

TEACHING AESTHETIC READING: ONE MORE ARGUMENT FOR LITERATURE IN THE WRITING CLASS

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For some time now literature has been banished from writing classes that emphasize the teaching of the process because interpreting literary texts, or even discussing prose models, was regarded as an analytic activity quite different from the synthesizing activity of the writer. In more recent years, however, new insights into the reading process have caused a return to an integrated reading and writing pedagogy (e.g., Bartholomae, Parisi, and Petrosky). Both reading theorists and reader-response critics have shown that the process of reading comprehension involves more than just receiving and retaining information, that it is, in fact, an interaction between the reader and the text in which the reader makes the meaning, literally makes sense of the text, "in the light of prior knowledge and current intentions and expectations" (Smith 6). On the basis of this new understanding, literature may experience a come-back in the writing class, not in the way it used to be taught, as an introduction to the genres and literary terminology, but as an activity that teaches how to think, how to make meaning, how to compose, and—as Anthony Petrosky demonstrates with his adaptation of David Bleich's response-heuristic—as an activity that can generate writing (27-35).

Despite the new insights into reading, a conceivable objection to any kind of reading in the writing class is that one or two semesters of reading are not enough to improve students' writing and that there is simply a limit to the reading a student will or can do outside the class. My contention is that we should not expect immediate improvement from reading, but that we should teach a way of reading that may bring results later, just as we teach the process of writing in the hope that later, after the writing workshop, the student may benefit from the process he has learned and produce effective writing. The way a student reads, the reading stance he or she adopts, I believe, is crucial if we wish to improve the writing.

Louise Rosenblatt distinguishes two reading stances, which represent extremes in a continuum: efferent and aesthetic reading. In efferent, or non-aesthetic reading, "the reader's attention is focused on what will remain as the residue *after* the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" (*Reader* 23). All personal responses to concepts, to sound and rhythm, all associations evoked by the words are ignored so that the desired information may be assimilated efficiently. In aesthetic reading, on the other hand, the reader does not shut out the inner resonance, but "listening to" himself; as Rosenblatt puts it, "he synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure" (*Reader* 25). This "thinking and feeling and seeing" *during* the reading is both the purpose of aesthetic reading and the essence of the aesthetic experience (Rosenblatt, "What Facts" 387). Since aesthetic reading admits a wider range of information into the reader's consciousness, it is necessarily a slower process. To experience also the dimension of sound and rhythm, the rate at which we read has to be slowed down to where we can subvocalize. Efferent

reading, which largely ignores our inner resonances, our personal associations as well as sound and rhythm, can consequently be carried out at a much faster rate (*Reader* 25).

Another significant property of reading stances is their independence from the nature of the text. Although certain texts are conducive to a certain stance, any text may be read efferently or aesthetically ("What Facts" 388). The first-aid instructions that come with a snake kit, for example, will hardly invite aesthetic reading, certainly not in an emergency, yet it is conceivable that the author of these instructions read them aesthetically at one time, maybe after one last satisfactory revision. The reading stance is thus chosen by the reader, not so much deliberately as intuitively on the basis of previous experiences with texts and contexts. This ability to choose a stance from his repertoire and the very possession of this repertoire are the marks of an experienced reader.

If we hope to improve students' writing through reading, we will have to increase our emphasis on the aesthetic reading stance. Quite apart from the personal gain and the pure pleasure of the aesthetic experience, aesthetic reading offers the developing writer the most painless way of learning. While in efferent reading the reader has to concentrate, to focus his attention on the desired information, so that he can commit it to long-term memory, in aesthetic reading attention is diffused to admit that wider range of internal as well as external stimuli into the reader's awareness. And although long-term memory may not be as prepared to recall factual details after aesthetic reading, memory is by no means inactive. I would even claim that the osmotic absorption of good writing, which centuries of imitation exercises ever since the *progymnasmata* have tried to induce, takes place during the aesthetic reading experience because long-term memory does absorb features such as sentence construction, sound patterns, and rhythms. Many of us have probably experienced this unconscious absorption of a certain style when after hours of reading a particular author, we begin to sound a bit like him or her. Moreover, while in efferent reading the role of memory is largely limited to receiving and retaining the desired information, in aesthetic reading memory plays a more active role as it also yields or generates information, which then has to be incorporated into a structure of meaning. Aesthetic reading thus incorporates to a great extent the same mental subroutines of generating, planning, and reviewing as the writing process (Flower and Hayes 370-75).

Yet despite the pedagogic potential of aesthetic reading, asking our students to read and maybe even to keep a response journal will probably not do much to improve their writing because many of our students are unaccustomed to aesthetic reading. And, in making this claim, I am not thinking of those we usually call poor readers, students who barely possess basic comprehension skills, but I am thinking of those who read widely, frequently, and even with interest and critical understanding. These good, efficient readers I would rather call "impoverished" readers because they have not been encouraged to read in any other but the efficient way of reading. Students' general preference for fiction rather than poetry is, I believe, an indication of their one-sided reading competence. A novel or short story read efferently will at least afford some entertainment on the level of plot and action, whereas a highly suggestive poem will appear quite meaningless. The students' limited repertoire of reading stances may also explain why reading for pleasure cannot easily compete with movies or television productions. A novel read efferently will never seem as rich as its movie version, in which

the subtle overtones and the vividness of scene have been provided by the imagination of the actors and director.

It has been so easy to blame television for students' lack of interest in reading, but maybe we should ask ourselves if we have not taken the pleasure out of reading by teaching primarily efferent reading in the schools. Louise Rosenblatt discusses the strong bias towards efferent reading in the elementary schools in her article with the telling title "What Facts Does this Poem Teach You?" Because of this early bias, many children never learn to read with any other purpose than to gather information, may never experience the more casual and more pleasurable way of reading with unfocused but all-perceiving attention. Even if a child has been so fortunate as to experience aesthetic reading on her own, the stress that continues to be laid on efferent reading in the secondary schools and later in college may well prevent her from ever adopting an aesthetic stance towards assigned reading. After all, it is risky not to remember every detail of the plot, especially if you are going to be quizzed on factual details.

In a 1974 publication, *The Improvement of Reading in the Secondary Schools*, the Texas Education Agency, for example, leaves no doubt as to its goals for reading instruction. The fact that the reading of literature is discussed under the heading "Reading in the Content Areas" suggests enough. And although one of the goals stated is to develop appreciation for the material, the general emphasis on fast reading is bound to stand in the way of true aesthetic appreciation (TEA 25). Equally revealing is the definition of the higher-level comprehension skills, which constitute the ultimate goal of secondary reading instruction: to recognize the author's "intent," "purpose," and "biases"; to distinguish fact from opinion; to recognize "the use of irrelevant data, false analogies, over-generalizations, half-truths, emotional and informational language, sarcasm, and quotations out of context for the purpose of distorting ideas"; and also to recognize "the devices of propaganda such as name-calling, testimonials, glittering generalities, transfer, card stacking, and the bandwagon technique" (TEA 24-25). The ability to read critically, and even with a healthy dose of distrust, is no doubt an essential skill for the student's future role as a responsible citizen, but the constant encouragement of the efferent stance and the distrustful attitude toward the written word make the aesthetic experience an impossibility because it depends on that "suspension of disbelief," on our trust that the author will lead us into a world that is logical in its own terms and therefore comprehensible, even if it is the world of the supernatural or a world of paradox. However, if we enter this world wary of subversive propaganda, then our apprehension will prevent our comprehension.

Some readjustment of emphasis in favor of aesthetic reading in elementary and secondary schools is, of course, needed if we want children to grow up with a repertoire of reading stances, but the point here is to show how unprepared many college students are to deal with texts that have more to offer than literal meaning and factual information. On several occasions in the past I have given my students one of Ronald Gross's found poems, "Yield":

Yield.
No Parking.
Unlawful to Pass.
Wait for Green Light.
Yield.

Stop.
Narrow Bridge.
Merging Traffic Ahead.

Yield.

Yield.

When I asked my students what the poem meant to them, a common response was that someone is driving down a road where he is not allowed to park or pass, where he has to watch for a narrow bridge and merging traffic and always has to yield. The situational context obviously prevented the readers from responding to these road sign phrases the way they would if they were actually driving, but their reading stance was still clearly efferent. Only a few wrote that they felt that the poem was saying something else, "something about prohibitions" or "maybe admonitions."

If we want aesthetic reading to work for our student writers—whether we believe in the osmotic assimilation of good writing or whether we want to utilize the reading process to reinforce the composing process—we first need to encourage the aesthetic stance, maybe even introduce the student to the fact that there is an alternative to reading for information. In the latter case we must virtually teach the process of aesthetic reading by first slowing down the reading rate so that the reader can subvocalize and pick up on the sound and rhythm and so that she has a chance to listen to the inner resonances. One way of encouraging aesthetic reading may be to present the student with texts that will not yield meaning, will not make sense, if read efferently, and to invite even the most idiosyncratic interpretations. To elicit from my students such subjective responses to Blake's "A Sick Rose," for example, I asked them what they associated with the words "rose," "night," "worm," "bed," and "frost" before I ever let them read the poem. The association game was a way of priming their imagination. Another way may be to ask students to write their own found poems. This task would require them to read ordinary phrases, to divorce them from their contexts, and to create new contexts in which these phrases assume a new meaning and in which they cannot be read efferently anymore. The student who already has the ability to read aesthetically but who finds it too risky for assigned reading needs the same kind of encouragement and the assurance that the text will mean whatever he sees in it.

Incorporating literature into the writing class in this way may make many of us uncomfortable, especially if we have been teaching literature as a content subject in which only the most reasonable interpretations were acceptable. But it has to be remembered that the objective here is not to teach about literature or to initiate the students into the art of literary criticism, but to introduce a way of reading that will help them as writers long after they have completed their Freshman Composition courses.

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CONFESSIONS OF A CONFERENCE GOER

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I might as well come right out with it. I'm the victim of a strange, debilitating malady that I suffer every time I attend a professional conference. After years of struggling privately with my condition, I've decided to go public because I wonder if anyone else is experiencing it. Let me describe the symptoms.

The problem usually starts when the moderator of a session I've wandered into rises to make the customary announcement: "There should be a few minutes for discussion after the papers have been read. The presenters ask that you hold all of your questions and comments until then." Those around me seem to take this prohibition calmly, but I begin to get disturbing mental pictures of muzzled dogs, gagged kidnap victims, or unhappy children being told to shut up or go play in the back yard. The malady is upon me.

I try to fight it, but my difficulties increase when the first presenter takes a stand behind the podium; plops down a huge stack of typed pages; and reads off the title, pausing briefly in the middle for the inevitable colon. I am no longer in control. Against my will, my mind begins constructing the many fantasies I use to escape the role of subordinate, muzzled listener.

One of my favorites is to imagine what it would be like to run conference sessions like the old television show *Queen for a Day*. I envision applause meters in all of the meeting rooms and a washing machine being awarded to the best-received presenter at each session. (It would give the audience something to do.) Then I think about what would happen if the folks at ABC Sports started producing our conferences. To add a little excitement, they would probably hand out number cards to the listeners, who could hold them up at the end of each presentation like judges at a gymnastics competition. The moderator could play the sports announcer's role: "Let's see what the judges thought of your presentation, Ms. Jones: 9.6, 9.2, 9.7, 9.3. . . . I wonder what you said to offend that little red-faced man waving a 1."

When the smattering of applause and the movement at the close of a session disrupt my fantasies, I search the faces of my fellow listeners, hoping for a sign that I am not alone—that others suffer my malady. Occasionally, in desperation, I'll turn to the person next to me and say, "A perfect 10! We'll be seeing her on Wheaties boxes soon" or "I wonder how he's going to get that washing machine home." But I always get a blank look instead of the brief smile of recognition I'm after.

After undertaking an extensive self-analysis, I've come to the following conclusion: either I'm maladjusted or there is something wrong with the way we, as a profession, are conducting our conferences. Since I've already made a convincing case for the first possibility, let me explore the second one for a moment.

Is it possible, do you think, that I'm struggling with the same feelings of alienation experienced by students in traditional, teacher-centered classrooms, where the wise instructor imparts knowledge and the ignorant students receive it, mute except for an occasional question permitted at the end of class? If the answer is "yes," some other questions naturally follow: Is there a distressing contradiction between our new pedagogy, which emphasizes such values as collaborative learning, process, and dialogue, and the format of our conferences, which emphasizes individual authority, product, and monologue? Are we working within a new paradigm in our classrooms and returning to an old one when we gather in New Orleans or Atlanta? Are we vacillating between Ptolemy and Copernicus?

I can't help but wonder if others share my feelings. Does it bother anyone else to hear so much about process and the advantages of responding to student writing in the early stages when most of the presenters are describing the outcomes of research or the results of instruction, leaving the listeners nothing to do but critique the finished product?

Does it bother anyone else to hear someone read word for word from a neatly typed paper on the use of language to discover and explore one's thoughts?

Does it bother anyone else to hear about the use of dialogue to create a learning community from a speaker who seems to be reading to himself while the listeners wander in and out, moving from one session to another like discontented television viewers forever changing the channel?

Does it bother anyone else to hear about democratizing the classroom at conventions where only a privileged few—an oligarchy—are empowered to speak from a position of authority?

To me, these contradictions are not only disturbing; they are destructive. How can we nurture our new pedagogical values in an atmosphere that chokes them? It seems as futile as running antipornography ads in *Hustler* magazine. The medium subverts the message.

When opportunities for genuine interaction such as workshops, special interest groups, and sessions featuring discussion and debate are part of a professional gathering, their relatively low status is obvious. Often scheduled during the days before and after the actual conference or during the evenings, they are clearly peripheral to the main business: the reading and hearing of papers. Those unorthodox sessions that do get to compete with the traditional ones in the main program are usually highlighted to look like specially marked local entrees on an otherwise epicurean menu. Instead of reforming the old system, we merely embellish it.

Because of our reluctance to break with tradition, our conferences have all the excitement of a student piano recital. One performer after another trots up on stage, nervously clutching music that will be played note for note except for the mistakes; the listeners follow along on programs, applauding weakly at the end of each piece; and everyone is a bit relieved when it's all over. The whole affair is static, staid, staged. Contrast that with jazz musicians getting together to jam. When they sit down to play, they enter into a collaboration whose outcome is uncertain. Their purpose is not to perform, but to explore—to see what emerges from the pooling of their talents and energies. As the lead moves from instrument to instrument, each participant becomes both audience and performer, sharing in a sense of community created through musical dialogue.

To make the jam a controlling metaphor for our conferences, we must stop reading papers to each other and start talking. None of us would write a letter to a colleague, board a plane with