sometimes satirically, and sometimes concerns of dramaturgy are deliberately perverted. One is story; the other, "mind"--or some similar dubious epithet. One is ostensibly to be believed, or not disbelieved in Coleridge's sense, the other not.

Other authors on the list seem to me to deploy a mixed-bag technique: Kafka and O'Connor and Rulfo yoke perfectly realist strategies of storytelling to eminently untenable realities; Paley proposes a tenable world in rather whimsical, believe-it-or-not terms.

I find most curious in such a taxonomy that the hysterical side of the tree is arguably the more investable in anything like true belief, and the natural side, if you will, requires more effort in that ever famous suspension of disbelief. Whether we actually wrestle this little paradox to the carpet of the seminar room or not, the reading list should hold its own as good reading alone.

My use of the preposterously cumbersome "verisimilitudinous" and "verisimilitudinousless" is deliberate, because any talk of these two "branches," if there are branches, indeed if there is a taxonomy, seems to me awkward at best. Similar terms might be deployed, none of them quite adequate:

real	vs.	un-, sur-, super-, hyper-,	irreal, etc.
believable	vs.	unbelievable	
suspend disbelief	vs.	don't bother	
listen to this story	vs.	listen to <u>me</u>	
fiction		vs.	metafiction

One could go on. At best, there is a kind of writing generally called realistic which expects a reader to invest emotionally after more or less swallowing a Once-upon-a-time proposition, and there is a kind of writing which patently or latently (this may be where the oddness of Paley obtains) eschews soliciting that investment.

I am interested in the strategies of both camps, and not convinced that there are not finally many in common; nor am I certain that the same kind of investment is not always really sought, regardless of where on the spectrum of storytelling a given fiction may fall.

There are several factors affecting where on the spectrum of credulity a work falls. Please see items 1, 9, and 3 in the Appendix.

Let us call three of the factors, robbing these passages of their original wit, Writer Upfrontness, Fantasy/ Precision, and

Untidyness. As these three increase in value, the work moves to the verisimilitudinousless end of the spectrum, the wacky, the zone in which one is not asked to suspend disbelief after hearing a more or less somber Once-upon-a-time beginning. I call this the right, as opposed to left, end, for purposes of visualization, though of course "far to the right" suggests, by political convention, the other, conservative, end of things. Too bad.

Upon The Code and and the Spectrum of Credulity

Now: Why would I, yet tenuously sane, go on so about such a spectrum which even I admit should not obscure our simply looking at our books, they being themselves (see item 8, Appendix)?

I do so because of a heretofore mysterious entity, which you will encounter if you get serious about spoiling paper fictionally, called The Code. The Code is something that nearly everyone refers to and nearly no one can define. I can. I am the only person I know who can define The Code. Here is an actual reference to The Code by the editor of four Nobel Laureates: [TK letter from Pat Strachan, if I can find it].

No one rejecting you dishonestly will bother to speak of The Code. If you ever get a rejection which speaks of The Code, you may trust that it is sincere, even if the party deploying the term can not define it. It may behave if you can define it. So here it is: The Code means where on the spectrum of credulity the work falls.

A second cousin to The Code is Murky Intentions. Intent can be murky in several aspects, but the most troubling, the hardest to address, the hardest to correct, is murky position on the spectrum of credulity. You will hear the expression "couldn't tell how to read this"--means, simply, "couldn't tell how to believe this": i.e., couldn't place this on the spectrum of credulity with any precision.

So I will submit that my going on about this inane spectrum may not be so idle after all. I would have you note the word "precision," which has been used twice in this harangue. Miss O'Connor used it so: the more fantastic the action the more precise the writing. She implies that the less fantastic the action the less precise the writing might be, and I think such a case might be winnable. But I think there is a looseness in such a proposition which bears relation to the looseness of thinking that emotion is not required of fiction on the right end of the spectrum. Emotion is always required, and precision is always required. Fiction is accuracy of sentiment conveyed by precision of utterance, always, like armwrestling, I'm tired, let's go home.

Requirements & Objectives

(Note the revolutionary implication in my yoking of these terms: the requirements are the objectives, and these are stated clearly

at the outset.)

1. Write a 250-word passage after each author. Toward getting the hang of an author, I suggest locating within the work model passages, or paragraphs, or sentences. With these models (fingerprints, vide supra) in hand you should be able to write a passage that sounds and looks like the author under consideration.

I am more interested in fidelity here than in parody, though often parody is irresistible, and indeed it may be the only way unto the faithful counterfeit. In the main, try for an accurate syntactic mimicry, and reproduce where you can the concerns of the writer as well (the first move in parody, I would say were I to pretend to know anything about it, is to substitute concerns lower than those of the parodied author).

2. Develop one passage into something substantial--a complete fiction.

3. Do some poking around one of the authors and write a 250-word piece of distinguished criticism. I have in mind a kind of informal but intelligent Talk-of-the-Town-like piece ("We ran into Kafka the other day and realized how much he means to us") that would tell us something non-standard and memorable about the author's work in absolutely sterling fashion. To do this right you probably should read a good bit, in the work, in letters, in biography. Locate something fresh and telling.

4. Provide a copy of your pieces to all seminar members. We will do #1s weekly on the appropriate day, and #3s when they obtain.

5. Provide me a copy of your full story and read it aloud during the last two weeks of class. Keep the matter of its authorial provenance to yourself. I will grade it according to its merits as a work of fiction on its own--that is, how well it works no matter who it's supposed to be after. The ideal work in this regard is one that sounds just like so-and-so, or weirdly not just like so-and-so, but that is somehow still fresh and "original." I will supply you a model or two of this kind of taking off from one author by another, which should be suggestive.

Schedule

(Dates will be adjusted to fall 2001)

Jan 8 Introduction

	15	Turgenev
	22	Diderot
	29	Kleist
Feb	5	Dinesen
	12	O'Brien
	19	Rulfo
	26	No Class
Mar	5	Fuentes
	12	No Class
	17	Rush
	26	Barrett
Apr	2	Readings
	9	Readings
	16	Readings
	23	No Class--picnic?