

The Transition to College Reading

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I began my work on this assignment, as many students do, by e-mailing an expert for assistance. I wrote to a colleague who has been teaching one of our survey courses at Brown and asked her what she felt were the most important problems or deficiencies in the preparation of first-year students in her literature courses. Her reply, though only a hasty e-mail rather than a considered statement, was so helpful that I quote it here, with her permission:

I think that the new high school graduates I see (and sophomores with no previous lit classes) most lack close reading skills. Often they have generic concepts and occasionally they have some historical knowledge, though perhaps not as much as they should. I find that they are most inclined to substitute what they generally think a text should be saying for what it actually says, and lack a way to explore the intricacies and interests of the words on the page. Sometimes the historical knowledge and generic concepts actually become problems when students use them as tools for making texts say and do what students think they should, generalizing that all novels do X or poems do Y. Usually the result is that they want to read every text as saying something extremely familiar that they might agree with. I see them struggling the most to read the way texts differ from their views, to find what is specific about the language, address, assumptions etc. (Tamar Katz, pers. com., 17 September 2001)

Her observations confirm my own sense that we have a reading problem of massive dimensions—a problem that goes well beyond any purely literary concerns.

This, in turn, drew my attention to the asymmetry in our topics for this panel, which mirrors the asymmetry in our professional arrangements.¹ Setting aside the institutional differences, which affect everyone, the other

two topics were divided into writing and literature. The natural reciprocal of writing—which, of course, is reading—had somehow disappeared, apparently subsumed under the topic of literature. (I have taken the liberty of compensating for this asymmetry in my own title for this piece by replacing the word *literature* with the word *reading*.) But this division of the English project is not just an aberration in the thought of this session’s organizer. It is the way that most English departments at college and secondary levels think of their enterprise. This, as I have argued for some time, is an unfortunate error that we need to correct.

Why is it an error? I shall spend the rest of this essay counting the ways. We normally acknowledge, however grudgingly, that writing must be taught and continue to be taught from high school to college and perhaps beyond. We accept it, I believe, because we can see writing, and we know that much of the writing we see is not good enough. But we do not see reading. We see some writing about reading, to be sure, but we do not see reading. I am certain, though, that if we could see it, we would be appalled. My colleague Tamar Katz, like many perceptive teachers, has caught a glimpse of the real problem, which she puts this way: “They want to read every text as saying something extremely familiar that they might agree with.” The problem emerges as one of difference, or otherness—a difficulty in moving from the words of the text to some set of intentions that are different from one’s own, some values or presuppositions different from one’s own and possibly opposed to them.² This problem, as I see it, has two closely related parts. One is a failure to focus sharply on the language of the text. The other is a failure to imagine the otherness of the text’s author.

One of the great ironies in this situation is that the study of literature, especially as conceived by the New Critics, whose thought still shapes much of our literary education, was supposed to develop the student’s ability to focus on the language of texts. If we nonetheless fail to teach close reading—and many of us would agree with Katz and with Arlene Wilner (in this issue) that we do—then the problem may lie not so much in the words themselves as in the otherness of their authors. That is, if the words belong to the reader, they are likely to express the reader’s thoughts. What we actually mean by “close” reading may be distant reading—reading as if the words belonged to a person at some distance from ourselves in thought or feeling. Perhaps they must be seen as the words of someone else before they can be seen as words at all—or, more particularly, as words that need to be read with close attention. It is no secret, of course, that the New Critics defined as a fallacy any attempt to read a text for its author’s intention. Since then we have had the death of

the author, reader-response criticism, the self-deconstructing text, and the symptomatic readings of cultural studies, all of which, in various ways, undermine the notion of authorial intention as a feature of the reading process. And all of them, in various degrees and respects, are right and useful, but only if reading for authorial intention precedes them. The author must live before the author can die. We teachers must help our students bring the author to life.

The reading problems of our students can themselves be read as a symptom of a larger cultural problem. We are not good, as a culture, at imagining the other. After 11 September 2001 we have begun to learn, perhaps, that this deficiency is serious, though I am afraid that much of our response has been to shout our own words louder and to try to suppress those that differ from ours. On the present occasion, however, we must focus on this problem at the level of schooling. I mention the larger picture not to aggrandize the topic but to indicate the depth of the problem, which is as much a matter of ideology as of methodology. English teachers must solve it at the level of the curriculum and the classroom. We must make some changes both in what we teach and in how we teach it, starting in secondary schools.

First, the past. Consider the following advice from a textbook on reading:

The great object to be accomplished in reading as a rhetorical exercise is to convey to the *hearer*, fully and clearly, the ideas and feelings of the writer.

In order to do this, it is necessary that a selection should be carefully studied by the pupil before he attempts to read it. In accordance with this view, a preliminary rule of importance is the following:

Rule I.—Before attempting to read a lesson, the learner should make himself fully acquainted with the subject as treated of in that lesson, and endeavor to make the thought, and feeling, and sentiments of the writer his own.

I linger over the word *hearer*, which I have emphasized in this quotation. What has a hearer to do with reading? This unexpected word alerts me to the fact that I am facing a text that I must read carefully, attending to presuppositions different from my own. This advice about the teaching of reading comes immediately after the table of contents in McGuffey's (1879: 9) *Fifth Eclectic Reader*. It applies to what the text calls "reading as a rhetorical exercise," that is, reading aloud—and also reading to express "the thought, and feeling, and sentiments of the writer." That is where the hearer comes in. Odd, isn't it, that attending to "the thought, and feeling, and sentiments of the writer" is exactly what our students now find difficult? The older pedagogy saw it as a problem,

too, but had a solution for it. The solution was “elocution,” or reading aloud. That is one thing we can learn from our predecessors, for reading aloud makes the reading process evident to the ear in tone and rhythm and to the eye in bodily posture and facial expression, just as writing makes the composing process evident in written signs. In this older dispensation, failure to “get” the author’s thought, feeling, and sentiments would emerge during an elocutionary performance. I am not certain how close we can come to the McGuffey method in our classrooms, but I think that we should try to bridge the gap.³ I know that we can come very close to it in teaching drama, where the move to oral interpretation requires no explanation or apology—which is an argument for getting more drama into our courses.

It should follow that we need to consider including in our courses texts that are difficult for students to read as “saying something extremely familiar that they might agree with”—texts that say things that many students will not, in fact, agree with and that we may not agree with, either. For some years Gerald Graff has urged us to “teach the conflicts.” Insofar as our intra-departmental conflicts are concerned, I have never been persuaded that students would care enough about them to make the enterprise worthwhile, but Graff (forthcoming) is clearly broadening his notion of conflicts in *Clueless in Academe*, and I am happy to agree with him about the need to teach texts that express conflicting positions. There has been concern, since Quintilian at least, and probably since the Sophists, about whether a good rhetorician was necessarily a good person. Without rushing in where angels like Richard Lanhams have trod warily, I want to say that a good person, in our time, needs to have the rhetorical capacity to imagine the other’s thought, feeling, and sentiments. That is, though not all rhetoricians are good people, all good citizens must be rhetoricians to the extent that they can imagine themselves in the place of another and understand views different from their own. It is our responsibility as English teachers to help our students develop this form of textual power, in which strength comes, paradoxically, from subordinating one’s own thoughts temporarily to the views and values of another person.

This is one reason that I think it is a bad idea for the Bush administration to tell television networks to censor the words of our enemies in the videos they broadcast. We Americans are seen as arrogant by a large part of the world—and not just the Islamic part—precisely because we do not listen to other points of view, but we have never made it a national policy not to listen to them until now. Nor can our government plead the fact that other parts of the world do not listen to us or understand us as an excuse for refusing to

allow us to listen to them. Our form of government and our sort of society depend on the freedom of individuals to interpret texts for themselves. Our roots, as a culture, are deeply embedded in a Protestant tradition of individual interpretation of sacred texts, which rests on access to those texts for all. People died for the right to translate and circulate these crucial texts, taking them out of the hands of a priestly caste. This tradition has also allowed the publication and discussion of profane texts, on the grounds that truth will prevail. It is disheartening, at a time of national crisis, for our government to seek to suppress the words that may enable us to understand our enemies' motives. It is, writ large, the same problem we encounter in students who cannot understand a point of view different from their own.

Katz points out one form of the problem: students simply assimilate the thought and feeling in a text to their own thoughts and feelings. Wilner points out another: students recognize a different position and simply refuse to read it or think about it. These two responses to otherness constitute the American way, I am afraid, and it is a way of responding to texts that we, as teachers, have a duty to counteract. If rhetoric is a schooling in textual virtue as well as in textual power, as I believe it is, this virtue consists largely in our being able to assume another person's point of view before criticizing it and resuming our own. We, and our students, must learn to put ourselves into a text before taking ourselves out of it. Even in these difficult times we must remain open to otherness.

If we accept this rhetorical goal as a part of our teaching mission, it follows that we must organize a curriculum to support it. Our present emphasis on literature, however, is at cross-purposes to this goal because of the way we have defined the term *literature* and because of the methods we employ. In our educational tradition "literature," and its predecessor, "belles lettres," once included powerful speeches and essays along with poems, plays, and stories. But over the past two centuries an opposition between the aesthetic text and the rhetorical text has developed, so that the term *literature* now excludes texts intended to persuade, whether they be essays or orations, advertising or propaganda, in print or in other media. The process through which this has happened is too long and complex for treatment here, but it assuredly did happen, and we are dealing with the results. The insistence that literary texts "should not mean, but be," as Archibald MacLeish put it in his well-known poem "Ars Poetica," contributed mightily. (MacLeish, we should note, was making an argument in a poem that argued against making arguments in poems.) In any case, literature became defined as texts that do not speak to us

except with a forked tongue. Paraphrase became a heresy, intentionality a fallacy, the author a mute corpse, and the literary text a self-deconstructing artifact or ideological symptom.

We need to change our definitions as well as our curriculum. First, we need to include more overtly persuasive or argumentative texts in our curricula. We can do it in virtually every kind of course now in the literary curriculum. In the American literature survey, for instance, we can include not only more speeches and documents but texts in traditional literary forms that take strong positions, like Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Justice Denied in Massachusetts," about the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. We can also include critical interpretations of such texts, for example, Allen Tate's attack on Millay's poem in his essay "Tension in Literature" (see Scholes 2001: 17–21, 64–75, for Tate's and Millay's texts).

We can and should do this, in both secondary school and college. The objections to including criticism in literature courses are mainly made on behalf of greater coverage of literature itself, since critical texts must displace some literary texts if they are included. The primary answer to these objections is that, if we are teaching reading, we must give some examples of how it is done, but there is a secondary answer as well. Critical texts, if properly chosen, will differ with one another, so that reading them will lead students to recognize difference itself as they situate their own readings in relation to those of the critics. The purpose of this approach is not to make literary critics more important. They have become too important already. It is to bring criticism out into the open so that every student can be a critical reader. It is to bring criticism back to earth.

Second, newer technologies also offer possibilities for the teaching of reading that we are only beginning to explore. There is a lot of writing on the Web that takes positions and makes arguments, well or badly. There are ongoing arguments, on all sorts of topics, that can be traced through particular threads on Web sites. Part of the problem we face in classrooms, especially in the general-education classrooms of colleges and in the English courses of secondary schools, is that debates about literary interpretation simply do not engage many of our students. These same students, however, may go right from our classrooms to their terminals, where they engage in serious debate about issues that are important to them.

Let me give a trivial example. For my sins, no doubt, I frequently follow discussions on a Web site devoted to the New England Patriots football team. On these pages I have found, and find regularly, debates conducted with a high degree of seriousness and skill over matters related directly to

football, including coaching strategies, personnel, media coverage, and training methods. Despite the occasional flame war, these debates typically involve the presentation of evidence (often statistical), the drawing of conclusions, the consideration of opposing views, the eloquent expression of attitudes—in short, all the things that go into persuasive and argumentative writing. One can also find examples of exposition and explanation, such as a clear and cogent description of the differences between one-gap and two-gap defensive-line play. There are hundreds if not thousands of comparable sites dealing with everything from motorcycles to religion. We need to see the Web as a constantly replenished source of textual materials for study. We should be asking students to bring back examples from sites of interest to them and to discuss the positions taken, the quality of various presentations, and their own views of the matters at hand.

We need, in short, to connect the development of reading and writing skills to the real world around us and to the virtual world in which that actual world becomes available to us in the form of texts. Without education, as Thomas Jefferson well understood, participatory democracy cannot function. The basis of an education for the citizens of a democracy lies in that apparently simple but actually difficult act of reading so as to grasp and evaluate the thoughts and feelings of that mysterious other person: the writer. The primary pedagogical responsibility of English teachers is to help students develop those skills. We need to give this humble task more attention, and we need to do a better job of it, too. We can start by recognizing it as a crucial object of our discipline—as more fundamental and more important than “covering” any canon of literary works.

Notes

1. This commentary is a revised version of a talk delivered during a session at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference in Baltimore in November 2001. The session, organized by David Laurence, national director of the Association of Departments of English, focused on the transition from high school to college. Each panelist addressed a specific problem: Sandy Stephan, institutional differences; Tom Jehn, college writing; and Robert Scholes, college literature.
2. See Arlene Wilner’s discussion of this problem in “Confronting Resistance: Sonny’s Blues—and Mine” in this issue.
3. In “‘Reading Fiction/Teaching Fiction’: A Pedagogical Experiment,” Jerome McGann (2001: 147) makes a similar argument for what he calls “recitation”: “Over some years I have observed the (perhaps increasing) disability that students have in negotiating language in an articulate way. This weakness seems to propagate others, most especially

an inclination to ‘read’ texts at relatively high levels of textual abstraction. With diminished skills in perceiving words as such comes, it seems, a weakened ability to notice other close details of language—semantic, grammatical, rhetorical. Recitation—I am talking about oral recitation of the fictional text—forces students to return to elementary levels of linguistic attention. To be effective as a pedagogical tool, however, it must be performed regularly and explicitly discussed and reflected upon. These exercises form the basis for developing higher-level acts of linguistic attention.”

Works Cited

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