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1

INTRODUCTION

Has it ever happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven't you ever happened to read while looking up from your book?

—Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*

Although this book enters a long- and hotly contested subject area, it is not a polemic. Rather, it is an invitation to approach this area—of institutional, pedagogical, and personal relations between literature and writing—from a new angle. I acknowledge that acceptance of this invitation opens my own text up to approaching from new angles, but I welcome that phenomenon, which of course would happen even if I didn't. In fact, that probability supports my book's claims about the usability of texts beyond their authors' intentions, except my focus here is on "literary" texts, not nonfictional ones. My primary target audiences are college writing program administrators (WPAs), faculty and scholars in English and writing studies, and graduate students in both disciplines. Secondary readers include undergraduates of all kinds, high school English and composition teachers and their students, education scholars, and intellectual public audiences. I name these parties not only so they will feel personally invited to participate in this text but also to suggest that they belong in each other's company, in theory as well as in practice. This book seeks to prompt dialogue both within and among these groups that I believe often function too separately from each other in relation to the content addressed herein.

In short, my book proposes a case for studying and making rhetorical uses of literary texts. I believe that doing so can open up many powerful and pleasurable learning opportunities, especially regarding oneself in relation to one's lived contexts. I refer to these uses as *affordances*, after a term derived from ecological psychology for applications that emerge in a given context, whether intended (e.g., sitting on a chair)

or not (e.g., standing on a chair to reach something). I wish to broaden the knowledge and expectations of readers—especially readers who may seek, or who teach those who seek, no more from literary material than entertainment—of what they can do with literary texts, partly by disregarding what the text or its author intends and what the text’s conventional reception indicates is an acceptable interpretation. Another way to put this is: allowing oneself to be unconcerned with the text’s meaning, regardless of who or what may determine that meaning. This disregard need not be impudent or permanent, and it can be useful in certain situations without damaging whatever meanings may otherwise be associated with the text.

People will generally acknowledge that literary texts can powerfully affect audiences, and with some prompting, many people can also identify an example that has made a notable impact on them individually. However, relatively few may realize that they may also do something with such material, with value for themselves and others. That is to say, although it is well-known that literature *says* things and, to a lesser degree, that it *does* things, rarely do we consider what *audiences* can *do* with literature: what functions it can be made to serve beyond being experienced and analyzed. My book approaches literary material, then, not to be interpreted but to be used, both as intended (i.e., what I call an *apparent* affordance) and not as intended (i.e., *subtle* affordance). Making affordances of texts as such reconceives reading as an active, applied, and creative practice. Other reader-focused theories have made a somewhat similar shift, but with rare exception they are mostly still concerned with what texts *mean*. I am pursuing texts as means to *other* ends.

A considerable influence on my thinking, from whom I eventually diverge in this way, is Louise Rosenblatt, who explains that “literature provides a living through, not simply knowledge *about* [its subjects]: not information that lovers have died young and fair, but a living-*through* of Romeo and Juliet,” for example (1995, 38, emphases added). These italicized prepositions help explain my approach. Whereas an interpretation is a response *to* a text that is *about* the text, a literary affordance is a response to something *else* (e.g., a rhetorical situation), which emerges *through* a text (e.g., as a lens or a way of being). My book invites and tries to help readers reflect on their processes of *living through* literature in the latter way, not just during text-oriented current acts of reading or shortly thereafter but also in applications made continuously intermittently afterward in life-oriented situations that may have nothing to do with the literary text, its author or period, or its conventional reception. To expand on this introduction’s epigraph by

Barthes, with some texts you look up from your book and keep reading indefinitely, even unconsciously.

So let's imagine that you have "lived through" *Romeo and Juliet* or some other text you may connect with better. What might you *do* with that experience, for yourself and for others? Note the shift in emphasis from the stereotypical complaint to English majors, "what are you going to do with *that?*" to an invitation to all kinds of readers of literature, "what are you going to *do* with that?" I am not claiming that this approach is necessarily any better than conventional treatments of texts, but I also don't think it's any worse. That depends on the context. Though formal literary interpretation is not something most people often find themselves doing in the course of life, living *through* literary texts *is* something they do throughout life's duration, from bedtime stories to last rites. Add to this the talk we hear in the womb and our eulogies and obituaries, and we can see that "our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" that is textual.¹ That is to say, people live narrative and rhetorical lives, amid the discourse of other people and sources, to which they constantly respond with the use of any number of tools or tactics. I intend to show that these tools and tactics can and do include repurposed texts or textual features: what I call literary affordance, a skill that can be improved if individuals become more aware and are supported in the practice. For this reason I would like to see *affordance* become a familiar counterpart to *interpretation* in educational (and other) contexts. This practice has the potential for widespread appeal, since by definition affordances are useful, and in this case they can also be artful. In other words, making affordances of literature is not restricted to situations in which texts or their meanings are the central preoccupation—which, as I just said, are rare occurrences in most people's lives—yet these affordances also potentially deeply engage people with literary content.

Before going further, I want to clarify some key terms and issues. For starters, I will spare my readers and myself from surveying the copious definitions of rhetoric from its thousands of years of theorizing. For present purposes we can take the word to mean the use of sign systems in contexts, with recognizable results. My deliberately passive phrasing here leaves room for the existence of *unintended* rhetorical effects (a debatable concept, I realize). My vagueness about determinants of effectiveness seeks to accommodate widely varying situations. So potentially any effect in any circumstance may be found to have value, even in the unconscious (again, I know: debatable). Detailed accounts of the meanings of *affordance* are offered in chapters 2 and 3, until which we can provisionally equate the term with words like *use*, *application*, or

appropriation. Literary affordances, then, are applications of features of literary texts to unrelated rhetorical situations.

Throughout the book I distinguish between what I call *interpretive* meaning and *cultural* meaning, with my focus squarely attending to the former. This designation seeks to indicate the kinds of meaning texts accrue through interpretation as literary artifacts, whether by consideration of authorial intent, elements of the text itself, critical reception, or some combination of these and other such scholarly emphases. The latter designation, *cultural* meaning, seeks to indicate the kinds of meaning texts accrue through existence as artifacts associated with various identity or subjectivity groups. Though these two kinds of meaning are of course not mutually exclusive, my book's encouragement of provisional disregard for textual meaning is meant to apply only to *interpretive* meaning. In other words, I do not recommend ignoring *cultural* meanings of texts. Expressions of literary affordance, therefore, should always seek to maintain respect for cultural meanings of texts—a potentially complicated matter that might be best addressed on a case-by-case basis by stakeholders in given rhetorical situations. Discussions about why and how to determine such cultural respect can yield important outcomes and may even comprise the main point of an educational exercise in rhetor response theory.

When I speak of *students* in my book, I tend to mean *readers* generally, and by that I also mean audiences, viewers, listeners, fans, gamers, and so on. Although I prefer the more capacious *rhetoric and composition to writing studies*, my book employs the latter name to identify the academic discipline more recognizably for non-specialist readers; however, I occasionally use *composition* in place of *writing* for historical or situational accuracy. When I use the terms *literary studies*, *literature* (as a field), and *English*, I often mean the aggregate of people, places, and activities that belong to English departments or the equivalent, minus that of writing and rhetoric (which may or may not also be housed there). The term *literature* (as a text) might mean multiple works, an entire single work, or only one or some of a single work's features, as the topic at hand may involve no more than a given theme, character, or just an image or a line from a text. I use *work* and *text* interchangeably, despite my appreciation for Roland Barthes's (1986, 56–64) distinction between the terms. So for the sake of ease, I may employ the metonymic terms *literature* or *material* as stand-ins for the part(s) they represent. Furthermore, by *literature* I mean any published or public text or artifact that is not nonfiction. This includes but is not limited to novels, stories, poems, works for the stage, art or design pieces, myths, graphic novels, comics, fairy tales, feature

films, TV shows, songs, fanfiction, and video games. My examples in this book are drawn from what is more traditionally thought of as *literature* per se, but that is only because this material is most familiar and appealing to me personally, not because I believe it inherently possesses or deserves special status above these other forms. I am unconcerned with high/low distinctions among these genres in any general sense.

Let it be clear that I do not wish or call for affordances to replace interpretations in educational or any other settings, nor do I believe they ever could. Rather, I am proposing the investigation and making of affordances as other things to do with literary texts, with different methods, results, and values—which some, if not many, readers have already done with varying degrees of awareness and development. I am also suggesting that my approach may carry appeal to some people in some contexts that literary interpretation does not tend to carry (or not as much). This is partly because the study of literary affordance as I present it here involves greater attention to oneself and one's situational/rhetorical existence than to the text in question, the latter of which interpretation tends to emphasize. But I want to nip in the bud the dichotomy already beginning to form here, despite myself, between interpretation and affordance. It seems likely to me that making effective affordances of texts involves some degree of their interpretation (or at least analysis) and that unique affordances can also inform interpretations (or analyses). This view follows Steven Mailloux's (1997, 379) convincing position, variously articulated throughout his career, that "rhetoric and interpretation are practical forms of the same extended human activity: rhetoric is based on interpretation; interpretation is communicated through rhetoric." So I do not present my rhetor response theory as competing with interpretive or analytical modes of textual engagement but rather as pursuing different ends as each other from related origins.

Further, I do not presume that making an affordance of literary material will or should *work* for anyone with any text at any time, putting aside for now what it might mean for an affordance to "work" as such (see chapters 3 and 6 on that point). In fact, I generally recommend that, apart from being provided with some basic awareness, guidance, and encouragement, individuals be enabled to develop affordances as organically as possible (i.e., of their own volition and in their own ways). My aim in this book consists far more of inviting awareness and development of the inherent occurrence of literary affordances in many readers than to argue for a specific hierarchy or course of action for them. Furthermore, I would hope that the effectiveness of literary affordance be determined (i.e., assessed), if at all, not against a supposed universal

standard but in relation to elements of its corresponding rhetorical situation: purpose, audience, and exigence.² These elements necessarily change across time and space, as presumably do readers' approaches to texts, albeit probably less constantly. Finally, throughout the book when I refer to an "approach" to texts, I am inviting a focus on the nature of the *phenomenon* of approaching rather than on the spatial, temporal, and causal connotations of the word *approach*.

A famous example of an affordance made from a literary source is Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex. For his entire mature career, Freud explained this theory of the child's unconscious sexual desire for the child's parent of the opposite sex explicitly in terms of the ancient Greek myth of Oedipus, best known to Freud and most others from the Sophocles play *Oedipus Rex*. Freud derives many rhetorical benefits from this framing technique, including that his difficult and controversial theory becomes easier to understand and remember (through both narrative and naming), as well as initially more palatable (through the somewhat distancing indirection of analogy). He also gains the insinuation of timelessness to the phenomenon he is pointing out by locating it in a text from as far back as the fifth century BCE.

But it is insufficient and inaccurate to consider Freud's affordance of this myth to be merely an analogy or an explanatory tactic (not that those are insignificant effects). The myth also had a considerable or even essential *generative* role in Freud's formulation of his groundbreaking theory, as well as his worldview. Shortly after his father's death, Freud, who was deeply attached to his mother and was intimately familiar with *Oedipus Rex*, began writing about the Oedipus complex as such. We can intuit from a letter he wrote to a friend at the time that Freud possessed a predisposition to read and generalize his own (childhood) experience *into* the play, a work that was known until that point more for its themes of fate and morality than for its element of incest: "I found in myself a constant love for my mother, and jealousy of my father. I now consider this to be a universal event in early childhood" (1985, 17). During those same years Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "The action of the [Sophocles] play consists now in the gradually intensified and skillfully delayed revelation—comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis—that Oedipus himself is Laius' murderer, but also that he is the son of the murdered king and Jocasta" (1999, 202). Freud continues: "His fate moves us only because it could have been our own as well . . . It was perhaps ordained that we should all of us turn our first sexual impulses towards our mother, our first hatred and violent wishes against our father" (1999, 202).

Freud's *response* as a reader of *Oedipus Rex* was hardly "just" (or for that matter even much of) an interpretation of the play's meaning; rather, it was an emergent and abiding assemblage of his own emotional, familial, social, professional, and aesthetic experiences. Moreover, the affordance he made of the text became the basis of a remarkable rhetorical accomplishment and an extraordinarily influential, if disputed, contribution to psychology. I have to add, finally, that the idea of the psyche itself is another example of a literary affordance. Many centuries before *psyche* became the semantic root and conceptual foundation of *psychology*, Psyche was a classical literary character, whose story makes such an extremely apt analogy for representing the unconscious that today it serves this purpose entirely transparently to most people. Whether we know it or not, when we think of psychological subjects, we are thinking *through* or *in terms of* the story of Psyche. As such, this literary affordance is not only analogical to but also constituent of our thinking. This distinction is key to understanding the potential power to be derived from making and studying literary affordances, as well as the considerable extent to which higher-order reasoning in general relies on metaphor and narrative.

As I have indicated and as the Oedipus complex example demonstrates, literary affordance can and does happen *organically*, which is to say un- or semi-consciously, unintentionally, or of its own volition, so to speak. Many elements seem to have been mutually present at the right time and place for Freud to have found/created what he did in/from the Sophocles play, even though he may not have been consciously intending for this to happen. You might say such a discovery is providential, but I also believe that one's circumstances and especially one's awareness can be influenced (without too much interference) in such a way as to increase the likelihood of one's finding/creating an affordance in a literary text, not to mention taking rhetorical advantage of it. (As for this matter of slashes, I am going to shift now to only employing the latter usage with the assumption that the former is subsumed therein; I say more about this in chapters 2 and 3.) Let me begin to explain this claim by returning to my initial example of a chair.

One may not know in advance that one is going to activate the latent stand-on-ability³ of a chair, but if one is aware that one somehow needs to reach an object at a height and then goes looking for a means to do so, then one may indeed be more apt to make an affordance of a chair by standing on it (which was not intended by the chair's maker). Among other factors less significant to my purposes—such as the person's height and the size of the chair—a combination of one's will (conscious

or not), one's awareness (including "only" through one's intuition), and the situation or context brings the affordance into emergence. One of my hopes for this book is that its readers will join me in developing ways to influence students' circumstances as such, in order for these students to make literary affordances of their own and to study this phenomenon in general. I do not presume to have this theory and practice finished, only perhaps a head start in working on it explicitly.

In chapter 2 I offer a selective overview of affordance theory in its original and most directly successive formulations, respectively, by psychologist James Gibson and by some of his most prominent scholarly beneficiaries in the area of ecological psychology. To establish a foundation for my application of the term *affordance* to literary and rhetorical purposes, I offer definitions, key terms, examples, ambiguities, and debates surrounding that concept. I also ask and answer a pair of significant related questions: are affordances made or found, and are affordances percepts or concepts?

Chapter 3 integrates an eclectic selection of scholarship that unwittingly suggests an opening for literary affordance in the theory and practices of reading, writing, and rhetoric. It also answers a number of important related questions. Rather than develop my theory into a method to be followed strictly, I offer literary affordances as a general *approach* to working with texts, which warrants and welcomes variation because of its applied, contextual, and personal qualities. With this approach, readers become rhetors by making applications of literary content to situations they are engaged in, which may very well be unrelated to the literary text, its author, and its reception history. It is essential to note that with literary affordance, no claim is made to the interpretive *meaning* of the "source" text from which this application emerges but only to the text's *use value* in another, "target" context. So because literary affordance lays no claim to a text's interpretive meaning, correctness seems an inappropriate evaluative criterion here (as opposed to effectiveness and respectfulness, for example). But I acknowledge that my stating this cannot and need not necessarily prevent teachers from introducing literary affordance along with restrictions, and it certainly does not stop anyone from rejecting the approach altogether. I am not arguing that anyone *must* use my theory or must do so for a particular reason or in a specific way; rather, I am inviting readers to consider whether, why, and how they and the personnel they oversee might take it up and to join the conversation either way. For my readers who do not make it to or all the way through chapter 3 (though I implore you to please hang in there), let me now declare that my theory does not license an *anything-goes* treatment of

texts. I will make it clear that the *going* indicated by the phrase *anything goes* is always relative to a rhetorical situation and that any failure to “go” (i.e., to be rhetorically effective or culturally respectful) should be taken up on a case-by-case basis relative to the given context. Although it is not a generalizable finding, I will mention anyway that to date, I have received no offensive affordances from the hundreds of students with whom I have practiced this approach. That’s not to say it cannot happen, only that it may not be worth fixating on ahead of time.

Chapter 4 addresses a diverse institutional readership that may be interested in rhetor response theory. I propose literary affordance as a supplement to conventional literary-interpretive and writing-instructional practices for educators and students to consider, especially if they have little, no, or conflicted stakes in such conventions. Possible applications include research opportunities for scholars and graduate students, units of study for advanced undergraduates, and assignments or assignment options for others at the postsecondary and secondary levels. My case incorporates a concise history of the ongoing (but in some places nonexistent) institutional “divorce” proceedings between English and writing studies, as well as a response to current scholarship from the latter field on disciplinary expertise, independence, and content. I warn against an unwitting partial reversal of marginalization that writing has long suffered by English, of which I now see potential signs, as well as missed opportunities to possibly improve professional and pedagogical aspects of both fields through a reconciliation of sorts. Two example literary affordances are made of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

Chapter 5 offers an original demonstration of literary affordance in theorizing an alternative approach to argumentation and the rhetorical audience. My case makes rhetorical uses of the famous Orpheus myth to critique high-stakes English language arts tests and the narrow approach to textuality they and other exams like them reflect. My objections: these pervasive, highly influential tests impose on students a reductive and potentially unethical attitude toward audiences through an insistently narrow view of argumentation, and they squander much of the wonder and power of literature on rote and resented evaluations that disadvantage teachers as well as learners. In contrast, I want to open up approaches to reading and to rhetorical engagement (and to narrow the perceived distance between these acts) by encouraging writers to increase their holistic awareness (i.e., felt sense) of audience indeterminacy, on the one hand, and of the potential power of literary content in their lives (including through its appropriation by readers), on the other hand.

In chapter 6 I address the issue of why to study and practice literary affordance, and I offer explanations of how I have taught literary affordance and my rhetor response theory, as well as a significant related activity called *autotextography*, which I have assigned at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Autotextography is presented as a kind of writing-to-learn investigation into past affordances that one has made un-/semi-consciously or unintentionally. One result of this systematic inquiry can be to establish methods and aims for subsequent making of conscious/intentional affordances, including by adaptation of prior affordances one has come to understand through autotextography. The exercises and examples I offer are not meant to be prescriptive but rather descriptive and invitational of potential actions by other practitioners of the approaches I am endorsing in this book. The final section of chapter 6 variously seeks to distinguish the acts of literary affordance and literary interpretation from each other, specifically with regard to teaching writing but with easy application to other contexts. Readers who are seeking a (relatively) shorthand clarification of this vital distinction between affordance and interpretation might skip ahead to this passage at the end of the book and then, it is hoped, backtrack through the supporting theory and numerous examples and explanations throughout the rest of the book.

Interspersed between each pair of the book's chapters is a short interchapter in which I demonstrate my technique of autotextography, which again represents an important precursor activity to literary affordance and is an essential conceptual tributary to rhetor response theory. In these accounts, I briefly narrate and analyze what a particular literary text or set of texts has done for me and how these effects have become assimilated into my rhetorical and pedagogical repertoire. My hope for these interchapters is to support the hypothesis that literary texts often do things to readers that they are not aware of or not wholly aware of and which may be unintended by the authors and irrelevant to interpretive norms. I also seek with these interchapters to model a generative writing and research practice that can usefully and satisfyingly discover and repurpose those effects in unrelated rhetorical situations.

There are many reasons why I would like my readers to consider theorizing, practicing, and promoting literary affordance and autotextography, not the least of which is that they can be highly rewarding experiences. I am focusing on literature in the book partly because I believe people are already inclined to make affordances of nonfictional texts, under different names of course (i.e., we are more accustomed to *using* rather than *interpreting* nonfiction). I focus on literary texts

also because literature does things nonfiction arguably does not do (1) as often or as much, (2) in the same ways, or (3) as well. Those things include moving our emotions, stretching our imaginations, and becoming interwoven with or assimilated into our own life narratives. I believe these and other such effects should not be off limits to rhetorical inquiry and application for any reason, let alone for antiquated, unproductive, and often unwanted divisions between the disciplines of English and writing. Some of the more tangible potential benefits I envision for taking up literary affordance in educational and scholarly contexts are as follows.

WPAs stand to gain a viable, cost-free bargaining chip for respectfully engaging their many literarily inclined instructors in writing-studies and rhetorical training. In turn, these often-contingent faculty members gain a sanctioned opportunity to incorporate their literary expertise into their teaching of writing and to generate scholarship from that. Graduate English studies can better help its students prepare for today's faculty jobs, many of which require teaching writing and do not offer support for scholarship. Undergraduate English studies gains a practical means by which to potentially appeal to a wider population of students than it often ordinarily does, or at least English faculty will have new material to consider for their teaching and scholarship. Students of all levels and disciplinary concentrations gain a technique for developing analytical understanding of themselves as consumers and producers of texts, which my instructional experience shows can be empowering in a number of ways. Secondary school teachers and students, education scholars, and public audiences gain new insights and inroads into the value of the liberal arts, which may help counteract the current trend of declaring the humanities and their former crowned jewel, literature, to be fallen.

INTERCHAPTER 1

The Allegory of the Save

I first encountered and started *using* the Orpheus myth shortly after my parents divorced when I was seven years old. A musty paperback of summarized Greek myths was kept in a bookcase in my brother's and my room beneath a window (which reappears in my final interchapter), whose shade we liked to keep drawn because our neighbors', the Paines', window was directly across and near enough to easily see in. I privately reread the story of Orpheus many times in those days. It grabbed and held me like no other myth in the book or any other story did, I think because of my cognitive dissonance in simultaneously admiring and criticizing Orpheus. Only many years later did I realize that this story and especially this dissonance significantly influenced my worldview, and years after that I began shaping my pedagogy in terms of that influence.

Orpheus has long been celebrated for his artistry, courage, and deep love for his wife, Eurydice. This love is what drew me to him—or, more specifically, the thwarting of his love by her loss. As the story goes, tragedy strikes these newlyweds when Eurydice dies suddenly. But Orpheus, the greatest mortal poet and musician, suffers such grief that he resolves to rescue his wife from death. So he charms his way into the underworld using his lyrics and lyre and convinces the gods to restore her life, their one condition being that Orpheus must not look backward during his and Eurydice's ascension from the underworld. Of course that is exactly what Orpheus does in a moment of doubt, thereby losing his wife forever. Afterward, he fails to reenter the underworld, he is killed, and his dismembered head continues to mourn aloud until Apollo eventually quiets it.

I could never fathom why Orpheus turned around during the ascension. To be clear, it is neither his burning doubt nor his desire to confirm his wife's presence that I had trouble understanding; those natural impulses are easy to grasp, even for a seven-year-old. Rather, what have always caused me genuine frustration are Orpheus's self-preoccupation and his (consequent?) resourcelessness in that moment of crisis. He did

not need to turn around to confirm Eurydice's presence; he could have simply called back to her (or just waited). But when faced with the threat of a repeated separation from his wife, he failed to speak with her about the difficulties they were certainly both experiencing, and they paid a fatal price for that.

I had no idea as a child that I was reading and rereading my own story refracted through the Orpheus myth: not just for the similarity of a gifted language user suffering at the breakup of his family but also for the lack of communication about that crisis. As divorces go, that of my parents went better than most seem to do: they are civil to each other, my two brothers and I have remained close with each of them and with each other, and both parents went on to marry again, to lovely people with whom they are much happier. This is why I do not say I experienced a trauma *per se* (i.e., in comparison with people who unfortunately suffer far worse), but relative to my own experience the divorce was certainly difficult. I shared with Orpheus fears of repeated separation, which were not talked about and which seemed perilous to face directly, but my rhetorical response to this situation differed importantly from that of my mythological counterpart.

I have never blamed my parents or myself for the divorce, and I do not recall ever wishing they would get back together. Rather, the crisis for me (at least as far as I know) came from the shock of my suddenly shattered reality and from the anguish my parents' separation seemed to cause (1) them for their worries about us kids, which I wished to absorb; (2) a brother older enough to have gotten mad, whom I wanted to keep close; and (3) a younger brother, whom I wanted to protect from all harm. So (doubtless, I admit, also as a projection or denial strategy) I assigned myself the task of trying to please these loved ones above all else: a doomed mission that may have played out mostly in my mind and which for a long time I often also unsuccessfully applied to relationships with other (sometimes undeserving) parties. The major difficulty I encountered was communicating about—and thereby, in my case at least, understanding—loss and its attendant anxieties. For all my talents and good intentions I could not, of course, spare my loved ones (or myself) from the conflicts that inevitably arose.

But I still became quite capable at pleasing. The best way to accommodate another's desires, I intuitively discovered, is to make their desires your own desires, and the best way to do that is to not even be aware of the conflation. To this day, I cannot tell whether I simply have very few desires of my own or whether I have repressed them to the point of inaccessibility. I have decided that ultimately the difference does not matter.

The service to others of which I speak was almost always done willingly, so I can peacefully leave it at: what's the difference? Regardless, below are four pieces of evidence that help explain why Orpheus became my negative heuristic in this case and how that literary affordance originated my pedagogical theory.

First, when I was a boy I knew that my strong linguistic intelligence greatly (and understandably) pleased my parents. I aced tests and attended seminars for gifted children. I won school awards in English and published poetry and newspaper columns. My youth's episodes in oft-recited family lore highlight my corrections of adults' grammar, my deconstruction of a question about a given year's Halloween being "the best ever" by my insistence that such could not be determined "because there haven't been all of the Halloweens yet," and an admired family friend's prediction that I would "do something great" in life, which still hangs over me today (will this book finally do the trick?). So many things like this came easily to me and were pleasing to my parents that the role I played in each case—which I rarely resented or resisted, if I was even aware at the time—was mostly that of a conduit from what came naturally to me to what was pleasing to others. Note the "I" here is more of a function than an essence, which is a kind of a basic truth about my subjectivity that could be said to be rhetorical and which explains the genesis of this book and its theories.

Second, not long after the divorce, a family-friend artist drew a caricature of my mother, brothers, and me, which hung in our home for a time. My mother was portrayed as talking too long on the phone, my one brother as drumming virtuosically, the other as joyfully baking, and me . . . as vacuuming the house. My signature trait—as obvious to the caricaturist as a big nose would be—was an over-eagerness to please. Note: vacuuming did not reflect any special dedication to cleanliness; rather, it reflected (accurately) that my character manifests primarily as a relation to the needs and desires of others. To this day, whatever I can do to help I will often do as a reflex, without consideration of preference on my part—usually because I do not possess one. Incidentally, for this reason I could never help but misinterpret Jacques Lacan's claim that a person's desire is always for the Other's desire as an apt account of how other people's desires stood in for my own absent desires. Unlike what Lacan probably means, I have generally not wished to be the object or recipient of the other's desire but rather a supporter of their desire. Surely this trait, coupled with my talent for language, at least in part led me to become a writing teacher—a job in which (as I approach it) I mainly serve the needs of others without need (arguably) of conveying much content.

Third, the only distinct memory I have of the day on which my parents announced their divorce to my brothers and me is of a private moment afterward in which, despite not being religious, I genuinely prayed for the first time. My prayer was to be able to absorb my brothers' pain, to experience it *in their place* (a telling metaphorical phrase, given Eurydice's position in the Orpheus myth). I have never told anyone of this episode, and I recount it now only as a significant example of my situationally derived tendency to serve others without consideration of my own needs (or whether the others wish to be served).

Fourth, as an adult I was told by a reliable source—supporting what I had already suspected in my bones—that my conception (what a word!) might have been in part a deliberate attempt to improve the circumstances of my parents' marriage at the time. (I should note: this may have been a one-sided, unspoken, and/or only retroactively realized attempt.) If so, then there's nothing wrong with or unusual about such a plan; it is widely believed that a baby brings happiness into a home. And though the happiness I did bring to my family could not keep our home together, this potentially explained history nevertheless helps me understand why, as an especially intuitive child born into this specific alleged context, I may have come to prioritize service to others in my approach to life, whether by nature or nurture or both. It also helps explain why I would come to "relate"—as my students like to say—to Orpheus's desperation to save Eurydice and to denounce his rhetorical failure to prioritize her need over his own desire. Both the similarity and the difference are key to the value of this relation.

My point here has not been to lament my failure to save anyone but rather to reveal some of the key processes by which I came to understand my past (i.e., familial) rhetorical situations and to approach my present and future (i.e., pedagogical) ones through the use of a fictional text whose meaning has nothing directly to do with these issues. Without having contrasted my choices with those of Orpheus over the course of many years, I genuinely believe I would not have achieved the awareness I now enjoy and can put to good use for myself and for others in life. Why this particular text, among others that might have prompted a similar affordance? The answer may not (and need not) be wholly or even mostly rational, but one rational reason is because it was there at the right time and it contained such features as to emerge with my abilities in the way it did. Having been revealed as such an important tool for me, this text might now more easily be repurposed for use by others in any number of ways, including the rhetorical use of it I pursue in chapter 5.