University of Technology, Sydney

Martin Harrison

What Can Poets Teach?

> *...there is a profound and irreducible antinomy between literature as practice and literature as teaching*[1]

"Reflections on a Manual" is one of Roland Barthes' more brief and less well-known essays. Yet ever since I first read it many years ago, this short, modest essay has always struck me as one of the most magisterial pieces he ever wrote. Addressed to a colloquium of secondary school literature teachers at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1969, "Reflections on a Manual" is an essay about teaching - about the transmission of knowledge - by one of the great critics and teachers of the period. But it is magisterial also in an extended, more everyday sense, for in this piece Barthes succinctly lays out an entire programmatics for the critical teaching of literature and, in particular, presents the case for a major re-thinking of how a contemporary teaching relates to classical and neo-classical accounts of what literature is. A reflection on a teaching handbook - no doubt the sort of handbook which secondary school teachers such as those in Barthes' audience might well be using - "Reflections on a Manual" might itself be the prefatory essay for an entirely different kind of manual, perhaps a manual based on a semiotic reading of literature or a manual which prescribed texts in a fashion deliberately relevant to student interests. Indeed, this essay is worth mentioning in the context of the teaching of writing because, while constantly underscoring the potentially simplistic nature of his ideas, Barthes feels obliged at various points to apologise for a possible lack of applicability to the work of the literature teachers he is speaking to. The tone of the essay is sometimes hard to assess, in this regard. A year after the May events at Vincennes and in Paris generally, was Barthes perhaps worried that his audience might be hostile, or more likely that his comments would be insufficiently political and would be pushed aside for ideological reasons? Perhaps it is just hard to be both complex and to get the matter right - that is, to be simple and conclusive.

For the date of the essay - 1969 - is significant. Across Europe, it was an epoch of great change in thinking about culture, about writing and about the status of the classical curriculum. In the context of the time Barthes' proposals are certainly radical. For he suggests firstly that we should, as he puts it, abandon pseudo-genetic accounts of literature so that we can 'do' literary history backwards (his phrase). He proposes, in other words, something with which we have become very familiar in the intervening twenty years or so - namely, the idea of teaching literature from our own interests, teaching it as a cultural product cut through with contemporary ideas and codes and not teaching it as an authoritative inheritance which must be historically rehearsed by students period by period, culture by culture, genre by genre. Teaching literature (including the teaching of ancient and classical literature) becomes, in other words, an exemplary system, accessed through its sign-systems, through its thematics and at base through a readability concurrent with the reading of any other sign-system - the TV for example, or popular cultural products or film.

The two other proposals made by Barthes for a revision in the idea of "teaching literature" also constitute a major break with tradition. "Reflections on a Manual" offers; for instance, a succinct description of the change taking place in the practice of literature teaching through the 70s and 80s - namely, a shift away from treating the text as an object of explication. A "sacred object" Barthes calls this classically conceived text, an "object of philology." [2] His proposal for a more updated, contemporary practice locates what became for a decade or so a highly controversial re-thinking of the terms "text" and "textuality." I am referring here, of course, to his proposal, argued much more fully in *S/Z* and in many of his other essays, to "substitute text for author, school and movement." The argument is that a broader, generic notion of text as writing should replace the sorts of critical classifications which someone like myself was still partly being instructed in at precisely the time Barthes was writing: those classifications like epoch, influence, literary genre, biographical and historical emergence. To treat reading and writing as themselves forms of textuality, to study the production of the text, to pursue a non-hierarchical cross-reading of different sorts of text (poems, advertisements, scripts, novels and so on), these new forms of critical practice - and the textual theories which underpinned them - were already at work even in my own experience of literature teaching in the late 60s and early 70s. Indeed by 1970, Barthes' final and third proposal - "at every moment to develop the polysemic reading of the text" - was a key element in the sort of radical agenda which university-educated writers like myself took on board in critical and teaching practice and whose implications we tried to understand back then in terms of writing and the aesthetics of creative writing. [3]

A "polysemic" reading was a many-valued reading, a reading which allowed for multiple meanings and for multiple styles of reading. It was a reading which traced signification in writing across many different sorts of text whether

the text of the poem, the text of street signs or social behaviour or the text of landscape or the text of intellectual and political history.

"Reflections on a Manual" offers, in short, a powerful summary of a set of ideas about writing and teaching which, in the nearly twenty years since that colloquium at Cerisy-la-Salle, have become the lingua franca of literature teaching in many universities and which have significantly influenced the nature of the secondary school curriculum here in Australia as in other parts of the world. There is no suggestion of course that this was necessarily the direct influence of critics such as Barthes - there were, after all, many other ideological and political strands to the changes taking place in the 60s and 70s. Nonetheless it is worth stating the obvious about the essay: not one of Barthes' proposals is radical in 1998. This is one reason why "Reflections on a Manual" is worth drawing attention to now. Looking back at it after nearly thirty years, it could even be said that the essay offers such a "period" account of critical and pedagogical theory of the time - i.e. it is a document whose contours are so symptomatic of an influential historical debate of its time - that we could see it as a text still so to speak "in the writing" in Barthes' sense of textual production. It is cut through by so many energies of that time that it now reads as a singularly constructive moment in what might be termed that debate's theoretical and historical limits. We can, in other words, now look at Barthes' proposals with the hindsight gained by the very success of the notion of textuality which he proposed, measuring the way in which Barthes' idea of literature teaching has, for instance, only certain things in view and not others, and observing the means by which a series of excisions and inclusions are engineered in Barthes' notions of teaching, of writing and of literature. For no matter how magisterially it is written, "Reflections on a Manual" was also an essay which laid out its terms along a series of rifts or dynamic relationships which perhaps only now - when the very terms of "text" and "criticism" and "writing" are once again changing - are beginning to be apparent.

Barthes' interlinking of the category literature with that of teaching, for instance, is part of an argument with an older humanist, genetic idea of literature teaching which concerned itself with periods, canons and major and minor exponents. At the back of this interlinking, there is a question about childhood and the school-child's experience of literature: "Can literature be anything else for us," Barthes asks, "than a childhood memory?" (4) What is it that continues, what is that persists, he goes on, once the young adult leaves school, exiting from the context where literature, teaching and a childhood sense of the canon no longer constitute central elements of learning? The essay is dialectically tied to this shared historicising vision of writing and its tradition, according to which literature is implanted, passed on and memorised. If Barthes argues against this earlier, humanist agenda it is only in order to collapse a previous historicising sense of literary study into a present-day, methodologically immediate sense of how to read (he uses the phrase "decompression in our teaching of literature" as a way of encapsulating the change of method he has in mind.) But his is still a view of literature teaching which makes the main burden of connection between the student and teacher that of reading an already established area of texts. Further, this is still a historicising view of the connection between literary text and teaching but one where the connection between "text" and teaching has been moved into an entirely contemporary zone of history - that of ideology, politics, relevance, popular culture and so on. Thus, Barthes' sense of "textuality" may change the set of texts which constitute a required reading, but there is no dispute as to the necessity of a set of such pre-required texts.

Thus, we may well have to understand the classical text differently, we may well not have to set up boundaries between disjunctive forms and we may well have to find a way of reading polysemic equivalences, but there is no doubt that both the classical humanist view and the Barthesian view share a sense that we teach the reading of literature - or rather of texts - because such teaching establishes a necessary critical practice in relation to writing and because it opens up a necessary zone of interpretation and reception. Readability and writing may change their relationships like two boxers sparring with each other, but there is no doubt that both must be in the ring as significant protagonists in the production and understanding of meaning.

This new, pluralist teaching maintains this relationship between writing and reading - a relationship which at the same time guarantees an inter-relationship between teaching and literature - because, like the older humanism, it too has to deal with a further question which inflects the whole of Barthes' essay. It is the question which allows Barthes to be, as I put it earlier, magisterial, to be in other words a teacher. Again Barthes' summative, yet modestly phrased words are instructive. For him this question has to do with how to deal with what he calls "the most serious problem we face today, the problem of the transmission of knowledge." (5) It is, in short, the question of teaching itself, phrased as a critical question, a problematic question, to do with transmission. Faced with this key question, however, the necessity of bring into place a readerly critical practice, the necessity of inventing a polysemous, literary zone of interpretation, are taken to be appropriate and proper responses. Neither of them is questioned. Likewise, the metaphor of "transmission" is never called into doubt; nor is the matter of "knowledge" genuinely questioned. Secure in their symbiotic relations, the two boxers of reading and writing must keep circling each other. Nowhere, in other words, is there any hint that the place by which a connection can be established between reading and writing - the very place, that is, which guarantees the connection between teaching and the text - is organised by a necessity of a much more profound sort. This necessity is the drive to maintain the corpus - the working body - constituted by the paired term teaching/literature. Nowhere in this new orthodoxy of textuality, of plurality and of the articulation of many-sided values is the vital connective tissue between literature and teaching investigated. Thus, the new orthodoxy may teach literature differently and in a many-valued, textual way, but it does not question the way in which the primary zone of activity, the surface which all these critical transfers transect - the very space, that is,

which is brought into being by those secondary school teachers' manual which Barthes is referencing in his essay - is represented exclusively as a zone of reading and reception.

"Reflections on a Manual" is, to be sure, a response as much as an appraisal. Barthes was writing in reaction to a time when there was a critical (in both senses) need to up-date writing-theory and literature teaching in relation to a variety of then contemporary achievements in the human sciences, in the researches of linguistics, in the new relativistic logics, in the development of media and popular culture. As Barthes puts it, there had occurred a 'break' in modernity - a paradigm shift it might be called these days - and criticism and poetics had to take account of it. In 1998, it is hard to find a singular, public event (equivalent to *les evenements*, that is) which determines the character of an equally decisive shift, but I would suggest that some such realignment in the connective between teaching and literature has occurred all the same. Perhaps the moment we find ourselves in is, if the phrase may be permitted, more subterranean than the moment which confronted Barthes in that the Barthesian textualising and semiotic categories of reading and writing have been permanently changed almost without anyone noticing it. A change has come from beneath us like a tremor, or from the air. The whole cosmology which linked literature, teaching, readability, textuality - and which then set them off against a historical context of humanist knowledges and the problematic of maintaining the transmission of humanist enquiries - has not just suffered a break, it has more or less definitively begun to fall apart. If for a critic like Barthes, the development of a new "science" of semiotic reading required a re-positioning of literary study in relation to a still largely supported contemporary teaching practice - the teaching, namely, of a scholarly attentiveness to major historical examples defined within their historically mapped genres - this new shift seems to require a re-positioning of the practices of both teaching and writing in relation to a philosophical area which is itself contemporarily still largely unknown. It is as if we have to think ourselves anew in relation to a *terra ignota* or an intellectual-historical moment suddenly emerging in the new forms of interface between reading and writing. This is the point that Michael Heim makes when he says that the new reading/writing technologies require not just an epistemological shift i.e. they require more than just new descriptions of how knowledge is accessed. Rather, they require what he calls an 'ontological' shift in which there is "a change in the world under our feet, in the whole context in which our knowledge and awareness are rooted." (6)

To attempt to summarise the nature of this subterranean shift runs the risk that anything one says will be too brief, too simplistic, to matter. But I think that the attempt is worth making because a number of critical implications about the importance of creative work can all too easily be lost in endless enumerations of, say, the new technological systems and in the complex, often highly rhetorical claims made about these new media. What I would suggest, however, is that the systematics which traditionally link the four terms of teaching, literature, reception, readability - in short, the panoply of terms which all follow from the broad assumption that reading/writing is at heart a systematised corpus of representation - can no longer be treated as integral and mutually cohesive. That is to say, there is no longer a padagogico-literary system in place. Teaching writing, the idea of the text, the multiplicity of connections which can be made via a practice of reading - these activities have been overtaken by the contemporary notion (and writing practices) of the interface. The shift referred to here is of course practical as well as philosophical. Thus it is no longer possible to treat textuality as a "generic" phenomenon operating across all forms of writing and subverting their classical consolidation as "style" or exemplariness within a specific medium; nor (even more tellingly) is it possible to treat the production and representation of textuality as processes which somehow automatically and necessarily occur within the teaching/reading/writing system. The very terms "production" and "representation" seem too facile - indeed too industrial - for the latest virtual writing, for the latest instantaneity. The new interface is elaborated more around practices of modality than of representation; it is about recognising that writing is a programming activity which programs not only the nature of texts but also the nature of human interactions with text. Accordingly, there are no productive/representational artifacts securely generated in the process of writing even though there is communication, exchange, design and data-management. Rather, what is produced is the generation of a memory-bit in the form of a down-loaded document whether that be of an image or a written text or a book.

Theoretically speaking, all writing has been of course an interface in the sense that (right from the start) the invention of writing re-organised not just discourse and logic but also the mind. "Reflections on a Manual", however, is written in a period in which it was still reasonable to assume a stability in the representational function of writing within that interface whereas we are encountering writing systems which are not representational in that sense at all. These new systems are to borrow Gregory Ulmer's phrase "chorographic:" (7) they are writings of space, they involve the building of topographical systems, they re-organise readability along the model of journey and orientation, and they open up connectives between data, judgement, discovery and image which work in manifold, potentially infinitely interlinked ways. They seem to have little to do with the formation of a critically receptive "space" for judgement and appreciation. If anything, the space for reading has ceased to be a reflective space in the mind of an appreciative reader (that solitary reader with the book by the window) and has become an interactive, communicative space for which reading is the access code, the point of no more than entry.

Secondly, a matter of interlinkage. Barthes proposed a style of 'polysemous' reading in which each textual instance is composed of a series of overlapping kinds of reading and in which each textual instance can be placed in (and looked at from) different contexts. Instances such as operatic vocal style, the experience of playing music, the reading of a short story, the effect and affect of an advertisement could be read in relation to discourses of the body, discourses of

popular entertainment, in relation to psychoanalysis, to technologies, to mythic systems and so on. But the associative, so-called electronic logics of contemporary hypermedia and multimedia break out of even these relativistic, many-sided notions of boundary. Links are made according to the productive possibilities of hyperlinkage - that is, according to the the design possibilities of "writing in" further and further links. True, all forms of generic distinctions between instances do not entirely disappear: the modelling of an utopically constructed web of points floating in an infinitude of data remains a model which will always be restricted by actual uses. But it is true, nonetheless, that writing takes on the function of a design instrument constructing linkages between such points (data banks, image repertoires, sounds, moving images, interactive sites) in disregard of differences of genre, differences of source and differences of context. As several contemporary theorists have pointed out, writing moves much closer to dream work - to dream writing - and away from the powerful analogue established between written discourse and rational discourse which humanist and post-humanist teaching promotes. Hyperlinkage indeed is perhaps best defined as a highly active form of bricolage, a kind of bricolage in motion. This difference in logics between conventional script systems and hyperlink systems, says Gregory Ulmer, is "the point of departure for imagining what a new rhetoric will do that does not argue but that replaces the logic governing argumentative writing with associational networks." (8) We are encountering, as Ulmer says elsewhere, a writing which is paradoxically beyond representation or "the other side of rhetoric."

Provisionally, in the light of these new interfacial, consciously modal ways of writing, it might be possible to describe the contemporary humanities school as, at heart, a place of writing. The nexus between teaching and text is no longer one which establishes the symbiosis of teaching/literature - in any of the critical senses so far developed in modern and modernist curriculum. Teaching is rather about access to system and about creative associative uses. Multimedia design, hyper-rhetoric, the creation of interactive uses, the capacity to access data - these become core elements in a teaching practice which is addressed less to interpretation than to invention. In this new school, older modernist forms of representation - cinematics, sound, radio, music composition - take on the role of what could be called 'classical' components, as does literary composition and the reading of philosophy. They become one of the modalities available to invention. Whereas Barthes felt it necessary to maintain what he termed the antinomy between literary practice and literary teaching - in other words, felt it essential to divide the notion of writing into two parts of the creative and the pedagogic - the question must now be asked whether that distinction is any longer applicable in interface systems. Yet that other profound difficulty which Barthes mentioned, namely the problem of transmitting knowledge, does not go away even if we cannot any longer divide off (as Barthes does) critical practice from creative engagement. In fact it could be argued that all transmissive systems - in media no less than in knowledges - currently face a moment of crisis deeper than the issue of modern 'break' which faced the school teachers back in 1969. For Barthes, this problem of knowledge was a problem of alienation - of relevance, of applicability, of connectedness to the post-structuralist generation. But for us the problem of knowledge is one both of status (reliability, scholarly basis, meditative extent) and of creative re-invention.

This is why, I would suggest, that if contemporary humanities is a topos or place of writing, poetics is at the heart of its contemporary teaching practice. Poetics, however, is not proposed here as a substitute foundational discipline, nor as the sort of extended heuristic method which semiotics was for Barthes. Poetics is both speculative and practical: it is both a study of the way in which knowing is represented and a doing of that knowledge. The old-fashioned language of disciplinary outcomes does not apply here: the poiesis of inventive practices has to with a topography - a writing of places - as an experiential and informatic activity, as an energy-moment in the system. That said, however, there are certain applicabilities which thread through all aspects of the contemporary interface. Firstly, poetics is the area in which truth-conditions - issues, that is, about illusion, reality and the mediating function of language - can be understood. Poetics would be definable, accordingly, as a study which, in the broadest sense, comprises a metaphorics - a discourse on, and analysis of, the work of metaphor. This metaphorics could be conducted through a variety of terrains whether literary, psycho-analytic, cinematic, philosophical, systemic, cosmological or biological; but at the same time it would be a study which necessarily explores the immersion of each individual in his or her own metaphoric construction of the world. Secondly, poetics is language in action, but it constitutes an action which must be reflected on (generically, imagistically, historically) in relation to the present: the study of poetics is, in short, a study of what might be termed 'realisation.' It is about bringing to consciousness one's own and one's work's relationship with time. In this regard, poetics is close to being a grounding 'art' for the new interface of conductive and interactive knowledges. Thirdly - and, in a simple fashion, this is where an essential articulation in curriculum could be brought into being - poetics is a modality of experience. It is invention in and from both mainstream and liminal experience: poetics directly concerns, so to speak, the nature of the dream no less than the nature of a conscious determination of a "what is." If contemporary teaching must now imagine a writing possessed of a mobility that exceeds any merely pedagogic discourse of stylistics, the teaching of that writing must address key issues of location, the senses and interactive modalities of 'sensing' no less than it must address the seemingly haphazard issue of personal histories and desires. A poetics must, in other words, address a complex, overlaid space where a multiplicity of phenomenological experiences merge, start, stop, appear and disappear. To emphasise the experiential basis of invention would - given that such a teaching could be practised as a pre-requisite for the creative scholar - provide the strongest residuum for knowledge and practice. In other words, poetics is both about invention from the actual but also about the ontological status of that actual: it is not merely a mode of reflection and analysis but key to the range of reflective practices which the concepts of 'analysis' and reflection' are based in Western epistemology. Poetics, therefore, articulates a space necessary for interrupting what threatens to be a seamless

relationship between managerialism and massively technological, over-realised determinations of the interface; it would energise a writing which risks being numbed by its use as a merely political instrument.

Martin Harrison is a poet who lectures in writing at University of Technology Sydney

References

1. Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1986, p27 Return to article
2. Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1986, p28 Return to article
3. Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1986, p28 Return to article
4. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1986, p22 Return to article
5. Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1986, p.27 Return to article
6. Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p.xiii Return to artilce
7. Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994, p.61 passim Return to article
8. Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994, p18 Return to article

---

TEXT
Vol 3 No 1 April 1999
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au