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Teaching “Theory” in Topical Graduate Seminars*

MATTHEW ROLLER

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses a method of teaching theory to graduate students in the context of graduate seminars that are constructed around classical topics—particular ancient texts or authors, specific historical or art-historical or archaeological questions, and so forth. This method ties the necessary theory directly to the seminar’s topic, and thereby subordinates the exposition of theory to the overall problematic of the seminar. This approach contrasts with that of the dedicated theory survey course, which gives priority to the theory as such. Two examples of such seminar construction are provided, both from the Ph.D. program in classics at Johns Hopkins University.

It is clear from this collection of papers, and from the panel at which several of them were first presented, that finding intellectually appropriate and pedagogically effective ways of teaching theory to students of different levels is a challenging task. Yet this task admits of many different solutions, or at least approaches, depending on the level of student, the inclinations of the instructor, and the scale, resources, and structure of the institution. This paper discusses a method of teaching theory to graduate students in the context of graduate seminars that are constructed around classical topics—particular ancient texts or authors, specific historical or art-historical or archaeological questions, and the like. This method ties the necessary theory directly to the seminar’s topic. Such a presentation subordinates the exposition of theory to

* I thank Nigel Nicholson for inviting me to participate in the 2013 APA panel from which this collection of papers arose. I am grateful to the other panelists, namely Nicholson himself, Leslie Kurke, and Christopher van den Berg, as well as to the large and engaged audience in attendance, for lively and fruitful discussion of these issues. Above all I thank Hérica Valladares for discussion of these matters from a departmental perspective, and for generously supplying information about her seminars.

the overall problematic of the seminar, rather than giving the theory as such priority (as one would do in a dedicated theory course)—though, of course, the topic of the seminar may itself be inflected by theoretical concerns. I provide two examples of such seminar construction, one by myself, and the other by a colleague in my home department, namely the Classics Department at Johns Hopkins University. While our department is small, its faculty covers a wide range of fields and embraces a diversity of scholarly approaches. For reasons of both size and diversity, we have never found it practicable or even desirable to introduce a dedicated theory course for graduate students, and we have adopted the approach sketched below instead.

To justify this choice more fully, I will begin by considering the nature of the task we are setting ourselves when we decide that our students should be acquainted with theory. For there are different ways of conceptualizing what the intellectual apparatus that we call “theory” is, and these different conceptualizations open up different possibilities for packaging and presenting this material to our students. First, I agree emphatically with other authors in this dossier that “theory” needs to be seen as something classicists “do”—by which I mean not merely that classicists need to be engaged with the intellectual currents flowing through the humanities more generally (this argument was settled, I think and hope, a generation and more ago), but that we need to take its teaching in-house, rather than—or in addition to—telling our students to enroll in the theory survey offered in the departments of English or comparative literature. But dedicated survey courses in literary theory have always raised two concerns in my mind, one involving the precise intellectual skills we want our students to acquire, and the other involving coverage. Let me take these in turn.

First, when we say that our students should be comfortable with, or at least acquainted with, “theory,” it seems to me we are really saying, in a somewhat displaced manner, that we want our students to be interdisciplinary. We want them to be willing and able to locate, read, understand, assimilate, and apply scholarship produced in other disciplines—scholarship that may allow us to see our own materials, problems, and questions in a new light. Sometimes, such scholarship can be categorized under one or another of the larger intellectual movements or critical styles that bear an “-ism”-style name: Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and the like. So labeled, these movements function rather like genres within the field of literary criticism,

for like genres they display certain broad internal regularities and similarities. It is certainly useful for our students to learn about these influential critical genres and to discover the assumptions and worldviews that lie behind them. And this is assuredly what theory survey courses do, courses of the sort that Nigel Nicholson and Leslie Kurke describe in their contributions. But depending on what cultural product we are analyzing at the moment—a literary or documentary text, a built monument, an object, an image, an artifact assemblage—and depending on what specific questions we are asking, it may be that the most pertinent and illuminating interdisciplinary work does *not* participate in one of these famous critical genres, and therefore would not appear in survey of such genres (see below). Yet we still want our students to know that such work may exist, and we must equip them to seek it out and exploit it where useful. In my view, then, our primary pedagogical goal in regard to “theory” is to instill in our students the intellectual orientation and scholarly practice of interdisciplinarity. Surveying and sampling some of the major critical genres, as one does in a dedicated theory survey course, is by no means irrelevant to this task, and may be both fascinating and eye-opening to boot. But it nevertheless seems to me logically secondary, and for particular types of investigation may be entirely off-target.

My second concern about theory survey courses has to do with coverage and selection. I do not mean whether it is possible to cover all the critical genres one might wish to include in the ambit of one semester or quarter; of course one cannot, and choices always have to be made. I mean rather that, at least at the graduate level, the training of students ranges broadly not only over ancient literature—for which specifically *literary* theory may be relevant—but also over ancient history, art, archaeology, and philosophy, to name just the major subdivisions of the field of classics. A large apparatus of “theory” accompanies each of these broad fields, just as for literature. My own graduate seminars, reflecting my interests and orientations, tend to focus on social, cultural, and historiographical questions, which engage with literature and literary criticism but also with other forms of evidence and other critical and theoretical approaches. In these seminars the pertinent interdisciplinary interlocutors include major social theorists such as Norbert Elias, Maurice Halbwachs, Clifford Geertz, and Pierre Bourdieu, and certain well-established critical approaches like memory studies. But they also include, for example, the small field of the study of different forms of historical consciousness, which does not even have a name; and the even tinier, equally unnamed

field involving the investigation of the moral dimensions of experiencing art—hardly a field, even: just a small group of philosophers and cultural theorists, working at the point where ethics and aesthetics intersect. Such approaches would not be sampled by a survey course focusing on the major genres of literary theory, either because the genres in question are not major, or because their chief object is not literature. Even the burgeoning and elaborately theorized interdisciplinary field of memory studies, which now has a large footprint in the scholarship of ancient historians, does not seem to have penetrated deeply enough into literary studies (or at least *ancient* literary studies; Proust has always been central to this field) to be included in any classicist's canon of theoretical approaches to literature. Regarding visual and material culture, a Ph.D. program may have a legitimate interest in assuring that its students learn something about various art-historical theories of viewing, and to be generally familiar with the debates between processualist and post-processualist archaeologists. In the doctoral program at Johns Hopkins, where all students do significant work in all these fields, familiarity with these other domains of theory is no less or more necessary than familiarity with theory of the specifically literary sort.

So how do we encourage an interdisciplinary orientation in our students, and provide them with a range of interdisciplinary interlocutors consonant with, and appropriate to, the full range of their seminar work? Obviously there is a limit to what can be packed into a one-term theory survey course, and no one would argue for proliferating additional courses of this sort in order to accommodate all the approaches with which we might wish our students to be familiar. For we seem, once again, to be at a point where Ph.D. programs need to be made shorter, not longer, and also more affordable in terms of the institutional resources they consume.

To my mind, these considerations point to a different approach. If indeed our fundamental aim is to inculcate in our students an orientation toward interdisciplinarity, then it may make sense to pursue this aim in a bottom-up rather than a top-down manner, allowing the particular questions posed by the topic one wishes to pursue, or the material with which one is currently working, to drive the comparative agenda. In other words, we can introduce our interdisciplinary interlocutors, or our apparatus of theory, at the level of the ordinary, thematic graduate seminar. Such a seminar may or may not be team-taught, like the undergraduate course that Christopher van den Berg describes in his contribution; but it would share the aim of developing its interdisciplinary approach

and theoretical apparatus out of the thematics of the course topic. To illustrate what such a seminar might look like, I describe one recent offering of my own in some detail, and sketch more briefly another offering by a Hopkins colleague who employs a broadly similar approach.

In Spring Semester 2011 I offered a graduate seminar, which met three hours per week for thirteen weeks, entitled “How to Persuade an Emperor.” This offering needed to do double duty as a Latin seminar and a Roman history seminar. It was therefore organized around substantial weekly readings of two Latin texts, Seneca’s *De Clementia* and Pliny’s *Panegyricus*; but four of the early meetings also involved substantial scholarly readings on the topic of aristocrats giving advice to rulers. These readings focused on four specific themes, picking out particular social and rhetorical dimensions of such advice giving. These themes were as follows: (1) subaltern speech, a general examination of the rhetorical constraints and opportunities affecting people who address those holding power over them; (2) metaphors for the ruler’s authority, which illuminate the conceptual models by which subalterns figure their relationship to those holding power over them; (3) courts and courtly society, giving a broad context for the social dynamics of the relationship between rulers and their aristocratic coteries; (4) virtue language, a key rhetorical device deployed by subaltern speakers in the attempt to connect the behaviors they wish to see in their rulers to social values they believe or hope their ruler embraces. For each of these themes there exists a significant sociological and anthropological scholarly literature, as well as scholarship by classicists. For these four meetings, then, scholarship pertinent to these thematic units was assigned, along with readings in Latin that foregrounded issues of speech, values, and power in the relationship between emperors and aristocrats. The seminar’s focus was thus firmly on a set of Roman problems as framed by Latin texts. But those problems were illuminated through engagement both with classical scholarship and with scholarship by non-classicists who study structurally similar phenomena in other societies. Having introduced these problems and themes in the first half of the semester, in the second half I stopped directly providing the scholarly content but required the seven students, who were all working on papers, to give weekly updates on their research. This research notionally grew out of their ongoing readings of the assigned Latin texts and their encounters with the various scholarly approaches presented earlier in the seminar. (See the Appendix, the full syllabus for this seminar.)

My second example is a seminar taught by my colleague Hérica Valadares. Entitled “Roman Landscapes in Context,” it was offered one semester at the graduate level and another semester at the advanced undergraduate level in a somewhat different form. This seminar examined Roman landscape paintings, mostly from Pompeii, together with a variety of Latin literary texts that represent or depict the countryside, including Horatian satire, selections from Vergil’s *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, Varro’s *De Re Rustica*, certain books of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and some letters of Cicero and Pliny. The aim was to juxtapose literary and visual modes of landscape representation. In addition to a wide variety of philological scholarship on the texts and art-historical or archaeological studies of the paintings, all by scholars focusing on the ancient world, there is also a substantial scholarly literature and theoretical apparatus regarding painted representations of nature in general—though with a focus on later periods, since landscape has been a staple of Western painting continuously from antiquity to modernity. Students thus could discover how Roman discourses about nature are similar and different in the two different media (and indeed there is much cross-fertilization between Roman paintings of nature and Roman literature concerning nature), and they could also see how scholarship on the representation of nature in the art and literature of later periods might refine our understanding of Roman representations of nature.

Seminars so configured are doubtless not especially novel or unique; there are likely many such offerings, *mutatis mutandis*, in many classics doctoral programs. Nor are such seminars incompatible with the existence of a dedicated literary-theory survey course offered in the same program at the same time. In our own graduate program, however, given limited time and resources and the breadth of our scholarly engagements, we felt we could best instill the interdisciplinary orientation and working methods we desired in this bottom-up way, seminar by seminar, problem by problem, and that we could dispense with the top-down approach of the dedicated theory course. Through this problem-centered approach to interdisciplinarity, we expose our students to at least a few of the major critical movements—structuralism, Marxism, and others assuredly crop up from time to time—but our approach does not always lead back to these major critical movements, and certainly not to *literary* theory exclusively. The signal strength of this approach, then, is not that it presents theory in a systematic and organized way, but rather

that it helps students to embrace interdisciplinarity in the truest sense of the word. That is, it enables them to recognize that, whatever material they are working with and whatever questions they are asking, there are scholars working not only in classics or ancient studies but also in other fields, perhaps quite distant ones, who have something to say to them. And it shows them how they might go about finding such material and using it to illuminate the questions they are pursuing.

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Appendix: How to Persuade an Emperor Graduate seminar in Classics, Johns Hopkins University

(This graduate seminar met once per week, for thirteen weeks, three hours per meeting, in Spring Semester 2011.)

This seminar is built around readings of Seneca’s *De Clementia* and Pliny the Younger’s *Panegyricus*—in both cases, texts with the primary or proximate aim of persuading the emperor to behave in certain ways and not in others. In the first six weeks of the semester, particular themes or questions are introduced that provide broad frameworks for addressing the matter of “persuading an emperor.” Each theme has a body of theoretical or comparative work behind it, some pertaining to ancient Rome and some to other cultures and periods. By mid-semester, following the introduction of these frameworks, each student will choose a paper topic. In the second half of the semester weekly readings of the Latin texts will continue, and in each meeting each student will present a five- to ten-minute summary of how her or his research has progressed since the previous meeting, to be commented on by other students and faculty. The final paper is due at the end of the semester.

Required books for this seminar are Basore’s Loeb edition of Seneca’s *De Clementia* and Radice’s Loeb edition of Pliny’s *Panegyricus*. Critical editions, scholarly studies, commentaries, and similar resources will be available either electronically or in print in the Classics Course Reserves in the Library.

Weekly assignments are as follows. The readings specified for each week are to be prepared for that week, and will be discussed in that seminar meeting.

Week 1: Introduction to Seminar; Sight-reading and Discussion of Sen. *Clem.* 1.

Week 2: Introduction to *De Clementia*

Primary reading, in Latin: Sen. *Clem.* 1.1–6

Scholarly readings: S. Braund, ed., *Seneca: De Clementia* (Oxford 2009), 1–91 (“Introduction”)

Week 3: Speaking to Power

Primary reading, in Latin: Sen. *Clem.* 1.7–12. Also Plut. *Mor.* 47–74, “How to tell a flatterer from a friend” (in translation)

Scholarly readings: J. Scott 1990, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven 1990) chs.1, 6; F. Ahl, “The Art of Safe Criticism,” *AJP* 105 (1984) 174–208; D. Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge 1997), selections discussing friendship and flattery

Week 4: Metaphors for Imperial Authority

Primary reading, in Latin: Sen. *Clem.* 1.13–19

Scholarly readings: M. Roller, *Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome* (Princeton 2001) 213–64; T. Steven-son, “The Ideal Benefactor and the Father Analogy in Greek and Roman Thought,” *CQ* 42 (1992) 421–36; E. Dickey, *Latin Forms of Address: From Plautus to Apuleius* (Oxford 2002) 77–109

Also of interest: parallel selections from Seneca’s *De Beneficiis* and *De Ira*

Week 5: “Courts” and Court Society in Antiquity

Primary reading, in Latin: Sen. *Clem.* 1.20–26

Scholarly readings: A. Winterling, *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome* (Malden, Mass., 2009) ch. 5 (“A Court without ‘State:’ the *aula Caesaris*”); J. Paterson, “Friends in High Places: The Creation of the Court of the Roman Emperor,” in A. Spawforth, ed., *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge 2007) 121–56; A. Wallace-Hadrill, “The Imperial Court,” *CAH*² 10 (1996) 283–308

Also of interest: J. A. Crook, *Consilium Principis. Imperial Councils and Counsellors from Augustus to Diocletian* (Cambridge 1955); A. Winterling, *Aula Caesaris: Studien zur Institutionalisierung des römischen*

Kaiserhofes in der Zeit von Augustus bis Commodus (51 v. Chr.–192 n. Chr.) (Munich 1999); A. Winterling, ed., *Zwischen Haus und Staat: Antike Höfe im Vergleich* (Munich 1997)

Week 6: Virtue Language

Primary reading, in Latin: Sen. *Clem.* 2.1–7

Scholarly readings: D. Konstan, “Clemency as a Virtue,” *CP* 100 (2005) 337–46; C. Noreña, “The Communication of the Emperor’s Virtues,” *JRS* 91 (2001) 146–68; M. Dowling, *Clemency and Cruelty in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor 2006), selections

Week 7: Overview of Pliny’s *Panegyricus*

Primary reading: Pliny, *Paneg.* 1–6

Scholarly readings: S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge, Mass. 1994) 148–88; S. Hoffer, “Divine Comedy?” *JRS* 96 (2006) 73–87; M. Charles, “Calvus Nero: Domitian and the Mechanics of Predecessor Denigration,” *AClass* 45 (2002) 19–49

Also of interest: G. Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Traians: Herrschaftsdarstellung im Prinzipat* (Stuttgart 2004) 214–96

Weeks 8–13: Student Research Updates

Primary reading: Pliny, *Paneg.* 7–60 (in weekly increments)¹

¹ A whole new toolkit for teaching and thinking about Pliny and panegyric appeared shortly after I offered this seminar: P. Roche, ed., *Pliny’s Praise: the Panegyricus in the Roman World* (Cambridge 2011); R. Rees, ed., *Latin Panegyric* (Oxford 2012). The other weekly bibliographies also now require some updating.