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### Making Space for Students' Encounters with Texts

This paper begins with an audacious claim. A student-centered approach to literature instruction is not only one of numerous ways to teach literature, it may be the best way to ensure that literature maintains a vital and vibrant presence in our society today. This claim is founded on two broad premises, but, before I explain them, let me offer working definitions of the key terms at the heart of this matter: literature and student-centered. For my purpose here by "literature" I mean any imaginative text, in which, to borrow Frank Farrell's phrase, "the way particular words are arranged in a particular order matters greatly" (152). The boundary defining what is and is not literature will, I think, forever be blurred, fluid, and contested, but for my interest an especially broad definition of the term will serve. By "student-centered" I mean an instructional approach in which students' contributions serve a central role in the classroom, in this case, students' reports of their encounters with the texts that are the subject of the course. So why is student-centered literature instruction essential to a continuing role for literature in society?

My first premise is this: literary texts have no value or function, no role to play in the world, apart from readers' encounters with them. Without readers, texts remain merely marks on paper. J. Hillis Miller makes a version of this claim when he says, "Literature is a use of words that makes things happen by way of its readers" (20). This understanding of the nature of literature calls for attention to what

happens to and through readers when they read a text because it is in its effect on readers that literature matters in the world.

Yet even when attention is not paid to a reader's experience with a text, that literary encounter remains influential, and this leads to my second premise. Whether a reader gets caught up in the imaginary world of a contemporary piece of fiction, or works out the intricacies of an extended metaphor in Shakespeare or Dickinson, or performs a feminist reading of a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, all of those acts began with a first encounter between the reader and the text. What transpires in that encounter is what everything that follows is built upon. And that initial experience may in many cases determine what the reader or scholar does next with the text. In his work on ethical criticism, *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth describes this phenomenon. He writes,

I read a novel and find it not just pleasant but good, and I work out for myself the qualities that make it so: it is beautiful, unified, harmonious, coherent, original, new or risk-taking. Or it does something for me that I now think needed doing: it has deepened my experience, heightened my sensibilities, ... 'defamiliarized' the word and the world. ... The next step is almost inevitable: that good is not only a good, it is *the* good that all art ought to serve. (52)

As Booth demonstrates, and this is my second premise, claims about literary texts or about literature in general began with or are grounded in initial, even personal, encounters between the particular self making the claim and the particular text, unless of course the claims are only hearsay.

So if knowledge of a literary work or claims about it, the authentic ones as opposed to merely received notions, begin with an encounter with the text and if literature's role in the world takes place through the effect of that encounter, then two conclusions follow. First, if students are going to know a literary text and know literature's capacity to affect change in the world and thereby to matter, then students must have their own encounters, their own experiences, with the literary work because that is the potential location of that knowledge and effect. Secondly, if teachers of literature have any hope of being effective in our role, we must as best we can know what happened when the particular students in our classes encountered the particular texts we asked them to read. And the only way we can find out what happened is to persuade them to tell us.

If we don't ask or if students don't say what happened when they read or attempted to read the assigned text, the very locus of literature's potential power (for good or ill) and of the motivation that drives much academic inquiry remains invisible to both teachers and students. And that unfortunately is the situation in many literature classrooms. In typical lecture classes, the contents of the lecture can serve to convey the background or scholarly developments necessary to perform an "educated" reading of the text, or a lecture can model for students such a reading. However, what students are then actually able to do with a text themselves based on that model, or how well suited the lecture was to address the obstacles or challenges those students faced in the text is unknown. Often the lecturer discloses nothing of the stumblings or surprises of her first encounter with the text, leaving students with

the impression that the sophistication of the expert's reading is forever out of their reach. Some may even conclude that successfully or meaningfully reading any literary work is for them impossible.

In a discussion-based class, on the other hand, students are expected to take an active role. However, it is still often the instructor who determines the questions that will be discussed and who usually drives or directs the discussion. Of course, the instructor should challenge students to examine and reflect on their initial interpretations of a text. Yet, these questions, especially if they are provided before a student encounters the text, can over-determine the nature of the student's reading experience and even become a more central focus of students' attention than the literary work itself. Also, because the literary experts students have seen rarely make reference to their initial encounters with a text or the process by which they arrived at an understanding or assessment, students tend to couch their remarks in similar-sounding pronouncements, parroting the ways they have heard literature discussed in the past. And so students can hide their own confusions or "stupid" questions not only from their instructors but even from themselves.

All that said, ask a classroom full of students what their encounter with an assigned text was like, and you will likely be met with silence. Should that silence be eventually broken, the responses may indicate (in my experience) blatant misunderstanding or even no understanding whatsoever depending on the distance between text and students. And these results represent two central challenges of the student-centered approach to literature instruction that I'm advocating. First,

how can we overcome many students' learned reluctance to speak forthrightly about their experience with a text? Most of those who end up in our classes have already spent much of their lives in school trying to perform well by figuring out what the teacher wants. Students will necessarily need to adjust their expectations if their teacher now wants an honest explanation of what their experience reading a text was like.

Here's how I attempt to facilitate that adjustment. When I assign a text or a portion of it, I ask students to follow their reading by writing about the encounter, their experience of the text's "world" or their experience of the process of reading it or both, whatever stood out to them most. Once in class, students read these brief pieces of writing to a small group of classmates (and the critical reflection begins as they notice differences in what one another did with the text and the kinds of experiences it evoked for different readers). Then the small groups report brief summaries of what they discussed— differences and similarities in what their members wrote, questions or confusions they were unable to resolve. In this way students are primed for discussion, and they begin to see in small steps the kind of participation I am asking for, as they also gain perspective on their own reading process and its results in comparing theirs to others. I also quickly read these "experience reports" after class so that I know what challenges they are facing with the text and where we need to begin in our exploration of it, but it is important that I not evaluate or grade them except to encourage students' focus on what happened when they read as the ground of their claims or questions about the text. I do give

credit for the writing, however, to help motivate students to complete the work and with the only stipulation that no credit will be given if the report is so lacking in specifics to suggest that no actual reading took place at all. (Student dishonesty with assignments like this is an issue I discuss with classes directly, challenging them to buy into a shift in roles where they and I no longer attempt to outsmart one another but we instead work together, a shift they usually welcome at least in theory.)

Once students begin sharing what transpired in their encounters with a literary work, the second challenge of this approach becomes apparent. And I do want to emphasize that this sharing of initial encounters is just the beginning and not, of course, the substance of the class. With some exceptions, depending on the make-up of a class, students tend not to succeed at making much of many texts. Confusion and even frustration often reigns. Yet I have found these confusions and frustrations, especially the bluntly worded complaints, to be especially productive for discussion and inquiry. Often these serve as pathways into the text or the culture from which it emerged. All that is needed is that students turn their complaints into questions. In a general education introductory literature course I often have students read Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Many dislike reading the first half of the book, they complain, because nothing happens, there's nothing and no one they care about, and they can't even tell what really happened in the novel's past because they're given different characters' very different versions of the same events. When we discuss those complaints, I will turn it into a question by asking how those feelings might relate to the novel itself, and someone is usually easily able to

recognize that their frustration with the novel matches the protagonist's feelings about his own life, leading to a discussion of how a novel like this conveys an experience.

In reading Homer's *Odyssey* in a sophomore-level survey course, I was surprised to find how much trouble some students had with Odysseus as a hero because he cries so much. Not only did that observation lead to questions about the nature of an ancient Greek hero and to conceptions of masculinity in that long-past culture, both great topics for class research papers, but it also provoked questions about the students' resistance to a strong man weeping openly and what that says about our culture. This difference in expectations for a hero also led students to realize that reading a text from another time and place required them to set aside their own standards or protocols in order to take on temporarily the ones of the literary work as best they could. By attending to what transpires in their encounter with a text and by sharing it with others in class, students, with some guidance, are able to do the work themselves of making meaning of a piece of literature, discovering ways of working on a text as they also realize the various ways that a text can work on its readers. And the knowledge they gain through this means is not hearsay.

If the encounter between a particular text and a particular reader is the ground of all claims about literature and is the location of literature's effects in the world, then this student-centered approach is a way—the way?—to make possible that experience for students, showing them how and why literature matters.

## Works Cited

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