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# Pedagogy and Pizarro

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## Abstract

This essay describes the pedagogic style and teaching philosophy of Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, a scholar distinguished by his translations (from Latin) and literary interpretations of important, somewhat under-recognized early medieval texts, his discovery of emergent narrative styles in literary history, and his identification of “firsts” within the trajectory of early medieval literature. The article focuses on Professor Martínez Pizarro’s dedication to his students and accompanying beliefs that guided his career: teaching is vital to the scholarly project; language instruction extends the subtle craft of translation; and a medievalist worth their salt does not adhere slavishly to constraints of genre or periodization but explores generic overlaps while reading and teaching outside the medieval canon. For both writers, Professor Martínez Pizarro’s impact has been profound and ongoing. Showing a scholar of remarkable breadth and literary passion bequeathing some of what he knows, this essay makes a larger argument for the necessity of medieval studies to a healthy humanities curriculum.

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Joaquín Martínez Pizarro—one of the late-twentieth-century’s leading scholars of late-antiquity and early-medieval literature—used to describe himself, somewhat humorously, as “the sole working Auerbachian in academia.” This was true and untrue. Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis* remained essential to Joaquín’s long, productive career, inspiring both his scholarship and pedagogy. He sometimes had students read “Odysseus’ Scar” before cracking open a copy of Homer. Joaquín wanted undergraduate and graduate students alike to prepare for the Homeric style, with its impulse “to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relationships” (Auerbach 1953, 6). With his tutelage, Greek epic’s visual and stable aspects helped content-oriented students prone to improvisational character analysis move toward an appreciation of literary composition—though never at the expense of historical context.

In his first monograph, Joaquín credits Auerbach for producing “The most influential modern analysis of early medieval narrative technique” (Martínez Pizarro 1989, 41). Yet he notes limitations to Auerbach’s explication of an episode from Gregory of Tours, the narrative of Sichar and Chramnesind, in which the accidental murder of a servant during Christmas festivities creates an escalating feud between two prominent Tours families—a dispute the bishop himself cannot quell as it moves toward multiple murders. Joaquín notes that Auerbach’s judgement of the episode as vibrant but garbled is, *prima facie*, persuasive. However, Joaquín observes that the feud’s development does not ultimately sustain Auerbach’s generalizations about Gregory’s narrative *in toto*. Granted it might form one of Gregory’s most incoherent segments. Nevertheless, his “description of the bloody aftermath in book nine... is crystal clear,” a quality to which Auerbach gives “little attention” (42).

Those of us lucky enough to study with Joaquín heard him praise *Mimesis* as one of the central books of his life. We also, however, heard him state that Auerbach, in his view, overrated the influence of Scripture on western narrative. To sit in Joaquín’s classes, to meet him for coffee (where the real education took place), and to read his scholarship, was to receive lessons in such intellectual integrity. This professor never became so lost in admiration of a single critic or theorist that he dulled his razor-sharp intellect. He taught us to be equally scrupulous, giving literary exegetes their due while noting their logical fallacies and/or biased interpretations. His devoted students, and there have been many, were cured of any impulse toward simplification or generalizing overstatement and nudged toward accuracy, precision, and intellectual fairness.

Medieval representations of reality had been Joaquín’s driving concern as a graduate student in comparative literature at Harvard, where he studied with scholar of Icelandic saga, Theodore M. Andersson. Joaquín became a member of the Harvard Society of Fellows and taught briefly in Holland before returning to his alma mater, Oberlin, to work as a medievalist and then move on to become a tenured member of Stony Brook University’s English Department.

He has generated a corpus that is as original as it is influential. His first book delineates the emergence of a new, scene-based narrative style that emerged in sixth-century Europe. He then undertook the first full study of Andreas Agnellus’s ninth-century *Liber Pontificalis* Ecclæsiæ, an account of Ravenna, which was a center of culture and political power in the late Western empire. Because Agnellus “performed” portions of his history before live audiences, Joaquín was able to analyze it as an example of the Middle Ages’ formation and enactment of narrative. His ongoing

interest in Visigothic history and society found expression in his last monograph, *The Story of Wamba: Julian of Toledo's Historia Wambae regis*. Here Joaquín provides the first translation from Latin of an account of the seventh century Visigothic king Wamba's quelling of an uprising in Gaul, composed by the young priest, Julian of Toledo, the son of converted Jews. Analyzing the text's political dimension in a milieu defined by hostility between royals and aristocrats, this study contains gems, such as the fact that "Julian's description of Wamba's unction is the earliest account extant of royal anointing in Western Europe...." (2005, 41).

As significant as his scholarship has been, his students testify to the enduring influence of his teaching. I, Edward Currie, Joaquín's pupil at Stony Brook University, cannot exaggerate the high quality of his instruction. This remarkable teacher inspired me to pursue an academic career. I, Jaclyn Geller, his student at Oberlin, experienced his teaching as revelatory. We each remain close to Joaquín, and while he is now family to both of us, the pedagogical aspect of these relationships never stops—thankfully. Joaquín's reading is so broad and multidisciplinary, his knowledge of languages so extensive, and his curiosity so unquenchable, that he continues to challenge and encourage us both to be the best writers and teachers we can be.

In what follows, we describe meeting Joaquín at two different points in his career, learning from him, and internalizing what we learned in ways that facilitated our subsequent education and intellectual growth. We focus on specific aspects of his pedagogy, many of which we have adapted to suit our own teaching styles. Hopefully, these reminiscences demonstrate not just the impact of this brilliant and dedicated professor but the value that medieval knowledge and pedagogy has for universities.

### Edward Currie

When I was an undergraduate at Stony Brook University, I took Professor Joaquín Martínez Pizarro's course, "Medieval Prose Narrative." He opened the first class meeting with a question whose answer seemed obvious but proved fundamental to the field of medieval studies: what does the word "medieval" mean? After outlining the etymology of the word and discussing whether the medieval period is truly separate from the Classical period and the Renaissance, he explained that "medieval" came to define roughly a millennium in Western Europe (ca. 500–ca. 1500 CE) and, unfortunately, still has a pejorative connotation. He ended his presentation, plainly the product of extensive research and careful thought, with the conclusion that "the word has no concrete meaning."

Such memorable conclusions turned out to be characteristic of his lectures. So was the lecture's structure. Planned precisely with a compelling question to hook his listeners, it ended with an unexpected answer. With this exhilarating lecture and its confounding conclusion, Professor Martínez Pizarro reshaped my conception of history. Rather than understanding it as comprising solid yet sweeping periods of time, I came to realize the arbitrary nature of the "medieval period." Later, in my graduate career at Cornell University, I built on this realization when I studied Latin historiography, particularly Paul the Deacon's eighth-century *Historia Langobardorum* (*History of the Langobards*) and Saxo Grammaticus' thirteenth-century *Gesta Danorum* (*Deeds of the Danes*). I realized that it is more useful to view these works, separated by centuries, as productions of particular time periods by specific authors with their own aims rather than think of them as belonging to one enormous period. For example,

knowing that the Denmark of Saxo's time had grown into an extensive empire with ambitions to extend its borders is significant. It explains why he was commissioned to weave Latin tales of a grand, legendary past to reflect the majesty of the Danish empire in his own day. In other words, what I learned from Professor Pizarro's first lecture ended up shaping my academic career.

And so this reshaping of my mental framework for understanding the past continued. In our first few class meetings, he spoke extensively about the epics of Homer and Vergil and the histories of ancient Greece and the Roman empire. Previously, I had tended to separate history from literature, but his course broke this mental barrier. He emphasized the necessity of a firm grasp of history of every stripe—political, cultural, and intellectual—for rigorous literary analysis and interpretation. Most importantly, he did not assume that students had the necessary literary-historical background already; instead, he equipped us with this knowledge.

Sometimes he helped us acquire that knowledge by asking us to rethink what we thought we already knew. For instance, when the class focused on Old Norse sagas produced in medieval Iceland, he asked probing questions: How are Norse family sagas, which make historical claims, designed as works of art? How do we interpret the reticence of their protagonists? For answers, he pointed to the words before us. Thus, in the first chapter of *Njáls Saga*, a certain man named Hoskuld, son of Dala-Koll, asks his brother Hrút what he thinks of Hallgerd, Hoskuld's daughter. Hrút is silent, so his brother asks the question again. Hrút replies that she is beautiful but wonders how "the eyes of a thief" have come into their family (2001, 2). Pizarro pointed out that the character's words are charged with meaning because theft was a very serious crime in medieval Iceland. The prophetic speech also foreshadows the conflict Hallgerd will instigate; for instance, she sends a slave to steal food from a certain Otkel's farm ("enough butter and cheese for two horses to carry") and has him burn down the farmer's storage shed. When her husband Gunnar discovers the theft, he says, "It's a bad thing if I'm partner to a thief" and slaps her on the face (81-2). Professor Martínez Pizarro prompted us to consider how a medieval audience would have understood such scenes in a saga, compelling me to think from the perspectives of people quite unlike myself, who lived in a time and culture remote from my own. The intellectual challenge of attempting to answer such questions brought home the complexities of studying literature and showed why it was worthwhile.

Having challenged us with his questions, he would then ask one more: "What more can we say?" That is, he pushed us to develop our own questions and interpret the text from as many angles as possible, a critical teaching strategy I continue to use in the classroom to bring out many points of view from students. This technique was so elemental to his pedagogical style that even during lectures—at carefully calculated moments—he would pause to draw us into a discussion. These conversations made me realize how important it is to avoid teaching students as if they are members of a captive audience. Through his practice, he taught the importance of keeping the students' perspectives in mind as much as possible.

Also striking was that he paid no special attention to morality in literature. Prior to his courses, I had been taught to read stories as if their primary purpose was to convey moral lessons and messages. From Professor Martínez Pizarro I learned that, instead, the point was to comprehend each text on its own terms. He directed us frequently to the importance of the relationship between form—the shape of a text—and meaning. Why is a saga structured symmetrically? By understanding saga authors as literary artists, he allowed us to see that narrative symmetry—in the form of repetitions and

contrasts—made the sagas attractive to audiences who delighted in recognizing parallels and noticing deviations. By means of such rhetorical techniques, he showed us how an audience could be eased into certain points of view about characters and their actions.

My interest in medieval literature piqued during that first course with him, I enrolled in his “Medieval Epics” course the following semester. Again, I witnessed how he could move between the broad and the expansive on the one hand, and the narrow and particular on the other. When we read the Old English “epic” *Beowulf*, we covered such subjects as perceptions of nature in Old English poetry and their relationship to the monstrous Grendelkin. As he read passages aloud from *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, Old English poems which contain representations of nature, the pace of his speech slowed to linger over how nature appears threatening to humans. Close reading—at times explaining the import of a single line or just a word—was as crucial to his pedagogy as broader lectures on literature and history.

That one word could be important to the drama of a literary work was clear in a lesson on the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* about the Burgundian princess Kriemhild, a widow who burns with the desire to avenge Siegfried, her beloved husband betrayed by her brothers to his death. In the second half of the epic, she looks through a window at her family members, who have arrived to visit her in Hungary where she now resides as the wife of King Etzel: “She was looking out for her relations, *as* friends do for their dear ones” (1965, 215; my italics). The professor observed shrewdly that though this poet was no Homer or Vergil, he composed this subtle moment ingeniously to highlight that Kriemhild only pretends to welcome her family *as if* she were happy to see them, concealing her thirst for blood revenge. Here, “as” spoke volumes about her appetite for vengeance.

It was in large part due to his close attention to language that I enrolled in his Old English class. To illustrate Professor Martínez Pizarro’s rigor and creativity as a language teacher, I include an excerpt from a quiz he gave on Noun Phrases (all declensions) (Figure 1). The test instructions read as follows: “Give the Old English equivalent of the underlined phrases in the following sentences: For each one of them, indicate a) gender, b) number, c) case.” He had us translate Modern English into Old English without the aid of a dictionary or any other resource, and we had to do grammatical identifications. Indeed, we were expected to understand not just what words meant but how they generated meaning.

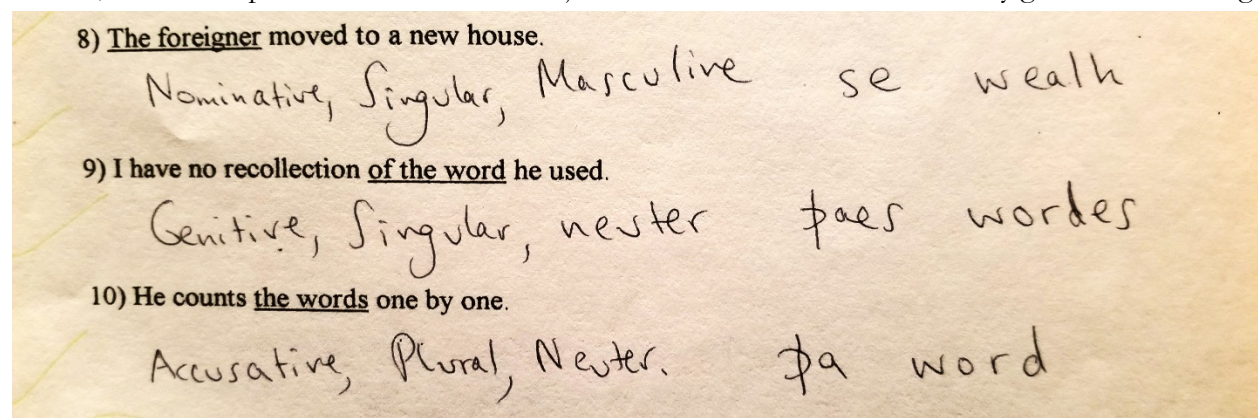


Figure 1. Excerpt from one of Martínez Pizarro’s Old English quizzes.

In his literature courses, he brought this careful attention to individual words even in texts translated from a medieval language to modern English. He would pause at a key word and lead us back to the original word—for example, the Norse *godi* (chief and priest) or the Latin *speculum principum* (mirrors for princes, a genre of literature designed to teach princes how to rule)—so that his vast linguistic knowledge could lead us to a deeper understanding of medieval literature. The fact that we read English translations of texts composed in dead languages was a limit that he could transcend, to a certain extent, by translating important words and concepts for his students.

Inspired by how, in his literature courses, he regularly pointed us back to the original languages, I subsequently did two tutorials with him, one in Old Norse and the other in Medieval Latin. In the Old Norse tutorial, we began with excerpts from Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. He not only taught me proper pronunciation and essential verbs but continued to impart his sense of the large and the small. He knew when to dwell on a particular word and elucidate its shades of meaning; he knew when to move on, translating passages smoothly and swiftly in order to get the gist of a large chunk of text. During our sessions, he would sometimes stop me from translating to tell me about a work of art or explain aspects of Norse culture. These were more than just linguistic lessons. He described the carvings of the Norse hero Sigurd the Dragonslayer in Norwegian stave churches, thereby enriching my sense of medieval Scandinavian culture beyond the study of its letters. Under his tuition, I realized that translation involved more than merely deciphering a written text and translating it into English. For example, he explained that women in Norse literature are often represented as goading men into conflict: the noun *hvort*, which means instigation, is derived from the verb *hvetja* which means literally “to whet, sharpen a cutting instrument” and metaphorically “to make one keen, encourage” (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1957, s.v. “hvetja”). As I grasped the meanings of these words, I was not only better able to understand the sagas, but I also gained deeper insights into Norse culture. After each session, Professor Martínez Pizarro told me about literature outside of the tutorial that he found admirable and interesting. He spoke about works in various languages with great enthusiasm, such as the novels of Heinrich von Kleist and André Gide, as well as the scholarship, for instance, of the Swiss medievalist Andreas Heusler, who did influential research on Germanic heroic legends, Eddic poetry, and Norse sagas. As a student educated in the Anglosphere, I had never even heard of these important authors.

His energetic talks about texts, medieval and modern, motivated me to read widely. Already, he had encouraged me to practice translating Norse literature outside of the tutorial in order to discover how much I could learn on my own. Now, I borrowed books from the library written in, for instance, Modern German, French, Medieval Latin, and Old English. I felt, paradoxically, that I had drunk deeply from a well of knowledge that he led me to and yet only just begun. Professor Martínez Pizarro's emphasis on the importance of foreign languages and literatures opened a door to a storehouse of knowledge. This foundational work in multiple languages continues to shore my own scholarship and my teaching.

Professor Martínez Pizarro fired my enthusiasm for foreign languages and literatures and gave me the tools to read them. These are gifts that only a teacher of a particularly high caliber can give, and which I aspire to pass on.

### Jaclyn Geller

“It seems my Old Norse has held up,” Joaquín Martínez Pizarro told me on the phone one day. “I’m doing a tutorial with a rather unusual student. He’s interested in learning Old Norse so he can read the sagas in the original. And he’s doing it. He can handle the translations.”

“Great,” I replied. “Terrific.”

My faint disappointment—I had always wanted to be good at languages—was outweighed by happiness that my former professor had found a student with whom he could share his love, not just of literature but of language acquisition. I had never burned with the desire to master Old Norse and couldn’t be much help in this capacity.

This was the first time I heard about Edward Currie, who was drawn to the early Middle Ages, Joaquín’s chief area of study. I was not surprised that his Old Norse had “held up.” His ability to master classical, medieval, and modern languages was the stuff of folklore at Oberlin College, where he had taught me years earlier before moving to Stony Brook University. Rumors circulated that he spoke five languages fluently: no, six; no twelve. Students lacked the pluck to ask him directly. “I hear he’s read everything that’s ever been written,” a nervous undergraduate in the English literary survey whispered to me as we entered class. When she asked him if this was true, he said it was a very sweet comment, but no, that breadth of reading was impossible for any single human being.

In the survey, required of all English majors, Joaquín, as we called him, eschewed first-day introductions and getting-to-know each other exercises. But he didn’t plunge immediately into literary analysis. He began the class with a startlingly simple question: “Why do we read?” A passionate lover of books, I had never asked myself—or anyone else—that question. Oberlin students are loquacious; a freewheeling discussion followed. Various ideas surfaced: reading is entertaining, reading expands vocabulary and makes us more articulate, reading connects us to a community of other readers.... The professor offered no opinion. However, anyone struggling to articulate a position received his assistance: “So, reading fiction makes us better psychologists? Perhaps this is because it places us into the consciousness of another person, a character?” He demonstrated an uncanny ability to help participants discover what points they were trying to articulate.

I remained silently reflective during this hour. If I had been honest, I would have said that something personal underscored my literary passion: reading had become basic to my self-perception. When stranded (as my adolescent self-saw it) in a sterile, mindlessly competitive, materialistic suburb, I had found refuge in books while simultaneously crafting the identity of an outsider: the oddball with a novel and two volumes of poetry in her satchel. Belying my genuine literary enthusiasm was a process of self-fashioning that I could barely admit to myself and certainly not announce to a room full of strangers. But the frankness of this professor’s question forced me to begin confronting an internal tension between reading so ardent that it felt criminal and the simultaneous construction of a suburban “outlaw” reader’s persona.

Joaquín’s tutelage would last three formal years followed by thirty informal ones. Joaquín shepherded me out of adolescent self-fashioning and into the life of the mind, eventually encouraging me to attend graduate school and focus on Restoration and eighteenth-century studies, where he said, “Much work still remains to be done.”

Years later, as an English professor who specializes in this period, I don't operate in the intellectual hothouse that was Oberlin but at a state university in Connecticut, with a very different student population, running the gamut from uncultivated to sophisticated readers, with exceptionally strong graduate students (in our English master's program). Whatever the class, I echo my former teacher, beginning with the question, "Why do we read?" Some of the answers recapitulate those I heard years ago. One reply I never heard at Oberlin is, "We don't—at least I don't." This creates an opportunity for me to explain that substantive books are essential to a meaningful life. I restrain myself. One of Joaquín's valuable pedagogical lessons came in the form of a rare directive: "Don't preach to undergraduates about the value of reading. They sit through it, but it doesn't penetrate." I concur; the best way to make my undergraduates appreciate reading is first to understand that it's a practice they may need to defend at home or with friends. Second, a professor can model the book-oriented life without sermonizing. I have, however, refined Joaquín's initial query to better suit my audience. At the end of our first class, I tell them why I think reading is important by recurring to Dionysius of Halicarnassus's theory of *imitatio*. His emphasis on authorial influence as well as the notion of crafted literary models (rather than direct imitations) is accessible to those who are listening. Every subsequent class reinforces this idea in some way.

I considered myself well-read before arriving at Oberlin. After all, I'd consumed Shakespeare's major plays, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Dubliners*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *A Room of One's Own*...I'd read four of William Faulkner's novels and four of James Baldwin's...Eliot, Yeats, Pound, and a handful of Emily Dickinson poems. How much more was there? Quite a bit, I would quickly learn. Most of it wasn't written in English; most of it had appeared before the twentieth century. If this professor taught me one thing, starting out, it was that I had been educated in an Anglophone bubble with a modernist bias. My literary provincialism ended the day I stepped into his classroom.

Joaquín had us read Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* in its entirety. After introducing the basic poetic feet and explaining that foot and word divisions do not align neatly, he required us to submit weekly assignments in which we analyzed poems metrically. I found this strange and not entirely fair. Students in other sections of the survey were agreeing how much depended upon a red wheelbarrow; I was tracking caesuras in Edmund Waller lyrics. The professor instructed us not to be overly fastidious: "Read the poem aloud; remember that one almost cannot read poetry too slowly. Use the markings to indicate where stresses fall. Divide feet according to the way it sounds to you." Still, it seemed like hypervigilant obsessiveness—not to mention a lot of work. Quickly, though, I began to see how thoroughly meaning was encoded in poetic music, and by the time we reached *The Rape of the Lock*, I could recognize Pope's metrical wizardry and see how one simple enjambment hones a satiric moment to perfection.

I also noticed that the development of a technical vocabulary made me feel different as a reader: more competent, less alienated from pre-modern literary productions. Although this was not a medieval literature course, it showed me what a grounding in the Middle Ages gives someone who applies that expertise to other periods. I continue to argue—and it has become a point of controversy—that medievalists perform a vital function for all students of the humanities. In a "relevance"-obsessed academic environment which is, perhaps, more condescending to pre-modern writing than any that has come before, every literature department needs at least one scholar of the

Middle Ages to mitigate what Anthony Kemp calls “the estrangement of the past” (1991, vi).<sup>1</sup> This does not mean privileging the past as salvific or rebutting originality, but rather bringing Classical antiquity and the Middle Ages into the undergraduate consciousness for basic purposes of intellectual contextualization and to denude students of a now-centered approach that reifies their own certainties.

The survey course’s chronological arrangement and traditional poets were balanced with unusual choices that showed its professor’s comparative-literature background. It was here that I read my first eighteenth-century novel, Denis Diderot’s 1792 *The Nun*. (Joaquín stressed that early modern British literary culture was bilingual, with French being de rigueur for people of letters—hence his inclusion of this French novel in a British literature survey.) It was here, in a novel one would not expect to find in this course, that I first carefully considered the topic that would shape my career: a non-maritally born character (137-8). Years later, in graduate school at New York University, I would devote a portion of my dissertation to representations of non-marital children, which led to a (forthcoming) crossover book on non-marital history that details the Middle Ages’ legal disenfranchisement of so-called bastards, once the most rightless citizens in Europe. It was Joaquín who first awoke my curiosity about the maltreatment of children who have committed no crime, whose only viable option often was retreat to a religious order.

Joaquín’s medieval syllabi contained forms new to me: hagiographies, sagas, conversion narratives, allegories, character books, estate satires. I confessed to him that I felt overwhelmed by the scope of my ignorance. There was so much I hadn’t read.... How would I get a handle on the important books? His response was helpful—even liberating: “You can read diligently for the rest of your life, and you should. But you’ll still get to the end and find yourself way behind. You cannot run to keep up with yourself, trying to cover everything.” I’ve since told anxious, ambitious students the same thing and gotten the same request I gave my professor: “Will you make a list of the texts you think are important, so I can at least read those?” Of course, he would. Of course, I do.

He treated the word “medieval” as a way of acknowledging stylistic differences between works produced in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Always, he stressed that the partition was not rock-solid. We read Roman fiction, like Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass* (which prepared me to treat skeptically my graduate professors’ claim that the novel was an eighteenth-century invention) and Augustine’s *Confessions* (which readied me for my first teaching assistantship in an NYU course called “Conversations of the West,” where Augustine’s hostility toward sex mystified my students, to whom, because of Joaquín, I could explain the medieval cult of celibacy).

Joaquín also reminded us not to overstress the division between West and East. He assigned a hagiography of the non-maritally born Byzantine saint, Theodore of Sykeon and a (startling) account of the pillar saint, Daniel the Stylite. He explained that Christianity’s ascetic tradition, both cenobitic and anchoritic, began in third-century Egypt and spread westward. For undergraduates, the extremes of self-flagellation these hermits pursued seemed bizarre. The professor made space for our discomfort, though he assumed we could handle the material and gave no prefatory cautions. Nor did he explain the behavior of men who allowed their beards to freeze into icicles in twentieth-century psychiatric terms like “self-harm.” Rather, he led us to understand the spirit in which fifth- and sixth-

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<sup>1</sup> Kemp argues that “Between the fourteenth and the eighteenth century, the Western comprehension of historical time reversed itself, from an image of syncretic unity and an essential sameness of time, to one of dynamic and supersessive change, spawning schism after schism from the inherited text of the meaning of the past” (vi).

century monks undertook these regimens: how fully absorbed they were in emulating Christ, how self-denial and pain represented an attempt to purify their contemplation of sacredness. Listening to him explain the theological underpinnings of monasticism's outermost participants and convey the fifth- and sixth-century zeitgeist, I felt my revulsion and condescension subside as my curiosity intensified.

He believed that historical background was important to comprehending any literary period. (This is another tenet that has allowed me to successfully teach the eighteenth century, which has an unusually topical literature.) It wasn't a matter of vaguely knowing a few names; he wanted us to *know* certain parts of medieval history. Accordingly, he had us write summaries of the Germanic incursions into Rome. I based my own five-page summary on two of the professor's lectures combined with a short book on the Germanic invasions that he had assigned (Figure 2). Joaquín understood that with history, students cannot be passive vessels. They must actively reshape what they have heard, or it will evaporate. In a scaled-down way, I have my students do similar exercises—not explaining a massive uprooting that spanned centuries but writing three paragraphs on the English Civil Wars or Lord Hardwicke's 1754 Marriage Act.

Joaquín's treatment of *Beowulf* stands out in my memory. Although he taught the poem in translation, he had us read it with attention to early medieval poetic conventions, capturing the effect of short stressed lines carried by alliteration over a medial caesura. I found illuminating his description of the Danes as a beleaguered people making the best of their lot, who possess an abstract monotheism from which they depart when experiencing intense duress. His extensive, original research on medieval insult scenes made it natural for us to linger on the verbal confrontation between Beowulf and Unferth; we split into groups of three and traced the balance between summary and direct speech, according to his rubric that the former condenses selectively, creating an effect of distance, while the latter provides dramatic immediacy, pulling readers in and often providing the essence of an episode. This distinction has held me in good stead, especially when teaching or writing on Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, a balancing act between summary and direct speech, in which the narrator often dissolves, and the biography effectively becomes a drama.

The elongated scene in which Beowulf and Unferth trade affronts led naturally into what Joaquín stressed as *Beowulf's* chief puzzle, contained in lines 2201-10, where readers learn that after Hygelac's

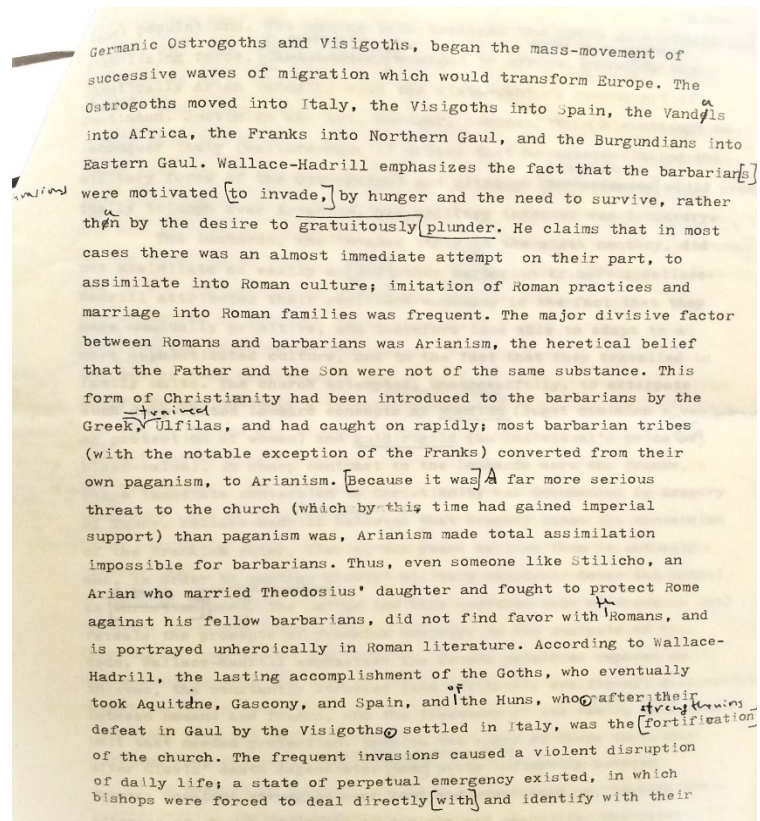


Figure 2. Geller's summary of readings and lectures.

death in battle, Beowulf rules for fifty years. Why a foreshadowing scene of traded accusations that comprises 107 lines (499-606), compared to a fifty-year kingship relayed in one long sentence? (35-41, 151). He rebuffed suggestions that the poet, having written long ago, was incompetent, pointing out that sophisticated use of kennings and strategically placed digressive stories ruled out charges of authorial ineptitude. No: this had every appearance of a conscious aesthetic choice. He assigned our class the work of drafting position papers to speculatively explain it.

I was the “task lead” of a group of four students who met every day for a week, wrestling with this question. We decided, as many undergraduates had before us, that the gap suggested a notion manifest throughout *Beowulf*: lulls don’t merit narrative representation. A young Beowulf ripping off his antagonist’s arm was one thing; a middle-aged Beowulf settling land disputes was another. As well, the melancholy tone suggested situations repeating themselves, with new people stepping up to fulfill old roles. A senescent king (Hrothgar) is threatened by a monster and aided by a young warrior (Beowulf). Then, Beowulf himself becomes a senescent king under siege by a monstrous fiend, who accepts the aid of a youthful fighter. The future offered little in the way of anticipatory novelty or progress. Juxtaposing two parallel episodes illustrated this perspective in high relief.



**Figure 3.** Martínez Pizarro and Ana Cara with another lover of Old English verse, guest speaker Jorge Luis Borges, at Oberlin in 1983 (Little 1983).

As the only woman in my group, I felt eager to showcase my newfound feminism. When we reported our conclusions to the class, I referred, not to the monk who wrote *Beowulf* but to the nun who had authored the poem. I expected pushback from the professor; I at least hoped to grab his attention. But he simply took notes, allowing our analysis to unfold. When we finished, a woman asked if the poem could have had a female author. Joaquín replied, “Certainly. Monk—nun. We don’t know who wrote it.” The young men in the room, who looked up to our instructor, nodded, as if the matter was settled. In that moment, he validated my nascent understanding that women had a history that

went beyond domestic servitude. As importantly, by not explaining *Beowulf's* narrative lacuna but allowing me to discover it with other students, the professor had given me new confidence. After our successful *Beowulf* presentation, everyone in the group stood a little taller.

Joaquín agreed to continue our discussion of (definite) women writers in a private reading on Ivy Compton-Burnett, Nathalie Sarraute, and Natalia Ginzberg, with Mary McCarthy providing a critical lens for exploring how they each managed dialogue in the post-modern, post stream-of-consciousness novel. This tutorial took the form of a weekly meeting in which we discussed the respective authors' styles. I wrote a paper on each one, but by this point Joaquín understood my commitment to learning everything I could from him, and he let me guide the experience with my questions, sometimes letting me reach in a way that exceeded my grasp. Joaquín read Sarraute in French and Ginzburg in Italian. I—did not. But this didn't seem to matter so much. The problem, as he defined it going in, kept us talking endlessly. He had not selected these authors because they were women; he chose them because they were to him the most interesting writers reacting to modernism's stylistic experiments. His assumption that literature included male and female authors of the highest caliber and the most eccentric, far-ranging talent, was not a given at this time.

It made a permanent impression on me, opening my mind. I came to see Virginia Woolf as one luminary in the twentieth-century canon. Joaquín exposed me to other innovative female writers who were not on our agenda—always with a preternatural ability to lay bare an author's premiere achievement. By the end of our independent study, Joaquín had me asking a larger question: Why are certain women canonically enshrined while other gifted female stylists are sidelined? I still turn this question over alone, in conversation with him, and in discussions with the three women—all scholars, co-workers, and close friends—in my writer's group. Something like an answer is starting to form—something like a book idea is beginning to take shape.

This independent study with Joaquín set an enduring pattern for me. I now read as he taught me to: across genders, genres, geographical boundaries, eras, and cultural traditions. (Medievalists must do this for, as he once explained to me, there really is no way to become expert in ten centuries of history and literature.) I now understand the importance of belonging to a vibrant intellectual community, which makes reading a solitary activity but a shared joy. Mine includes Edward Currie, who rescues me when I teach World Literature and need a Latin phrase translated or a medieval plot twist clarified. It also includes my writer's group, which comprises three other scholars: a modernist, a theorist, and a specialist in the late Middle Ages. As I continue to consult Joaquín on early medieval matters, I turn most often to our group's medievalist for intellectual and professional guidance. With these worldly, erudite, principled scholars as my role models, I persist in believing that I can immerse myself in any period and write whatever I think is important. I am doing just this.

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